ATHLETICS DIRECTOR LEADERSHIP: HOW FORCES AFFECT LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AGENDAS

Marc E. Christian

A DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

in

Higher Education

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Education

2017

Supervisor of Dissertation:

_______________________________________
Shaun R. Harper, Professor of Education

Dean, Graduate School of Education:

_______________________________________
Pamela L. Grossman, Dean and Professor

Dissertation Committee:

Shaun R. Harper, Professor of Education

Brandon E. Martin, Director of Athletics, Cal State University, Northridge

Scott Rosner, Practice Professor, Legal Studies and Business Ethics, The Wharton School
DEDICATION

To all my former and current student-athletes who day-in and day-out achieve excellence in the classroom and on the “field.” You represent the best of college athletics and continue to inspire me daily.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This body of work cannot be claimed to be entirely my own; rather it represents a culmination of the support, love, and certainly the influence of the many educators I had the privilege of learning from throughout my career. As this study found, there are so many forces that influence us daily, and so it only seems appropriate to recognize all those people who have influenced, guided, and encouraged me along the way to complete this dissertation. Below are the people who are my best supporters and have often believed in me when I have not.

Mom & Dad

Champions are made from something they have deep inside them – a desire, a dream, a vision. They have to have last-minute stamina, they have to be a little faster, they have to have the skill and the will. But the will must be stronger than the skill.- Muhammad Ali

My parents gave me a poster of Muhammad Ali in the fall of 2007 with the above quote after going through a difficult stretch in college. It motivated me more than they probably realize, but it became a certain modus operandi for me as I have matured as a young man. This thoughtful gesture is just one small example of the countless number of times my parents have selflessly and full-heartedly supported and loved me. I am forever grateful to them for all that they have sacrificed to see me succeed; with the passage of time it only becomes more remarkable and profound what they did for me. I am also thankful for my parents dispassionately encouraging me to pursue what I love to learn and do as a professional. I would not have found my passions for higher education and college athletics if this were not the case. They have all of my love and gratitude.
My wife, Melissa

I am nothing without my best friend and partner Melissa. Throughout this whole processes she has supported me from near and afar. Her love carried me many times throughout the writing of this dissertation. I am thankful she walked this path with me and believed in me.

My Entire Family

I want to say thank you to my brother Matthew for blazing the path for his younger brother, keeping me humble and always laughing. I also carry with me a deep sense of thanks for my Pop-Pop for whom I am named. He always saw the best in me and made me feel special. I am also indebted to his financial support that allowed me to pursue this doctorate. There are so many others to thank; my dear sister-in-law Kathleen, my wonderful, thoughtful and generous in-laws Joyce and Vern, and of course the Steiner clan of Andrew, Annie and Aaron. Thanks to all of you for loving me and supporting me throughout this writing process.

Dr. Shaun R. Harper

I am humbled and grateful to count Dr. Harper as my teacher, mentor, and colleague, but most importantly my friend. I have encountered few individuals who can give so much of themselves to others like Dr. Harper can. I have been the beneficiary numerous times, as have so many of my fellow students, and I can imagine so many others as well. I first became acutely aware of his selflessness when he, (after much persistence from me), invited me to join him in writing a book on college sports despite not knowing me that well. I will forever be grateful for his willingness to take a chance.
on a wide-eyed and eager graduate student. Your scholarship, thoughtfulness and encouragement continue to push me forward—thank you for all that you have done for me.

The Participants

I had the remarkable opportunity to speak with 24 of the finest Division I athletics directors in the U.S. I am so grateful they took the time out of their busy schedules to share with me their experiences and wisdom from their tenures as athletics directors. I gained a profound respect for their pursuit to provide opportunities for young adults to achieve excellence both academically and on the “playing field.” These individuals represent the tireless efforts that often go unseen to strengthen the non-traditional union of athletics and academics.

The Committee

I would like to sincerely thank my committee members, Dr. Shaun R. Harper, Mr. Scott Rosner, and Dr. Brandon Martin for their time, helpful feedback, and constructive criticism. Your insights served me well as I headed into the “field” to collect my data, thought about my findings, and wrote my conclusions.

The Cohort

Throughout the writing process I was fortunate enough to have wonderful support and thought partners in Andrew Mo and Georgia Kouzoukas. You guys kept me on track, laughing and validated my writing. You made this a very special time in my life and glad to have shared it with the both of you.
ABSTRACT

ATHLETICS DIRECTOR LEADERSHIP: HOW FORCES AFFECT LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AGENDAS

Marc E. Christian
Shaun R. Harper

Intercollegiate athletics have received considerable attention by scholars in higher education. Despite this wide treatment by scholars, there is little examination of the athletics director. Most of the published research on athletics directors disproportionately focuses on the responsibilities of the athletics director, the pressures of the leadership position, the characteristics and behaviors of these leaders, and the organizational culture of athletics departments. The purpose of this study was to investigate and gain insight into the environmental forces that disrupted and influenced athletics director leadership. This study explored how the participants understood, acknowledged, and reacted to forces that unavoidably influenced their choices. Particular attention was placed on comprehending how these individuals led change in their organizations while at the same time balanced the intersecting demands on their positions.

Qualitative research methods were used to explore the forces that influenced athletics directors at large, public and private research universities that were part of the NCAA and sponsor Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) or Division I-AAA (no football) athletics. A grounded theory methodological approach was used in the design and execution of this study. Using this method built theories through systematic stages of data analysis and conceptual
development. The development of these concepts became the building blocks of theory, which explained the participants’ experiences as athletics directors. These findings offer insight into the forces that influenced athletics directors as they led change in their organizations.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY
- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
- Statement of the Problem .............................................................................................. 3
- Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................... 7
- Definitions and Related Concepts ............................................................................... 10
- Organization of the Dissertation ................................................................................ 10

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
- History and Evolution of Athletics in Higher Education ............................................. 11
- Contemporary Issues in College Athletics .................................................................. 25
  - Academic & Athletic Divide .................................................................................... 25
  - Commercialization and Economic Forces ............................................................... 31
  - Scandals and Misbehavior ....................................................................................... 40
- Cultural and Organizational Dynamics of Athletics Departments ......................... 45
  - Social & Cultural Norms ......................................................................................... 46
  - Occupational Stress ................................................................................................ 48
  - Integrity v. Winning .................................................................................................. 49
  - Boosters & Fundraising ......................................................................................... 54
- Governance and Leadership of Intercollegiate Athletics ......................................... 57
- Summary and Synthesis of the Reviewed Literature ................................................ 64

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS
- Qualitative Methods in Education ............................................................................. 66
- Methodological Approach: Grounded Theory ......................................................... 68
- Participants .................................................................................................................. 70
- Data Collection .......................................................................................................... 72
- Data Analysis .............................................................................................................. 74
- Trustworthiness ........................................................................................................... 76
- Role of Researcher ..................................................................................................... 79

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS
- Stakeholder Forces ...................................................................................................... 82
  - President Expectation ............................................................................................. 83
  - Trustees & Regents Oversight .................................................................................. 85
  - Senior Leadership Team ......................................................................................... 87
  - Faculty Members ..................................................................................................... 89
  - Coaches .................................................................................................................... 90
  - Student-Athletes ..................................................................................................... 92
  - Donors ...................................................................................................................... 93
  - Conference Affiliation ............................................................................................. 96
  - The News Media ..................................................................................................... 98
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Forces</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Staff</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Building</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Values</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Alignment</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Mission</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Athlete Experience</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Winning</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Forces</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Resources</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercialization of the Enterprise</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T.V. Revenue</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Institutions</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority Sports</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Party Vendors</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Efficiency</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Funding</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Forces</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Issues</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power-5 Conferences</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCAA Legislation</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of Attendance</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title IX Legislation</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Forces</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Communication</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Interactions</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Plans</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry Colleagues</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Scandal</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers’ Scandal</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Tensions</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Positioning</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Landscapes</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Forces</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Experiences</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Values &amp; Principles</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspectives on Integrity &amp; Winning</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion.......................................................................................................................... 146
Conclusions......................................................................................................................... 155
Implications for Practice.................................................................................................... 157
  Implications for Athletics Directors .............................................................................. 157
  Implications for University Presidents .......................................................................... 161
  Implications for Faculty Members .............................................................................. 162
Implications for Future Research................................................................................... 162
Closing................................................................................................................................. 165

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.............................................................. 168

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM......................................................................................... 169

REFERENCES..................................................................................................................... 171
CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

They have to be fans and dispassionate observers. They must have creativity, imagination and vision, but they better know NCAA rules to the letter. They must lead, follow and get out of the way. They must be contrarians with deft conflict resolution skills. They must make deals and friends (wealthy ones, especially). They must hire and fire. They must understand contracts and contractors, traditions and academicians, Twitter and glitter. (Berkowitz & Upton, 2011, p. 1)

In a 2011 article titled “Demands on College ADs Resemble CEO Challenges,” USA Today profiled athletics directors at Michigan State University and the University of Michigan (Berkowitz & Upton). The authors described how modern-day athletics directors more closely resemble boardroom executives at nearby Ford Motor Company than the athletics leaders of generations past, who were typically picked from the coaching ranks (Branch, 1990). Mark Hollis of Michigan State and Dave Brandon of Michigan resemble such corporate executives, each having brought extensive—albeit different—job experiences to their posts as athletics directors (Berkowitz & Upton). Although Hollis spent his entire career working in college athletics, he was nationally renowned in the athletics industry for his entrepreneurial initiatives, such as hosting a hockey game against rival University of Michigan in the football stadium rather than the indoor hockey arena, and arranging for a basketball game on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson in San Diego Bay. Brandon took a different path to becoming the leader of Michigan’s athletics department. As the former chief executive officer of Domino’s Pizza, Brandon had donated millions to the university and served on its board of regents for 8 years before coming the athletics director.
Hollis and Brandon were both tapped for the most senior position in the athletics department of their respective universities because of their relevant work experience, and they each stood to personally gain from the role. Hollis stood to earn nearly $400,000 in 2011, while Brandon signed a contract with Michigan worth more than $700,000 a year. Such lofty salaries came with high expectations: to produce winning teams, promote a culture of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) compliance, negotiate television deals, solicit donations from boosters and alumni, manage coaches, and bridge the divide between athletics and academics. Hollis has spent time in the living room of Magic Johnson to raise money, and Brandon had to deal with the fallout from the football coach violating NCAA rules. Navigating such a range of responsibilities has never been more difficult for an athletics director. Three short years after Brandon’s appointment, he resigned amid “growing controversy over his attitude toward fans and Michigan’s traditions” (Snyder & Jesse, 2014, p. 1). As of spring 2016, Hollis continues to lead Michigan State’s athletics department.

Why has Mark Hollis been more effective at leading the athletics department at Michigan State than Dave Brandon was at Michigan? Why were the initiatives that Hollis put forth more broadly accepted than those that Brandon implemented at Michigan? Was Hollis more adept at working with academic and athletics leaders, or did he enjoy the confidence of other stakeholders, such as boosters and the board of trustees? This excerpt on the tenures of Hollis and Brandon sheds light on the complexity of leading an athletics department. Both individuals were highly qualified to lead the athletics department, yet undefined forces enabled one athletics director to succeed, while other forces led to the
demise of the other. If these leaders had been more aware of the political, social, and economic forces at hand, could they have been more effective leaders and successfully implemented agendas to change their athletics departments? How do athletics directors make choices in the face of so many challenges and forces?

**Statement of the Problem**

Research regarding athletics directors in higher education disproportionately focuses on the responsibilities of the athletics director, the pressures of the leadership position, the characteristics and behaviors of these leaders, and the organizational culture of athletics departments (Copeland & Kirsch, 1995; Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996; Duderstadt, 2009; Frey, 1982a; Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Scott, 1997; Yusof, 1998). These studies explain the responsibilities of the athletics director and what types of behavior and organizational culture lead to better functioning departments. However, there has been relatively little research on the forces that influence athletics directors’ leadership or their ability to implement change agendas.

Many scholars of college athletics conclude their reports or book volumes with recommendations for better understanding athletics director leadership, college athletics broadly, and reforms these leaders should implement. Below is a selection of quotes that map the challenges scholars interpret as a hindrance to understanding athletics directors:

- "It is extremely difficult to ‘unpack’ financial statements in athletics, and many, many people misunderstand the full financial implications of decisions to compete at various levels of play." (Shulman & Bowen, 2001, p. 290)

- "The forces external to the college or university affecting intercollegiate athletics are immense and are not neatly categorized or ordered. Commerce, culture, laws and regulations, collaborative structures, and the politics of their interaction cumulated over time make prospects for rightsizing athletics daunting at best." (Estler & Nelson, 2005, p. 105)
If the current movement for reform within intercollegiate athletics is to succeed, athletic directors must first help develop a philosophy and model of intercollegiate athletics. This would include a reexamination of the goals, values, and priorities of institutional programs and intercollegiate athletics nationally and reaffirm a proper role of athletics within university life. (Lapchick & Slaughter, 1989, p. 198)

These scholars pinpoint the barriers to understanding athletics director leadership. Due to the isolation of the athletics department from the greater university, only a few on campuses are fully acquainted with the operations of college athletics. This structure limits the knowledge of the department’s operation to the few who run it. Furthermore, an unwieldy number of forces affect institutional leaders, and those forces are neither easy to fully grasp nor to navigate. Lastly, in the face of these circumstances, athletics directors are expected to lead reform for their department and college athletics broadly. The literature that seeks to explain how athletics directors react to these forces is virtually nonexistent.

The Study of Athletics Directors in College Athletics

The research literature on college athletics directors has received little attention in the higher education literature. Almost all the published research and commentary specific to athletics directors are part of broader histories and surveys of college athletics. The importance of the athletics director to the governance of the athletics department, and the university or college more broadly, has been consistency exposed and well documented by many scholars (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Chu, 1989; Clotfelter, 2011; Duderstadt, 2009; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Frey, 1982b; Lapchick, 2006; Lapchick & Slaughter, 1989; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 2004; Thelin, 1994; Toma, 2003; Toma & Kramer, 2009; Yost, 2010).
Scholars have consistently approached college athletics from a perspective of evaluation and commentary on its relevance and role to the broader academy. Buried in these observations are perspectives on the athletics director and his or her relation to broader issues such as commercialization, scandals and misbehavior, and governance tensions. The problem remains that many of these scholars do not specifically consider the role of the athletics director.

Several researchers have considered the role of the athletics director from a behavioral and traits perspective, examining the types of leaders that lead athletics departments. Most of these scholars have examined athletic director leadership through the transactional/transformational leadership perspective (Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996; Kent & Chelladurai, 2001; Kim, 2010; Peache, Burton, & Wells, 2014; Pruijin & Boucher, 1995; Welty Peache & Burton, 2011; Yusof, 1998). Most of these studies indicate that the leadership style of athletics directors determines how well they partner with others, and largely influences the climate and success of the organization. Though previous researchers have found what types of leaders best lead athletics departments, there remains a gap in explaining how forces internal and external to the athletics department affect athletic director leadership.

Researchers specifically examining the extent, impact, and implications of environmental forces within college athletics have primarily focused on the shift in institutional control (Chu, 1989; Frey, 1982b, 1987; Gilley & Hickey, 1986; Grant, 1979; Hardy & Berryman, 1982; Smith, 1983). Armstrong-Doherty (1995) suggested that the primary concern of scholars has been to unpack how and why there has been a shift in
control from presidents, faculty, and athletic boards to the external control of alumni, boosters, and corporate sponsors. “Many attribute the academic compromises, recruiting violations, and exploitation of athletes in American colleges to that control [shift], which is often believed to be linked to financial control” (Armstrong-Doherty, p. 76). The scholarship considering the environmental forces that affect college athletics remains limited. Even less is known about how these forces influence the leadership and governance of athletics directors. It seems important to explore how the various forces continually pointed out by scholars of college athletics influence athletics director leadership.

The Importance of Athletics Directors to Reform in College Athletics

Athletics directors have been cited by many higher education research studies as pivotal in the operation, and arguably more important for the reform, of college athletics. As Duderstadt (2009) explains, athletics director responsibilities cover a broad range of skills:

Leadership, fiscal management, personnel relations, public relations, and, perhaps most important, a deep understanding and acceptance of academic values...many (presidents) also seek leadership committed to better integrating intercollegiate athletics with other activities of the university rather than building independent empires. (p. 246)

In spite of the numerous responsibilities of athletics directors, it is well established that athletics directors must also be prepared to lead the reform of their own departments and the entire field more broadly. Bowen and Levin (2003) explain that the quality and priorities of the athletics director in many ways determine whether reform can take place. Those individuals who are committed to the educational standards of universities serve to diminish the ever-widening gap between athletics and academics. Yet, as many scholars
point out, not all athletics directors have the perspective to diminish the overbearing nature of athletics on the academy; this often leads to athletics directors who are out of sync with presidents, boards of trustees, and other actors who seek to improve college athletics.

As Bowen and Levin (2003) explain, “the tendency to be collegial can be overdone, and seeking paths that will appeal to everyone within the institution can lead to what someone referred to as ‘nibbling around the reform agenda, without really addressing it’” (p. 320). Further examination of the available literature on college athletics reveals that almost all scholars who write on this topic offer their own perspectives on reforms. Each scholar cites what is necessary in order for the enterprise to “return” to a form that does not continually drive a wedge between itself and academia. What is glaringly missing in most of these treatments by scholars is an examination of how and why athletics directors struggle to implement change agendas. Perhaps further examination of the forces that influence athletics directors will provide greater insight into why reform in college athletics historically has been incredibly difficult. This study is a reaction to the inadequacies of prior research on athletics directors and an interpretation of the need to understand how these individuals govern. This study also offers a different perspective from previous scholars who have examined these leaders.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate and gain insight into the environmental forces that disrupted and influenced athletics director leadership. This study explored how the participants understood, acknowledged, and reacted to forces that
unavoidably influenced their choices. Particular attention was placed on comprehending how these individuals led change in their organizations while at the same time balanced the intersecting demands on their positions.

**Research Questions**

The primary research questions that guided this study were as follows: What are the forces that influence college and university athletics directors at Division I institutions as they implement organizational change agendas? Additional questions guided the study as well: To what do participants attribute their successes and failures as leaders? What do participants interpret as impediments to reform in college athletics? How do participants view themselves as agents of change in athletics on their campus and throughout higher education more broadly? How do participants perceive the impact of external actors on their leadership? How have their agendas changed from the time of their appointment to their current leadership?

**Importance of the Study**

College athletics reform movements spanning almost 90 years have been remarkably consistent. They never reformed much of anything. (Byers & Hammer, 1995, p. 337)

In the preceding quote, Walter Byers, who served as executive director of the NCAA for nearly 40 years, criticized the viability of college athletics to police and reform its operation and governance. Byers went on to explain that the NCAA has repeatedly, throughout its entire existence, sought to constrain athletics, but that in its attempt to implement reform, the organization has only accelerated the growth of college athletics.

The NCAA is not alone in its failure to implement reform; member institutions
that comprise the NCAA have also failed to make fundamental change to prevent the widening gap between athletics and academics. Chu (1989) explains that many of the failures are derivative of the governance tensions that have existed throughout the history of college athletics. The struggle for the governance of college athletics between the faculty, presidents, boards of trustees, and boosters has led to leadership gridlock or the hijacking of the agenda by the most influential individuals. Yet, in the midst of these governance battles sits the athletics director, who is frequently cited by scholars as the singular individual responsible for the day-to-day governance and integrity of the athletics department as well as its vision. This study revealed how athletics directors managed their responsibilities within an environment that incessantly sought to influence their leadership and choices.

Athletics directors across all divisions of college athletics stand to gain from this study, as it presents qualitative reflections on the experiences of their colleagues. This study is a departure from previous research that either examines athletics directors from only a broad perspective or focuses on the leadership traits of these individuals. Examining the forces that influence athletics directors will begin to paint a broader picture as to how these professionals navigate environmental forces.

It is not useful to wish for a return to a time when college athletics was untainted; such a time simply did not exist. Yet, there is a very real need for leaders of athletics to be stewards of the broader enterprise, and to understand how these leaders influence athletics’ relationship with higher education. Despite sometimes competing perspectives on the appropriateness of intercollegiate athletics, understanding the forces that influence
athletics directors is critical to informing this profession and enabling meaningful change.

**Definitions and Related Concepts**

Below are definitions and personal interpretations of terms used throughout this dissertation:

*Athletics director:* An administrator at an institution of higher education who oversees and is responsible for the work of coaches and related staff involved in the operation of the athletics department.

*College athletics:* Term used to describe collegiate- and university-level sponsorship of sports as part of intercollegiate competition among higher education institutions.

*Forces:* Term used to attribute meaning to the broad spectrum of intersecting relationships and environments that influence the decisions, outlook, and capacity of athletics directors.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

Literature related to the forces that affect athletics director leadership and organizational change agendas is reviewed and discussed in Chapter Two. Chapter Three describes the methodological approach as well as the data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter Four discusses the findings from the analysis of the interviews, and finally in Chapter Five the conclusions and implications from this study are discussed. A list of the references cited throughout the dissertation and the appendices follow the final chapter.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter presents an extensive overview and analysis of the literature related to the forces that affect athletics director leadership and organizational change agendas. First is a review of the seminal research on the history and evolution of college athletics within higher education. Second is an overview of contemporary issues in college athletics, specifically the academic and athletic divide, commercialization and economic forces, and scandals and misbehavior. Third, the seminal work on cultural and organizational dynamics of athletics departments is reviewed. Lastly, the literature on leadership and governance in intercollegiate athletics considers how governance influences athletics directors across postsecondary campuses.

History and Evolution of Athletics in Higher Education

Early History

College athletics has long been a complex endeavor that is riddled with challenges. In fact, the very first intercollegiate athletics competition—a contest between the rowing crews of Harvard and Yale in 1852—contained many of the same challenges and limitations that face college athletics today (Frey, 1982b; Harper & Donnor, 2017; Lapchick, 2006; Smith, 2000). According to Sperber (2004), the competition between Harvard and Yale was highly commercialized, and Harvard was accused of cheating. The boat race itself was not at the behest of the institutions but rather of James Elkins, the superintendent of the Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad. Elkins, in exchange for
financial compensation to Harvard and Yale, hosted the boat race on Lake
Winnipesaukee, which was a significant distance from both institutions, and used the
opportunity to promote selling land in the area to fans of the boat race (Smith).
Furthermore, the competition was the first instance of the subversion of fair play. Yale
questioned the eligibility of Harvard’s coxswain, contending he had already graduated
from Harvard, rendering him “ineligible” from participating in the event (Frey, 1982b;
Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 2004). The shift from the intramural model of
intracollegiate competition to a model of intercollegiate competition between institutions
set in motion a legacy in which stakeholders sought to influence the direction of college
athletics (Flowers, 2009). As this chapter will reveal, administrators, faculty, students,
alumni, and external actors each seek to influence the direction of athletics on and off
campus, and these stakeholders exert incredible amounts of time, energy, and money to
push athletics in a particular direction (Frey; Shulman & Bowen).

In the 19th century student groups were the first to sponsor and conduct
championships, outline rules of play, and determine eligibility of players, but the control
of college athletics shifted as institutional leaders recognized the value and challenges of
athletics on campus (Frey, 1982b). The shift occurred because student-sponsored
intercollegiate sports became very popular, and students found themselves in control of
prestigious organizations that were producing significant revenue. In fact, by 1889, the
Yale–Princeton football game had revenues of $25,000 in gate receipts, equivalent to
$665,150 in 2015 dollars (Frey; Friedman, 2016). Consequently, alumni and presidents
considered the value of these athletics events too important to be controlled by students.
The revenue and prestige gained on the field had the potential to build the reputation of an institution. Therefore, administrators and alumni wanted exclusive control to determine the course of athletics in higher education (Flowers, 2009).

Just as the commercialization of the early student-run athletic contests pushed administrators to seek authority, the violence and frequent death of football players also pushed administrators to seek greater control. The violence and death on campuses became so prevalent that they prompted US President Theodore Roosevelt to summon the presidents and football coaches of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton to the White House to alter the course of play (Fleisher, Goff, & Tollison, 1992; Thelin, 1994; Watterson, 1995). Roosevelt, a former player at Harvard and long-time supporter of Harvard football, often defended the virtues of the violence in the sport. However, he could no longer publicly protect the sport because of the public outcry over the deaths occurring in football (Washington, 2004). Roosevelt hoped that through meeting with the coaches and presidents of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, he would encourage these leaders to reform the sport, improve presidential control, and prevent it from being banned from campus. The meeting ended with a signed pledge to end the violence in the sport and encourage sportsmanlike conduct, but, in fact, the meeting did little to reduce violence in football (Carter, 2006; Watterson).

The reform efforts by President Roosevelt and university leaders were finally heeded following the death of a Union College football player. The Chancellor of New York University, Henry M. McCraken, summoned leaders from 62 institutions to discuss three things: “should football be abandoned, if not what reforms are necessary to
eliminate its objectionable features, if so, what substitute would you suggest to take its place?” (Smith, 2000, p. 399). Although Roosevelt was not part of these meetings, he encouraged Harvard’s coach, Bill Reid, to accept reforms to the rules of the game in order to prevent the banning of football. In fact, a ban of football was a real threat, as the Harvard faculty had voted to ban the sport unless a series of demands were met to alter the play of the sport (Watterson, 1995). At the meeting called by McCraken, the Intercollegiate Athletic Associations of the United Sates (IAAUS) was born to govern the rules of college athletics (Lazaroff, 2007; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Thelin, 1994; Watterson). Harvard, Princeton, and Yale chose not to initially join the association (which would ultimately become the NCAA) because of a desire to maintain control of their own athletics organizations (Watterson). Established to usher in reform, the IAAUS did alter the rules of play to limit the violence on the gridiron, but it did little to change the administrative governance of college athletics. According to Thelin, football coaches were more concerned with the rules that governed play than with reforms that would alter “administrative control or the structural and financial place of college sports within American universities” (Thelin, p. 16).

The period between 1890 and 1910, which saw the commercialization of football and the need for rules to safeguard the lives of players, was when intercollegiate competition became institutionalized in higher education (Thelin, 2011). The athletics programs on campus were professionalized, shifting from loosely organized student- and alumni-driven organizations to ones controlled by an athletics director and coaches with faculty and administrative oversight (Rosner & Shropshire, 2004). The shift of oversight
from students to the institution was pivotal in establishing a model of governance that still dominates college athletics today. Shulman and Bowen (2001) argue that institutionalizing college sports has protected this enterprise under the auspices of education, setting the precedent for the inevitable conflict over the role and value of athletics on higher education campuses:

No other historical development in intercollegiate athletics has been as influential, or as subtle, as the progressive institutionalization of the athletic clubs that students once ran. In institutionalizing these programs, the schools have, in effect, declared, “this is something that we do.” This act of assuming ownership of the goals, values, and norms associated with college sports in a way that has allowed the athletic enterprise to have access to the inner chambers where the educational mission of the school is defined and pursued. (p. 9)

The institutionalization of college athletics was not widely embraced by all members of campus; faculty, administrators, and alumni all sought to influence athletics in divergent ways, as they hoped to protect what they viewed as most integral and important to education or athletics.

At the turn of the 20th century, the shift in the governance of athletics from students to administrators motivated alumni and faculty to reestablish authority over athletics. Alumni realized they were losing influence over athletics. As a result, the very first boosters of athletics traded money for influence over the direction of athletics policies (Frey, 1982b; Thelin, 2011). In contrast, faculty formed groups to raise awareness of the perceived “evil” of athletics on college and university campuses, concerned that the abuses of “(1) professionalism, including the tendency to hire coaches and recruit athletes, (2) increasing the size and mismanagement of finances, (3) lack of sportsmanship, (4) glorification of athletics over academics, (5) derivative evils such as
drunkenness and gambling” all would undermine the academic core of institutions (Frey, p. 20). As Frey explains, the competing interests of faculty and boosters had several effects: they not only eliminated students from controlling the destiny of athletics on higher education campuses, but they situated presidents as the fiduciary power determining the role and prominence of athletics on campus. Positioned to negate the ill effects of athletics on college campuses, presidents remained pinched between the desire to use college athletics to promote institutional reputation through sport and the fear of athletics dominating academics on campus. Few presidents were able to indulge in the latter without committing political suicide (Frey; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Thelin, 1994).

