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SPORT MANAGEMENT

Justification of a Deficit Mentality in a Division I Intercollegiate Athletic Department

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Abstract

In the competitive context of Division I (DI) intercollegiate sport, an unwillingness to undertake change can often reflect the attitudes of complacency on the part of stakeholders, that their institution is doing an adequate job in providing the optimal experience for its student-athletes, or resignation, that they can do no more to increase success. This paper examines New State University's, a pseudonym for a DI Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), organizational deficit thinking. It demonstrates prevalent deficit thinking in intercollegiate athletics and offers suggestions to reframe such thinking. Schroeder's (2010) case study cultural framework was used and the interaction of four collegiate environments examined. These were institutional culture, leadership and power, internal athletic department, and external athletic department. Data collection and triangulation analysis included 36 interviews, researcher observations, photos, archival data, and social media. The complexity of assumptions, traditions, deeply held beliefs, and values suggests a proud sense of identity projected to the outside world that, nevertheless, prevents the internal athletic department's ability to address perennial deficit thinking. In this case, the nexus justifying deficit thinking centered on geographical location of the university. Specifically, location was blamed for team losses, inability to retain quality coaches, and a negative culture of fandom. On a larger scale, deficit thinking may be prevalent in many DI universities

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attempting to compete with the few programs with perennial championships across sports.

Deficit thinking is seen and felt in many contexts, which ultimately marginalize individuals and groups of people (Delpit, 1995; Pohan, 1999; Valencia, 2012). One concept related to deficit thinking is negative thinking, in which social scientists apply social Darwinism to explain social stratification of groups of people on the basis of their alleged genetic lot in life (Hergenhahn, 1992; Valencia, 2012). Yet, in the classic sense, social Darwinism cannot answer to the role of societal structural forces creating social hierarchies (Valencia, 2012). The sociological-cultural framework creates, sustains, and justifies deficit thinking (Sharma & Portelli, 2014). Justification is the action of showing something to be right or reasonable (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Today, the K–12 educational institutional context widely accepts the the construct of deficit thinking. We argue that this mentality carries over into higher education, specifically intercollegiate athletics. For the sake of clarity and context, this paper uses this characterization of deficit thinking:

> Deficit thinking is a very common way of thinking which affects our general way of being in and constructing the world. Differences from the 'norm' are immediately seen as being deprived, negative, and disadvantaged. It never questions the legitimacy of what is deemed to be normal nor does it consider that differences may actually go beyond expected norms. It discourages educators, coaches, and administrators from recognizing the positive values of certain abilities, dispositions, and actions. Deficit thinking leads to stereotyping and prejudging. It marginalizes certain people on the basis of misinformation and misconstructions. (Sharma & Portelli, 2014, p. 255)

Deficit thinking translates into action for the blamers when "victim-blamers identify social problems" (Valencia, 2010, p. 47). It is easy for victim blamers to seek simple answers for problems in an organization over complexities (Valencia, 2010).

Critical Influences on Deficit Thinking

According to Valencia (2010), an educational culture creates, sustains, and often "justifies" deficit thinking; for example, results of pseudoscientific academic progress reports, grade point averages (Aragon et al., 2013; Writer & Oesterreich, 2012), sport teams' perennial win–loss records are utilized in the building of stereotypical views of marginalized groups. In addition, deficit assumptions and dispositions seem to be deeply embedded in school culture and are sometimes invisible, but powerfully felt. "Values and artifacts often coincide, but may still inaccurately describe organizational culture" (Schroeder, 2010, p. 100). Artifacts make up the most superficial tier of Valencia's theory and refer to cultural elements that a person can see, hear, or feel (Sharma & Portelli, 2014). "Although artifacts like mascots, fight songs, and facilities are easy to perceive, underlying meanings associated with these artifacts are not always clear" (Schroeder, 2010, p. 99). As a result, artifacts offer an incomplete or inaccurate picture of organizational culture (Schein, 2010; Trice & Beyer, 1993).

It is not uncommon for an organization to act in complete contrast with its stated beliefs and values (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Schein, 2010). Such deliberate and/or unintentional practices contribute to the undertow development of social identity in "lack of diversity," "perennial low-performers," and "undesirable location," with respect to physical and symbolic capital, authority, and the process of work, which in turn make up their social class identity (Anyon, 1980; Brown, 2010).

Earlier research pinpoints to the impact of disparate roles of the athletic departments in higher education institutions (Thelin, 2011). Two conflicts athletic departments face within higher education institutions are the wild-goose chase of perennially winning championships and the incessant need for more money to fund athletic department facilities (Sack, 2009). First, university stakeholders value winning so much that they sometimes pay their head revenue-generating coaches (i.e., football and men's basketball) more than the president of the university. They also fire them within a few years of their contracts if they do not produce conference championships. Second, the race to produce the biggest and best sport facilities has faculty questioning the purpose of the athletic department's role in

higher education institutions. This paper documents deficit mentality statements of those working with a Division I (DI) intercollegiate athletic department.

Four Environments of an Intercollegiate Athletic Department

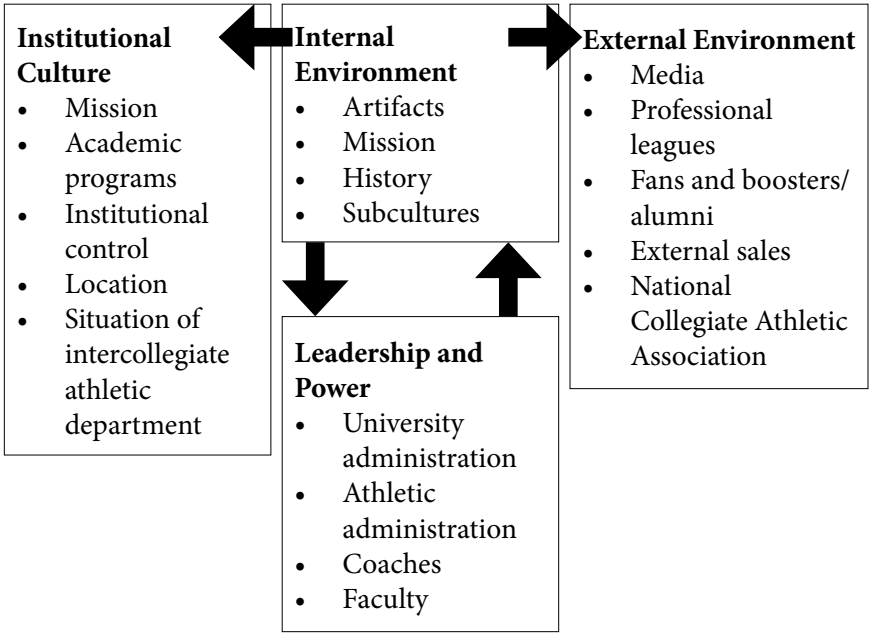
We examine and document the cultural context of intercollegiate athletic department stakeholders prominently institutionalized by working long-term in a higher education system. The essential components of Schroeder's (2010) intercollegiate athletic (ICA) department model are outlined here. The key components in Figure 1(Institutional Culture, External and Internal Environments, and Leadership and Power), although not mutually exclusive, of the intercollegiate athletic department culture are analyzed for patterns of meaning (Butin, 2010). These components interact in unique ways to form a well-defined athletic department culture (Schroeder, 2010). Figure 1 defines the distinctive cultures specific to athletic departments and presents themes to understand their organizational cultures.

