Leadership In College Athletics

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Leadership In College Athletics

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Abstract

This study was conducted with the purpose of better understanding what makes a good leader in the world of college athletics. Understanding the traits, characteristics, decision-making process, and sports involvement of leadership helps to provide scholars with the opportunity to gain a better insight into the minds of leaders. This study was conducted through a qualitative research method. The questionnaire was sent out to a small pool of student-athletes, coaches, and administration in the athletic department. The questions were framed in a way that provided open-ended responses which led to straightforward responses. The open-ended questions provided beneficial information, concerning what makes a good leader in college athletics. The results show that leadership takes place through many different methods. The participants felt a good leader consists of leading by example on and off the field, creating a positive team culture, and having a positive attitude while remaining humble. The results help provide a blueprint of what good leaders should act like in the world of college athletics.

Keywords: Leadership, college athletics, ethics, NCAA (National College Athletics Association, NIL (name, image, likeness))
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Leadership In College Athletics

This study focuses on the importance of leadership within college athletics. Research by Shannon Chia (2015) defines leadership as “the behavioral process of influencing individuals and groups toward set goals” (Chia 2015, as cited by Barrow, 1977, p.232). College athletics has a big footprint across the United States. Each year the NCAA generates 1.16 billion dollars in revenue. The NCAA is the National College Athletics Association. They provide rules, regulations, and guidance along all three collegiate athletics divisions, 1,2,3. The fact of the matter is that the NCAA creates opportunities that require strong leadership. Though the NCAA makes up a strong majority of the revenue for college athletics, other divisions such as NAIA and JUCO still make a solid share of revenue respectively. Each division has different requirements, rules, and regulations that must be followed. These rules and regulations are set to maintain appropriate boundaries among student-athletes. These rules ensure the NCAA runs smoothly and avoids as much conflict as possible. Across the different levels, different issues arise, such as recruitment, NIL (name, image, likeness), and the pay-to-play rules. Managing these issues puts a greater emphasis on the importance of leadership within a college setting. As leaders within the NCAA, it is important to understand these issues need to be managed delicately. Each of these issues can have a drastic effect on long-term and short-term effects that could negatively affect schools, student-athletes, and administration. Each university involved must have a high level of
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effective leadership to help guide young athletes through the difficult process of college athletics. Understanding the importance of having a good leader is not always something that young athletes value when choosing and contributing to a program. Through student-athlete examples, there is a lot to learn about the effective and ineffective leadership techniques being used in college athletics. The consensus is that further exploration into this topic can allow for a greater understanding of how coaches, administration, and student-athletes can grow as leaders and individuals.

The current study investigates how leadership affects the recruitment process, performance, academics, and overall enjoyment of the college experience for young athletes. Understanding what athletes look for when choosing a university is the first step in determining the leadership characteristics needed from the coaching staff. Through a qualitative method, this study focuses on determining the different characteristics that good coaches/recruiters/leaders use. Some of the most commonly associated traits of good leaders according to IMD are self-awareness, situational awareness, strong communication, conflict management, collaboration, negotiation skills, the ability to work with others, and the ability to make hard decisions. (IMD, 2023). According to Ackerman (2019), the strengths of strong leaders are, “traits and qualities that serve leaders well, helping them to more effectively lead, manage, and motivate their followers” (pp. ). Through experience with college athletics, many people possess one or many of these skills, thus, making an even bigger case for the importance of having strong leaders in this setting. In comparison, the other side of this study investigates how lack of leadership can cause worsened performances and overall experience. According to
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Grensing-Prophal (N/A) of business training experts, bad leaders lack eleven key characteristics, to name a few; poor communicators, indecisive, lack of integrity, and unwillingness to change. The lack of these skills in college sports can be especially detrimental. Leadership is something that never takes a rest when working in college sports, ranging from top to bottom, good leaders drive a successful program. New factors in collegiate athletics only heighten the importance of leadership to help ensure not only program success but athlete success as well.

**Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to decipher the different variables that fuel the importance of leadership in college athletics. Understanding these variables can help scholars take a new approach to studying leadership at the college level. Understanding what works and what does not can provide advantages to coaches, administration, and players moving into the next era of college sports. Several things can be implied when looking at the leadership and college athletics scene as a whole. As we move into a new era of college athletics, there are new topics that require strong leadership. Having poor leadership with new issues such as NIL, recruiting, scholarships, academic performance, and on-field performance can be detrimental to an athlete's college experience. When experiencing strong leadership, it makes the whole experience better for the individual. It allows them to feel more like themselves and just enjoy the experience rather than worrying. Along with this, good leadership takes the pressure off them when handling NIL deals. They will be guided the right way rather than straying off on their own. Having guidance can be a huge factor for so many young athletes.
Research Questions

The question being investigated for this study is, What makes a good leader in college athletics? This study can provide benefits for many different groups. Coaches can use this study to determine how they want to manage their coaching style and program; this allows them to better understand what is expected of them and how they can leverage their strengths. This study also provides insight for the school's faculty. Some of the sub-questions this study aims to explore are,

1. How does a good leader in college athletics handle conflicts or disagreements?
2. How can leadership practices be implemented into the school's athletic programs?
3. How can strong leadership affect the team dynamics on and off the field?