The popularization of athletics on college campuses in the early 20th century led to the emergence of the athletics director position as the national model for the leadership and operation of athletics programs. This model began at the University of Chicago in 1892, where President William Rainey Harper created the position of “athletics director” for its famous football coach, Alonzo Stagg (Carter, 2006; Thelin, 1994). Yale University followed suit, where former football player Walter Camp became the athletics director, holding a higher position than faculty on campus (Carter). Camp’s tenure as athletics director set a national precedent for how athletics programs would operate. Camp directed money from alumni into the football team, pushing the team to national prominence, a “strategy that allowed a coach and athletics director to gain leverage over both student groups and academic officials” (Thelin, 2011, p. 179). His decision to funnel the majority of money to the football team established a model for the distribution of resources. Coaches from other sports felt that the distribution of money was unfair, yet
Camp’s practice to prioritize football was universally adopted by other athletics directors (Mahony, Hums, & Riemer, 2002; Thelin, 1994). Camp, among other athletics directors, recognized the value and power advantage of maintaining a competitive and well-funded football team. The influence and power gained by Camp and his fellow athletics directors and boosters solidified the authority of these stakeholders in college athletics and diminished the capacity of faculty to hold the programs accountable to the educational mission of a school.

The consolidation of power over athletics among college administrators and presidents set the stage for competing interests among stakeholders, placing pressure on leaders to choose policies that would determine the academic and athletic balance on campus. Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton in the early 1900s, articulated the dilemma faced by presidents of higher education, describing athletics as the “sideshow,” a rising tide about to drown the “circus” of education, “leaving the main tent to whistle for their audiences, discouraged and humiliated” (Frey, 1982b, p. 20). Yet other presidents saw real value in supporting athletics. President William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago believed that college athletics was an opportunity to build a collegiate culture among students on campus. He believed that “rooting for the college team, would unite students in a common cause and create the bonds so integral to college life historically…loyalty to the team as a central feature of college athletics and one of its greatest contributions to academic life” (Bachin, 2001, p. 94). The emergence of the NCAA and the Carnegie Report of 1929 paradoxically showed that Wilson and Harper were both right and wrong.
The NCAA and the Carnegie Report

Presidents, hoping to allay the fears of faculty members and reduce the shadow that athletics cast over the educational standards of institutions, pushed for institutions to form athletics associations. In 1910, the IAAUS was renamed the NCAA, a move intended to promote faculty control and educational standards as well as to reflect a departure from focusing on the rules of play, which was the primary concern of the IAAUS (Lazaroff, 2007). As a national organization, the NCAA could “bring some sense of order to the often chaotic scheduling of college athletics events, and to give college athletics some degree of public and academic respectability” (Peach, 2007, p. 13). The NCAA grew quickly during the early 20th century, sponsoring national championships for several sports. But with the growth of the organization came new challenges. Lazaroff explains that as membership grew in the NCAA, it became “evident that reliance upon voluntary compliance by NCAA member institutions would not solve the myriad problems created by the dramatic expansion of intercollegiate athletics and the financial opportunities such growth presented” (p. 2). The NCAA lacked any real mechanism to enforce the rules and regulations set forth by the organization. The Carnegie Report of 1929 confirmed that the NCAA lacked enforcement power; the report revealed that members of the NCAA consistently violated rules and that an environment of malfeasance permeated all of college athletics.

The NCAA in 1926 invited the Carnegie Foundation and its primary investigator, Howard Savage, to issue a report on the state of intercollegiate athletics and its relation to education in the modern university (Thelin, 1994). The growth of the NCAA and
intercollegiate athletics more broadly led to more critical attention of college athletics by those in higher education, as increases in the commercialization of sport influenced how athletics were governed (Smith, 2000). The report concluded that the commercialization of athletics had indeed corrupted the educational values of institutions:

A change of values is needed in a field that is sodden with the commercial and the material and the vested interests that these forces have created. Commercialism in college athletics must be diminished and college sport must rise to a point where it is esteemed primarily and sincerely for the opportunities it affords to mature youth. (Smith, p. 13)

Thelin (1994) explains that the Carnegie Report also found that outside interest from alumni and boosters resulted in several consequences: it placed commercial pressure on sports, threatened academic integrity, and questioned both whether athletics actually builds character and how boosters should influence athletics programs. In the face of these circumstances, the Carnegie Report advocated for institutions to take control of student clubs and for faculty to provide oversight of the governance of such programs.

As Smith (2000) explains, the Carnegie Report also exposed how commercialism in athletics occurred at the behest of administrators and diminished the academic values of universities and colleges. The purpose of athletics was no longer to just build strong bodies for the students who played the games; instead, the Report identified the interests of alumni, presidents, trustees, faculty, and the media as contributing to the growth and importance of athletics. According to Thelin (1994), the Report found that the importance placed on athletics by competing interests laid bare the real source of conflict and controversy:

The pervasiveness of such conditions muted any claims that big-time college sports had “educational value” and led to the conclusion that “naturally, then, the desire for power and influence is the source of most controversies over athletic
The commercialism identified by the Carnegie Report continued to be problematic as the NCAA grew and the sponsorship of athletics by institutions became more complicated. The Carnegie Report offered reforms, and while some institutions like the University of Chicago took drastic steps to preserve their educational model by abandoning their successful football team, most institutions embraced the commercialism that accompanied the sponsorship and growth of their athletics programs (Smith, 2000; Thelin, 1994). According to Smith, many of the themes in the Carnegie Report continue to echo in today’s college sports; and while the report concluded that presidents and other administrators “could change the policies permitting commercialized and professionalized athletics,” this has not occurred (p. 14).

**Commercialization and Reform in College Athletics**

By 1942, the NCAA had 314 member institutions and had entered a modern era in which it dominated the governance of college athletics. Its membership represented the most successful and powerful athletics programs, and the organization itself had the most extensive resources to fund a large staff and organizational infrastructure (Estler & Nelson, 2005). Yet, despite these advantages, the NCAA was unable to prevent the cycle of pervasive abuses in football, as schools continually ignored established rules, to the detriment of fair play and the integrity of higher education. To confront the pervasive abuses, the “Sanity Code” was introduced in 1947 as a way to temper violations and ongoing debates over institutions offering student-athletes financial aid (Fleisher et al., 1992). Sack and Staurowsky (1998) explain that this policy provided strict guidelines for
how students were to receive financial aid, but that it also permitted off-campus recruiting, resulting in the systematic deregulation of college athletics. Estler and Nelson offer another perspective, explaining that the Sanity Code can be interpreted in two ways: “the sanity code either opened the flood-gates to professionalizing college sports, or acknowledged and put constraints on existing practices” (p. 29). The Sanity Code was ultimately short-lived, as members threatened to withdraw from the NCAA because the only recourse for rule violations was expulsion from the organization. Despite the failure of the Sanity Code, the NCAA solidified its position as a cartel-like organization controlling a majority of the policies and procedures of college athletics.

With the end of World War II and the passage of the G.I. Bill, campuses across the United States were flooded with new students enrolling at universities and colleges with an appetite for learning and engaging in the excitement of playing and watching college sports (Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, & Finney, 2012). By 1950, the NCAA further established its dominance as a national organization when it hired the first full-time executive director. The organization by this time controlled television rights, national tournaments, rules enforcement, and governance of postseason football games (Tow, 1982). Fleisher et al. (1992) found that during this period the NCAA transitioned from a rule-making organization to one designed as a trade-restricting cartel; the NCAA effectively controlled all aspects of college sports—most significantly the revenues from televised football and basketball games.

Between 1951 and 1984 the NCAA monopolized control over television rights for broadcasting college athletics competitions. Fleisher et al. (1992) and Smith (2000) found
the emergence of the NCAA as a strong enforcement authority was a product of the growing demand for college sports and the NCAA’s ability to control the revenues generated from TV broadcast. These scholars explain that under the leadership of the NCAA’s executive director Walter Byers, the expansion of college sports and the reliance on the NCAA as the governing body positioned the organization to continue to expand and maximize revenues from the success of sports programs. Byers strengthened the enforcement policies of the NCAA and its financial position by leveraging the commercial opportunities presented by radio and later television (Smith). However, by 1984, member institutions challenged the NCAA’s control over the broadcast rights. The Supreme Court case *NCAA v. University of Oklahoma* ruled that the NCAA had to relinquish its authority over the negotiation and distribution of television rights of college sports. This court ruling opened the door for schools and conferences to negotiate their own television contracts, completely changing the commercial rights landscape in college sports (Peach, 2007). Smith explains that the strongest athletics programs in the United States were able to “funnel more television revenues in their direction, which has led to increases in other forms of revenue in their direction, which has lead to increases in other forms of revenue” which has unbalanced the playing field (Smith, 2000, p. 19).

Lazaroff (2007) found that the continued liberalization of the NCAA eroded the enforcement of this governing body and incentivized institutions to bend the rules in favor of winning:

Despite “ever more detailed regulations,” and increased enforcement efforts by the NCAA, schools throughout the nation “devised new ways to pay their athletes on the side.” The increased commercialization of intercollegiate sports and the opportunity to reap vast amounts of revenue from successful football and basketball programs created significant incentives for schools to do whatever they could to maximize athletic success. The NCAA, with a revised
enforcement mechanism and rules addressing student-athlete eligibility, “capping” financial inducements, limiting transfers, and penalizing “under-the-table payments,” created the foundation for “today's corporate college sport.” (p. 3)

Smith (2000) found that member institutions criticized the NCAA for failing to adequately navigate the commercialization of athletics and instead acting as an impartial enforcement and regulation body; “it was criticized for responding inadequately to the increased commercialization of intercollegiate athletics, with all its attendant excesses; [and], it was criticized for unfairly exercising its regulatory authority” (p. 16). According to Fleisher et al. (1992), the NCAA’s cartel-like behavior meant that “member schools do not benefit equally from every new restraint and differing participants (school presidents, athletics directors, coaches, and players) are not equally affected by cartel decisions” (Fleisher et al., p. 36).

This theme of failed impartiality has historically defined the role of the NCAA as the governing body of college athletics. Smith (2000) explains that over the past 30 years, the NCAA has evolved to not only enforce rules and regulations but also to position itself to control the commercialization of college athletics. Fleisher et al. (1992) found that the NCAA’s pursuit of controlling the input (rules) and the output (revenue) reinforced its cartel-like behavior, diminishing the ability of any one school to achieve its true market value. Furthermore, this inequity extended to the policies of the NCAA and college athletics programs. It was not until the 1972 passage of Title IX, the first legislation to force these organizations to provide equitable opportunities for women in college athletics, that the power and policies of the NCAA and college athletics organizations were at least partially checked. The emergence of equity in sport not only affected the
governance of athletics but also how it was funded. Supporting women’s athletics placed a heavier burden on the NCAA and athletics departments to generate revenue from men’s sports (particularly football and basketball) to cover the expenses of sponsoring women’s sports.

In the decades leading up to 2000 and into the 21st century, the relationship between the NCAA and its member institutions continued to be defined by governance and economic issues (Duderstadt, 2009; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Smith, 2000). In 2002, it was found that Division I institutions that sponsored football spent on average $23,200,000 on this team (Fulks, 2002). The enormous sums of money required to fund a single college athletics team put increasing pressure on college institutions to maximize revenues, which in turn increased the strain on the NCAA as it sought to regulate commercialism and enforce rules. However, as Smith points out,

> The meteoric rises in television and related revenues, the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics has continued to grow at a pace that places significant strain on institutions and the NCAA. These commercial pressures, together with increasing costs related to non-revenue producing sports, costly gender equity requirements, and other resource demands (e.g., new facilities), make it challenging to maintain a viable enforcement process and a balanced playing field. (p. 21)

The history of college athletics in the American higher education system makes it clear that the challenges that existed during the very first collegiate boat race between Harvard and Yale have continued to define and shape the enterprise over its century-long evolution. The union between athletics and academics at colleges and universities around the country was one that began at the fringes, with students, and then became internalized as administrators and presidents recognized both the value and challenges that came
with the sponsorship of athletics. The strain over the appropriate relationship, purpose, and prominence of athletics and academics moved higher education as a whole toward greater oversight and sponsorship of athletics, but it did so at the cost of increased commercialization. In the sections that follow, it will become apparent that many of the economic and governance challenges that so frequently defined the evolution of college athletics persist today as forces acting upon those who lead these departments on college campuses.

**Contemporary Issues in College Athletics**

This section considers several relevant contemporary issues in college athletics related to athletics directors. The issues to be addressed include the academic and athletic divide that has complicated the role of athletics directors on higher education campuses, the commercialization and economic forces that influence athletics directors, and the scandals and misbehavior of athletics directors.

**Academics & Athletics Divide**

Scholars of college athletics have sought to understand the origin and role of sport within the academic setting of higher education (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Clotfelter, 2011; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Thelin, 1994). Both historical and contemporary scholarly research perspectives regard college athletics as a phenomenon that is wholly connected to, yet simultaneously disconnected from, the academic mission of higher education institutions. Scholars of this field have pinpointed this paradox as a phenomenon that exists across a multitude of higher education campuses. The coexistence of athletics and academics at postsecondary institutions has complicated the missions and identities of
schools of higher learning. Thelin explains this paradox:

A check of institutional accreditation self-studies, mission statements, and annual reports suggests that an American university seldom discusses intercollegiate athletics as part of primary purposes of teaching, research and service. The irony of this stance is that, for many universities, big-time athletics stand out as a central activity, a program likely to be protected and promoted. (p. 2)

Clotfelter reinforces this premise, explaining that despite higher education’s formative role in society broadly, colleges and universities continue to be most universally recognized and understood through the visible role of athletics. Chu (1982) explains that the collective consciousness of society does not question the connection between athletics and the academic priorities of an institution; nor does it question if sports belong in the educational system. Yet, despite higher education being characterized by athletics, “the academic side of universities seem not to recognize athletics as a significant part of universities, but outside of universities” (Frey, 1987, p. 40). Scholars have focused on the inherent divide between athletics and academics and the justification for sports in higher education in order to understand how these two entities interact and shape one another (Bowen & Levin; Clotfelter; Estler & Nelson; Thelin).

Institutional and stakeholder values have shaped the scholarly investigation of academics and athletics, just as competing interests have led to varying interpretations of the conflict between education and sports in higher education. Despite the multitude of stakeholder interpretations of the problems between athletics and academics, the discussion of the appropriate relationship of these two entities demonstrates that they have been inextricably linked since the early 20th century. Scholars have examined this divide between the academic mission and college athletics from two points of view:
first, to justify the presence of college sports on higher education campuses, and second, to express concern about the sophistication of sport and its ability to widen the gap between education and athletics (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Clotfelter, 2011; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Thelin, 1994).

Clotfelter (2011) identified four constants that institutions use to justify the role of athletics within higher education: (a) education—evoking the Greek notion that athletics can educate both mind and body; (b) money—athletics programs are sources of revenue for the institution; (c) public visibility—athletics offers institutions the opportunity for national recognition and prominence due to the athletic feats of their student-athletes; and (d) institutional allegiance—the student body’s rallying behind athletics builds a sense of community and unity when supporting their school’s athletics teams.

Clotfelter (2011) points out that these justifications are neither as simplistic as they appear nor completely accurate descriptions of what occurs on college and university campuses. Scholars have examined institutional allegiance as a contributing factor for alumni financial support to be mostly ambiguous (Sperber, 2000; Thelin, 1994; Zimbalist, 1999). Additionally, Toma and Cross (1998) found that the public visibility gained through athletics did not necessarily translate into higher enrollment numbers. Similarly, public visibility due to athletics did not necessarily lead to improvements in the academic quality of applicants or to increased levels of donations by alumni. As cited in Lapchick (2006), in a meta-analysis of 13 studies, Frank (2004) found that “individual institutions that decided to invest more money in their sports programs in the hope of raising more funds or improving their applicant pools may be throwing good money after
bad, and would be wiser to spend the money in other ways” (p. 46).

However, Toma (2003) found that institutions that invest in a national brand through athletics can provide a boost to reputation and visibility that positively affects faculty hiring, alumni giving, and student enrollments. Yet Toma warned that there can be negative externalities to this increase in visibility, because athletics scandals can undermine giving and enrollments. The justifications for athletics within the scholarly literature are opaque at best, interpreted by scholars as a part of higher education that is best left to the judgment of the multitude of stakeholders who argue for and against the place of athletics within higher education. This push and pull between the various stakeholders continues to widen the gap between athletics and academics (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Chu, 1989).

Bowen and Levin’s (2003) investigation of conferences (the Ivy League, the University Athletic Association, and the New England Small College Athletic Conference) comprised of highly selective institutions revealed that even in lower-stakes athletics environments (Division III, nonscholarship Division I institutions), athletics have widened the gap between the academic and athletics mission of institutions. The sophistication of athletics at this level—such as the specialization of athletes and coaches, the allure of national championships, and interactions with Title IX—have led to issues of underprepared recruits, clustering of athletes in particular fields of study, and underperformance in the classroom.

The alignment and misalignment of values between athletics and academics has been considered a leadership question for scholars (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Clotfelter,
In examining leadership styles and structures, the marriage of athletics and academics on higher education campuses has been found to be inherently at odds. Academia is a model where successful leadership “becomes an exercise in persuasion rather than in top-down command and control” and communication styles depend on the independence of thought and contributions of faculty (Clotfelter, p. 40). Athletics, however, is a highly commercialized, business-like operation that exists in a for-profit environment where the cost of supporting athletics most likely exceeds any profits gained. The contrast in philosophies of academia and athletics is found even within its operating structure, no doubt a reason why a gap exists between these two entities.

The gap between athletics and academics extends beyond the structural differences. Toma and Kramer (2009) attributed this gap to a conflict of identity. In other words, the tension between academics and athletics goes beyond physical differences; instead, it is an “identity conflict” that persists and inhibits effective reform agendas. Toma and Kramer argue that the reform efforts by administrators have failed to account for culture of athletics, the commercialization of the athletic enterprise, and how that enterprise relates to the traditional educational values of an institution. Toma and Kramer argue that the conflict in identity arises because too often administrators interpret athletics and academics as distinct, when in reality “academic values are part of athletics, just as there is a business side to academe. So both sides must also contend with an internal struggle, not just one between them, in answering the ‘who are we?’ question” (p. 112). Athletics directors more than ever face pressure to unify the mission of athletics and academics. These individuals have “found themselves stuck in the middle of a
smoldering debate: defending a besieged model while acknowledging athletes deserve more, including a strong voice in decisions impact their welfare” (Rittenberg, 2014, p. 1). This pressure forced athletics directors in the Power-5 conferences to adopt reforms designed to reduce the time demands of the student-athletes (New, 2013). These initiatives acknowledge and seek to remedy the imbalance between athletics and academics, but ultimately how athletic directors’ handles this balance signals their priorities.

Managing this dual identity at higher education institutions is where the quality of leadership is revealed. Those leaders who are able to manage dueling identities by deemphasizing conflict between missions and finding productive synergies among academe, business, and athletics are the ones who emerge with missions most similarly aligned. Toma and Kramer explain that this can be a symbiotic relationship for leaders on campus and the broader institution:

Athletics rely on academe for legitimacy, and spectator sports serve the commercial and communal needs of institutions. These mutual uses are important, making synergy a critical strategy in both academe and athletics; managing (and even embracing) various dilemmas and paradoxes associated with dual-identity organizations is critical. (p. 114)

The history of college athletics as chronicled by scholars points to the uniqueness of the partnership between the academy and athletics. Yet this partnership has been fraught with unexpected challenges, as the educational mission often is deemed under threat by the expansion of and importance placed on athletics. As scholars (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Clotfelter, 2011; Estler & Nelson, 2005) have pointed out, the inherent divide between academics and athletics has continued to grow, as issues of commercialization, societal norms, and scandal continue to reframe the role of athletics.
within higher education. Responsibility for the roles of athletics and academics ultimately falls to those who lead higher education campuses—in other words, presidents, trustees, faculty, and athletics directors. The advocacy needed from these stakeholders becomes complex as commercialization and economic forces motivate these individuals differently, making it challenging to align values and vision for the institution and athletics department.

**Commercialization and Economic Forces**

Commercialization and economic forces that arise from college athletics have influenced how athletics directors make choices and the expectations placed on them by their superiors, alumni, and student-athletes. Scholars (Duderstadt, 2009; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Thelin, 1994; Yost, 2010) have considered the commercialization of college athletics to be the very impetus for the many complications sports impose on college campuses and the difficult choices athletics directors have to make when considering the balance between the need to produce winning teams, to be financially solvent, and to be true to the educational mission of an institution.

Smith (1986) explains that while athletics directors have more financial security than some of the coaches they employ, “they too are expected to produce commercially successful ‘winners’ because the bottom-line of their athletics budget must balance” (p. 1038). The responsibility athletics directors have to their organization and the education mission of the institution becomes challenging because these leaders are expected to be fiscally entrepreneurial in the face of rising costs, especially in an environment where winning at any cost pervades due to its connection to the financial reward of winning
Shulman & Bowen; Toma & Kramer, 2009). Balancing these demands has become increasingly difficult as the stakes continually escalate, but, as Suggs (2006) points out, “throughout the history of collegiate athletics, they [athletics directors] have managed the tension between education and commercialism without promoting enough of an outcry to doom the enterprise” (p. 2). Suggs considers this behavior as evidence that educational leaders have compromised their values. They condemn the pervasive commercialism in college athletics but continue to extend “their hands to collect the financial benefits such commercialism allegedly brings”—all of which contributes to the decline in the “educational values, academic integrity, and public trust in higher education” (p. 59).

Estler and Nelson (2005) explain that intercollegiate programs were always entrepreneurial units on college campuses, setting a precedent for all stakeholders internal and external to college athletics to maximize potential revenue. Beginning with the student organizations in the early 19th century generating substantial revenue, to the multibillion-dollar industry college athletics is today, athletics directors have positioned college athletics as synonymous with the revenues garnered from media, sponsorship, gate receipts, and many other revenue sources (Yost, 2010). The market for college athletics has evolved so substantially that the NCAA in 2010 negotiated a contract with CBS television network to broadcast the March Madness basketball tournament for $11 billion (O'Toole, 2010). This singular deal captures the overall environment of college athletics; where there is money to be generated, institutions, the NCAA, athletic conferences, and external actors will collaborate to maximize revenue, even if this has the potential to undermine the financial well-being of institutions and student-athletes’
academic success (Yost). Deardorff (2000) explains that student-athletes are often the victims of institutions pursuing profits; colleges are now forced to play games at times that television studios deem best for maximizing viewership, “resulting in more lost class time for students, but more television money for the school” (p. 62).

The pursuit of media revenue dominated the attention of athletics directors; the allure of securing sizable sums of money represented an opportunity to guarantee revenues for their departments. Media contract revenue rapidly accelerated between 2004 and 2014; 48 of the 65 schools comprising the top conferences (Power-5) saw revenues nearly double, from $2.67 billion to $4.49 billion (Hobson & Rich, 2015). The sale of broadcast rights in the past five years reached all-time highs for several conferences; the SEC sold its rights for $3 billion over 13 years, the BIG10 for $2.64 billion over six years, and the PAC12 for $3 billion over 12 years (Facher, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2011; Staples, 2016).

Despite sizable increases resulting from media deals, two notable factors that emerged how commercialization complicated athletics. First, despite revenues doubling over the ten-year period from 2004 to 2014, most of the Power-5 institutions spent more money than they generated in revenue (Brady, Berkowitz, & Upton, 2016). These phenomena did not exclusively affect the Power-5 schools; in fact expenses consistently outpaced revenues across all levels of Division 1. In 2015, FBS institutions reported negative net generated revenue of $12.8 million, FCS institutions of -$12.2 million, and 1-AAA institutions of -$11.7 million (Twelve-year trends in Division I athletics finances, 2015). Second, the media revenues garnered by the Power-5 conferences broadened the
financial and competitive divide between these institutions and the rest of Division 1. In a 2015 report by the NCAA, analysis of revenues from the first (high) quartile of FBS institutions compared to the third and fourth (low) quartiles displayed how unbridled commercialization fostered winners and losers. The first quartile institutions had median broadcast rights revenues worth $22.3 million dollars, whereas the schools in the third and fourth quartiles netted media revenues worth, $71,000 and $159,000 respectively (Fulks, 2015). Media revenue contracts have hastened the divide between the Power-5 schools and the rest of Division I. Yet remarkably, commercialization similarly impacted all schools despite the difference in media revenue. This was no new phenomenon—Zimbalist (1999) wrote that in 1996 an NCAA report claimed the typical IA program was $1.2 million in the black, but he explained the headline should have read “Excluding institutional subsidies, typical program is $237,000 in the red” (p. 152). Athletics directors historically overspent the revenues they generated, the only difference appeared to be that the gap created by media revenues has exacerbated the competitive playing field and the pressure to spend money to keep pace with the best athletics programs (Brady et al.).

The influx of cash and continued commercialization spurred student-athletes to question why they (particularly football and basketball players) were not receiving more benefits. More controversial, many student-athletes desired pay for their time of the field, the use of their likenesses, and guaranteed four-year scholarships, among other demands. The concerns of student-athletes about fair treatment took shape in two ways: (1) lawsuits in the U.S. legal system to force the NCAA and its member institutions to change their
behavior and compensate former and current student-athletes, and (2) the adoption of NCAA and conference legislation to provide extra benefits to student-athletes. The later most notably reconciled student-athlete demands by adopting cost-of-attendance stipends, unlimited food and guaranteed four-year scholarships (Berkowitz, 2015). Cost-of-attendance legislation allowed full-grant scholarships to include previously banned expenses such as academic-related supplies, transportation, and other costs beyond the tuition, fees, books, and room and board (Hosick, 2015). Since the passage of this NCAA legislation, the advancement of student-athlete compensation through cost-of-attendance spurred creative accounting (New, 2015). The NCAA estimated that adopting cost-of-attendance stipends would increase aid amounts by approximately $2,500 per athlete. Their estimate fell short of reality—NCAA members manipulated this legislation to improve their competitive advantage. Some members of Power-5 conferences considered this an opportunity to adjust institutional cost-of-attendance figures to boost the stipend amount offered prospective student-athletes. Consequently this led to institutions adopting stipends that were much higher than originally estimated by the NCAA (New; Solomon, 2015)

Cost-of-attendance stipends are not without controversy— the disparity and variance in the amount of aid each school could afford to offer to student-athletes spurred coaches and administrators of non-Power 5 institutions to denounce this as an opportunity for the richest and most athletically driven institutions to widen the competitive gap (Solomon, 2015; Teel, 2015). Dabo Swinney, the head football coach at Clemson University, phrased it in this way:

But for one school to be able to pay $3,000 or $4,000 more than another
school, then at the end of the day, guys are going to make decisions for the wrong reasons, and it shouldn’t be that way…It’s going to be a factor in the recruiting process, there’s no question (Teel, p. 2).

Schools outside of the Power-5 conferences shared these sentiments, but it also meant that the adoption of cost-of-attendance stipends reduced the efficiency of every dollar spent on athletics. The passage of this legislation while optional, appeared necessary to remain viable. However, as the competitive and resource gap widened, it was unclear if implementing it was beneficial or fiscally responsible for these schools to pursue (Katz, 2015).

The unequal distribution of resources in college athletics created inequities among its members and student-athletes. The concentration and control of wealth in the hands of the NCAA, conferences, administrators and coaches encouraged former and current student-athletes to file lawsuits against the NCAA (Staples, 2014). Three cases currently in the legal system challenge the status quo of college athletics. The highest profile case, O’Bannon v. NCAA, centers on former U.C.L.A. basketball star Ed O’Bannon and his challenges to the NCAA’s amateurism rules (Nocera, 2016). In 2015, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that NCAA regulations limiting what college athletes were paid violated antitrust laws. While the antitrust law required institutions to offer scholarships that covering all costs to attend college, it did not require institutions to provide additional scholarship, or what it deemed “cash sums untethered to educational expenses” (Perez & Berkowitz, 2016). The NCAA and the plaintiff both appealed this decision to the Supreme Court, but in October of 2016 the U.S.’s highest court declined to hear the case. This meant the previous ruling by the Ninth Circuit stood and opened the
door for future cases challenging the anti-trust violations of the NCAA (Nocera).