Power and Leadership

Culture is intimately linked with leadership—"the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture" (Schein, 2010, p. 11), which originates from three sources: (1) beliefs, values, and assumptions of founders; (2) learning experiences of group members; and (3) new beliefs brought in by new members and leaders. Beliefs, values, and assumptions of founders is the most important aspect underpinning culture (Schein, 2010). Therefore, leadership is highly sought by group members for a reduction in group anxiety (Conner, 1993; Northouse, 2013).

Clotfelter's (2011) *Big-Time Sports in American Universities* suggests that universities operate commercial sports programs while hardly acknowledging them. The form of college sports follows the loose structure of universities, which allows for a myriad of disconnected missions and goals. To that end, there is a lot of slack in university oversight hierarchies, thus giving athletic directors similar leeway to that of deans of academic departments and sometimes presidents of institutions (Clotfelter, 2011). Also, it is difficult to pinpoint leadership in athletic departments "because athletic

Figure 1
Interactions of the Elements Model of Intercollegiate Athletic Department Cultures



cultures have both formal and informal leaders and stakeholders are not easily defined" (Schroeder, 2010, p. 108).

Institutional Culture

A university's mission, academic programs, and admission standards all affect the values and assumptions about intercollegiate athletics (Trail & Chelladurai, 2002). A college's size and institutional control (i.e., private/public) can influence the number of fans an athletic department must deal with (Schroeder, 2010). "With the popularity of intercollegiate sports growing in the public eye, as well as the concern for college football integrity and safety, higher education administrations [endeavor] to legitimize and codify college sports" (Vanover & DeBowes, 2013, p. 42). College sports provide athletes and spectators with important life skills such as teamwork, persistence, and discipline (Duderstadt, 2006). They also provide a sense of unity and pride for the students, the university,

and the community. There are several areas of concern such as the quasi-professional nature of intercollegiate sports, exploitation of student-athletes, hindrances to the academic mission, tolerance of low graduation rates, and cheating and scandal (Brand, 2006; Duderstadt, 2006; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013).

Frey's (1994) seminal study on values in higher education attributes value discrepancies in intercollegiate athletics to "the structural and organizational characteristics of colleges and universities" (p. 111). Universities tend to operate with a norm of departmental autonomy, thus athletic departments can develop independent values that nobody questions in the university (Baxter et al., 1996). The institutional environment has a strong effect on a university's assumptions about athletics (Ridpath, 2008). Not all faculty members oppose intercollegiate athletics, but faculty tend to regard intellectual capacity higher than athletic ability (Brand, 2006). However, faculty perceive the opposite to be true of administrators, citing discontent with the financial favor that athletic departments, especially football and men's basketball, receive over academics in the institution (Brand, 2006; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013).

In universities with revenue-generating sports programs, "many top-level administrators learn early on they have little authority over their celebrity coaches and players, and often less status" (Clotfelter, 2011, p. 11). Unfortunately, limited presidential and top-level administrator power does not necessarily imply a lack of perceived value of intercollegiate sports (Moltz, 2009). "Compared to faculty from D3 schools, those at DI are more likely to agree that faculty at their institutions resent athletics and believe that athletic department personnel engage in practices of questionable ethics and opposing values" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 79). Universities with large sports programs are less likely to mention athletics in their formal mission statements than they are to mention research endeavors, accomplishments of faculty and students, or professional schools (Clotfelter, 2011). There is a paucity of research around sports and its place in higher education (Brand, 2006; Duderstadt, 2006; Jaschik, 2012; Vanover & DeBowes, 2013).

External Athletic Department Environment

External environments reinforce many assumptions upon which intercollegiate athletics operate (Southall et al., 2008), similar to the

concept of organizational culture (W. Scott, 2005). Fortunately for athletic programs, groups of fans tend to congregate on the "university's periphery to lend their support" (Clotfelter, 2011, p. 15). These groups as coalitions have two prominent values: winning and loyalty (Frey, 1994). The external environments include media and advertising companies, merchandisers, boosters, and donors. The established distribution of power by means of external groups is an accepted way of doing business for monetary necessity; they have internal athletic department support and some legitimation and adoption within the larger organization (Frey, 1994; Martin, 2002). Some external groups challenge the course of formal leadership and influence normal governance processes, which may result in significant breaches of a university's integrity (Benford, 2007; Nixon, 2014; Schroeder, 2010).

Coalition patterns are labeled traditions and eventually institutionalized (Schein, 2010). A booster coalition is mainly composed of external groups: athletic foundations, corporate sponsors, conferences, media, serious fans and boosters, and corporate sponsors "who exchange resources in the form of money, materials, and political influence for the right to associate with coaches and athletes, for the status or prestige this association brings, and for the access to other persons like themselves and may possess political and economic resources that the coalition need or want" (Frey, 1994, p. 116).

Coalitions plant roots for rights of involvement with their respective sports teams over many years through ritual participation (Nixon, 2014). The revenue gleaned from media, sponsors, boosters, and postseason appearances of teams can entice leaders into making changes that are inconsistent with athletic department assumptions (Yow et al., 2009). Together, external environments ultimately influence the actions of administrators, coaches, and athletes that lead to athletic department values and assumptions (Schroeder, 2010; Wolfe & Pulter, 2002). Administrators prefer to rely on their coalitions for funding special needs. However, with this deference means giving up some control. There are a myriad of external environments vying for their voice to be heard in intercollegiate athletic programs. Sports benefactors find fame and events draw audiences that major corporate sponsors gravitate toward. Commercialized sports have favor in

the U.S. mainstream culture and critics are not likely to dissuade the public to relinquish a long-running tradition (Clotfelter, 2011) .

