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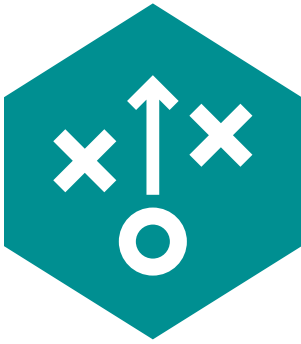
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Division I Student Athletes

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Becoming REGS: The Impact of Institutional Sport Elimination on Division I Student Athletes

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Abstract: The elimination of varsity sports at American colleges and universities has become a frequent strategy to reduce rising institutional subsidies for intercollegiate athletics. This paper analyzes the psychological effects of institutional sport elimination on a sample of college athletes from five varsity programs at a large public Division I university on the west coast of the United States. Utilizing historical trend analyses and quantitative methods, findings suggest that the involuntary loss of a sponsored athletic identity had varying effects on these participants' athletic commitment but did not alter their self-identification as athletes. While the majority of these college athletes remained committed to their educational goal of graduating from the institution, the decision negatively impacted these college athletes' sense of belonging on campus and their general commitment to the university.

Keywords: NCAA Division I College Athletes, Varsity Sport Elimination, Involuntary Athletic Termination

Amidst the turmoil of rising athletics expenditures, weakened institutional support for athletics and a national economic downturn, cutting sports has become a frequent strategy to reduce rising institutional subsidies for intercollegiate athletics (Brown 2010; Mayster 2010; Suggs 2003). According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) (2010) *Sport Sponsorship Report*, since 2000, a considerable proportion of Division I member institutions have ended sponsorship of many non-revenue varsity sports. For example, the proportion of institutions offering men's tennis has decreased by nearly ten percent, from 86.6% in the 2000-01 season to 77.0% in the 2009-10 season. Other sports with noticeable declines include women's tennis (four percent decline), men's swimming and diving (5.2 percent decline), men's golf (4.4 percent decline) and men's cross country (3.7 percent decline). This pattern of varsity sport elimination is especially prevalent among institutions with broad-based sports programs, such as the University of California, Berkeley (Cal), which offers 29 varsity teams. On September 28, 2010, the university announced the decision to terminate sponsorship of five varsity sports: baseball, men's and women's gymnastics, women's lacrosse and men's rugby.

Given the controversial and unexpected nature of the decision, a systematic and highly public effort ensued on the part of the eliminated teams and their alumni to raise the funds necessary to save these programs. Just how much money would need to be raised for the university to reinstate some or all of the sports seemed to be a moving target. On February 11, 2011, the administration at Cal announced three sports programs would be reinstated: women's lacrosse, women's gymnastics and men's rugby. According to the Chancellor, the generosity of donors allowed these three teams to be saved. Two months later, the university announced that the 119-year-old baseball program would be reinstated, although the decision was conditional on the promise of continued fundraising. The Save Cal Baseball fundraising group had secured \$9

million in pledged donations, which was short of the target of \$10 million for formal reinstatement. A little less than a month later, the university announced that men's gymnastics would be conditionally reinstated as well. As only \$2.5 million of the targeted \$4 million had been raised by this varsity program, the conditional reinstatement also included a reduction in the number of athletic scholarships offered.

Certainly, no group felt the effects of sport termination more than the student athletes themselves. In total, 163 student athletes experienced the pain of the initial decision and subsequent aftermath. In the case of baseball and men's gymnastics, because these teams did not meet initial fundraising targets, the student athletes were told multiple times that their teams would cease competition at the end of the 2010–11 academic year.

