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“It’s just a lot *they* are asking from *us*”: College Athlete Experiences of Division III to Division II Reclassification

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of college athletes directly impacted by their institution’s pursuit of gaining membership to a different NCAA division (i.e., divisional reclassification). More specifically, this study sought to understand specific changes that accompany the Division III to Division II transition, which include: 1) divisional philosophy, 2) financial aid, 3) level of competition, 4) athletically related activities, and 5) academic standards. Conceptually, this study was guided by the stress appraisal and coping process. The Brief COPE inventory of coping responses was applied as a framework from which to understand how college athletes coped with the financial, athletic, and academic changes to the college athlete experience. Research participants were Division III college athletes who reclassified with their athletic program to become Division II college athletes, and who participated in semi-structured interviews that allowed for rich descriptions of their experiences through the reclassification process to be captured. Findings suggest reclassification was a relative stressor, meaning the process was perceived as stressful by some but not all the reclassifying college athletes interviewed. In coping with the relative stresses, college athletes demonstrated a greater tendency to engage in emotion-focused coping, which included the venting of emotional distress. More specialist support services are proposed to encourage more problem-focused coping responses among affected college athletes.

Keywords: appraisal; attribution; college athlete; coping; reclassification; stress

The unique physical and mental demands placed on college athletes at the intercollegiate level are well-established (see Cutler & Dwyer, 2020; Jolly, 2007; Madrigal & Robbins, 2020; Pinkerton et al., 1989; Pritchard & Wilson, 2005; Stevens et al., 2013). Specifically, college athletes must learn to balance athletic, academic, and social demands of the college experience, which renders college athletes distinct from the general incoming student population (Gayles & Baker, 2015). Athletically, college athletes are expected to practice 20 hours per week and compete during their sport season; while academically, college athletes are expected to maintain a minimum grade point average and make satisfactory progress toward their degree in order to maintain athletic eligibility (Gayles & Baker, 2015). As a result, balancing these requirements is problematic even for the most capable students (Kissinger et al., 2015). College athletes also face several additional negative and/or threatening events during their college career. For instance, player injuries and interpersonal violence (such as hazing or bullying) present a substantial physical and mental burden (NCAA, 2014). Additional stressors include being cut from a team, losing starting status, reduction or loss of scholarship, and the end of athletic career (Etzel et al., 2006). Yet, one less common but equally as threatening college athlete stressor is the divisional reclassification of the athletic program within which the college athlete participates.

Reclassification is the process where a college or university makes a formal request to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for a change in division membership (Schwarz,

1998). When faced with the prospect of divisional reclassification, college athletes have the option to either remain at their current institution or transfer to another institution. Those who decide to remain at their current institution have one of two further options: 1) navigate the reclassification process, or 2) forego athletic participation altogether. Importantly, the Division II membership application does not explicitly require institutions to evidence the support of their existing college athlete body (NCAA, 2020a). Instead, reclassification often is rationalized from an institutional perspective where universities and colleges “plan strategically and assess which NCAA division is better suited for their institution” (Williams et al., 2015, p. 155). As such, reclassification is presented in terms of institutional benefits such as the perceived inherent value of being part of a higher division (Dwyer et al., 2010) that includes increased revenue, prestige, and reputation. The longer-term strategic benefits of reclassification and the marginality of college athletes within strategic decision-making reinforces the “increasingly dominant view of college athletes as transient users and consumers” (Snyder, 2013, para. 39). Therefore, college athletes have an assumed lack of control within the divisional reclassification process, which makes this a potentially unique stressor should the reclassification itself crossover with college athletes’ four years of athletic eligibility.

The progressively higher levels of competition that accompany upward reclassification require different types of resources to best enable college athlete success (Kissinger et al., 2015). However, Division III to Division II reclassification is a particularly novel upward divisional transition for several reasons. For example, college athletes at Division II are subject to greater academic scrutiny from the NCAA than their Division III counterparts where academic standards are set by the school (NCAA, n.d.a). Additionally, Division II athletics represents the threshold for athletic scholarships. College athletes go from no athletic scholarships in Division III, to partial athletics scholarships where 60% of athletes receive athletics aid (NCAA, n.d.a). As stated by Kissinger et al. (2015), an opportunity exists to investigate institutions who have undergone divisional reclassification to help college athletes more effectively embrace the challenges correlated with the transition. However, by focusing on the Division III to Division II reclassification there is an opportunity to target this investigation – not only where potentially significant athletic, academic, and financial changes accompany reclassification, but also where little is known about how affected college athletes appraise and cope with the related sources of change.

To understand the impact on college athletes of divisional reclassification from Division III to Division II, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do college athletes appraise their experiences of change within the Division III to Division II reclassification process?

RQ2: How do college athletes cope with the potentially stressful changes that accompany Division III to Division II reclassification?

Accordingly, this study examined the Division II reclassification experiences of college athletes recruited at the Division III level within a single case setting – Mountain State University (MSU, pseudonym). As this study intended to elicit the lived experiences of college athletes, a descriptive research design was implemented involving semi-structured interviews with a sample of college athletes. The result was a better understanding of how divisional reclassification is experienced from a psychosocial perspective.

