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# Separate Kingdoms: Academic Advisers' Perceptions of College Athletes and Athletic Departments

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**Abstract:** Existing scholarship suggests that faculty, staff, and non-athlete students hold negative views of college athletes' academic abilities, but few studies have examined academic advisers' perceptions. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore primary role advisers' views of college athletes and the athletic department at their institutions. One hundred and fifty-five academic advisers at NCAA Division I Power 5 institutions answered an open-ended survey question asking for general thoughts about advising student-athletes and working with athletic departments. Our analysis of the data suggests that academic advisers link athletes' academic performance to the culture and organization of athletic departments. Specifically, advisers believe (a) college athlete academic motivation varies by sport, (b) time demands make athletes prioritize athletics over academic success, (c) athletic departments enable athletes, and (d) athletic departments are siloed from academic advising. Broadly, these findings reveal that academic advisers do not simply stereotype athletes as "dumb jocks," which previous scholarship implies they would. Rather, they see poor academic performance as the product of students' broader cultural and institutional context. These findings suggest that supporting college athletes involves not only combating negative stereotypes, but also building and repairing relationships between academic advisers and athletic departments.

**Keywords:** academic advising; academic advisers; perceptions; college athletes; athletic department culture

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A growing body of research has examined perceptions non-athlete students and faculty have about college athletes. This research has found that college athletes have endured negative perceptions (e.g., Gaston-Gayles, 2004) and “dumb jock” stereotypes (Comeaux, 2010, 2011; Engstrom et al., 1995; Simons et al., 2007). Valentine and Taub (1999) summarized these negative views: “The historic perception of the student athlete has been that of a ‘dumb jock’ who is handed everything from grades to money on a silver platter” (p. 164).

Studies have demonstrated that college students feel their athlete peers are not dedicated to their academic pursuits, believing that college athletes’ academic motivations do not extend past meeting academic eligibility requirements in order to compete athletically (Comeaux, 2010; Parsons, 2013; Simons et al., 2007). Non-athlete students have expressed discontentment in the preferential treatment of college athletes (e.g., grade inflation, deadline extensions, extra tutoring) (Comeaux, 2010; Simons et al., 2007). Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) found that non-athlete students do not trust athletes’ academic abilities and are suspicious of their motivations for being in college.

The negative stigma surrounding college athletes’ academic abilities has been reinforced by faculty (Comeaux, 2010, 2011; Engstrom et al., 1995; Simons et al., 2007). Simons et al. (2007) found the lack of academic preparation and class participation, excessive absences, bored attitudes, late assignment submissions, and plagiarism fortified poor faculty perceptions of college athletes. Class absences for athletic responsibilities have produced conflict and criticism of college athletes at institutions of higher learning (Parsons, 2013; Simons et al., 2007). Comeaux (2011) discovered that “unlike their attitudes toward students in the general population, faculty members indicated that it would be unlikely, impossible, and unexpected” for an athlete to receive an A in their class (p. 80). Kuhn (2017) determined that “faculty sometimes believed student-athletes rely on others to cheat” in courses and noted, “faculty hold more prejudicial attitudes toward male athletes compared to female athletes” (p. 87). Further, Kuhn (2017) discovered a strong implicit bias among the participants toward non-White athletes regarding cheating in courses.

Historically, the top performing athletes received preferential treatment, including acceptance to universities without meeting admission requirements, free tutoring, and grading curves (Weber et al., 1990). Faculty members have communicated feelings of embarrassment and anger when athletes were admitted to the university with lower entry scores (Engstrom et al., 1995). On the other hand, many faculty members have expressed respect for athletes’ ability to balance academics with athletics (Comeaux, 2010; Simons et al., 2007). Academic eligibility requirements may put pressure on faculty to pass athletes (Comeaux, 2010), and in response to the pressure from athletic departments, faculty members have awarded preferential treatment to star players (Weber et al., 1990). The preferential treatment has reinforced non-athlete students’ negative perceptions of athletes (Parsons, 2013).