On the heels of this case is a class-action suit filed by Shawne Alston, a former West Virginia football player, that claims the NCAA violates antitrust laws by limiting the total compensation of athletes (New, 2016). Another lawsuit on behalf of Martin Jenkins, a former football player at Clemson, focuses on unlimited compensation for student-athletes. This case claims the NCAA and its members colluded to cap the value of athletics scholarships, and “seeks to drop a bomb on the business model for college sports, strip away the NCAA's compensation rules and truly open the market for football and men's basketball players” (Staples, 2014, p. 3). These cases represent a philosophical attack on the NCAA. The plaintiffs argue that the NCAA and its member institutions have:

Lost their way down the road of commercialism, signing multibillion dollar contracts wholly disconnect from the interests of student-athletes who are barred from receiving the benefits of competitive markets for their services even though their services generate these massive revenues (p. 3).

These cases cast a long shadow over the status quo of college athletics, and was impetus which spurred the NCAA and its members to adopt legislation allowing cost-of-attendance and unlimited food (Berkowitz, 2015). Paradoxically, these cases represent a potential paradigm shift that could restructure how the NCAA and its member institutions operate college athletics. Despite the pending litigation, college athletics directors continue to pursue resources in order to successfully operate their departments.

College athletics directors are ensconced in a legacy of revenue maximization, a consequence of an environment where revenues are expected to keep pace with expenses
because of the need to continually fund capital projects and salaries, among other expenses. College athletics programs have always sought ways to generate revenue to pay for the ever-expanding costs associated with operating, but the increasing costs of athletics—deemed an “arms-race”—has dominated the field of athletics for decades (Chu, 1982). Fear of not competing on a level playing field with peers has pushed institutions to continually spend money on facilities and pay high coaching salaries, among other costs, to prevent falling behind perceived competitors (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). The increasing costs of running a department have prevented athletics directors from reducing or controlling costs, forcing these leaders to continually seek additional revenues to meet expanding expenditures. The pursuit of these additional revenues by raising money through external sources, such as media deals, corporate sponsorship, and boosters, complicates the “governance and control [of athletics programs] as well as raise questions about the values that schools want to communicate to their students, their faculty, and the broader public” (p. 228).

In fact, between 1983 and 2001 the amount of money institutions spent on college athletics tripled, as revenues from ticket sales, television, and donations buoyed the expenses of operating an athletics programs. As the costs have continued to rise, however, the ability of athletics directors to keep pace with expenses has become increasingly challenging (Estler & Nelson, 2005). This has led athletics departments to rely on institutional funding to help cover the expenses of the athletics programs (Toma & Kramer, 2009). In a recent report by the Chronicle of Higher Education and the Huffington Post, it was estimated that since 2010, 201 public institutions have used
student fees totaling $10.3 billion to pay for athletics programs. This represented an increase of 16% over 5 years, a significant rise in reliance on student fees to fund athletics. These fees confirm that the out-of-control growth in spending of athletics has bled into the financial obligations of nonstudent-athletes, unwittingly increasing the costs of attending a higher education institution for these students (Wolverton, Hallman, Shifflett, & Kambhampati, 2015).

The burden of funding athletics programs has also depleted the coffers of the broader institutional departments of universities and colleges. Most Division I programs in the United States rely on institutional funding (beyond the revenue of student fees, alumni donations, and other external revenue sources) to cover the operating expenses of the athletics programs (Toma & Kramer, 2009). A 2013 report by the NCAA found that only 20 athletics programs in Division I generated enough revenue to cover the departments’ expenses, whereas the other 108 Division I Football Subdivision (FBS) athletics departments relied on institutional funding to pay for their programs. The report detailed that the average loss among the five highest-revenue conferences (the Atlantic Coast, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, and Southeastern conferences) was “$2.3 million but was much higher—$17.6 million—at all other FBS schools” (Burnsed, 2014, p. 1).

The commercialization of college athletics places a heavy burden on athletics directors. The expectation of producing winning teams requires significant financial investment, yet the investment does not guarantee any financial reward or accolades for teams. Estler and Nelson (2005) suggest that like many college players who expect to springboard their success and play professionally beyond their college years, institutions
unrealistically “aspire toward great financial rewards and enhanced academic reputation for athletics success” (p. 87). Zimbalist (1999) found that the allure of financial rewards compromises the impartiality of athletics directors, coaches, and other school administrators. As these individuals push for more investment to garner winning teams, these individuals also stand to reap financial gains from the success of athletics programs.

The commercialization of athletics has complicated the ability of administrators to control college athletics; on the one hand, the incredible growth of the related markets has liberated athletics departments from the financial constraints of the university, but on the other hand, athletics spending has increased so rapidly that these departments now lean on academic coffers to cover gaps in the athletics budget. The paradox of simultaneous autonomy and dependency has prevented higher education institutions from minimizing the repercussions of the commercialization of athletics. These economic forces have isolated athletics on campus and limited the capabilities of athletics directors to make meaningful financial change. And as the commercialization of athletics has continued, it has led to scandals and misbehavior that further complicate the leadership on campus.

Scandals and Misbehavior

Scandals have long plagued college sports. Improper behavior by student-athletes, coaches, athletics directors, and boosters, among others, has violated both the academic standards of universities and the athletics rules designed to ensure conformity among athletics programs. Scandals within athletics programs include, but have not been limited to, impermissible recruiting tactics, boosters giving money to undergraduate student-
athletes, gambling, point shaving, and violating academic standards (Duderstadt, 2009). Despite these misdeeds and their frequent coverage in the media, Duderstadt (2009), Lapchick (2006), and Harper and Donnor (2017) contend that most of college athletics comprises student-athletes, coaches, and athletics directors who behave with high integrity and honesty. Yet scandals continue to occur within college athletics programs, under the leadership of athletics directors who are responsible for preventing these incidents from occurring. As Duderstadt and Yost (2010) explain, it is the opaque enforcement and reporting structure of the NCAA and the athletic conferences, as well as the high visibility of these athletics programs, that lead to scandals that undermine athletics director leadership.

The athletics director is responsible for establishing an athletics culture of compliance with institutional, conference, and NCAA rules. This model is extremely flawed because those who have the most self-interest in violating the rules (athletics directors, coaches, student-athletes, boosters, etc.) are the very individuals who are asked to uphold and comply with the established rules. Koch (1985) explains that athletics directors, along with the NCAA, are ill-equipped to monitor the everyday behavior of those in and around an athletics program. There are 350 Division I NCAA institutions; with only a handful of investigators nationally and a limited number of compliance officers designated on each campus, it is impractical to expect that an athletics director could promise compliance with rules due to the self-interest that motivates so many individuals (Yost, 2010). In fact, former NCAA executive director Walter Byers estimated that up to 30% of schools that sponsor “big-time” athletics programs “cheat
consistently without being penalized” (Koch, p. 19). Harper and Donnor (2017) argue that in order to understand why this occurs, one must examine the motives of human participation in competitive situations. Institutional leaders, student-athletes, and boosters are motivated to act in scandalous ways because these individuals do not want to lose to rival schools, because they perceive an intense pressure to win, and because they consider college athletics to be an avenue to professional sports. These factors influence individuals to compromise the integrity of college sports.

Duderstadt (2009) found that the high visibility of college athletics in the media opens up athletics programs, coaches, and student-athletes to scrutiny. The scandals and misbehavior that occur within college athletics only magnify the profile of athletics on higher education campuses, where “the slightest misstep ignites a firestorm in the media, [which is] always on the alert for any sign of misbehavior or scandal that might sell more papers or bring in more advertising revenue” (p. 216). Although the media’s coverage of scandal in college sports boosts ratings, the violations that occur are not because of media scrutiny but are rather the result of poor institutional control. Duderstadt contends that the organizations (i.e., NCAA and athletic conferences) and individuals (i.e., athletics directors, presidents, and coaches) responsible for imposing a culture of compliance fail because of an inability to provide meaningful oversight to the athletics department or prevent the unacceptable behavior of boosters and other agents. In other words, scandals and misbehavior occur because there is not a strong link between the rules and the bodies meant to enforce those rules. While this phenomenon is not new to college athletics, the inability to provide meaningful oversight does not adequately explain the forces that lead
to scandals.

Harper and Donnor (2017) found that the compensation in big-time college sports partially explains why scandals and misdeeds frequently occur. Athletics directors and football and basketball coaches garner substantial salaries. For example, in 2015 71 football head coaches, nine football assistant coaches, 39 basketball head coaches, and nine athletics directors received compensation in excess of $1 million (USAToday, 2015). Harper and Donnor (2017) suggest that the connection between the salaries of athletics directors and coaches and the expectation to win ensure that many will be motivated to act scandalously in order to preserve their salaries.

The ability of individuals within college athletics to commit such scandals is connected to the diminished role of faculty in the governance of higher education. The popularity and profitability of athletics has put this enterprise on a pedestal at many colleges and universities, creating an atmosphere of tension between faculty and athletics. Harper and Donnor (2017) explain that the diminished role of faculty in the governance of higher education is due to fewer tenured and full professors. The loss of control by the faculty has allowed scandals to flourish. The ability of athletics departments to independently operate and generate revenue from private corporations and alumni diminishes the reliance of athletics on the academy. Consequently, athletics departments continue to operate in isolation from the overall operation of universities and colleges. This is no more apparent than the buildings erected for athletics programs, creating an atmosphere of exclusion. These buildings give few others than the student-athletes and coaches involved reason to enter, leaving these athletically oriented centers open to
unobserved scandal.

The patterns detailed above set the stage for scandals and misdeeds to occur. As the following examples show, within the span of a single year, athletics directors at prestigious state flagship institutions fell victim to their own misdeeds.

In 2015 athletics directors from the prestigious state flagships of the University of Illinois, Rutgers University, and the University of Minnesota were fired for issues related to program accountability and violations of ethical standards set forth by the institution and the NCAA. The high visibility of these athletics directors garnered nationwide media scrutiny, making headlines in most media outlets. At Illinois, athletic director Mike Thomas was fired because of his failure to hold his football coaches accountable. The football coaches promoted an environment where there was extensive mistreatment of football players and a disregard for medical protocols following injury (Ryan, 2015). At Rutgers, Julie Hermann was fired as the athletics director for a series of personal indiscretions at former institutions (she was being sued by her former assistant volleyball coach for discouraging pregnancy, and by former players for mistreatment) and due to the arrest of several football players and the head football coach for violating university academic compliance policies (Sargeant, 2015). At Minnesota, athletics director Norwood Teague resigned after it was revealed that he used text messages to sexually harass coworkers within the athletics department (Medcalf & Bennett, 2015). The failures of these athletics directors highlight the scrutiny faced by high-level administrators who are vested with the responsibility to provide ethical leadership. Presidents of institutions are forced to replace athletics directors when these senior administrators are unable to
adequately manage and lead their organizations (McLaughlin, 2004).

The scandals and misbehavior within college athletics has been prevalent as long as institutions have sponsored sports. These scandals continue to occur because of the lack of governance structures to ensure accountability. However, they also occur because of character flaws or a lack of skills among athletics directors. The following section considers how many of the contemporary issues addressed are a byproduct of the cultural and organizational dynamics of athletics departments, and how these dynamics ultimately affect athletics directors’ leadership and their organizations.

**Cultural and Organizational Dynamics of Athletics Departments**

Athletics departments are organized similarly across higher education. They are vertically organized, with the athletics director at the top of the departmental hierarchy instructing coaches in a “military style of command and control” to follow a set of standards; the coaches, in turn, pass these instructions on to student-athletes (Duderstadt, 2009, p. 110). The athletics director reports to his or her administrator in the education unit of the institution but has the responsibility and authority to promote the integrity and financial health of the department. This organizational structure is a relic of how athletics has always operated, where the athletics organization operated external to the direct oversight of the academy. Despite the simplicity of the organizational structure, the complexity of the athletics environment influences the operation of the department. The following subsections address this complexity by examining the issues related to social and cultural norms, the stress of leading an athletics department, the ethical dilemmas that face these leaders, and the role of boosters. These are the forces that make up the
cultural and organizational dynamics of an athletics department. The organization of
athletics is about far more than whom the athletics director reports to; it is also about the
context in which athletics directors lead and how such contexts influence their decisions
and vision for the department. There is comparatively little literature that considers
athletics directors specifically, relative to other aspects of college sports. Therefore, this
section of this chapter relies on those scholars and studies that consider athletics directors’
leadership indirectly, thereby providing insights into how the cultural and organizational
dynamics of athletics departments influence these leaders.

Social and Cultural Norms

Estler and Nelson (2005) contend that intercollegiate athletics are shaped not only
by an institution but also by broader US societal norms, where a diversity of cultures and
perceptions push and pull one another. This diversity in higher education “affects the
meaning they [different cultural individuals and groups] ascribe to athletics participation,
sports’ role in the institutions, appropriate levels of financial support, and the mission of
the college or university itself” (p. 58). For instance, issues of gender, power, privilege,
homophobia, masculinity, race and academic culture all play out on the “fields” of
athletics, making college athletics a unique “connector between the college or university
and differing class communities and communities of color” (Estler & Nelson, p. 71).

Andre and James (1991) identified the feminist movement in the United States as
one of the issues that shaped the historically male-dominated nature of sports on college
campuses. The passage of Title IX legislation in 1972 became the field where this social
movement played out (Zimbalist, 1999). Andre and James found that the introduction of
equal opportunities for women in college sports led to new values within athletics, instead of the “physical aggressiveness to escalate into violence, psychological aggressiveness into hostility toward opponents, or ‘winning at all costs’” that defined men’s sports, women’s participation in athletics promoted values of “self-actualization and empowerment, mutual respect and affirmation” (p. 81). While these social and cultural norms shaped college athletics broadly, they have also specifically complicated the roles of athletics directors on campus.

Scholars who examine social and cultural norms in athletics (Andre & James, 1991; Chu, 1989; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Harper, 2004; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morphew, 2001; Zimbalist, 1999) point out that the intersection of these important issues places a burden on athletics leaders to challenge the status quo. Addressing issues concerning women’s equality, diminishing expectations of the masculinity of men, the exploitation of African Americans, among many other social and cultural issues, requires leaders who are willing to make “systematic” and “intentional” decisions that implements change (Estler & Nelson, 2005, p. 71). Zimbalist explains that making systematic change is incredibly difficult for athletics directors because of the economic constraints that leaders face, but the enforcement of legislation such as Title IX makes change more inevitable because of the broader cultural influence. The pressures on athletics directors are remarkable; these leaders must understand a multitude of complex topics and issues in order to lead an organization that can respond to the changing cultural and social environments. These issues put enormous amounts of pressure on the athletics director, and in many cases puts these leaders under stress. In the following
section, occupational stress will be further explored to better understand how this stress affects athletics directors’ leadership and the effectiveness of their organizations.

**Occupational Stress of Athletics Directors**

The psychological and physical demands on the athletics director are extensive. To lead an effective organization in the current era of college athletics, an athletics director must be prepared to handle not only traditional responsibilities, such as managing the budget and hiring personnel, but also demonstrate competency over issues related to NCAA and conference legislation, external funding, and equity in sport (Copeland & Kirsch, 1995; Lapchick & Slaughter, 1989). Balancing these responsibilities to meet the expectations of a president or board of trustees and the needs of coaches and student-athletes—not to mention the demands of alumni and those external actors who undermine the integrity of a department—puts high levels of burden on the athletics director who is central to the operation of the organization. Scholars have considered how the occupational stress experienced by athletics directors affects their ability to lead organizations and reach institutional goals (Copeland & Kirsch; Horine, 1994; Ryska, 2002). Understanding stresses on athletics directors can also help explain “what is/is not perceived as stressful” which, in turn, “may assist ADs in coping, either in preparing for stress, or in knowing what factors are less likely to cause it” (Copeland & Kirsch, p. 71).

Ryska (2002) explains that increased stress experienced by athletics directors in the workplace can lead to burnout, which manifests itself in individuals in various ways, such as “fatigue, aggression, illness, low productivity, and both emotional and physical withdrawal from the work setting” (p. 195). These stressors were found to reveal
themselves in athletics administrators based on the manner in which these individuals pursued their leadership agendas. Those athletics directors who were well positioned to handle the demands of their positions experienced less occupational stress, whereas those whose capabilities and the demands of the job were farther apart experienced higher levels of stress.

Yet Copeland (1995), in a study that examined athletics directors from across the three divisions of the NCAA, found that all athletics directors experienced occupational stress. Variation occurred only when comparing Division I athletics directors with Division II and III directors, with Division I athletics directors reporting higher levels of stress related to raising money for their department. Copeland found that all athletics directors experienced stress related to managing a budget and firing coaches, forces that could impact their performance. Job stress is a powerful force that can influence the behavior and performance of athletics directors. These stressors affect how athletics directors make decisions, particularly surrounding the winning and the integrity of programs.

The subsequent section explores how internal and external forces influence athletics directors as they consider the balance of promoting winning teams and promoting the integrity of an institution, conference, and the NCAA.

**Integrity versus Winning**

Stoll and Beller (2006) broadly outlines the moral and ethical dilemmas that plague college sports and those who lead them:

Rules exist and individuals, that is, administrators, coaches, fans and athletes, knowingly violate the rules but argue that either they did not know or they rationalize that their actions was misunderstood. This sordid story usually ends
in contrite behaviors, good moral intentions to solve the problem, but wholly naïve expectations to mitigate the greater problem. (p. 76)

Athletics directors constantly navigate the moral and ethical decision making that constitutes the balance between winning and upholding the integrity of an institution. As Soll and Beller points out, the rationalization used by administrators that molds their decision making many times warps the moral outlook of their leadership choices.

Athletics directors incorrectly choose paths that prioritize winning over the education of students and the code of conduct of an institution. Lapchick and Slaughter (1989) assert that athletics directors are complicit in the decline in integrity of college athletics because they “have actively participated in the creation, development, and perpetuation of a set of values, activities, and practices that has undermined the ethical foundations of both college athletics and higher education itself” (p. 154). Riess (1998) explains that athletics administrators in the early years of college athletics promoted winning over the integrity of the athletics programs. Consider, for example, the extreme measures taken by Columbia University in 1899 in order to win football games against the best teams in the country. Unabashed promotion of football at Columbia led to the coach utilizing a team manager to hire star players who were not matriculated at the university. Despite these subversive tactics coming to light and the manager taking the fall for the violations, the coach was retained and his salary was increased because the team won games.

Coaches at Division I institutions wield considerable power and influence, which has complicated how athletics directors balance winning and integrity. Several recent examples demonstrated how the high-profile role and ego of coaches clashed with
athletics directors. In 2014, the University of Nebraska fired their football coach Bo Pelini. Only after he was hired at another institution was his true character publicly revealed. He was quoted as saying about Nebraska’s AD, “I really didn’t have a relationship with the AD. The guy, you guys saw him, the guy is a total (expletive). I mean, he is, and he’s a total (expletive)” (Laken, 2014). The Nebraska athletics department responded, stating they were “extremely disappointed,” but this was evidence as to why he was no longer leading the young men at Nebraska (p. 1). In 2011 at the University of Central Florida, the athletics director resigned amid allegations of recruiting violations that occurred in football and men’s basketball (Reports, 2011). The failure of the athletics director to promote a culture of accountability by demanding coaches adherence to NCAA rules undermined the AD’s credibility and led to his dismissal. In 2013 at the University of Oregon, the athletics director Rob Mullens signed football coach Mark Helfrich to a contract with “specific provisions related to NCAA rules compliance, including a requirement that Helfrich actively look for red flags of potential violations” (Berkowitz, 2013, p. 1). The Oregon AD believed that football coaches were responsible for promoting a culture based on integrity, but without contractual incentives, it would be challenging to hold them accountable to maintain a healthy balance between winning and integrity.

In over a century of athletics, little has changed. Myles Brand, former president of the NCAA, cited misgivings in 2005 about athletics administrators who prioritize winning over preserving the educational integrity of institutions. Brand argued that the spiraling fiscal problems of college athletics were set to make it indistinguishable from
professional sports, and that it was up to leaders of institutions to reset the course toward integrating athletics programs “into the educational mission and traditions of the university” (Lapchick, 2006, p. 45). Brand’s call for athletics administrators to realign institutional priorities to promote integrity over winning in athletics appears unlikely to happen, especially when considering that this moral dilemma has persisted throughout the history of college athletics.

In *Character of American Higher Education and Intercollegiate Sport*, Chu (1989) found the crack in the ethics of college athletics and higher education to be a systemic problem, not one confined to either the athletics department or the greater institution. Chu discovered that institutions often deliberately admit students who do not meet the academic requirements for admission. Unqualified prospective student-athletes are admitted to institutions because they are valued for their athletics contribution regardless of their preparation for higher education. Chu describes how the University of Georgia prioritized the winning of its athletics teams over other institutional values. Pressures from the athletics department led to admissions indiscretions, compromising the integrity of the institution. It was revealed that students who barely met the 2.0 high school GPA requirement were being admitted to the University. In response to media coverage of this revelation, the president of the university cited a need to admit these students, arguing that otherwise the school would “unilaterally disarm” the athletics department in the “race for student athletic talent” (p. 110). An academic advisor from Georgia perhaps best explained how institutions prioritize winning over educating students: “I know for a fact that these kids would not be here if it were not for their utility
to the institution. There is no real sound academic reason for their being here other than to be utilized to produce income” (p. 110). This condemnation of college athletics suggests the decisions-making process of athletics directors should be considered as binary. In other words, they must either choose a path that promotes winning at the expense of integrity, or they must prioritize the integrity of the university at the expense of winning.

Although the choices of past athletics directors have shaped the current collegiate athletics environment, athletics directors are uniquely positioned to establish new standards and expectations for the college athletics programs in order to avoid compromising choices (Lapchick and Slaughter (1989). Unfortunately, these directors’ inability to safeguard the integrity of academic and athletics standards has resulted in many negative consequences, such as the financial exploitation of athletes, problems with academic integrity, lack of equity in opportunity for women, and noncompliance with established standards. The moral battle between wanting to win and upholding the integrity of the athletics department falls squarely on the shoulders of the athletics director.

As Lapchick and Slaughter (1989) assert, it is up to these individuals to formulate and implement strategic plans to safeguard the values that institutions purport to represent and provide the action steps to members of the athletics community to prevent unethical behaviors and decisions from undermining what the department seeks to achieve. Scott (1997) found that how an athletics director promotes an organizational culture within the athletics department is essential to its success. Athletics directors who establish a
“distinct vision, collaborating with group members, setting and communicating clear objectives, allowing participation in decision making, providing principled leadership” can improve the chances of success for the organization (p. 414). Yet, as athletics directors seek to prevent moral reasoning dilemmas from undermining the core values of a department, external actors such as boosters and the pressure to fundraise influence leadership choices. The following section considers how boosters and fundraising influence athletics directors, as previously discussed issues such as winning, integrity, and commercialization place added pressure on athletics directors when navigating the role supporters of athletics have on their decisions.

**Boosters & Fundraising**

As noted in the history of college athletics section earlier in this chapter, external stakeholders, known as *boosters*, have overtly influenced the commercialization and control of college athletics over the last century. Frey (1982a) explains that boosters are perceived by athletics directors as necessary not only to develop programs but also to maintain the ability to compete with “big time” athletics programs, “because legislative appropriations, university budgets, or gate receipts did not provide sufficient funds for a high-level program” (p. 55). In fact, in a survey of Division I institutions, Fulks (2000) found boosters and alumni contributed 17% of the annual revenues of athletics departments, for an average of $3.5 million per institution. Yost (2010) explains that these are not just enthusiastic fans; these are individuals (alumni and unaffiliated individuals) who contribute millions of dollars to the athletics department to gain access to administrators (i.e., to influence what coaches are hired and fired), curry favor for
particular teams, and become closer to their beloved sport. Sperber (1990) clarifies that most individuals who donate to athletics departments are not former alumni of the institution; instead, closer to 98% of all boosters who donate are individuals who never enrolled at or competed for the institution. Boosters often operate outside higher education, establishing private foundations to raise money for athletics departments.

Athletics departments have historically approached boosters cautiously, in part because these individuals are not beholden to the university and sometimes comply with established rules only to avoid harming their favored institution (Sperber, 2000; Yost, 2010). In the early 1990s, the NCAA formed the Principles of Institutional Control, a series of rules and regulations asserting that it is the responsibility of athletics directors to educate boosters about how to properly support an athletics department (Howard & Crompton, 2005). Despite this formalization of booster education, there remains significant risk that boosters will not comply with the rules governing athletics. Furthermore, risk exists when athletics directors count on revenue from boosters for operating budgets because there is no guarantee a booster will continue to donate every year at the same level as years past, and do it according to NCAA rules. Boosters in many ways are rogue agents; according to Sperber (2000) they “are capricious, and if a particular situation displeases them—an unpopular coach, a losing streak, a star player dropped for academic reasons—they are liable to cut back on or even withhold donations” (p. 78). If an athletics director counts on booster donations as expected revenue, it could compromise the financial standing of the department (Sperber, p. 78). Yet, athletics directors continue to rely on this revenue stream. Boosters provide the funds that
administrators need to operate their programs and, as a consequence, boosters “exercise a great deal of influence, direct or indirect, on athletic policy” (Frey, 1982a, p. 57). The tradeoffs for athletics directors are significant. They accept needed donations to fund their programs but at the risk of NCAA violations, penalties, and financial retribution. Currying favor with boosters also has an impact on the academic side of an institution, as boosters can negatively affect the fundraising for academic programs.

Stinson and Howard (2004) examined the giving habits of alumni and boosters to understand how their behavior affected fundraising for academics and athletics. They found that the success of athletics programs had a neutral to negative effect on the giving of donors to academic programs and that “athletics-related fundraising has been and is associated with reduced giving to the academic mission of the institution” (p. 138). As this study points out, the growth of athletics boosters threatens the financial well-being of academic programs. Furthermore, the growth of athletics spending by departments to keep pace with peer institutions empowers boosters, because athletics directors are desperate for funding, and since athletics remains external to the academy, these fundraising practices continue even when it is a detriment to the overall institution.

In a national survey of head football coaches by Cullen, Latessa, and Byrne (1990), boosters were cited as the second major reason why violations of institutional and NCAA policies occurred. Boosters undermine the authority of athletics directors and other institutional administrators because of their ability to act independently of the institution, without integrity or consequence. The most infamous example of boosters violating NCAA and institutional rules to curry favor and influence winning was at
Southern Methodist University (SMU) in 1985. Boosters of the football team placed an enormous amount of pressure on the team to win, and went as far as paying players to attend the institution (Smith, 1986). These actions by the boosters ultimately resulted in the SMU football team receiving the “death penalty”—the cancellation of the football team’s subsequent season—a decision by the NCAA that devastated the program for many years. It also led to the resignation of the university’s president and the firing of the athletics director and football coaches (SportsDay, 2012).

The complexity of the cultural and organizational dynamics of athletics departments overtly influences athletics directors. These individuals confront challenging topics that are unique to the operation of athletics; whether it is current social norms or the actions of rogue boosters, athletics directors are forced to make decisions within the framework of their institution and broader governing bodies. As the following section reveals, the cultural and organizational dynamics that athletics directors navigate occur in a governance and leadership structure that has primarily been dominated by longstanding tensions between the academy and the athletics department.

**Governance and Leadership of Intercollegiate Athletics**

The governance and leadership of intercollegiate athletics has evolved from one dominated by a few (coaches and students) to one shared across the institutional administration. The president, board of trustees, faculty, and athletics director each occupy unique positions in the stewardship of college athletics on college campuses (DeSensi & Rosenberg, 2003; Fallucca, 2010; Kish, 1998; Steadland, 2015). Over the last century, institutions sponsoring athletics and the NCAA have evolved toward shared
governance. This governance model theoretically provides checks and balances to prevent abuses and corruption. As this section reveals, despite using a model of shared governance, college athletics has historically been dominated by governance tensions and a divergence of opinion over the emphasis and value that should be placed on college athletics.