Historically, scholarship on the identity processes of intercollegiate student athletes has examined the psychological costs associated with career termination, typically in involuntary circumstances, such as injury and de-selection (Alfermann 2000; Alfermann and Gross 1997; Blinde and Stratta 1992; Butt and Molnar 2009; Crook and Robertson 1991; Pearson and Petitpas 1990; Svoboda and Vanek 1982; Taylor and Ogilvie 1994, 1998; Werthner and Orlick 1982). However, to our knowledge, no research to date has specifically examined the identity consequences associated with sport termination in intercollegiate athletics as a result of the institutional elimination of varsity programs. Given the frequency that institutions cut sports as a means to fiscal responsibility, it is critical that those associated with intercollegiate sports, especially the participants themselves, understand its effects. This paper describes the psychological effects on this group of student athletes who had to confront becoming regular students, or what some of these participants derisively called "REGS," when their varsity sports were eliminated at Berkeley. The consequences of the institutional decision had varying effects on these participants' self-identification, their athletic, educational and institutional commitments. Based upon the study's findings, the paper proposes several recommendations of how colleges and universities can best support college athletes whose sports are eliminated in the future.

Commitment to Sport and School

In their model for student-athlete academic success, Comeaux and Harrison (2011) describe initial and continuing commitments as primary predictors of academic engagement and success in college. The authors cite three key commitments within their model: educational goal commitment, sport commitment, and institutional commitment, all of which may develop and shift over time. Educational goal commitments may include students' educational plans and the highest level of education to which they aspire (Bean and Metzner 1985). Comeaux and Harrison define sport commitment as "the amount of physical and psychological time and energy that student-athlete devotes to his or her sport." Institutional commitment is defined as "a student-athlete's expectation of satisfaction with the institution and the degree of importance ascribed to completing his or her undergraduate degree at the institution" (238). The authors argue these commitments are often at odds, whereby student athletes with higher levels of sport commitment tend to have lower levels of educational goal and institutional commitment.

In general, however, participation in interscholastic and intercollegiate sports has been shown to enhance one's commitment to their educational institution, as these participants often demonstrate an increased identification with their school and an enthusiasm for working within its institutions (Coakley 2009; Eckert 1989; Miracle and Rees 1994; Rees and Miracle 2000). Thus, one's institutional commitment may be both academic and athletic in nature. When institutions shift their commitment away from sponsorship of certain varsity sports, however, it is quite possible that the student athletes in turn will alter their own commitments based upon such decisions.

For the purposes of this study, the degree of importance placed on graduating from a college or university is more a reflection of educational goal commitment than one's commitment to

a given institution. As the first half of Comeaux and Harrison's definition attests, institutional commitment may be primarily a factor of student satisfaction, defined here as one's sense of belonging on campus and the reflection of having made a good decision by enrolling at a given institution. This focus on student satisfaction is important, as the success of an intercollegiate athletic department is based, at least in part, on the satisfaction of its student athletes (Reimer and Chelladurai 1998; Turner and Chelladurai 2005).

The NCAA's (2011) G.O.A.L.S. study revealed that college athletes tend to be more committed to athletics than academics. This was especially true for those participating at the elite Division I level, where in-season time devoted to athletics often exceeded 40 hours per week, particularly for revenue-producing sports. Division I student athletes also reported missing as many as 2.4 classes per week due to athletic commitments. It is perhaps not surprising that many Division I college athletes identify more as athletes than as students (Potuto and O'Hanlon 2007), especially among revenue-generating college athletes who tend to have less balanced academic and athletic identities compared to non-revenue student athletes (Adler and Adler 1991; Comeaux, Speer, Taustine and Harrison 2011; Authors Redacted 2000; Authors Redacted 1999).

Though intercollegiate athletics has the potential to integrate the greater student body, community, and alumni (Coakley 2009; Duderstadt 2000), college athletes' over-commitment to their sport often leads to role domination and a corresponding social isolation from the rest of the campus community (Adler and Adler 1991; Howard-Hamilton and Sina 2001; Jayakumar and Comeaux 2011; Reimer, Beal and Schroeder 2000; Shulman and Bowen 2001). Due to the lack of social networks beyond athletics, previous research has focused on student athletes' feeling of loss when separated from their teammates and coaches (Astle 1986; Lavallee, Gordon and Grove 1997; Murphy 1995; Parkes 1988; Werthner and Orlick 1986). For student athletes who consider their coaches and teammates as central to their primary identity construction in college, the process of transitioning out of athletics becomes increasingly difficult.