Perceptions of athletes may vary by sport. Through a survey of 2,071 faculty at Division Football Bowl Subdivision institutions, Lawrence et al. (2007) found that faculty were more satisfied with the academic performance of students in sports other than basketball and football than that of the non-athlete student population. They emphasized, “Faculty are particularly alarmed by campus cultures that elevate the importance of athletics at a cost to the intellectual atmosphere” (p. 48). Perceptions may also vary by institution. The dumb jock stereotype about athletes has been especially common at colleges and universities where sports were highly valued (Engstrom et al., 1995). Simons et al. (2007) surveyed 538 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I college athletes at an academically selective public institution about how this population felt they were perceived by faculty and their non-athlete peers. The researchers found over 60% of college athletes felt their professors and classmates viewed them as seeking special treatment, and lacking intellectual ability and academic motivation. Athletes in this sample also believed they were treated unequally (with discrimination) in class. On the other hand, Parsons (2013) adapted Simons et al.’s (2007) instrument to study 252 athletes at a small private Division II institution in the midwestern U.S. about faculty perceptions. Only 11.5% of Parsons’ (2013) participants felt they were viewed negatively by faculty.

### **Advisers’ Perceptions of College Athletes**

Although research has examined faculty and non-athlete student opinions about college athletes, few studies have examined perceptions university staff hold about this population. Particularly missing in the literature is information about how primary role academic advisers perceive college athletes and athletic departments. While it is possible that there are similarities between advisers’ perceptions and those of faculty and non-athlete students, it would be beneficial to understand advisers’ perceptions specifically. Such information would allow us to understand how advisers can best support athletes and potentially collaborate with athletic advisers.

Stokowski et al. (2016) provide one notable exception to the lack of research about advisers’ perceptions of student athletes. They surveyed 369 primary role advisers at Power 5 institutions using four instruments that studied advisers’ perceptions of the athletic department, stereotypes toward athletes, involvement with the athletic department, and knowledge of NCAA academic regulations. The regression analysis revealed that primary role advisers held negative perceptions towards athletes and the athletic department, were not involved much with the athletic department, and lacked knowledge about NCAA academic rules. Correlations demonstrated that the more negatively an adviser viewed the athletic department, the more the adviser stereotyped athletes. However, the results suggested that as advisers increased their knowledge of NCAA regulations, their perceptions of athletes and athletic departments became more positive.

While this quantitative data began to tell a story, it did not explain the why behind advisers' negative perceptions. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore why primary role advisers held these negative views. Understanding the perceptions primary role academic advisers have about athletes may address bias and assist in promoting positive relationships between college athletes and advisers.

## Advising College Athletes

Before discussing our methods and findings, to provide necessary background information for readers, we pause here to review how advising for college athletes is typically delivered and how athletes may benefit from advising. In athletic programs with large budgets, like those among the NCAA's Division I Power 5 institutions, college athletes often work with athletic advisers who specifically support them as a student population (Rubin, 2017). Power 5 institutions have been classified as the 65 colleges and universities in these five NCAA Division I athletic conferences: Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big 12, Big Ten, Pac-12, and Southeastern Conference (SEC). Athletic programs hosted by Power 5 institutions play at the highest level of NCAA competition.

College athletes also have an academic adviser on campus, whether a primary role/professional adviser or faculty adviser, depending on their institution's model. Given that athletes tend to work with their athletic advisers regularly, sometimes daily (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018), and spend less time building a relationship with a campus adviser, primary role academic advisers and faculty advisers typically have not developed more than a surface-level relationship with the athletes in their caseload through meetings once or twice per academic year (Rubin & Lewis, 2020). Because primary role advisers work with all students in a major or academic class, they might have less incentive to meet with athletes compared to athletic advisers, whose primary job is to work with athletes. However, as noted by Stokowski et al. (2016), "most institutions require all students, including student-athletes, to meet with their major-specific advisers, who typically have no affiliation to the athletic department, on a regular basis to ensure student-athletes are staying on track for graduation" (p. 66). Meeting with a campus adviser has been an educationally purposeful activity, so this could be impactful for athletes who might otherwise have felt isolated using academic support and facilities designated only for the athlete population (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009).

