



Driving Systemic Change: Examining Perceptions of High-Impact Practices for Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Intercollegiate Athletics

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals in NCAA intercollegiate athletic departments, with a primary focus on understanding how these professionals leverage high-impact practices to contribute to the advancement of DEI work. Understanding what athletics DEI professionals perceive as high-impact practices is important to inform wide-scale changes in policy and procedures that meaningfully support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across intercollegiate athletic departments. Based on 23 semi-structured interviews with DEI professionals in NCAA athletic departments across the U.S., the authors highlight four main high-impact practices that advance DEI work in collegiate athletics: (1) Diverse Hiring & Retention Practices, (2) Holistic and Engaging Support, (3) Culturally Relevant and Responsive Programs, and (4) Infrastructure for Institutional Transformation. Implications for research and practice are outlined in order to further support the successful advancement of DEI – and empower the individuals holding DEI positions – within intercollegiate athletics.

Over the last decade, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)¹ initiatives have increased exponentially across higher education (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017; Dover et al., 2020). The increase in DEI initiatives can be attributed to the changing demographic landscape of students within higher education as well as national legislation (Harper et al., 2009) geared towards supporting the growth and development of diverse populations across higher education. As a result of the increased number of students from diverse backgrounds and identities, stakeholders within institutions of higher education have recognized the importance of providing specific support mechanisms that foster inclusive, equitable, and socially just campus environments (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kuh, 2008; Museus, 2014). Institutional environments have not always focused on equity and inclusion, and many diversity initiatives have emerged as a response to the underrepresentation of various populations (i.e., increase recruitment of underrepresented student populations) or social justice issues that arise (i.e., campus incidents) (Wilson, 2013).

Many of these diversity initiatives, while well-intentioned, lack the commitment and long-term sustainable investment required to have a significant impact at colleges and universities (Dover et al., 2020). Ahmed (2012) argues that to do DEI work well and be effective on college campuses, there must be a commitment to moving beyond superficial rhetoric and more towards engaging in actions that disrupt the foundational principles on which higher education was built and from which it continues to profit – including racism, sexism, elitism, and heteronormativity (Ray, 2019; Museus 2014). Indeed, many scholars have argued convincingly that DEI efforts still fall short and do not address the structural inequities embedded deep in the fabric of higher education institutions in the U.S. and day-to-day operations that are often exclusionary (Ahmed, 2007; Brayboy, 2003; De Welde, 2017; Williams 2006). As Williams (2006) outlined, diversity work requires long-term attention and continuous evaluation and should not be viewed as a one-time fix, but rather a dynamic, evolving, and ongoing process. This is especially true within intercollegiate athletics, a space that seemingly struggles with operationalizing and sustaining strategies and initiatives that support and advance principles of DEI (Cunningham, 2009). Intercollegiate athletics has historically been dominated by white, able-bodied, heterosexual men (Davis, 1994; Regan et al., 2014), and thus the emphasis on DEI has often not been a priority for leaders within the industry.

In line with many broader institutional plans to support diversity and social justice, athletic departments are seeking ways to address the climate and culture of their departments to support various minoritized groups – and create environments committed to the advancement of social justice and equity. It is evident that when departments within an institution can develop meaningful and robust initiatives, along with creating a culture that holistically supports students

¹ Throughout this essay, we conceptualize the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion as follows. As a group concept the term diversity encompasses the different identities represented in a given context, including but not limited to those based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, national identity, ability, or age (Roberson, 2006). Equity refers to the creation of fair policies, procedures, and practices that allow people to thrive based on their unique needs and identities (Hurtado-Prater, 2021). Finally, inclusion is defined as the active creation of a sense of belonging in an environment where individual differences are respected, accepted, and celebrated (University of Michigan, 2020).

from diverse backgrounds, there is an increase in retention, persistence, sense of belonging, and overall increased levels of satisfaction within that environment (Palmer et al., 2011; Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018). Across the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), many athletic departments hold seemingly diverse college athlete populations, particularly in regards to race. While a large number of these college athletes tend to be from racially minoritized² backgrounds, especially in sports such as football and basketball, in many instances outside of athletic programs the numbers of students from racially minoritized backgrounds is significantly lower across the institution (Harper, 2016). The NCAA demographics database reports that the racial demographics of college athletes during the 2020-2021 year was 56% white, 21% Black, 5% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Two or More Races, 4% Unknown, 2% Asian and 7% Non-resident alien (NCAA, 2021). As such, the racial composition of college athletes in an athletic program does not necessarily signal that there is a genuine commitment to advancing equity and inclusion. In fact, one way this is evidenced is by the lack of representation of racially minoritized individuals at the senior leadership level of intercollegiate athletics (Lapchick, 2019).

Additionally, racial diversity is only one (albeit extremely important) aspect of DEI work that is often sidelined in intercollegiate athletics. Many take the representation of racial diversity (i.e., the number of Black student-athletes) as a sign that the department or athletics program is doing meaningful, equitable, and socially just work when this is often not the case (Comeaux, 2013; Gayles, 2015). Athletic departments are frequently tasked with developing initiatives and establishing cultures that meaningfully support diverse students by embodying the commitment and investment required to truly support the unique needs of students holding a variety of identities. While athletic departments across the country sometimes offer lofty and broader diversity goals (i.e., create an inclusive environment that supports the diversity of athlete populations), they often lack the intentionality and commitment required for disrupting dominant discourse to effectively implement, execute, and achieve meaningful diversity, equity, and inclusion goals (Bimper & Harrison, 2017; Bimper, 2020; Cunningham, 2009).

Data collection for this study coincided with the murder of George Floyd and the numerous national protests against police brutality on Black populations across the United States. These pivotal circumstances certainly played a role in how receptive higher education institutions (and, more specifically, intercollegiate athletic departments) were to DEI initiatives – regardless of whether they were symbolic or substantive. Given the national outcry against racial injustice and increased attention to matters related to DEI, intercollegiate athletic departments have started to create positions focused on driving DEI initiatives. This trend was elevated by legislation passed across all three NCAA Divisions in August 2020 that required each institution to appoint an Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee (ADID) to serve as a conduit for DEI communication from the NCAA national office to their respective campus community (Dent, 2020). In addition to this recent legislation, since its inception in 2010 the NCAA's office of inclusion has provided support to member institutions through educational programming (e.g., the annual NCAA Inclusion Forum), professional development opportunities (e.g., the NCAA Pathway Program for senior-level administrators), policy recommendations (e.g., for the

² We use racially minoritized to describe populations who identify as People of Color and who are often termed 'minorities.' This description acknowledges structural racism and recognizes that the term 'minority' is simply a status placed on people who have limited power in society and is subjective based on those who hold power (Benitez, 2010; Stewart, 2013).

inclusion of transgender athletes), and best practice resources (e.g., *NCAA Champions of Respect: LGBTQ Inclusion Best Practices*) geared towards creating equitable and inclusive environments within intercollegiate athletic departments.