The primary fiduciary power responsible for the conduct and control of the athletics department is the office of the president (DeSensi & Rosenberg, 2003; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Moore, 1992). According to Frey (1987), in the early 1980s college presidents and faculty began to assert their authority in the NCAA’s governance in order to gain control of college athletics. In 1991, the Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics issued a report that called for the presidents of universities to assume the control of athletics. What emerged was the one-plus-three model of athletic governance (Athletics, 1991; Bouchet & Scott, 2009; DeSensi & Rosenberg) in which the president—the “one”—is responsible for promoting the “three” of academic integrity, financial integrity, and independent certification. The adoption of this model in the early 1990s was a significant shift away from the historical model in which coaches and athletics directors lead the athletics organizations (Steadland, 2015).

According to Steadland (2015), faculty are integral to the governance of college athletics because these individuals interpret it as their responsibility to promote academic integrity. In the NCAA, faculty involvement has taken shape in the form of a faculty-athletic representative. This is a member of the faculty who is “assigned the formal responsibilities of representing the institution and its faculty in their relationships with the
NCAA and athletic conferences” (p. 23). Despite this formal participation of faculty in the governance of athletics, Lawrence (2009) found that faculty are often dissatisfied with their ability to influence the governance of athletics. In a study of 2,000 faculty at 23 Division I FBS institutions, nearly 42% were dissatisfied “with the extent to which faculty input informs administrative decisions, and 44 percent were dissatisfied with the range of faculty perspectives considered by administrators who formulate institutional positions on intercollegiate athletics” (p. 108). Kuga (1996), in a study of 240 faculty members at Big Ten Conference institutions, found that the majority of faculty who participated in the governance of athletics did so in the hopes of more closely aligning athletics with the academic mission of the university. This study also found that faculty who participated in the governance of athletics perceived a greater contribution to athletics and “less value conflicts between athletics and academics than those who had not participated in athletics” (p. 149). Faculties participate in the governance of athletics serve to preserve the balance between the integrity of academics and athletics.

Like faculty-athletic representatives, members of boards of trustees also provide oversight of athletics. Boards of trustees not only support the policies and agendas of the president but also hold the president, athletics directors, and all others accountable for their behavior. Yet, as Duderstadt (2009) and Byers and Hammer (1995) found, the actions of boards are not always benign and can undermine the authority and policies of presidents. At the University of Michigan in 1906, then-president James Burrill Angell decided that the university should join the Western Athletic Conference (the future Big Ten Conference) in order to “restrain the growth and restore the integrity of college
sports” (Duderstadt, p. 232). Fielding Yost, the successful football coach at Michigan, disagreed with this decision because it reduced the number of games played, controlled ticket prices and benefits to players, and limited his earning potential. In a shrewd move, Yost approached the board of trustees—even though he reported to the president—to persuade the board to veto Angell’s move and withdraw the school from the newly formed conference. The trustees voted to overrule Angell. As Byers explains, this proved to be a watershed moment in the governance of athletics and “was more significant in charting the course of college athletics than the founding of the NCAA in that same year” (Byers & Hammer, pp. 37-38).

Little has changed in the ensuing century. The Knight Commission issued a report in 2001 calling for presidents and trustees to work more closely and to “not wage the battles so commonplace today over control of the athletic enterprise” because “presidents cannot act on an issue as emotional and highly visible as athletics without the unwavering public support of their boards” (Knight Foundation, 2001, p. 24). This report reveals that the governance tensions that existed in 1906 at the University of Michigan continue to be problematic in the modern era of college athletics. Stakeholders continue to have divergent views of college athletics and continually push for their interpretation of the proper direction of college athletics. These existing governance tensions are not exclusive to the leadership of presidents, boards of trustees, or faculty, they also exist for the athletics director.

Duderstadt (2009) explains the extensive purview of the athletics director. This individual is responsible for the financial health and business operation of the
department; the integrity of and adherence to institutional, conference, and NCAA policies and regulations; the firing and hiring of coaches; and, ultimately, the welfare of student-athletes. As athletics directors confront these expansive responsibilities, “external forces challenge and sometimes even subvert institutional control of college athletics” (p. 106). Whether these “external forces” are boosters, the media, the NCAA, presidents, faculty, or members of the board of trustees, each of these stakeholders seek to influence how the athletics director operates the department on a day-to-day basis.

Several scholars (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Fisher & Koch, 1996; Kish, 1998) have found that the relationship of the athletics director with academic leaders determines the quality of the partnership. Fisher and Koch found that the relationship between the athletics director and the president establishes the tone for how athletics will be governed at the institution. Those athletics directors who are trustworthy and are committed to the highest standards remain the “essential link in the CEO’s attempt to govern intercollegiate athletics” (Kish, p. 31).

Bowen and Levin (2003) analyzed the relationship between academic leaders and athletics directors, finding that a quality partnership between these leaders was essential for meeting the expectations of institutional leaders. The president and board cannot effect change alone, they need to be able to rely on competent athletics leaders. By relying on “loyal and committed colleagues, including provosts, deans, and other senior administrators,” the president and board are able to defer to “their detailed knowledge of this complex terrain and in their interest in it” (p. 319). Bowen and Levin identified the expertise of the athletics director as “critical” for navigating the often “difficult”
responsibilities involving coaches, players, and alumni (p. 319).

As (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Fisher & Koch, 1996; Kish, 1998) found, the partnership between the athletics director and other academic leaders is critical for the synchronization of athletics departments with the broader goals of academic institutions. Yet, successful partnerships between athletic and academic leaders do not always occur. Bowen and Levin (2003) explain that many times athletics directors who are unable to successfully lead in a model of shared governance are either “out of sympathy with broader institutional goals, or just do not understand the trends leading to a widening of the athletic divide can undermine reform efforts” (p. 320). Toma and Kramer (2009) found that this potential conflict is a byproduct of competing interests; “because what is contested, like academic values or professional tendencies in athletics, is central and enduring, [and] conflict tends to persist and reform or change can be quite difficult” (p. 112). The governance of athletics directors hinges on their ability to lead with the confidence and trust of the president and board; what makes this consistently challenging is the intersection of the NCAA and athletic conferences, two such external entities that impact the governance of college athletic programs.

Estler and Nelson (2005) found that governance tensions persist in college athletics because the NCAA and athletic conferences further complicate the control of college athletics, which is already saturated with a multitude of stakeholders. These external actors have the ability to promote agendas that can challenge the priorities and standards of a particular university or college. Conferences, such as the Southeastern Conference (SEC), which represent a collection of institution’s athletics programs, “are
key forces in the governance of intercollegiate athletics,” especially when it comes to rule making in the NCAA (p. 34). Each conference has “its own culture, resources, and governance, and in turn, represents a coalition of institutions in regard to NCAA decision making” (p. 22).

Beyond rule making, conferences influence the financial health of those institutions they represent. As discussed earlier, the deregulation of TV rights in the 1984 Supreme Court Case Oklahoma v. Board of Regents vested conferences with leverage over the financial future of individual institutions. Their ability to negotiate TV contracts on behalf of individual institutions has contributed to the commercialization of college sports and directly removed institutions from control over an important aspect of their athletics programs. Institutions perceive belonging to conferences as a necessity due to the financial reward, but at a cost of relinquishing control over their athletics programs.

Toma and Kramer (2009) and Estler and Nelson (2005) found that institutions have similarly longstanding conflicts with the NCAA. Institutions’ core mission of instruction, research, and academics has often come in conflict with the NCAA’s requirements and eligibility standards for academic progress. The NCAA’s establishment of eligibility requirements has superimposed its interpretation of academic eligibility and preparedness on its more than one thousand members. Estler and Nelson explain that the NCAA often supersedes the authority of presidents, who ultimately are responsible for holding the NCAA accountable. For instance, external to the authority of the presidents, NCAA staff control the process of rule making and enforcement.

The governance of college athletics reflects its complexity; the multitudes of
stakeholders who seek to govern this enterprise contribute to the governance tensions that have existed throughout the history of college athletics. Presidents, boards of trustees, faculty, athletics directors, the NCAA, and conferences all have sought to govern athletics and subsequently address the rising challenges related to commercialization, scandal, and academic integrity, among other topics. The competition over the governance of athletics confirms the need for strong and thoughtful leaders who are willing to work across stakeholder positions to prevent the abuses of athletics and to ensure that athletics align with the values of the academic institutions they represent.

**Summary and Synthesis of the Reviewed Literature**

A quick Google search or query of Penn’s scholarly databases reveals that the topic of “college athletics” produces an unwieldy number of results. Despite the expansiveness of information on college athletics, based on the nearly 115 books and articles reviewed and cited throughout this paper, a single conclusion can be reached: the complexity of college athletics influences athletics directors’ leadership and their ability to implement organizational change agendas. The literature overwhelmingly indicates that since its inception, college athletics has been laden with flaws. Governance tensions between stakeholders, scandals and misbehavior, and unregulated commercialization have complicated the leadership roles of athletics directors. Yet, as the literature points out, leaders of college athletics have perpetuated these systemic problems that have defined college athletics for its entire existence. Those who have advanced the scholarship on college athletics provide overwhelming evidence that these problems persist, but scholars have yet to consider how the various forces explored in this literature...
review influence athletics directors’ leadership and their ability to implement change agendas. Fortunately, the scholarship on college athletics provides a framework for explaining the forces within college athletics; applying this knowledge will explain how the multitude of forces that continues to exist in college athletics influence athletics directors.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODS

Presented in this chapter are the methods used to identify the forces university and college athletics directors perceived as impacting their leadership choices and ability to implement change agendas. I first justify the use of qualitative inquiry and discuss the methodological approach selected for the study. Following are descriptions of the contexts from which participants were sampled, criteria I used to construct the sample, and the data collection and analysis procedures. After this discussion, the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, along with a description of my role in the study, concludes the chapter.

A Rationale for Qualitative Methods

Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 43). Qualitative research is an opportunity for the researcher to study things in their natural setting and attempt to make sense and interpret phenomenon that are of meaning to individuals. Ascribing meaning to the human experience is what differentiates this method from those quantitative in nature, which seek to assign a “statistical mean” to a person overlooking the “uniqueness of individuals” (Creswell, p. 48; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Patton (2015) explains this method provides a path to understanding the lived experiences of humans by: evaluating meaning making, ascribing meaning in the meaninglessness, and ultimately making interpretations when constructing meaning.
Using qualitative inquiry in these ways ultimately illuminates how humans engage and make meaning in their worlds.

The questions asked in this study demanded the use of qualitative methods because of a necessity to “develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Previous researchers have inadequately explained the forces that influence athletics directors. Qualitative methods were an opportunity to develop theories about athletics directors because they ascribed meaning to their experiences and connected these meanings to the world around them (Miles et al., 2014).

Capturing and unpacking athletics director leadership required qualitative methods because this research paradigm “empowers individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, (and) to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Exploring the experiences of athletics directors in this way explained how the multiple intersecting forces impacted their leadership. Qualitative research also enabled the study to explain how perceptions and reactions are only known to those who experienced them (Weiss, 1994). Ultimately, to examine the forces those athletics directors faced, a qualitative approach was best to illustrate the interactions of individuals. For instance, this method explained nuanced topics that vary from gender roles, race and economic standing (Creswell). The use of qualitative methods was preferred because of its ability to discover the nuances of athletics directors.
Methodological Approach: Grounded Theory

The grounded theory methodological approach was used in the design and execution of this study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed this approach in reaction to traditional research practices that called for assigning a particular theory to an investigation. These researchers felt that mapping one theory was not always appropriate for participants in a study (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory research to develop theory that “offers a framework to…help provide some standardization and rigor to the analytical process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13). This link between theory and data makes this method rigorous. Glaser and Strauss explain that theory based on data is difficult to refute because it is so intimately linked to the data. This link, Hubert (1978) explains, takes the researcher into and close to the real world, “so that the results are ‘grounded’ in the empirical world” (Patton, 2015, p. 110). Hubert describes this research methodology as “lifting the veil” for what is occurring in the social world:

The metaphor that I like is that of lifting the veils that obscure or hide what is going on. The task of scientific study is to lift the veils that cover the area of group life that one purposes to study. The veils are not lifted by substituting, in whatever degree, preformed images for first-hand knowledge. The veils are lifted by getting close to the area and by digging deep in it through careful study. (p. 38)

Additionally, grounded theory builds theories through systematic stages of data analysis and conceptual development (Charmaz, 2005). The development of these concepts becomes the building blocks of theory, which begin to explain participants’ meanings, actions, and worlds. Grounded theory was essential to this study because just as Glaser
and Strauss (1967) argued, other theories did not effectively capture the experiences of athletics directors and how environmental forces impacted their leadership. Ultimately this methodology will explain how “the basic social process of [X] happens in the context of [Y] environment” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374). The research questions in this study mirror this methodology. The research questions sought to identify the phenomenon studied and were oriented towards action and process (Birks & Mills, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Grounded theory research is distinguished by its use of process to link action and interactional sequences. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain that process is a way to “give life to data by taking snapshots of action/interaction and linking them to form a sequence or series” (p. 144). When analyzed, process shows how the evolution of events change, stay the same or regress, “why there is progression of events or what enables continuity of a line of action/interaction, in the face of changing conditions, and with what consequences” (p. 144). Lastly, grounded theory uses conditional matrixes to model the macro and micro conditions that are related to the phenomenon being studied. This model enhances the clarity of the emerging data because it visually distinguishes and links levels of condition and consequences (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin).

Grounded theory research uniquely applies constant comparative methods as a data and analysis procedure (Birks & Mills, 2011). This method combines explicit coding with theory development. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain “data collection and analysis are tightly interwoven processes, and must occur alternately because the analysis directs the sampling of data” (p. 59). Simultaneously analyzing data through the collection
process allows the researcher to adapt and determine if and when a return to the field is necessary in order to saturate a category with relevant information. This ensures that emergent theories are fully elaborated in all of their complexity (Creswell, 2013).

The goal of this study was to explain the forces that influenced college and university athletics directors at Division I institutions as they implemented organizational change agendas. A lack of theories to explain the forces that influenced athletics directors suggested that grounded theory was the most appropriate qualitative method. Implementing grounded theory allowed a theory to emerge and revealed how forces interacted and impacted athletics directors.

Participants

Contexts

This study was conducted at large, public and private research universities that are part of the NCAA and sponsor Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), or Division I-AAA (no football) athletics. These institutions were similar in terms of the organizational structure of the athletics department and the sponsorship of sports. All of these institutions sponsored the minimum of 14 sports (seven for men and women, or six for men and eight for women), as dictated by the NCAA. In addition, these schools met the minimum financial aid awards dictated by each sport, and abided by the maximum number as well.

The Division I institutions in this study are where athletics directors led their organizations, but for the purposes of this study, athletics directors were the unit of analysis. Each institution had an athletics director who oversaw the operation of the
athletics department, along with a tiered administrative structure. These administrators oversaw the day-to-day operation of the athletics programs. In total, there are 350 colleges and universities that comprise the FBS, FCS, and I-AAA providing athletic opportunities to more than 170,000 student-athletes. The selection of these institutions was very intentional; as pointed out by Harper and Donnor (2017), Division I institutions that sponsor big-time sports, namely football and men’s basketball have historically been the battle ground for policy decisions regarding college athletics. These battles are manifested in the governance tensions, commercialization or scandal and misbehavior that frequently occur in Division I athletics. These environmental forces have subsequently influenced those who lead these athletics departments. It seemed the most appropriate to study athletics directors at these institutions who encountered similarly described environmental forces that impacted their leadership choices.

**Sampling**

I recruited athletics directors by soliciting their participation through introductory e-mails explaining my study and through leveraging personal contacts to introduce me to these individuals. The selection of athletics directors was limited to those individuals who were the primary leader of the athletics organization. Two sampling strategies was used; purposeful and convenience sampling.

Purposeful sampling strengthened this study because the research questions demanded “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). Talking with those individuals who were closest to the phenomenon being studied
allowed for information to be easily discovered (Goulding, 1998). Purposeful sampling avoided the pitfalls of random sampling of college athletics directors, which may select individuals (i.e., Division II/III athletics directors) who might not be as exposed to those forces that influence athletics directors implementing change agendas (Maxwell, 2013). Purposeful selection of athletics directors garnered the individuals who are the most relevant, but the use of convenience sampling ensured the selection of athletics directors who were most easily accessible, able to answer the research questions and build the strongest relationships (Maxwell, 2013). Access to athletics directors was difficult because they are few in number and are often extremely busy individuals. The use of convenience sampling allowed me to pinpoint those athletics directors who wanted to participate in the study and answer the research questions. This maximized the effectiveness and functionality of this study.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection in grounded theory research is participant interviews (Creswell, 2013). The use of interviews “gain focused insight into individuals lived experiences; understand how participants make sense of and construct reality in relation to the phenomenon, events, engagement or experience in focus” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 146). In turn, these interviews allowed me to assess the experiences of athletics directors to forge an emergent theory. Interview data was collected in two phases, which I describe below.

Phase One: Individual Interviews at NACDA Conference

In phase one of the data collection I traveled to the National Association of
Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) convention to conduct one-on-one interviews with athletics directors. This annual convention was the best opportunity to gain access to numerous athletics directors over the course of several days. Athletics directors are historically difficult to gain access to, therefore in the environment of the convention, where these individuals are learning and sharing best practices, I interviewed athletics directors who were willing to participate in this study.

These first round interviews were the first steps to fully develop and saturate the grounded theory model (Creswell, 2013). I developed an interview protocol that asked athletics directors to explain how environmental forces influenced their leadership. These questions “focus on understanding how individuals experience the process and identify the steps in the process (what was the process? How did it unfold?)” (p. 88). Primarily I did this in a semi-structured way; I asked the athletics directors about the forces that influenced their leadership choices, but I did not interfere with their responses, allowing a conversational approach to lead to the expression of their experiences, insight and conceptualizations of what was occurring in college athletics. Charmaz (2006) described a necessity on the part of the researcher to “choose question carefully and ask them slowly to foster the participants reflections…use in-depth interviewing to explore, not interrogate” (p. 29). Following these interviews, in accordance with grounded theory procedure, I began to code the data and examine the initial emerging concepts. This initial step “move us toward later decisions about defining our core conceptual categories. Through comparing data with data, we learn what our research participants views as problematic and begin to treat it analytically” (p. 47).
Phase Two: Second Round Interviews

In phase two of the data collection, I conducted interviews with athletics directors via phone to examine the initial emergent concepts from phase one’s interviews. This was driven by the constant comparative method discussed earlier, which ensured that emergent theories were fully elaborated in all of their complexity. This included going through interview tests “line by line, noting provisional themes, and subsequently comparing with other transcripts in order to ensure consistency and also to identify negative cases” (Goulding, 1998, p. 297). The athletics directors interviewed did not participate in phase one. I had to expand the participant pool beyond the athletics directors from the NACDA Conference due to their unavailability for a second interview. The interviews in this phase followed a semi-structured interview protocol. This interview structure allowed the participants to express their own experiences and interpretations of the forces that influenced them to emerge.

Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994, 1998) and Charmaz (2006) lay out specific steps to use in analyzing the data from a grounded theory study. These steps include the use of coding, open, axial, and selective, to breakdown large amounts of data into smaller units. From these smaller units, the first concepts will begin to emerge and be the impetus for reframing questions that will be asked in subsequent interviews. I meticulously followed these steps.

To begin the data analysis, I analyzed the data from the first phase of interviews. The concepts that emerged from this analysis began to map an exploratory model of the
forces that influenced athletics directors as they implemented change agendas. This generated a new set of questions that was the basis for returning to the field to interview additional athletics directors to solidify the emergent themes. This model became clearer in the second round of analysis. I used additional steps to ensure the conceptual accuracy of the model, which I explain in the next section of this dissertation.

Grounded theory differentiates itself from other methodologies in several ways. First, this methodology uses memoing as a technique to develop theory when the data are collected and analyzed (Creswell, 2013). These memos are an opportunity to identify emerging concepts and begin to map the flow of the processes. Second, this method uses coding to systematically represent the data that emerges from the study. Three coding techniques are used: open, axial, and selective. Open coding breaks apart the data, broadly determining the major categories of phenomena that emerges from the study (Creswell, 2013). Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain that “without this first basic analytical step, the rest of the analysis and communication that follows could not take place” (p. 62). As a next step, axial coding examines the data by making connections between categories and subcategories (Creswell; Strauss & Corbin). Strauss & Corbin explain “this is done by utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences” (p. 96). The last procedural step is selective coding. This method is not inherently different from axial coding; it is a deeper examination of the data from a more sophisticated and abstract level of analysis. Strauss and Corbin state “this is the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need
further refinement and development” (p. 116). In each of the steps described above, the analysis of data required procedural precision. To achieve this, I maintained an audit trail, closely managed the data and resources, and demonstrated procedural logic to ensure precision (Birks & Mills, 2011).

**Trustworthiness**

Data in this study were susceptible to my biases as a researcher; therefore steps were taken to promote the trustworthiness of the findings. Ethical issues challenge grounded theory researchers because when grounded theorist claim that emergent themes are based on the views of participants this “raises questions about power and authority and giving appropriate voice to participants about the process of the research” (Creswell, 2012, p. 439). Trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, hinges on the ability of the researcher to persuade their readers that the findings in the study are worth taking note of because of their contributions. Lincoln and Guba (1986) clarify that rigor in qualitative research is how the researcher convinces their audience that the findings are valid. This is established when “exploring the truth value of the inquiry or evaluation (internal validity), its applicability (external validity or generalizability), its consistency (reliability or replicability), and its neutrality (objectivity)” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 75). In grounded theory research, the researcher also must be aware of the reflective process of bracketing. This is where the researcher “recognize and set aside (but do not abandon) their a priori knowledge and assumptions, with the analytic goal of attending to the participants’ accounts with an open mind” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376). These researchers clarify that when these criteria are satisfied, the issues that arise from bias and
Lincoln and Guba (1986) provide several steps that promote the quality of research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility was established in this study through the use of member checks, peer debriefing and triangulation. Member checks is “the process of continuous, informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents to the investigator’s reconstruction of what he or she has been told” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 77). In this study I implemented member checking by requesting the participation of a small group of athletics directors who participated in the study to react to my findings and provide feedback. The feedback from this informant team confirmed if the finding were representative of the experiences of athletics directors. This feedback ultimately “identify validity threats, your own biases and assumptions,” and refined the theories that emerged from this study (Maxwell, 2004, p. 259).

Peer debriefing was an opportunity to “expose oneself to a disinterested professional peer to ‘keep the inquirer honest,’ assist in developing working hypotheses, develop and test the emerging design, and obtain, emotional catharsis” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 77). This occurred at the beginning of the inquiry process and the discussions focused on the issues related to preliminary data and analysis, and what the next steps were in the methodological process and analysis (Spall, 1998). I engaged in peer debriefing by soliciting help from college athletics coaches, as well as assistant and associate athletics directors. As participants in college athletics, these peer debriefers were able to engage with the study in meaningful ways, offer suggestions and ask thoughtful questions. Working with these individuals allowed me to “talk at length about
the development of interview ideas, questions the debriefers asked during data analysis, and other support for the research process” (p. 290).

Triangulation of the data enhanced the credibility of the data collection and analysis of this study. Triangulation occurred throughout the data collection and analysis process when I used the constant comparative method. Using this method “the researcher triangulates data between the information and the emerging categories. The researcher poses questions that relate [to] the categories, and the returns to the data and looks for evidence, incidents, and events” (Creswell, 2012, p. 442). Triangulation did not automatically increase the validity of the study, therefore careful consideration was taken to prevent confirmation bias and the avoidance of selecting methods that only supported my conclusions (Maxwell, 2004).

Lincoln and Guba (1986) explain that the transferability of a study hinges on thick descriptive data, that allows others to be able to apply “all or part of the findings elsewhere” (p. 77). The findings in this study transfers to Division I college athletics, not Division II or III, or two year institutions. In order to ensure that this transferability is clear, I repeatedly emphasized throughout my findings and recommendations that this study is based on athletics directors at Division I institutions.

The dependability and confirmability of this study was established through the recording and transcribing of interviews and other forms of data collection. Lincoln and Guba (1986) explain that an audit trail is necessary to allow the “disinterested auditor” the ability to examine and assess the process and the judgments in the study (p. 77). An electronic audio recording device was present at each interview and recorded the
conversation between the participant and myself. Following the recording of the interview, care was taken to transcribe the conversation to allow for the qualitative analysis to occur. Lincoln and Guba explain, “that part of the audit that examines the process results in a dependability judgment, while that part concerned with the product results in a confirmability judgment” (p. 77).

**Role of the Researcher**

Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain, “one does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (p. 23). Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain that the emergence of theory requires objectivity on behalf of the researcher. Objectivity gives the researcher “confidence that his or her findings are a reasonable, impartial representation of a problem under investigation, whereas sensitivity enables creativity and the discovery of new theory from data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 53). Yet, objectivity is impossible to achieve. Distancing one’s self from the phenomenon does not guarantee objectivity, it only guarantees distance (Scriven, 1972). In his evaluation of qualitative methods, Patton (2015) explains objectivity in the postmodern age is no longer relevant:

To claim the mantle of objectivity is to expose oneself as embarrassingly naïve. The ideals of absolute objectivity and value-free science are impossible to attain in practice and of questionable desirability in the first place since they ignore the intrinsically social nature and human purposes of research. (p. 58)

The departure from objectivity is rooted in Glaser (1992) critique of his original work with Strauss in 1967. Glaser explains that the original framework of grounded theory “had overly emphasized rules and procedures, a preconceived framework for categories, and theory verification rather than theory generation” (Creswell, 2012, p. 428). Rather,
Glaser argued that grounded theory research should be at the most abstract conceptual level, grounded in the data and not forced into categories, and meet the four central criteria of, fit, work, relevance and modifiability.

Some researchers using grounded theory disagree with the emergent design approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). Charmaz (2006) promoted the constructivist approach to grounded theory because it is rooted between the positivist (more quantitative) approaches of Glaser, Strauss and Corbin and the postmodern approaches of researchers who dispute the relevance of methods (Creswell, 2012). This position allows for the researcher’s subjectivity to be part of the overall process, because ultimately the researcher makes decisions about categories throughout the study and these decisions need to be accounted for in the process.

Creswell explains:

In applying this approach, a grounded theorist explains the feelings of individuals as they experience a phenomenon or process. The constructivist study mentions the beliefs and values of the researcher and eschews predetermined categories, such as those found in axial coding. The narrative is written to be more explanatory, more discursive, and more probing of the assumptions and meaning for individuals in the study. (p. 430)

This study was consistent with the constructivist approach to grounded theory research. As the researcher, I had to make fundamental choices when collecting and analyzing the data. As part of this process, I had to take account of my choices and understand how this influenced my articulation of the experiences and meaning for the individuals in this study. Additionally, this approach went beyond how individuals interpreted their environments, “it not only theorizes the interpretive work that participants do, but also acknowledges that the resulting theories is an interpretation” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130).
My role as a researcher was to provide a fresh perspective on the field of athletics, examining the ways in which forces both positively and negatively impacted athletics director leadership. As a current college athletic coach, my experiences afforded me a working knowledge of how higher education and college athletics interact. As a coach, I have existing relationships with athletics directors. These individuals evaluate my professional contributions to the overall athletics department; whether it is with recruiting, developing a budget or managing the team. I also bridge a gap to the academic side of higher education; I work with professors and student affairs professionals to provide the best education environment for my student-athletes. This working knowledge makes me an insider; I know the jargon used in these spheres and how an athletics department and larger university operate. My experiences in this field required me to examine my biases to conduct a valid study. Otherwise, my position and experiences as a coach could have misled this study. It is my hope that college athletics directors will recognize that my interests in studying this topic are to improve the knowledge base for this community, not to expose the quality or capabilities of an athletics director. I believe that being a coach and former student-athletes related a certain level of understanding to my participants that outsiders would have to prove to the participants. I believe that athletics directors recognized that I am a committed member of college athletics, originally as a student-athlete, and now as a coach and researcher. I made this clear, articulating that my role as a researcher was to help inform this knowledge community to improve college athletics.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Findings from the interviews with 24 Division I athletics directors are presented in this chapter. The findings reveal the forces that influenced the ADs as they made organizational change. The assertions made in this chapter are supported by verbatim quotes that illuminate the reflections of the athletics directors. The participants encompassed a wide range of Division I athletics directors, including BCS, FCS, and non-football institutions. Despite the stratification of the participants, a definite congruence between their experiences existed, shedding light on the forces that influenced them. These findings provide fundamental answers to the research questions posited in Chapter One.

