



## **Impacts of Division III Female Student-Athletes' Experiences on Pursuing a Career in Sport**

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*The passage of Title IX has been instrumental in creating participation opportunities for girls and women in sport. Prior to Title IX, only one in 27 girls competed in sport, today that number is two in five. At the collegiate level, increases in opportunities for women to participate in sport have been similar. Unfortunately, Title IX has not had the same impact on women in leadership positions. Pre-Title IX, more than 90% of women's teams and athletic departments were led by women, however, today, that number is less than 50%. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine the experiences of former female Division III student-athletes who pursued a career within sport using career construction theory as the guiding framework. Eight female-identified former Division III student-athletes were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide regarding their early sport experiences, Division III student-athlete experience, and decision-making process in pursuing a career within sport. Participants' experiences were constructed into three higher order themes: (1) Pre-college experience, (2) Holistic educational experience, and (3) Post-College: A career in sport? Findings have important implications within the literature on women in sport, specifically related to growing representation of former female athletes in the sport industry.*

*Keywords: career construction theory, career development, careers in sport, Division III, gender*

**A**rguably, one of the most drastic changes to athletic competition over the past few decades has been the increase in girls' and women's sport participation (Coakley, 2016). Since the beginning of the 1950s, girls and women have broken barriers that have historically prevented them from participating in sports (e.g., as players, coaches, athletic directors, referees; Coakley, 2016; Fink, 2015; Pfister, 2010). Since the construction of Title IX in 1972—mandating equal rights and opportunities regardless of sex in higher educational institutions—sport participation for girls and women has gained even more momentum. In 1971, boys outnumbered girls on school teams by 12.5 to 1; however, participation for girls in sport increased over 1000 percent between 1971 and 2014 (i.e., one girl to every three boys; Coakley, 2016).

Despite the increase in female sport participation, the road to gender equality has been anything but easy. Sport and athletic competition have been built upon organizational structures that produce, reproduce, and celebrate hegemonic masculinity, a concept that legitimizes roles of manhood that are widely accepted within larger society (Coakley, 2016). These socially constructed beliefs impact women's athletic involvement and continues to influence how people view girls' and women's sport today. From the moment girls and women started participating in athletic competition, they were considered outsiders, ill-equipped, and othered. Further, some sports and physical activity were, and continue to be, more advisable for women than men and vice versa (Pfister, 2010). For example, rugby and wrestling have been characterized as being for men due to their physicality, whereas ice skating and gymnastics are viewed as being for women (Wiley et al., 2000). Although more attention is being directed toward women's sport at many levels of competition (i.e., youth, collegiate, and professional), women continue to be sidelined by men's sport regarding participation and leadership (NCAA, 2021d; Pfister, 2010).

Although girls and women have seen notable increases in their ability to participate in sport, there has not been the same growth in opportunities for women to work in the sport industry. In fact, since the passage of Title IX, there has been a decline in the percentage of college teams and athletic departments that are headed by women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Prior to Title IX, the majority of college women's teams and athletic departments were led by women, but today, women hold only 25% of all head coaching positions and 22% of the athletic director positions across all three National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) divisions (NCAA, 2020). These statistics are similar when examining professional and international sport as well (see Adriaanse, 2018; Lapchick, 2021), and demonstrate a disconnect between participation in sport, especially at a high level, and pursuing a career in sport among girls and women. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of former Division III (DIII) female student-athletes who now work within the sport industry to better understand how their experiences as a DIII student-athlete impacted their career decisions.

## Literature Review

### *National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Sport*

In 1973, the NCAA created three divisions to “align like-minded campuses in the areas of philosophy, competition and opportunity” (NCAA, 2021c, n.p.). While there are similarities across all divisions, there are also considerable differences. Some of the differences are between each division, while some differences are between Division I (DI), Division II (DII), and DIII institutions. For example, the NCAA determines standards for college-bound students who want

to compete at either the DI or DII levels. For DIII student-athletes, admissions standards are set by each individual school. Further, DI and DII institutions are able to offer athletic-based scholarships, while DIII institutions are not (they can, however, offer merit-based aid for academics). Additionally, and as discussed in more detail in the next section, the focus of DIII athletics differs from DI and DII in that DIII athletics focus on the educational experiences of the student-athlete as opposed to the athletic endeavors. Finally, much of the previous research on the experiences of student-athletes (and employees) focuses on those at DI institutions, creating a dearth in research on DIII athletes. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus our attention on DIII institutions and student-athletes.

*Division III (DIII).* DIII is the largest NCAA division in terms of both the number of institutions as well as the number of participants; it contains over 195,000 student-athletes at 446 institutions, representing 44 conferences (NCAA, 2021a). Unlike DI and DII, the highest priority for DIII institutions is the overall quality of the educational experience and the successful completion of student-athletes' academic programs (NCAA, 2021a). The overall philosophy of DIII includes, "seek[ing] to establish and maintain an environment in which a student-athlete's athletics activities are conducted as an integral part of the student-athlete's educational experience, and an environment that values cultural diversity and gender equity among their student-athletes and athletics staff" (NCAA, 2021b, para. 1). The NCAA provides DIII institutions 18 ways to help fulfill this mission. These strategies include, but are not limited to: (1) place special importance on the impact of athletics on the participants rather than on the spectators and place greater emphasis on the internal constituency than on the general public and its entertainment needs; (2) financial aid shall not be awarded to any student on the basis of athletics leadership, ability, participation or performance; (3) assure that student-athletes are supported in their efforts to meaningfully participate in nonathletic pursuits to enhance their overall educational experience; and (4) assure that academic performance of student-athletes is, at a minimum, consistent with that of the general student body (see NCAA, 2021b for all 18 guidelines). Despite the differences in the mission at the DIII level (i.e., less emphasis on athletics performance and more emphasis on holistic development including academic achievement), there is still an underrepresentation with women in head coaching and athletic administration positions similar to that found at the DI level. Detailed in the next section is a discussion on the staggering decrease (and now stagnation) of women in leadership positions as well as potential explanations for the lack of representation.