Ideally, these questions will provide insight into how we can better advance leadership at the college level. Though there are many great leaders in college athletics at this very moment, there is always room to improve. Sports, especially college athletics, need strong leaders. Whether leadership comes from coaches, administration, or even players, leadership must take a prominent role at every university across the country.
Leadership in college sports is an essential factor when trying to build a positive culture within a University's athletics program. As young student-athletes begin to transition from young individuals to adults there are a lot of changes, challenges, and opportunities. Having a strong leader can help streamline this process and lead these individuals down the right path. The question then becomes, what is ethical leadership? Oftentimes people wonder how ethical leadership truly affects the process and does it truly matters. The answer seems to be unclear, when working in and being a part of college athletics there is a lot of “gray area” along with strict rules and regulations, such as the rules like not being allowed to work and make money while being a college athlete. Though these rules seem unique, it is a general standard across all three divisions that fall under. So many young athletes at all levels are struggling financially. This sparks the question, is it wrong to give your players money for meals, groceries, school supplies, or anything along those lines? The answer may be clear but that brings us to the point I am trying to make. What makes a leader's decisions ethical? If a coach does something like this, are they really “unethical” or in fact, are they good leaders for always looking out for their players? This becomes increasingly subjective based on one's individual opinion. This study aims to provide insight into what makes leaders in college athletics good leaders. What qualities do they have and how do they leverage these to be strong ethical leaders?
Throughout this section of the study, it will introduce different literature about leadership and leadership within the college setting. The hope is to build connections between different literature and gain insight into what makes leaders in college athletics good and ethical leaders.

Like anything, there will be examples of what drives bad leadership and how it can be avoided. The goal is to get a better understanding of how scholars, coaches, administration, student-athletes, and faculty can learn to leverage skills or downfalls to improve themselves as leaders. The goal is to provide readers with insight that can be beneficial in understanding how leadership in college athletics can be enhanced in an ever-changing environment. Throughout this section of my research, I explored a variety of articles. Each one provides a different insight into the different aspects of leadership within college athletics, ethical leadership, and the growth and change of leadership in sports. The three sections that will be used to categorize these sections are ethics in college athletics, leadership in college athletics, and the changes college leadership has made over the years. Each subsection provides insight into the world of college athletics and how important leadership is. College athletics is a business like anything else, as the current changes and popularity are on the rise, it is more important now than ever to investigate how strong leadership can play a drastic effect on the outcomes for everyone involved.

**Ethics in College Athletics Leadership**

It is no secret that ethics play a pivotal role in any sort of business. The combination of ethics and leadership together is an important part of any business,
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The NCAA is no different. A few of the articles I collected discussed leadership and the importance of ethics when it comes to college athletics. Laura Burton and Jon Welty Peachey, scholars at the University of Connecticut and the University of Illinois, discuss ethical leadership in intercollegiate athletics. The two define ethical leadership as, “The demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Burton et al., 2014 p.14). Their definition sets the baseline for how we are going to look at ethics within college leadership. This provides the baseline definition for how my research will identify ethical leadership. Essentially, the common denominator between all three articles is the importance of practicing what you preach. By doing so, this can build the culture you are looking for within a university's athletics department.

Authors Anglea Lumpkin and Joe Doty, authors of Ethical Leadership in Intercollegiate Athletics (Lumpkin et al., 2014) state, “Athletic directors and other athletic administrators as ethical leaders need to commit to nurturing values-based cultures that shape and develop the character of athletes and colleagues they influence” (Lumpkin et al., 2014 p.8). The gist between the first two pieces of research is that ethical leadership is that leadership in collegiate settings is a top approach. To promote ethical leadership, it needs to be done from the top.

More research from Peter Paul Roby author of Ethical Leadership In College Athletics States (2014) says, “Ethical leadership is nurtured and encouraged by family, coaches, friends, supervisors and mentors” (Roby, 2014 p.39). As you can see from the
articles, all the authors push that ethical leadership is something that comes from the top. The actions of organizational leaders and how they prioritize ethics in their university drive how it is viewed by everyone within the university. To further back up this claim, Burton claims that “If leaders practice ethical decision-making and act ethically, their employees will model this behavior” (Burton et al., 2014 p.3). Not only does she point this out, but Lumpkin also states, “This culture is largely (or perhaps even solely) dependent on core values communicated, modeled, and rewarded by the athletic director and other athletic administrators.” (Lumpkin et al., 2014 p.7). Clearly, research indicates the environment is created by people at the top. It is also mentioned throughout the articles the value of a rewards-based system when good ethical practices are shown. It is shown that the rewards system has been a good way of ensuring ethical culture is sustained in a university’s athletic department. In summary, all three of these articles discussing ethical leadership in college athletics touch upon the same things. Ethics is a top-down process, resulting in more successful outcomes if higher-ups promote this with some sort of reward system to benefit the offenders practicing ethical leadership.

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The next pool of literature gathered had a theme of leadership in college athletics. The purpose here was to investigate different trends and similarities between the two. At this stage, I was hoping to see the potential for some differences within different research. The first piece of literature I used provided me with a better basis for how leadership should look in individuals. The purpose of this article was to highlight what good characteristics of a leader in a sports setting should be. The article states,
“Conversely, an informal athlete leader emerges as a function of (a) group interaction, (b) distinct group needs, and (c) the personality traits of individual athletes. This type of athlete leader acts in a way that often complements the style of an established leader within the group (the formal athlete leader). However, the informal leader emerges naturally, without designation by another group member or the organization. (Iresearch, 2019)

Understanding the different characteristics of an informal leader provides us with a general understanding of how this may look. There may be some differences in college athletics because the setting can change and there are more factors such as scholarships, NIL, recruiting, athletes from different geographical locations, and so many more factors. Looking into the difference between Managing and Leading In College Athletics (Belzer, 2022), this piece provides a sectioned view of how leaders in the college setting can have success. The research presents three tips for managing as a leader in college athletics.