Locus of Control and Identity Foreclosure in Athletic Termination

Depending on their self-perception of an athletic identity, or what Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder describe as, "the degree in which an individual defines herself or himself in terms of the athlete role" (1993, p. 237), Division I student athletes will view their transition into a life after intercollegiate sports with varying levels of difficulty. The degree of voluntariness in the decision to disengage from athletics has a major impact on the feelings of self-efficacy, control, and the general mental health of the student athlete (Alfermann 2000; Seligman 1991). Previous research has found that when faced with the prospect of athletic termination, college athletes with high perceptions of control, or degree of voluntariness, have significantly healthier transitions into a life without athletics (Alfermann and Gross 1997; McPherson 1980; Werthner and Orlick 1986).

For student athletes whose athletic careers end involuntarily, a process of identity foreclosure (Marcia 1966) may negatively impact the development of a new identity. Some of the negative outcomes reported include identity crisis (Baillie and Danish 1992; Crook and Robertson 1991; Pearson and Petitpas 1990), loss of self-worth (Sinclair and Orlick 1993; Werthner and Orlick 1986; Wylleman, De Kop, Menkehorst, Theeboom and Annerel 1993), decline in life satisfaction (Werthner and Orlick 1986), emotional problems (Alfermann and Gross 1997; Werthner and Orlick 1986), unaccomplished athletic goals (Werthner and Orlick 1986), alcohol abuse (Milhovilovic 1968), dietary problems (Blinde and Stratta 1992; Chamalidis 1995; Ogilvie and Howe 1982; Papathomas and Lavallee 2006; Sinclair and Orlick 1993; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot and Delignieres 2003; Svoboda and Vanek 1982) and even suicide (Ogilvie 1987).

Thus, student athletes who must confront the involuntarily termination of their athletic careers due to an institutional decision to eliminate sport face significant psycho-social challenges. The current study hypothesized that the institutional decision would impact participants' self-iden-

tification as student athletes, reflected in their athletic and educational goal commitments. The study similarly hypothesized that the university's decision would impact these college athletes' institutional commitment and sense of belonging, both comparatively and historically.

Method

Participants and Procedures

All 163 college athletes who comprised the active rosters of the five eliminated sports teams at U.C. Berkeley were invited to participate in this study: 38 members of the men's baseball program, 61 from the men's rugby program, 19 from the men's gymnastics program, 15 from the women's gymnastics program, and 30 members from the women's lacrosse program. These sports programs are considered non-revenue, meaning the direct and indirect operating costs for each team exceed their revenues. The first author of this study, a university administrator and professor, emailed the impacted players and requested their participation. The email included a link to an on-line survey, hosted by a third-party website.

From the group of 163 impacted college athletes, 113 responded, for a response rate of 69 percent. This rate of participation varied by sport, from a low of 50 percent (men's gymnastics) to a high of 93 percent (women's gymnastics). Eighty-eight respondents provided complete demographic data (gender, race or ethnicity, scholarship status, year in school) and responded to all variables used in the present study.

Measures

The on-line survey included demographic, Likert-scale and open-ended questions. As illustrated in Table 1, a total of 109 members of the men's baseball program, men's rugby program, men's and women's gymnastics programs, and women's lacrosse program responded to the same items about their self-perceived academic and athletic identity, as well as their institutional commitment and sense of belonging in 2006. These questions were asked as part of a larger survey conducted during the university's NCAA institutional certification process. The rate of responses within this sample is compared to the rate of responses from the 2010 sample of 88 college athletes, to yield a pool of 197 respondents and to provide an opportunity for historical trend analysis.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants from 2006 and 2010 Surveys