### *Women in Sport Leadership*

Prior to 1972—when the groundbreaking Title IX legislation went into effect—over 90% of women's teams and athletic departments were led by women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014); however, those numbers have drastically decreased over the last 50 years (NCAA, 2020). At the DIII level, the story is similar with only 27% of all head coaching positions and 40% of the athletic director positions being held by women (NCAA, 2020). Additionally, there is a marked difference in gender of head coaches based on gender of the athletic director. For example, at the DIII level, when there is a male athletic director, only 44.4% of teams are coached by women; however, when there is a female athletic director, 53.9% of teams are coached by women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). When looking specifically at women's sport, women coach less than half of all women's teams. Following a drastic decrease from 1972 to 1978 (i.e., decrease from over 90% to 58.2%), the percentage has become stagnant around 43% (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Additionally, since 2000, only about one-third of the new collegiate coaching

jobs created have been filled by women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

The lack of representation of women within coaching and administrative positions is troubling because women in these positions can serve as same-gender role models for female student-athletes (Massengale & Lough, 2010). Recently, researchers have illustrated the importance of representation within college athletics (e.g., Darvin et al., 2019; Swim et al., 2021). Swim and colleagues (2021) found that female student-athletes who had female head coaches reported significantly higher levels of self-efficacy to enter the coaching profession as compared to female student-athletes who had male head coaches. Further, recent work by Darvin and colleagues (2019) illustrated the importance of sponsors when trying to break into the coaching profession. Additionally, female student-athletes with fewer instances of perceived discrimination also reported higher levels of self-efficacy to enter the coaching profession (Swim et al., 2021). These researchers also found female student-athletes had a low overall desire to coach, and their head coach's gender did not impact their desire to coach (Swim et al., 2021). These findings are important and provide insight into the interest-levels of female student-athletes to enter the coaching profession, and they illustrate that representation is important; however, representation alone is not enough to significantly impact the career decisions of female student-athletes.

There are additional factors that may impact the lack of women in coaching and leadership positions that should also be noted. For example, access and treatment discrimination have been found to negatively impact women's capability to secure leadership positions (Burton, 2015). Additionally—and as illustrated by the differences in percentages of female coaches based on the gender of the institution's athletic director—homologous reproduction has been shown to impact representation of female coaches (Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Though women hold more entry-level positions within athletic departments than men, at more senior-level leadership positions, women (and those with other marginalized identities) have exited the profession completely (Weight et al., 2021). This is problematic as it demonstrates cultural issues present within college athletic departments that are driving women to leave the industry prematurely (Darvin, 2020). Darvin (2020) found that destructive leadership (i.e., toxic leadership), burnout, and non-nuclear family balance (e.g., factors outside the traditional family structure) all impacted the decision of female assistant coaches to voluntarily exit the industry.

## Career Construction Theory

Given the focus on career development and decisions, career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) was utilized as a guiding framework. Career construction theory has been applied when examining women who work in the sport industry (see Darvin et al., 2019; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Taylor et al., 2018). Career construction theory explores how and why individuals choose specific professions by asking questions such as: how does someone construct, process, and negotiate meaning within their life as it relates to career choices (Savickas, 2005)? Although the focus of career construction theory is on the professional life of individuals, Savickas (2005) established that career decisions can be influenced by memories, current experiences, and future aspirations. As such, career construction theory utilizes three subthemes: *life themes*, *vocational personality*, and *career adaptability* (Hancock & Hums, 2016).

*Life themes* give an individual purpose and allow them to make meaningful decisions in their work (Savickas, 2005). By examining factors of an individual's personal life (e.g., personal experiences, relationships established) researchers can better understand why individuals make decisions related to their career. Personal experiences (i.e., life themes) have been found to

impact women's career decisions within the sport industry, especially as they relate to the creation of personal relationships with former coaches and current colleagues (Darvin et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2018). *Vocational personality* describes an individual's "career-related abilities, needs, values, and interests" (Savickas, 2005, p. 47), including educational experiences and trainings, efficacy, and career history. Vocational personality can also include demographics such as gender, which has been found to impact career decisions by way of gender role socialization and cultural norms (Hancock & Hums, 2016). Further, previous research on women in the sport industry has illustrated hostile work environments (see Hindman & Walker, 2020), thus impacting the career experiences and potentially the future plans of female employees. For example, Hindman and Walker (2020) found that women working in professional sport experience a culture that perpetuated sexism, "including the diminishment and objectification of women" (p. 64). Further, previous work on the experiences of women working at the collegiate level has included descriptions of gender discrimination and harassment (Taylor et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Finally, *career adaptability* refers to a person's ability to engage in developmental tasks (e.g., learning a new skill). Additionally, a person's level of career adaptability can be influenced by structural and social determinants that impact career aspirations and expectations. Hancock and Hums (2016) found that women in collegiate administration were negatively impacted by a "leaky pipeline" that resulted from organizational structure and limited and specific skill acquisition (e.g., technical skills related to budgeting and finance, which are seen as desirable for candidates in athletic director positions).

While there has been substantial growth in sport opportunities for girls and women, there has also been a drastic decline—and now stagnation—of women in coaching and leadership positions within athletic departments (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Additionally, and as previously mentioned, the experiences of female employees in college sport call into question the current organizational culture of athletic departments, signaling the need for more research. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine how former DIII female student-athletes perceived their student-athlete experience to impact their career decision to work in sport.

## Method

A descriptive, qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, was adopted to explore the experiences of former, female, DIII student-athletes and the impacts their experiences had on their decisions to pursue a career in sport. This approach was selected as we were "seeking to describe an experience" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 335). Since "interviews offer a depth of information that permits the detailed exploration of particular issues in a way not possible with other forms of data collection" (Amis, 2006, p. 105), this mode of data collection was deemed most appropriate. Specifically, interviews assist in discovering meaning of fundamental themes or realities in the participants' lives, as well as allow for participants to discuss their feelings and perceptions about their experiences in descriptive detail (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Qualitative methods also allow for the utilization of direct quotations from participants, enabling participants' voices to be heard (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006).