The coding procedures outlined in Chapter Three led to the identification of six thematic categories that encapsulated the shared experiences of the participants. These categories are: (1) stakeholder forces; (2) cultural forces; (3) economic forces; (4) contemporary forces; (5) organizational forces; and (6) personal forces. Discussed below are the six thematic categories and their corresponding sub-themes that illuminate the forces that influenced the ADs.

Stakeholder Forces

To understand the demands on an athletics director is to understand the multitude of stakeholders who pull them in various directions. The first finding reveals the stakeholders placed unique demands on these leaders. These stakeholders represent a diverse group of individuals interested in college athletics who shared a common
connection: they sought to influence athletics directors due to their perception of them as gatekeepers who, in part, determined the course of any institution’s athletics programs.

The ADs expressed that each stakeholder group challenged their leadership, but the overall consensus was the importance of building partnerships with these diverse groups. This rationale was attributed to the fact that the ADs could not act alone. When interviewed, the ADs independently commented that college athletics was entrenched within higher education. They felt obliged to consider the opinions of stakeholders to be effective, and were often swayed by them as they weighed different solutions to organizational change.

**Presidential Expectation**

The majority of participants in this study cited the president of their university or college as the defining influence on their decision-making as athletics directors due to both their professional and personal relationships. Direct reporting (supervisor-employee relationship) to the campus chief executive provided the primary motivation and direction for the participants. The AD’s often noted that when considering particular initiatives or decisions with substantial impact, they often asked themselves, “Does this align with the president?” One participant explained the importance of alignment in the following way:

> In the higher education arena, obviously the president is the one that’s making decisions, the one that is politically aligned with so many of the other major stakeholders. So the president is key. The president is the leader that has the ability to trigger, to launch, to ignite momentum behind any initiative. And any major initiative is not gonna go anywhere without that kingpin, that play, that leadership aspect of the relationship on any campus.

The frankness with which so many ADs described the importance of being aligned with
the president was best summed up by one participant who stated, “it was a scenario where, 
if your president is not on board, then you are screwed.” The vision and mission of a 
president possessed the ability to make or break the participants’ choices and decisions. 
Explained simultaneously as frustrating and essential, alignment with the president 
appeared indispensable to successfully promote the athletics departments’ objectives and 
initiatives. Without the president’s backing, the ability to implement significant and 
lasting change was monumentally challenging, and highly unlikely.

Participants additionally explained that presidents had significant influence on 
their personal development. They credited presidents with frequently pushing them 
beyond their perceived skill sets to achieve the objectives promoted by the president for 
the institution and athletics department. Presidents would importune participants to think 
about how they could better operate and organize their athletics departments to integrate 
into the larger campus community. In one instance, a participant described how he 
had failed the president of his university when he did not present an initiative to the 
budget planning council, after doing it annually and never receiving funding. This AD 
believed he unintentionally had made the choice of isolation, rather than that of seeking 
the support of other stakeholders. In similar scenarios, the support and encouragement of 
presidential leadership was essential for the participants to grow as leaders to match the 
expectations of the president, and operate the athletics department successfully.

Presidential leadership was additionally impacted the participants when a 
transition of power between two presidents occurred. A change in leadership dramatically 
influenced the participants because of uncertainty over what values and initiatives the
new president might impose on the ADs. The athletics directors explained that may have accepted a position under the leadership of one president whose values they aligned with, only to have that president leave and be replaced by an individual with whom they do not share the same philosophy and mission. One AD expressed significant concern when this occurred, remarking on how she feared whether her new boss would like her and if their values would align, and if they did not, what the repercussions that might entail for her leadership. Participants also reflected on how this change in leadership had dramatic effects on the agendas they hoped to achieve as athletics directors. Due to the importance of being aligned with the president’s visions and goals, the participants asserted that when a new president comes to power, they must exhibit a willingness to change and adapt when operating the athletics department. One AD articulated that during his tenure he had three different presidents, and it was only during his partnership with the third leader that he felt pressure and a sense of urgency to achieve his objectives.

**Trustees & Regents Oversight**

Trustees and regents (board of governors) played influential roles in the day-to-day lives of athletics directors. Similar to the dynamic the participants displayed with presidents, ADs asserted that boards maintained overt and explicit power to impact their objectives and missions. They explained that while they reported to the president, many times they also reported to, (or had a responsibility to consult with) the boards before making certain decisions. One participant said, “the board is critical to be informed, to have their confidence, their encouragement, their willingness to provide candid, honest feedback as well.” Other than the president, the trustees retained the unique ability to
impact the athletics directors in seismic ways. Due to the significant financial investment, board members maintain in an institution, trustees and regents were motivated to ensure the money donated to the university or college was channeled in ways they observed as appropriate. One AD explained that when one “look[s] at the institutional culture, many of the board members have skin in the game. So the expectations at that level have changed.” Undoubtedly, these financial considerations influenced how these participants guided their organizations.

When asked about how trustees impacted their ability to lead and implement change, participants remarked that it was essential to achieve the support of and alignment with these individuals. One AD asserted that it was critical to have a relationship with the board, otherwise it would be incredibly hard to achieve any real change as a leader. He explained that even though these people are “not in your business, when they do get in your business, they can be huge impediments if they don’t know you, trust you, understand you.” Maintaining a relationship with trustees evidenced as critical to moving forward projects they hoped to achieve. In one instance, an AD explained that in seven years he had successfully initiated over $170 million worth of new or upgraded facilities, and without his preexisting relationships with his board, he would not have been able to achieve the change he implemented.

Several other participants confirmed the importance of alignment with the board to achieve organizational change. Harmony with the board spurred investment and shifted momentum in the favor of athletics. One athletics director commented that with the support of their regents, in less than three years they were able to eliminate governing
rules that prevented the sale of corporate sponsorships. Eliminating this impediment allowed the AD to access funding to add three new sports to eliminate gender equity concerns, and establish an aggressive fundraising scheme to endow scholarships and operating funds.

**Senior Leadership Team**

The participants in this study detailed the importance of their senior administrative team when considering decisions and the day-to-day facilitation of the athletics departments’ missions. The ADs cited senior administrators such as senior associate ADs, associate ADs, the general counsel, the vice president for communications, and the chief revenue officer, among many others, as critical to their decision making. The participants asserted they influenced their outlook by virtue of their ability to offer advice and expertise in critical areas important to the day-to-day operation of the athletics department, and were essential to moving forward the initiatives of the AD.

Many athletics directors remarked on the importance of their senior staff’s opinions to challenge their established beliefs on how to best operate their organization. One example a participant cited, related to the need to cut the budget without diluting the student-athlete experience. In this instance, the AD commented “I try to use [ideas] and I bounce them off our senior administrators to make sure that I am making a good decisions, I try to foster an atmosphere they feel comfortable [telling me] I am wrong.”

Furthermore, the ADs maintained that senior administrators were most useful when they sought to collaborate with the AD, and were not afraid to test new ideas or of bringing a potentially stupid idea to the table. As one participant remarked, when your
senior staff begins to mesh and work well together, “[W]e understand each other a lot better, we make decisions more quickly. I think we are getting better ideas from lower levels of staff on things that can help us grow and improve, and save more and raise money.”

The athletics directors suggested that by developing a culture of constructive criticism, senior staff influenced them when they were called upon to offer their expert opinions. In a particular incident, an athletics director described a scenario where a religious symbol put on a jersey became a source of criticism and legal dispute. The AD was forced to rely on the expertise of his general counsel to ensure the athletics department, the institution and its student-athletes remained protected.

Senior staff members appeared to maintain an integral role when developing business plans. A participant shared that he relied heavily on the knowledge and insight from his chief revenue officer, because of his proximity to the department’s finances and the fan base that drove both opinion and demand. He explained:

He (chief revenue officer) will give me a digest version of what kinda is going on. They (fans) think we are on an upward trajectory, or they think we are stalling out, or they think we are headed down. And you can reform your strategy, kinda double down on certain efforts, depending on what kind of feedback you get.

Remarkably, the members of this study maintained that their senior administrators were often the linchpins that assured their vision for the athletics department was faithfully executed. Several of the ADs’ commented that they were unable to immerse themselves in many of the smaller every-day decisions critical to moving their organization forward. In their stead, senior administrators played a vital role in promoting the mission and
values of the athletics directors. One AD asserted, “those people handle the issues, meet with the coaches, oversee their budgets, if we lose a coach they are in charge of the hiring process. That senior leadership team really helps me run the entire department.”

**Faculty Members**

The athletics directors reflected on the importance of achieving a partnership and mutual respect with faculty members. The AD’s considered faculty principal stakeholders in determining campus life and climate, that subsequently impacted the perceptions of and relationships athletics maintained on their respective campuses. The influence faculty held motivated the athletics directors to forge strong relationships with them. Participants articulated that fostering lines of communication and participating in the academic life of student-athletes engendered goodwill.

In one instance, an athletics director remarked how ADs often want to be in their own athletics silo, cut off from the rest of the university, believing they do not need anyone else to be successful. He argued this could not be further from the truth because AD’s need to be engaged with faculty to form a “cohesive team.” He insisted that if this relationship did not exist, the negative impact of faculty could wreak havoc on the athletics department, and confidence in an AD’s leadership. Offering a counter-narrative, in his experience, maintaining a relationship with the faculty allowed him to make a sincere appeal to his faculty senate to explain the status of the athletics department. He said:

I went and met with the faculty senate, and it was good, it led to them asking some really hard questions. Look we struggled in football for example, and they were saying, ‘Why are we doing it, how much is it costing us, and shouldn’t that money be spent on other things?’ And to walk them through that answer and explain to them, in a way that
maybe they don’t agree with us, but it’s an actual, ‘Here’s the deal.’ And so that to me, is something that is really important, to build those relationships up.

Seizing the opportunity to help faculty understand the role of athletics was considered by many participants to be strategically paramount when leading their organization. The ADs’ repeatedly contended that developing a partnership with faculty spurred engagement and support from this constituency. An AD explained that he strategically and intentionally built his relationships with the faculty. Within the first sixty days of being hired, he met one-on-one with all of the deans with the goal in mind of forging strong bonds with the faculty and engendering mutual respect.

**Coaches**

The participants cited another group of key stakeholders who impacted the culture and priorities of athletics departments were the coaches. ADs describe coaches as operators who shaped the success and failure of the sports programs on a day-to-day basis. The pressure exerted on coaches to succeed meant they pushed the ADs’ to promote a culture of growth that prioritized what they deemed important- namely, success.

One AD remarked that his basketball coach had a remarkable amount of influence not only on the success of his organization, but also on his own personal success as the leader of the department. He explained that:

If he is successful, I am successful. If I am successful, he is successful. I’ve got to help him by getting him the things he needs to win. He is going to help me by bringing in good kids and winning. You kinda have to go together.

The quality of the partnerships between coaches and AD’s appeared critical to how the culture of the athletics departments evolved. A participant concluded, “[I]t’s a
partnership, but it’s not easy and it requires special people who can hold strong to those values, even though they know again that winning is gonna disproportionately impact their success and longevity.”

When this was not the case, the athletics directors remarked on the importance of hiring coaches who would promote a culture of excellence. An AD quipped, “the hallway has changed a lot, and so I’ve gotten people who care and wanna be here.” When this occurs, the ADs elaborated, the culture of the athletics department opens to growth in positive ways. One of the athletics directors described how after dismissing an unpopular football coach who refused to engage with fans, he hired a coach who understood the need to engage with the fan base. Even after starting 0-5 in his third season, the AD said fans were pulling for him:

If I heard it once, I heard it 100 times, ‘Boy, man it’s a tough start for the football team but I’m pulling for coach.’ The reason they’re saying that is because he is a guy who had been engaged in the community.

Beyond culture, the participants described how coaches influenced the priorities of the athletics departments. When asked for specific instances when coaches pushed them in certain directions, an athletics director asserted that coaches advance priorities that are important to help them win and grow their program. This often evidenced by coaches making appeals to the participants, where they would present their cases for support. AD’s remarked that this influenced how they moved their organization forward in several ways.

First, the priorities suggested by coaches that promoted the student-athlete experience were considered by the ADs’ as incredibly important. An athletics director
asserted that it manifested as truly critical “when you are basing your decisions on trying to make this department better, and make that experience better for all the kids that go to school here.” Second, when coaches pushed for initiatives that were unfunded requests, this challenged how they could successfully act as agents of change. An AD confessed that “being able to say yes or no to a coach” was one of their most challenging positions. In one instance, a coach asked an AD, “Are we doing this, am I going to be able to go out on the road and tell recruits that we are doing like, the University of [   ], who we recruit against all the time?” These situations illustrate the continuous struggle between coaches and athletics directors, and how they impact the culture, policies and decisions of the participants.

**Student-Athletes**

Student-athletes are in a position, probably like the ‘70s where they have a voice. We need to make sure we hear their whispers before everyone hears their screams. But they definitely influence our decision making, much more so than, I think, in the past probably two or three years because of their ability to have a strong voice. That’s not good or bad. But it speaks to the importance of the student-athlete experience. That means that we need to be on point with that and make sure that we’re treating them in a way and communicating with them in a way that they wanna be treated and communicated with.

Sentiments such as this reflected the outlook many of the participants shared regarding how student-athletes impacted their decision-making. The voice of student-athletes was cited not only as the cause of NCAA mandates, such as practice time demands and cost-of-attendance stipends, but also institutional-specific decisions such as helping with hiring coaches and commenting on the cultural climate of the athletics department. This was believed to be a radical change for many ADs, because as they invited student-
athletes into conversations, this demonstrated a stark change from the recent past. Previously it was, as one AD remarked, “Because I told you so. Because this is the way it is.” In the current culture, student-athletes showed they expected to be part of the greater organizational process, and have a voice in how the athletics departments implemented change. One AD said that in “any coaching hire I’ve made, I’ve involved student-athletes and I always tell the student-athletes up front ‘You’re not gonna hire your coach, but your perspective’s valuable.” Another AD commented, “we do post-season surveys…it gives student-athletes an opportunity to give you a feel for what it’s like to be in their shoes.” This was also true when an athletics director remarked on his support of a SAAC forum regarding race on campus and how the department could better serve its student-athletes. He said:

We invited all of our student-athletes just to have an open dialogue about their experiences here, how we could be more welcoming, concerns, making sure they know where to go with concerns, how to handle those, the resources that are available.

The participants avowed that maintaining consensus among your student-athletes was crucial when considering organizational change. Student-athletes were thought of as the core reason why college athletics existed, and as student-athletes became emboldened by the strength of their voice, it was said that “all we have to do was show the student-athletes that we are in alignment with what their expectations are. And they have embraced it.”

**Donors**

The relationship between athletics directors and donors was regarded by every participant in this study as highly influential on their outlooks, decision-making and
agendas. The stakeholder group of “donors” was representative of former alumni, parents, friends of the institution and athletics programs, business partners, among others who gave money to the athletics departments. The participants in this study understood and explained their interactions with donors in two ways. First, the ADs remarked they needed to build strong relationships with donors in order for this stakeholder group to feel engaged and to cultivate future giving opportunities. Second, it was asserted that donors sought to influence the decision-making of ADs because of the leverage their monetary contributions afforded them.

The cultivation of relationships with donors was perceived by the athletics directors as critical to building fan support and creating opportunities to solicit for financial contributions. Several ADs remarked that when working with their staff, how they messaged and engaged with donors determined if donors felt they were a part of the athletics community. One participant interpreted that the underlying motivation behind donors’ financial contributions was a desire to be connected with their favorite athletics programs beyond the monetary transaction. This need to connect with the athletics departments was remarked on in the following way:

Well one of the things we are always looking to make the ask, and those people are always willing to give, but I think as important is, what are we doing on our side of our business to justify that giving. These people, give not only with their money, but they also give their time and they are invested in our department. They feel like they are a part of it. When we win or lose a game, they don't say you guys won or lost, they say we won or lost, and that’s important to us. So those donors play a huge role in what we do here.

The participants explained that if you can build strong relationships with donors, not only will they be more likely to give back to the programs, but also there will also be a
larger impact on the quality of the community that supports the athletics programs. They opined that since these individuals are already giving money to the program, buying tickets to games and overall informed on the state of the program, ADs have an opportunity to communicate with their donor base and gain buy-in on change they are seeking to implement. Tapping into the passion of their donors can, as one AD believed, “work for you and against you, but you gotta listen. You gotta involve them.” This viewpoint was validated by another AD who related that “you want them to feel engaged at a level in which they feel compelled to really invest in the student experience.”

The participants pointed out that while it was incredibly important to engage with donors, a negative byproduct of accepting financial contributions was the entitlement the supporters felt to influence the agendas of the athletics directors. Donors who contributed six and seven-figure sums of money were described as individuals who shared their opinion and vision with an expectation that it would impact how the athletics departments would be operated. However, as one AD explained, donors often failed to understand the complexities and nuances that impacted the operation of an athletics department. He said:

Donors are not athletic directors. They don’t have a full view and context of whatever situation may be occurring. When a donor says, ‘Hey, we should do this’ whatever this is… A donor says ‘We should be in the Big Ten or in the A-Ten for basketball.’ I’m like, ‘Okay. Well, in order for us to do that, we have to dominate our conference and where does our football team go?’ And a whole list of other things. Then they start to realize, ‘Oh, okay. I didn’t think of that. I didn’t of that. I didn’t think of that.’ That’s why when I say balance; you have to balance some of the expectations from your donors with the real world of our enterprise.

Despite this strong argument and shared sentiment, most of the athletics directors maintained that when donors make substantial gifts to the athletics departments, it is
nearly impossible to ignore the opinions of the benefactors. Due to this reality, it was said that donors “are going to have access” to the athletics directors, “they are going to try and promote other individuals (coaches). They’re going to try and have an influence on your decisions.” The participants described varying levels of influence on their leadership, but all cited an overt pressure by these stakeholders to consider their opinions.

In one instance, an AD related how a $20-million-dollar donor’s opinion mattered. He said, “having a relationship with him, he’s probably, besides him and the president, they could have me fired in a day. And he doesn’t wield that kind of power. But he has it, if he wanted it.” Similarly, another athletics director asserted, “I’m certainly not gonna tell you that I’ve never ended up having to do something that a donor wanted to do just to make sure that I didn’t lose my job. It happens all the time.” As ADs were confronted with donors who wanted to be consulted with major decisions, many of the participants cited a need to hold true to institutional, department and personal principles to guide decision-making. They believed that following these principles would help them to make decisions in the best interests of the university and student-athletes. As one AD suggested, “You’ve got to block out all that noise and anything that’s a distraction towards those two outcomes.” As all the athletics directors noted, the balance between building support and diminishing overt influence by donors was challenging, but absolutely necessary for building a vibrant and successful athletics program.

Conference Affiliation

The athletics directors insisted conference affiliation impacted their leadership and agendas in several ways. They asserted that belonging to a conference denoted a
willingness to relinquish a level of autonomy in exchange for certain standards to be upheld. Peer institutions became benchmarks to measure an athletics department’s success, quality and priorities. The ADs disclosed that conference affiliation dictated the type of student-athletes that had to be recruited, the type and quality of facilities needed, the kind of coaches you could hire, and ultimately, the type of success you could achieve. They believed affiliation symbolized an exercise in understanding how conferences messaged both internally and externally the priorities of the athletics departments. One athletics director explained it in this way, “Who do we look like? Who do we want to so to speak ‘be in bed with?’ Who do we want to compete against and do we look like them?”

The participants cited that a primary motivation to belonging to a conference was the strength gained by partnering with other institutions. It was emphasized that “conferences, and decisions about conferences, lead to collectivism, and aggregation for common goal, common purpose.” The idea that binding one’s future success with other institutions meant that ADs had to not only consider what was best for their institution, but also what was best for the conference as a whole. In some instances, this meant that the athletics directors agreed to initiatives that adversely affected them. One AD remarked, “so yeah, I guess there’s probably been some things we voted for that we weren’t on the majority side of and vice versa, but you gotta think differently when you got your conference hat on.” The ADs believed that by prioritizing the success of the league, the overall effect would be collective success. A participant explained it in this way:

I want people to ask at ‘Y’ University, “Well, what’s ‘X’ University doing?” Instead of everyone at ‘Y’ saying, “Well, I wonder what ‘X’ is doing.” So from that standpoint, the league vision is important because
all the other schools are trying to play within that league vision and if we
don’t play within that league vision, people aren’t going to aspire to be
what we do. So that influence, to me, it’s really, really, really important at
the league level. Like I said, we’ve been in this league three years. We’ve
chosen that this is the group of people that is our peers.

The ADs explained that when done properly, partnering with other institutions became a
platform from whence they could drive new revenue streams and increase their local and
national profiles. However, with these partnerships also came conference mandates that
required the athletics directors to act in certain ways. They insisted that this influenced
their agendas; for instance, an AD said their conference mandated all schools provide
cost-of-attendance stipends to their men and women’s basketball teams. This was an
additional cost for the schools that was not funded by the conference, but was viewed as a
priority required to be competitive nationally.

The News Media

The twenty-four athletics directors interviewed for this study collectively cited the
media (local, national, paper, TV., etc.) as a stakeholder that interrupted their leadership
and change agendas. The ADs complained their relationship with the media was a tug-a-
war over the nature of their coverage. The ADs portrayed the media as most often being
present only to cover conflict, rules violations, or the hiring and firing of coaches. One
participant said that you, “got to be cognizant of the media. We are under a microscope
here.” However, in light of these situations, the athletics directors conceded they would
try and take advantage of these opportunities to broadcast their own messages. They
would attempt to forge a relationships to assist in furthering their own agendas, because
as one AD explained, “you can provide what you believe is accurate information and,
hopefully, put them on a path where they try and accurately represent the situation.”

Another AD mirrored this thinking, remarking that, “and so you’re thinking, okay, how do we keep the media informed but try and ensure that they’re not out there shooting at us.” Ultimately, many of participants said they were seeking to cultivate a relationship with the media, so they could better position themselves with news outlets and improve the ways their athletics programs were represented in the media.

**Cultural Forces**

The athletics directors in this study shared a common belief; their institution and athletics department shaped their thinking, expectations and beliefs. The second finding in this study asserts that cultural nuances influenced how the ADs made decisions. Culture was described in several ways; it was thought to be the values they and others upheld, the relationships they formed, and the expectations demanded of them. They believed these unique forces overtly defined their role as they considered decisions to make changes at their institutions.

**Culture**

The people make the place and it takes time to develop that culture, but that’s where it starts.

The participants referenced “culture” as an intangible force that dramatically impacted their ability to implement change. To the ADs, culture represented the expectations and standards upheld by those working within the athletics departments. The degree of alignment between the ADs’ standards and those of his or her staff determined the quality of the culture. One AD advised, “If you’re going to make changes, part of it, you’ve got to get everyone on board the bus so everybody’s going in the same direction.” When
this does not occur, the AD confided “[it] probably speaks to why the culture here is not a culture where success is an expectation.”

Several of the ADs spoke to how changing the culture was critical to the future evolution of their departments. They disclosed that their success hinged on their ability to change the culture as it established standards that signaled the expectations of those who worked in the athletics department. A participant shared that when hired, he inherited a broken culture where success was not demanded. In order to make change, he cautioned, “You’ve got to surround yourself with people who have that same expectation.” In order to do that, the ADs described a need to understand the existing culture and what changes could be tolerated and accepted. When implemented over time, the expectations, roles and standards held people accountable, and ultimately began to forge a culture that allowed the ADs to execute the agenda and goals they hoped to accomplish. As one AD believed, “That’s what culture is all about. Now there’s accountability peer-to-peer and that’s when it gets really special.”

**Hiring Staff**

The athletics directors alluded to the process of hiring coaches and staff as an important tool to implement and make lasting organizational change. Hiring provided an opportunity to put in place people who understood and promoted the policies and visions of the athletics directors. A participant observed that ADs have to either hire people that support their policies, or hope that current staff members will embrace a strong policy. He asserted that it was better for ADs to hire their own people because, “it’s about people. And it’s about hiring to that, and recruiting to that, and reinforce that, and [make] that
mentality be contagious throughout your organization.”

The ADs maintained that in order to be effective agents of change, they must surround themselves with people who have the same expectation as they do. One AD remarked that, as he hired coaches in basketball, football, volleyball and baseball, he preferentially selected individuals who aligned with his vision and expectations. The opportunity to hire these coaches disrupted the existing status quo, because they challenged how the current staff operated. The AD believed that without hiring coaches that fit their vision, it was unlikely they could change their organization appreciably. This appeared to hold true for all members of athletics departments, as one AD retorted, “If I hire somebody that doesn’t believe in simultaneous achievement of athletics, academics, and citizenship, and integrity; if I hire the wrong person who doesn’t believe in that, we’re gonna butt heads from day one.” The ADs insisted that hiring was a key force to change the culture of an organization because it continued to streamline the vision the organization hoped to achieve.

**Relationship Building**

The relationships the participants maintained internal and external to the athletics departments was believed to impact not only organizational change, but also the success and failure of the change. The ADs described their role as the “hub” of athletics that relied on the many “spokes” they interacted with to successfully pursue their agendas. The quality of the relationships with administrators, faculty, staff, student-athletes, coaches, among many others determined the support or push-back the ADs experienced when making organizational change. The participants believed that to be successful they
needed to rely on others, therefore fostering strong relationships was the path to successfully implement change:

The old-fashioned phrase is you can’t be a bull in a china shop. I think there’s ways you have to go about it and I think part of people being more accepting is it doesn’t start when you want to make that change; it starts way before that. How do they perceive you? How do they respect you? How have you connected with them when there’s — as supposed to there’s not a real strong connection but then you’re going to come in and tell them they got to change something? I think that people don’t react to that. Most people don’t react to that really well but if there’s a connection, they still might not like the change but they’re going to respect you and they’re going to respect your perspective and they’re going to do it.

The ADs asserted that building relationships with others on campus was critical to attain consensus and effectively promote change. This was achieved by educating stakeholders on campus, supporting initiatives external to athletics, and fostering relations with key pillars of an institution, such as the president and board of trustees. A participant explained that over time, when strong relationships are forged, the goodwill between individuals’ results in equity the AD could use to leverage their position. To achieve this equity, they clarified it necessitated building relationships based on trust through actions. This meant involving key stakeholders in any process intended to bring about change, such as hiring staff or facility construction. It was believed that the more people involved, the more feedback the ADs received and the clearer the path they should take when making decisions. As one AD explained, “Not any one person has a monopoly on a good idea,” so it is important to bring together the best group of leaders with subject-specific knowledge.

**Staff Values**

My philosophy on change with everybody was this when I walked in
the door. I said, “There are three things we can all do. You get on the train, embrace it and move forward. You challenge it and convince, whether it’s me or whoever, that it’s not the right thing to do. Or if you don’t like it and you can’t convince anybody it’s wrong, you go find someplace else where your mentality fits with the culture that you’re walking in to.”

The athletics directors articulated that successfully implementing change hinged on the alignment between the values of the AD and his or her staff. The absence of comparable values was argued to lead to ineffective and unproductive athletics organizations; “If people don’t believe in what you’re trying to do then you’re not going to be successful.”