Despite the fact that the NCAA office of inclusion has served as an important resource in driving and expanding inclusion efforts across intercollegiate athletics, empirical research on athletic department staff with DEI responsibilities is scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of DEI professionals in intercollegiate athletic programs at institutions across the United States and to understand how these individuals were able to successfully implement and contribute to meaningful DEI work within their institutional contexts. Specifically, this study examines high-impact practices that advance DEI work in intercollegiate athletic programs. While scholars in higher education usually approach high-impact practices from a student perspective and focus on student outcomes (Kuh, 2008), we define *high-impact practices for DEI* as practices that contribute to the centering of DEI in the cultural and structural fabric of an organization (e.g., intercollegiate athletic department/institution of higher education) in ways that are culturally relevant and responsive (Museus, 2014) and take into account the needs of a diverse set of stakeholders within the organization (e.g., students, staff, leadership). As such, this study offers important contributions to understanding the range of high-impact practices necessary for athletic departments to create sustainable environments that are institutionalizing transformative DEI work.

Literature Review

DEI in Higher Education & Intercollegiate Athletics

At the institutional level, the increase in DEI offices and Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) positions across higher education institutions indicate that higher education is somewhat committed to engaging in DEI work. Along with the role of the CDO, departments dedicated to DEI initiatives are often tasked with helping to create more diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus environments that support the most marginalized populations on campus (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). While these units serve an important purpose in helping to advance the development of diverse, equitable, and inclusive college campuses, they are also often expected to fix everything wrong in the institution as it relates to diversity issues, and many times without adequate support to do so effectively (Stanley, 2014). The allocation of resources to CDOs, as well as the priority their units are given on campus, often influence how effective they are able to be with inclusion efforts. Those who receive comprehensive support and buy-in from institutional leadership yield far more positive results than others who have more limited support (Stanley, 2014).

Similar to broader institutional contexts in higher education at large, collegiate athletics in the U.S. has historically been overrepresented by white men in leadership positions, which continues to be the case today (Cunningham, 2009; Harrison et al., 2009; Lapchick, 2019). While athletic departments have seen slight increases in the number of minoritized individuals in leadership positions, the low numbers indicate there is still a long way to go as senior athletic positions continue to be occupied mostly by white men (Comeaux, 2017). Of all athletic director and coaching positions across men's and women's sport, 80% are made up of white individuals and 50% of these positions are held by white men (NCAA, 2019). Athletic directors specifically, who remain the key stakeholders in college sports, are comprised mostly of white men as well:

72.3%, 70.8 %, and 61.6 % across Divisions I, II, and III respectively (Lapchick, 2019). To address the lack of diverse representation in leadership positions within athletic departments, there has been an increased desire to become more diverse. This has often been limited to focusing on gender diversity, with a specific emphasis on recruiting women (Ortega, et al., 2020).

While there has been an increase in gender diversity, racially minoritized populations, individuals with different immigration status, gender identities, and sexual orientations still rarely occupy leadership positions in athletic departments (Lapchick, 2009) – and when they do, they are often relegated to positions designated to DEI (Wilson, 2013). As such, those who are minoritized are oftentimes put in positions that specifically rely on *their* labor to improve DEI shortcomings within athletic departments (Cunningham, 2009). Similar to the broader institution, athletic departments depend frequently on recruitment as their sole strategy to improve DEI efforts. While increasing the number of minoritized individuals in athletic departments is important and needed given institutionalized practice often disadvantages them (Walker, Schaeperkoetter & Darwin, 2017), equal attention must be paid to matters of retention. In fact, many minoritized individuals find themselves on campus after being recruited with little to no support for their retention (Harper et al., 2013). To truly improve and advance DEI within athletic departments, there must be a willingness and long-lasting commitment to dismantling non-inclusive cultures present across college athletics as well as shift towards viewing DEI as essential to the advancement of athletic departments and also the broader community in general (Singer & Cunningham, 2018).

Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to how members of the campus community can support inclusive excellence in and through athletics while facing persistent structural challenges affecting various minoritized populations (Andrassy & Bruening, 2011; Bernhard, 2015; Carter-Francique, 2018; Comeaux, 2018; Harper, 2016; Harper et al., 2013; Ortega et al., 2020). Harper et al. (2013) and Harper (2018), for example, found that Black male athletes continue to be overrepresented in collegiate athletics, specifically football and men's basketball, even though they remain underrepresented in the general undergraduate population. Harper's studies further argue that intercollegiate athletics profits from the labor of racially minoritized athletes (particularly those who are Black and play football and basketball), but rarely is the athletes' overall well-being considered, outside of winning championships (Cooper & Dougherty, 2015). In addition, Comeaux and Grummert (2020) have shown that the racial climate on campus as well as anti-Black racism in college athletics often negatively impact the academic success of Black student-athletes. Going beyond the classroom, Carter-Francique (2018), has noted that Black female athletes continue to be underrepresented in athletic careers post-college despite their success as student-athletes. This, as Carter-Francique (2018) posits, is primarily due to policies and practices across intercollegiate athletic departments that do not prioritize a strong culture where these athletes feel a sense of belonging and perceive a lack of support for their future careers beyond collegiate sports.

Current High-Impact Practices for DEI in College Athletics

As outlined in the introduction, we conceptualize high-impact practices for DEI as those practices that center DEI in the cultural and structural fabric of the organization. Ortega et al. (2020), for instance, examined athletic diversity mission statements and found 90% of institutions did not have an athletic diversity statement or mention diversity in their mission and

vision. An athletic diversity statement was considered an important tool in communicating an athletic department's level of engagement with, and commitment to, advancing principles of DEI – and therefore not acknowledging these principles showcased that an institution may not be invested meaningfully in DEI (Ortega et al., 2020). This study, as well as others before (Andrassy & Bruening, 2011; Bernhard 2016; Ward, 2015; Ward & Hux, 2011), highlights the disconnect between athletic departments aspiring to be diverse, equitable, and inclusive and actualizing that commitment through something as rudimentary as a mission statement, which many stakeholders (e.g., student-athletes, coaches, and administrative staff) use to inform their decision to join a specific athletic department.

It is studies such as these that show the need for establishing long-term, viable DEI practices that have the potential to transform college athletics and, by extension, the broader institutions they are housed in. Indeed, research has shown that in higher education, when campus environments reflect, affirm, and celebrate the diverse identities and experiences of their students, faculty, and staff, there is an increase in feelings of belonging (Strayhorn, 2009), increased engagement (Akens et al., 2019; Museus, 2014), academic success, and retention (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Much of the DEI work emerging in college athletics is becoming more geared towards fostering culturally relevant and responsive programming, especially towards the student-athlete population (Cooper et al., 2019). For example, Jolly et al. (2020) looked at the experiences of Black athletes at historically white institutions; they found that culturally responsive programming provided these athletes with a space to develop holistic identities beyond their athletic identity. Therefore, such programming can be an important tool for creating environments that support the holistic development and success of college athletes.