Additional support from academic advisers may benefit athletes, as this population faces particular academic challenges. College athletes have been found to prioritize athletics over academics (Engstrom et al., 1995; Gaston-Gayles, 2004), particularly athletes playing high profile sports (Adler & Adler, 1991; Simons et al., 1999). Focus on athletics may be attributed to the challenge of balancing two full-time roles as student and athlete (Parsons, 2013). Coaches and athletic academic advisers have felt pressured to maintain athlete eligibility (Comeaux, 2010; Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018; Weber et al., 1990), and athletes

have even been encouraged to take “athlete-friendly” classes at the Division II level (Parsons, 2013, p. 402). Athletes have also experienced isolation from the general student population on college campuses (Adler & Adler, 1991), perhaps due to coaching and athletic department staff exaggerating the value of athletics and enforcing a strict schedule (Comeaux, 2011).

## METHODOLOGY

The current literature does not address academic advisers’ perceptions of college athletes and athletic departments’ academic support beyond the quantitative results reported by Stokowski et al. (2016). We believe qualitative feedback provided by primary role academic advisers may provide necessary and unknown insight into their interactions with college athletes. In particular, Stokowski et al.’s (2016) quantitative findings revealed that primary role advisers hold negative views of college athletes and athletic departments. However, qualitative data can reveal the nature and content of these negative views more deeply, helping us understand why advisers hold such perceptions.

### Data Collection and Participants

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, an email invitation to participate in the study was sent to 369 academic advisers at NCAA Division I Power 5 institutions. The invited academic advisers worked in academic departments, colleges, or designated advising centers. We obtained advisers’ email addresses from colleges’ and universities’ websites. The invitation to participate included a hyperlink to an online questionnaire. We sent follow-up reminders via e-mail to participants, with the instrument available for a two-week period. The questionnaire included demographic questions and Likert-scale items, and asked participants to provide a response to the open-ended question “is there anything you would like to share with us about advising athletes and working with the athletic department?” Before sending out the survey, it was piloted by advisers in NCAA Division I institutions, who provided feedback to ensure reliability.

The quantitative results of the questionnaire were reported in Stokowski et al. (2016). This study analyzes the 155 open-ended responses provided by participants from that survey, yielding a 54.2% response rate. The respondents were primarily female (64.5%), the vast majority (90%) did not participate in intercollegiate athletics, and all respondents graduated college with a majority (87.8%) obtaining a graduate degree (e.g., J.D., Masters, Ph.D.). The sample ranged in experience from one to 47 years’ of advising experience ( $M = 10.31$ ,  $SD = 9.02$ ). Because this study focused on one primary purpose—exploring why primary role academic advisers’ may hold negative perceptions of college athletes and their academic prowess—this would be simple to replicate with a survey, interview, or focus group.

## Data Analysis

Our goal was to make sense of the data in addressing the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, we began with inductive analysis, organizing the data into units, called codes, and taking notes on the process as we identified patterns (Bhattacharya, 2017). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) demystified coding as “nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p. 199). Our notes during coding enabled us to individually map out connections between participants’ responses. To maximize correct interpretation, we conducted individual analyses, then held research team discussions to ensure investigator triangulation, which “occurs when there are multiple investigators collecting and analyzing the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245). We met to review potential patterns and worked together in a process called pattern coding, which allowed us to search for similarities in our analyses of the data to co-construct meaning (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldaña, 2015).

Of critical importance to our analysis was to consider the following criteria in developing the themes: address the research question and purpose, be exhaustive to include all data, be mutually exclusive, be sensitive to the data in robust description, and be conceptually congruent so that all themes make sense together (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We sought to construct meaning through themes that met these criteria. After the pattern coding process, we rearranged data by agreed-upon categories (Saldaña, 2015). The themes were then reorganized to specifically address the posed research question.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We strived to understand why primary role academic advisers held negative perceptions of college athletes and their academic capacities, building off of the results shared in Stokowski et al. (2016). Four themes were developed through analysis of the 155 open-ended responses provided by survey participants: college athlete academic motivation varies by sport, time demands make athletes prioritize athletic over academic success, athletic departments enable athletes, and athletic departments are siloed from academic advising. These are discussed in more detail below with corresponding participant responses.