Sport	n	Race/Ethnicity				Athletic Scholarship		Year in School	
		Asian	Black	White	Other	None	Part/Full	Under	Upper
2006									
Baseball	28	4%	4%	89%	4%	29%	71%	39%	61%
M. Rugby	45	4%	0%	80%	16%	100%	0%	40%	60%
M. Gymnastics	8	0%	13%	75%	13%	25%	75%	13%	88%
W. Gymnastics	13	31%	0%	62%	8%	62%	38%	31%	69%
W. Lacrosse	15	0%	0%	100%	0%	13%	87%	27%	73%
Sub-total	109	6%	2%	83%	9%	60%	40%	35%	65%
2010									
Baseball	13	8%	0%	92%	0%	31%	69%	69%	31%
M. Rugby	39	5%	0%	90%	5%	100%	0%	49%	51%
M. Gymnastics	5	60%	0%	20%	20%	60%	40%	40%	60%
W. Gymnastics	12	42%	0%	50%	8%	25%	75%	83%	17%
W. Lacrosse	19	5%	0%	95%	0%	11%	89%	74%	26%
Sub-total	88	14%	0%	82%	5%	58%	42%	49%	51%
Total	197	10%	1%	82%	7%	59%	41%	47%	53%
<i>Note.</i> “Under” refers to underclassmen, who are in their first or second year of college. “Upper” refers to upperclassmen, who are in their third, fourth, or fifth year of college. Totals do not always equal 100% due to rounding.									

The Likert-scale and open-ended questions focused on participants’ academic and athletic identity (e.g., “I see myself more as a student than as an athlete,” “I see myself equally as a student and as an athlete,” “I see myself more as an athlete than as a student”), their relative commitment to academics and athletics (e.g., “I will graduate from this institution,” “I will transfer to another institution because of the recent decision regarding my sport”), and their institutional commitment and sense of belonging (e.g., “Knowing what I know now, I would still choose to enroll at this institution,” “I feel that I belong at this university”).

Results and Discussion

Historical trend analyses were conducted, utilizing quantitative methods. Two-proportion z-tests tested the null hypotheses that (a) attitudes, commitments, and perceptions of identity did not change within subgroups over time, and (b) did not differ between subgroups. While the open-ended responses provided a preliminary means for participants to elaborate on the 2010 survey questions, selected quotations were not formally analyzed as qualitative data. These quotations simply highlighted participants’ attitudes and perceptions in their own words.

Self-Reported Academic/Athletic Identity

Table 2 captures the frequency that impacted college athletes self-identified primarily as students, equally as student and athlete, or primarily as athletes. Overall, respondents in both 2006 and 2010 were significantly more likely to see themselves primarily as athletes (28 and 36 percent,

respectively) rather than as students (21 and 16 percent, respectively): $Z = 2.90, p < .01$. This is a trend that was particularly acute when comparing the responses of athletes by scholarship status. Nearly half of respondents in 2006 and 2010 who received athletic scholarships, for example, perceived themselves primarily as athletes (45 and 51 percent, respectively), compared to non-scholarship participants (15 and 25 percent, respectively): $Z = 4.21, p < .001$. Differences of gender and year-in-school, however, were variables that did not seem to meaningfully influence one's self-perceived academic versus athletic identity.

Table 2: Self-Perceived Academic and Athletic Identity of College Athletes

	Primarily as a Student		Equally as a Student and as an Athlete		Primarily as an Athlete	
	2006	2010	2006	2010	2006	2010
Total (N = 197)	21%	16%	51%	48%	28%	36%
Men	22%	21%	53%	46%	25%	33%
Women	18%	7%	46%	52%	36%	42%
Scholarship	7%	5%	48%	43%	45%	51%
Non-Scholarship	31%	24%	54%	51%	15%	25%
Underclassmen	21%	13%	53%	46%	26%	41%
Upperclassmen	21%	21%	51%	50%	28%	29%

Note. The boxed values highlight a significant difference in self-perceived identity among college athletes based on their scholarship status: those who do not receive an athletic scholarship are significantly more likely to view themselves primarily as students ($Z = 3.79, p < .001$), whereas scholarship athletes are significantly more likely to view themselves primarily as athletes ($Z = 4.21, p < .001$). Totals do not always equal 100% due to rounding.

It was hypothesized that involuntary termination of sports sponsorship would impact the self-identification of these college athletes. However, when the responses of these college athletes were compared to student athletes from the same teams answering the same questions four years earlier, there were no significant differences found in terms of their self-reported academic versus athletic identification. However, it is striking that despite the institutional elimination of their sport, more college athletes in 2010 identified primarily as athletes than those surveyed in 2006. This increase in athletic identification was found across all social categories under analysis. One freshman baseball student athlete wrote:

I refuse to relinquish my identity as a D-1 athlete, so I will choose to pursue this goal I had set for myself at another institution. I value my academic career greatly, however what I learn on a D-1 team—dedication, mental toughness, and accountability—are extremely important and are attributes I wish to carry with me for the rest of my life. My identity will not change as sports have showed me how to confront the obstacles in my path. I will rise above this.