Within this type of research, the researcher undertakes the instrument role in the data collection, and together, the interviewer and interviewee co-create the data (McGrath et al., 2019). This is important—and discussed further in the bracketing interviews and research reflexivity sections—as McGrath et al. (2019) suggested interviewers benefit from using their backgrounds and experiences in appropriate ways during the conversation. As such, it is important to note that we (i.e., all three authors) are former members of NCAA DIII women's varsity athletic teams.

A three-part, semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure consistent inquiry across participants; additionally, the semi-structured nature allowed for follow-up questions and probes that could develop organically throughout the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The first part of the interview investigated pre-college experiences (e.g., tell me about your sporting experiences growing up), the second part examined college experiences (e.g., tell me about your experiences playing [(insert sport(s) here] in college), and the third part explored why these women pursued a career in sport post-undergraduate degree (e.g., tell me about your decision-making process in pursuing a career in sport). Interviews were crafted in this manner to allow for the exploration of sporting experiences across the participants' lives, as we did not want to assume only collegiate experiences had an impact on the career decisions of participants. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) with the following inclusion criteria: 1) female-identifying, 2) former DIII student-athletes, 3) currently employed within the sport industry.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom Video Communications programming, which allowed for the interviewing of participants across various geographic locations. Interviews conducted not in person (e.g., telephone, video conferencing software) have been shown to provide decreased social pressures and increased rapport between participants and the researcher (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Novick, 2008; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

### *Participants*

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, eight female-identified, former DIII student-athletes—who currently work in sport—participated in the study. All but one participant identified as White/Caucasian/Non-Hispanic; one participant identified as racially mixed. Although this group is homogeneous, it is similar to the demographics of all DIII institutions (e.g., demographic data provided by the NCAA for 2020 illustrates white women make up 69-84% of athletes in the sports represented in the current study; NCAA, 2021d). During their undergraduate experiences, participants reported competing in the following sports: basketball ( $n = 3$ ), lacrosse ( $n = 2$ ), softball ( $n = 2$ ), soccer ( $n = 2$ ), field hockey ( $n = 1$ ), indoor/outdoor track ( $n = 1$ ), swimming ( $n = 1$ ), and volleyball ( $n = 1$ ). One of the participants competed in three sports at their DIII institution, three of the participants were two-sport athletes, and four of the participants competed in one sport during their tenure. Currently, participants are employed in a variety of contexts (i.e., high schools, community colleges, Division I and III institutions) and occupy various positions. See Table 1 for participant information.

### *Procedures*

***Bracketing Interviews.*** Following IRB approval and prior to data collection, we engaged in bracketing interviews utilizing the same interview guide that was used with participants. The purpose of these interviews was twofold. First, the first two authors both interviewed participants, so it was important for us to identify the ways in which our beliefs and experiences would guide the interviews with participants (Berger, 2015; Patton, 2014). Second, all three of us constructed the themes from the interviews, therefore, it was important for us to identify how our beliefs and experiences may influence how we thematized the data (Berger, 2015; Patton, 2014). As a result of the bracketing interviews, the following themes were generated that were applicable for all authors: (1) Early introduction to sport, sampling many sports as children and adolescents; (2) Positive coaching relationships within youth sport, and these coaches encouraged them to compete at the collegiate level; (3) Positive experiences at

their respective DIII institutions with respect to the flexibility of being able to participate in internships, clubs, etc., as well as choose their academic major; (4) DIII experiences heavily influenced future career paths in sport; and (5) Found a passion for research during their graduate studies.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Race and/or ethnicity	Sexual orientation	Sport(s) in college	Attend grad school (Y/N)	Graduate assistant (GA) position (or similar) in athletics	Current title
Linda	White	Heterosexual	Softball	Y	GA coach, softball	Assistant AD – media relations/sport information
Shirley	White/Non Hispanic	Gay	Basketball	N	N/A	Adapted PE teacher/Head boys basketball coach
Calleigh	White	Heterosexual	Volleyball, Basketball	Y	GA teaching undergraduate courses	Head women’s volleyball coach
Lexi	White	Heterosexual	Soccer, Indoor/Outdoor Track	Y	GA, athletics communication	Athletics compliance officer
Eva	White/Caucasian	Heterosexual	Swimming	Y	GA coach, swimming	Head men’s and women’s swim coach
Amelia	Mixed race	Bisexual	Softball	Y	GA coach, softball	Head softball coach
Cassandra	White	Lesbian	Soccer, Lacrosse	Y	N/A	Head women’s lacrosse coach
Katie	White	Queer/Gay/Lesbian	Basketball, Lacrosse	Y	GA researcher	Assistant Professor

*Researcher Reflexivity.* The first author (she/her) is a white, cisgender woman who competed in both volleyball (three years) and track/field (one year) at a DIII institution. She is currently an assistant professor at a large, public university in the mid-Atlantic United States. The second author (she/her) is a Japanese, cisgender woman who competed in both soccer (four years) and softball (two years) at a DIII institution. She is currently an assistant professor at a small, private university in the Midwest United States. The third author (they/them) identifies as white, European-American, queer, transgender, gender-nonconforming, able-bodied and competed in softball for four years at a DIII historically women’s institution. They are currently pursuing a doctorate degree in Counseling Psychology with a Specialization in Sport and Performance Psychology at a large university in the northeastern United States.

Our own experiences as former DIII student-athletes, as well as our current positions within the sport context, were the catalyst for this research study. By identifying our own

identities and biases, we aimed to be reflexive. Reflexivity allowed us to remain ethical by monitoring how our own cultures informed how we interpreted the data (Frisina, 2006; Josselson, 2007). And, ultimately, our “insider” identities positively influenced the study in that participants were willing to share openly about their experiences as DIII student-athletes, given that we shared that identity with them and had some prior knowledge of that context. Additionally, we were able to validate and normalize the experiences of participants (Berger, 2015). Having shared identities with participants provided a few advantages: (1) easy entry, (2) prior knowledge about the topic, and (3) understanding of nuances within experiences (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006; Padgett, 2008). These commonalities allowed for richer conversation and a deeper analysis. In an attempt to maintain reflexivity throughout the entire process, we also aimed to situate ourselves throughout the findings and discussion.