Belzer states, “Whether you’re an athletic director, coach or business executive, you must work hard to: 1) understand the people you are managing, 2) the tasks they are trying to complete and, 3) their competency to do so” (Belzer, 2022). When acting in any sort of leadership role, understanding the importance of this can be a pivotal part of success. This applies to players as well, the better the understanding the better chance you have for success. Seeing that the more you resonate with the people you are leading makes sense because everyone likes to be understood. Being understood can lead to comfort which makes the overall experience better for both parties. Belzer also states that leaders “should be able to understand the capabilities of their followers” (Belzer, 2022).
Understanding talent levels, work ethic, home situations, and other factors can play into how you manage your followers in each situation.

Looking at a study conducted by Cynthia Sawari (1989), a scholar from North Carolina State University, provides this study with insight into how different age groups respond to different leadership styles. The research she gathered was from college athletic department higher-ups. It was broken into different ages, genders, sports played, sports participation, and the extent of the sport played by the given individual. The purpose of the study was to determine the different factors that different leadership styles had on the individuals who participated in the study. Using this study from Sawari (1989) was very beneficial. However, she used a small sample size but does provide value. Breaking it down shows us the different age groups and genders and how they respond to different leadership techniques. Using this data, leaders can understand the specific group they are dealing with. Using this as a tool presents the leader with the advantage of taking steps to make sure they understand and are in touch with what their follower wants. In summary, this section’s literature shows us that understanding your followers and their needs is the essential piece to having success in a college leadership setting.

Leadership Styles for Organizational Effectiveness

An important aspect of leadership is organizational effectiveness. In college athletics, there are many moving parts that not only drive organizational effectiveness but require attention to ensure that the athletics departments run smoothly. In research conducted by Naidoo, Coopoo, and Surujlal, they state, “However, most researchers agree that it involves attention to the attainment of goals, relationship with the external
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environment of leadership and organizational performance” (Naaidoo, 2015, as stated in Oghojafor, 2012). This research begins by showing the baseline for what leaders view as organizational leadership. After conducting their research, Naaidoo (2015) found that transformational leadership is the most common form of leadership among athletic departments. As stated by Naaidoo, “Sports administrators are, therefore, required to align their subordinates’ aspirations and needs with the strategic objectives of the HEIs so that those objectives can be achieved” (Naaidoo et al., 2015, p.176). Understanding these needs to be an element of flexibility as leaders in college athletics helps show how big of a business athletics are. Comparatively speaking, research conducted by Joseph Cooper (2020) states, “The predominant leadership style in Division I college sports in the U.S. is transactional” (Cooper et al., 2020, as stated by Burton, 2015). This data could be skewed, considering he only states this leadership style to be the most predominant at the division one level. It is widespread knowledge there are far more division three universities in the United States. The NCAA states, “Division III is the largest NCAA division, with 430 active schools and over 200,000 student-athletes” (NCAA, 2023).

Both of these leadership styles prove me to be effective in college sports. Each provides us with different ways of handling fast-moving situations. As always, the use of these styles is individual and situational dependent.

Furthermore, research conducted by Melissa Bowers (2017) discusses organizational culture and how to find the right person to handle crisis management. When it comes to organizational culture, handling crises is an important aspect of a leader's job. This directly ties in with the different leadership styles used across different
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sports teams in the United States. This research varies from previous research on this topic because it does name a specific style of leadership as being dominant. Bowers (2017) states, “Furthermore, leadership style matters— not all leaders are best suited for handling a crisis. Organizations must perceive, prepare, and position for crisis response by knowing the organization’s culture and leaders and applying CRLM based on crisis environment, organizational culture, and leadership style to select the right leader for the crisis” (Bowers et al., 2017, p.11). The research from Bowers (2017) is different because rather than saying there is a specific method a leader should use, it discusses using different leaders for different crises. It drives home the point that everyone should be prepared to lead if need be because everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. There seems to be no golden method for organizational effectiveness, it seems to vary based on the specific organization and what that organization's needs are at that time.

In a study written by Jay Caulfield for the Journal of Business Ethics, he discusses the leadership approach that has the best benefits for an athlete's well-being. Caulfield has a different approach to leadership when in a college sports setting. Caulfield (2022) believes that the best form of leadership to reach athletes is through a humanistic approach (Caulfield 2022). This approach varies from the previous thoughts on what leadership technique should be used when in an athletic environment. Caulfield (2022) states,

“In high-stress environments such as college athletics, we suggest that the beliefs endeavors that flow from humanistic leadership hold promise for human flourishing and shared well-being. With clear identification and ongoing
discernment of humanistic values transpiring through healthy social interaction occurring at and between all levels, holistic student well-being is more likely to occur.” (Caulfield 2022).

As you can see this approach from Caulfield is different than the previous author's thoughts on what leadership techniques should be used. The main difference is the idea of healthy social interaction. This helps push the fact that it will benefit the athlete's perspective and overall enjoyment while playing the sport or being around the team. The other approaches focus more on how the leader can benefit, whereas this approach seems to be more focused on the outcome for the athlete who is currently playing the sport.