From the athletic department perspective, a larger focus has shifted toward intentional actions to diversify staff and support individuals from minoritized groups in leadership positions. For example, a study conducted by Katz et al. (2018) showed that women in college athletics leadership often have less cohesive professional networks compared to their peers who are men – a finding that is particularly alarming given gender diversity is often at the forefront of diversity action. Indeed, when it comes to diverse hiring practices, as Cunningham (2015) has noted, these practices are seemingly limited to increasing representation based on gender. Doherty et al. (2010) encouraged athletic departments to integrate current surface level practices (proactive hiring practices, diversity training, transformational leadership, and encourage the expansion of individual perspectives) with deeper more intentional actions (advocacy, resistance, institutionalized prioritizing of diversity), the latter of which led to more meaningful and sustainable changes. To comprehensively dismantle structures that are inherently racist and sexist, the practices highlighted above should also be extended to athletic administrators and coaching staff to transform the overall culture of collegiate athletics (Ortega, et al., 2020).

Strategic efforts to advance DEI action across the NCAA have become increasingly important over the past two decades (see e.g., Kluch & Wilson, 2020). Most notably, in August 2020 legislation across all three NCAA Divisions was passed that mandated athletic departments to designate a current employee dedicated to serving as a point of contact for DEI work (Dent, 2020). These professionals, who are referred to as Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designees or ADIDs, are crucial to college athletics as they can spearhead the charge of outlining strategic priorities for athletic departments that can create diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces and transform the culture of athletic departments (Dent, 2020). The new designees are primarily tasked with communicating NCAA resources for creating equitable and inclusive spaces to their constituents in the department and across campus. While the designation does not represent a

new position and is thus assigned to a current member on staff, the responsibilities that come with the ADID designation may add to the workload of staff already charged with DEI responsibilities who often operate with little to no resources or support and, like their institutional counterparts (CDOs and other DEI administrators), are expected to find solutions to all DEI-related issues plaguing athletic departments (McInnis, 2020).

Since the mandate, some institutions have opted to create a new ADID position, whereas others have added it to the role of a staff member. Even though the NCAA provides training and professional development opportunities for DEI professionals, Bopp et al. (2014) argue the small NCAA office of inclusion staff cannot enact change within their 1,200-school membership, highlighting the importance of more localized support at the institution level. DEI professionals in athletics, whether they serve as their institution's ADID or hold DEI responsibilities outside of the designation, are important across the board to both athletes, administrators, and coaching staff – yet the benefits of having these professionals, and amplifying the work of those who are engaging in high-impact practices to advance DEI work in athletics, is not yet comprehensively captured in the literature on DEI in collegiate athletics. As a result, this study fills a void in the literature by focusing specifically on high-impact practices for DEI in collegiate athletics, as documented by the experiences of staff at NCAA member institutions with DEI as part of their official job responsibilities.

Theoretical Framework

Research on the impact of campus environments for diverse populations has increased over the last few decades (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, 2014; Museus & Neville, 2012; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendon, 1994). The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model was developed by Museus (2014) to primarily examine the impact that institutional environments have on the success of racially diverse student populations. Museus (2014) found that it was crucial to incorporate the lived experiences and realities of people from diverse backgrounds into campus structures, and explained that the success of these groups of students was heavily impacted by an institution's ability to cultivate environments that validate their backgrounds and allow for opportunities to engage with their communities and peers both in curricular and co-curricular settings. The CECE model has nine indicators for success of diverse populations on college campuses: 1) Cultural Familiarity; 2) Culturally Relevant Knowledge; 3) Cultural Community Service; 4) Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement; 5) Collectivist Cultural Orientations; 6) Culturally Validating Environments; 7) Humanized Educational Environments; 8) Proactive Philosophies; and 9) Holistic Support (Museus, 2014). These indicators were generated based on evidence suggesting that when these components are present in an institutional environment, diverse populations were more likely to experience success and thrive on their campus (Museus, 2014). Museus (2014) groups the nine indicators for success into two main categories: Cultural Relevance and Cultural Responsiveness. Cultural relevance indicates the extent to which campus environments are relevant to the varied backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences of students (Museus, 2014). In this group, there are five indicators for success: First, *cultural familiarity* captures the opportunities diverse populations have to connect with faculty, staff, and/or peers with shared backgrounds, identities, and experiences. Second, *culturally relevant knowledge* describes opportunities for diverse populations to learn about their cultural communities. Third, *cultural community service* refers to opportunities diverse populations have to engage in work within their communities that allow

them to give back to these communities. Fourth, *meaningful cross-cultural engagement* describes the opportunities to engage with others from different backgrounds. Fifth, *culturally validating environments* describe how diverse populations believe their institution values their cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities (Museus, 2014).

Cultural responsiveness refers to how institutions respond to the needs of diverse populations through policies, practices, and procedures (Museus, 2014). Four corresponding indicators fall in this category. First, *collectivist cultural orientations* refer to how community-oriented a college campus is. Second, *humanized environments* describe how invested institutional stakeholders are about creating meaningful relationships with diverse populations. Third, *proactive philosophies* describe the extent to which campuses can make decisions on their own, anticipating the needs of diverse populations and addressing them in practice and policy. Fourth, *holistic support* refers to the on-campus network that diverse populations have access to, especially in terms of how confident they feel that support can and will be provided no matter what need arises (Museus, 2014).

The CECE model, while primarily geared towards student success, has been (re)envisioned for faculty success (Wright-Mair, 2017) and can also be applied to the experiences of administrators as well. Therefore, the CECE model can be a useful tool to inform educational stakeholders about how to develop campus environments that incorporate high-impact practices for advancing DEI work. In this study, the CECE model was particularly useful for interpreting and developing findings that provide insight into how DEI professionals in athletics aim to make campus environments more inclusive through high-impact practices. As such, the CECE model provides a guiding lens to inform the development of high-impact practices that advance DEI work in ways that contribute to establishing culturally engaging athletic environments on U.S. college campuses. While current literature offers insights into DEI work in higher education and intercollegiate athletics more broadly, questions about how to advance DEI work in college athletics specifically remain largely unaddressed. Therefore, this study draws from the CECE model to understand high-impact practices geared towards advancing DEI in NCAA athletic departments. While the data collected was part of a larger study examining the experiences of DEI professionals in the NCAA, the primary research questions guiding this part of the study were:

RQ 1: What practices do NCAA DEI athletics administrators perceive to be high-impact practices for driving DEI work in intercollegiate athletics?

RQ 2: How do NCAA DEI athletics administrators drive DEI action within their institutional contexts?