### *Analysis*

Interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed via Zoom Video Communications. Following the automated transcription process, we reviewed each transcription, while listening to the recording, to ensure accuracy. After transcripts were reviewed and formatted, we read each transcription multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the data (Merriam, 2009). To analyze the transcriptions, we utilized Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) three-step process of open, axial, and selective coding. Open codes were assigned to basic topics, such as “Family Influence.” Following open coding, researchers grouped codes together based on contexts, experiences, or actions in the data (i.e., axial coding). For example, there appeared to be a relationship between “academic decisions driving the college selection process” and “the decision to participate in sport at the DIII level,” in which participants selected their institution based on the academic reputation of the institution as opposed to the success of their respective athletic programs. Finally, selective coding involved reviewing the categories that were related to the NCAA DIII Philosophy Statement (e.g., Assure that student-athletes are supported in their efforts to meaningfully participate in nonathletic pursuits to enhance their overall educational experience) to further examine the impact of the DIII environment on participants’ experiences.

## **Findings and Discussion**

We organized the findings in coordination with the three parts of the interview guide (i.e., pre-college experience, college experience, why a career in sport post-college). First, we begin with a discussion of participants’ pre-college influences on sport participation and the decision to pursue college athletics at the DIII level, including family influence and the expectation to go to college. Next, we discuss the holistic educational experience that was described by participants. We end with a discussion of the decision of participants to enter a career in sport, with a focus on how many of the participants were unaware that they could pursue sport as a career.

When appropriate, we attempted to incorporate components of the NCAA DIII Philosophy Statement into the discussion of the themes to help support and situate the experiences of the participants. Additionally, at times, we identified overlap amongst themes. For example, the expectation to go to college was detailed by participants as not only pressure from their family to pursue post-secondary education but was also influenced by the fact that they were high-achieving students in high school. The fact that these women were high-achieving students in high school also impacted the academic experiences of participants during their college careers, which is detailed in the holistic educational experience theme. Finally, because of our insider identities and shared experiences with participants, we also provide our own

experiences within the findings. This form of reflexivity afforded us an opportunity to maintain the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, keeping our own identities and experiences at the forefront as we constructed the themes.

### *Pre-College Experience*

The pre-college experience theme focused on the experiences of participants from childhood through high school graduation. Participants spoke about who and what impacted their sport participation growing up, and reasons for choosing the academic institution they attended and sport(s) they played.

*Early Sport Sampling.* Interestingly, all eight participants engaged in multiple sports throughout their childhood and none of them specialized before middle school. Shirley described her early experiences by saying, “We kind of experimented with sports.” Similarly, Amelia noted, “We did everything...we tried everything when we were little.” The experiences of the participants in the current study aligns with *early sampling*, found within Côté and colleagues’ Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté et al., 2003, 2007; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Children who participate in a variety of sports are afforded many opportunities to access different physical, cognitive, affective, and psychosocial environments (Côté et al., 2009). The various abilities that children are then able to develop through their involvement in different sports provide them with a foundation of physical, personal, and mental skills that may facilitate their specialization in one sport during late-childhood/adolescence. Additionally, sampling gives children experience in various social interactions with peers and adults (e.g., coaches, parents), and helps to reinforce transferable skills (Côté et al., 2009).

Early sampling for the participants in the current study could have also been one of the factors to some participants competing in multiple sports in college. For example, Katie played field hockey, basketball, and lacrosse; Calleigh played volleyball and basketball; Lexi played soccer and participated in track and field; and Cassandra played soccer and lacrosse. Similarly, the first author competed in both volleyball and track and field and the second author competed in both soccer and softball. These experiences also align with the NCAA DIII Philosophy Statement that, “Encourage[s] participation by maximizing the number and variety of sport offerings for their students through broad-based athletics programs (NCAA, 2021b, point f).

*Family Influence.* Participants noted sport participation being influenced by all members of their family (e.g., siblings, parents, grandparents). For example, Cassandra mentioned, “We...as in my siblings and I, we’d play soccer, we’d do horseback riding, we’d do gymnastics, a bunch of other little things.” Others mentioned early memories of watching and attending Major League Baseball games with their fathers and grandfathers as a driving factor behind their passion for baseball (e.g., Calleigh noted baseball was her “first love” and the passion stemmed from these early experiences with her father and grandfather). Although much of the work on influential factors of sport participation has focused on parental factors, recent work by Blazo and Smith (2017) found that siblings have both a passive and active influence on physical activity levels and can be sources of positive and negative influence. For example, their systematic review of youth sport participation literature found that sibling participation in a specific sport was positively related with personal involvement, and that sibling support was instrumental in predicting rates of physical activity (Blazo & Smith, 2017).

Although participants reported numerous influential people and experiences, the majority of the participants (who had brothers) noted their brothers were the largest influence on their

sport participation as a child. For example, while Shirley noted that both her parents and older brother played basketball—which influenced her participation in basketball—she emphasized that she and her twin sister would do “whatever, and I mean whatever” her older brother did. Eva had a similar experience, stating, “I was the youngest of three. I have two older brothers, and they both did the soccer route and the swimming route, and so that was just kind of what I did.” Linda discussed her early sport participation in baseball—as opposed to softball, which is the female equivalent—because of her brothers, stating:

As I grew up, I always wanted to be like them, so I always played the sports that they played. I was playing baseball instead of softball when I was younger because that's what they did and that's what we were playing.

Additionally, Calleigh reflected on her first memories of playing sport saying, “My first memories are playing soccer and baseball with my brother.” Girls who have brothers report more engagement with sport and physical activity than girls who have sisters (Bagley et al., 2006; McHale et al., 2004).

These experiences illustrate that while opportunities for sport participation for girls and women have grown exponentially since the passage of Title IX (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; National Federation of High School Associations, 2014), there is a continued lack of opportunity for girls as compared to boys. Specifically, participants noted beginning sport participation in sports traditionally played by boys (e.g., baseball) and switching to gender-specific sports (e.g., softball) later in their career. For example, some participants recalled their earliest memories of organized sport came from playing in boys-only and/or co-ed leagues and they did not participate in single-gender, girl-only sport until much later. Linda recalled the summer when she started playing softball, and indicated the switch only happened because her baseball coach had an older daughter who played softball and their team needed an extra player. So, her baseball coach asked if she would consider playing with them. She found the skills learned in baseball to be transferable and understood her baseball career had a time limit on it, as opposed to softball that she could continue playing into high school and college. Similarly, Shirley played football in middle school but was dissuaded from continuing participation into high school.