**Growth of Leadership in College Athletics**

Over the years sports have changed significantly. But not only have sports changed, but the landscape of college athletics has also changed. There have been numerous different changes that affect the way leadership plays out within this setting. Leadership is at the forefront of college athletics. The NCAA states via its leadership collective program, “The NCAA Leadership Collective serves as a tool to progress toward an environment of diverse representation in collegiate coaching and athletics administration” (NCAA, 2023). This program is one that all divisions across the country have access to. It is set up through administration and they are constantly looking for representatives. This change relates to the other literature in this section because it promotes the inclusion of diversity among coaches and young leaders.

The Human Kinetics Journal discusses the changes in mindset when it comes to leadership in a college setting. The article states, “This acknowledges the idea that reality
is constructed through the views and interpretations of a collective group and not just through the ideologies of an individual” (Ferkins et al., 2018). This connects to the first article because you start to see the greater importance of expanding and viewing leadership more collectively. The progress has jumped forward in hopes of expanding the importance of leadership as collegiate athletes. It is comparing these articles to A stakeholder’s perspective on ethical leadership (Constant et al., 2020). This piece of literature also states, “While broadening the scope of ethical leadership in sports research to more diverse settings, attention could be paid to more practice-oriented research questions and the practical implications of the study’s findings” (Constant et al., 2020). There is a change in trying to increase the diversity of leadership, in hopes of expanding the pool of qualified leaders that can benefit universities' athletic programs.

A new step in college athletics is the heightened importance of supporting athletes. As a leader, this new trend is more important now than it ever has been. With new support systems and ways to benefit your athletes, understanding the value of this as a leader is critical. David McDuff author for the University of Maryland and his coauthor Michelle Given write about the importance of the. McDuff (2016) states, “Many teams and members of sports organizations will utilize psychological and psychiatric services throughout the year if they are cost-free, broad in scope, and offered on-site at the training facility” (McDuff et al., 2016 p.1). A new aspect leaders need to be willing to utilize, as this can be a driving factor in your follower's motivation, effort levels, and willingness to be productive. Later on in the study, McDuff (2016) discusses how this relates to college athletics. In the section titled University he states, “The prevalence of
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SP/MH providers working with college teams has increased in the past decade and support for these services is growing among university and athletic department administrators” (Mcduff et al., 2016 p.5). As you can see, in the new age of college athletics there is a need for this. Being conscious of your athlete's well-being is a growing trend. So much so, McDuff (2016) talks about the lack of resources some schools have at this position, claiming, that even though this is a growing trend there is still a lack of positions open for the volume of needs of some universities, schools are reluctant to fill this as a full-time position (McDuff et al., 2016). As you can see, this is where the opportunity as a leader grows. Just because there is not a titled position, leaders can step into this role and help out their athletes. Showing even more, that being a leader in college athletics has changed. The new opportunities to grow are endless.

Leadership, From an Athletes Perspective

Being a college athlete at any level is no easy task. There are always challenges and opportunities that present individuals with the opportunity to grow and develop. Many athletes may not see themselves as leaders. Each sport takes a different set of leadership skills, this dynamic can change whether you are playing an individual sport like golf or a team sport like football. Nevertheless, leadership plays an important role. When examining research, a commonly asked question was if these young athletes see themselves as leaders, and if so, what qualities do they think they present? Research conducted by Keith Eiche (1997) shows “Leadership in college athletes seems to be associated with a strong internal sense of control and an optimism for dealing with problems. Athletes are certainly placed in situations where they can develop their
leadership skills and these situations may draw out leadership behaviors in individuals who may not otherwise exhibit such characteristics” (Eiche et al., 1997, p. 14). Athletes understanding that they are in situations where they can develop their leadership skills can help them learn that they have the potential to be strong leaders. Comparatively, a study conducted by Shannon Chia (2015) used research from student-athletes in Singapore, the results of this study showed, “While this study found that the congruence of perceived and preferred leadership in social support influenced the level of satisfaction among collegiate athletes in Singapore” (Shia et al., 2015, p. 503). Understanding that this study is from a different country, can cause difficulty making connections. However, understanding that these athletes preferred to be led in with social support shows how these athletes do themselves as leaders. The social aspect comes from your peers, which in this case are your teammates. Even though they are from two different countries, athletes still seem to have the vision that they have leadership qualities.

Similarly, an article written by Olena Ivashchenko (2017) discusses an athlete's leadership skills and how they determine their effective performance and sports achievement (Ivashchenko et al., 2017). In this study, the results yielded a similar result to the studies used above. Ivashchenko (2017) states, “While comparing the importance of interactional centrality across different roles, we see that in every sport the task leader was the player most likely to occupy a leading position” (Ivashchenko et al., 2017, p. 478). The tasked leader sees themself in a leadership role, which further emphasizes that athletes can see themselves as leaders. Assuming they have some sort of assumed
role of power, they believe in their ability to lead. Along with this, being put in a task leader role, shows the people around the athlete see he has leadership qualities as well.

**Understanding the Importance of Diversity and Inclusion in College Athletics**

In this new age of college athletics, a promoted aspect of being a leader is how leaders handle diversity and inclusion. It is of extreme importance that leaders handle this situation delicately. According to the article “A Call for Culturally Responsive Transformational Leadership in College Sport: An Anti-ism Approach for Achieving Equity and Inclusion,” there is a long-standing issue with diversity in college athletics. The author of this article, (Joseph Cooper, et al., 2020) states, “A longstanding fact in college sports in the United States (U.S.) is the reality that inequities, inequalities, and discrimination have been major issues preventing institutions from fostering harmonious diversity and inclusion” (Cooper et al., 2020, p.1). From this article, we can infer that there is evidence showing that some schools try to implement these practices. It is not always easy to implement something some people see as a complicated process. In an article by Ajhanai Keaton (2021), he states, “One major issue facing athletic departments is the lack of diversity in leadership positions” (Keaton, 2021, p.86). This shows where the disconnect lies. The article by Joseph Cooper discusses what barriers are preventing diversity inclusion. The article by Keaton says that schools are lacking diversity in athletics departments. The disconnect lies in the lack of understanding at leadership levels that diversity is important. Having no diversity in the athletic departments affects the department because so few people within the department understand why it is important.
With no one of diversity in the department, it fails to translate into actually implementing diversity. It appears this problem remains consistent.