Thus, the institutional decision might have actually created a stronger athletic identification, at least in the short term, particularly given that the decision to end their sport was beyond their control. After all, the university's decision was not a reflection of these participants' athletic abilities or desires to compete in the future. Additionally, for each sport, a campaign had been launched to raise money and save their respective programs from elimination, providing hope that these students would continue to represent the university as intercollegiate athletes.

Athletic Commitment

Two survey questions reflected participants' athletic commitment: a) "I will likely leave the university before I complete my eligibility;" b) "I will transfer to another institution because of the recent decision regarding my sport at Berkeley." The correlation between these two items was very strong at 0.87, and over one-fourth of the impacted student athletes reported their intention to leave the university either immediately or in the future, purportedly to compete athletically at another institution.

There were no significant differences by gender in terms of these college athletes' athletic commitment following the elimination of their respective sports. However, as Table 3 illustrates, there were notable differences by sport, differences found both between male sport athletes and between female sport athletes. For example, when comparing women's lacrosse to women's gymnastics, the differences were striking. None of the female college gymnasts reported the intention to transfer or leave the institution prior to completing their athletic eligibility, while 42 percent of women's lacrosse players stated that they planned to transfer or leave the university before exhausting their athletic eligibility: $Z = 2.61, p < .01$. As one student athlete reported, "I really only have a few more years to play lacrosse competitively in my life. Berkeley was my dream school, but I can't stay here anymore."

Similarly, when comparing baseball college athletes with members of the men's rugby and men's gymnastics programs, striking differences were also reported. Eleven percent of men's gymnasts and rugby players reported the intention to transfer or leave the institution prior to completing their athletic eligibility. Conversely, *over seventy percent* of baseball players stated that they planned to transfer or leave the university before exhausting their athletic eligibility. As one sophomore baseball player stated, "I want to make a career out of baseball and the only option is to transfer." These differences were significant: $Z = 4.26, p < .001$.

These findings were also interesting given the tremendous success of the Cal baseball team in the spring, which advanced to the College World Series and provided a compelling Cinderella story of triumphant reward following the university's initial decision to eliminate the sport. Three members of the baseball team actually transferred prior to the team being conditionally reinstated in April 2011 and then formally reinstated two months later in June, 2011. This fact was seldom discussed in the ensuing media celebration of the reinstated team's road to the College World Series.

Scholarship athletes (43 percent) were more likely to announce their intention to leave the university before completing their athletic eligibility than non-scholarship student athletes (20 percent): $Z = 2.4, p < .05$. This finding suggests that participants on some form of athletic aid were motivated to compete athletically, whether at Cal or elsewhere. The institution promised all scholarship athletes that financial support would continue after their sports had been eliminated and for as long as was needed to complete their degrees, related to their remaining years of athletic eligibility. But the large number of scholarship athletes who reported their plan to transfer or leave the university suggests that these college athletes wanted to compete and earn an athletic scholarship rather than simply receiving financial aid but not competing at Berkeley.

On the other hand, one second year female gymnast added, "I was told that I get to keep my scholarship for the remainder of my education here, so I am choosing academics over athletics." Despite the sentiments of this sophomore student athlete, there were significant differences by year-in-school regarding athletic commitment. Underclassmen were significantly more likely than upperclassmen to announce their intention to leave U.C. Berkeley before completing their eligibility (39 versus 15 percent: $Z = 2.42, p > .05$). This finding suggests that it is less likely that college athletes will transfer to another institution in order to compete in their respective sport as their years of athletic eligibility decrease.