The experiences of the participants match with those of the third author from the research team. The third author’s earliest sport memories include playing baseball with their brother and they did not find softball until later in their sporting career. While early sport experiences in boys-only and/or co-ed sports are not problematic in and of themselves, continued involvement in these sports and leagues can be difficult if there is a ceiling on continued involvement because of one’s sex or gender identity.

*Siblings who played at the DIII level.* In addition to being influenced by the sports their siblings played—particularly their brothers—many of the participants also discussed how their siblings either attended and/or participated in sport at the DIII level, which impacted their decisions to pursue a collegiate career at a DIII institution. For example, Eva noted, “I did so much of what my brothers did and watching them transition from high school to [DIII] college and have a really great college experience impacted my decision.” Similarly, Linda mentioned:

And so as I got older and playing sports, it was because I guess, I thought everyone pretty much played sports in college. Because I was just exposed to that world so early like I understood with brothers playing [DIII] college football.

Linda also discussed how the athletic director of the institution where all three of her older

brothers played football knew her by name and tried to recruit her to attend and play for the institution when she was visiting one of her brothers for the weekend. Shirley's brother also played DIII college football, which impacted her decision; and, although younger, Calleigh's brother played DIII college baseball. Calleigh noted that she and her brother still bond over the fact that they both played at the DIII level 20 years later, and both work in DIII athletic departments. Additionally, Amelia's sister attended a DIII institution, and although she did not participate in athletics, her enrollment at the institution introduced Amelia to DIII. She recalls, "my sister went to [university in the same conference as the institution she attended] which is one of those DIII schools and she loved it."

*Expectation of going to college.* Participants discussed feeling as though the decision to go to college was not as much of a decision about whether or not they would attend college, but where. For example, Linda discussed how college was an expectation, stating, "So when I was growing up, and I think it also was with the way my parents raised us, it wasn't if you're going to school, it was where you're going to school. And so it was always in my head like that's what you do after you go to high school, you go to college." Similarly, Cassandra joked, "I'm a big nerd and I love school, and so that was kind of the first, and most important thing for me."

Additionally, some of the participants discussed pressure from their parents to attend schools deemed as "academically rigorous" or schools that offered specific majors. Six of the eight participants attended small, private, DIII institutions, with four attending liberal arts colleges ranked in the top 100 by US News in the 2021 rankings (U.S. News, 2021), and two attending large, public institutions. The percentage of participants who attended private institutions matches that of the larger DIII public/private institution makeup (NCAA, 2021c). Eva discussed these academic expectations by stating:

For me and my household, it was always academics first, and it was always about finding the best school I could get into where I could also swim. So, it was pretty easy for me to cross off a lot of the schools that showed any interest or that I might have otherwise pursued.

Amelia echoed these experiences by saying, "There were a couple of schools...actually a handful of junior colleges that wanted me to come play for them and...just academically, you know, wasn't the right fit."

As previously noted, unlike DI and DII institutions, there are not athletic-based scholarships at DIII institutions. Therefore, prospective student-athletes must meet admissions requirements set for all students (NCAA, 2021c). This was evidenced by a number of participants noting that they applied to their institution *before* contacting the head coach of the sport in which they wanted to compete. This is illustrated by Katie, who stated, "So I decided where I wanted to go because of the school, and it was a benefit for me to be able to play field hockey." This prioritization of academics and athletics as an "added benefit" was also representative of the third author's experience. Similarly, Linda admitted understanding, "I'm not going to be a softball player my whole life, you know, there's life beyond this." This realization impacted her decision to pursue an athletic career at a DIII institution, and specifically, an institution that offered a major in which she was interested.

The sub-themes under Pre-College Experience (i.e., Family Influence, Siblings who Played at the DIII level, and Expectations to go to College) all align with the life themes pillar of career construction theory. These sub-themes illustrate the importance of personal relationships and experiences on the career decisions an individual makes. Though early sport participation may not provide a direct link to post-college career decisions, the personal relationships and

experiences along the way created lasting connections. Further, the early sporting experiences of these women helped establish their interest in sport, forming their vocational personality. Though our findings suggested much influence from male siblings, illustrating the way in which sport continues to perpetuate gender role socialization, the early introduction to sport—thanks to male siblings—provided these women exposure to sport thus cultivating passion.

### *Holistic Educational Experience*

In congruence with numerous parts of the DIII Philosophy Statement (e.g., primary focus on intercollegiate athletics as a four-year, undergraduate experience; assure that student-athletes are supported in their efforts to meaningfully participate in nonathletic pursuits to enhance their overall educational experience; NCAA, 2021b, points d and i), all eight participants stated that they had the capability to successfully maintain a balance between their academic responsibilities and athletic participation. Participants noted being purposeful in the selection of their institution as they sought a holistic college experience, and not one where academics or athletics dominated their time. For example, Cassandra reflected:

I've always kind of been interested in how things work and so the science side of things was a big draw for me, making sure that I could go to a school that supports that. And then also being able to play a sport, not necessarily a level where it's my job, but a level where it can be a passion and I can have passion in many different areas. So, DIII was a huge draw because of the academic balance with athletics.

For many participants, coach support helped facilitate this balance. This was evident by Linda's comments about the flexibility of her coaching staff, who were willing to alter practice times, offer alternative practices, and provide one-on-one practice options to accommodate class schedules. She stated:

I think it was every Tuesday and Thursday I was at practice for like 45 minutes total during the team practice when everyone was there [because of my class schedule], you know, but they made it work for me. You know, they [the coaches] would come in early, come back late, come at a different time.

Additionally, participants reflected on the fact that they felt as though their coaches were more than just sport coaches for them. For example, Shirley explained:

Coach always knew it wasn't about basketball. That's the other thing about DIII: she took a genuine interest in my life. We had player meetings and we would just sit there and talk for like hours, it was like therapy sessions. Coach saved my life on multiple occasions and I think that her love of the game and her passion for making people better... I feel like I've taken that from her.