Background

Several colleges and universities over recent years have reclassified their athletic programs. As examples, California Baptist University was accepted into Division I reclassification from Division II in July 2018 (California Baptist University Athletics, 2018) and Dixie State announced a similar move in January 2019 (DSU Athletic Media Relations, 2020). Much of the scholarly research focusing on college athletes’ experiences of divisional reclassification considers similar transitions to the pinnacle of intercollegiate athletic competition (i.e., Division I). For example, Kissinger et al.’s

(2015) research on Division II to Division I reclassification established that college athletes face several challenges as a result of reclassification, including how to manage their financial aid, maintain satisfactory academic progress, and transition successfully into post-collegiate life. In contextualizing divisional characteristics at the lower divisions of the NCAA, five distinct differences exist between Division III and Division II athletics that serve as possible sources of stress for reclassifying college athletes. The five changes relate to: 1) divisional philosophy, 2) financial aid, 3) athletically related activities, 4) level of competition, and 5) scrutiny of academic standards.

Divisional Philosophy

Division III institutions pride themselves on focusing on academics and providing a ‘holistic experience’ that truly instills the ‘student-athlete’ persona (Love, 2018). Furthermore, the philosophy of Division III athletics is solely concerned with the academic and social success of college athletes, rather than athletic triumphs and national exposure as stipulated for Division I institutions (Katz et al., 2015). Division III institutions often promote a college athlete’s athletic activities as an integral part of the college athlete’s educational experience (NCAA, n.d.b). The general understanding is that Division III college athletes attend colleges and universities for the academic and social experience, where athletics are considered extracurricular activities (Katz et al., 2015). Whereas at the Division II level, the institution highlights the importance of academics in a college athlete’s life, but also puts less emphasis on intertwining the two entities (NCAA, n.d.c). So, while the Division III college athlete experience is driven by academic success and the Division I experience by athletic distinctiveness, Division II introduces a dual academic-athletic approach that encompasses both equally (Drew, 2019).

Financial Aid

Division III athletic programs cannot offer athletic-based scholarships or compensation to students who commit to attend and play a sport for the institution but may offer academic base scholarships and institutional grants, which reinforces the notion whereby Division III athletics is viewed and treated like an extracurricular activity – not as a scholarship activity. Instead, their participation is assumed to be intrinsically motivated out of pure enjoyment of their sport. Grites and James (1986) elaborate on this idea of purity by suggesting that historically Division III college athletes have been viewed as the last true amateurs who play for the good of the sport. On the other hand, the NCAA estimates that approximately 60% of Division II college athletes receive athletic aid (NCAA, n.d.a), which is awarded through a partial athletic scholarship model. Yet, Drew (2019) claims Division II college athletes are presented with the most financial inadequacy because they are less likely than their Division I counterparts to receive a full athletic scholarship, often leading to increased stress and even college athlete burn-out. Yet, while the likelihood of receiving a ‘full ride’ athletic scholarship in one of six head-count sports at the Division I level is slim, the burden of receiving a scholarship is a stressor itself because college athletes are likely to perceive themselves as an investment (Kissinger et al., 2015).

Athletically Related Activities

Division III playing and practice seasons are limited at 18 or 19 weeks in length, which allows college athletes to excel athletically, academically, and in co-curricular activities (NCAA, n.d.d). At Division III universities, coaches also have much stricter limitations on the time they are permitted to spend with their teams (Covell & Barr, 2010). On the other hand, the Division II college athlete experience is deemed the most strenuous of the three divisions because of the intensity of time commitments with only partial compensation (Drew, 2019). Moreover, the Division II college

athlete's time commitment also has been deemed parallel to the Division I time commitment, but with less recognition for their efforts (Drew, 2019). During a sport's championship segment, Division II college athletes cannot exceed four hours a day and 20 hours a week on countable athletically related activities, which is "any required activity with an athletics purpose that involves college athletes and is at the direction of, or supervised by, any member of an institution's coaching staff, including strength and conditioning coaches" (NCAA, n.d.e, para. 1). Yet, when compared across the three divisions, Division I and Division II men's basketball college athletes reported spending 32 hours each week on athletic activities in season versus 29 hours for Division III men's basketball college athletes (NCAA, 2020b). In summary, Division II athletes can be expected to dedicate more time to their athletic endeavors than their Division III counterparts.

Level of Competition

While instances of lower division team sport programs achieving success against higher division programs are relatively common, the general understanding is that the higher the division in college sport, the higher the level of competition. For instance, Division II college athletes compete at a championship level of intensity and within a 'championship atmosphere' while not traveling as much and missing less class time than their Division I counterparts (U'ren, 2017). As such, Division II athletics represents an increase in competition when compared to Division III athletics, which "provides for passionate participation in a competitive athletics environment, in which college athletes push themselves to excellence and build upon their academic success with new challenges and life skills" (NCAA, n.d.f, para. 5). The performances of college athletes in individual sports such as track and field, cross country, and swimming highlight the differences in level of competition between the three divisions.

Scrutiny of Academic Standards

College athletes at Division II are subject to greater academic scrutiny from the NCAA than their Division III counterparts where academic standards are set by the school (NCAA, n.d.a). Specifically, college athletes at the Division III level are subject to the same academic standards as the general student body (NCAA, n.d.a). Alternatively, at the Division II level, college athletes must comply with academic standards set by the NCAA that includes a minimum 2.0 cumulative grade-point average each year as well as at least nine-semester/eight-quarter hours to be earned each full-time term (NCAA, n.d.g). However, within the context of reclassifying athletic programs, the relentless schedule of athletic activities combined with the immediate pressure to succeed as an athletic program causes programs to neglect the importance of maintaining academic excellence (Chandler, 2014). In fact, it is noted that college athlete success rates are much lower in institutions who have reclassified when compared to their more established divisional peer institutions (Chandler, 2014).