Methods

To find answers to the research question posited above, we conducted semi-structured interviews, as the method allowed us to capture detailed, in-depth descriptions of the experiences of DEI professionals in athletics (Patton, 2002). While we acknowledge the power imbalance inherent in interviewing situations (Kvale, 1996; Edwards & Holland, 2013), our semi-structured interviews proved valuable in centering the unique experiences of DEI professionals in intercollegiate athletics, particularly in terms of what aspects of their environment contributed to engaging in meaningful DEI work. A semi-structured interview approach also gave the research

team the flexibility to probe when necessary during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participant Recruitment & Demographics

Purposeful and snowball sampling was utilized to recruit participants who met the criteria for the study (Patton, 2002). To meet the criteria for the study, participants had to be staff members in an athletic department within the NCAA and had to have DEI responsibilities as part of their job duties. Participants were recruited through various outlets including NCAA staff directories, social media, and the researchers' professional networks. We identified 51 individuals who held DEI responsibilities across NCAA athletic departments nationally. After contacting all 51 potential participants via email, 14 interviewees agreed to participate in the study. Snowball sampling yielded an additional nine participants. In total, the sample for this study included 23 DEI professionals working in NCAA athletic departments across the United States. Participants represented a wide range of colleges and universities from all three divisions within the NCAA. Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, 19 of the 23 participants completed a voluntary demographics survey in which they could self-identify their gender identity, race, sexuality, and other identity categories³. In terms of gender, the sample included ten self-identifying men ($n=10$), eight women ($n=8$), and one non-binary participant ($n=1$). The respondents self-identified their sexual orientation as straight/heterosexual ($n=15$), gay or lesbian ($n=3$), and queer ($n=1$). Lastly, participants self-identified their race, with the sample including Black or African American ($n=12$), White, ($n=6$), and Latino ($n=1$) participants. Table 1 below summarizes the participants and their institutional NCAA division classification.

Data Collection & Analysis

All interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted either via phone or via Zoom videoconferencing technology. Participants were invited to provide pseudonyms during interviews and, in some cases, participants asked the researchers to choose a pseudonym on their behalf. An interview guide was utilized for the semi-structured interviews. Examples of the interview questions include: How would you describe the campus culture at your college/university? What diversity and inclusion services do you provide to your athletic department? What have been some of your major successes in your current position? How do you ensure that athletes, coaches, and administrators promote diversity and embrace inclusion? Based on your experience, what do you think are examples of exemplary diversity and inclusion work? Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and were transcribed for data analysis following each interview. In addition, detailed memos were taken during interviews, as these memos documented the perspectives of researchers conducting the interviews as well as interpretations of responses from participants (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

To analyze our data, we utilized open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify higher-order themes that captured the high-impact practices for DEI utilized by the participants of the study. During the first stage of analysis, interview transcripts were read twice

³ Given the number of DEI professionals in intercollegiate athletics remains relatively small, we chose not to include any further identifying information beyond NCAA division in this manuscript in order to protect the identities of the participants.

Table 1
Overview of Participants

Name	Division	Institutional Context
Alice	III	Private small liberal arts, Diverse Fields Institution
Carter	I	Large public, R1 Institution
Betsy	III	Medium public, M2 Institution
Clara	I	Medium private Ivy League, R1 Institution
Clark	I	Large public land-grant, R1 Institution
Antonio	I	Large public, R2 Institution
Juan	III	Small private Roman Catholic, M1 Institution
Leah	III	Small private liberal arts, Arts & Sciences Focus Institution
Rico	I	Large public, R2 Institution
Julia	III	Small private, Arts & Sciences Focus Institution
Eliza	III	Small private Lutheran, Diverse Fields Institution
Jabari	I	Large public land-grant, R1 Institution
Peyton	I	Large public land-grant, R1 Institution
Rachel	I	Large private, R1 Institution
Frank	I	Large public land-grant, R1 Institution
Pete	I	Large public land-grant, R1 Institution
Kobe	N/A	N/A
Paulson	I	Large land-grant, R2 Institution
Allen	II	N/A
Stephanie	I	Large public land-grant, Medical Schools & Centers Institution
MJ	II	Medium public, M2 Institution
Red	II	Small private liberal arts M1 Institution
Ruth	II	Medium public, M1 Institution

by an assigned member of the research team to develop a rich understanding of the experiences of DEI professionals in athletics. After each research team member read through their assigned transcript, they open coded the transcript, which meant they assigned a code for each part of the interview (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process included categorizing the codes that emerged from the study and organizing them in a codebook utilizing the qualitative coding software *Dedoose*. After we completed the open coding process, our research team met to discuss the congruence of all emergent open codes. Next, the open codes were axially coded; that is, they were put in relation to each other to develop higher-order themes in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Given the CECE model (Museus, 2014) was used to inform data analysis and provided a lens for understanding how to create optimal environments that promote equity; close attention was paid to how culturally relevant and responsive DEI initiatives, policies, and practices were utilized by the participants – as well as how DEI athletics professionals understood and talked about the impact of these initiatives on their experiences in advancing DEI work in athletics and on campus.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is referred to as the process that accurately represents and portrays participant voices in a study. A diverse sample of participants representing a range of institutions allowed researchers to maximize transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of findings regarding DEI professionals in intercollegiate athletics. Throughout the study, the researchers held regularly scheduled debriefing sessions and engaged in constant dialogue at all stages of the study, from its conceptualization to the writing of this manuscript. Each researcher engaged in reflexivity (Hall, 1999; May & Perry, 2011) and kept detailed memos throughout data collection and analysis. Additionally, in debriefing sessions, researchers reflected collectively about the unique perspectives each brought to the study, and the assumptions held regarding issues related to professionals doing DEI work in intercollegiate athletics. The process of individual and collective reflexivity ensured that our perspectives were included, but also provided us with several opportunities to ensure that we were not misrepresenting participant experiences based on own identities, experiences, and research expertise. Collectively, our professional and personal commitments to DEI shaped the ways in which we approached this study and analyzed data. As scholars who are invested in transformative DEI work, we recognize that our identities are crucial to our research⁴. To ensure

⁴ When it comes to the positionality of the authors, the research team represents a diverse set of identities and perspectives. The first author identifies as a Black, multi-racial, first-generation, immigrant, woman faculty member in higher education. Her research agenda is focused on creating equitable institutional environments for racially minoritized populations. She also has extensive experience consulting on issues related to DEI in and across higher education. The second author identifies as a white, able-bodied, and queer cisgender man. He is a faculty member with a research agenda focused on DEI in sport, athlete activism, and inclusive leadership, and has a sport-specific background in DEI consulting as well as industry experience working for sport organization's offices focused on DEI. The third author identifies as a white, able-bodied, and straight cisgender man. As a doctoral student in sports administration, his research focuses on DEI initiatives within interscholastic and collegiate sport structures, with a focus on women in sport. Finally, the fourth author is a faculty member in sport administration and identifies as a white, able-bodied, straight man. He has a research agenda focused on diversity and inclusion in sports as well as student-athlete well-being.

that we accurately represented our participant voices, we held bi-weekly research team meetings and openly discussed the data analysis process in relation to our unique identities and perspectives.

Findings

In relation to the research questions, four higher-order themes emerged from the data in relation to high-impact practices that advance DEI work in NCAA athletics: (1) Diverse Hiring and Retention Practices; (2) Holistic and Engaging Support; (3) Culturally Relevant and Responsive Programs; and (4) Infrastructure for Institutional Transformation. Below, we outline each of the themes.