This phenomenon of the coach caring for the athlete outside of “just sport” is consistent with the care heuristic, introduced by Fisher and colleagues (2019). While researchers have not examined the student-athletes' perspectives of coach caring, one of the core aspects is that coaches define care as whole-person development. If this is the case, then the coach will demonstrate to the student-athlete that they care, the student-athlete will perceive that they care, give more effort, and develop holistically, ultimately facilitating student-athlete performance and helping coaches

feel successful (see Fisher et al., 2019 for a description of the heuristic). Based on the experiences of the participants in the current study, it is challenging to tell whether or not their coaches' philosophies facilitated their performance; however, given the emphasis on whole-person development, DIII might be an ideal environment to better understand the care heuristic.

*Academics.* The academic opportunities available at each participant's institution was a frequently discussed topic throughout the interviews, and a point of pride for many of the participants. Participants made note that they understood their freedom to pursue any major was unique to the DIII level. For example, Linda discussed her brother's experience at the DI level before he transferred to the DIII institution where he finished his eligibility. She stated:

They [his coaches] said "No, those classes are too hard. You need to take these instead." And he's not dumb you know, and he was frustrated with that. He was like, "So you're forcing me to take a class where it's literally like, you show up, you're going to pass." But it was because they didn't want any academic problems during football season. And so, you know, that was frustrating to him, and I got to see how he felt like his sport dictated everything like his entire life.

His experience impacted her decision to attend a DIII institution, and she joked about knowing she made the right decision when she was able to complete three majors during her academic career. She reflected on this experience stating, "I couldn't have done all those things if I was at a bigger school, and so I really credit the DIII experience of allowing me to do that."

As previously mentioned, many of the participants noted missing practice for class or labs, and not receiving any sort of test accommodations for game days. Shirley jokingly noted, "I remember being so ticked off because I had to go take a final exam and I was like, we are going to the National Tournament today. Like no, I cannot, no." She went on to compare her experiences to the DI level stating, "I feel like at a Division I school, they [the basketball program] hire proctors so you can take your tests at the hotel or at your earliest convenience." This realization from Shirley highlights point h from the NCAA DIII Philosophy Statement: Assure that athletics participants are not treated differently from other members of the student body (NCAA, 2021b). Additionally, Amelia noted she did not have to participate in "study hall" because "the coaches didn't worry about it. They knew you were going to get your [stuff] done because you cared about your academics." Researchers have not found any significant differences in the academic success of DIII student-athletes and their non-athlete peers (Richards & Aries, 1999; Robst & Keil, 2000), which suggests the capability for the student and athlete identity of DIII student-athletes to co-exist with an emphasis on total development (Brand, 2006; Cooper & Weight, 2012). These educational experiences helped construct the vocational personality of each participant as they were able to dedicate the necessary time required to complete their educational training, and in the case of many of the participants, even complete advanced degrees, in their desired fields. Further, several of the women completed undergraduate degrees unrelated to sport (e.g., geology, education), which allowed for them to foster their career adaptability later in their education by completing advanced degrees related to sport.

*Flexibility.* Participants noted an appreciation for the general flexibility that was afforded to them as DIII student-athletes. While they noted they were still expected to give 100 percent on the court/field/track/pool—and in the classroom—they were also able to engage in a variety of activities including on-campus clubs, jobs, and family commitments. For example, Katie noted having an interest in playing basketball during her first year (in addition to field hockey);

however, she was hesitant to commit to the team because she wanted to be able to spend time with her sick grandmother over the winter break. Despite the fact that she did not initially try out, Katie was welcomed to the team after the conclusion of winter break and able to spend time with her grandmother before she passed away. In addition, Shirley discussed how she and her teammates were expected to work out during summer break but were not required to be on campus. She stated:

We didn't have to be on campus May through August, but would have check-ins; coach would call all the time or text or whatever. And then we have workouts that we had to submit and we worked out, but we didn't have to be on campus. So that was kind of nice to be able to, you know, go home or get a job.

Cassandra and Lexi had similar experiences as they were also able to get summer jobs, specifically as youth sport coaches. Additionally, Calleigh was able to hold multiple on-campus jobs, which was necessary to help pay her tuition. Much like the participants, the first and second authors both had on- and off-campus jobs to help pay for tuition and the third author was able to study abroad despite missing off-season practices; they were also a member of numerous on-campus clubs and associations unrelated to athletics.

*Leadership.* The majority of participants held at least one leadership role on their team (e.g., captain), within the athletic department (e.g., student-athlete advisory committee member), or on-campus (e.g., president of an academic club). Some participants, like Linda, held multiple roles serving as both team captain and president of the department's student-athlete advisory committee. Calleigh discussed how she was a multi-year captain of the volleyball team as well as the "recruiter" for the basketball team, even though she did not have as big of a playing role on the team saying:

But I was the key recruiter for the basketball team we had. The sophomore class my senior year there were 10 women, and nine of the 10, I hosted. I just said yes, I never said no. I'm like "Sure, yeah, I'll host whatever." I thought it was going to give me good grades and I realized that I was really good at that part.

The participants suggested their leadership experiences—both within and outside of sport—helped them land graduate assistant positions, and then eventually their full-time jobs. Katie described her experience of being "pushed to be in more leadership positions" during her junior year, which led to more leadership positions in her senior year, and ultimately helped propel her into her career:

Going back to my junior year, I was being pushed to be in more leadership positions and I was like, "I haven't put enough time" and I was very rigid. My coaches were like, "Whether you realize it or not, you're in leadership positions because people listen to you. So, start figuring that out; start being comfortable with that."