Conceptual Framework

Psychosocial stressors are events that individuals interpret as negative or threatening, which are different to physiological stressors that put strain on the body (Centre for Studies on Human Stress, n.d.). When exposed to psychosocial stressors, individuals first evaluate the significance of what is happening (i.e., appraisal; Lazarus, 1993). More specifically, individuals engage in a two-step appraisal process. Primary appraisal is the initial process of perceiving a threat, which then is followed by secondary appraisal and the process of considering the available coping responses to the threat (Lazarus, 1966). Not all individuals appraise stressful events uniformly. In fact, while some stressors are absolute (i.e., everyone exposed to such events would interpret them as being stressful), others are relative (i.e., only perceived as stressful by some – but not all; Center for Studies on Human

Stress, n.d.). For example, college athletes are proven to appraise potential stressors in different ways. Madrigal and Robbins (2020) evidence how college athletes recognize several prominent stressors, including injury and loss of playing time, but that not all college athletes appraise such stressors in a uniform manner.

When a psychosocial stressor is appraised as stress-inducing, individuals then engage in a process whereby they manage the demands of the situation (i.e., coping; Lazarus, 1993). In the context of organizations, transformational change is widely considered a significant psychosocial stressor (Judge et al., 1999). Research indicates that individuals cope with the stresses of organizational change through problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies (see Robinson & Griffiths, 2005). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) understand problem-focused coping as a process through which individuals first define their perceived problems and generate alternative solutions before assessing the costs and benefits of each alternative and deciding upon a preferred course of action in response to the stressful event or stimuli. In other words, problem-focused coping refers to efforts taken to directly address the source of the problem in a proactive manner. Alternatively, emotion-focused coping is a defensive process where the focus is more on managing feelings of anxiety, fear, and dread perceived as inherent within the stressful event or stimuli (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

The COPE Inventory is a generic taxonomy of coping strategies (Robinson & Griffiths, 2005), which has been validated in various work-related contexts, including applications within the nursing (Rahman et al., 2021) and teaching professions (Yu et al., 2015). The inventory originally was developed by Carver et al. (1989) to include 14 scale measures or coping strategies. Carver (1997) subsequently developed a Brief COPE that refreshed the scale measures to provide an instrument that was much easier operationalized for research use. The Brief COPE strategies include: 1) active coping, 2) planning, 3) positive reframing, 4) acceptance, 5) humor, 6) religion, 7) using emotional support, 8) using instrumental support, 9) self-distraction, 10) denial, 11) venting, 12) substance use, 13) behavioral disengagement, and 14) self-blame. While college athletes are not considered as employees, they still are key participants and service users of intercollegiate athletic programs. As such, any significant organizational change within an athletic department stands to impact returning college athletes, which in turn will trigger various coping responses. The Brief COPE, as a validated assessment instrument for understanding myriad coping responses, provides a relevant conceptual framework from which to categorize and make sense of the experiences of reclassifying college athletes.

Method

Study Setting

MSU is a public institution in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States where the decision to reclassify to Division II was made based on several factors. Specifically, MSU's existing Division III athletic conference was experiencing significant membership contraction, the university's leadership had expressed an interest in reclassification due to the potential larger media exposure of Division II athletics, and a vacancy had opened in a regional Division II athletic conference. These reclassification factors created a perfect storm of opportunity and sense of urgency for MSU to consider an upward reclassification. Ultimately, reclassification was progressed on an expedited schedule whereby the university would receive Division II provisional status in around 18 months. As a result, the reclassification impacted a significant proportion of the college athletes who had competed at MSU as Division III college athletes in the years immediately preceding reclassification.

Research Design

This study used a descriptive research design to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics (Nassaji, 2015), which in the context of this study was the experiences of college athletes undergoing divisional reclassification. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which employed a blend of closed- and open-ended questions along with several why and how follow-up prompts to elicit a rich description of the phenomenon (Adams, 2015). The qualitative approach to this study allowed for a detailed, uninterrupted, and individually specific understanding of the college athlete's psychosocial experiences during the athletic department's reclassification from Division III to Division II.

Participant Selection

In this study, the population was comprised of MSU college athletes who had participated in athletics for at least one season at the Division III level and one season at the Division II level (i.e., these college athletes were affiliated with MSU during the reclassification period). Through a process of reviewing archival sport rosters, the target population was estimated as 164 eligible research participants (circa 30% of the total population of 492 college athletes). Research participants were recruited using a quota-based chain referral method where a study sample was generated through referrals made among research participants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The sampling goal was to create a sample that was representative of the college athlete population and included a mix of men's and women's sports as well as individual and team sports. Therefore, an initial email message requesting participation was sent to 10 college athletes who met the inclusion criteria and who represented a split of five men's sports and five women's sports, as well as seven team sports and three individual sports. Four of the 10 college athletes contacted in the initial communication agreed to participate in the research study and later were asked to make referrals to other college athletes who met the inclusion criteria. Subsequently, these four college athletes yielded the names of 17 other college athletes who met the inclusion criteria across a further two levels of chain referral, of which eight agreed to participate in the research study. In total, 27 college athletes were contacted with a total of 12 college athletes participating in the research (a 44.44% participant response rate).