In another section of Cooper's article, he discusses how “individuals of oppressive racial groups are being forced to switch their leadership style just to get interviews for coaching and administration roles at universities” (Cooper et al., 2020). Again, it is clear there is a lack of diversity understanding. Comparing this to the research conducted by Alfonso Martinez-Moreno (2021), where he states, “Currently, there has been discussion concerning emerging leadership in organizations. A good leader puts their strategic, tactical, operational, and human knowledge at the service of the organization” (Martinez-Moreno et al., 2021, p.3-4). Now understanding this poses the question, if this is what makes a good leader, why are oppressive races being forced to change? Not only that but why is diversity lacking? When it comes to hiring good leaders, race should not be of concern. Athletic administration should be more concerned about hiring the best candidate. To support this statement, Cooper (2020) states, Especially when these people may be able to provide them with a more diverse group dynamic.
Chapter 3

Research Methods

Research Design

Through qualitative research, data was collected through an open-ended qualitative survey. This survey asked student-athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators their thoughts on leadership, ethical leadership, traits, and behaviors good leaders possess. The open-ended survey was created through the author of this study’s experiences in college athletics. The questions used are designed to gain a wide variety of responses and insights on the topic of leadership in college athletics. Having a diverse pool of questions allows for a variety of different responses, in hopes of understanding what makes a good leader in college athletics. The goal of this research was to identify the different factors that play a key role in leadership within college athletics. Determining the factors of leadership that drive successful and less successful teams around the university. The purpose of this study is to open scholars’ eyes to new perspectives and use the results to strengthen their research moving forward.

Data Collection & Analysis

Once the research data was obtained, it was analyzed, which generated trends that are discussed in the results section. Once the data was obtained, it was categorized by, age group results, gender results, and specific age results. Looking at results this way made it easier to begin the analysis process. It provided a smaller sample size, rather than a big pool of responses. Having a large sample pool from different teams, genders, coaches, and administrators provides diversity. A question related to participants’ age was
included to show how different age groups view leadership and see if this affects the results. Sports have changed significantly over the years; the goal was to note changes in perspectives from different age groups.

**Participant Selection**

The participants in this study were University of Southern Maine, athletes, coaches, or athletic administration. The total number of participants for this study was ten members of the USM community. The pool of participants is made up of current players, coaches, and athletic administration. In this study, the ideal demographic is adults ages eighteen through seventy-five. The athletic center is frequently accessible, this is where the bulk of the recruitment for this study is taking place. The reason for using the athletics center as the main location for recruitment is that it provides easy access to students athletes, faculty, and administrators. This provided an adequate sample size of college athletes' perspectives on how they view leadership. Keeping this research to athletes at the school will allow for different perspectives from the same collegiate experience. All of the student-athletes who participated in the survey had different views of leadership. Because the participants were from the same University, it provided similar results. This was ideal because everyone was answering from the same “sports culture”. Schools try to create a similar culture across all sports, so this should allow for the best and most accurate results.

**Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the research process, consent guidelines were put into place to protect the confidentiality of each participant’s responses. The use of participant consent forms
and a question regarding participant consent at the beginning of the survey were used to ensure the safety of all participants involved. All the participant's survey responses are stored on a locked computer with password access. The only person with access to the laptop, password, and Google account is the author of this thesis.
Chapter 4

Research Analysis

As mentioned previously in this thesis, the understanding of why leadership is important is crucial. The purpose of this is for us to be able to determine and understand the importance of leadership in college athletics. As leaders, it is important to understand the different variables that go into being a successful leader in college athletics. The goal of this study was to aid coaches, players, and administration with new information on what approaches to take when exercising leadership. Leadership will always be at the forefront of college athletics, its importance will never go away. Navigating the ocean of college athletics will always call for guidance from strong leaders. While conducting research, the goal was to get as many diverse perspectives as possible. The participants provided a wide variety of years of experience in college athletics, ranging from thirty-nine years of experience, all the way to one year of experience. As you can imagine, times have changed, so the perspective of the older participants varied from the ones with less experience in college athletics. The participants that made up this study were current coaches and players at the University of Southern Maine. All the participants provided insightful and helpful information when sharing their experiences, thoughts, and ideas about what makes a good leader in college athletics.

Identifying Research Trends

While dissecting the data, there were three trends worth highlighting. The participants were asked their thoughts on what qualities or traits make a successful leader in college athletics. These trends will be the guidelines for the next sections of this thesis.
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To keep this study concise and to the point, the top three recurring ideas from the participants are what are used.

1. Leading by example, on the field, in the classroom, outside of athletics entirely
2. Creating total buy-in into the program, by creating a trustworthy culture and treating everyone with respect
3. Positive attitude, staying humble, and working hard.

Now that these standards have been set, it allows us to identify what current individuals value when it comes to leadership in college athletics. All of the participants mentioned at least one of these theories in their response to that question.