Educational Goal Commitment

The survey question, "I will graduate from U.C. Berkeley," was used to measure participants' educational goal commitment. This question was negatively correlated with both the two athletic commitment survey questions: -0.64 with the likelihood of leaving the university before exhausting eligibility and -0.71 with the intention to transfer to another institution. While the decision to transfer to another institution in order to compete athletically does not negate these college athletes' intention to graduate from another college or university, the stated decision to remain at Berkeley after their sport had been eliminated suggests a relative commitment to their academic and degree goals vis-à-vis their athletic goals.

As Comeaux and Harrison (2011) argue, the degree of importance ascribed to completing a degree at a particular college or university may also indicate a student athlete's institutional commitment. Among this study's population, however, participants' educational goal commitment and institutional commitment may be quite different, particularly when institutional commitment reflects student satisfaction and their sense of belonging on campus.

The vast majority of college athletes surveyed (80 percent) reported their intention to graduate from the institution in which their sport had been eliminated. This finding is significant ($Z = 7.24, p < 0.001$). There were no significant differences by gender overall. The vast majority of both male (82 percent) and female (74 percent) college athletes from the five eliminated sports reported their plan to graduate from U.C. Berkeley. However, there were differences by sport in terms of educational goal commitment, both among male and female participants. Women's gymnasts reported their intention to graduate (92 percent) at higher rates than women's lacrosse student athletes (63 percent). Among the impacted male college athletes, gymnasts (80 percent) and rugby players (90 percent) reported their plan to graduate from Berkeley at significantly higher rates than did baseball players (62 percent). These differences were significant: $Z = 2.33, p < 0.05$.

There were no significant differences in educational goal commitment by race or scholarship status. There was, however, a significant difference by year-in-school. Upperclassmen were more likely (94 percent) to report their intention to graduate from the institution than freshmen and sophomore student athletes (70 percent) from the five eliminated sports: $Z = 2.69, p < .01$. This result may simply reflect the academic progress made by juniors and seniors, who were more likely to have declared majors and fulfilled educational requirements towards their degrees relative to the underclassmen and women on their respective teams. A women's lacrosse student athlete commented, "I am a senior so it does not exactly affect me, but if I were a freshman I would have considered going other places." This finding likewise supports the corresponding results regarding freshmen and sophomore student athletes who reported a greater likelihood of transferring or leaving the institution prior to exhausting their athletic eligibility.

Table 3: Educational Goal and Athletic Commitment of College Athletes on Eliminated Sports Teams

	I will graduate from U.C. Berkeley.	I will likely leave the university before I complete my eligibility.	I will transfer to another institution because of the recent decision regarding my sport at Berkeley.
Total (N = 88)	80%	30%	26%
Men	82%	26%	26%
Women	74%	35%	26%
Scholarship	73%	43%	35%
Non-Scholarship	84%	20%	20%
Underclassmen	70%	39%	37%
Upperclassmen	94%	15%	9%
Baseball	62%	77%	69%
M. Rugby	90%	10%	13%
M. Gymnastics	80%	20%	20%
W. Gymnastics	92%	0%	0%
W. Lacrosse	63%	58%	42%

Institutional Commitment and Sense of Belonging

Institutional commitment and sense of belonging were differentiated from educational goal commitment, focusing on student athletes' satisfaction with their university. Two survey questions reflected institutional sense of belonging ("I feel that I belong at this university") and institutional commitment ("Knowing what I know now, I would still choose to enroll at this institution"). The institutional and involuntary loss of a sponsored athletic identity impacted many of these students' general sense of belonging on campus. One baseball student athlete noted,

I walk around campus and feel embarrassed. I feel like less of an athlete as a result but also less of a student at Berkeley. I find myself less involved, especially in going to other athletic events and participating because it's hard when you know that you won't have it next year. The school has taken away our identity and I don't think I will be able to find a different one here.

In addition to their stated intentions about graduating from Berkeley or transferring to compete elsewhere, college athletes from the five eliminated sports reported feeling lost and embarrassed following the institutional decision. A women's lacrosse student athlete wrote,

I no longer feel empowered by my student athlete title but more like I am a poser, pretending to belong to a group I once felt a part of. The term REGS has been tossed around a lot amongst the athletes who have been cut. We are no longer athletes. We are regular students (REGS). I feel like I have been left in limbo land and abandoned by my community.