### College Athlete Academic Motivation Varies by Sport

Within this theme, Participant 10 summarized, “I have seen different levels of motivation and ability in student-athletes in different sports.” Generally, Participant 99 explained, “I feel the athletes that I meet with are either very prepared, or very unprepared. [It] seems to be one of the two extremes and not a whole lot in between.” The perceptions offered by the participants are mostly biased negatively towards athletes from specific sports and male athletes. Participant 7 offered, “I

have found female athletes in general tend to be more engaged,” and Participant 150 confirmed, “Female athletes do better academically than male.”

Many academic advisers in this study gave negative comments about athletes in the “high profile” sports of football and men’s basketball, as well as sports they shared as particularly popular at their own institutions (e.g., men’s ice hockey, women’s basketball). Many compared athletes on those teams to non-revenue sport athletes. Participant 92 reported, “Those selected for the big-time sports of football and basketball for the most part dummy down the institution.” Participant 71 agreed, sharing a belief that the stereotypes about these athletes are true. Participant 12 felt that football and baseball athletes wanted more special accommodations.

Several participants suggested that athletes in sports that have limited professional opportunities tend to focus more on academics, whereas the “potentially lucrative” sport athletes are less motivated academically. Participant 101 indicated that both football athletes and their athletic advisers are “extremely tedious to deal with,” while noting that non-revenue sport athletes and their athletic advisers have high expectations. Participant 153 summarized positive views of non-revenue athletes: “Many of my advisees in non-revenue sports have also been high-achieving students – smart, well-organized, thoughtful.”

A limited number of advisers had positive perceptions of all athletes’ academic abilities. For example, according to Participant 26, “A majority of student-athletes . . . excel at both their chosen sport, and their academics.” However, generally primary role academic advisers in this study perceived lower levels of educational ability and motivation for certain athletes. Similar to the findings of Lawrence et al.’s (2007) study on faculty, academic advisers’ perceptions differed by specific sport and gender. Prior research found high profile college athletes prioritize athletics (Adler & Adler, 1991; Simons et al., 1999). Previous work (e.g., Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Simons et al., 1999) has demonstrated that female athletes express higher motivation to excel academically when compared to their male counterparts. The participants’ responses in the present study coincide with such findings.

### Time Demands Make Athletes Prioritize Athletics Over Academic Success

In a typical day, an athlete might practice in the morning, go to class, lift weights with a strength coach, see an athletic trainer for medical needs, meet with coaches, watch film or scout opponents, participate in an evening practice, and attend study hall. This does not include time for eating, showering, or sleeping. In competition season, athletes must also travel, which requires students to miss classes. Several primary role academic advisers in this study mentioned the struggles they had working with athletes because such commitments conflicted with courses required to persist in their degree programs. Participant 111 emphatically expressed, “The most difficult issue I have faced in advising athletes is working required classes in around practice schedules.” Participant 46 explained, “They are often victims of their athletic schedules and can’t take the courses/instructors that might best suit

their academic needs. They are often stereotyped by staff and faculty as academically inferior and/or privileged somehow.”

College athletes’ difficult schedules make it difficult for them to pursue certain degree programs. Advisers in this study were aware of such conflicts. In the case of engineering, Participant 81 lamented, “I will never justify putting athletics before academics. I work with athletes whose practice times conflict with class times, and who expect us to change teaching schedules for them. Engineering is not compatible with these athletes, and I have to advise them to seek another major.” This participant did specifically mention that athletes expect advisers to change schedules for them, which might hint at the “special accommodations” Participant 12 previously mentioned.

