STUDENT-ATHLETE WELLBEING AND PERSISTENCE:

An In-depth Look at Student-Athlete Perceptions

By:

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Abstract

This study investigated student-athlete perceptions of wellbeing, delimited to satisfaction regarding Athletic Department Policies and Practices, Educational Characteristics, Institutional Facilities and Services, and intent to academically persist. The study employed quantitative and qualitative data queries. This paper reports emergent findings specific to the seven student-athletes (5 male and 2 female, 4 team-sports and 3 individual-sports) who participated in the follow-up interviews. These findings revealed that the student-athletes: (a) recognized, albeit at times somewhat reluctantly, their role, responsibilities and agency in terms of their academic progress, and instructional (faculty to student-athlete and non-athlete to student-athlete) communications and relationships; (b) acknowledged reliance, appropriately so, on the Athletic Department (administrators and staff/coaches) in terms of assistance in understanding and complying with NCAA rules, regulations and eligibility requirements; (c) were aware of and made at least limited use of institution-based academic content support services; and (d) saw and valued themselves as students and student-athletes.

Introduction

Historically, college sports have evolved from student-run athletic clubs to institution-led intercollegiate sports programs associated with national-level sport governance organizations (e.g., the National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics [NAIA], the National Junior College Athletic Association [NJCAA], etc.) (Schulman & Bowen, 2001). Over time the NCAA developed from an exclusively men's sport organization concerned with establishing rules to minimize violent behavior, to a multi-division (D-I, D-II, and D-III) sport governance organization that has assumed fiscal management, certification, and administrative control of most college sports (Maxcy, 2004). Today, the NCAA describes itself as being "…[f]ounded more than one hundred years ago as a way to protect student-athletes…[implementing] that principle with increased emphasis on both athletics and academic excellence" (NCAA website, 2011).

A Brief Overview of the History and Evolution of Athletics-Academics NCAA Reforms

Intercollegiate athletics has gone through a number of restructuring periods associated with the challenges of balancing athletic and academic excellence (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Thelin, 1994; Zimbalist, 1999). The 1920's were characterized by numerous media reports conveying the deplorable nature of intercollegiate games (Thelin, 1994). This was a period marked by irregularities that challenged the running of intercollegiate athletics due to increased and out-of-control sport commercialization and professionalism, emphasizing maximizing profits and the consequent exploitation of student-athletes (Thelin, 1994). These irregularities led the Carnegie Foundation of Advancement of Teachers (CFAT) to appoint Howard Savage and Associates to embark on a nationwide study in 1929. Savage's study confirmed anomalies and inconsistencies associated with intercollegiate athletics and the role

and mission of colleges/universities in terms of their core business that is, educating students (Thelin, 1994).

The problems student-athletes faced continued to escalate over the next two and a half decades leading to the formation of a 1952 Presidential Committee by the American Council of Education (ACE) (Thelin, 1994). This committee investigated and reported on ethics in collegiate sport. More recently, the 1999 and the 2001 Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (KFCIA) published reports that revealed and substantiated ongoing conflicts between academic and athletic goals, such as admission practices for intercollegiate athletes being at odds with institutional education goals (KFCIA, 1991, 2001). A 2010 KFCIA report noted that the conflicts identified in the earlier reports have escalated, particularly among schools in prestigious conferences. According to this report not only has the gap in expenditures between athletics and academics continued to widen, it has reached intolerable levels. The KFCIA attributed this increasing adoption of a "business model of intercollegiate athletics" that has led to unattainable economic demands for most institutions, thereby compromising core academic values (2010, p. 16). Further, the 2010 KFCIA report noted that meaningful reform can be realized only through (a) "fiscal discipline in athletic programs," (b) limiting the focus of intercollegiate athletics towards professionalism by rewarding institutions that prioritize academics, and (c) treating athletes as students (p. 17).

During the latter 20th century the NCAA instituted a number of legislative reforms to strengthen admission standards for prospective student-athletes (i.e., Propositions 48 and 16). Proposition 48, passed in 1986, represented efforts to improve the academic success of potential student-athletes in basketball and football, the key income-generating sports (Pound, 2008). Proposition 48 required student-athletes to have a high school GPA of at least 2.0 in 11 core

courses and achieve a combined 700 score on the SAT. Failure to meet these requirements disqualified student-athletes from participating in athletics and from receiving athletic-related financial aid during their first year of collegiate enrollment. NCAA eligibility became even more stringent when Proposition 16 was passed in 1992 (Pound, 2008). Proposition 16's implementation occurred in two phases. The first phase increased the number of core high school classes from 11 to13 and added two elective courses, with SAT/ACT and minimum GPA conditions remaining the same as those in Proposition 48. The second phase eliminated the electives and incorporated an extra year of English. In 1996, the NCAA instituted a sliding scale that combined SAT/ACT and GPA in a minimum of 13 core classes.

At each stage of reform the NCAA hoped that by better aligning the standards used to admit student-athletes with those used by the institution for non-athletes, when student-athletes arrived on a college campus they would be better able to meet athletic and academic demands. This ideal was consistent with the 1991 KFCIA report that stated, "student-athletes will be students as well as athletes" (p. 62). Despite NCAA legislative measures and requirements, recent literature confirms that student-athletes still confront conflicting roles associated with education and athletics (Hyatt, 2003; Nordeen, 2005; Suggs, 2003; Suggs, 2005; Wolverton, 2008). In addition, cases of academic fraud, in the form of altering athlete transcripts, acceptance of lower admission standards, awarding grades for classes that athletes had not attended, dishonesty, unethical practices, use of improper incentives from alumni, smear campaigns and attacking programs at other institutions persist (Ferris, et al., 2004; Kelo, 2005; KFCIA, 1991, 2001, 2010; Maxcy, 2004; Thelin, 2004; Zimbalist, 1999).