Another component seeking a voice within athletic department cultures is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA; Schroeder, 2010). The NCAA mandates rules protecting student-athletes, yet benefits financially from corporate sponsorships. No doubt their monetary contributions, along with rules and policies, shape how stakeholders interact with one another and perceive their social identity among other sporting programs. The NCAA, moreover, is complicit in creating this logic by supporting commercial policies and ignoring its own rules for commercial gain (Southall & Nagel, 2008). The external environment provides a portion of the resources that athletic departments need to operate and build bigger and better facilities (Case et al., 1987). Ultimately, these factors combine to create situations in which athletic departments become "organizational mutations" (Frey, 1994, p. 120), or countercultures, with values conflicting with universities' academic missions. Even with monies from external environments, most colleges and universities struggle to balance the costs and justify their missions in higher education.

Method

A qualitative case study lends itself to researchers' subjectivities (Jones et al., 2013). Because we believe knowledge is socially constructed and emerges from the meaning individuals make of their experiences, we used a constructivist case study approach to the inquiry (Creswell, 2014). In evaluation language, we used an explanatory case study to describe and explain phenomenon such as organizational culture (Schroeder, 2010). As such, perceptions of key episodes or testimonies are told directly from participants. Direct responses to questions help the reader gain access to the subjective elements of a setting (Schroeder, 2010; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2011) In addition to the description, the final distinguishing feature of case study research is its heuristic nature.

Initially, Strauss and Corbin (2008) situated grounded theory methodology with an awareness of the interrelationships among conditions and interactions between people and the structures that illuminate a process. The premise of those interactions further suggests that researchers and participants can co-construct the meaning

in interviews and in turn generate the grounding of the theoretical rendering (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005). Further, interest in culture encourages the researcher to focus on concepts such as hierarchies, equity, fairness, privilege, and power (Schein, 2010). Thus, constructivist grounded theory is appropriate for studying how deficit thinking is justified within collegiate athletic departments. To that end, Schroeder's (2010) cultural theoretical framework perspective was also deemed compatible with grounded theory analysis, as we primarily considered how the process was also influenced by the systems that impeded or promoted the way participants constructed their deficit thinking (Klenke, 2008).

Setting

This study took place at New State University (NSU). NSU was selected because of its status as a member of the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and athletic administration permitted access (Merriam, 1998). NSU is a pseudonym for a public land-grant university in the Western United States. The university is in a city of 25,000 to 45,000 people. Enrollment is close to 20,000 undergraduates and 3,500 graduate and professional degree students from 50 states and 90 countries.

Since 2010, the university has been busy with capital facilities projects. Private donations and legislative appropriations have fueled a building boom, including several new facilities with state-of-the-art classrooms and research areas. The athletic department's 2015 renovations and facility projects included a two-phase, $30 million basketball arena, a new locker room for soccer and wrestling, and a $1.5 million indoor training facility for golf.

Fifteen athletic teams compete in DI in the NCAA and the University belongs to a conference established in 1999 with eight original members. Conference realignment has welcomed four institutions since 2011. Its 12 members are in seven western states. Three of the original members have been conference rivals since the 1960s.

Participant Selection and Identification and Procedures

To ensure valid and credible information, we used purposeful criteria sampling (Patton, 2005) in this study. We selected universities on the basis of identifying as DI and participating in the FBS. We used snowball sampling approach only in the athletic department

and when employees recommended another person in the department, who would also recommend someone else and so on (Jones et al., 2013). If participants volunteered, we permitted consent to contact and scheduled individual interviews via email or in person. The inclusion criteria identified potential participants who qualified under one of the four criteria: (1) worked at the university for a minimum of 2 years in administration, in athletics, or as full-time faculty; (2) were members of the athletic department booster club; (3) were affiliated partners of the athletic department on contract as an outsourcing advertising firm; or (4) were a current student-athlete (Table 1). Four participants were not employees of the university. One was an employee of a multimedia firm associated with the athletic department. One male and one female booster offered external views of the athletic department. The NCAA faculty athletic representative provided broad institutional perspectives of the university. Information concerning academic life was garnered from an athletic-admissions representative, alumni director for university fundraising, two department chairs, and two faculty leaders.

The lead author conducted all interviews. During the interviews, the interviewer asked participants initial questions of when, what, where, why, how, and what consequences, to distinguish the process of forming culture, particularly what that meant for the individual, environment, and the institution (Table 2). The interviewer also asked participants questions related to who holds power and decision making (Schroeder, 2010).

Analysis

We followed qualitative case study data analysis procedures that align with constructivist grounded theory methods (e.g., initial, focused, clustered, and thematic coding; Charmaz, 2009; Yin, 2014). Over 2,250 min of interview recordings were transcribed by a transcription service. Interview data were initially read and 25 emergent themes and categories were discovered, with 14 themes and 5 meta-themes to emerging. Interviews, photos, website information, and newspaper articles were uploaded into NVivo 10 in their respective categories (4,659 NVivo codes). Some of the focused codes included "gender and racial inequity," "geography and population," "game day attendance," and "facilities." Those initial clusters provided the broad view, subsequent frequency count, and line-by-line coding of

Table 1
Professional Status, Gender, and Environment of the Interview Participants

Professional status	Gender	Environment
Coordinator of student admissions	Female	Institutional
Athletic department faculty representative	Female	Institutional
Professor of higher education and leadership	Female	Institutional
Assistant professor of sports psychology	Male	Institutional
Chair of the business school, marketing program	Male	Institutional
Chair of health sciences	Male	Institutional
Alumni director for university fundraising	Male	Institutional
Marketing and branding director	Male	Institutional
Business manager	Male	Internal
Financial aid coordinator for student-athletes	Female	Internal
Associate director-facilities and event management	Male	Internal
Equipment room manager	Male	Internal
Compliance director	Male	Internal
Head women's soccer coach	Male	Internal
Head volleyball coach	Male	Internal
Head women's tennis coach	Male	Internal
Head swimming and diving coach	Male	Internal
Head women's golf coach	Female	Internal
Head cheer coach	Male	Internal
Assistant volleyball coach	Female	Internal
Assistant men's basketball coach	Male	Internal
Assistant cheer coach	Female	Internal
Individual student-athlete	Male	Internal
Individual student-athlete	Female	Internal
Individual student-athlete	Female	Internal
Athletic director	Male	Internal
Senior associate director-internal affairs	Male	Internal

Table 1 (cont.)