Similarly, there were more trends regarding what each individual believed to be the best leadership style. These trends relate very closely to the trends listed above. The general trend in this response was understanding the fine line between being cooperative but fair, leading by example through hard work (indirect leadership), and someone who has multiple ways of leading in different situations (transformational leadership). As expected, the leadership styles line up very similar to the leadership qualities one possesses. Along with further investigating, how leadership skills can be developed, the participants were asked what leadership skills have evolved in their repertoire. Some of the most common responses were improved verbal, communication, and problem-solving skills. Along with these skills, athletes noted stronger senses of confidence in themselves as leaders. As noted back in chapter one, college athletics have been and always will be evolving with the times. This was confirmed in the open-ended survey (See Appendix B). One of the open-ended survey questions is, Do you believe that leadership in college
LEADERSHIP IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS

athletics has evolved over time? If so, how? The following question asked about the emerging trends with leadership in college athletics. Many of the participants mentioned the new NIL (name, image, and likeness), the transfer portal, and the lack of responsibility/usefulness of captains at the collegiate level.

Overall, this research provides us with some unique and interesting perspectives on the landscape of college athletics. Back in chapter one research questions were presented that this study aimed to answer. What makes a good leader in college athletics? Along with this main question, there were three following questions,

1. How does a good leader handle conflicts/disagreements
2. How can leadership practices be implemented into schools' athletic programs?
3. How can strong leadership affect the team's dynamics on and off the field?

These questions were all addressed by the participants allowing for a very strong understanding of what it takes to be a strong leader in college athletics. This study only weighs relevance if you have the understanding that responses to these questions are subjective. Leadership does not have one true fit. What one person sees as a strength, someone else may see as a weakness. Understanding that leadership does not have one true fit, allows for the opportunity for many different types of people, styles, or personalities to be successful in leadership roles. But that is not what this study is about. This study is about determining what makes a good leader in college athletics. Those questions are answered in the next chapter of this thesis.
Chapter 5

Open-Ended Survey Question Results

The results from the open-ended qualitative survey provided insightful information to help answer the questions presented in Chapter One of this study (see chapters 1&4 for the questions). To fully understand the responses to the main question, there needs to be an understanding of the additional three questions. These questions help scholars formulate an understanding of some of the things good leaders in college athletics need to be conscious of. As noted in previous chapters, the college ethics realm is and will be forever changing.

Handling Conflicts and Disagreements

How does a good leader handle conflicts/disagreements? After analyzing the results of the survey, a few things became clear. It seemed particularly necessary to have strong leadership in college athletics. There was a wide variety of approaches suggested by different participants on how leaders handle conflict in the world of college athletics. Starting with a response from participant number ten. Participant number ten states, “letting it sort itself out over time” (2024) is the best way to handle conflicts. Where participant Number One discusses “confronting conflicts ahead so things do not fester” (2024). As you can see, this question is subjective, everyone has a different view. Participants one, two, and five all say that the direct approach is the best way to handle conflicts and disagreements. Participant Two states, “Go right to the head coach immediately and let him handle it from there” (2024), this is a very direct approach, going with the same style as Participant One, will help alleviate things festering and
causing long-term issues. Participant Five also states, “Depending on the team makeup, confrontation can work in certain situations. A good leader will understand the team dynamics and use effective strategies to resolve conflicts by incorporating input from the coaching staff and expecting individual accountability.” (2024). This response is a bit of a hybrid approach but still has a direct approach. Along with the direct approach, there still is the important understanding that a good leader will understand the type of team they have. Understanding your team can allow you to tailor your approach when it comes to handling conflict. The consensus for the survey poll is to handle conflicts directly, with the understanding that a leader's approach cannot change depending on the team and position they are dealing with.

**Implementation of Leadership in Athletic Programs**

Question two was how can leadership practices be into schools' athletics programs. This study was conducted at the University of Southern Maine (DIII) in Gorham/Portland, Maine. All of the results for this question are tailored to what the participants think would be essential additions concerning leaders at USM specifically. A majority of the participants suggested that the university offer classes that are open for the athletes and other students to better understand leadership. Participant One states, “Should develop a course in Leadership at the school. There are not as many leaders developing in this day and age. We need to find them and encourage them. I believe the "me-first" society that is present needs to be changed to "team-first"” (2024). Participant five states, the university needs to be “more consistent with its leader philosophy across the whole athletic department” (2024). This approach has the potential to be adopted by
all athletics programs. The only flip side issue here is that typically most schools have a leadership approach, but this always varies from team to team for numerous reasons such as the specific nature of the sport, men’s & women’s sports, and experience of the coaching staff. An interesting response to this question comes from participant eight. This individual would like to see, “more opportunity for students to get to work with the department either as interns or Graduate roles to get more firsthand experience and maybe some undergrad opportunities to develop leadership as well” (2024). A strong idea and hands-on work always have the potential to enhance and allow students to better understand leadership as a whole.

This question is a two-part question in a sense, leadership ideas can be thrown around left and right, but if USM or any other universities do not support their athletes in their leadership endeavors, it is useless. Participant Four believes that “encouraging athletes to be themselves will develop more leaders” (2024). A similar approach is suggested by Participant Ten, who suggests “creating an environment where independence is encouraged” (2024). This seems to be the adage, learn through trial and error how to lead. This approach is beneficial because there is never a true book that teaches one how to lead, it comes with years of experience and learning from past failures. Overall, the consensus with these questions is that leadership is well supported and encouraged at USM. Of course, there is always room to improve, as almost all of the participants suggest offering or adding more leadership-related classes or electives.