The NCAA's mission is focused on maintaining college sport as a primary component of the academic process. In response, efforts to shift control of intercollegiate athletics to university

presidents have been enacted in an attempt to regulate and improve the academic and financial integrity of athletic programs. According to Unruh (1999) intercollegiate athletic departments need to better prepare and support student-athletes as they transition to collegiate life by providing academic support and NCAA eligibility compliance information, and working to ensure that student-athletes interact with peers and faculty external to athletics. Unruh concluded that student-athletes, like other students, must keep up their grades, have opportunities to meet new friends, select majors, make career choices, follow institutional rules, and meet the demands of their coaches. Unruh advocated for a good rapport between athletic departments and institutions to enrich the campus experiences of student-athletes. Likewise, Hill, Burch-Ragan, and Yates (2001) noted that the success of an intercollegiate athletic program depends on combined efforts made by the whole institution to make the overall college experience for student-athletes a success.

Student and Student-Athlete Persistence

In a 2006 report titled: *What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature*, Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek presented a conceptual framework for student success wherein student engagement was portrayed as a college experience nexus of student behaviors (e.g., student academic time and effort, faculty and peer interactions and involvement) and institutional conditions (e.g., resources, educational policies, practices and programs, and structural features). In terms of behaviors, purposeful engagement in academic and extracurricular activities has been shown to positively influence academic performance (Astin 1993; Crawford, 2007; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Hathaway, 2005; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Academic achievement has been shown to be positively correlated to persistence (Astin, 1993; DeBerard, Speilmans, & Julka, 2004).

Astin (1993) asserted that frequent interactions with faculty and peers increased student satisfaction; with faculty interactions being particularly important when faculty demonstrated an interest not only in students' academic progress but their wellbeing. Similarly, peer-to-peer interactions had a significant positive impact on the way students perceived their connection to and integration into campus life. Comeaux, (2005) and Comeaux and Harrision (2007) noted that the nature and content of faculty to student-athlete communication mattered. As an example, among male revenue sport student-athletes Comeaux found "…faculty who provided help in achieving professional goals [made] a relatively strong contribution to student success whereas faculty who provided encouragement for graduate school did not …" (Conclusion ¶1).

Specific to student-athletes Crawford (2007) noted that like their non-athlete peers, the level of student-athlete purposeful involvement in campus life and associations with faculty and peers enhanced their academic experiences. According to Crawford, student-athletes acknowledged that positive associations (with faculty and peers) were instrumental in enhancing both their academic and athletic experiences. Further analysis revealed gender differences within the student-athlete population, with females being more engaged in interactions than their male counterparts. Differences were also noted between upper- and lower-class student-athletes and revenue and non-revenue sports, with the former in both instances indicating more involvement.

In a study examining factors related to NCAA Division I student-athlete engagement and academic outcomes, Gayles and Hu (2009) identified four areas of student engagement and examined the extent to which engaging student-athletes in these areas impacted academic success. These included interactions with faculty and non-athletes, participation in organizations outside athletics, and academic-related activities. Gayles and Hu found that while student background characteristics had limited influence on student engagement, student-athletes

benefited in ways similar to their non-athlete peers and experienced a significant positive impact on college outcomes as a result of engagement in educationally purposeful activities.

Hathaway (2005) explored collegiate levels of engagement among both athletes and non-athletes and the impact of engagement on academic development. Hathaway's study considered the areas of academic challenge, active and collaboration learning, student and faculty interactions, and engaging educational experiences, and utilized grade point average as a measure of level of academic development. Results indicated more intense levels of engagement in academic activities, interactions with faculty and peers, as well as the application of critical concepts learned during group discussions held outside of class among non-athletes; while athletes were more involved in non-academic activities and efforts associated with professed future athletic careers. Interestingly, the study established that athlete status was not predictive in terms of positive or negative academic development.

Relative to institutional conditions, Umbach, Palmer, Kuhn, and Hannah (2006) compared academic support programs designed for student-athletes to those available more broadly across the institution (i.e., available to athletes and non-athletes). Findings indicated that despite heavy sport-related demands, pressures and expectations student-athletes did not differ much from non-athletes in terms of academic support use. However, relative to attendance at and/or participation in non-athletic campus organizations and events student-athletes exhibited limited engagement. Engagement fosters a sense of university and community connection, and thereby positively impacts wellbeing, academic achievement and persistence (Astin 1993; Crawford, 2007; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Hathaway, 2005; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

While undoubtedly student-athletes are distinct from their non-athlete peers, at the least in terms of practice- and competition-related time constraints, demands, pressures and expectations, research demonstrates numerous similarities in terms of student engagement and college experience—*What Matters to Student Success* (Astin 1993; Crawford, 2007; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Hathaway, 2005; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). With this in mind, in addition to the engagement literature described, Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome model (IEO) was used to frame an understanding of student persistence; and Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure was used to shed light on measures institutions could pursue to retain students. Both models focus on the general student body, but were assumed to be applicable to student-athletes.

Astin's (1993) IEO model put forward the notion that when students start college they have defined expectations (inputs) and these expectations influence their willingness to persist. In addition, institutional characteristics such as size, type, characteristics of peers and faculty, curriculum, and student involvement, all influence student success. Moreover, if students are satisfied with these characteristics they are more likely to stay at the institution. Astin's model predicts that the closer the match between student expectations and institutional characteristics, the higher the persistent rate (output).