Professional status	Gender	Environment
Associate director-development and revenue enhancement	Male	Internal
Associate director-media relations	Male	Internal
Associate director-business operation	Male	Internal
Senior associate director-external relations	Male	Internal
Booster Club member	Male	External
Booster Club member	Female	External
Booster Club member	Male	External
IMG Learfield property manager	Male	External
Newspaper sports reporter	Male	External

Note. This list included power and leadership and internal athletic department environment interview participants. In total, the interviewees (n = 36) were 26 men and 10 women with a range between 2 and 40 years of employment at the university. Age range was from 21 to 73 years.

interview transcripts. This was the largest data source of the study. Line-by-line coding was then followed by identification of pertinent text and reduced to 105 focused codes. We created memos about the focused codes to sort out interpretations about the meaning behind the codes. The last coding phase was then summarized and linked to the meta-themes and subthemes as these developed. Some of the thematic codes included "distance teams must travel for competition," "coach retention," "time away from classes because of weather delays," "isolated from big cities," and "small population." This encompassed reconnecting categories with rich quotations from participants that shed light on the athletic department's deficit thinking mentality. This in turn helped connect the conditions, properties, and dimensions of the coherent categories.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness relates to the rigor we employed throughput the data collection and analysis to support the credibility of the research (Yin, 2014). The way we stemmed epistemological and the theoretical foundations in the conception and execution of this study supports the integrity of this study (Creswell, 2014). We analyzed

Table 2
Beginning Questions for Investigating Culture in Intercollegiate Athletic Departments

Element of culture	Key questions
Institutional culture	• What is the mission of the college/university? • Is the institution private or public? What are the residency requirements? • What are the values and assumptions of the institution?
External environment	• How does the university structure the athletic department? • What is the scope of the department's environment? • What externalities influence the department? • How intense are the department's interactions with the environment? • What does the department gain or contribute to the environment?
Internal environment	• What is the history of the department? • What is the mission of the department? • What memberships does the department maintain? • What subcultures exist? • What symbols/artifacts exist? What meanings do they have?
Leadership & power	• Who are the formal and informal leaders? • What does the organization expect from its leaders? • What are the main sources of power? • How are decisions made?

data from transcripts with participants, document analysis, and field notes from site visits, to triangulate multiple sources of data to confirm or disconfirm findings (Creswell, 2014; LePeau, 2015). We used measures such as "offering thick descriptions of participant's word in providing rationale for the key categories in the theory, and we conducted member checks with participants by sharing a summary of findings" (LaPeau, 2015, p. 106). Participants confirmed the viability of the theory.

A peer debriefer and an external researcher experienced with intercollegiate athletics and familiar with grounded theory methodology and analytic methods raised questions about emergent themes that encouraged us to return to the data as we worked to saturate categories. The auditor tracked that there was congruence between data analysis and the theoretical rendering (Charmaz, 2009; LePeau, 2015). Finally, individuals involved in the peer-debriefing and member-check processes confirmed our rationale for support of the emergent theory (Creswell, 2014). We also kept a research journal to track decisions made throughout the research process, to examine researcher positionalities, and to reflect on perspectives about deficit thinking that the participants shared (Yin, 2014).

Limitations

Asking participants to provide an oral history of work, culture, and leadership between the environments (power and leadership, internal athletic department, external athletic department, and institutional) is a possible limitation to the study (Peterkin, 2010). Participants had to work or be affiliated NSU for at least 2 years, a benefit of gathering long-term influences in the culture of the athletic department and/or the institution. Nevertheless, participants' potential memories of events are an important factor (Yin, 2011). This said, it is important to note that the "participants' firsthand knowledge of the institution acted as an environmental historian and provided a thorough landscape of the issues" of intercollegiate athletics culture for several decades (LePeau, 2015; Yin, 2011).

Findings

The function of deficit ideology is to justify existing conditions by identifying problems of inequality as located within, rather than as pressing upon, disenfranchised entities so that efforts to redress

inequalities focus on "fixing" disenfranchised people rather than the conditions that disenfranchise them (Gorski, 2010). The voices, documents, field notes, pictures, and the researchers' observations address the issues of deficit thinking and the justifications of why the individuals think the way they do. The following narratives demonstrate attitudes and emotions associated with the athletic programs and are organized by reoccurring voices across the four environments. The core category was constructed around a singular nexus: geographical deficit as the plague of the athletic culture. Three core categories—"location," "population," and "geography"—emerged as elements of the theoretical process. More of narrative findings appear in the Appendix.

Lack of Population Surrounding the University

Participants viewed the small population in the state and city as having an overarching, detrimental effect on the athletic program. A sports psychologist explained the lack of population shared by other states:

> It's not just this state. You just have this geographical region where there is nobody. I don't mean to say that in a negative way; it's just people-wise there is nobody. This is an isolated state geographically and with that comes structural constraints.

As such, the relationship between population density and competition at the highest level of intercollegiate sports seems like a constant struggle for the athletic department. To that end, a kinesiology professor explained,

> Looking at it from a sporting perspective, the recruitment side of things, they struggle to recruit. Especially DI, particularly with football and men's basketball, there's an expectation to achieve perhaps more than it can. That's an issue they have. Particularly, what they're bringing in are very expensive coaches, to compensate for this lack of population, for a team, which, is at the bottom of the DI tier.