In contrast, when ADs surrounded themselves with staff members holding similar values, the buy-in among staff produced momentum that facilitated positive organizational change. A participant explained that aligning with similar-minded individuals was an opportunity to be a change agent on campus. She asserted, “You are a change agent by getting people to be inspired by your vision. You ask them to be participatory in it, and you ask them to put their best foot forward.” Implementing the organizational change required the athletics directors to inspire their staff, but it also was predicated on the willingness of his or her staff to “lock-arms” in decision making. When successfully done, it was believed that the alignment of values between the ADs and their staff allowed organizations to better achieve their goals.

**Institutional Alignment**

The degree of alignment between the values of universities and their athletics departments was claimed by the athletics directors to influence their capacity to implement change. They explained the perception that athletics departments had carte blanche to act independently because they were the figurative front porches of institutions.
They maintained this was not the case, and in fact, was quite the opposite. The participants throughout the study reiterated that their athletics departments were “never separate from the institution.” It was insisted “when things happen, and when things happen in athletics, it’s not an athletic problem. It’s a university or institutional problem.”

An AD remarked that historically, college athletics in the 1970s and 1980s habitually made the mistake of “paying lip service” to the academic enterprise. The failure of college athletics to align with the objectives of the greater institutions led to poor graduation rates, declining academic standards, among other problems. Participants stressed that this legacy of misalignment continued to haunt college athletics through the current day, and had created a necessity for athletics directors to prioritize what was best for the institution. This ideology was reiterated time and again by the participants:

Athletics has to fit within that [institutional] mission.

[Athletics] is a co-curricular endeavor.

The number one goal of our department is institutional alignment.

One [force] would be just the landscape of higher education and remaining aligned with the educational mission.

So there has to be an alignment of values that has to start with the institutional leadership and the institution. Then we have to complement and enhance that.

If it’s not a partnership and if there’s not alignment and there’s not trust, it won’t work…there’s no single thing that’s gonna influence our success more than the alignment of values with that group.

The athletics directors’ mentality was to seek alignment between athletics and the larger institution because of the need to act in the best interests of the institution and community.
When considering organizational change, aligning the priorities was necessary for the ADs to implement change.

**Educational Mission**

I would say that intercollegiate athletics is a bit of an outlier in terms of universities. How does that fit into the mission of the university? The universities are there, first and foremost, for education. Therein lies a lot of square-peg-in-round-hole issues for faculty, for administrators. Where does that fit? In my experience, athletics fits and is governed properly when it's taken in as where it is.

One AD’s words noted above maintained that their primary responsibility was to shape their leadership and actions to support the education missions of their respective universities and colleges. They asserted that college athletics was co-curricular to that of the education mission. The ADs dismissed the “media and legal outcry” that college athletics had irreverently abandoned the ideological foundation of education that underpins the institutions of higher education. Rather, the participants believed that athletics represented an integral part of the educational mission of an institution, and it was their responsibility to uphold and improve this contribution. For these leaders, “intercollegiate athletics is very much part of and not contradictory to the educational mission of the university.”

An athletics director at a Power-5 institution contended that the educational mission at his University persuaded him to improve the job attainment rate for his graduating seniors. In his first year, 62% of his seniors had accepted a job prior to graduation. He believed that while this was relatively good, he thought they should do better, therefore he set a three-year goal of achieving 70, 80, and 90% job acceptance rates. Persuaded by the “overarching purpose of student development” he and his
department were able to achieve the goals of 70 and 80% in two years, and only just fell short of 90% in the third year.

A participant at a different institution articulated the education mission held him accountable when making a decision about student-athlete travel. When finalizing the basketball schedule, it became apparent the team would be on the road for five games in a row, missing considerable class time. He said that, in consultation with his faculty-athletic representative, he was able to prioritize the education standards of his institution by providing an academic advisor to travel with the team and mandate study hall on the road. The actions by this AD were not unique, rather they represented similar tactics that other ADs have used to ensure that the underlying priority of the athletics department remained promoting and ensuring the success of the education missions.

**Student-Athlete Experience**

The majority of the athletics directors cited the “student-athlete experience” as a primary motivator when considering organizational change. These leaders asserted that every decision they made must be with student-athletes in mind because they are the reason why ADs existed. Therefore, they claimed, it was critical to understand how their actions impacted the student-athlete experience.

One participant described that creating a positive experience, whether it was by providing every team with a new locker room, or helping them win a championship, had macro-implications on their experiences. Those student-athletes were more likely to be successful after graduating and give back to the institution. This was reiterated by other ADs, citing, “our primary professional purpose in life is to be some sort of catalyst to
student development, so obviously an additional internal force would be making sure that we align with our values of student development and student formation.” The athletics directors asserted this force led them to implement agendas that included study abroad programs, mentorships, facility investment, open-door policies with administrators, and professional skill development, among other initiatives. These leaders believed that lasting change could not be accomplished without focusing on preparing young adults, because “the student-athlete experience is our number one core value.”

**Benefits of Winning**

The participants affirmed the concept of winning was an influential force because of the subsequent implication producing winning teams had on achieving organizational change—it dictated culture, perception, motivation and priorities. These ADs believed they needed to produce winning teams because successful programs motivated donors to give back to the university, the livelihoods of the coaches and ADs depended on it, and student-athletes and the community expected it. They specified basketball and football programs that won conference and national championships had the ability to rally their fan bases and prospective student-athletes. They argued that winning teams meant that fans were more likely to donate, buy season tickets, and purchase TV packages; all of which benefited the resources of the athletics departments. One of the participants lamented that he was always trying to figure out how to raise money, and the easiest way to do that was to ensure that the basketball team was winning. He said that when the basketball team was winning it was easier to get more people involved in the program and purchasing season tickets, because “everybody loves a winner.”
An AD explained that sustained success was a double-edged sword. Those in and around the programs began to expect victory, and the athletics department began to rely on that triumph to help fund those winning programs:

One of the challenges for a school like this, as you know, we’ve had a lot of success from a football standpoint. The expectations of the people who surround our program are very very high because of what we have accomplished. And don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t change those wins for anything, but at the same time, the expectation is that, you know, [University] needs to go out and beat Florida St. every time they play them. That’s a lot easier said than done, so I think those financial challenges providing you know our coaches here the resources they need to be successful, in terms of trying to meet those expectations is a big challenge for us.

The ADs maintained that this feedback loop encouraged them to seek ways to implement change that engaged the community and raised more funds because the expectations around the programs were significant.

The pressure to win was further articulated by athletics directors who oversaw programs that had recent success. They explained that when teams were winning two things occurred: (1) people expected that winning would continue to occur, and (2) they had to ride the wave of success to maximize the growth of the athletics departments.

These forces determined how the ADs chose strategies, such as marketing, ticketing, and fundraising campaigns. This was also apparent for athletics programs that were struggling to win. One of the participant offered that in light of a $5 million dollar shortfall, he decided to cut the funding for four athletics programs. He rationalized that “part of [his] charge [was] to put ourselves in a position to win championships” because “we can’t suck in everything” and this would have occurred if he didn’t cut any programs.
**Economic Forces**

To understand the economic pressures on the athletics directors in this study is to comprehend how they operated in an environment dictated by a scarcity of resources. The third finding reveals that the demands on the ADs to maximize their resources were real and dominated their daily agendas and outlook. These athletics directors were hard pressed to make a decision where they were not asking the question, “Do we have the resources to pursue this objective?” The financial demands of an athletics department fell squarely on the shoulders of these athletics directors, and as elucidated below, influenced their decision-making.

**Financial Resources**

Every participant in this study emphasized that “resources” were a defining force that determined how, when, and what type of organizational change they could implement. They defined resources as institutional funding, donations, TV revenue, conference revenue sharing, and selling tickets and sponsorships, among other sources that subsidized the organization. Remarkably, all of the participants commented that resource allocation was one of their biggest challenges as leaders. This was true even of athletics directors from Power-5 conferences, arguably the best-funded athletics departments in college athletics. The ADs remarked that the level of funding dictated the feasibility of their agendas. They concluded that the instability in how they were resourced presented an impediment to reform, and the discrepancy in funding from year-to-year challenged their agendas. The selection of quotes below best exemplifies these issues, as resources were routinely blamed in affecting how the athletics directors’
thought and subsequently acted:

Resource acquisition is really, really important. I think it’s a balance as an athletic director between totally tuning that out and letting it just totally consume your decision-making. –Southland Conference AD

When people ask me why it’s going on, I said, “Reduce it to a color and the color is green.” Green is the answer. Green allows you to make the expenditure. Green allows you to follow the arms race to compete with other schools for coaches; to keep your coach; to go pay exorbitant amounts of money for another coach. To do all those things and you followed the money and follow it where it goes, you’d see that is the root of all the conference affiliation changes. –Atlantic 10 Conference AD

Everybody thinks we’re rich, but let’s talk about what those resources are for…when you run a 31 sport, 800 plus student-athlete program on $30 million less than Texas is running 17 sports and 350 athletes, the economics are real. –Big10 Conference AD

Sometimes, not having the resources and having to say to somebody, “We can’t do that. We can’t build that stadium. We can’t raise that amount of money,” or “We have all these sports. We can’t do for everyone but we can do for this sport because it produces revenue,” and that breaks your heart when you have to do that. –Atlantic 10 Conference AD

Any time your ticket sales, your donations, your sponsorships, your TV revenue, your league distribution, any time those resources aren’t there then obviously our budgets – everybody talks about a balanced budget. Well, let’s just be balanced. Well, any time you lose revenue streams, concession sales, whatever it may be, then it puts pressure on the overall operation. So trying to balance it and manage revenues is critical which is why the importance of outside forces like donors and sponsors is so important. –American Athletic Conference AD

The forces that are causing us to be disrupted, are the challenges to professionalize. There has always been financial challenges, and I think it is really overstating that we are challenged financially, we always have been because we are self-sustaining. –Big12 Conference AD

For us, I think it’s resources. That has a tremendous impact on how successful we think we can be. The more resources we have the more things that we can build, the more support we can provide for our student athletes, the better experience we can provide, the better coaches and staff we can hire. Not having those would be a significant challenge for us. I would say, high level, not having resources would be a huge challenge
for us. –Mid-American Conference AD

I spend seventy-five percent of my time thinking about how I fund what we do. –Conference USA AD

Budget restraints and constrictions, what can you can and can’t you do, and so I think that is a significant one. A lot of it we don’t control at our level, where we are not generating enough money to cover all costs, we are getting a huge subsidy, so if all of a sudden that subsidy goes down, that impacts your ability to provide the resources to our coaches that they need to be successful. So that’s an impact. –Atlantic 10 Conference AD

Well, unfortunately or fortunately, however you want to look at it, the driving force is money. And we’re all trying to raise as much as possible whether it’s through our Learfield or apparel or tickets or sponsorships or what have you. And so at the root of it, if that’s a good word, is additional revenue. –Mid-American Conference AD

These excerpts revealed that the health of the athletics directors’ budgets influenced the likelihood they could act in certain ways. ADs described how their resources determined if they could hire coaches, build facilities, provide certain student-athlete experiences, among countless other initiatives. As one participant explained, “everything has to do with money” because it was linked to key organizational decisions.

Commercialization of the Enterprise

The participants declared that commercialization had eroded the college athletics model, subsequently narrowing their decision-making capacity and autonomy as organizations. The influence of money, the media, sponsors, NCAA and conference monopolistic behavior, the failure to prioritize student-athlete welfare, and many other factors attributed to a landscape that sought to maximize the revenue potential and output of college sports. The prioritization by those in and around college athletics to commercialize it was universally believed to be a “huge disruptor, because people lose
sight, there’s so much money at stake that people lose sight of, ‘this is about 17-22 year old kids, right?”

The ADs suggested that commercialization constantly challenged their leadership because it represented a necessary evil. They explained they felt equally caught between the opportunity for revenue growth, and the negative externalities that came with partnering with external stakeholders. The participants referenced relationships with sponsors, TV broadcasters, and the media all contributed to the growth of money within college sports. Conversely, those associations did nothing to increase participation opportunities, rather, many times they came at the expense of student-athlete welfare. The increase in funds were not distributed to fund more sports or increase scholarships; rather the monies were concentrated towards escalating salaries, facility construction, and scholarship maintenance due to rising tuition costs. Furthermore, the ADs remarked commercialization shifted choices that impacted the student-athlete experience to entities outside their control. This included the timing of games, and what types of equipment student-athletes were required to wear.

T.V. Revenue

The advent of TV contracts in college athletics impacted the ADs’ leadership in three ways: (1) TV media contracts were essential to funding the athletics departments, and (2) TV contracts failed to consider the welfare of student-athletes, and (3) the wealth gained from media deals was not evenly distributed amongst Division I institutions, thus creating winners and losers.

TV deals were insisted by the ADs as incredibly important due to the exceptional
sums of money that could be gained by selling the broadcast rights to media outlets. The revenue growth, cited to be in the millions of dollars, had a considerable impact on their ability to implement change. These contracts allowed the ADs to hire better coaches, build new facilities, increase budgets, among many other necessities. The presence or absence of these media deals determined the success or failure of the participant’s ability to enact change contingent upon budget constraints.

The athletics directors remarked that broadcasting college events on TV negatively impacted the welfare of student-athletes. They said because they had “chased the television dollar” they felt they had given up the best interests of their programs and student-athletes. One AD commented, that he would never be convinced that it would be a good idea that a volleyball team from the upper Midwest should be playing a team from the South on a Thursday night. TV broadcasters dictated these inconvenient schedules leading to student-athletes unnecessarily missing their classes.

The disparity between TV broadcast rights deals was articulated by the ADs as creating winners and losers. Several of the participants explained that the collective nature of conferences dictated the value of the broadcast rights. This meant that some conferences were valued more than others based on the brand affinity and athletic success of the conferences on the “field.” This was believed to been further exacerbated by the presence of the Power-5 conferences, which garnered the highest media rights deals. A participant explained this challenge:

If we’re talking in the last five to 10 years, that [media rights] has probably most significantly changed, depending on where you are, but how you operate because up until the most recent round of expansion four or so years ago, we could generally Division 1A, to use the old term, FBS, there was a gap, but the gap was surmountable and the gap over time wasn’t
so great that we couldn’t maintain competitiveness across a pretty large and broad number of institutions and programs.

Now if you look at a lot of our budgets, they’re still that way except for one line item. It’s that media rights conference revenue item and the gap is significant. So I think that not only changes some of the ways that we and others operate, but I think it obviously while it’s great for certain programs, I think it threatens our broad based model and it threatens some of the things that for a long time have been a part, an important core component, of college athletics.

TV contracts have overshadowed the authority of athletics directors; the snowball effect thereby created meant that ADs needed TV to remain solvent, yet this occurred at the expense of student-athlete academic welfare, level playing fields and economic independence.

**Peer Institutions**

I think something that this position and any management positions require is to keep an eye on the landscape, understand the landscape, understand what is influencing what and who is driving what.

The ADs believed it was their responsibility to be cognizant of the actions of their peer institutions. The ADs referred to how their peers raised money, what types of facilities they built, coaches they hired, marketing initiatives implemented, and how they positioned themselves during conference realignment impacted their outlook. They explained that peer evaluation dominated how the benchmarking of their own progress and success, ultimately determined how they implemented organizational change.

For one AD, evaluating their program’s peers provided context for who they wanted to “be in bed with,” who of their peers looked like them and who they wanted to compete against. Other ADs believed that understanding your peer institutions was essential in the competitive sphere of college athletics. They understood that in many
ways peer institutions put pressure on them to “keep up with the Jones,” it forced them to work faster, more efficiently and “convince the academic leadership” that cultural change was a necessity to move forward.

Another participant commented that peer schools provided sources of inspiration. The AD related an experience where his men’s basketball team made a deep run in the NCAA tournament. As a small school, this meant they had achieved unprecedented levels of success and the momentum that came with it. He explained that they did not want this to be an anomaly; rather they aspired to achieve sustained success. Therefore, he looked to schools such as Butler, Virginia Commonwealth, Dayton and Creighton who had sustained NCAA success, despite their small size. He reflected on how these schools achieved success and maintained it warranted a closer examination on how they operated, ultimately influencing how they determined their own course moving forward.

**Priority Sports**

The health of the athletics departments depended on the quality and success of the men’s basketball and football teams. The ADs believed that in order to successfully lead their organizations, they needed winning football and basketball teams. These teams represented opportunities to generate revenue and enhance the prestige of the institution. This platform engendered the participants to act in certain ways. Sponsoring these sports forced a preferential concentration of funding in these teams over others. One AD said that they had to invest over a million dollars in their basketball team when they fired and hired new coaches because it included higher salaries and new expenditures to maintain pace with their peers.
These teams were also prioritized on account of their revenue potential. The athletics directors pointed out they had to prioritize these teams because of the revenue gained from selling tickets. Investing in men’s basketball was a priority because “it’s kinda like Reganomics model, trickledown, and it makes a huge difference” in helping to fund the department and other sports.

**Fundraising**

The athletics directors expressed they spent a growing amount of time fundraising money for their athletics departments. They said fundraising remained essential to meet or exceed the gap between their institutional subsides and other revenue generators, and what they needed to operate their programs. It was borne out of necessity because “in order for us to get extraordinary items, or do extraordinary things, you have to bring in money.” The obligatory amount of time spent fundraising represented a significant portion of their responsibilities, and was cited as continuing to growing. Several ADs divulged that over time fundraising went from a luxury to a necessity. One estimated he spent 75% of his time fundraising; another boasted he grew fundraising by 300%, another 200%, and yet another doubled theirs from $15 million to $30 million.

The athletics directors explained fundraising required a significant amount of resources to cultivate relationships with donors, something they did out of necessity. A participant commented that he did not even blink an eye over spending $5,000 on a dinner for donors, as the return on investment far outweighed any money he spent on lavish dinners. Another hosted an annual donors dinner on campus to laud how the donors’ efforts positively impacted the experience of their student-athletes.
The ADs invested in these relationships as a result of the pressure that existed to raise money arising from the increasing costs of athletics. The responsibility fell on them to garner additional funding; a reality that dictated their agendas, “We’ve raised more money. We’ve modified they way we do things. That’s going to be an expectation placed on me, that we do our best to reduce the need for university allocation and student fees.”

The growing costs and inability to rely on institutional funding meant the participants had no option but to fundraise to meet their organizational needs. This influenced how they led, and attributed to the success or failure of their athletics programs.

**Third Party Vendors**

External vendors played an important role in the revenue generation sought by the athletics directors. They remarked that professional vendors such as Learfield, IMG, Millikin, Sodexo, Nike, and UnderArmour became fundamental partners when considering organizational change. The ADs explained these companies housed professionals that could produce resources, strategies, branding and apparel better than any internal operation. “Farming” out to these companies were believed to be necessary because they “really understand how to fully integrate the department into other areas of the university and how we can leverage the position of the entire institution to the benefit of that relationship.”

However, the primary reason so many ADs chose to work with external vendors was the allure of guaranteed revenue. They explained working with outside companies was win-win; they leveraged companies that were better trained and resourced in exchange for guaranteed revenue. They acknowledged this was at the risk of distancing
themselves from their best stakeholders, such as alumni, but they believed the ability to alleviate the financial burdens on the department outweighed any potentially negative outcomes.

**Resource Efficiency**

The ADs expressed the presence of consistent pressure to operate their athletics departments efficiently to maximize their funding sources. This was believed to be fundamental in an environment where subsidies from institutions were either flat or declining. The drive for efficiency influenced how the athletics directors understood their ability to implement change:

> I think our mantra has to be we want to be the most efficient athletic department in the country, and yeah there are different ways you can measure that, you can look at dollars spent per student-athlete, certain total dollars spent, conference finishes, directors cups, or whatever, and try and come up with efficiency measure, but that has got to be how we go about doing our business here at University. I don’t see a future where we have the resources that an Iowa State or a Texas or Florida has got.

The participants expressed that if they could not be self-sufficient, they “better take seriously the money we have coming in” because otherwise they were being wasteful with their money. This meant they had to prioritize expertise in driving revenue and business acumen to protect their budgetary dollars. A participant described a need to self-evaluate to determine if they were operating in the best ways. He asked himself, “I know we’re organized this certain way and we have been for five years and it’s still the right way to organize. Are we missing? Are we efficient? Are we functioning? Are we taking advantage of our strengths?” The drive to become operate at maximum efficiency permeated their outlook and decisions when considering change.
State Funding

A decline in state government funding for higher education institutions was alleged by the ADs as impacting their decision-making. The downturn in resources for universities that received state funding meant the athletics programs that relied on institutional subsidies no longer were funded at the same levels in previous years. Several of the participants articulated this trend, “15 years ago, the state was giving the University about 52% of its budget. Now it’s down to 22%.” Another said the same happened at their school, “it kinda aligned with the economic downturn in 2008 and 9. We used to be 70% state funded, 30% self-funded. In 2016, we’re 30% state funded and 70% self-funded.” The decline in funding meant they could no longer rely on the state for facilities maintenance and new construction. Rather, the ADs said it necessitated finding new ways to generate funding in order to implement the changes they intended to achieve.

Contemporary Forces

Athletics directors are often accused of living in their own athletics bubbles; however, the contemporary issues discussed by the participants’ suggested the contrary. The fourth finding of this study suggests that contemporary issues in college athletics, higher education and greater society influenced the ADs. The participants reflected contemporary issues such as NCAA legislation, social media and national social issues uniquely disrupted them. These were unexpected forces that made them re-examine how they were pursuing organizational change.
Social Issues

My primary message to our student-athletes when they come in the fall is going to be not about competitive and not about academic, but about social things; about how we interact with others.

The athletics directors identified how the national social landscape redefined the manner in which they led their organizations and implemented agendas. The growing number of social issues shuffled their priorities—no longer were administrators only responsible for “who has enough time on the practice courts, that the referee shows up” it is now “24/7/365” and encompassed a broad number of issues.

The ADs remarked that social issues related to mental health, sexual harassment/assault, concussions, hook-up culture, alcohol/drugs, behavior problems, among many others now dominated their attention and policy decisions. They explained that in today’s society, topical issues have challenged ADs due to their inherent public nature and an expectation they will be addressed immediately. This forced the ADs to spend money and time on education programs, professional speakers and leadership academies to address social issues.

One such example presented when an AD commented they were not trained or qualified to deal with mental health issues. This lack of experience compelled her to pay for professional counselors and psychologists to work with student-athletes. Other participants cited the national dialogue on sexual assault on college campuses obliged them to reconsider their policies and practices. They said witnessing other institutions go through sexual assault scandals influenced them to find new ways to educate their student-athletes. Some remarked that they pinpointed high-profile athletes from
basketball and football teams to meet with campus professionals and local law-enforcement to discuss the topic and explain the fallout from sexual assault. The ADs felt driven to make these changes because it was their responsibility to show student-athletes “how you act, this is what you do, this is how you not act.” This responsibility became a daily obligation to protect and meet the needs of student-athletes:

It’s an everyday thing, but when those things happen nationally and they’re brought to the forefront, then it’s our responsibility to take those opportunities to reinforce those values and those lessons and it’s important to invite a dialogue about it. That’s a big part of it.

**Power-5 Conferences**

In 2014, member institutions at the Division I level voted to allow a select number of universities to provide additional benefits to student-athletes. The byproduct of this legislative change was the emergence of the “Power-5 Conferences,” a collection of 65 athletics programs that were enabled to spend money on initiatives for student-athletes that were previously prohibited. Participants in this study who were not leaders at Power-5 institutions stated this new dichotomy impacted their agendas and ability to compete.

The following AD expertly explained what occurred and analyzed the fallout:

They [Power-5] figured out at each school there was a crack in what student athletes were getting. Transportation, an overcoat for a kid who can’t afford one in cold weather. Extra meals that they need because they’re student athletes and all those other things. That group said, “We want to do it,” and the rest of Division I said, “Well, that’s too bad. We have more votes; you’re not going to do it.” Which is true, if you look at the 350 people who are in Division I and only a hundred – actually, only 65 of them are in those power conferences.

They rattled their saber and said, “Well, if you don’t, we might break away.” That was implied. Guess what? People either abstained or voted in favor of it, to placate that group. I guess it’s a long answer to your question of that’s impacted, greatly, how everybody looks at things
now. What they were saying is, “Look. We’re not saying you have to do it, Toledo, Akron, Buffalo. You don’t have to pay your kids. You don’t have to do all these things but allow us to do it.” Well, what they’re saying is, “Here’s the line. Here’s the line; we’re drawing it. We can pay for these things; you can’t.”

Well, what does that say? “We’re going to do everything we can to set up a monopoly. We’re going to set up this system like the castles and the moats where we’re in the castles and we’re going to widen this water between our castle and where you are because now you may not get any kid, because when we’re recruiting a kid, we’ll say ‘Here’s the package you’re getting; here’s what you’re getting if you come here. Here’s your facility; here’s your dining hall. Here’s your practice facility.’” All those things. I’m not trying to overstate it, but that, to me, is going to be the biggest change moving forward in our business.

This was the new reality for non-Power 5 athletics directors, they were not only under-funded but also now out-spent by their peer institutions in the Power-5. This new governance structure meant that these ADs were now reactive, rather than proactive due to their inability to influence change. An athletics director further explained that since the NCAA is beholden to the Power-5 for revenue and valuable membership, they have lost faith in the system: “They are beholden to them, their best buddies are presidents at the biggest schools, and their paychecks, basically, and they feel are tied to these big schools continuing to generate the resources for them.” This new structure intensified the need for ADs to evaluate how they will operate; several questioned the feasibility of funding new student-athlete programs such as unlimited meals or cost of attendance. These unfunded measures put new pressures on their limited resources and growing desire to be competitive. This changed the agendas for many of the ADs since their appointment, forcing them to reevaluate how their missions would best be executed.
Diversity

The athletics directors expressed a need for diversity in college athletics; within their administrative staff, student-athletes, education programming, and the mission of the department. Diversity was considered a guiding principle and necessity for a modern athletics program. A core value existed in the building of strength of character and culture within the athletics departments. Several of the participants commented the importance of diversity led them to make several key organizational changes. One described dedicating a senior associate AD to the role of constantly surveying the department to understand how to better enhance the diversity of the department. Other ADs recalled on how campus forums played an important role to facilitate community discussions related to diversity. These candid conversations helped administrators rethink how they were implemented campus policies and programming. External to the campus, movements such as Black Lives Matter impressed upon the participants the need to address race on campus:

I think the Black Lives Matter movement has really allowed me to contribute not only within our athletic department but across campus in some issues that we’ve been dealing with and talking about. Its also compelled us to get more proactive in issues of race and gender.

The athletics directors additionally discussed how the diverse background of student-athletes influenced how they operated their departments. They explained that many of their student-athletes were minorities which had two effects: (1) the student-athletes looked different from the rest of their peers on campus making them uncomfortable, and (2) they often isolated themselves within small peer groups, failing to engage in broader communities and activities. ADs remarked that they responded by implementing
different policies and initiatives to develop a culture where students of a diverse background could feel welcome on campus and engage in a broad range of opportunities.

**Social Media**

The expanding role of social media influenced the athletics directors as they considered making organizational change. Social media was understood to be the primary way those in and around college athletics now accessed information. The ability to share information instantaneously, whether accurate or not, challenged conventional methods, especially for those ADs who began their career before the advent of social media. For instance, the athletics directors lamented they feared their president hearing about a major rules violation on Twitter before they had a chance to speak with their president; and the negative condemnation from fans and critics through social media that shaped the public’s perception about their athletics department. In the era of social media, problems that arose no longer could quietly be resolved or go away, rather:

> Social media now is a tool where there is just no kept secrets. It’s very difficult to keep something quiet, and I don’t mean that as trying to hide something, but sometimes it’s just a personal matter, and you can’t keep it quiet.