Astin (1993) used the following as outcome measures of the college experience: students' political identity, personality self-concept, attitudes and beliefs, patterns of behavior, academic and cognitive behavior, career development, and satisfaction with college environment. Astin's satisfaction measures examined contentment with the various undergraduate characteristics and experiences. Characteristics included contacts with faculty, interactions with peers and administration, curriculum and instruction, student life, individual support services, and

facilities. Experiences included overall college experience, willingness to re-enroll in one's first college, faculty, curriculum instruction, student-life, and individual support services. According to Astin "there is a positive association between student satisfaction, undergraduate GPA, and retention" (p. 311). Astin contended that debates in higher education have given precedence to educational evaluation outcomes and neglected student insights on educational experiences. Astin emphasized that student perceptions should be taken into consideration when such discussions take place; and that perceptions of students can be measured by ascertaining students' level of satisfaction and ratings of selected aspects of the college environment.

Tinto (1993) put forward a theory of retention that has become one of the most widely accepted in terms of college attrition. Tinto's model suggests that students enter college with a variety of backgrounds and characteristics that influence their achievement. Tinto identified these characteristics as follows: educational aspirations, socioeconomic status, high school grades, ability, gender, and race. Tinto hypothesized that these characteristics influence student success, and that success is realized when a compatible relationship exists between the university's institutional goals and the students' aspirations. Despite somewhat modest empirical support and concern specific to the applicability of Tinto's model to "…all students" (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 12) the concepts of academic and social integration, particularly as they relate to the elements of student engagement identified, as well as the definition of student-athlete wellbeing used in this study, substantiated the use of Tinto's model to supplement and complement the framework provided by Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome model (IEO).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was: (a) to investigate student-athlete perceptions of wellbeing, delimited to satisfaction regarding Athletic Departmental Policies and Practices, Educational

Characteristics, Institutional Facilities and Services, as well as their academic persistence intentions; and (b) to identify differences in wellbeing perceptions and persistence intentions based on student-athlete demographics (i.e., student-status, gender and sport played). The purpose was addressed through four research questions. These were:

1. What was the level of student-athlete perceived satisfaction associated with Athletic Departmental Policies and Practices (defined to include student-athlete preparation, athletic academic support services, and relationship with academe, athletic academic advisors, and coaches)?

2. What was the level of student-athlete perceived satisfaction associated with Educational Characteristics (defined to include interaction with faculty, quality of instruction, interactions with peers, and co-curricular activities)?

3. What was the level of student-athlete perceived satisfaction associated with Institutional Services and Facilities (defined to include campus services and facilities related to intercollegiate athletic participation)?

4. Were there differences in student-athlete perceptions regarding Athletic Departmental Policies and Practices, Educational Characteristics, and Institutional Services and Facilities, among and between first- and second-year student-athletes regarding their intent to persist at ISU?

While the broader study explored these perceptions using a mixed method approach, this paper is limited to the qualitative student-athlete data. The first three research questions addressed this focus in terms of the level of student-athlete perceived satisfaction related to wellbeing as delimited in this study and student-athletes' intent to persist. The fourth research question explored differences based on student-athlete demographics.

Methodology

Participants and Sampling

Participants for this study were delimited to first- and second-year student-athletes enrolled in their second and fourth semesters respectively during the spring 2010 academic year, who were in good academic standing (NCAA 2009-2010 Division I Manual, 2009). In addition, student-athletes considered for this study were those eligible to (a) practice, compete, and receive financial aid; (b) practice and receive aid; (c) received aid only; and/or (d) walk-ons. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to collect data from participants who fit into a wide-ranging group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Patton, 2002; Patten, 2007), and allowed the researcher to identify and target ISU student-athletes that met the identified inclusion criteria. Using sport participation rosters provided by the Athletic Department coaches, a total of 107 student-athletes were deemed eligible to participate in this study. Ninety-nine surveys were returned within the targeted time resulting in a response rate of 92.5%.

Convenience sampling was used for the recruitment and selection of follow-up interview participants. This sampling method relied upon survey participants who indicated (by checking a box on their returned survey and including contact information) a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. A total of seven interviewees were selected based on gender and sport participation demographics (i.e., males and females to represent team sports, and individual sports). Admittedly, results from this small sample size (seven interviewees) cannot be generalized. It is important to note that the sole purpose of the follow-up interviews was to explore the numerical data more deeply in those areas of concern while augmenting the qualitative data.

Instrumentation and Procedures

The broader study employed two instruments, a survey questionnaire (quantitative) and a semi-structured interview protocol (qualitative). As stated, this paper focuses on the qualitative data therefore the instrumentation and procedures describe the development and use of the semi-structured interview protocol.

The semi-structured interview protocol content was developed based on the survey instrument, survey response findings and emergent themes therein. The conceptual framework for the survey was grounded in elements of Astin's (1993) Summary on Satisfaction with College Environment and Undergraduate Experiences. The survey instrument was then subject to expert review and pilot testing. Once drafted, the semi-structured interview protocol, like the survey instrument was piloted for clarity and understanding.

Pilot process. Pilot study participants were recruited by the he researcher using a snowball sampling technique from among junior and senior student-athletes who met the study inclusion criteria in terms of academic eligibility. This allowed for the identification of a small and accessible pilot sample (Edmonson & Irby, 2008; Singleton & Straits, 2002). A total of ten participants were identified and two of these participants expressed their willingness to be interviewed. Two pilot interviews were conducted, one with a male (individual sport) student-athlete and one with a female (team sport) student-athlete. The pilot interviews helped the researcher ensure question clarity and understanding while also creating a more efficient interview process (Baumgartner & Hensley 2006; Edmonson & Irby, 2008; Merriam, 1998). Some of the notable changes made due to the pilot process included: clarifying categories of eligibility and receiving athletic support/aid (eligible to practice, compete, and receive aid, practice and receive aid, and receiving aid only); accommodating student-athletes who played

more than one sport, use of sport venues (distinguishing whether the same venue was used for practice and competition); and removing the non-applicable option on the use of athletic academic services and institutional services replacing it with awareness and use option(s).

Semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed the researcher to explore student-athletes' perceptions more thoroughly than could be expected from the survey item responses alone. The interviews generated qualitative data that were potentially more open, detailed, and sincere, and captured "a complex holistic picture" (Creswell, 1998, p. 5). According to Patton (2002) the researcher can use direct quotes, and let participants "respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their point of view" (p. 21). In addition, interviews allowed the researcher to solicit more information through probing and clarification (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, Edmonson and Irby (2008) affirmed that interviews offer more than uttered reactions, "through facial expressions, tone of voice, and other non-verbal cues" (p. 91).

The qualitative data in this study were more targeted and focused than the quantitative data. Edmonson and Irby (2008) affirmed that "what they [interview data] lack in breadth, they make up for in depth" (p. 89). The interview protocol content was based on survey findings and emergent themes therein. Themes identified for follow-up interviews were derived from survey items that student-athletes rated as dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. These included but were not limited to: pre-registration and orientation received from the Athletic Department Student Support Services; exposure to programs outside athletics aimed at equipping you with life skills; relationships with faculty and peers in and outside class; and athletic performance relative to priorities given to athletics/academics team's performance, and intentions to compete next season.

Interviews were scheduled at the convenience, in terms of time and location of seven student-athletes (e.g., athletic study hall, athletic department office, other location on campus requested by the student-athlete). Interviews were initiated by the researcher reintroducing herself and the study, explaining and gaining informed consent, and then proceeding using the semi-structured interview protocol to guide the process.

Interviews were recorded, and lasted approximately 20 minutes. The process began with question prompts designed to put participants at ease and support trust and rapport development (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Measures were taken to ensure consistency of the verbatim transcription by engaging an experienced transcriber who organized content in a manner consistent with the audio material (Poland, 2002). Recordings allowed the researcher to play back the interview to ensure accurate transcription (Patten, 2007). Following transcription, member checking was employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the understandings gathered from the qualitative data analysis (Krefting, 1991). The interviewees were asked to review the interview transcripts to verify response transcription accuracy and meaning (Bodgan & Biklen, & Krefting).

Design and Analysis

The study design adopted for this research was mixed methods, which combined quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) data queries. Combining quantitative and qualitative inquiry allowed for an in-depth understanding of perceptions and experiences of ISU student-athletes. The qualitative data derived from the interviews were analyzed using a general inductive approach as articulated by Thomas (2006). Emergent themes arising from the qualitative data were placed in categories and then coded. During qualitative data collection the researcher was the instrument and constantly evaluated the data to allow numerous readings and

constant comparison of new themes emerging from transcripts. These themes were incorporated with previous categorized and coded data in order to establish and refine categories and subsequently generated new interpretations. Patten (2007) identified ways of ensuring quality qualitative research through triangulation. According to Patten triangulation is commonly used in qualitative research to establish reliability and credibility of data using various sources. Patten (2007) suggested triangulating data through the use of various forms of data collection – methods triangulation (i.e., getting data from alternative sources) and researcher triangulation (i.e., the use of research assistants). For this study, triangulation was employed by way of multiple data sources, that is, the survey and interviews.

Findings & Discussion

The findings are presented and discussed in terms of the interviewee demographics, student-athlete wellbeing perceptions and persistence intentions. Summary findings from the quantitative-survey data are presented to lend context to the qualitative inquiry focus and findings. Table 1 displays the interviewee demographics (coded A- G) which include gender, student status and sport played.

Table 1

Interviewee Demographics

Interviewee	Gender	Student Status	Sport Played	Team /Individual
Respondent A	Male	Freshman	Track and Field	Individual
Respondent B	Male	Sophomore	Cross Country	Individual
Respondent C	Male	Sophomore	Basketball	Team
Respondent D	Male	Freshman	Football	Team
Respondent E	Female	Freshman	Golf	Individual
Respondent F	Male	Freshman	Football	Team
Respondent G	Female	Sophomore	Volleyball	Team

As Table 1 makes evident, perspectives were sought from male and female, team and individual sport student-athletes in an effort to more comprehensively canvas their perceptions.

Student-Athlete Wellbeing

As noted, student-athlete wellbeing was delimited to satisfaction perceptions regarding Athletic Departmental Policies and Practices, Educational Characteristics, Institutional Facilities and Services, and intent to academically persist.

Athletic Departmental Policies and Practices. The quantitative data indicated that respondents were generally satisfied with the athletic department services and supports, but were less enthusiastic in terms of level of satisfaction regarding exposure to life-skill programs outside athletics (e.g., nutrition and drug/alcohol seminars/ workshops). The interview protocol focused on perceptions related to student-athlete student and wellbeing supports specific to the process of pre-registration, athletic-specific academic advising, and exposure to institution-based seminars

and workshops. These areas were queried because survey respondents' satisfaction levels were rated as comparatively low and/or needed further clarification.

The Athletic Department pre-registration process is conducted in April for the following fall. Potential student-athletes receive face-to-face or telephone advising during this period. Incoming student-athletes who miss the spring pre-registration receive advising packages through the mail. While interviewee responses varied in terms of the effectiveness of this process, all expressed concerns in terms of what they perceived as superficial rote instruction as opposed to explanatory advising and guidance. Respondent G (a sophomore, volleyball athlete) said, "I don't know if it was necessary. It was like really vague. I felt like the entire advising process was vague…I think that was scary." She went on to add that the athletic department advisors did not explain the procedures clearly and seemed to assume that everyone understood what was going on. Respondent E (a freshman, female golfer) echoed the same sentiments. She said: "…we had people in the athletic department that were supposed to help, but I didn't feel like they were helpful. They kept saying, like, here you should take this and that and be set on track."