As shown in Table 1, research participants were assigned pseudonyms. The 12 college athletes who participated in the study represented seven different sports, but just one individual sport alongside six team sports. In addition, there were seven women's sport and five men's sport participants. As previously stated, the sampling goal was to create a representative sample of the college athlete body; the sampling procedure allowed the authors to cast a representative (albeit non-probability based) net over the total study population, which in turn leveraged the credibility gained in the initial round of interviews through the peer-to-peer chain referral process. This approach was deemed necessary given how neither author was a representative of the athletic department nor was the research study supported in its implementation by the athletic department.

Table 1
Study Participants

Pseudonym	Team/Individual Sport
Alexis	Team Sport ^a
Anthony	Team Sport ^a
Brandon	Team Sport
Brianna	Team Sport
Daniel	Team Sport ^a
Emily	Team Sport
Jacob	Individual Sport ^a
Joshua	Team Sport
Kayla	Team Sport
Madison	Team Sport
Olivia	Team Sport
Samantha	Team Sport

^a Denotes the four college athletes recruited following the initial round of participant recruitment

Data Collection

An interview guide was created by using the five major differences between Division III and Division II athletics. These broad categories allowed the researchers to isolate the experiences of college athletes within the context of this study specific to each major difference. With each difference, the interviewed participants were asked to appraise each source of change as well as share how they navigated and coped with the changes. As an example of how these questions appeared on the interview guide, to elicit appraisals the interviewees were asked “How did/do you feel about the [insert change to college athlete experience]?” and to elicit related coping responses the interviewees were asked “How have you coped with the [insert change to college athlete experience]?” The interviewees were made aware that the conversation was being recorded and all expressed understanding and consent.

The semi-structured interviews were facilitated by the first author of this study using Microsoft Teams video chat. Each interview lasted on average between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted over a three-month period between February and May 2021. For purposes of credibility, the first author engaged in comprehensive noting during and after each interview, which provided a rich source of reflective commentary that allowed for the researchers, through peer scrutiny of the ongoing project, to maximize the effectiveness of data collection techniques by making subtle iterative improvements to the wording and sequencing of interview questions (see Shenton, 2004). A further outcome of this peer scrutiny was the eventual realization that the rich and thick data descriptions provided by the sample of 12 participants enabled data saturation whereby the ability to obtain and achieve new information was unlikely.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and then transcribed to textual format using Otter Transcription service, which generated 720 pages of double-spaced textual data – an average of 60 pages per interview. Transcriptions then were analyzed, line-by-line, using thematic analysis in a deductive manner to apply the Brief COPE scale measures (i.e., the researchers’ conceptual idea) to understand how college athletes appraised and coped with changes brought on by the reclassification process

(see Joffe, 2011). All data analysis was performed by hand by the first author of the study using color highlighters and annotations of the printed transcriptions. As part of the data analysis process, the researchers engaged in frequent debriefing sessions, which provided the first author an opportunity to test their developing ideas and interpretations with the second author (see Shenton, 2004).

Findings

The findings section is divided into two sub-sections. The first sub-section considers the sources of stress and how college athletes appraised the five major differences between Division III and Division II athletes as established earlier in the paper. The second sub-section presents the disclosed coping strategies, which are categorized according to the Brief COPE inventory.

Sources of Change

College athlete appraisals of each of the five sources of change were labelled based on one of three categories: Negative (Absolute), Negative (Relative), and Neutral. Specifically, *Negative (Absolute)* indicates the change was negatively experienced in some way by all interviewed college athletes; while *Negative (Relative)* indicates that the change was negatively experienced, but only by some research participants. *Neutral* indicates the source of change had neither a positive nor negative appraisal. Table 2 displays the general categories of primary appraisal for each source of change. It is important to note that none of the sources of change were appraised as entirely positive.

Table 2

Primary Appraisals of Sources of Change

Source of Change	Primary Appraisal
Less emphasis on academic identity	Negative (Absolute)
Increased athletic time commitment	Negative (Absolute)
Availability of athletic scholarships	Negative (Relative)
More competitive environment	Negative (Relative)
Greater academic scrutiny	Neutral

Less Emphasis on Academic Identity

Reclassifying college athletes felt their newfound status as a Division II college athlete was accompanied by less attention and emphasis on academics. In several instances, college athletes appraised their Division II experiences in direct comparison to their experiences as a Division III college athlete where, according to Jacob, there previously existed a “focus more on the degree than the sports aspect.” For example, Brandon stated how he “came here to be a student first” and how prior to the transition their coach placed a greater emphasis on “being a student before an athlete.” Similarly, Joshua claimed how “we didn’t have as many hours [of athletic commitment] as we do now, so we were definitely like, could focus and have more time on school and stuff.” The same sentiment was shared by Samantha who said:

I really enjoyed playing at the DIII level because it allowed me time to focus on athletics but also time to focus on my classes. Along with that I was able to hang out with my friends and feel like a normal college student every now and then.

Finally, Jacob shared a similar viewpoint on the importance of maintaining a focus on their student identity:

I mean, some people have aspirations to play professional [sport], but for the majority of everybody, we're looking to work in a field that we think we enjoy. So, academics is something that's really important to a lot of us.