While Participant 81 placed blame on the athletes, others blamed athletic departments and programs for these time conflicts. Like Participant 46 shared previously, Participant 62 believed athletes were victims of their schedules: “My interaction with student-athletes has been largely positive. The only issues I have run into are practice times conflicting with course offerings, and unfortunately there is not a lot I can do to help with regards to that due to our very structure [*sic*] curriculum and limited faculty availabilities.” This response suggests that this academic adviser puts effort into working with athletes, but might not always be able to figure out a way to make schedule balancing successful. Additionally, Participant 65 declared, “Not allowing students to take labs and classes after 2pm is not ok.” This adviser is likely referring to the athletic department’s restricting students from taking classes at certain times because of how athletic-related activities are scheduled during the week.

### Athletic Departments Enable Athletes

Just as Participant 81 explained previously, athletes might expect advisers and other staff to help them because they are perceived as enabled, entitled, babied, and lacking responsibility for their own educational journey. Participant 23’s quote encompassed the theme: “Student-athletes are babied by the athletic department. They don’t have to do anything on their own, it’s done for them by the department.” Participant 12 believed that athletes have “an expectation that their academic decisions will be made for them by someone else.” Though this is negative towards athletes specifically, it is possible that these views are based on the culture of the athletic department.

This culture does celebrate athletic talent at colleges and, in some cases, makes athletes very visible, recognizable, or well-known to students, faculty, and staff. Participant 138 described this culture in practice:

I believe the Department of Athletics at my institution does so much for the athletes that many student-athletes do not understand the amount of responsibility we expect our students to take for their academic decisions. By the time they’ve worked with their Athletic Academic Supervisors for a

semester or two, they're accustomed to someone making their decisions for them, as well as keeping track of their degree requirements for them, and even (in some extreme cases) trying to interact with their academic advisers on their behalf. This undermines the work we're trying to do as academic advisers, which includes fostering a sense of independence and empowerment among our students.

This academic adviser explained in detail why the way athletes transition into college with the academic support provided by the athletic department might subvert what advisers do to develop students to be successful. The issues stem from when an athletic adviser might "take care of" something for an athlete that most students would do for themselves. Participant 92 presented, "On my campus, student athletes are given more academic resources than the average student: one-on-one tutoring for any subject, academic handlers that will walk a student-athlete through anything (even walking them to their professors' office to turn in a paper)." The use of the phrase "academic handlers" implies that the academic support provided by athletics is not truly advising or developing students.

In concern for fairness, Participant 43 commented, "Athletes get special treatment from everyone that they do not necessarily deserve. It is unfair to other students." Participant 33 attributed this sense of entitlement that athletes might have to this culture: "I fully believe that is based upon their 'status' within the team/athletic world." Participant 30 reasoned that this enabling of athletes does not help them "in the long run." Participant 21 experiences a situation regularly in advising appointments with athletes:

Many of the student athletes we advise come to sessions unprepared and with an attitude of entitlement...i.e. I shouldn't have to wait this long, you should fill out my forms for me, you should just make my schedule for me because I have no idea what I am supposed to take. There is very little responsibility assumed by the student.

What the participants have observed in their academic advising roles is a definite concern. It is not surprising that the athletic department might prioritize athletic activities over academics. Valentine and Taub (1999) emphasized, "Because of the consuming nature of athletics, the student-athlete often has not mastered basic developmental skills" (p. 165). They also noted that to many athletes, the power of coaches' influence on athletes is "absolute" (Valentine & Taub, 1999, p. 170). Our findings reveal that advisers are concerned that coaches and others in the athletic departments wield too much of such influence over their athletes.

### **Athletic Departments Are Siloed From Academic Advising**

There is a continuous struggle between athletic department culture and the educational mission of institutions that academic advisers support through their

work with students. Academic advisers expressed concern with the diminishing focus on students' academic interests and their pursuit of a meaningful education. Our participants attributed these issues in large part to athletic departments being siloed and separated from them and the academic activities at the institution. Participant 144 introduced this theme with these strong words: "The Athletic Department . . . is its own kingdom with its own rules . . . Student-athletes here are athlete-students because of this separation. This system is broken and without accountability." In Division I sports, the athletic department might be an independent entity, operating as an auxiliary unit of the institution. This is not always the case, and there are many institutions that support athletic departments financially and a few that are self-sustaining and give money back to their institutions. At Participant 70's institution, athletes only go to the athletic department's advisers for support and never visit a college advising center. Participant 9 summarized the impact of this culture on college athletes: "Our campus puts our students in an untenable situation. The demands on their time make it difficult for them to excel academically."