Diverse Hiring & Retention Practices

Participants in the study all discussed the importance of creating and sustaining diverse hiring practices within intercollegiate athletics in order to attract a wide range of diverse populations to help challenge as well as support existing policies, practices, and procedures. These participants noted that in order to advance DEI in college athletics, there should be a focus on robust recruitment and retention strategies in order to cultivate long-term sustainable solutions towards fostering environments that are equitable, inclusive, and diverse. Participants spoke about the importance of recruiting strategies that were intentional and noted the positive impact of creating a culture of recruitment that was equity-oriented and inclusive. Ruth (Division II), for example, shared one of the ways she contributed to shifting the culture of recruitment from just trying to attract diverse individuals to campus to fill a void in representation towards one where recruiters understood context for exclusion and the lack of diverse composition of communities on and around campus. She was able to apply that knowledge as her athletic department sought people to recruit to campus. Ruth (Division II) highlighted:

I created a diversity handbook, which is a tool that people now use when recruiting, whether that's student-athletes or recruiting staff members, [it includes] educational pieces they use to learn more about the different cultures represented in our community.

Participants also pointed out that implementing mandatory unconscious bias training for all employees in their department was something that was beneficial to recruitment, as it provided all staff, but especially those engaged in active recruitment, with resources and tools to understand their own biases. As such, it allowed them to move beyond the limitations associated with their understandings of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Jabari (Division I), for example, noted that his institution mandated staff training on “topics about diversity and inclusion in hiring, and eliminating unconscious bias in specific areas so that it doesn't affect hiring practices.”

Similarly, Carter (Division I) explained how he worked steadfastly with human resources and hiring managers to intentionally diversify applicant pools. For example, he shared that his department put job postings in outlets that attract diverse candidates. He also spoke about the education that has taken place to properly equip those in power (i.e., hiring managers) with the tools and knowledge to understand why being intentional in the hiring and recruitment process is crucial to DEI. Carter (Division I) outlined:

We've gone through a lot of educating from a campus standpoint on what to look for in the hiring process. It's been a process for our hiring managers that I've had to undertake on knowing who's out there, not using the excuse that, 'I can't find any diversity, or I can't find any people of color. When we know that there's going to be an opening in athletics, I work with our human resources department ahead of time and work with the hiring manager before the job is posted to get a list of names together that we might reach out to encourage to apply for these positions. We've had a lot of success in expanding our candidate pools and making those more competitive from a diversity standpoint. That's been a big initiative that we've undertaken and built that program from the ground. We're starting to see some of the fruits of our labor here. We also have an employee-led committee [made up of psychologists, strength coaches, athletic trainers, development officers] that focuses on recruiting folks from underrepresented backgrounds to apply for jobs.

These comments highlight some ways in which the hiring processes can be diversified and, as such, made more equitable. Comments such as Carter's often underlined the need to be intentional and strategic about diversifying recruitment pools, a task that was elevated by the educational efforts put forth by the DEI administrators in collaboration with campus units such as the human resources office.

Participants understood that a diverse workforce does not only come from diverse recruitment strategies, but also from a focus on the retention of underrepresented staff members. Most participants felt that retention was crucial to advancing DEI work as it created a pathway for integrating equity and inclusion into the culture of athletics. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that in order to be successful with retention plans, there had to be a focus on developing strategic goals, programs, and initiatives focused on retention. Participants also felt that coaches and administrators played an important role in helping to establish cultures focused on retaining individuals from diverse backgrounds. Antonio (Division I), for instance, acknowledged that while his department came a long way with recruitment practices, he wanted to stress the need to focus on retaining people they hire. He noted:

Before hiring, we need to say: Is there programming that allows a person to feel legitimately present in this space? So they don't have to hide who they are. Is our environment welcoming? Is our environment fair? Is there a true pathway where a person can express a grievance and have that grievance addressed? Can they thrive here?

Frank (Division I) also highlighted the need to create a culture focused on valuing the individual hired, noting that before the development of retention programs can occur, there must be a commitment to valuing the individual and providing them with tools to ensure their success. He states: "If we value the human being, then there should be equal types of resources allotted to ensure they are being welcomed, valued, and respected." The need for resource allocation for retention, in fact, was emphasized by other interviewees as well.

Participants pointed to a variety of retention programs that reflected a commitment to diverse hiring. Often, participants pointed out that for retention to be sustainable, athletic departments had to focus on inclusion first rather than diversity by itself. For example, Jabari (Division I) discussed poignantly that his goal was to "focus on inclusion first, make sure to

create an inclusive culture for everyone, and then focus on diversity [and] bringing in diverse candidates.” To create such inclusive environments in which retention can be successful, participants shared a variety of programs that were directed at retaining underrepresented staff. Among these programs, as stated by Rico (Division I), were mentoring programs with senior level administrators that would help members from underrepresented groups navigate the athletics space. Rico also pointed to goal setting meetings each semester, funding allotted to professional development, and monthly staff meetings with faculty and staff from racially minoritized backgrounds as further programs supporting the retention of staff members from underrepresented populations. This theme connects directly with the proactive philosophies Museus (2014) outlines in the CECE framework, as a major factor in developing campus environments that are proactive in understanding the needs of racially minoritized populations and provide the necessary policies and procedures upfront to support their success.

Holistic and Engaging Support

Participants spoke at length about the importance of relationships in their role as DEI professionals in athletics, and they explained how these relationships were crucial to doing strategic and intentional DEI work. Participants spoke about relationships with athletes, staff within athletic departments, staff and faculty across the institution, and external relationships they developed with people in the surrounding community. Relationships with student-athletes were important to the role of DEI professionals as they all felt a greater sense of commitment to supporting the athletes’ success and overall well-being. These relationships were driving forces that fueled participants’ desire to continue to be change agents and create environments that are diverse, inclusive, and supportive of all athletes, especially those with minoritized or underrepresented identities. Julia (Division III) explained how her commitment to DEI made a difference in developing meaningful relationships with athletes:

We had a student-athlete who was struggling to come out as gay, and as a male in our team locker room it was a very difficult experience for him. He was not ready to talk to me about it and didn’t want to talk to me about it and that was okay. Eventually, based on the other work that I was doing, he, I think, saw that I was *doing the work*. Eventually, by the time he graduated, he was really appreciative of the work that I had been doing and the action that I have been taking. During the [2016] election, he came to me and he said, “I don’t think I can compete this weekend”. It was the weekend after the election, and I was like, I get it. I think he was surprised that this was my response. That was a success; letting him have his time and, eventually, just by *doing the work* he began to open up to me and trust me. It really was just about me being willing to listen and validate his experiences.