Not a lot of the athletes came from the state. Table 3 displays home origin. The media relations director said, "There are some really

Table 3
Student-Athletes Home of Origin Per Sport

Sport	In-state hometown	Out-of-state hometown	International	Total
Football	8	91	9	108
Men's basketball	1	11	1	13
Women's basketball	3	8	1	12
Tennis	0	1	7	8
Volleyball	2	15	0	17
Wrestling	5	21	0	26
Men's golf	3	5	0	8
Women's golf	2	6	1	9
Women's swimming	2	31	4	37
Men's swimming	4	20	2	26
Men's track and field	14	20	3	37
Women's track and field	23	22	3	48
Men's cross country	10	4	3	17
Women's cross country	14	9	1	24
Soccer	3	14	7	24
Total	94	280	42	414

Note. Data from the university website in 2015.

good athletes here. They're just raw." To that end, the assistant volleyball coach also reiterated,

> Athletes in this state need to be tapped into. It's kind of a raw place. We're not going to get the well-refined athletic kid. They're just not coming here. We have to find our niche. We can either find a lesser athlete that's a great volleyball player, or we can find a better athlete, and try to teach her how to be a better volleyball player—if we want to recruit players from this state.

At times, the lack of population was described as a "unique trait" rather than a challenge. This was especially true of administrators

who worked for several years in the athletic department. For instance, the athletic director of external affairs spun a positive then comparative angle on the sparsely populated state:

> Every time you talk about this place, you're going to talk of what makes us unique. We're unique. We are in one of the least populated states. There is no place like this. But it's also tough when there are more people in a three-square mile New York City block than we have in our entire state.

The lack of population may be a player recruitment problem. However, the much larger issue of exclusion is apparent. The depth and differences in race and ethnicity of all 128 employees and staff versus 525 student-athletes is particularly notable and mirrors the population of the state. "NSU's general student population [is] predominantly Caucasian and middle to upper middle class," explained a student-athlete. Yet most student-athletes are Black (student-athlete socioeconomic status was unknown to the researchers).

To that end, college admissions staff and coaches valued the compositionally diverse student-athlete body and strive to provide athletic scholarships. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity was only compounded by the lack of gender equity in the head coaching and athletic administration ranks. There was one female head coach of eight women's team coaches (including the cheerleading squad) and only one senior athletic director, who served as the senior woman administrator. Consequently, when the lack of females in power and leadership roles was brought up, the women's golf coach responded,

> I personally don't know how that's even shaped over there. Our administrators do a great job. I don't really know in what positions if any females have even really applied—in the past.

When probed deeper, "So it's not a big deal?" she responded, "No, I don't think so. I know I'm the only head women's coach on staff, but I don't think anything of it, I guess."

Consistent with the follower mentality, conformers are those with unmet needs, low core self-evaluations, and low maturity (Powers et al., 2016). Followers in fear of negative repercussions often take unspoken cues from leadership. In this case, the power and

leadership environment would not support any communication on a hot topic such as gender equity. With regard to this topic, a sports psychology professor criticized,

> Our women's golf coach is the only head women's coach. Then you look at staffs where for example swimming is co-ed, but they have no female assistants.

Women's soccer had no female assistants; they had a female graduate assistant but no paid female assistants. When broached on the subject, the soccer coach diverted with another equity concern:

> One of the people that I tried to hire when I first got here had been my assistant for five years, but she told me "I'm a lesbian. I'm not going go with you to NSU." I'm like, "I don't blame you. I wouldn't either." She wanted to live in a town that will be more accepting of her lifestyle.

However, students wanted to see someone who looked like themselves in leadership roles. Thus, the issue of compositional diversity was a physical justification for the school's limited ability to provide a multicultural representation of the student-athletes in the internal athletic and power and leadership environments.

Weather

In regard to geography, the a participant external to the university reported, "Geography presents some unique challenges not faced by peer institutions within the athletic conference. Travel costs are high, travel logistics difficult, non-conference scheduling extremely challenging . . . all in a very small (yet loyal) market." This impacts almost every area of the athletics program operation from student-athlete recruitment, to academic performance, staff recruitment and retention, alumni support, ticket sales, and game attendance. The city has a total area of 20 square miles. Located between two mountain ranges, it is on a high plain. The closest big city is 100 miles away. Due to the high elevation, winters are long, and summers are short and relatively cool. Driving across the state depends on the weather because of the drastic fluctuations. An assistant basketball coach pointed out,

> This is not Miami, Florida, and it's not really a destination that you would want to go to. I think there is no way you can get around it. I think coaches would either see this as a stepping stone to keep moving forward, unless you grew up here. Frankly, you just get tired of the freezing weather and the blowing wind, and the isolation. There is really no way around that.

Even though many coaches and administrators mentioned a stigma associated with NSU being in the middle of nowhere, there was a lot of state pride. The women's golf coach described the state as being one big town with a lot of long streets. A broader description of the state, people hunt and fish regularly and those activities attract tourists to the state.

Critical Influences on Deficit Thinking

Issue of Imputation: Low Expectations

An external advertiser exposed,

> Sometimes I hear coaches and athletic directors say, "Oh, we're not a Texas, we can't beat so and so." That bugs the crap out of me. There's no reason we can't. They may have some better resources than here. I've heard that from people from time to time from people who've been here forever. Now, I'm the rookie here, but I believe we shouldn't approach things like that. So I can see some attitudes that wear people down, bother me and others.

The same participant said,

> We had an ex-coach football coach who I heard on the radio say, "This is a horrible location, bad weather." We're not that. We've got an airport. We're not that remote. My last property, I was really remote. So, I don't buy that. As for the weather, own it. I don't buy that either. Having excuses bugs me.

At NSU, identified negative attitudes were most prevalent among employees who had been there the longest. Yet even a student-athlete with high status among his peers demonstrated a weak attitude about the success of his team: "I think our successes are short lived. I think

we strive for average—just not the bottom of the pack. But when you pose a question, could we be an Alabama? I'm going to say no, we will never be Alabama." A senior leader in the internal athletic department shared,

> I think there's a stigma associated with NSU. Nobody gets a letter from us, and says, "oh my, NSU just contacted me." We have to kind of try to find a way to bridge that barrier as we're not in the middle of nowhere.

The chief business director noted the perception of being inferior to peer institutions:

> Even in our conference, I think our teams are often looked down upon. We go into it thinking we are the underdog. I think they look at us as being from a small community. I don't think people look down on us in our conference from the standpoint of leadership. I think they believe that we have quality people.

A booster claimed, "There is a pervading opinion that 'good enough is good enough' in football and basketball [at NSU]." Thus, there is not a sense of urgency and accountability that accompanies programs with high expectations for competitive success. A climate assessment from a participant external to the university mirrored the same sentiments: "The current culture of acceptance and validation has a major influence on the bloodline of football and men's basketball. Recruiting to NSU can be challenging, due to unique factors; however, this is exacerbated if those involved choose to focus on this daily."