Ultimately, the greater emphasis that was placed on being an athlete first and student second at the Division II level was appraised as a negative change by college athletes and led to instances of heightened stress. For example, Alexis shared that while initially the reclassification led to more of an emphasis on academic expectations, that after the COVID-19 pandemic she believed the athletic department “just wanted us to be more athletes than students at this point.” Olivia also explained how she “doesn’t like the idea of being an athlete-student” while adding “you came here for the academics; you didn’t necessarily come here for the athletics.” The sentiment shared by Olivia made clear how a shift in the relative emphasis placed on athletics over academics had by-in-large been appraised as a negative change to the college athlete experience.

Increased Athletic Time Commitment

Based on the college athlete interviews, reclassifying college athletes now were expected to commit more of their time to athletic endeavors. Some of the additional time was credited to the increased travel distances that accompanied the move to a new athletic conference. For example, Madison stated that most games now were “a little farther away.” Another source of the increased time commitment was the additional team sessions held between games and during the off-season. For instance, Emily explained how there is “a lot more to do at the DII level than it was at a DIII level,” which included more of a commitment of practice times and conditioning. There was a sense that this increased commitment was something that now presented itself as an expectation of Division II athletics; whereas previously, as Jacob mentioned, “If you wanted to train and get better it was all on your own.” More specifically, Anthony shared how “the hours from Division III to Division II doubled if not more.” Finally, Kayla mentioned how this increased time commitment had not just been limited to on-campus activities during the academic year, but that she also had noticed an increased expectation to maintain readiness year-round with more work required in the offseason than previously was the case.

Reclassifying college athletes also experienced a heightened intensity to the time committed toward athletics. So not only were college athletes committing more time to athletics, but the time they were committing was much more physically and mentally taxing. In terms of the intensity of athletically related activities, Daniel indicated the change in intensity from Division III to Division II requirements by sharing a comparison between both experiences:

We were just there to play. It wasn’t as serious ... We were still held accountable and stuff like that, and we had a lot of like lifts and conditions and practices, but it was definitely more, like I don’t want to say lackadaisical, but kind of just like more laid back than it is now [playing Division II].

By consensus, the college athletes interviewed shared how the new expectations of athletically related activities at the Division II level was experienced as a negative change and contributed to feelings of stress and exhaustion. In highlighting the challenges of managing these new athletic responsibilities, Samantha shared the level of exhaustion she felt compared to her Division III experience:

I was used to playing a lot and having a leadership role. I knew the transition would increase that. But I didn’t expect the weekly commitment to increase as drastically as it did. And coming from someone who did play a lot, that takes a huge toll on your body. A toll that was more tended too when the schedule wasn’t as grueling. Now, it’s relentless, and seems like there is barely enough time to catch our breath, and honestly, recognize how overworked we are.

The exhaustion caused by the increased time commitments of Division II athletics also was shared by Brandon, who stated:

Coming to Division III and playing a sport allowed me to continue the sport I loved but still focus on my degree and work. The time commitment of playing at Division II makes it hard to even wake up the next day because you are so exhausted, let alone do homework and go to work.

Availability of Athletic Scholarships

The presence of athletic-related aid following the reclassification from Division III to Division II yielded varying college athlete appraisals. For instance, reclassifying college athletes shared instances where their perceived new status as investments was a negative outcome of the reclassification process. As an example, Jacob stated, “I feel like they care about us as athletes, but they don’t care about us as people.” Jacob then went on to compare his perceived status as an investment to “modern slavery.” Alternatively, Samantha shared how she perceived the availability of athletic scholarships as a positive when she said, “With Division II comes scholarships and scholarships will bring better talent to the school and university as well.” Olivia downplayed the relevance of being part of a team where some college athletes received athletic scholarship, while others did not, mentioning how “it really doesn’t matter to me ... take somebody else who wants money.” As a result, the availability of athletic scholarships appeared as a source of change whose perceived stress was relatively experienced by the interviewed college athletes as both a positive and negative change.

More Competitive Environment

College athletes also shared how the step up in level of competition that occurred due to the reclassification to Division II athletics was at times a negative experience and stressful adjustment. As an example, Alexis shared how her team “didn’t have the best record” and how that in itself was “probably a stressor.” Likewise, Olivia stated, “Getting blown out ... I was confused for a whole season, and don’t know what to do about it.” Yet, while multiple college athletes shared their frustration and distress at their team’s inability to compete at the Division II level, Brianna shared how she “loves the competition [at Division II]” and how by competing at this higher level it “builds your confidence.” So, like the availability of athletic scholarships, the higher levels of competition experienced because of the reclassification to Division II was perceived as negative (and stressful) by some and positive by others.

Greater Academic Scrutiny

Finally, college athletes spoke on how academic expectations now were more loosely enforced after the reclassification to Division II. As an example, Daniel illustrated the lack of attention on academic expectations by stating:

We signed a contract at the beginning of the year ... It says, like, we have to go to class, like we have to be eligible to play, kind of thing, and we do study hall ... but it’s never been, like, held accountable.

Similarly, to emphasize the difference between the Division III academic expectations and the new Division II expectations, Olivia stated how their Division III coach believed:

[In Division III] Academics come first, so you don’t miss class to go to practice, you go to class. If you have a study session you need to go to study. Division II, I think we’re a little more like, hey, there’s a practice. Like when practice is happening unless you have class, of course, like maybe not go to the study time.

The comparison between prior and current expectations and level of enforcement also was shared by other athletes. For instance, Kayla shared how Division II seemed “a lot looser” and talked about how the athletic department requires a certain grade point average, but that the requirement was

not enforced. As a result, greater academic scrutiny was neither appraised as positive nor negative – and was rather perceived as a neutral source of change.