Katie then continued to describe how her leadership responsibilities began to increase, and these roles—in addition to her extracurricular experiences—allowed her to "piece together" her ultimate career path toward academia. Like the participants, the first and second author also held leadership roles during their DIII experience. The first author was a two-time captain of the volleyball team, and also held leadership roles within clubs on campus. Similarly, the second

author was a three-time captain of the soccer team, was president of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee her senior year, and also held leadership positions within various clubs on campus. Capitalizing on these leadership opportunities allowed participants to develop their vocational personality by utilizing opportunities within their sporting experience to help facilitate opportunities in their post-college athlete career. Previous research on women in sport has illustrated that women are often not afforded development opportunities due to departmental organizational students (see Hums & Hancock, 2016). However, these women began developing their human capital (i.e., formal leadership skills/abilities) before even entering the job market, allowing them to stand out from other applicants. Those with collegiate playing experience at a higher level (i.e., DI or DII) may not be afforded the time to complete internships or participate in clubs due to their heavy time commitments to training for their sport.

### *Post-College: A Career in Sport?*

Six of the eight participants went into college not intending to pursue a career in sport. For example, Eva majored in geology and during her final semester of college, interviewed for several environmental consulting companies. While Amelia noted she knew she wanted to coach when she was in high school, she was unaware coaching at the collegiate level was a career option. Lexi discovered majoring in sport management was an option when she toured her institution as a senior in high school, but at that time did not have a clear sense of what her specific career opportunities would be. There could be numerous reasons why the large majority of participants did not intend to pursue a career in sport, but one of the largest reasons discussed was a lack of representation of female coaches.

Seven of the eight participants noted one of the largest factors in them pursuing a career in sport was how much they loved their experience as a DIII student-athlete. However, one participant noted her drive to pursue a career in sport came from a negative experience stemming from the lack of compliance present within her athletic department. Although on the field everything seemed to be going great, Lexi's soccer team got a new coach her senior year who ended up getting fired for "reasons outside of soccer," and many of her teammates leaned on her as the team captain. She reflected on the experience saying:

I don't know from a legal standpoint and all these things going on...I don't know how to handle these circumstances. And so I feel like that is one of the things that really projected my career, because I had such a good experience in the first half of my experience. And then I saw how one person could come in and destroy your program because nobody's paying attention.

This finding illustrates the way in which previous experiences (i.e., life themes), both positive and negative, can impact career decisions. These participants described feeling a calling to the field. Recent literature has explored work as a calling, and Duffy and colleagues (2018) define the concept as "an approach to work that reflects seeking a sense of overall purpose and meaning and is used to help others or contribute to the common good" (p. 426). All participants, even Lexi, hoped to positively influence the lives of others through their career in sport, and were not motivated by factors such as money. Lexi discussed her future career goals stating she would like to, "help work with coaches and help work through problems. And you know, try and make them have a better experience and make them know that there is a support system there." Lexi's experience and future goals align with the experiences of the third author who went through a similar situation during their first collegiate softball season (i.e., their coach was fired mid-

season) and the athletic department did not provide adequate resources for them and their team. As such, when the third author took an introductory course on sport psychology, they knew that would be an ideal career path so they could help provide the support they did not receive, but desperately needed during their collegiate career.

Approaching one's career as a calling—as the participants in the current study did—can provide a person with a sense of purpose and meaning within their work, as well as more broadly within their life (Steger et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Peterson and colleagues (2009) found people who experienced a sense of calling in their work enact their core strengths at work, which positively impacts their work and life satisfaction. Research on DIII student-athletes suggests that they view life after collegiate sport as an “opportunity to pursue new adventure, coaching, or give back to their sport” (Smith & Hardin, 2020, p. 148). Further, these student-athletes felt as though they had learned life lessons and transferable skills during their sport career, which made them excited to chase new dreams, whereas former DI student-athletes reported uncertainty when thinking about their transition from college (Smith & Hardin, 2020).

Living out their vocational calling could be why many of the participants indicated they would not seek advancement in their career. For example, Eva discussed how even though she believed she could pursue administration, she loved her career as a coach and would not want a position where she did not get to interact with athletes as much (i.e., athletic director). Linda shared similar sentiments about working for her alma mater, and expressed interest in attaining more leadership responsibilities, but not if it meant she would have to move institutions.

*Representation and Mentorship.* A number of the participants discussed “falling into” a career in sport or not realizing working in sport (especially as a college coach) was a career option. This idea has been suggested with other samples of women working in sport, including athletic directors (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Eva discussed not having a female coach until she was in college, and reflected on the experience stating:

I had an assistant coach in college, who was a female, who I think looking back on it...I did admire her life and her. Like, I think she had a bigger impact than I consciously think she did. But like prior to that, I was coached by a bunch of old men.

Despite the fact that all eight of the participants competed at the collegiate level, mere participation does not always translate to an understanding that a career in sport is an option; athletic departments are often headed by (white) men and women's college teams are often coached by (white) men (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Despite DIII having the largest representation of women in coaching and athletic department leadership, the majority of departments are still led by men (NCAA, 2021d), and as illustrated by participants, many still had male coaches during their college careers.

In addition to a lack of representation related to gender identity, Katie noted a lack of representation from women who held her same intersecting identities (i.e., LGBTQ+ woman) within the athletic department, and how that was a limiting factor in her pursuit of a career within sport. She discussed taking on a role as a graduate assistant coach after she graduated, and struggled with how much she should disclose about her personal life; many of the student-athletes already knew her—as they were teammates the year before—but there were no openly LGBTQ+ women in the athletic department. Today, in her role as a professor, Katie is purposeful about providing mentorship and representation for women, specifically LGBTQ+ women, to ensure students do not have the same experience she had. Additionally, and in contrast to Katie's experiences, Shirley noted the beneficial impacts of having an openly gay

coach and the influence that had on her ability to be herself both on and off the court. She reflected:

She was an openly gay female coaching at a high level in the 80s. Right? Like she was doing it before it was done. And so going into that and having someone who looks like me, well not looks like me, but like who is a powerful woman, who is successful in her career, who is comfortable with who she is; not saying sorry to anyone for anything. To be able to see that and relate to that and have that guidance for four years...we've come a long way 10 years as far as acceptance of same sex partnerships and all that kind of stuff, but before that...I mean, she was a pioneer.