Many coaches and power and leadership stakeholders who come to NSU from other athletics departments constantly hear from peers at other institutions about the challenges that working there may bring. This consistent external messaging is obviously counterproductive to building and maintaining morale, which may lead to high rates of turnover adversely impacting the athletic teams. There were several ruminating tensions spoken of—across all groups—that at the core described inequalities resulting from moral, cultural, and behavioral deficiencies assumed to be inherent in disenfranchised

individuals and communities. This monocultural view of the institution and athletic programs became the excuse for complacency.

Issue of Imputation: Impact Recruiting Coaches and Mid-Level Administrators

The average tenure for men's basketball and football coaching jobs is 4.76 years, with a median of 4 years (Styczynski, 2009). The short tenure combined with limited or no access to private aircraft for coaches' recruiting efforts can have a drastic impact on the effectiveness of coaches throughout the season. Coaching and recruiting both suffer as the unique travel demands throughout the season wear heavily on the football and basketball coaching staffs, both of whom recruit primarily out-of-state. Coaches consider these as deficits when they weigh the pros and cons of working at NSU. As noted in Table 3, the number of in-state players is disproportionately smaller than the number of out-of-state and international players for every sport at NSU.

It was reported that NSU was a stepping-stone institution for coaches. Several participants voiced the university's difficulty in maintaining successful coaching staffs. The external advertising firm manager noted, "Coaches seem to move on to one of those Power 5 Conferences if they are successful." Coaching can be a transitory profession. The participant further explained, "I mean if you get somewhere that does really well, gets a better offer at a school with more exposure for his program, also doubling their salary, how do you compete with that if you're NSU?" The media relations director explained,

> There aren't a lot of people that desire to live here; unless they are from here. I don't know many coaches from anywhere in the state, much less who do well at this level that are in the coaching profession.

More findings appear in the Appendix.

Discussion

Four Environments of an Intercollegiate Athletic Departments

Schroeder's (2010) conceptual model was validated in this study as the interactions among the internal athletic department, external athletic department, institutional, power and leadership environments yielded three main tensions, which are likely to be similar at every other institution. The interactions among the internal athletic department, external athletic department, institutional, power and leadership environments validate Schroeder's (2010) conceptual model. The three main tensions are likely to be similar at every other institution.

First, within the internal athletic department environment, tension undoubtedly arises among administrators, coaches, and athletes as they negotiate the department's values and assumptions. There are numerous internal forces that impact internal athletic department values, but these forces are constantly evolving (Schein, 2010). The second major tension is each environment's attempt to draw the athletic department's values in their respective direction. While the internal athletic department environment can propel the department values in either direction, each cultural anchor can rapidly pull the values to either side if left unchecked or if not somewhat consistent. There is an assumption that the internal athletic environment has an obligation to adhere to policies of the university and that policies are reflective of values (Schein, 2010). Thus, the third major tension is when leaders attempt to move the athletic department culture along the institutional cultural continuum rather than the external athletic department pressures of perennial winning records.

The interaction of the internal, external, power and leadership, and institutional environments results in an assumption deeply embedded in deficit ideology. Due to factors such as a desolate location and low population, personnel issues may take the brunt of excuse-making team losses. The impact may come from critical incidents such as recruiting coaches and student-athletes, game travel, game attendance, and fans access to facilities and players—outcomes that relate to complacency and no effective method to address the underlying deficit mentality.

Another perspective regarding the assumptions of intercollegiate athletics is grounded in the values of its noninstitutional environments (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Trail & Chelladurai, 2002). Restricting access to facilities is taboo, according to boosters, because "that's what we do to show our excitement." Limiting access does not seem to hold importance by enough supporters for reform. The tradition of the public rushing the field is representative of tradition that the power and leadership environment is not willing to relinquish, albeit a large concern for many mid-level administrators and head coaches. Those in power and leadership positions fear that if they take access away from fans, loss of ticket revenue may ensue. Tradition justifies complacency on this issue, which causes fear of facility damage and possibly to a player's physical safety.

Implications and Recommendations

Grounded in the participants' views, the results of this study confirm the notion that when a "deficit mentality" is present, it typically results in the assignment of blame and responsibility to others and/or outside factors for lack of desired outcomes (Vibert & Sheilds, 2003). Adopting a deficit mind frame is further counterproductive considering that it centers around the problems and not the solutions (D. Scott & O'Neil, 2003).

From a practical standpoint, replacing the deficit mentality with a strength approach can prove a useful alternative that is contingent upon a positive mindset of people from all four environments (McCashen, 2005; Seligman, 1996). To that end, rather than overexposure of problems and weaknesses, a strength approach may lead to an initial recognition of issues and sorting out a deliberate plan to address them (Lees, 2004).

As it relates to the case of NSU or other similar cases, working through the social issues from a strength standpoint may include the following process (see McCashen, 2005, for a review):

1. Recognizing and outlining of the issues from the perspectives of all parties involved.
2. Generating a picture of the future or envisioning a good enough outcome to the seeming issues.
3. Identifying the strengths (e.g., available resources, individuals' skills and characteristics), as well as the time periods

when the issues seem to have been partly resolved or at least improved.
4. Classifying presence and availability of alterative resources and strategies to assist in the improvement of the recognized issues.
5. Developing plans and delineating steps to solve or at least partly improve the issues.

Given the discourse at NSU, a more productive approach then entails

1. Recognizing the most forthcoming issues including lack of people, adequate representation, and inconvenient location and weather, as well as other related issues including lowered expectations, recruitment challenges with regards to athletic staff, coaches and athletes, travel difficulties, lack of game attendance, and demanding access to public facilities from the perspectives of all parties involved.
2. Generating a mental picture of the future with what would be acceptable solutions or improvements to the issues.
3. Identifying the strengths as applicable such as identifying other alternative resources or potential events to increase quality people and overall visibility, improving individuals' expectations, and facilitating recruitment, travel, game attendance, and access to facilities. Strategies might include hiring coaches who players can identify and trust, as well as identifying time periods when these issues may have been relatively inexistent or partly resolved or improved.
4. Classifying strategies to assist in the improvement of the issues, for instance, by modernizing the brand and image of the university and athletic department.
5. Developing plans and delineating concrete steps to solve or at least partly improve the issues.