Coping with Stressful Change

The coping responses evident among the college athletes interviewed are presented here in order of frequency in which they were directly or indirectly referenced – with the most frequently mentioned coping response first and the least frequent last. In total, six of the 14 Brief COPE scale measures or coping responses were referenced by one or more college athletes.

Venting

Venting, as a coping response, refers to the tendency to focus on the emotional distress one is experiencing (Carver et al., 1989). Venting appeared as the most prevalent coping response across the college athletes interviewed and was used in response to several sources of change. For instance, the college athletes who perceived financial aid as a negative change focused in on their distress, which was brought about through a sense of entitlement to an athletic scholarship. For example, Madison claimed how scholarship allocations for returning college athletes was justified because “we had just been there from the beginning.” Anthony described the frustration he felt regarding decisions on how to disburse the funds:

I definitely think they should have [provided financial compensation to upperclassmen]. Just because they have the ability to and like us being seniors, we’ve now given four years of our lives, time and effort into the sports. So, I definitely think that even a little bit of money would have been nice to have.

Similarly, Jacob vented his emotions, implying that upperclassmen essentially were forgotten in the consideration for athletic funds:

At first, I think we were kind of like: that sucks. Like, especially the seniors were like: I want financial aid. Like I’ve been here for three years already. This is my fourth year; I should be the one getting it – not the freshmen.

Anthony shared how once the decision to reclassify was made official, it was communicated to returning college athletes that they would be considered for athletic scholarship. Yet, the athletic scholarship in that instance did not materialize, which Anthony attributed as a highly distressing experience:

[When I come back and play] I’m going to get a little bit of money, which is more than I expected coming into college. But when I came back, I haven’t gotten money from it. And I’m putting in all this work. I mean, the people that they did bring in off money, they’re barely playing.

Several emotional responses also were shared regarding incoming scholarship college athletes whereby the reclassifying college athletes demonstrated a sense of resentment toward their new teammates. This sense of resentment stemmed from the feeling among reclassifying college athletes that they had put the work in to build the program to a place where the institution would feel comfortable reclassifying to Division II. As an example, Brianna stated, “The recruits get more than the people who actually built the team.” Moreover, Alexis was very blunt with her distress and disappointment in incoming recruits receiving scholarship money over returners:

So, we take the hardest classes, have to lead the team, play the most, be a leader every day regardless of our exhaustion, and the freshmen who sit and watch get paid to sit there? That’s just messed up.

Madison felt the new recruits were there for one reason only – money:

I feel like they’re [recruits] money-driven. And they can mess around and say ‘I’m getting more than you, so I’m more valuable.’ Makes me feel disappointed to see where like the direction [the athletic department] is going in, it seems like a downward trend.

While Daniel echoed these thoughts and claimed, “At times, there were some like, freshmen coming in that were like, a little more cocky, or just because they were on scholarship and like, thought they would just blow people out of the water.”

Finally, reclassifying college athletes often vented their emotions when discussing their team’s inability to adapt to the new level of competitiveness at Division II, but this time it was the coaches that were the target of their distress. Specifically, college athletes suggested it was not just the returning college athletes that needed to adjust to the increasingly competitive Division II level, but also the coaches. Olivia shared how “our coach was a DIII coach, and knew how to play DIII, but I don’t necessarily think they know how to, like, play DII.” This sentiment was shared by Emily who thought “half the time the coaches don’t know, it’s like, a sense that nobody knows what to do for some reason.” Kayla discussed the change in morale when athletes and coaches started to feel the weight of reoccurring losses in a more competitive conference. She stated, “I just, I don’t think the coach is very positive at times. And at times, maybe they didn’t even know what they were talking about.” Furthermore, Madison relayed much of the struggles the team experienced in their inaugural Division II season to the coaching. She also shared her opinion on how important it is to the team’s success to have coaches who are knowledgeable of the demands of Division II athletics:

The athletic department needs to do a better job in making sure coaches are actually equipped to coach at this level. It’s not about being friends with them anymore, obviously firing a friend is hard. But if the coach can’t do their job, they need to find a coach who can.

Using Instrumental Support

According to Carver et al. (1989), seeking social support for instrumental reasons involves seeking advice, assistance, or information, and is a form of problem-focused coping. In the context of this study, college athletes expressed a desire to use instrumental support as a central coping response – most notably as it relates to coping with increased athletic time commitment and demands. However, references to instrumental support often were made from a deficit perspective; meaning the instrumental support, while needed, was not provided. For example, Anthony shared how the grueling and repetitive Division II schedule took a toll on his mental well-being. Anthony added that “just to have someone just to talk to and let everything off your chest would have been very, very helpful.” Some of the college athletes did mention the support services available on campus, but this often was from a critical perspective. For instance, Samantha discussed how the campus counselling services were potentially too generic and not tailored to college athletes:

They [the counselling center] get like the school side, and like what you’re going through, but you don’t understand, like what goes on, on the field, or just, like putting it all together.

Similarly, college athletes also expressed a desire to seek social advice and assistance to better come to terms with the college athletes’ perceived inability to compete at the Division II level – but, again, support services were perceived as inadequate. For instance, Emily shared how not having a sports psychologist available to college athletes was “something that we are kind of lacking.” She also went on to explain a scenario where they felt they would have benefitted from more dedicated and specialist support services. Specifically, Emily discussed how a poor performance during a game had a lingering impact on her mental state in the days following the game. She explained how she would have benefitted from more specialist support by stating, “If at that point I had like a sports psychologist to go to, like they would help me talk through and be like, hey, like this, every player goes through this like look, you’re not the only one.”