Although many of the participants discussed their lack of understanding as to the feasibility of a career in sport—or having a lack of women mentors who worked within sport—Shirley reflected on her college coach who served as a powerful mentor for her and her career decisions saying, “She is single handedly the only reason I'm doing what I'm doing.” She went on to say, “We made it to the state championship this year for the first time in like, I don't even remember how long, we're just not a basketball school period. And I called her that day, we were getting on the bus and I was having a panic attack like: what do I do, what do I say?! So I called coach.” Similarly, Amelia, who knew she wanted to coach since high school, was persuaded by her college coach to pursue a coaching career at a higher level:

I do remember sitting in her office one day and she asking me...She asked me, you know, “What are you doing next year?” And I was like, “Well, I'm going to grad school...this and this...I'm going to be a high school coach.” And she asked me, “Why?” She said, “Why?” And I was like, “Because I want to coach.” And she goes, “Why don't you coach college?” And it never even occurred to me, you know, and she said, “You're good enough...you can be good at this.” And it changed my mind...and, she was like, “Come back next year and you can help us and you'll see...you can see.” And that changed my life. That absolutely changed my life because no one ever told me, you can coach college, you can make a career out of this.

These findings suggest representation and mentorship are important factors in increasing the underrepresentation of women in the sport industry. Additionally, these findings are frustrating as there continues to be a lack of representation for girls and women in the sport industry, which makes creating change (i.e., increasing the number of women working in the sport industry) challenging. Athletic departments and other sport organizations need to be purposeful in their hiring of women and employees with marginalized identities to illustrate to young people that they can work in the sport industry.

Half of the participants described their intentions to pursue a career in teaching and coaching (part-time) at the high school or club level because that is what they saw women doing. Calleigh recalled how she took her teaching certification exams while also studying for the Graduate Record Examination because she had interest in pursuing a graduate degree but also felt as though teaching was a safe career outlet. Cassandra actually pursued a career in teaching and was a high school teacher and coach for five years before pursuing a full-time coaching career. Similarly, Shirley is currently employed as a teacher and high school coach; and, she is in the process of applying to full-time college coaching positions. These findings speak to the need to engage in purposeful conversations with current female student-athletes about the opportunities that exist for them within the sport industry. This is critical in order to grow the

representation of women who work within sport as research has illustrated that female DIII student-athletes have low desire to coach, even when they play for a team with a female head coach (Swim et al., 2021). Additionally, research on female collegiate athletes outside the NCAA (i.e., National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) found these student-athletes had a desire to coach at the high school level—similar to the initial plans of our sample—but not at higher levels (e.g., college sport; Stammers, 2016). Further, Sturm and colleagues (2011) found that DIII student-athletes held heightened levels of student-identity (as opposed to athlete-identity), which led to higher engagement with their academic pursuits and may have hindered their views of coaching as a viable, lucrative career.

## **Practical Applications for All Sport Managers**

Though the participants in the current study participated in DIII athletics, there are conclusions and practical applications to offer sport managers in and across divisions. For example, participants discussed the impacts of their holistic educational experience. Though this theme strongly aligns with numerous parts of the DIII Philosophy Statement, it is possible to ensure student-athletes at the DI and DII levels also receive a holistic educational experience. Based on the findings from the current project, student-athletes would greatly benefit from the ability to engage in extracurricular activities such as clubs (academic and/or industry related), internships, and volunteer experiences. As such, coaches and athletic administrators at the DI and DII levels should work to help student-athletes engage in extracurricular activities believed to strengthen their holistic experience, which will differ from student-athlete to student-athlete.

Additionally, participants specifically discussed their academic experience as impactful. Participants were encouraged to explore majors that required laboratory sessions and/or double, even triple majoring during their time in college. Thus, participants were able to find their passions instead of being pigeonholed into majors due to time constraints associated with strict practice times and heavy travel schedules. This was a result of the flexibility afforded to them by their coaches. Therefore, it is suggested that coaches and athletic administrators at the DI and DII levels provide adequate flexibility with practice and travel times to allow student-athletes to pursue their desired major(s).

Finally, many of the participants discussed not knowing they could pursue a full-time career in sport, despite wanting to stay involved in some way (e.g., teaching and coaching at the high school level). This is a focal point in much of the research on women's experiences within the sport industry (see Darvin, 2020; Darvin et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2018; Taylor & Hardin, 2016) and likely stems from the underrepresentation of women within collegiate coaching and athletic administration positions. As such, it is critical that athletic departments expose their female student-athletes to female coaches and athletic administrators to illustrate women can pursue full-time careers in sport and be successful.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the important insights gleaned from the current study, it is not without limitations. Even though the sample was representative of the student-athlete population within DIII in terms of demographics and type of institution, there was an overall lack of diversity. Therefore, future researchers should seek to gain a more diverse sample in terms of race, ethnicity, and current position. Additionally, although the qualitative nature of the study allowed researchers to thoroughly examine the experiences of the participants, this method of data collection limits the generalizability of the findings. Future researchers should therefore attempt

to secure a larger sample size. Finally, there are sectors of the sport industry that were not represented (e.g., no participants worked in professional sport). The experiences of women who participated in DIII athletics and now work in sport industries not represented here may be unique and provide additional insights into this line of research. Finally, we (the research team) shared many identities with the participants. This provided us with a unique perspective when collecting and analyzing the data, however, we do acknowledge and recognize our biases which may have impacted the analysis and representation of participants' experiences.

## Conclusion

There are a number of important takeaways from this study. First, former female DIII student-athletes were largely influenced by their older siblings (specifically brothers) in their athletic pursuits. Participants with brothers who played at the DIII level cited their brothers' experiences as critical in their decisions to attend, and play at, a DIII institution. Furthermore, the holistic educational experience was impactful to all participants. Specifically, the academic freedoms, flexibility, and leadership opportunities afforded to the participants due to their enrollment at a DIII institution were important to the participants in the study. Additionally, despite the largely positive experiences of the participants, many did not realize a career in sport was a possibility until late into their collegiate career, and sometimes not until they had begun a career in a related field (e.g., education). As such, it is critical that coaches and sport practitioners begin communicating potential career opportunities in sport with female athletes at an early age. Finally, the findings of this study help us advance career construction theory, by focusing attention to NCAA DIII athletics and the unique experiences of those who compete at this level.

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