Carter (Division I) explained that in his department there were several identity-based student-athlete groups that provide support to those who are racially and ethnically minoritized, international, and LGBTQ+. Carter explains that his department takes great pride in supporting student athletes who are minoritized. These groups have allowed for the development of close connections with student-athletes who are minoritized, and provides space to engage closely with athletics staff and those who are vested in DEI work. As a result of these relationships between student-athletes and athletics staff, Carter and his team are able to proactively engage with these

athletes, and commit to supporting their personal and academic success. Carter elaborated “We're doing things for our student-athletes as a whole, making sure that all of them have different opportunities to feel welcomed, and talk about some issues or just see a smiling face from somebody”.

Both Julia and Carter noted the importance of developing meaningful relationships with student-athletes, especially highlighting that being able to provide support mechanisms for those with minoritized identities was crucial to the success of DEI work.

Participants also discussed the importance of forming close relationships with staff within their own athletic departments as well as with staff and faculty collaborators across campus for driving DEI. These relationships were crucial for feeling supported across campus, and participants frequently highlighted how they were able to leverage these relationships to support their own work focused on DEI. After taking a senior-level DEI role, Rachel (Division I) noted that a climate survey revealed the need for better relationships among athletics staff to collectively engage in DEI work. She noted that the climate survey “allowed us all to see that people didn't know each other [and] they had been working with [each other] forever. They didn't realize what they wanted ... so this survey allowed us to develop closer relationships with each other.” Rachel also noted that the survey allowed her to establish further infrastructure for strengthening relationships in and beyond the athletic department:

We also created a committee focused just on enhancing the culture in athletics. This allowed us to work together and really support each other. Many silos existed in our own department before the culture/climate assessment. People were initially resistant to change but understood the need for it and were open to going deep, resulting in a huge difference in people's attitudes, relationships, and shared goals. We now operate as one unit working toward a common goal.

Antonio (Division I) explained that at his institution, the broader institutional community has easy access to people within athletics, which made it easy to collaborate on many opportunities. He explained:

The broader community has a certain access to athletics and I don't know that that's the case at other schools. As it relates to access, at least from a cultural perspective, because of my history with the environment and the fact that I came from the other side [student affairs], we receive calls regularly to bring student-athletes over for a tour, to do joint programming with the coalitions. Faculty reach out all the time, wanting to do something [together], and ask for my thoughts, they ask about doing presentations and research projects with the student-athletes.

Similarly, Rico (Division I) indicated that his strong connections across campus served well as he tried to advance DEI efforts within athletics. He noted that “developing strong networks across campus has definitely helped to increase the visibility of my work and given me a chance to also take my work in athletics to the wider institution.”

A final group of relationships participants described as crucial for advancing DEI work was that with members external to the campus community. They pointed out that the external environment was crucial to influencing what happens on campus. Paulson (Division I), to give one such example, said:

A diversity and inclusion fund was started within athletics to see if donors wanted to donate to our "Diversity/Inclusion Initiative" to get it off the ground. We got a great donor for at least the next three years and hope to continue that for the next three years but that was really a big success knowing that we have resources to utilize and support the initiative.

Stephanie (Division I) even took this a step further, when she discussed a collaboration with a locally situated global sports brand, which took their DEI work on campus to a new level. She explained:

We started to talk about: "What can we globally say about [our institution] that puts us on a map and makes us a leader that other universities can now follow?" [Our state] being in the backyard of [a major sports brand] along with all of the connections we had, we started to have conversations with [the sports brand] because they had an [equity] initiative there, so the conversations with them then led to this [institution specific] initiative. We started to put some logos and some graphics together. Students, staff, coaches really started to buy in. It just became the culture [of our community].

These findings illustrate the importance of holistic and engaging relationships at multiple levels – from athletes and coaches to staff and external stakeholder – and their impact on DEI work. This theme directly aligns with the humanized educational environment indicator from the CECE framework highlighting that when racially minoritized populations get the chance to develop meaningful relationships they are more likely to feel a strong sense of community and experience personal, professional, and academic success.

Culturally Relevant & Responsive Programming

Participants explained the importance of implementing culturally relevant and responsive programming for their athletic department. They shared a variety of examples for such programs, ranging from professional development workshops and policy-specific workshops to town halls and leadership advisory committee programming. The various programs were culturally relevant, according to the participants, in that they anticipated many of the needs of diverse student-athletes and athletics staff members and integrated those needs throughout the structure of the program. Julia (Division III) explained that she held weekly workshops in her department and noted that one of the items coming from those workshops was the launch of a policy committee created to create a transgender inclusion policy that responded to the needs of trans athletes. She also highlighted other workshops aimed at supporting underrepresented identities in the department:

Our professional development workshop series in the evening that we do has also been a big success. I do realize how important it is to give opportunities to our first-generation student-athletes as they may not have had the opportunity to know what different careers may be like or know a lot of different people with different careers.

Participants also described various leadership groups or advisory committees in their department that they led and outlined their benefits – especially to student-athletes. Clark (Division I) noted:

I also run a leadership advisory committee. We have a leadership group for our [minoritized], international, and women student-athletes, and [it] is designed to make sure that individuals in the group are receiving additional support, but also receive a mentor to help with their transition and retention at the university. It's also checking in with those students, it's also checking in with their mentors, developing content, managing the budget etc.

Creating a space for specific programming focused on the needs and experiences of underrepresented and minoritized individuals in the department, whether it was through committees or other groups, was a DEI high-impact practice shared by various participants. It provided them with a space in which they could intentionally and strategically drive DEI action while focusing on the needs of those members of the department that often felt most marginalized.

Additionally, participants highlighted that in response to current events (e.g., anti-trans legislation, the murder of George Floyd and other people in the Black community, as well as COVID-19) initiatives that they helped to launch such as town halls were used as an opportunity to create affirming spaces, exchange rich dialogue, and develop action plans for being more attentive and engaged with current events as well as understanding the impact of such events on minoritized populations. Pete (Division I) shared an apt example:

We hosted a town hall. Being a part of the [institution] inclusion group, we created a town hall conversation with the AD. In that conversation, the AD had all the student-athletes present, and we had breakouts and small group discussions. It was an opportunity for them to express themselves, express some of their frustrations, and just process what's going on.

Jabari (Division I) echoed similar sentiments about a newly developed series he led featuring DEI programming for members within the athletic department:

We have a lunch-and-learn series every month, we get in and just have real conversations about tough topics. We've had conversations about race, we've had conversations about LGBTQ+ inclusion, we've had conversations about Title IX; discrimination, harassment, freedom of speech. Just different things that will impact our student-athletes in the long-run. Then we also look at what's impacting them now, and equipping our staff with the resources to be able to serve them better, no matter what the situation is. Then just education for our staff in general as well. Just because sports is such a melting pot for our society, and it's something that people use in terms of [advancing] social justice and athletes speaking out. We want our employees to understand where this stuff is coming from, and why it's important, why it matters to our student-athletes and to our community. Lunch-and-learn is a huge programming piece.