A sophomore teammate noted the difficulty of losing institutional sport sponsorship and the corresponding identification as a Division I college athlete:

I can't see myself as a regular student, no longer an athlete. I know Cal is one of the top university's education-wise, but I fear I won't be happy without being a DI ATHLETE. I fear that I will resent Cal too much that it will affect my success in my academics. I have been a serious athlete my entire life and that is my identity. They have stripped that away and blindsided us without any warning (*participant's capitalization*).

Though there were no reported differences among the impacted student athletes in terms of their institutional commitment and sense of belonging, when the college athletes were compared to participants from these same teams four years earlier, the differences were striking. As Table 4 illustrates, Berkeley college athletes' sense of belonging significantly decreased from 2006 (95 percent) to 2010 (77 percent; $Z = 3.55, p > .001$). Differences were significant for both men and women, as well as for both scholarship and non-scholarship college athletes.

Table 4: Sense of Belonging and Institutional Commitment of College Athletes

	Sense of Belonging			Institutional Commitment		
	2006	2010	Z-score	2006	2010	Z-score
Total (N = 197)	95%	77%	3.55***	91%	57%	5.53***
Men	94%	79%	2.62**	90%	60%	4.22***
Women	96%	74%	2.37*	93%	52%	3.49***
Scholarship	96%	78%	2.32*	91%	49%	4.20***
Non-Scholarship	94%	77%	2.69**	91%	63%	3.64***
Underclassmen	89%	78%	—	92%	56%	3.79***
Upperclassmen	97%	77%	3.38***	90%	59%	3.75***
Baseball	96%	85%	—	86%	38%	3.09**
M. Rugby	93%	77%	2.14*	93%	64%	3.33***
M. Gymnastics	88%	80%	—	88%	80%	—
W. Gymnastics	100%	92%	—	92%	67%	—
W. Lacrosse	93%	63%	2.06*	93%	42%	3.10**

Note. Totals do not always equal 100% due to rounding. * indicates significance at the .05 level. ** indicates significance at the .01 level. *** indicates significance at the .001 level.

When asked whether college athletes would still choose to enroll at this institution, those student athletes impacted by the decision to eliminate their sports reported much greater ambivalence about their initial commitment to the university. In 2006, 91 percent of the college athletes from these five teams reported that they would still attend Berkeley, while only 57 percent of the impacted college athletes in 2010 responded that they would choose to attend the institution now. This finding is significant ($Z = 5.53, p < 0.001$).

Similar to these college athletes' institutional sense of belonging, differences in institutional commitment were significant for both men and women, all class levels (freshmen through senior year), and for scholarship and non-scholarship athletes. A rugby student athlete noted, "At this point, I feel like I play for the Cal rugby team, not U.C. Berkeley." This sentiment was reiterated by a baseball player, who wrote, "I feel more committed to my program and less attached to the university as a whole." Thus, the institutional decision to eliminate sports at Berkeley appeared to distance the impacted college athletes from campus at large, negatively affecting their sense of belonging. While the decision meant that these students would no longer

represent the university in athletic competition, they appeared to remain committed to their sport, their team and their athletic identity.

Conclusions and Implications

The NCAA's (2011) G.O.A.L.S. Report found that, across all of its divisions, athletics played a larger role than academics in student athletes' decision to enroll at a given institution.

Many college athletes' decision to attend a particular institution often follows a highly competitive recruiting process, involving official and unofficial visits between prospects and representatives (almost always from the athletic department) of the institution and the signing of a National Letter of Intent. By signing an NLI, a prospective student athlete agrees to attend the designated college or university for one academic year, while institutions agree to provide athletics financial aid for one academic year to the student athlete (NCAA 2011)¹.

These recruited students' initial commitment to the college or university suggests they may feel valued primarily for their athletic abilities and potential. It is perhaps not a surprise, then, that many Division I student athletes identify primarily as athletes rather than as students, particularly for those on athletic scholarships and from revenue-generating sports teams. In support of existing research, the current study found a higher relative commitment to athletics and to an athletic identity among the college athletes from the five non-revenue sports teams eliminated for sponsorship by the university. This emphasis on athletics was even more pronounced for those college athletes on some form of athletic aid.