Respondent C (a sophomore male basketball athlete) indicated he was "…pretty happy with it [the process]" commenting, "One of the guys over at pre-registration…let me know what would be good as far as me being an athlete as well as being a student.…When you first come in, you don't focus a lot on your major, you are trying to get your goals out of the way, so it wasn't that complicated." Respondents B and G (both sophomores) shared similar views, citing a lack of adequate academic advisors. According to Respondent B:

> I think that the preregistration process is set up in a way where students can be
> successful, but I think they have to almost put their foot forward and have some initiative
> and make sure what they are doing is correct. For example, they do give you a time line
> and goals which you can achieve….but what needs to be taken into account is there are

two or maybe three academic advisors at Idaho State University and there are over 500 student-athletes. During that time, they [the advisors] are bombarded with a lot of the people…everyone wants to get that process done.

Athletic academic advisors are in charge of advising incoming freshmen student-athletes who have not declared a major, as well as all student-athletes with less than 58 credits (ISU NCAA Certification Self-Study, 2009). While the established process seemed to get the job done, student-athletes indicated they were both confused and concerned regarding matters pertaining to eligibility. Respondent B explained this sentiment in the following:

There has been numerous times since I have been enrolled here that I have heard of students not eligible…[alleging]…the blame is with the academic advisor. Like I said, it is hard for those advisors to make sure everything is right….I think you, as a student, have to almost take initiative by going through your handbook, looking at your own transcripts, and doing the work for them so that when you go in there, you are prepared to ask questions and you have the main frame of what you are going to be accomplishing throughout school…. A lot of student-athletes go there with no knowledge of anything and expect the advisors to do it all for them. I think that can be okay at some times but that is not okay when you have 500 students that act like they are helpless and have 3 people trying to make sure every single person is on the right [eligibility and] graduation track.

Likewise Respondent C noted the academic advisors "… are more prone to making mistakes because of the load they are given….I think they just have too much on their shoulders." He went on to say:

This wasn't just a concern for me, but for my teammate…who had problems with eligibility. It really became a concern because the NCAA has so many by-laws we have people that work here that are specifically here because of the NCAA by laws, and when I got here as a freshman during summer, I took 3 credit hours, and I was actually supposed to take 6 credit hours but they didn't know until a year later. So I had to go find something…the eligibility thing is something that the students [and coaches and administrative people] have to stay on top of.

According to Hill, et al., (2001) the success of intercollegiate athletic programs depends on combined efforts made by the whole institution to make the overall college experience for student-athletes a success. Institution-based programs (e.g., career counseling, personal

counseling, nutrition, diversity, gambling, alcohol and drug guidelines, sexual orientation,

personal development, and leadership) can and do make an important contribution to student-

athlete wellbeing (NCAA 2009-2010 Division I Manual, 2009). As such, student-athletes'

perceptions were sought regarding their awareness and/or use of these institution-based

programs. In general, while the interviewees indicated they were at least vaguely aware that the

programs existed, their use and/or participation in them was near nil. Respondent C

unenthusiastically admitted that his coach invited a guest speaker to a team meeting to talk to

about nutrition: "Yeah, I know, our coach brought in a nutritionist for us. She was informing us

on what was good to eat what was good and how many calories we need to consume. Healthy

choices…." He went on to say, "Anything going on outside athletics, beneficial informative

seminars, I don't think I have been to any of them." Respondent B elaborated and described the

situation as follows:

> I don't think the Athletic Department really pushes forward to make it an issue on having
> a seminar on so and so today….I know they [the student body receives] weekly emails
> that give a recap as to what is going on throughout that week…I know everyone gets that
> email. It comes down to the actual Athletic Department saying things directly to the
> athletes….

Interviews gave the researcher an opportunity to elicit more detailed responses about

student-athletes' perceived satisfaction with Athletic Departmental Policies and Practices

specifically targeting student-athlete student and wellbeing supports. In terms of academic

advising findings revealed that student-athletes expressed concerns about inadequate advisor

access (i.e., too many student-athletes for the number of Athletic Department academic

advisors), and the resultant superficiality of the advising they received. Interviewees felt that

even if athletic academic advisors were competent in their work, they were prone to making

mistakes due to these large numbers. Interviewees acknowledged that they [the student-athletes]

probably needed to be more responsible in terms of mapping out and monitoring their own academic progress; but stressed their reliance on Athletic Department advising especially when it came to criteria and academic progress metrics associated with determining and maintaining intercollegiate athletic eligibility (NCAA 2009-10 Manual, 2009). Regarding institution-based (external to athletics) wellbeing supports (e.g., seminars/workshops, etc.) while acknowledging some awareness, the student-athletes interviewed admitted they did not avail themselves of these support options and opportunities unless scheduled and/or specifically directed by their coach and/or the Athletic Department.

Educational Characteristics. The quantitative data revealed that while respondents' expressed general satisfaction regarding their interactions with faculty and quality of instruction, they were somewhat less satisfied relative to interactions with their non-athlete peers. The qualitative queries sought to establish student-athlete perceived satisfaction associated with interactions with faculty, quality of instruction, campus environment, interactions with peers, and involvement in co-curricular activities (Astin, 1993). Two main thematic concerns were derived from the interview data. They were: (a) concern and at times confusion regarding instructional/ instructor inconsistencies associated with assisting and/or accommodating student-athletes when they had to miss classes, quizzes, or assignment deadlines due to athletic scheduling conflicts; and (b) difficulty scheduling and participating with non-athlete peers in classroom projects, discussions, etc., also associated with athletic scheduling conflicts.

In terms of instructional/instructor inconsistencies, Respondent B (a sophomore, male cross country athlete) relayed the following:

> I have heard of some teachers that say something like, "if we have any athletes in this class, please give me a schedule of all your events showing when you are going to be gone so I know ahead of time." I have heard teachers straight up say before class to other athletes, "I don't care if you are an athlete and I don't care if you miss class. If you miss

class and there is a test that day, it is your fault." They say this policy goes for athletes and any students. It is really diverse across the campus.