Yet, what concerned many of the ADs was the impact social media had on their student-athletes’ welfare. They believed that the saturation of 24/7 social media exposed their student-athletes to undue emotional burdens. It has become a platform where individuals can “be just nasty and mean to our kids, sometimes, and the impact that has on their health and well-being and esteem.” In response to this, they have spent considerable energy formulating policies to educate this generation, helping them to realize that social media captures the good and bad, and that they always represent their institution. One
of the participants stated they hired an outside consultant company to annually present to the student-athletes the exposure social media could bring. He said, “we hire a company and kind of alert the freshman that if you tweet or what have you, this firm can pick it all up. And the first time they came here, a lot of our student-athletes were really embarrassed.” Despite the challenges associated with the use of social media, the ADs remarked that it remained an important tool to maintain an edge in marketing and recruiting. This forced them to reconsider their strategies as they implemented agendas to effectively lead their organizations.

**NCAA Legislation**

The athletics directors in this study commented that legislation passed by the NCAA impacted their leadership choices and often was considered an impediment to reform. Recent legislation that separated schools into Power 5 and non-Power 5 conferences was cited as dividing Division I into haves and have-nots. Several of the ADs explained that the new governance structure shifted the influence towards schools with greater resources, meaning that the parity of influence they had for thirty years no longer existed. This made reform challenging since the majority of schools no longer influenced policy decisions. This has pushed the athletics directors into a position where:

Being able to find a way to stay competitive without breaking the bank is something the NCAA doesn’t care about, or they basically want to make sure that they’re gonna in some way write legislation, and the only people who are going to be able to follow it are the ones who can afford it.

Despite the legislative shift, the athletics directors remarked that NCAA rules had always impacted their decision-making. Rules and policies are not static, rather the ADs described a need to always be ready to assess legislative changes to determine how to
adapt:

It requires you to be nimble in the sense that when you make a decision one month, five months later you could be making a whole different decision. Satellite camps for football would probably be a good one. You go through the budget process well in advance and you make the decisions based on information that you know. We made some decisions thinking that there was not going to be satellite camps. A short time later that changes.

The shifting landscape frustrated many of the athletics directors as a result of the associated increase in costs, but said many of the changes were to prioritize student-athletes and hold athletics departments accountable. This included providing student-athletes with more resources and mandating stricter guidelines for eligibility to ensure students graduated. These changes forced the participants to constantly reevaluate their leadership decisions and ultimately dictated the choices they made for the growth and improvement of their organizations.

**Cost-of-Attendance**

Cost-of-Attendance legislation was articulated by a majority of the participants as disrupting how they operated their athletics departments. This initiative was cited as disrupting the ADs in two ways: (1) it was an unfunded budgetary line item that stressed operating budgets, and (2) was considered important to remain competitive when recruiting top prospective student-athletes. The athletics directors explained that these two reasons are why Cost-of-Attendance remained so challenging. They needed to implement Cost of Attendance, yet they had to find ways to resource this initiative.

Several of the ADs estimated that providing Cost-of-Attendance would add between $250,000 and $1,000,000 worth of expenses to their budgets each year. This
challenged if and how they could fund it, and was said to keep these leaders awake at night. Many of the ADs commiserated that prior to Cost-of-Attendance they were already pushing hard to find resources to meet the needs of the department. Adding in this legislation only complicated their efforts to fundraise and find new revenue streams to adequately fund their departments. One AD confided, “My first thought is I got to get full scholarships before I can start getting into cost of attendance.” Yet despite these struggles, in several instances the choice to add Cost-of-Attendance was out of the hands of the ADs. Some of the participants asserted that their president or their conference mandated they implement Cost-of-Attendance for their student-athletes. This forced these athletics directors to find ways to fund this legislation, determining how they set their agendas.

Cost of Attendance changed the agendas of the ADs because they saw it as critical to keep pace with recruiting prospective student-athletes. The institutions that had the resources, or found ways to fund it, motivated those ADs who were not outright positioned to fund the initiative. They expressed that they needed to find ways to allow their coaches to go out and speak with recruits knowing they could be competitive and offer Cost-of-Attendance stipends. They viewed it as their responsibility to go out and raise the funds necessary, and that failing to do so would contribute to their failure, and ultimately their athletics department.

Title IX Legislation

Title IX, in everybody’s opinion, was nothing more for many years than “are we being fair to women in sport”? With our budgets, with opportunities to participate, number of sports and all of that. And the focal point has increased or changed tremendously to include the violence portion and harassment, and all of that. And we’ve seen firsthand at other institutions, and even some issues here from a hazing perspective several years ago, that was eye-opening.
Title IX legislation, part of the Education Act of 1972, continued to influence the decision making of the athletics directors. These leaders explained it put pressure on them to offer equal opportunities for women, and now have extended to protect their experience and welfare. For instance, in an attempt to be proactive, one AD commented that he revamped freshman orientation to address issues of sexual assault on campus. Despite the positive outcomes for women, some ADs believed that Title IX was primarily responsible for eliminating opportunities for men.

A few of the participants remarked that when starting their tenures as athletics directors, the women’s programs at their institution were underfunded. This lack of support spurred them to increase salaries for head and assistant coaches, support staff, facilities and their budgets. These ADs said that this was not only the right thing to do, but also the best way to field competitive women’s programs. Yet, another AD saw it differently, noting, “Sometimes when you give on one side (football & basketball), you have to give to the other side (women’s sports) which makes no financial sense at the end of the day, but because of the policies and laws we have to follow,” which means they have to spend money on sports that may not need it, but they have to do it to stay equal.

The athletics directors believed that Title IX forced them to make tough decisions between funding men’s or women’s sports. They explained that because they needed to have so many women participating in sports, that they had to either eliminate men’s sports or limit their roster sizes. To one AD, this has:

Just broken my heart over the years to make, and the women’s rights groups will say, “We’re not making you cut men or cut sports, just give more to the women,” but the reality is that at most schools they’re not able to increase money, they have to cut men.
Title IX represented an impediment to the participants because it challenged the manner in which they made organizational change. It required them to make tough decisions about how they funded their programs; for many this meant funding the experience of current student-athletes, rather than funding new opportunities for others.

**Organizational Forces**

Athletics director at Division I institution required an acute awareness of how organizational dynamics influenced their leadership. The fifth category to emerge from these findings relates to organizational forces that interrupted, provided insight or asserted priorities for these ADs. Consensus existed among the athletics directors that they were not insular from the demands of the larger academic institutions or from what was occurring throughout the NCAA. These varying organizational forces adjusted how they thought and implemented policy.

**Presidential Communication**

The athletics directors in this study articulated that governance structures dictated whom they reported to, and for most placed an importance on their communication with their president. The frequency, timeliness and quality of the dialogue between the presidents and athletics directors impacted their ability to be agents of change. They opined that this relationship was their opportunity to discuss with the president national and local issues, educate them on current institutional dynamics, strategies and other goals they hoped to achieve. A participant discussed the importance of their dialogue:

> We have a very helpful, conversational relationship that we connect about once a month from a one-to-one basis and review progress. Have some dialogue as it relates to what have been some of our challenges and obstacles. He is always volunteering with “how can I help?”
The participants also expressed how the public nature of college athletics meant news traveled quickly. Therefore, when it came to potentially disruptive issues, they believed it was their responsibility to over-communicate with the president to ensure that any information that negatively impacted their athletics programs or school came from them and not the public. A lack of communication with the president could unfavorably impact their standing with the president. They believed it was critical to constantly update the president to guarantee they had the backing of the president when pursuing policies for the athletics department.

Staff Interactions

There are many times I rely on people within the organization to help me guide us to where we need to go. They’re the experts. So I learn from them. I ask them to challenge me on certain ideas or philosophies. We do that in a respectful way and I think they understand that I’ll make the decision, but that their input is important. I’m always trying to learn from everybody.

The athletics directors stressed that they were not on an island, or operating in a vacuum, rather they needed to interact with their staff to ensure they were pursuing the best ideas and agendas. They asserted that their staff remained critical to this task because they saw things differently than the ADs, and because “you only have one set of eyes, you have to rely on a lot of other people to help you.” A participant divulged that he really had to lean on his staff because at times he did not have time to deal with smaller details. It was more important for him to step back to manage larger tasks that required significant time and attention. Another athletics director viewed his interaction with his staff as critical to the success of the department because in order to make significant changes he needed the
buy-in from his staff. If this did not occur he remarked, the staff would reluctantly go along and then the likelihood of success diminished.

The athletics directors commented that staff members would challenge their ideas and agendas. They believed this dynamic integral to honing their organizational agendas. When done respectfully, staff members pushed their leaders in ways that would “collectively represent the best of as many different aspects as we can.” By allowing their staff to challenge their authority, this empowered their staff to help put the organization in the best position to succeed.

**Strategic Plans**

Strategic plans were insisted by the participants to be important benchmarks that held them accountable and on a path to achieve their goals. Strategic plans were described as formal plans or initiatives with specific and measurable attributes that pushed an athletics department towards achievable long-range goals. The ADs expressed an increasing importance of and reliance on these plans, “how much [time] I spend on strategic planning has shifted from probably very little to 25-30 percent of my time.”

These plans helped the ADs prioritize their day-to-day tasks. For instance, one of the participants said his plan directed him to maximize basketball, be true to fiscal responsibility, enhance fundraising, and promote diversity and gender equity. Another AD remarked that his plan pushed him to better align his department with the academy to ensure that the athletics department was working consistently within the values of the school. These plans, often developed through cross-campus partnerships, influenced the ADs as they looked to implement change, by providing guidelines containing broad-
based campus support. For these athletics directors, the strategic plan was critical to their own and the athletics departments’ success:

So it [strategic plan] was out of necessity and I believe in it. I’ve operated without a plan and I’ve operated with a plan and every single time you get better results with a plan. So I don't think it’s words on paper, at least it’s not for us. It’s something that we live, that we share. Again it creates our greatest communication tool. It creates accountability. It creates focus. So I don't know how you operate without one.

Industry Colleagues

In search of the best ways to operate their organizations, the athletics directors consulted with peers at other institutions and within their industry to learn about best practices. The participants attributed many of their successes to conferring with their peers because they offered different viewpoints and perspectives that helped to inform their choices that were similar in nature. As one AD pointed out, “Some of the best ideas are the ones you hear from other people, and so, when you hear them and you kind of figure out, and talk to see if they are right.” For instance, they discussed speaking with other ADs about how to operate ticket sales, make improvements to facilities and enhance recruiting. The ADs also described a reliance on industry peers to attain information when hiring new coaches. They would reach out to colleagues to learn about different coaches or vet others they were interested in hiring. These interactions allowed them to gain perspective and understand how to deal with a variety of challenges that would frequently present themselves.

The partnerships with colleagues extended to the NCAA level where communal benefits existed in unified opinions on national issues. A participant described a 1AAA athletics directors’ association that was formed to provide a strong national voice for
schools without football. This partnership helped prevent instances where Division I schools with football pushed the Division into a direction that would be unfair for the 1AAA schools. These partnerships influenced how the participants made decisions through collaboration that impacted their ability to implement organizational change for the betterment of their institution.

**Institutional Scandal**

The athletics directors described scandal on their teams and in their departments as significant disrupters that influenced how they made choices that set the course for their programs. A noteworthy majority of the participants articulated that scandal had affected them, some in drastic ways; while for others it was subtler. They shared stories about academic infringement, religious freedom controversy, sexual harassment and misconduct, behavior problems, point shaving and gambling. These various scandals forced the athletics directors to confront poor choices and develop strategies to put the athletics departments in a position to represent themselves in a way that reflected positively on the institutions. Several ADs said they hoped to accomplish this by being proactive to anticipate scandals, and by “trying to educate staff and student-athletes prior to ideally a crisis happening.”

The participants voiced that scandals pressed them to make important organizational changes to prevent future infractions from occurring. One explained that due to a prior scandal, the reporting structure of the senior staff changed to prevent conflicts of interest. Previously, the director of compliance and academic support team reported directly to the athletics director, however, after a scandal occurred this changed.
The compliance director switched to report to the president, and the academic support team reported to the dean of the university. He explained this was important because, “no coach or athletic director could go put them in an awkward position, and put power over them because I am their boss.”

Scandal influenced how the ADs made important changes because it had the ability to undermine any success they hoped to achieve; yet they were frank about this occurring on their campuses. To these leaders, even when they set a tone of rule compliance and scandal happened, this was just a byproduct of “human frailty.” Even in their best efforts to prevent scandal, it sometimes happened. The ADs believed they had to do their best to mitigate how it disrupted their leadership. Scandals were only made worse when they were covered-up, therefore they said it was important to face them head-on and change their approach to prevent future occurrences.

**Peers’ Scandal**

Peer institutions and colleagues that were experiencing scandal in their athletics departments influenced the participants as they considered organizational change. The ongoing scandals around Division I were cited as examples of what they hoped to avoid. They remarked that it was important to be in tune with what was occurring throughout Division I in order to learn from others’ mistakes. Many asked themselves, “If this particular scandal was occurring at another institution, could it happen to them as well?”

Clearly when the scandal happens most athletic departments are having conversations about whether that could actually occur at their institution. The best example I can probably give you is when the Penn State thing started blowing up. Everyone in the country in athletic departments was talking about; could that happen on our campus? And you start talking about federal laws of reporting crimes and that sort of thing, so yeah I guess I would say it does change behavior, but I think it changes
behavior in positive ways.

This AD alluded to how the other participants reacted to scandal at other universities; it spurred them to make changes to improve their policies and standards. Other ADs said watching schools such as Baylor go through sexual misconduct allegations pushed them to consider if they were creating an environment where their student-athletes were safe and their health was being protected.

The participants cited the sexual misconduct scandals at Penn State and Stanford, along with the academic cheating scandal at the University of North Carolina compelled them pay attention to issues that “maybe on a day to day basis you haven’t paid attention to. But you don’t pay attention until something bad happens. And so those things, they do force changes usually in a positive way.”

These positive changes took several forms, (1) new curriculum on sexual violence to educate student-athletes during freshman orientation, (2) sexual awareness training, (3) bystander intervention instruction, and (4) prioritizing policies that enhanced transparency. The participants perceived scandals as an opportunity for self-reflection and to ask tough questions about how they operated their athletics departments. Scandals at peer institutions clarified for many of these participants that how they needed to treat their student-athletes. When these standards were violated, it would disrupt any goals they were seeking to achieve; therefore, learning from others was an important task, “just because it hasn’t happened here, doesn’t mean it can’t happen.”

**Campus Tensions**

The relationships between the academy and the athletics programs was described
as frequently tenuous; the friction between these two sides of the higher education “coin” influenced how the athletics directors led their organizations. Several of the participants believed that much of the tension existed due to the jealousy members of the academic community felt over the success and exposure of the athletics programs. They said that the faculty would complain that all of the resources being spent on athletics should be directed towards academic pursuits. The ADs were quick to point out that most of the resources spent on athletics would not be available to academic programs, so this was a false argument. Athletics departments relied heavily on media contracts and fundraising for their budgets, two sources that would disappear if the athletics programs did not exist. Yet success still appeared to rile many faculty, and the tension over the success caused some problems:

At [    ] University, there was definitely this vibe from the faculty that the better we got in athletics, that meant the more academic compromises that the institution had clearly made. They were going out of their heads in '04, and '05, and '06 when our football team was top ten in the country. Having to talk about a disrupter, it was a disrupter from the standpoint of spending time putting out fires because of baseless rumors and baseless squabbles over things that weren’t true or were taken out of context.

Despite the frustrations faculty felt over the success of the athletics teams and sharing resources, the ADs pointed out that the incongruence between athletics and academics required them to extend olive branches to reduce impediments to change. One of the participants remarked college campuses were like “ecosystems,” meaning that “if you make a decision that really some of your constituents really like, but it upsets other constituent groups, you have to have an understanding of how that affects the whole unit, how that affects your standing at the institution.” For several of the ADs managing this
relationship, diminishing tension meant a need to eliminate misconceptions. They said many of the issues that arose, were mainly due to a lack of understanding. These barriers motivated the ADs to work with the faculty to explain how athletics added value and was part of the holistic approach of the institution.

For the participants, this meant working with faculty to reduce tensions by seeking compromises. They believed it was necessary to consider the overall impact of their decisions to reduce tensions; a challenging conundrum due to differing priorities between athletics and academics. For instance, an athletics director described a scenario where she and an academic support staff member disagreed over the need to travel a staff member with the men’s basketball team to help with studying and tutoring. She articulated that they were at complete odds, and it was because the academic staff member didn’t believe it was a priority to send someone with the team. The AD maintained that in this instance she refused to compromise because this was what the student-athletes needed and this was what the industry standard dictated.

**Brand Positioning**

In order to brand yourself, you have to take control of your brand, part of your brand is earning it, part of your brand is massaging it.

The participants commented that they bore the responsibility to grow and enhance the brand of their athletics departments and institutions. They explained the necessity to improve the profile of their university in a market saturated with competitors seeking to do the same thing. They rationalized this exposure had incredible value:

> It has value beyond athletics. It has value for your university. For instance, on the Southeast Conference Football Game of the Week, if we’re on in, I don’t know how many markets but they’ve got stations in San Antonio, Oklahoma in our region. We always get a chance to run some
university spots and we always do. The exposure for the university’s good. Obviously, recruits want to know whether you’re on television.

The ADs remarked they were constantly attempting to position their athletics programs to reflect well on behalf of their institution, because it was reliably the “front porch” of the university.

This exposure meant that athletics was the marketing agent that projected the image of the entire university. This responsibility influenced the ADs as they made decisions that dictated external messaging. An athletics director at a university that was less than twenty years old commented that a primary responsibility of his was to help grow not only the brand of the athletics department, but also that of the entire institution. Part of this branding was changing what everyone called the school because the old name was often confused with a community college. He said it was important to invest in a branding initiative because it improved the visibility and reputation of the school. He also believed that it encouraged camaraderie amongst current students and alumni which grew the brand on campus and throughout the alumni network.

The participants were motivated to improve their branding due to the inextricable link it contained to greater resources for their schools and athletics departments. Investing in marketing enhanced their academic and athletic brands which improved their media exposure. They commented that this would have a snowball effect—better brand recognition would help coaches recruit better athletes, engage more alumni leading to improved donations, and admissions would grow because of a desire by prospective students to be enrolled at a prestigious institution. Branding was an opportunity for the ADs to enact positive change on their campus, and this influenced their choices as
they considered how to implement branding plans.

**Changing Landscapes**

Change in priorities, expectations, needs, among other factors, influenced the participants in this study in a dynamic way that frequently shifted how they implemented their agendas. The ADs asserted that being an athletics director was not a static position, rather it dynamically changed to meet the needs of their student-athletes, institutions, NCAA, conferences, and alumni. These leaders expressed that when comparing their agendas from the time of their appointment to their current leadership, little resembled when they first began their tenure. They believed this occurred for several reasons; (1) changes occurred outside their control, (2) external actors such as the president, trustees and alumni reshuffled priorities, and (3) existing problems changed, or other more pressing challenges subverted any other priorities.

Several of the athletics directors explained that when they were hired they hoped to make certain changes they perceived as necessary for their athletics departments to move forward. However, what they discovered was that underlying problems that they were previously unaware of changed their priorities. One participant remarked that he wanted to initially benchmark his athletics programs with competitors, but he said, “I haven’t done as much of that stuff just because I’ve been consumed with internal things. I think maybe that was in part coming in and not understanding what was broken here and where I needed to concentrate my time.” Another AD commented that when he began he spent six years to address internal issues related to academics, business, and compliance, but now the pendulum shifted to focus on external priorities such as working with
vendors on corporate sales, media and broadcasting.

The ADs believed that a changing environment taught them to be flexible in an industry where being adaptable was a positive attribute. To be the most effective athletics director, they explained, a constant evaluation of what was going to have the greatest impact on your department, and determination of, “what can wait until later? What can I delegate?” were critical. They believed this skill set served them well when changes occurred, such as when different presidents were hired, shifting the agendas of the ADs – or when a president or trustee called or e-mailed them their days would often drastically change. These interruptions meant priorities the ADs believed were important were either reshuffled or didn’t get accomplished. The subversion of these priorities dictated how and when the ADs pursued their organizational plans.

**Personal Forces**

The athletics directors in this study all spent a majority of their careers in college athletics. The final finding in this study points to the extensive collegiate experiences of these participants shaped how they thought and acted. The perspectives they embodied dictated what they believed represented important change for their athletics departments. The relationships they built with mentors and their own trials as athletics directors formed their leadership characteristics. They also reflected on how their personal values and perspective on the relationship between integrity and winning guided their methods of decision-making process.

**Mentors**

The athletics directors in this study had extensive experience working in college
athletics. Many of them, as they worked their way up the ranks, formed relationships with colleagues that would become mentors who helped them develop their skill sets. These advisors shaped how they thought and influenced how they led as athletics directors. The ADs suggested that these role models continued to impact the decisions they made regarding organizational change. The following excerpts captured the impression mentors made on the participants:

I learned from them, and [ ] was very much a numbers guy and really looking at what you’re doing and being very calculated in the things he did…those are the things that I try to reach back and in my management style, [and] remember. –Sun Belt Conference AD

They just took me under their wing. And they were there if I needed advice. Or, I could call them about a hire, somebody I was looking at for a coach. So I think that those different entities and individuals have helped make me successful. –Conference USA AD

I think about the people professionally that have influenced me through the years in one way or another. Sometimes maybe I’ve seen something that it’s like, “when I get the chance to be in that situation I’m not gonna do that. I’m gonna do that differently.” –Southland Conference AD

I probably worked for the two best football architects in the history of college football and really learned a lot from those guys and I think those are attributed to our successes. –Sun Belt Conference AD

I’m heavily influenced by the people I’ve learned from. They’ve taught me how and shown me how to, I think, be a good leader, a good manager, and a good serving athletic director. –MAC Conference AD

You feel lucky you’ve been around places that have not only encouraged women in this profession, but men who have put them in those roles. I owe a lot to the female mentors and administrators that I have had a chance to work around. –Big12 Conference AD

The external people that I trust as mentors are probably more impactful in my decision-making than anybody here. They have a broader perspective so I try to understand when I’ve got a tough decision, I try to get their help from their experience and their perspective. –American Athletic Conference AD
I think especially as a younger AD, what would a mentor of mine have done in this particular situation? –MAC Conference AD

Professional Experiences

The participants cited professional experience as an important force that impacted how they thought about and made decisions regarding organizational change. The ADs in this study all had extensive careers in college athletics; they believed that their professional experiences guided them as they made decisions. Many of these experiences were mistakes they made as junior athletics directors. They asserted that learning from and owning up to their mistakes was critical to becoming better athletics directors.

A participant shared that when his current university interviewed him, he was asked what his weaknesses were as a leader. He responded by stating he had been working his entire career to become an athletics director. He said, “within the first month it was full of crap. Because I learned within a month all the things I didn’t know. I thought I was prepared. I thought I was…sitting in the chair is a different phenomenon.” The ADs judged it was their responsibility to learn from their mistakes and successes, because it informed their future choices. Building on these experiences gave them confidence and perspective as they made decisions about organizational change.

Personal Values & Principles

ADs described their values and principles as a road map to ensure they implemented organizational change that reflected their overall mission for the athletics departments. The participants remarked that the high stakes of college athletics constantly challenged their values, along with the rest of their athletics departments. This
environment meant, as one AD pointed out:

That’s why guiding principles come in. It in the end it’s about guiding principles. And our guiding principles are integrity, together, determination, excellence, and respect. And your guiding principles are designed to be guardrails for all of your coaches, your student-athletes, and how you administer the program.

The ADs expressed a reliance on their values when disruptions occurred, because their principles helped them make choices that were aligned with their change agendas. They described instances where people of influence and power attempted to interrupt their strategy, but their values steered them in the right direction. One AD remarked that when this did not occur was “where most organizations go wrong.” The same participant asserted that this was so important that she would stand up for her values even if it meant losing her job.

The principles and values of the athletics directors also impacted how they made decisions in lower stakes scenarios. A participant related an instance where he had to make a tough decision between firing staff members and allocating money elsewhere, or maintaining the status quo and not give his staff a raise. He explained that his principles ultimately validated the need to retain his staff because it ensured the cohesion of the staff, which would better impact the success of the organization. The prioritization of values and principles determined how the athletics directors implemented organizational change. The athletics directors believed that this was not something you did once in awhile it was every day:

So what you have to do day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month, year-to-year, is again there are those core principles and those core responsibilities and those core duties that you have to protect and preserve, that you have to prioritize and that you have to make absolute certain that they get accomplished and they get accomplished the way they need to
Perspectives on Integrity & Winning

A significant number of athletics directors discussed the relationship between integrity and the importance of winning. They conferred that integrity, which was described as doing the right thing without regard for the outcome, always trumped the need to win. Integrity existed as a moral test to dictate the best decisions even if it meant diminishing the likelihood of winning. An AD remarked that making the right choices required special people, who knew how to assert their values despite knowing that it could disproportionately impact their success and job security. Choosing the shorter path was appealing, but staying the course was described as the best decision because it mitigated many of the destructive outcomes that could occur when shortcuts were taken. One of the participant believed that integrity and winning were not mutually exclusive, rather “you must believe you can win with integrity. You must believe that. First of all its been demonstrated too many times not to be true. Secondly, the alternative could be just destructive in so many ways.”

The participants in this study also described how a perceived need for integrity influenced their actions to hold others accountable. The ADs maintained that one of their primary responsibilities was to implement policies that promoted a culture of integrity. When department, conference, or NCAA codes of conduct were violated, the ADs could lean on promoting integrity to correct the behavior of others. The athletics directors declared this was solved by including “codes of conduct” clauses in coaches’ contracts, promoting institutional policies, educating the staff, learning from peers, among other
tactics. As one AD asserted, when trying to make organizational change, you have to “control the controllables” because that will have lasting impact on the success of the organization.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined 24 Division I athletics directors’ insights on the environmental forces that disrupted and influenced their leadership. Participants included athletics directors who were leaders at FBS, FCS or IAAA institutions – schools that sponsored big-time sports, namely football and men’s basketball that have historically been the battleground for debates and policy decisions regarding college athletics. This chapter details the consistency of the study’s findings with previously published literature, as well as where the findings contest and contradict prior results. Following this, discoveries will be detailed that are as of yet, undocumented in published literature. Next, I offer a series of conclusions about athletics director leadership, followed by implications for practice, policy, and future research. Finally, I offer concluding insights on forces that influence athletics directors.

Discussion

The scholarly literature overwhelmingly indicates that since its inception, college athletics has been burdened with flaws. These defects—namely governance tensions between stakeholders, scandals and misbehavior, and unregulated commercialization—have long complicated the leadership roles of athletics directors. The findings in this study validate many assertions of previous scholars, however some inconsistencies have been discerned. Additionally, several new discoveries shed light on the complexity of forces that influence athletics directors’ leadership and their ability to implement organizational change agendas.
Clotfelter (2011) and Frey (1987) argue that higher education is universally recognized and understood through the visible role of athletics, but the academic side of universities do not recognize athletics as a significant part of the university. The participants in my study vocalized they bore a responsibility to grow and enhance the brand of the athletics department and university. They believed in their ability to positively enhance the reputation and resources available to their institution, through the use of athletics, to improve the national profile of their school. Yet, the athletics directors explained they could not achieve these goals without the support of key stakeholders—specifically faculty and their institutions’ presidents. Participants rebuked the argument that there is an inherent divide exists between athletics and academics. They asserted that faculty were principal stakeholders in athletics and their relationships with these individuals were characterized as partnerships built on mutual respect.

Bowen and Levin (2003) found the complexity of athletics has led to a misalignment of values between athletics and academics. The athletics directors’ insights suggested this was the case; the college athletics model eroded their decision-making capabilities due to the influence of money, the media, sponsors, the NCAA, and conferences. These internal and external forces diluted their power, meaning the ADs lost control of the student-athletes’ academic and personal welfare, along with what was individually best for their institution.

Despite this widening distance between athletics and academia, participants were more aligned with the findings of Toma and Kramer (2009), who attributed the gap to a conflict of identity. These scholars suggest the dual identity between academics and
athletics can lead to tensions that persist and inhibit effective reform agendas. However, institutions that are able to manage dueling identities by deemphasizing conflict between missions and finding productive synergies among academe, business, and athletics are the ones who emerge with missions most similarly aligned. Athletics directors in this study exhibited the capacity to develop partnerships more often than not characterized their leadership. Their ability to promote change required a willingness to be aligned with stakeholders and institutional values. They articulated that when positive synergies of values, mission, and the student-athlete experience existed between the president, board of trustees, and faculty, that athletics became part of the core mission of their institutions. This alignment shaped these participants’ perspectives—an institution’s education mission no longer appeared external to the success of the athletics programs, but rather an integral part of their core values.