Recurring through advisers' responses was the role coaches play in perpetuating this "athletics first, academics second" culture within the athletic department. Participant 14 moved from advising athletes within athletics to a primary role academic advising position after two years, commenting, "The pressure from coaches always fell on the academics staff, rather than the student-athlete." Participant 29 agreed, sharing,

I think that the conflicts of interest between the coaches and the academic staff and faculty is atrocious. Students should be here because it's a good academic fit, period, and their academics should come first. But I am also the kind of person who thinks football is a complete waste of resources and doesn't belong at my institution – and I am, of course, in the minority.

Coaches do have a lot of authority over students on their teams, as Valentine and Taub (1999) presented. Because the athletic department is investing so much in coaching salaries and striving for wins and championships, the focus might shift from academic to athletic success. Regarding coaches' conflicts of interest, Participant 45 further explained,

Due to the major I advise in, a large portion of the student athletes I work with don't have strong educational goals. There is also a culture with a couple sports that push students to put their academics second consistently. One set of coaches tells their athletes to take all classes online regardless of what their advisers say. This past year, we also had a group of coaches decide to hold warm-ups (out of season) at a time that prevented any of their students from taking the math classes they needed two terms in a row. These kinds of actions have made it difficult to believe that some of these coaches care about their students' academic success and goals.

These types of actions may harm students' progress and their ability to pursue the degree of their choice.

Additionally, Participant 55 stressed the problems with the athletic department culture and contrasting priorities between athletics and academics: "On our campus, the importance of athletics overshadows academics. The athletic department keeps records of past tests, which is institutionalized cheating. In no other country of the world, as far as I know, are semi-professional sports so much a part of university life. It's a major conflict." These comments are shocking, especially since this practice of keeping past tests is known to academic advisers and likely others on campus. Academic advisers also expressed concerns with the coaches' recruitment of students who are underprepared for college. Participant 18 articulated,

I think the adulation of student sports and student athletes is unhealthy for the students and the institution. I also believe that many sports, at my institution and elsewhere, recruit students who are woefully unprepared for college-level work and who have no real interest in academics – we exploit these students for their athletic skills, and I consider that reprehensible.

Not only did this adviser point out that athletes are knowingly recruited while academically unprepared to be exploited for their athletic talent but also that the culture of college sports might harm the institution and the general student body. In her study of athletic advisers' background, roles, and training, Rubin (2017) found that on "some days coaches blame the adviser for a student's failed eligibility, and on other days the coach expects the adviser to find a way to get an academically ineligible prospective student-athlete admitted into the institution" (p. 43). Horner et al. (2016) reasoned, "With the enormous pressure of superior athletic performance levied on student-athletes and those on whom they depend most for support and guidance (namely, coaches and administrators), a quality academic experience is often the first thing to be compromised" (p. 194). Of course, these were primarily advisers' perceptions of the athletic department and coaches, but they could trickle down to the athletes, producing negative attitudes or biases towards them. The academic advisers in this study also shared more specific perceptions about the athletic advisers within the athletic department.

College athletes need to be made aware of why, on most NCAA Division I Power 5 campuses, they must have both an athletic adviser and a primary role academic adviser (Rubin & Lewis, 2020), though this was not clear to Participant 88, who exclaimed, "The roles are not clear to us or them!" However, Participant 34's quote suggested a mutual understanding of roles: "My job is to guide students into the perfect major. The athletic adviser's job is to keep the student eligible. Between the two of us we make sure the student's needs are served by the university." Several respondents mentioned that they mistrust athletic advisers' support of athletes because their focus is on eligibility rather than persistence.