Likewise, Respondent A (a freshman, male track and field athlete) noted:

> Yeah, that is one thing I like about the faculty here….They are really helpful and are willing to help you with everything. If I go in there and tell them I am leaving on these days for track so I won't be here and they are like okay here's what you are going to need to know and as long as you do it in a timely manner. [In contrast]...I had one instructor he wouldn't let me do a test. He was not prepared to rewrite the test for me and he was like no you will just have to skip this test.

Similarly, Respondent C (a sophomore, male basketball athlete) described the following:

> I went to one of my professors because I missed some quizzes and I emailed her and she e-mailed me back saying I could make them up, but by the time she emailed me back I was right back out of town with no internet access. Some professors can really not want to dedicate or commit themselves to working with you….Some professors have a policy where you can't miss that much and usually you have to get out of that class. But in my experience most of my professors have worked pretty well with me. I think I had one where it wasn't too good, but most of my professors they worked pretty well with me.

Respondent B later commented that he believed if instructors knew ahead of time when a student-athlete was going to miss class, they were more willing to work with the student-athlete.

He said:

> Yes, I think even if a teacher didn't like athletics or respect the individual, which in some cases there are teachers that are biased. If you were to take the initiative to go up to a teacher and show that teacher this is what I do, this is why I am here, I want to do excellent in your class, I want to learn from you, I respect you, you are a Dr. so and so, and give them the schedule of the dates you will miss class, I think this should turn the light on in that teacher's head, "Well this person came up to me and is trying."

Respondent F (a freshman, football athlete) echoed the same sentiments:

> I've realized that like if you're an athlete and if you just sit around in class and if you're are doing bad in a class and you don't go to them for the help, then that's when they don't like you. But I have also known some who just don't like athletes in general….I have had some professors who will say I am only giving that quiz that day and so you're kinda out luck for that situation.

Overall, while noting inconsistencies, like their sentiments related to the advising process, the interviewees acknowledged awareness of their role in at least influencing whether or

not athletic schedule conflicts were favorably viewed and/or accommodated by the faculty they interacted with. Similar results were found with interactions with non-athlete peers.

Hyatt's (2003) study, *Barriers to Persistence among African American Intercollegiate Athletes* showed the need for athletes to interact with non-athletes. Hyatt pointed out that student-athletes who were isolated from non-athletes were disadvantaged in their ability to perform well socially and academically. Athletes were described as typically so engrossed in their sport programs that they had very little time to socialize or study. Above all, according to Hyatt time spent traveling robed athletes of an average of 15-20% of contact time, and as a result they were likely to fall behind or miss a significant amount of information and interactions with other students, and faculty, and feel less prepared and less orientated to their academic courses. Hyatt's observations were consistent with Astin's Involvement Theory which hypothesized that the more involved a student is in the campus environment the more likely he/she will be to persist.

When asked about contact and/or working with non-athlete peers in and out of class time most of the interviewees experienced problems associated with their athletic-related practice and/or competition schedules. Respondent A stated: "It is a bit of a struggle at times, usually when…I get done with classes I go to track and they are just sitting around, so they are like oh let's get this [the assignment or project] done and I am like whoa [I can't meet right now] I am at track." Respondent C described how at times he really had to work at communicating because he was out of town fulfilling athletic commitments. He shared the following example:

> I did a project last fall, and we went out of town. I had a problem because we went out to LA and I had to just do my part, we had to delegate different parts of this project. Really we had to communicate. We were e-mailing each other, and we were calling each other and the communication has to be a little better than average with the group, because you don't have that mixture of athletes and regular people.

When asked if the same project might have been easier to manage if he had worked with an athlete peer or teammate his response was: "Yes, I think so. In a way you can work better because you can relate to each other as teammates and practice at the same time."

Respondent G (a sophomore, volleyball athlete) added that problems associated with group assignments were further compounded by working with non-athletes with family commitments. She said, "Sometimes other people in your group have families and want to be home in the morning and evening and do the work in the middle of the day [while their kids are at school] so it hard to balance that, I think." When asked how this was resolved she said, "I mean when worse comes too worse, like I have to miss practice." When the researcher followed up asking whether her coach accepted this, she confirmed that he did as long as it did not happen on a regular basis. Similarly, Respondent A said: "I may need to talk to my coach and be like can I come early to practice because I have this report due and I have to work on it with my group."

When asked about personal relationships and/or socializing with non-athletes the interviewees perceived that there was a divide between them and their non-athlete peers. According to Hyatt (2003) athletes are discouraged from socializing with non-athletes often in response to negative stereotypes of student-athletes. As a result, there seems to be a divide between athletes and non-athletes. When Respondent G was questioned about this she said:

> I don't think it is true that we want to be by ourselves. I do think it is hard for someone who is not an athlete to understand what we have to go through, I mean practicing, workouts, always being tired and then balancing that with school. We are with the athletes so much because we see each other at work outs, practice, we eat together. I think those are the people you hang out with so those are the people you see the most. I don't think athletes want to be by themselves, I think we just don't have enough time to get to know anyone else.

Similarly, Respondent C said:

> Yeah, it is definitely like that, as athletes we know each other and we make that concerted effort because we have an automatic relation, we automatically relate to each other for

the reason that we go to a similar thing. But it is definitely a divide as far as like parties or a getting together, there are only athletes there; I have never seen a lot of non-athletes there, unless they were neighbors of athletes.

Respondent A did not believe the divide was deliberate, and attributed it to the hectic schedules experienced by most student-athletes. He felt that living on campus gave him the advantage to at least meet non-athletes who lived in the dorms. He said:

It is a little bit difficult, it's like I come back from track and do my homework and it is a bit of a struggle. But since I live in housing here on campus, Turner Hall, like I talk to my neighbors and everything so it is not like completely isolated. If I lived off campus, I think it would be a little more isolating for an outside social life.