Behavioral Disengagement

Behavioral disengagement refers to “reducing one’s effort to deal with the stressor, even giving up the attempt to attain goals with which the stressor is interfering” (Carver et al., 1989, p. 269). In

the Brief COPE, behavioral disengagement is synonymous with the idea that individuals simply cope by ‘giving up’ (Carver, 1997). Specifically, three college athletes expressed how they were aware of teammates who had given up on their athletic endeavors following the reclassification. For instance, Olivia mentioned how “for many it was too much to handle and they left the college athlete life and just focused on being a student.” Moreover, Alexis explained how a sense of simply going through the motions had rippled through the team to a point where other players “just gave up.” Finally, Daniel was the third college athlete who referenced behavioral disengagement and mentioned how “there were a couple players who definitely didn’t want to stick around and then we lost a couple of players mentally. They didn’t leave the team, but they checked out mentally.”

Positive Reframing

Positive reframing, which originally was coined by Carver et al. (1989) as positive reinterpretation and growth, refers to construing a stressful transaction in positive terms. While some teams carried over their existing Division III coaches, others did not. This was viewed by some as stressful change because college athletes had a hard time adjusting to a new coaching style and approach. As an example, Joshua stated how learning their new coach’s style of coaching was akin to “two different worlds colliding.” On the other hand, when Brandon shared his experience of getting a new coach while entering Division II, he explained how they attributed much of the sport’s success to the preparedness of the coach. Brandon explained that the program had been refreshed because of the new set of eyes, and that the coach commanded much respect because of his organization and readiness to compete. This college athlete appraised many sources of change as stressful, but they tried to reframe the situation and make it seem more positive. In another example, and in response to their concerns about higher levels of competition at the Division II level, Joshua actively reframed the change by referring to how the program had “been provided a lot more funding,” which in their eyes meant that athletic performances were “not something I can complain about.”

Acceptance

A small sample of the college athletes interviewed rationalized that together with their teammates they persevered with the reclassification because of their love for the sport and their desire to continue what they started – in essence, they (reluctantly) accepted the changes. In some instances, this acceptance lead college athletes to focus on just reaching the finish line. Specifically, Olivia explained how her team’s struggle to compete at Division II created a scenario where “at the end . . . it was kind of just like giving up and just getting to the end, right?” Moreover, the waning effort left some college athletes feeling as though they “just had to play for us [themselves]” to finish out the season.

Support for Emotional Reasons

“Seeking social support for emotional reasons is getting moral support, sympathy, or understanding” (Carver et al., 1989, p. 269). There was one specific instance of a college athlete who coped by seeking moral support in response to the stresses of the athletic time commitment increase and the difficulties this presented for balancing academic commitment. Specifically, Samantha expressed how she sought support from her fellow college athletes and shared how “a lot of my success came from my teammates pushing me to be better.”

Discussion

The changes to the athletic, academic, and financial aspects of the college athlete experience were not uniformly perceived as negative and stressful by the college athletes interviewed. As a result,

divisional reclassification within the specific context of this study was experienced as a relative stressor because the responses to divisional reclassification caused different reactions in different people (Center for Studies on Human Stress, n.d.). However, the sources of change operationalized within this study largely were confirmed as having a prominent influence in the experiences of reclassifying college athletes. For example, though the NCAA as a governing body tries to create and enforce the amateur status of college athletes, the reality is once financial compensation is incorporated the innocence of the college athlete persona is lost (Grites & James, 1986). In turn, Grites and James' statement, which arguably still holds true today, supports how a change in relative emphasis on the role and identity of college athletes is to be expected as college athletes compete at higher collegiate levels. Similarly, the college athletes interviewed in this study sensed a shift from a 'student first' mentality to one that is more of an 'athlete-student' persona. As a result, the reclassification-induced stresses experienced by the college athletes in this study arguably are more pronounced than how the NCAA conceptualizes the differences between Division III and II athletics. If anything, the college athletes interviewed shared instances where they felt their athletic and academic concerns now were at odds, which is consistent with Katz and colleagues' (2015) understanding of the Standard Model that is most common within Division I athletics.

The one exception within the sources of change related to how college athletes appraised the greater academic scrutiny that accompanies Division II athletics. Based on divisional differences, the expectation was that college athletes would find the increased level of external scrutiny on academic standards and performance as a stressful change. However, as Chandler (2014) states, the relentless schedule of athletic activities, combined with the immediate pressure to succeed as an athletic program following divisional reclassification, causes programs to neglect the importance of maintaining academic excellence. In fact, it is noted that college athlete academic success rates are much lower in institutions who have reclassified (Chandler, 2014). The college athletes interviewed in this study confirmed the challenges of upholding academic expectations at reclassifying institutions by identifying a lack of enforcement placed on their academic progress and achievement. Perhaps had the institution engaged in a downward reclassification from Division I or II to Division III, the college athletes would have appraised a lessening of academic scrutiny as a stressful change. Yet, in many ways, academic standards were experienced as a continuation of the college athletes' Division III experience where there was greater responsibility for the college athletes to manage their own academic performance in line with the wider institutions' own academic expectations.