In fact, conscious adoption of a strength approach in these settings should be crucial because adopting a deficit approach risks distracting all parties involved from solution-centered outcomes (Fenton, 2008). Consciously adopting a strength approach comes, however, with unique challenges; most often deficit assumptions and

inclinations are deeply rooted in a culture. Thus, even when invisible to the outsiders, they could still be powerfully felt by the insiders (Valencia, 2010).

With regard to this case, like Payne's (2001) research on academic institutions and negative beliefs, it is apparent that the internal athletic environment at NSU has negative beliefs about location and population that foster mediocrity and negative thinking. A striking pattern across the critical imputations loops back into the location of the institution and the lack of population, yet presumably other peer institutions within the conference face such issues. Thus, additional research may shed further light on how university and college intercollegiate athletic departments create a more receptive climate for cultural shifts in deficit thinking.

A clear justification for deficit thinking in this context centers on the location of the institution, first and foremost. However, many institutions that are more remote, with fewer resources are winning championships and recruiting and retaining high-caliber coaches and student-athletes. How the university and athletic department addresses the limitations connected to location and lack of population will continue to be NSU's biggest justification for deficit thinking; however, for researchers the biggest reform issues revolve around the power and leadership environment. Diversity and inclusion initiatives need to be addressed, such as the lack of female and minority coaches in any sport other than women's golf. NSU needs to start by questioning if ethnic and racial identification is important in its leadership roles for student-athletes.

The first step in combatting anti-oppressive behavior often begins with open and honest communication and shared decision making (Van Wormer & Besthorn, 2017). This can be challenging at mid- to large-size universities where administrators are hired for fundraising efforts over management style preferences. Administrators who adapt to inclusive leadership and management styles may ultimately ignite an opposite trend. Athletic departments fostering diversity in all environments will be a big step toward dynamic thinking in the internal and institutional environments and a symbol of solidarity for the power and leadership and external environments. Despite past examination of leadership roles in athletic department culture, little is known about the collaboration of institutional, internal,

and external components in higher education's deficit mentality (Clotfelter, 2011).

Reframing the defensive rhetoric of "blaming the victim," in any context, does not change behavior. Instead, an examination of employees' perceptions of their academic institutions and the subtle communication exchanges may identify deeply embedded deficit thinking. For some readers, looking at one university's athletic department may appear limited and a random situation. For others, the rich descriptions of deficit thinking in the context of a DI athletic department may be all too familiar. Some researchers have reported in-depth about cultures of athletic departments (Schroeder, 2010; Ridpath, 2008; Trail & Chelladurai, 2002), but few, if any, have penned credible voices of those who live and work within such an organizational context.

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Appendix: Findings

Issue of Imputation: Recruiting Student-Athletes

Recruiting and retaining Division I/FBS caliber student-athletes and staff are major challenges. These are major issues for many universities vying for the same blue-chip recruits and coaching staff. These are the two most critical priorities in improving the competitiveness of athletic programs. Location, low population density, and proximity to a major metropolitan posed a dilemma on enticing competitive athletes to play at NSU. The head women's soccer coach commented, "Considering the closest metropolitan city is two hours away —an athlete drives by several universities to get here—makes it difficult to sign them." Student-athletes want activities to do in their free time. A professor in the business school declared, "There are no upscale shopping centers here, Starbucks is in a grocery store, not a lot of the amenities that might attract some athletes who might be more skilled coming out of high school." The women's golf coach exclaimed, "I've tried to get kids to visit. If they have tournaments close to here I say, 'Hey come on up, it's only two hours.' It's difficult to get them to go out of their way. Peer institutions use our location as a sore spot with recruiting kids!" The deputy AD declared, "We're recruiting against Green State and they make it sound like we're in the boonies. But I think the hard thing is to actually just get them here."

Several coaches schedule on-campus visits for certain months to downplay the long, harsh winters. The head tennis coach stated, "I rarely have any recruits that sign if they haven't come here." A female student-athlete on the track team commented on recruits' perceptions of NSU:

> I think they are shocked when they actually get here. So I guess their perception is small college town in the middle of nowhere. Once they get here, and I think they see how beautiful the area is and how nice the campus is.

Other issues regarding the location and the impact on recruiting included the expense and time of driving two hours to the closest hub airport. The head soccer coach explained,

> We can't simply drive a lot of places. Then on top of that, the hardest thing is how do you retain those student-athletes once they are here? The culture shock sets in. I think we have to figure it out. I mean we've definitely recruited a ton of international athletes because they're just happy to be in the States. Last year we had five Australians and six Canadians on the roster.

The external review committee recommended, "Transporting recruits in limousines, entertaining recruits with video games to divert athlete's attention so the trip didn't seem so long." This was "so they don't sit in a car and stare out the window all the way from the airport and back to the airport," according to the chief financial officer.

Issue of Imputation: Travel Impact on Student-Athletes

Many participants voiced concern over student-athletes' academic performance and how it may be negatively impacted by missed classes due to extensive in-season travel. However, other teams have similar rigorous travel schedules. A participant external to the university asserted, "NSU's conference and non-conference schedule is not constructed so that it minimizes travel time and expenses." NSU is not impacted more than any other conference team, as other schools must travel to NSU as well. Table 1A displays a comparison on mileage, commercial flight, and ground transportation times between NSU and a peer-conference institution for the 2014–15 women's basketball schedule and shows the only difference for travel time and distance is 4 hours round-trip to the airport. This potentially negatively impacts academic performance of student-athletes (too much missed class time), overall costs of team travel, and competitive ability of the team (wear and tear as a result of difficult travel to and from games within the conference). Chartering air transportation is possible. The AD explained travel logistics and future plans:

Table 1A

Distance Comparisons Between NSU Women's Basketball Versus Conference Institutions (to Away Games)

Institution	Miles between institutions	Drive-time between institutions	Commercial flight-time between institutions	Other miles between institutions	Other drive-time between institutions	Other commercial flight-time between institutions
To:						
University 1	791	11 h 27 m	3 h 35 m	921	12h 51m	3h 30m
University 2	686	9h 45 m	3 h 35 m	510	7h 12m	2 h 55m
University 3	1,111	16 h 5 m	3 h 45 m	388	5h 16m	2h 55m
University 4	592	8h 16 m	2h 55m	935	14h 2m	3h 40m
University 5	907	12h 44m	4h 55 m	1, 046	14h 54m	3 h 25 m
University 6	67	1h 12 m	n/a	682	10h 46m	4 h 55m
University 7	1,156	16h 45m	4 h 5 m	766	11h 4m	1 h 40m
University 8	1,184	17 h 2m	4 h 25m	574	7h 58m	1 h 20m
University 9	384	6 h 5 m	1 h 30 m	592	8 h 16 m	2 h 55m

Note. Google Maps used to calculate the distances in 2015.