Respondent E (a freshman, female golfer) was dissatisfied with her non-athlete interactions and relationships. She said: "I am close friends with my golf team. But I mean I have not made a lot of friends with non-athletes. I am more friends with athletes."

The interview responses revealed that the student-athletes: (a) experienced inconsistent instructional/instructor academic interactions when they had to miss class, quizzes, or major assignments due to athletic commitments; (b) acknowledged awareness of their role in initiating athletic schedule conflict communications with instructors; and (c) faced similar challenges when scheduling conflicts arose in terms of working with non-athlete peers. On the social side, interviewees confirmed that there was a divide between athletes and non-athletes, citing athletic-related schedules, work, and family commitments as some of the reasons that kept them the two groups apart.

Institutional Services and Facilities. These queries sought to establish student-athlete perceived satisfaction relative to Services and Facilities delimited to campus support services (career counseling, health, computer labs, library, tutoring, and academic services) and intercollegiate facilities (team training, competition, locker room, and weight training room). Quantitative data revealed that respondents expressed satisfaction regarding support services and

campus facilities in terms of counseling, student health services, computer labs, library services, tutoring—academic advising, and weight training. However, regarding sport practice and competition facilities, respondents were less satisfied, with females reporting less satisfaction than males. The interview protocol focused mostly on institution-based, non-Athletic Department academic support services (i.e., content area tutoring in math and writing labs). According to the ISU NCAA Certification Self-Study, (2009) content area tutoring is offered on an individual basis, or in small groups for all subject areas except those addressed through the ISU Center for Teaching and Learning (i.e., the Writing and the Math Centers—now named the Student Success Center). Consistent with the interview focus thus far in terms of 'student' student-athlete supports, the researcher wanted to explore the extent to which access to these services was impacted by athletic-related schedule issues.

Interviewees were asked about their awareness and use of services. Respondent E (a freshman, female golfer) had this to say, "I am aware they are there I don't understand like exactly what I would need to do to get that kind of assistance just because I haven't looked into it myself." The problem of awareness of these services was also expressed by Respondent F (a freshman, football athlete). He said:

> I think a lot of the people don't know what is available for them and how they can get access to those kinds of programs. That is something that could be talked about; I don't know what or how other athletes feel about that. Because it seems like there are good things that are available, that could be very helpful especially for student-athletes, maybe it is just circumstantial where they see a student-athlete needing that kind of help, they are going to address that, and they will come to them alone and say see this is available for you, so I don't know how that exactly works.

When questioned about whether access to these services conflicted with scheduled class or practice times, Respondent A (a freshman, male track and field athlete) said he did not experience any problems: "If I went to the math department, math tutoring center, it seemed to

be opened late enough that I could get in there and do some work." Respondent C (a sophomore, male basketball athlete) concurred. He said, "Yes they are easily accessible. Last semester when I took Calculus, I had to sign up for a tutor and we met in the math center up there and that was very beneficial. I used that service for as long as I needed to." Respondent B (a sophomore, male cross country athlete) had positive comments about the math lab. He said, "I think the math lab is doing a good job. I have been there and done that." He went on to confirm the accessibility to the lab, "I think the math lab is open is open from 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. That is a pretty wide span throughout the day to go in there." He also added that student-athletes had the responsibility to make use these services, stating "I mean if you don't have the time to go in there, then you are not using your time well." These sentiments were echoed by Respondent C who reiterated the student-athlete's role in taking responsibility for his/her academic progress and success. He said:

> I think a lot has to do with the way you look at things. Look we're in college now, when you get to this age, you have more responsibilities you are more accountable for what you do. I think that the types of people who are coming to the university have a lot to do with it, we have different services and I think they can be improved. But ultimately I think the student-athlete has to be the person who takes the initiative to improve themselves academically and in their sports.

He went on, commenting on the importance of explicit direction and support from Athletic Department staff/coaches:

> I think coaching has a big part to do with it the coaches have to be very involved in the schedules of their players. They have to let the player know that they care, let the player know that they want them to succeed. I think things like that could really help push a student-athlete go and explore the different things that the university has to offer.

The interview protocol focused on institution-based support services and revealed that: (a) student-athletes were satisfied with the supports available and their access to these services; (b) again acknowledged their responsibility in terms of making use of these services; and (c) admitted reliance on Athletic Department staff/coaches in terms of pushing them to "…explore

the different things the university has to offer" (Respondent C). Some confirmed that it was too early for them to be using services such as career counseling, tutoring, and academic advising outside athletics, because given that the study sample was delimited to freshmen and sophomores most of their advising was done within athletics.

Student-Athlete Persistence Perceptions & Intentions

Specific questions relative to student-athletes' intentions to persist were asked relative to re-enrollment and intentions to complete a degree at ISU, priorities in terms of athletics and academics, experience and individual and team athletic performance, and ISU expectations. The quantitative data indicated that student-athlete persistence intentions were overwhelmingly positive regarding academic priorities, degree completion, and alignment between what they expected in terms of their student-athlete experience and what they were receiving. The researcher took the opportunity to delve into satisfaction perceptions related to individual and team performance, athletics-academic loyalties and the potential link to intention to complete their Bachelor's degree at ISU.

Most of the interviewees were happy with both their individual and team performance, although they wished that their teams could win more games. Respondent C (a sophomore male basketball athlete) had this to say when asked about his individual and team performance:

> Yes, I am pretty happy with that. I think that it can be improved of course….Yes, maam, I started playing as a freshman, so I have been growing in the process of a teammate, a player and an individual, I feel like it was pretty good, but there is always room to get better to improve.