It is this population of college athletes who face the greatest challenges when confronted with the involuntary loss of their athletic identity through injury, de-selection, or the elimination of their varsity sport. But whereas injury or de-selection often dictate the individual's separation from the team, the institutional decision to cut sports often bring teammates and coaches closer together, in unison around a common goal or perceived injustice. At Berkeley, teams rallied around saving their sport from elimination by soliciting money through mad dash fundraising, while casting dispersions on the university and its decision to cut their particular sport.

The elimination of sports at colleges and universities may further isolate these impacted student athletes from the rest of campus, and even within the athletic department itself. Stripped of an institutional identity, these college students can no longer participate on teams representing the institution in intercollegiate athletic competition. These students' decreased sense of belonging and institutional commitment, as found in this study, may likewise decrease these students' academic engagement and performance. Ironically, such academic disengagement could limit athletic opportunities for those college athletes who reported their intention to transfer and participate in varsity sports elsewhere, as these students may be ineligible due to their lack of academic progress and performance.

Institutional responses to the cutting of sports often shed light on the level of integration of the student athlete population within the campus community. As the elimination of sports has the potential to segregate the impacted student athletes from their own athletic community, it is all the more critical to promote the integration of college athletes into the larger student body. Ideally, this process of integration begins once a student athlete has committed to attend a given institution. Just as young men and women commit to play their respective sport at a given institution, there ought to be an institutional and shared commitment to these young people who select our colleges and universities, a commitment which is broader than simply an athletic scholarship for one year.

¹ Based upon legislation passed by the NCAA Division I Board of Directors in August 2011, Division I schools have the option to offer athletic scholarships guaranteed for more than one year. An attempt by member institutions to override this multiyear scholarship legislation fell short of the required mark in February 2012 (Hosick 2012).

A shared institutional commitment to support all students provides a more holistic understanding of student services rather than separating out groups deemed “special” or “privileged.” While the NCAA now requires institutions to provide academic support for student athletes (Bylaw 16.3.1), this support need not be segregated from the rest of the student body. Rather, individualized, customized support should be offered for all students throughout the matriculation process. A multi-dimensional approach to academic and social support services includes counseling college athletes with transition and change, expanded identity development, and career planning. Greater integration into the larger campus community also benefits student athletes as they are encouraged to become full participants in an active and diverse social and intellectual community. Academic and social integration, in turn, influence educational goals and institutional commitment, ultimately leading to these students’ academic engagement and performance. Finally, the ultimate demonstration of commitment to these students is that we not end our support after their athletic eligibility is exhausted or a varsity sport has been eliminated, but that we continue to promote educational opportunity, academic progress, and a more comprehensive understanding of student development. Within this student development framework, emphasizing an integrated student body, the transition of college athletes out of school-sponsored sport and an institutional identity will be less pronounced and less traumatic when colleges and universities are forced to eliminate their varsity sports.

Limitations and Future Research

The major limitation of this study was the restricted sample size, focused on a single NCAA Division I institution. Future research should extend this study to other colleges and universities of all NCAA divisions which face a similar decision to eliminate varsity sports at their respective institutions. As there were significant differences in this study between scholarship and non-scholarship college athletes, for example, it would be interesting to see the results at Division III institutions which offer no athletic scholarships.

While this study provided the opportunity for participants to expand on survey questions, these responses do not provide reliable qualitative data. Future studies should pursue more thorough qualitative efforts at studying this impacted population of students, such as observation and the use of focus groups, interviews and journals. Such methods would help more fully develop some of the significant results and emerging themes found in the present study.

This study was able to analyze the perceptions of student athletes from the same teams and at the same institution before and after the elimination of their respective sport; however, because each of the five varsity programs eliminated at Berkeley was ultimately reinstated, there is no opportunity to study the longitudinal effects on these particular participants. However, future research may focus on participants at colleges and universities which do not reinstate programs once eliminated. Such research could focus on the short, intermediate and long-term effects of involuntary athletic termination as a result of institutional sport elimination.

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