> We select games that we think will give us a better advantage to charter to. We do occasionally charter flights for men's and women's basketball teams five times a year—on top of championship tournaments. All of our sports, soccer, volleyball, golf, wrestling, ought to be able to charter flights. Unfortunately, the money is not there for such expenditures.

One advantage peer institutions have over NSU is proximity to major airports when flying commercially to away games. NSU adds 4 hours round-trip to travel time for flying commercially. Moreover, the weather at the closest airport also impact the student-athletes. "It's known to get snowed in, and we can't get back" was a criticism of student-athletes losing another day of academic instruction. A senior athletic director added, "Wear and tear physically and mentally of doing that versus being able to fly right back in here, and being home in a few minutes, over the span of a season negatively affects the teams."

The senior women's athletic director stated,

> Student-athletes must have understanding professors, because if we fly commercially they may miss three consecutive days of school. Let's say you have a game on Wednesday, fly out commercially the day before the game, and lose Tuesday. You're going to play on Wednesday night, so you lose a class day on Wednesday. Then, most of your day is getting back on Thursday.

The women's golf coach appreciated the chartered flights for the sake of her players but admitted that chartering flights does not correlate into winning:

> Academically and wear and tear–wise, I think it's better for our players. Now, if you take a look at the tourneys that we win when we charter versus don't charter, I'm not sure you would say that the money is helping obtain [wins]. The wins and losses probably won't tell you that.

Issue of Imputation: Game Attendance

Geography presents some unique challenges not faced by peer institutions within the conference. Travel costs are high, travel logistics difficult, nonconference scheduling extremely challenging…all in a very small (yet loyal) market. This impacts almost every area of the athletics program operations from student-athlete recruitment, to academic performance, staff recruitment and retention, alumni support, ticket sales, and game attendance. Lack of attendance was described as a "worry" and a "source of contention" for senior leadership. The business manager explained,

> Do people go to games? Yeah, but the number one cause of attendance decline here is when hunting seasons opens. So, it's just a complex web of things that happen in the state. That's a higher priority in the state.

Poor attendance disturbs coaches because they expect a strong home presence at games. The tennis coach expressed, "I think it's disappointing. I know that in the '80s and even in the '90s people came from afar. It's disappointing if fans consider themselves passionate, which I think they are, but don't support us by attending events." Poor student attendance baffled the associate director of external affairs: "We have tried so many things with the students. So, why don't they walk 50 yards from the dorms to the games?" Already on the radar, the athletic department began addressing low attendance:

> At times we question if discounting prices will sell tickets. Will that get more people here? You take the risk of reducing the ticket prices and those people who were going to buy anyway are just paying less. So, you're getting less revenue, really shooting yourself in the foot. You're going to get the same people but they're just going to pay less.

Issue of Imputation: Public Access to Facilities

The director of academic compliance, the senior associate athletic director of development, and the assistant athletic director of facility operations had serious concern for the football turf and basketball arena court. All three participants used the word

"acceptance" to explain public access policy. The cost of the football turf was approximately $500,000 and the newly, updated basketball court nearing $1,000,000. Fans have been allowed full access to the sports fields and volleyball and basketball courts after sporting events and during daylight hours. The assistant athletic director of facility operations explained,

> We're very open. So if we wanted to walk out there right now we could. After volleyball games, kids are running around and throwing volleyballs. People are on the court after. We have autograph sessions and things like that, so people are around.

The director of academic compliance perceived the public access as a lack of professionalism and desperation to maintain attendance:

> It's a small town, traditional pastime; it's been this way forever. In my mind though, after a volleyball game, there should not be college kids playing 3-on-3 volleyball while girls are doing interviews and things like that. Get them off the court. This was a college match. It's done. This isn't high school; you do allow spectators to ruin the court with their street shoes! It's just kind of the mindset but it's difficult because our fans think that they own us.

Several participants expressed dissatisfaction with entertainment during games and tournaments, marketing the teams and events, and the branding of its athletic programs—all key parts of recruiting—yet the director of marketing seemed unaware of these issues.

Issue of Imputation: Impact of Recruiting Coaches and Mid-Level Administrators

Given seven members of senior leadership had a combined 70-plus years of working in the athletic department, this comment seemed an outlier. However, athletic department middle management "has been far more nomadic than senior leadership. I can rattle off ten schools our staff has jumped ship for last couple of years; Arizona State, Oklahoma State, Southern Miss, Iowa State," according to the senior AD for external affairs. In addition, he said,

> When I started, people wanted to get a job, establish yourself, you want to be there. Now it's three or four years. They tell themselves "I've got to go, I can't be here any longer than that." I felt hurt. I thought this wasn't a good enough place."

The sports psychologist added,

> Athletic administration recruiting is a challenge as well. NSU is a great place to begin a career, but you don't want to see people stay particularly long. So when you have this consistent turnover of people, that can create a real challenge as well. So I think people can see this spot as an opportunity to prepare for the next step, rather than being the next step itself and that mindset absolutely creates some real challenges.

Capitalizing on successful coaches "at a school like NSU" moved in cycles, according to the sports psychology professor:

> I think men's basketball right now is at a peak of a relatively successful cycle and maybe football is at the opposite end of that. I don't know I mean it's tough to balance 3 and 9 then 8 and 4 then 4 and 8 and then 5 and 7 [win–loss records].

The same participant continued,

> Other sports are the same way. I think what happens so with the university like ours is that our cycle of not performing as well is a longer cycle versus performing well. It takes a special group of student-athletes and coaches to come through and you got that 2-year, 3-year window, maybe, to really take advantage of those people.

The same participant said,

> Someone like "Current Star Player, Jr.," he could have gone to a number of different schools, but we have a coach here that has got a history with his father, senior. He committed. Now, all of a sudden, we can recruit and throw out "you can play with 'Current Star Player, Jr.' and you get this bubble for four years around this one player and one coach. That coach brought that here and allowed for that to happen.