While several emotion-focused coping responses were initiated, comparably fewer problem-focused coping responses were shared. These findings are indicative of the lack of control afforded to the research participants within this stressor. Bordia and colleagues (2004) suggest "the more control we have over stressful events, the less harmful the consequences of the stressors" and "people dislike being in situations where they lack control and try to regain control by various means" (p. 350). As a poignant example, research indicates that when individuals are stressed, this stress reduces their sense of control, and as a result they exhibit a higher tendency to form causal attributions (Keinan & Sivan, 2001). As established, the decision to undertake divisional reclassification by an athletic program is a long-term strategic decision, and the lack of control afforded to reclassifying college athletes within this process suggests any consequences experienced likely are harmful. Additionally, the more harmful the consequences, the more likely college athletes will seek to attribute the causes of their stress to environmental and situational factors, rather than engage in active coping where individuals increase their efforts to execute a coping attempt (Carver et al., 1989).

The tendency to vent also was accompanied by a tendency to attribute causes of distress. Ultimately, the research participants interviewed in this study were Division III college athletes, and if not for the institution's decision to reclassify still likely would have remained Division III college athletes. The course of events and the accompanying lack of control within the reclassification process created a sense that reclassification was something the college athletes were complying with

– as opposed to something the college athletes navigated willfully. One quote by a college athlete clearly articulates this sentiment:

A lot of the players, they were like, yeah, we didn't sign up for this. We haven't got an off day in a minute. It's just a lot that they're asking for us. And then to travel these long distances and get blown out. It was I guess; it was sometimes hard.

Importantly, the college athletes at MSU were asked to reclassify on an expedited schedule, which meant the athletic program did not exercise an exploratory year and began competing at the Division II level immediately following the attainment of provisional membership. While this decision was not appraised as stressful by the college athletes interviewed and was grounded in valid situational factors, an exploratory year where college athletes were prepared for the changes may have reduced the tendency to vent and attribute their distress. Specifically, proactive coping, which are “efforts undertaken in advance of a potentially stressful event to prevent it or to modify its form before it occurs” (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997, p. 417), can minimize the degree of stress experienced during a stressful event (Hobfoll, 1989).

Practical Implications

To better equip college athletes with the resources they need to make the reclassification process less stressful, institutions should provide more support services to reclassifying college athletes that will encourage them to engage in more problem-focused coping. For instance, campus-wide resources may not be perceived as an effective and valuable resource for college athletes because they may lack an awareness and appreciation of the unique demands of college athletes. Moreover, as upward reclassifications shift the emphasis of the college athlete dual identity (i.e., from student-athlete to athlete-student), this may create even more justification for specialist, athletics-specific support services for college athletes. As examples, short-term support for the reclassifying athletes could be offered during the transition period such as the availability of sport psychologists to overcome any problems college athletes foresee or experience with the program's as well as their own newfound status in Division II. The role of an exploratory year within the reclassification process also is a phenomenon that justifies further empirical investigation to determine the suitability of this time and space for more proactive coping efforts. For instance, this time could be used to better assist college athletes in determining whether a move to Division II athletics is the right move from a holistic standpoint (i.e., athletically, academically, socially, etc.), whether that be through assessment tools or more extensive discussions with coaches and administrators.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the possible tendency of research participants to be sensitizers (i.e., the research participants tended to “overinterpret potential threat and conflict;” Altrocchi et al., 1960, p. 67). In other words, the college athletes who responded favorably to participating in the interviews may have felt compelled to do so because they were experiencing stress and wanted to talk about it. Furthermore, since the study used chain referral sampling, the research participants may have referred other college athletes they knew also were struggling with the transition (i.e., sensitizers referring to sensitizers). Attempts were made to mitigate an over-sampling of this population by actively recruiting a diverse sub-set of college athletes within the initial group of college athletes that began the chain referral process (e.g., male versus female and individual versus team sports). However, the chain referral process produced a sample whereby college athletes of individual sports were under-represented, which is acknowledged as a further limitation of this study.

Conclusion

This study sought to provide an understanding of the experiences of reclassifying college athletes in appraising and coping with the stresses that accompany a transition from Division III to Division II athletics. The findings of this study reveal multiple stressors or instances where changes to routines, schedules, and expectations presented stress for college athletes. The Brief COPE proved useful in making sense of the coping responses. Specifically, while most of the research participants openly disclosed instances of emotion-focused coping (i.e., they were managing feelings of anxiety, fear, and dread), there were instances, albeit less common, where college athletes shared problem-focused coping responses (i.e., they worked proactively to provide a solution to the problems, such as accepting the stressful changes). And as mentioned, the tendency to vent emotional distress perhaps was a result of the lack of control afforded to college athletes in the wider reclassification process.

While this study used exclusively qualitative methods, further research could be conducted on the experiences of reclassifying college athletes through more quantitative measures (i.e., surveys). For example, a larger and more representative sample could yield important findings and allow for comparisons between key variables such as gender, race, sport, sport type, and class standing. Another method of inquiry on this subject that could be beneficial to future research is a multiple case study approach. For instance, research that compares and contrasts the experiences of college athletes at multiple institutions could produce more generalizable findings that could be applied with greater confidence to alternative settings. Ultimately, more research is needed to better establish the experiences of reclassifying college athletes, which can be used as a knowledge base for future decisions that stand to impact the short-term experiences of reclassifying college athletes in a long-term reclassification process.

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