Scholars have extensively covered the economic and commercialization forces that complicate college athletics (Duderstadt, 2009; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Smith, 1986; Thelin, 1994; Yost, 2010). Smith asserts that commercialization challenges ADs to balance financial solvency and institutional values. Yet, Estler and Nelson (2005), Yost (2010) and Deardorff (2000) purport that commercialization has deeper and lasting effects: that intercollegiate athletics programs are entrepreneurial units seeking to maximize potential revenue, even at the expense of the financial well-being of institutions and student-athletes’ academic success. Resource acquisition was a primary concern for participants in this study, and this pursuit for funding often had negative repercussions for institutions and student-athletes. The ADs
maintained that effective organizational change hinged on their ability year-over-year to grow their funding sources from donations, TV revenue, conference partnerships, and selling tickets and sponsorships. This pursuit eventuated negative externalities; they sold TV rights at the expense of student-athlete welfare, overspent resources to keep up with peer institutions, and invested large sums of money in primary sports such as football and basketball at the expense of other sports they sponsored. This is consistent with findings reported elsewhere in the published literature.

Lazaroff (2007) and Smith (2000) maintain that the liberalization of the NCAA allowed member institutions to bend rules, and undermined the NCAA’s ability to act as an impartial enforcement and regulatory body. Participants in my study shared this outlook; claiming they were victims of the continued decentralization of the NCAA, which eroded their power to influence the future of Division I athletics. They criticized legislation passed by the NCAA that impacted their leadership choices, impeded reform and concentrated power in a small number of prominent athletics departments. These sentiments mirror Fleisher et al. (1992) findings that the NCAA acts as a cartel; their monopolistic control unequally distributes benefits to its member institutions. This was echoed by some of the athletics directors who pointed out the NCAA was beholden to its wealthiest members who threatened to withdraw from the Association, which would defund and destabilize the self-serving organization. This allowed for legislation such as “Cost-of-Attendance” to be blessed by the NCAA, which unfairly widened the competitive gap between those who could fund the initiative and those who could not.

Duderstadt (2009) contends that individuals responsible for imposing a culture of
compliance (including athletics directors) fail due to an inability to provide meaningful oversight to the athletics department. Scandalous behavior at the participants’ institutions occurred due to a lack of oversight and elicited reactionary behaviors. Incidents of academic infringement, sexual misconduct, and cheating, among others forced the athletics directors to reevaluate their policies and procedures to avoid future scandals. Yet, many of the participants exhibited a proactive stance in fostering a culture of compliance and oversight, and did not prioritize their own self-preservation due to their generous compensation as Harper and Donnor (2017) contend. Rather, the participants articulated they promoted oversight by constantly surveying what was occurring throughout their industry. Scandals at peer institutions spurred them to make changes to improve their policies and standards to avoid similar scandals occurring at their institutions.

Athletics directors in my study contended the intersection of social and cultural norms in athletics placed a burden on them to challenge the status quo which is consistent with the findings of Andre and James (1991), and Chu (1989), and Harper (2004), and Sack and Staurowsky (1998), and Zimbalist (1999). These scholars point out that ADs struggle to make systematic change as a result of economic and social constraints, but the presence of social and cultural norms pressures these leaders to make broader organizational change. The 24 participants shared the same opinions, asserting that athletics directors encountered a wide range of norms—pressures to diversify their department, the demands of information exchange through social media, the impact of NCAA and conference rule changes, the evolution of Title IX interpretations, and the expectation to prioritize the student-athlete experience—and all were significant culture
and contemporary forces that influenced their decision-making.

The influence of contemporary and cultural forces pointed out by the scholars do not account for the totality all of the forces that influenced the athletics directors. Pressures at individual, organization, and institutional levels had dramatic effects on the participants. Relationships between individuals, individuals and organizations, and between organizations on campus prioritized specific institutional values, principles, and expectations for these leaders. These standards shaped choices the athletics directors made— it influenced who they hired, the quality of their relationships with others, and the alignment of their values with the people and organizations with whom they collaborated.

Lapchick and Slaughter (1989) argue that athletics directors are complicit in the decline in integrity of college athletics because they “have actively participated in the creation, development, and perpetuation of a set of values, activities, and practices that has undermined the ethical foundations of both college athletics and higher education itself” (p. 154). These scholars suggest when choosing between producing winning teams or prioritizing the integrity of their institution, athletics directors primarily choose the former. The participants in this study suggested a different narrative. They believed that promoting integrity superseded winning because they thought that these two concepts were not mutually exclusive. Rather, the participants argued that they were most likely to win when their culture was rooted in their institutions’ values. The ADs formed consensus that guiding principles and alignment with their institutions’ values were critical underpinnings of the decision-making process.

Despite these assertions by the participants, some of their actions did mirror what
Chu (1989), and Lapchick (2006), and Riess (1998) describe as part of the 100-year legacy of decision-making by athletics directors that has always promoted winning over integrity. They purported that when confronted with moral dilemmas between winning and integrity, promoting winning supersedes all other values, undermining the ADs’ credibility. The ADs in this study agreed winning was important because it was the grease that kept the athletics engine running. Winning teams meant donors were more likely to give back to the university, provided leverage when negotiating TV contracts, rallied fans to purchase tickets, and enticed prospective student-athletes to attend their institutions. This created a feedback loop that the ADs were forced to support. Winning produced rewards for their institution and themselves, but to maintain these rewards they had to continue to make decisions that prioritized winning.

Frey (1982a) found that donors to athletics programs are perceived by athletics directors to be necessary to compete at the highest levels because other revenue sources (university budgets, sponsorships, ticket sales, etc.) are not enough to adequately fund their sports. Participants in this study shared this outlook; relationships with donors were developed to cultivate future opportunities to ask for money. The resource constraints on the ADs forced them to pursue fundraised dollars. This motivated them to make decisions that pulled donors closer to the athletics programs, making them feel engaged in the athletics community and integral to their success.

Frey also postulated that a reliance on boosters to fund athletics departments gave these individuals direct and indirect influence over policymaking decisions. And as Cullen et al. (1990) suggest, this influence is a major reason why institutional and NCAA
policy violations occur. The ADs in my study offered a complex and contradictory

description of the influence of donors on their decision-making. Many ADs agreed that
donors feel entitled to have access to them, and donations in the millions of dollars
provided a platform for these boosters to wield their influence. However, some of the
participants pushed back that they were beholden to the opinions of donors when making
decisions, because they (boosters) did not understand the complexities of athletics nor
higher education. While essential monetarily, donors did not have the tools or
institutional experience to dictate policy decisions. These competing narratives are
further complicated by the revelation that participants spent a growing amount of time
dedicated to raising money, which meant an increasing number of outsiders gained access
to and applied pressure to ADs to adopt favorable policies.

The scholarly literature states the primary fiduciary power responsible for the
conduct and control of the athletics department is the office of the president (DeSensi &
Rosenberg, 2003; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Moore, 1992). The athletics directors explained
their relationship with the president dictated their priorities, values and long-term vision.
This oversight meant they had to frame their decisions in the context of, “Does this align
with the president?” However, their relationships extended beyond the supervisor-
employee role. As Fisher and Koch (1996) point out, the relationship between the
athletics director and the president establishes the tone for how athletics will be governed.
The athletics directors agreed the quality of their relationship with their president
determined how the athletics department would be supported. They remarked that forging
a strong bond with the president was essential to eliminate barriers to reform. This
rapport was also essential when a transition of power occurred. The ADs were fearful over the ambiguity of their relationship when the presidency transitioned between leaders because it was unclear if there would be an alignment of values.

This study points to other stakeholders previously overlooked who influenced the priorities, values and decisions of the athletics directors. They regarded their senior athletics administrators, coaching staffs, and student-athletes as key participants that heavily influenced their roles as leaders. They relied on their senior staffs to help facilitate their departments’ mission on a day-to-day basis, and deferred to their expertise in critical areas. These individuals also challenged the athletics directors’ ideas and proposed ways to improve the athletics department. This dynamic extended to the ADs’ coaching staffs. These individuals were critical to the day-to-day implementation of the departments’ mission as they coached their teams. More significantly, participants acknowledged their success was wrapped up in the success of their coaches. This relationship provided a foothold for coaches to influence athletics directors. Coaches pushed ADs to adopt policies and spend money in ways that increased the likelihood of their success, defined in terms of winning. Student-athletes represented a cohort that was believed more than ever to dictate the priorities of the athletics director. Student-athletes spurred the ADs to adopt legislative change such as “Cost-of-attendance” (amongst others currently being debated at the NCAA level), have roles in hiring coaches, and shaping the cultural climate of the athletics department. This pressure augmented by the increase in media attention on student-athlete welfare, shifted the ADs’ focus to enhance the student-athlete experience. This study also revealed the prevalence of personal forces
that influenced the choices of the participants when they considered organizational change.

Mentors in the journey of their professional careers shaped how they thought and acted once they became ADs. They influenced their values and outlook on college athletics, and frequently acted as sounding boards for challenging decisions such as hiring. The ADs also considered their professional experiences as critical benchmarks that shaped their leadership choices. They learned from their failures and successes, which ultimately dictated their future choices as leaders.

**Conclusions**

Findings that emerged in this study of forces that influence athletics directors as they implement organizational change at Division I institutions led me to the following six conclusions.

1. Resource constraints, subsequent methods to alleviate these financial pressures, and the perceived need to win habitually position ADs into morally compromising dilemmas. The commercialization of college athletics and liberalization of NCAA legislation has undermined their sovereignty. ADs are expected to produce winning teams, but the governance of Division I athletics does not allow them to independently dictate the course of their organizations. This has forced these athletics directors into arrangements where they must choose to maximize their resources or uphold the espoused values of their department and institution.

2. Athletics directors are inherently linked to a multitude of stakeholders and cannot act independently of them. Various stakeholders place different demands on ADs,
some force them to be proactive, others reactionary, but all impose burdens that frame the athletics directors’ perspectives and choices. For instance, the presidents dictate their mission and expectations, but others such as coaches, student-athletes, donors, and the news media challenge these priorities. The responsibility to manage these stakeholders falls on the shoulders of ADs. How well they navigate the capricious waters of these relationships determines the quality of the leader, and ultimately, their athletics department.

3. Athletics directors do not consider athletics to be external to the educational mission of higher education. ADs spend a considerable amount of time and energy positioning their departments to better align with the mission of their institutions. This motivates athletics directors to buy-in to the culture and values of their institutions. They consider this critical to forging mutually beneficial partnerships and to successfully achieve the goals of their athletics departments.

4. Contemporary forces disrupt and reshuffle the priorities of athletics directors. The changing landscape of college athletics, higher education, and larger society impose unique challenges that force ADs to reexamine how they operate their athletics departments. Comprehending the ramifications of changes in NCAA rules, or a perceived need to improve the diversity of their operation, motivates ADs to implement specific agendas.

5. Leading within a complex organizational structure forces ADs to be exceedingly intentional when making decisions. Athletics directors are hesitant to act in rash ways; exhibiting an acute awareness of the multitude of intersecting demands,
perceptions and responsibilities of their position. They manage relationships with presidents and faculty, meanwhile comprehending how scandals, campus tensions, and changing landscapes force them to be dynamic, thoughtful and adaptive leaders. These different organizational forces shift how they think about and implement policy.

6. Athletics directors’ decisions are influenced by their experiences and belief systems. These inform their leadership methodology and interpretation of what are the best decisions for their organization. Practical experience in their careers and the mentors who helped to guide them along the way paved the foundation these leaders relied on when considering change. It provided perspective and assurance they were promoting values that were consistent with what they hoped to achieve.

**Implications for Practice & Policy**

Findings from this study offer implications for athletics directors and other stakeholders in college athletics who can benefit from understanding forces that influence athletics directors when making organizational change. Recommendations for practice are offered in this section.

**Implications for Athletics Directors**

The number of forces that influence ADs are significant (106 identified in this study, 56 informed the findings) and profoundly impact how they make decisions. These leaders would benefit from mapping out the complex and interconnected forces that impact their leadership. Through self-reflection and collaboration with peers and
supervisors, athletics directors can identify what forces overtly sway and subtly influence their decisions. Identification of these forces moves intangible ideas to constructive comprehension followed by action. Taking these actions will aid athletics directors as they seek to better understand their environment and make decisions consistently in alignment with their departments and institutions.

This study reveals athletics directors are under considerable pressure to manage their financial resources. The escalating costs of college athletics require these individuals to secure additional sources of revenue to adequately fund their programs. As the ADs themselves point out, this pressure is fraught with conflict and situations where the temptation to undermine the educational mission of their institution in exchange for money abounds. In contrast, the ADs overwhelmingly concurred that they work consistently to align their athletics department with the broader goals of their institutions, because they believe athletics is part of this greater mission. Yet, we know decisions are made by ADs that directly undermine these stated beliefs. A disconnect occurs when athletics directors make choices which support either needs or values, but not both. Diminishing this gap dictates that athletics directors prioritize measures that identify where resource constraints can undermine their objectivity and institutional goals, and establish plans to prevent the fallout that occurs when athletics and academia are not aligned.

Athletics directors need to continue to strengthen the formal and informal connections between academia and athletics. Critical stakeholders exist in academia who continually influence the perceptions and direction of the athletics department. Athletics
directors who are actively and consistently partnering with presidents, trustees and faculty will forge strong institutional cultures to enact successful change. Participants pointed out that significant measures can be taken to strengthen this partnership: hire administrative staff and coaches who promote the policies and visions of the institution, who also share the same value systems, and integrate the educational mission of their institution into the core values and mission of the athletics department to name a few.

Coaches are key stakeholders that push athletics directors to evolve their departments. It is essential that ADs harness the passion and resoluteness of coaches because they have immense influence on the adoption and adherence to institutional values. Furthermore, whom they hire is paramount—hiring quality coaches will positively impact student-athletes, diminish the likelihood of ethics violations, and promote a culture of growth aligned with the ADs’ visions.

Athletics directors who are not part of Power-5 Conferences have failed to collaborate to prevent a minority number of institutions from dictating policy for the majority of NCAA institutions. Currently the non-Power 5 institutions lack the ability to act as a legislative check on Power-5 schools—this needs to change. Without this substantive change, ADs from the non-Power 5 schools face an increasing uphill financial and competitive battle. These ADs need to adopt a collective strategy to minimize the escalation of commercialization and promote favorable legislation. This concept dictates sacrificing autonomy in exchange for prioritizing a greater good, which ultimately benefits the entire group. As participants in my study explained, the NCAA continues to empower and enrich a minority number of institutions; which has only
contributed to the destabilization and inequity that occurs in the NCAA; which amplifies resource efficiency and moral dilemmas. The non-Power 5 athletics directors need to collaborate as a group to reassert their own self-interests, promote a playing field which is then necessarily more broad and level, and diminish the acceleration of resource constraints.

The varying landscape of college athletics, higher education and greater society demands athletics directors are flexible and prepared for change. There are significant instances of upheaval that occurs in athletics—presidential leaders change, scandalous behavior disrupts well-intentioned ADs, and tensions between faculty and athletics leads to mistrust and misconceptions. These instances of conflict can undermine and derail leaders as they pursue their missions and uphold their values. ADs should proactively strategize ways to minimize instances that cast athletics departments into conflict. The participants explained this can be achieved by implementing a strategic plan, learning from the mistakes of their peer institutions, collaborating with industry colleagues to learn best-practices, and promoting a culture wherein their staff feels welcomed to constructively critique their leadership and promote innovative ideas. Harnessing these influences will allow ADs to weather challenging crises and build strong campus-wide partnerships.

This study highlighted the pressures on ADs – they are expected to manage finite resources and produce winning teams, all while touting and adhering to institutional and personal core values. As college athletics has shown in its century-old history, too often have ADs, coaches, and others compromised values for success. For athletics directors to
truly become partners in higher education, winning and adhering to stated principles cannot operate mutually exclusive end goals. ADs need to continue to work to ensure that winning is underpinned by the values of their institution.

**Implications for University Presidents**

Presidents overtly influence athletics directors more than any other stakeholder in college athletics. Understanding how they, along with the many other forces influence ADs, will help presidents to support ADs as they encounter challenges. Internalizing these forces will do the following: (1) strengthen the trust, communication and shared vision between the president and AD, (2) diminish tensions between academia and athletics as the leaders promote a unified vision, (3) allow for strategic plans to be better executed, and (4) be aware of the financial challenges and moral dilemmas that ADs face.

Presidents who are aware of the financial pressures in college athletics can limit the influence of this force on ADs. Presidents who work to diminish financial constraints on ADs not only help their athletics programs to not only be successful, but also diminish the likelihood that negative externalities, such as scandal or impairment of student-athletes’ welfare may occur.

Presidents are positioned to foster strong mentor/colleague relationships with athletics directors; this will improve collegiality between these leaders. The findings point out that the participants’ value their relationships with their mentors because they are confidants who can reliably guide them when making difficult decisions. Presidents should seek to construct strong relationships with their ADs because they will positively respond to their opinions and thoughts on how to best develop their skill sets for growth.
and decision-making.

Implications for Faculty Members

Faculty members play an important role in supporting and holding athletics directors accountable; they need to do more of both. ADs expressed in this study that they care deeply about the success of their student-athletes and the broader institution. These leaders actively seek ways to bolster this support and more closely align athletics with academia. Faculty members need to respond in kind; athletics departments are not going to vanish, therefore it is in their best interest to position faculty in ways to bring athletics closer to the academic enterprise. Misconceptions and distrust occur when a lack of understanding and knowledge about others is the norm. Faculty should extend an olive branch to athletics directors to forge partnerships that can benefit both worlds.

College athletics remains an unwieldy, and often seemingly independent entity of higher education, therefore faculty members need to reassert their oversight roles for athletics. Institutions are first and foremost places of learning and development, if athletics begins to overshadow academic life, it is the responsibility of faculty to hold athletics directors accountable. As the findings in this study suggest, athletics directors are not infallible, therefore faculty should continue to hold athletics directors accountable in ways that promotes cultures of integrity and accountability.

Implications of Future Research

Previous scholars examined athletics directors from a broad perspective or specifically focused on the leadership traits of these individuals, few focused on forces that influenced the choices of these leaders (Kim, 2010; Yusof, 1998). This study offered
a different perspective, it examined the forces that influenced these leaders’ choices. More research needs to be conducted to further understand how ADs navigate the complex environment of college athletics. Six thematic categories emerged from the findings, each should be addressed in their own respect to delve deeper into how these forces impact ADs.

This study investigated the forces that influenced athletics directors from BCS, FCS and I-AAA institutions; future research should disaggregate between Division I levels to understand the different demands that these ADs’ face. In this study, ADs offered few conflicting perspectives, but the topics on which they did (financial resources, TV revenue, commercialization, NCAA legislation) demands future research to understand how BCS ADs are influenced differently from those at FCS and I-AAA institutions. This will help us to learn how the continued legislative and resource separation between Division I institutions at Power-5 and non-Power 5 schools impacts the choices of athletics directors.

This study confirmed scholars’ assertions that the NCAA unfairly exercises its authority, which often benefits a minority number of institutions, and opens the gates for increased commercialization (Fleisher et al., 1992; Smith, 2000). This erosion of NCAA objectivity provides the impetus for many of the forces that influence ADs. If there were a stronger enforcement body, many of the economic and contemporary forces explained in this study could be diminished. Additional research needs to be conducted to understand why the NCAA has continually lost its enforcement power and acted as a cartel, determining which schools benefit and those who do not.
Scholarship on the divide between academics and athletics in higher education campuses is stagnant. Previous scholars identified conflicts between the union of athletics and academics on higher education campuses; tensions over the public nature of athletics, the increasing sophistication of sports, athletics’ ability to publicize institutions and draw in prospective students and donors, and the scandals that often occur in athletics (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Clotfelter, 2011; Frey, 1987; Harper & Donnor, 2017; Toma, 2003). While these observations continue to be accurate, the default interpretation of the relationship between academics and athletics is one of conflict and based wholly on an assumption that athletics directors are not actively seeking to position their athletics departments closer to the academic side of their institutions. ADs in this study negated this concept, suggesting a different narrative; they propose that they are, in fact actively working to build relationships and adopt policies that will align their athletics programs with their academic counterparts. Future studies need to validate how ADs are attempting to achieve these goals; whether they have been able to negate conflicts pointed out by scholars, and the rates in which they are successful.

This study contained 106 different codes that identified a force that influenced an athletics director, but only 56 of these were included in this study due to a saturation test that determined if a code qualified to be part of this study. The 100 additional codes found during the interview process exhibit merit, but the limited number of athletics directors interviewed for this study prevented further codes from reaching saturation point. It is reasonable to believe that these undisclosed forces do in fact influence ADs, a few of these are: (1) needing facilities to improve a competitive advantage, (2) the
growing influence of parents, (3) the impact of the Fair Labor Standards Act, (4) how
ADs act in self-preservation ways, and (5) the rising cost of tuition. Future studies should
expand the number of athletics directors interviewed to determine if some of these
additional codes influence ADs’ choices.

Estler and Nelson (2005) found that intercollegiate athletics are shaped not only
by an institution but also by broader U.S.-societal norms. My study’s findings suggest
their assertions are accurate—numerous social, cultural, and contemporary forces
influenced the ADs. The lack of scholarly research beyond the few cited in this study
necessitates future research on these topics. Social and contemporary norms have a
remarkable ability to suddenly demand the attention of ADs. For instance, the advent of
cost of attendance legislation, the explosion of social media, and the rise of the student-
athlete experience to name a few, demand the attention of athletics directors, influencing
their time, perspectives and decisions.

Scholars have identified the moral and ethical dilemmas that ADs face, but a lack
of literature identifying how ADs successfully, or unsuccessfully navigate these moral
dilemmas (Chu, 1989; Lapchick & Slaughter, 1989; Riess, 1998; Stoll & Beller, 2006).
Research that models how athletics directors make decisions when facing challenging
scenarios will help to inform athletics directors how to avoid negative outcomes
successfully.

Closing

The tendency to be collegial can be overdone, and seeking paths that will
appeal to everyone within the institution can lead to what someone
referred to as “nibbling around the reform agenda without really
addressing it” (Bowen & Levin, 2003, p. 320)
Bowen and Levin make the argument that athletics directors are critical decisions-makers who are frequently put in difficult positions. They feel a responsibility to their coaches and student-athletes, but these leaders who claim a commitment to educational values often find themselves making decisions that widens the athletic-academic divide. As these scholars infer, ADs will make popular decisions but not the decisions needed to make real reform. These scholars’ observations are not inaccurate, but this study herein suggests the explanation as to why athletics directors make certain organizational decisions are more complicated than the two-factor model supposing a conflict between athletics and academics.

The findings confirm that a multitude of forces influence athletics directors as they implement organizational change agendas. There is no simple explanation as to why athletics directors make certain decisions—well known pressures such as self-interest, the allure of prestige, and pressure from wealthy benefactors influence their decisions; but so does (as found in this study) the presence of strategic plans, the opinions of student-athletes, staff values and personal mentors. The multitude of environmental forces encountered by athletics directors means each leads under unique circumstances that only they can navigate. This is why when Bowen and Levin make the case that athletics directors who pursue agendas that are universally appealing fail to make any real reforms, they ignore the comprehensive complexity of forces that influence AD leadership.

Despite the multitude of forces, participants in this study overwhelmingly believed that collegial partnerships were the bedrock that more closely aligned athletics
and its academic counterpart. There was overwhelming sense of commitment on the behalf of these athletics directors to the mission and values of their institution. Many worked tirelessly, some for the majority of their professional careers, to promote an athletics program that achieved success within the framework of their institution. They would say that they could not achieve this alone, because despite being critical decision-makers at the intersection of so many influential forces, they fervently believed their partnerships with academic leaders above all else strengthened their ability to implement organizational change agendas that mirrored the goals of their institutions.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

EXAMINING FORCES AFFECTING ATHLETICS DIRECTORS

Date: __________________________

Athletics Director Interviewed: __________________________

Interview Completed by: __________________________

I am conducting a study of the forces affecting athletics directors. This study is to investigate and gain insight into the environmental forces that disrupt and influence athletics director leadership.

Our purpose in meeting with you today is to learn your thoughts, feelings, and experiences as an athletics director. Your insights will help to understand the challenges athletics directors face.

Anything you tell us is confidential. Nothing you say will be personally attributed to you in any reports that result from this interview. All of the reports will be written in a manner that no individual comment can be attributed to a particular person.

Your participation in this interview is totally voluntary. Are you willing to answer our questions?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What are the forces that influence you (a college and university athletics directors at Division I institutions) as you implement organizational change agendas?

2. To what do you attribute their success and failures as a leader?

3. What do you interpret as impediments to reform in college athletics?

4. How do you view yourself as an agent of change in athletics on your campus and throughout higher education more broadly?

5. How do you perceive the impact of external actors on their leadership?

6. How have your agendas changed from the time of your appointment to your current leadership?

Do you have any other comments about the forces that influence athletics directors?
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Consent for Participation in a Research Project

ATHLETICS DIRECTOR LEADERSHIP: HOW FORCES AFFECT LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AGENDAS

Shaun Harper; Marc Christian

Purpose:
You are invited to participate in a research study designed to investigate and gain insight into the environmental forces that disrupt and influence athletics director leadership. This study will explore how the participants understand, acknowledge, and react to forces that unavoidably influence their choices. Particular attention will be placed on comprehending how these individuals lead change in their organizations while at the same time balance the intersecting demands on their positions.

Procedures:
Participation in this study will involve an interview. We anticipate that your involvement will require one hour.

Risks and Benefits:
There are no physical risks associated with this study. However [some questions may make you uncomfortable and] there is the possible risk of loss of confidentiality. Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential; however, this cannot be guaranteed.

Although this study will not benefit you personally, we hope that our results will add to the knowledge of college athletics and higher education.

Confidentiality:
All of your responses will be anonymous. Only the researchers involved in this study and those responsible for research oversight will have access to any information that could identify you. Your responses will be numbered and the code linking your number with your name will be stored in an encrypted computer. When we publish any results from this study we will do so in a way that does not identify you unless we get your specific permission to do so. We may also share the data with other researchers so that they can check the accuracy of our conclusions but will only do so if we are confident that your confidentiality is protected.

Voluntary Participation:
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decline to participate, to end your participation at any time for any reason, or to refuse to answer any individual
question. Refusing to participate will involve no penalty to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Questions:**
If you have any questions about this study, you may contact the investigator, Marc Christian at marcchri@upenn.edu or at 401-374-9429.

If you would like to talk with someone other than the researchers to discuss problems or concerns, to discuss situations in the event that a member of the research team is not available, or to discuss your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Pennsylvania’s Human Subjects Committee, 215-573-2540, Additional information is available at http://www.upenn.edu/IRB/

**Agreement to Participate:**
I have read the above information, have had the opportunity to have any questions about this study answered and agree to participate in this study.

______________________________  ____________________
(printed name)                  (date)

______________________________
(signature)
References


Burnsed, B. (2014). Growth in Division I athletics expenses outpaces revenue


Fallucca, A. C. (2010). *Faculty senators and their knowledge and perceptions of the governance of intercollegiate athletics: The case of the Southeastern Conference*. (Ph.D.), University of South Carolina, Ann Arbor.


Kim, H. (2010). Transformational and transactional leadership of athletic directors and their impact on organizational outcomes perceived by head coaches at NCAA Division II intercollegiate institutions. (Ph.D.), The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

Kish, F. B. (1998). The role of the university president in the governance of intercollegiate athletics: A comparative case study of chancellors Strong and Budig at the University of Kansas. (Ph.D.), University of Kansas, Ann Arbor.


Rosenblatt, R. (2011). Breaking down the Pac-12's new TV deal with ESPN/FOX &


Publishers.