*Leadership and Its Effects on Team Dynamics*
Question three discusses how strong leadership can affect the team's dynamics on and off the field. There was a wide variety of responses here, all of them indicated the importance of leadership and its effects on how a team performs. It is no secret that the participant pool feels that there is a connection between strong leadership and a team’s dynamic. Participant Seven provided an excellent example through their own experiences. Stating:

“It hugely impacts team dynamics on and off the field. In my experience in high school, we had a year where we were very poorly led by our head coach and by the captains of the team. It led to poor play on the field for a team that had easily the most talented team in the area and off the field the players were at odds with each other as well and there wasn't anything that could get cohesion back and the team fell apart right before the end of the season and we only won games later in the year off of talent alone and hit a limit on our success because of it.” (2024)

This experience by this individual, paints the picture of the importance of good leadership and its role in creating a positive group dynamic in sports. Another stellar example by Participant 2 states:

“In 2014, while playing in an eight-team Regional, a lot of our starters were sick. We had two or three starters out each game. Some of the starters played sick and a few subs stepped in to play. We ended up winning the Regionals and going on to the College World Series. Everyone stepped up to the plate and played different positions without missing a beat.” (2024)
As you can see, the participants feel strongly about leadership and its connection to the overall team dynamic. In the example listed above, the coaching staff prepared everyone to be ready to play which led to success even in the face of defeat. Other participants also state that they feel a strong leader greatly impacts the team as a whole. Participant Nine explains, “I think good leadership shows when you are on the field and getting the team together off the field” (2024). Not only does strong leadership affect on-field play, but it impacts how the team behaves off the field, whether that be in the classroom, around campus, or in their personal lives. To finish up, participant 10 discusses their thoughts on how “Lack of leadership from coaches causes issues amongst the players” (2024). This statement reinforces that there is an importance of the culture the leader creates.

**What Makes A Good Leader?**

Now to answer the big question, what makes a good leader in college athletics? According to the pool of athletes, there are a few things that put some leaders ahead of others. Referring back to chapter four, there was a baseline of what the participant pools' most common answers were for what makes a good leader.

1. Leading by example, on the field, in the classroom, outside of athletics entirely
2. Creating total buy-in into the program, by creating a trustworthy culture and treating everyone with respect
3. Positive attitude, staying humble, and working hard.

These were the standards that were determined by the pool of participants. Each one of these aspects is important to making a strong leader. These aspects tie directly in with the previous questions. Each of these aspects of a good leader affects how a team is dynamic.
If a strong leader has these qualities, odds are, they will create a good culture amongst the team. The same goes for the question regarding how leaders manage conflicts and disagreements. If a strong leader is open and positive when dealing with conflicts, it paves the way for others. Another key aspect of this is leading by example. Managing conflicts can be hard, but leading by example and doing things the right way will help alleviate the long-term effects of disagreements on the team. The qualities of a strong leader do not falter, they offer strong, confident leadership skills at all times, creating a positive culture for everyone around them. College athletics are an up-and-down environment, a big aspect of sport is handling failure. Having strong leadership to guide individuals through failure will pay dividends in creating a positive team culture.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

Future Implications

Throughout this research, the literature collected did a good job of summarizing the importance of ethics within a college setting. Not only ethics, but it pointed out some of the key pieces that we as scholars need to be on the lookout for. Placing a higher emphasis on creating diversity in the changing field, but also understanding leadership is changing in college sports at a rapid pace. However, there is still research to be done, on topics like driving factors that could increase diversity, how to handle bad ethics in leadership, and what we can do rapidly to keep up with the change. This research aims to identify the traits specific leadership traits that can benefit a leader. Identifying ethical leaders and their traits is another objective of this study. Not only that, it aims to identify the benefits of increasing diverse leadership by promoting the importance of all parties involved in the leadership process. Once we as scholars identify these factors, we can not only better study but understand leadership in college athletics.

Summary

Throughout this study, it is clear certain criteria must be met if you want to excel as a good leader in college athletics. Being a strong leader consists of creating a strong culture, staying positive, and leading by example. All of these aspects are what create a successful leader in the world of sports. Sports is a very leadership-reliant operation. Leadership trickles down from the top and creates a culture in which everyone abides. Whether you are the athletic director, coach, or team captain, the importance of
leadership is the same. Creating an environment your followers can buy into is the most important aspect of a leader in sports. Helping people when they are down, earning trust, and encouraging others to strive for greatness every day, is how you can leave your mark as a leader in the world of college athletics.
Appendix A- Consent Form

University of Southern Maine
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Leadership In College Athletics

Principal Investigator(s): Owen Sullivan

Phone: 207-468-0552
Email: owen.sullivan@maine.edu

Faculty Advisor: Elizabeth Goryunova
Email: elizabeth.goryunova@maine.edu

Introduction:
General requirement language:
• Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
• You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the effects of leadership in college athletics. I am hoping to understand the traits good leaders present in a college sports setting. The goal is to better understand how leaders can enhance their skills to become better leaders. Through a research questionnaire, I will ask questions to hopefully provide me with real-life examples.

Who will be in this study?

Individuals involved in this study will be current college athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators. This pool was chosen because it is in the closest relation to what I am trying to uncover. This pool should allow me to better understand the thoughts of the current college athletics pool.
• You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.
• 10-15 college athletes, coaches, and athletic administration.