Interestingly, many of the primary role advisers in this study described differences in perceptions of athletic advisers based on the teams they support, similar to the previously shared perceptions of athletes by sport. Participant 3 explained, “On my campus the experiences of student-athletes in revenue generating sports are very different than the experiences of student-athletes in the other sports, especially the lengths the athletic advisers go to take care of things for their students.” This quote also conveys that “take care of things” might enable students and take away being responsible for their academic experience in college. Participant 50 expressed disappointment in athletic advisers’ “unrealistic expectations” for primary role academic advisers in working with athletes.

Several respondents noted a lack of communication between academic advisers and athletic advisers. Participant 59 commented, “There is no contact between academic advisers and athletic advisers, and in my experience athletic advisers dissuade students from taking difficult classes that are needed in order to stay on track for graduation.” Whether this is true or not, the perception of athletic advisers’ discouraging students from taking important courses needed to graduate causes problems when academic advisers and athletic advisers collaborate to support college athletes. In Participant 62’s case, there is dread when hearing from athletic advisers:

My interactions with athlete-advisors on the other hand has not been as positive. I do not think this should be a reflection of their work however, it is just unfortunate that the majority of the contact I have with athlete-advisors is when they are asking for “exceptions” or “preferential-treatment” for the athletes with whom they work. Typically, again as a result of our structured curriculum, I cannot accommodate these requests, and that, I believe puts a strain on our relationship. Usually, we do not have much interaction with the advisors when things are going well, so just being contacted when they need a favor is a struggle.

Academic advisers in situations like these might become weary when only hearing from athletic advisers about doing favors for or otherwise accommodating this student population. They might not feel valued or might think their work with students is overlooked, when they are only asked to provide special accommodations for athletes, as several respondents discussed previously. Building on this, Participant 80 added,

It often feels like instead of working together with our athletic advisers, they want exceptions for their students that we do not offer for ANY student population. It seems that student athletes at times get a lot of “[loophole]” advising from athletics to keep them eligible or to try for additional exceptions which don’t help our student athletes graduate on time or ensure success in their college and major. I’ve found most student athletes to be very hard working and honest but the athletic advising they receive is very

different from the College/Major advising they receive. At times it feels our goals are very different.

These competing goals relate back to the culture of the athletic department and how that permeates campus. The exceptions and loopholes provided for athletes has been exhausting for primary role advisers. Participant 100 stated, “Our departments have mandatory advising, with holds placed on students’ registration until they meet with an advisor. Athletes seem to get out of these mandatory advising meetings with their holds being lifted without meeting with an advisor.” This is a major problem, because students cannot then build relationships with their advisers. Though Participant 74 indicated some respect for athletic advisers and their work, the impact on students remained a concern: “I believe these advisers care about the success of the students they advise, however working more closely with the major academic adviser could only enhance the student’s total advising experience.” Yet Participant 74 also felt that communication with athletic advisers went in only one direction, as athletic advisers would not respond to emails or calls, which then caused frustration. The support that academic advisers provide is critical for college athletes to receive to navigate their campus and be academically successful, so if athletic advisers find a way to bypass this important source of information and advocacy, athletes face a challenging path through college.

## CONCLUSION

Previous research has focused on perceptions of college athletes by faculty and non-athlete students. To contribute to the literature, this study sought to determine how primary role academic advisers perceive college athletes and the academic support provided by the athletic department. Academic advisers have a key role in students’ development and academic success, and it is important to understand their perspectives when working with the college athlete population in colleges and universities.

Advisers’ perceptions of athletes varied based on students’ gender and sport participation. Some advisers demonstrated positive views of athletes academically. However, a majority expressed negative views about athletes’ academics, which were linked to negative perceptions about athletic culture and organization within higher education. Academic advisers showed concern for college athletes’ schedules and how those conflicted with academic requirements. Some blamed scheduling issues on the students themselves, but most blamed athletic departments and coaches. With respect to athletic departments and their academic support, perceptions described a culture of enabling athletes and doing important developmental tasks for them so they could not take responsibility for their educational experience in college. Academic advisers viewed athletic departments as a powerful, independent kingdom, dictating an impossible situation for college athletes while demanding exceptions from typical campus norms. Lastly, primary role advisers suggested a divide between the roles of athletic advisers and academic

adviser, pitting eligibility and academic exceptions against student development and persistence towards graduation.