These comments speak to the importance of being able to anticipate the needs of diverse groups through proactively planning and developing initiatives that support and validate their lived

experiences and identities. The examples provided also highlight how crucial it is to respond to current events that impact marginalized members of the community – and then be able to provide programming geared towards making sense of these experiences and processing them as a collective unit.

Relatedly, was programming led by the institution or the national governing body focused on the professional development of DEI professionals. Participants often referenced such opportunities being provided from their campuses, DEI organizations, or the NCAA national office. Carter (Division I), for example, states that programming from the Association has supported his own professional development:

For me, attending conferences and utilizing the NCAA leadership development programs are important. They have all types of different programming that you can find whether you are anticipating becoming an athletic director or a president or something else or people aspiring to move up to that next level. They have something for just about everybody. We learn the nuts and bolts of moving into senior leadership in college athletics and how to navigate that. That program has opened my eyes to best practices. And I can lean on my classmates, the folks who were in the class before me and the people who are going to be in the class after me. I lean on them pretty hard because they're spread out in all three levels of the NCAA.

Participants such as Carter emphasized the need for programming specifically designed for members of marginalized communities, as they often face additional barriers within intercollegiate athletics compared to their more privileged peers. This theme emphasizes the culturally relevant knowledge indicator of the CECE model which notes the importance of incorporating diverse knowledge from minoritized communities into both curricular and co-curricular opportunities.

Infrastructure for Transformation

Arguably the theme that was most highlighted by participants was that of creating a comprehensive infrastructure for DEI transformation. Participants indicated that support structures embedded within their departments provided opportunities for them to advance professionally as well as propel DEI efforts. Participants discussed the importance of having support and buy-in from senior athletic administrators who often set the tone for how DEI work is viewed and valued within the department. Carter (Division I) posited:

It starts at the top. I'd say our athletic director has really made it a priority in talking about the efforts we're making in recruitment, at all our department staff meetings, so he's done that over the past year probably in three or four different occasions in front of the entire athletic department staff. All of our coaches, and all of our support staff. Once you say it in front of some pretty powerful figures in coaching in our business, they get the message. And then [again] in front of all of our senior and executive staff members. They hear the message loud and clear. From a buy-in standpoint, it's a lot easier to get some buy-in when the boss tells people this is a priority.

Betsy (Division III), similarly, highlighted the importance of getting buy-in from department leadership for DEI initiatives to be sustainable and impactful – particularly when facing pushback for those efforts. She added:

There was a lot of eagerness to learn and eagerness to grow. There was definitely a lot of support from the higher administration. The president and our AD specifically were very supportive of those [DEI] initiatives, which made it very helpful and easy knowing that I had that support to lean on when things would get difficult or you faced pushback from maybe students or other employees who didn't understand what we were doing.

As such, Betsy's comment underlines what was mirrored by many of the participants in this study: Buy-in from leaders, particularly during times of crisis, was crucial to advancing DEI work in athletic departments.

When it came to support structures, the DEI professionals in this study also highlighted that for DEI work to be impactful an infrastructure focused on open and transparent communication had to be created. Participants reiterated throughout interviews that not only was open and transparent communication with senior administrators crucial to their success, but so was the leaders' willingness to receive feedback on what worked and did not work when it came to their DEI efforts. Julia (Division III), for instance, underlined the value of assessments to the DEI work she led:

I think the other good thing is [including] the assessment piece. Being more intentional with having dialogue. If the student-athletes trust me, they will be honest. A student I feel I got really close with over the last year told me straight up: "What you're all doing here is just not working, and this is why." ... The survey is good because the survey is anonymous and can drive change.

Given participants operated in spaces that were often facing significant DEI challenges, they frequently highlighted the importance of having autonomy in their DEI work. That autonomy went beyond having the buy-in from leadership and assessing DEI needs toward the institutionalization of their role within the leadership structure of the department. Participants spoke about how either having a position on the senior leadership team, or having a direct report line to the senior leadership team was crucial to promoting DEI action within the department. Paulson (Division I) elaborated:

I think being promoted to senior staff and having a seat at the table is a big thing as well. I think when you can sit at the leadership table with the admin and your AD and be able to be the voice for diversity and inclusion for your student-athletes and staff who you're trying to get this to work for, that's empowering and that's impactful, that's huge. Especially to be the only person of color on senior staff, it's huge.

In addition to having a seat on the senior leadership team, participants overwhelmingly discussed that structural support (i.e., resources) played a key role in their success. Pete (Division I), for example, stated that funding specifically allocated to DEI work sent a strong message that the work is valued and central to the athletic department:

You can't just say [you want to do] diversity work and not give people money to do stuff ... and adequate staff members ... Like really looking at ... stuff that matters, the systematic stuff. I have a mentor who says "Commitment without cash is counterfeit." Basically, if you are not committing money towards it, if you're not really putting your dollar behind what you're saying, then it's counterfeit. You don't really mean what you're saying. You are just saying it. Give DEI work a budget, show 'Hey, we are committed to this, you got a budget for this, you have the buy-in from admins.'

Funding as a resource for DEI infrastructure was not only crucial for driving DEI action within the department, but was also necessary for providing participants with professional development opportunities to strengthen their work. These comments illustrate that when resources like funding are available, DEI professionals can develop their expertise and do meaningful work. The importance of having support structures for DEI professionals was an important driving force to engage in innovative and transformative DEI work within athletics. As pointed out in the CECE framework, the availability of comprehensive holistic support is crucial for racially minoritized populations to succeed and thrive.

Discussion

This study contributes to the extant literature on high-impact practices within intercollegiate athletics that advance DEI. High-impact practices are defined as practices that positively influence the outcomes and success of various populations on campus (Kuh, 2008). Based on interviews with 23 DEI professionals in NCAA athletic departments, we identify four primary practices that meet this criteria: (1) Diverse Hiring and Retention Practices; (2) Holistic and Engaging Support; (3) Culturally Relevant and Responsive Programs; and (4) Infrastructure for Institutional Transformation. The high-impact practices outlined in this study serve as a foundation for advancing DEI work and help to broaden the discourse on future comprehensive practices within intercollegiate athletics. Though DEI work and its wide-reaching impact has been widely researched across higher education, there is sparse literature available on the experiences of DEI professionals within athletics specifically, and the practices that help to support their work. Our study fills this void in the literature by outlining specific ways in which DEI professionals can utilize high-impact strategies to drive meaningful DEI work in U.S. intercollegiate athletics.

To start, our findings contribute to the discourse on the benefits of diverse hiring and retention practices. While much attention has been paid to increasing compositional diversity across higher education and in intercollegiate athletics (Milam et al., 2005; Singer & Cunningham, 2012), our findings indicate athletic departments must intentionally design recruitment and retention initiatives aimed specifically at individuals from underrepresented and minoritized groups. This is particularly important because the lack of diverse representation is a significant barrier to advancing DEI. These findings demonstrate a core component of the CECE model (Museus, 2014): the need for proactive philosophies when developing diverse hiring practices and long-term sustainable retention plans that prioritize and ultimately advance DEI work. As such, our study reaffirms the existing literature on the benefits of diverse recruiting practices, while also extending the literature on retention practices by showing how retention is necessary for both student-athletes, coaches, and staff (Gaston-Gayles, 2003; Kayes, 2006; Stanley, 2006). However, we argue that while diverse hiring and retention programs are crucial

to fostering a culture of DEI, they should not distract from the necessary work still needed in athletic departments to create inclusive environments, dismantle systemic discrimination, and improve the overall experiences of diverse populations.