What will I be asked to do?
In this study, you will answer the questions in the questionnaire. You can fill the questionnaire out through the email link I will send to all of the eligible participants. Answering the questions honestly, truthfully, and thoroughly are the expectations. All information will be kept confidential, so feel free to answer how you please.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study

• There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

The possible benefits are you can help better develop the coaches and athletic administration at the college level. With a better understanding of leadership and important qualities, ideally, this will allow for the betterment of the leadership pool.

• There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There may be a benefit to others, the organization, etc. …

What will it cost me?

It will cost you nothing financially, just a response to the survey is required.

How will my privacy be protected?

Privacy will be protected by making all names of people involved in this study anonymous. If wanted by the participant. The study will only be seen by the conductor of this study. All information will stay within the confines of the study.

How will my data be kept confidential?

Will be confidential if selected by the study participant.

• This study is designed to be anonymous, this means that no one, can link the data you provide to you, or identify you as a participant.
  
  ○ NOTE: Anonymous means that no one (including the researcher) can link data to an individual. Researchers should not promise complete anonymity, especially in the case of research conducted via the internet.
    • Research records will be kept in a locked file
    • Business sensitive data: Data will be stored on a password-protected computer and on a USM network drive;
    • Individually identifiable data will be destroyed after the study is complete;
    • No individually identifiable information will be collected.

General requirement language:
• Please note that the Institutional Review Board may review the research records. Please remove sponsors or funding agencies from this language if they are not applicable.

What are my rights as a research participant?

General requirement language:
• Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of Southern Maine. This survey will have no effect on students or faculty members at the University of Southern Maine.
• You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
• If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
• Additional element as appropriate: You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.

What other options do I have?

You may choose to not take the survey, if you choose not to take the survey there will be no penalty or affects on you.

Whom may I contact with questions?

General requirement language:
• The researchers conducting this study are Owen Sullivan and Elizabeth Goryunova. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact Owen at (207) 468-0552 or owen.sullivan@maine.edu. You may contract Elizabeth at elizabeth.goryunova@maine.edu
• If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Owen Sullivan at (207) 468-0552.

NOTE: Student researchers are required to have the faculty advisor listed. The faculty advisor is expected to take an active role in students’ research activities and provide supervision throughout the duration of their research study. The faculty advisor is legally responsible for all research activities.
• If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call the USM Office of Research Integrity and Outreach at 207-780-4517 and/or email usmorio@maine.edu.
Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

General requirement language:
  • You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant’s Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

_________________________________________________________________

Participant’s signature or
Legally authorized representative

_________________________________________________________________

Printed name

Researcher’s Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

_________________________________________________________________

Researcher’s signature

Date

_________________________________________________________________

Printed name
Appendix B- Open-Ended Survey Questions

This study is for adult student-athletes, coaches, and administration within the University of Southern Maine's athletic department. You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. If you are 18 years and older, do you consent to participating in this research study?
Yes:
No:

Section 1: Participant Information
Gender:
College/University:
Athletic Team/Program
Position/Role in Athletics
Years of Experience in College Athletics:

Section 2: General Background and Experience
1. How would you describe your experience as a college athlete
2. Can you briefly describe the role of leadership within your college athletic program?
3. Have you held any leadership positions within your team or athletics department? If so, please describe.
4. In your opinion, what qualities or traits are essential for a successful leader in college athletics?

Section 3: Leadership Styles
5. What leadership style(s) do you believe are most effective in college athletics, and why?
6. Can you provide an example of a coach or teammate who demonstrated exceptional leadership? What made their leadership effective?
7. How does the leadership style of a coach impact the team's performance and cohesion?
8. How do you think leadership styles may vary between different sports within the same college or university?

Section 4: Challenges and Obstacles
9. What challenges do student-athletes face in assuming leadership roles within their teams?
10. Have you experienced any specific challenges as a leader in your athletic program? How does the balance between academics and athletics affect a student-athlete's ability to be an effective leader?
11. Can you describe any instances of conflict or tension within the team related to leadership roles or decisions?

Section 5: Coach-Athlete Relationship
12. How important is the relationship between coaches and athletes in fostering leadership development?
13. What role does trust play in the coach-athlete relationship and leadership dynamics?
14. How do coaches support the leadership development of student-athletes?
15. Have you experienced any positive or negative interactions with coaches that influenced your leadership development?

Section 6: Team Dynamics
16. How does leadership impact team dynamics, both on and off the field/court?
17. Can you share an experience when leadership played a significant role in overcoming a team challenge or adversity?
18. How do team captains or leaders contribute to team cohesion and morale?
19. In your view, how do leaders handle conflicts or disagreements within the team?

Section 7: Personal Growth and Development
20. How has your experience as a leader in college athletics contributed to your personal growth and development? If not it has not, where can you improve?
21. What skills or qualities have you developed as a result of your leadership role?
22. How do you see your leadership experiences in college athletics benefiting your life beyond sports?

Section 8: Future of Leadership in College Athletics
22. What changes or improvements do you envision for leadership development programs within college athletics/University of Southern Maine?
23. How can the University of Southern Maine better support student-athletes in developing leadership skills?
24. Do you believe that leadership in college athletics has evolved over time? If so, how?
25. Are there any emerging trends or challenges related to leadership in college athletics that you think are important to address?

Section 9: Additional Comments
26. Are there any other thoughts or comments you would like to share or elaborate on regarding leadership in college athletics?
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LEADERSHIP IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

MASTER IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

May, 2024

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Owen Sullivan entitled *Leadership In College Athletics* be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in Leadership Studies.

_________ Thesis Advisor (signature)

_________ Second Reader (signature)

Accepted

_____________________________ Department (signature)