This study indicated some reasons why primary role academic advisers at NCAA Division I Power 5 institutions might have negative perceptions about college athletes, athletic departments, and athletic advisers. In fact, many of the respondents felt that certain subgroups of athletes did not even belong in institutions of higher learning. This is startling, as research shows the importance of academic advisers and students developing a trusting relationship from the start of their college experience (Anderson et al., 2014). This study highlights how it is important for academic advisers to understand the needs and motivations of athletes under their guidance. Further, this study demonstrates that primary role academic advisers should recognize their potential biases towards certain groups of college athletes by gender and sport.

### Limitations and Future Research

Though the initial survey had 369 participants, only 155 provided a response to the open-ended question “is there anything you would like to share with us about advising athletes and working with the athletic department?” Perceptions are subjective and cannot be attributed to academic advisers in specific disciplines or based on demographic characteristics, as we did not collect demographic data specific to open-ended responses to ensure participants were not identifiable. This question could have also been written more specifically about how the respondents perceived athletes’ academic abilities or the role of academic support provided by the athletic department. Furthermore, the use of semi-structured interviews or focus groups would have allowed the researchers to add follow up questions, which may have provided a deeper understanding of the participants’ perspectives.

Future research should investigate more background variables of academic advisers (e.g., ethnicity, age, academic department/major, number of athlete advisees, sports/teams represented by advisees). Also, it would be interesting to study the relationship between primary role academic advisers and athletic advisers on campuses around the country that sponsor intercollegiate athletics beyond the Power 5 institutions. Another study could focus on faculty advisers’ perceptions of athletes, considering that previous research focused on their perceptions in an instructional role. Lastly, future work regarding college athletes and academic advisers should focus on the power and policy structures that influence this important relationship.

### Implications

Negative perceptions of college athletes, especially males in high profile sports, indicate a need for understanding and empathy between academic advisers, athletes, and athletic departments. This supports prior research suggesting that the lack of contact between these groups can lead to prejudices (Kuhn, 2017; Stokowski

et al., 2016). It is important to communicate to athletes the purpose of having both a primary role academic adviser and an athletic adviser (Rubin & Lewis, 2020). Responses by participants are just perceptions and do not represent all academic advisers' views, so depending on campus culture, steps could be made to improve these working relationships. This, in turn, would likely improve the academic advising experience for college athletes, especially in their empowerment and in taking responsibility for their academic decisions.

Also, primary role advisers should receive training and professional development to support students' expectations (Anderson et al., 2014) and learn more about the approaches and NCAA academic policies utilized in the athletic advising unit on their campus. Athletic departments should offer, at minimum, annual NCAA rules education sessions and invite primary role academic advisers to learn more about NCAA academic regulations impacting college athletes (Rubin & Lewis, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2016). Though the term "eligibility" is negatively perceived by the participants in this study as the focus of athletic advisers, this is one of the sources of pressure on athletic advisers (Rubin, 2017; Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018). Understanding these rules more deeply might also accelerate or improve a collaborative relationship between primary role academic advisers and athletic advisers (Stokowski et al., 2016), especially because advisers in both areas might feel their roles are misunderstood by the other group (Rubin & Lewis, 2020).

Primary role academic advisers have the opportunity to establish and build a trusting relationship with the athletes they advise, starting with the first meeting. As primary role academic advisers and athletic advisers consider the importance of working together to support athletes, advisers can develop individual approaches to supporting students based on the students' needs. Athletic departments and academic advising centers must find ways to collaborate and better communicate to improve their relationship and clarify misunderstandings of roles (Rubin & Lewis, 2020). Regardless of how the adviser perceives an athlete advisee, the student's academic interests should be the pillar of the advising relationship. The best possible situation for college athletes is to work positively with their primary role academic advisers in a judgment-free environment throughout their enrollment, with academic success in college as the ultimate goal for both adviser and student.

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