Further, the study affirms the importance of DEI professionals holistic and engaging support with colleagues and student-athletes. This theme aligns with the component of humanized environments under the CECE model (Museus, 2014), as it emphasizes the need for environments that cultivate relationship building and care in order to contribute to success. These relationships benefit the overall goals that DEI policies, practices, and programs often seek to achieve. As outlined, relationships are an essential component to building community and can lead to transformational partnerships that help with forwarding equity agendas (Museus, 2014; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). These relationships are especially relevant to advancing DEI work, which is often collaborative in nature and involves developing long-term partnerships with others in hopes of achieving a common goal anchored in equity and inclusion. Meaningful and sustainable relationships with others have far-reaching impacts and, as evidenced from the findings in this study, contribute to the success of both minoritized individuals and marginalized groups of people. For example, in this study the positive relationships between DEI professionals and athletic directors played a significant role in the success of DEI work. These relationships contribute to humanizing campus environments, thus creating places and spaces where people are open to, and willing to, engage in the work necessary to advance equitable and inclusive outcomes.

Third, findings concretize the need for culturally relevant and responsive programming in order to serve the growing number of diverse populations in intercollegiate athletics (Jolly et al., 2020). Incorporating various elements of the CECE model could prove beneficial in understanding how to do this comprehensively. The fact that participants highlighted the need for such programming supports the indicator of the CECE model outlining culturally relevant knowledge. Indeed, when educational programs facilitate purposeful engagement with socio-political realities, and applicable life skills, diverse populations benefit greatly, as they are prepared for investing in solving real issues while simultaneously being able to develop personally, academically, and professionally (Museus, 2014). Not only does culturally relevant programming affirm and validate people from diverse backgrounds, but anticipating the needs of these groups and planning accordingly communicates a strong message that people from these diverse groups are a priority. As noted throughout the literature, and affirmed by the findings, culturally relevant and responsive programs offer students and staff valuable avenues to feel a sense of belonging in an environment that demonstrates that their unique identities and lived experiences matter (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kuh, 2008; Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011). Additionally, when athletic departments are equipped to immediately respond to issues that arise with care and humanity as a focal point, those who are most impacted benefit tremendously. This requires proactive planning for the unknown and understanding the importance of responding with urgency to issues that can negatively impact the diverse communities within athletic departments.

Lastly, the current inquiry emphasizes the importance of creating the infrastructure for transformation, most evident in the need for comprehensive support structures as a vehicle to equip DEI professionals with the tools necessary for transformational change to occur. This theme demonstrates the importance of holistic support, a core part of the CECE model (Museus, 2014), as a mechanism to support and validate DEI professionals in athletics, enabling them to engage in important work across the board in an effort to advance social justice efforts within

athletic departments. It is not enough to be given general goals to achieve in a checklist manner; rather, professionals within athletic departments who have specific DEI job functions must be given resources to support their professional DEI efforts. In addition, these professionals need to be provided with specific resources to advance DEI action. In our study, for example, the DEI professionals who were most successful were those who had full buy-in from their leadership, were allocated departmental funding and support staff for DEI work, as well as professional development resources geared towards their success.

Limitations, Implications & Conclusion

This study has several implications for both research and practice. Specifically, this inquiry contributes to understanding current high-impact practices for DEI and why they are important to the success of DEI work in intercollegiate athletics. However, this study did not come without limitations. We realize that the majority of our participants came from Division I institutions. Future research, therefore, should focus more extensively on DEI administrators from Divisions II and III. Second, all participants in this study had DEI as part of their responsibilities. Future research should look at how athletic administrators without specific DEI responsibilities can drive DEI action. Third, while some of the participants in this study served as their institution's Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee (ADID), being the ADID was not a criterion for inclusion in the study. As such, future research should examine the experiences of ADIDs specifically so that the designation can serve as a meaningful change agent for DEI in intercollegiate athletics. Finally, while our findings present high-impact practices that support the advancement of DEI work, research should further examine the challenges and limitations that DEI professionals face within athletic departments as they seek to do DEI work often by themselves and without the necessary support and resources to be successful. An examination of individual athletic programs can be beneficial to provide an understanding of how DEI work is supported at specific institutions and illustrate what barriers arise for DEI professionals in these contexts. In addition, engaging a variety of constituents (e.g., athletes, other staff members) and getting more perspectives from other stakeholders within the institutional context could provide a more comprehensive and robust picture of the extent to which the findings discussed in this study led to substantial change across intercollegiate athletic departments.

When it comes to implications for practice, our findings highlight that the hiring of employees specifically for DEI roles is an important first step in centering DEI in the work of the athletic department. However, it is equally important that such hires are provided with the support to be successful in DEI work. Our findings highlight the urgency for leaders within athletic departments to be authentically committed to DEI work. Athletic directors and members of the senior leadership team, for example, should ensure that the mission, vision, and core values of their departments align with their actions, signaling a strong commitment to advancing DEI. Additionally, buy-in and support from department leadership is crucial for the work that DEI professionals engage in. Beyond hiring professionals designated for DEI initiatives, it would benefit intercollegiate athletic departments to fund entire units to lead efforts similarly to how many universities create units designated to equity and inclusion with a full staff and operational budget. When there is an investment in promoting and integrating DEI work into the fabric of intercollegiate athletic departments, there is a greater likelihood that these environments will be truly committed to advancing DEI work. In addition, our findings suggest that developing a culture committed to DEI across the board must be prioritized in athletic departments. DEI work

cannot only be seen as a checklist of accomplishing specific initiatives, but rather should be viewed as a multifaceted, integral part of the department or division. This ranges from who is being recruited for DEI positions, to whether they get a seat at the decision-making table, to influencing the kinds of initiatives and support structures required to foster success for DEI.

To close, though research on DEI in higher education has increased over the last two decades, very little research exists on DEI roles in intercollegiate athletics specifically. Over the past two years, several athletic departments have been tasked with developing programs and policies geared towards advancing DEI without much direction or support. The passing of legislation requiring every NCAA member institution to designate a point person for DEI is an important first step in anchoring DEI in athletic departments across the association. However, the ADID designation does not replace the need to hire and retain staff specifically charged with driving DEI work within and beyond the athletic department. In order to better understand how intercollegiate athletic departments are advancing DEI work, it is thus important to examine current high-impact practices that exist in order to inform future work that prioritizes DEI in (and beyond) athletics. Only if high-impact practices are documented, shared, and elevated, transformative change advancing DEI can be achieved.

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