Respondent G (a sophomore, volleyball athlete) elaborated, including commentary on the link between being part of a team and persistence.

> Yeah, I think being a part of the team is like being part of a family. I don't think you can just leave, it would be really hard. I wish our season could have gone better … but I think we could have done better. For the most part, I am pleased.

In contrast, Respondent F (a freshman, football athlete) was not satisfied with either his

individual or team performance. He said, "I feel like you can't be happy with your individual

performance if your team doesn't do any good." He explained how he believed persistent losing

affected his team not only on the field, but spilled over into the classroom and his relationships

with non-athletic peers. He said, "They don't know what we have to go through to be able to

play hard and maintain your GPA." He gave an example of an argument that went on in one of

his classes: "I have been involved in some debates in some classes where non-athletes think that

athletes are always given everything like that we are always given good grades, or we get more

opportunities and stuff like that." When asked whether such an environment affected him, his

wellbeing, and/or his likelihood of persisting at ISU, he said: "…I don't see myself leaving ISU,

like I want to win, it doesn't bother me too much I came here to get my education and do as good

in football as I can...." When asked whether being in a team sport made it easier for him to

persist at ISU than if he were in an individual sport, he responded:

> In team sport you have a lot more people to socialize with. You feel more welcome. But
> in an individual sport if guys are not making friends, then you may not have those people
> that you could go to places with and stuff like that. Your teammates become like your
> brother or sister. Whereas in individual sport, you are by yourself a lot of times just you
> and your coach and if you don't have a good relationship with your coach, then it would
> be hard for you to come back.

Respondent B (a sophomore, male cross country athlete) alluded to some of the assertions made

by Respondent F, in particular challenges linked to unfulfilled expectations about college.

> There are times when a lot of people are down and out and say, "I miss home, I want to
> go home, and this place is so much different than where I am from." Maybe someone had
> higher expectations for this place than where they came from, or what was perceived to
> be different on their recruiting trip. I think that I have thought about it, but I believe that
> happens at a lot of schools.

Although some of the interviewees echoed similar sentiments, they were clear in

acknowledging that they were here as students as well as athletes, and that it was important for

them to excel in both. This point, consistent with the literature cited and long history of NCAA

reforms designed to facilitate and support better balance between athletic and academic

expectations (KFCIA 1991, 2000, 2010) was emphasized by a number of interviewees when

asked about areas they felt needed be improved. Respondent G (a sophomore volleyball athlete)

said:

> I think it should be stressed more on how hard it is to balance college athletics and
> school, I feel like a lot of the freshman become ineligible because they don't keep up on
> it. This is not like high school. I think it should be stressed more. If I were to do it over
> again, I would put more stress on that.

When asked to state whether their priority was athletics or academics, in the main they felt that

both were important. Respondent A (a freshman, male track and field athlete) said:

> I think it would depend on the person, like if they are on scholarship or something. They
> will just oh well track is getting me through school, but my main focus is on school, and I
> am not going to do track afterwards I am just doing this to get me through school. And
> then there are other people who are like oh this sport is mine, this is my job, like I love
> doing this sport so them might take that more seriously than academics, but for me I like
> to balance it out and I won't go and miss practice and I won't go and miss class. I don't
> skip out on either of those.

Respondent F's response perhaps illustrated the combined athletics-academics loyalty

experienced by most athletes. He said:

> My priority is athletics, but I mean not athletics its school, but athletics well there kinda
> both priorities, because athletics is why I'd be here but I'm here to get my education. But
> if I don't do one then I don't get the other, basically.

All interviewees were affirmative in their assertions regarding their willingness to re-

enroll and complete their Bachelor's degrees at ISU regardless of their individual or team

performances. They clearly understood the concept that they were students as well as athletes,

and confirmed that they were committed to succeed in both their academic and athletic

endeavors. These findings were consistent with the literature (Ferris, 2004; Freeman, Hall, &

Bresciani, 2007; Kuh et al., 2006; Umbach et.al, 2006) as well as Astin's (1993) model that

predicts that the closer the match between student expectations and institutional characteristics the higher the persistent rate. Specifically, findings revealed that student-athletes intentions to persist at ISU could and would be facilitated by enriched campus experiences (Unruh, 1999), removal of potential institutional barriers to persistence (Hyatt 2003), and purposeful engagement in academic and extracurricular activities (Astin 1993; Crawford, 2007; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Hathaway, 2005; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Concluding Thoughts & Implications for Action

These findings offer insights into current and future student-athlete perceptions about student engagement, collegiate quality of life and student-athlete wellbeing specific to Athletic Departmental Policies and Practices, Educational Characteristics, Institutional Facilities and Services, and intentions to persist. Freeman et al., (2007) saw value in examining current students' perceptions because it affords the opportunity for their issues and concerns to be addressed promptly and used to help mitigate student-athlete attrition. Upcraft et al. (2005) noted that successful outcomes from studies may "create change or confirm current practice…either way… (shaping) future policies, programs, and practice" (p. 486). Similarly, results of this study may be useful to those with decision-making authority over academic and athletic programs, and/or those who are involved in the organization and administration of intercollegiate athletics, in terms of re-examining, amending, eliminating, establishing and better supporting policies and practices that address student-athlete wellbeing/quality of life issues, thereby positively impacting student-athlete retention.

The following conclusions and associated implications for action derive from the study findings.

1. Relative to wellbeing and Athletic Departmental Policies and Practices: While survey respondents were generally satisfied with the athletic department services and supports, specific to academic advising, the interviews allowed the researcher to delve more deeply and revealed student-athlete concerns about inadequate advisor access (i.e., too many student-athletes for the number of Athletic Department academic advisors), and the resultant superficiality of the advising they received. Interviewees acknowledged that they [the student-athletes] needed to be more responsible in terms of their academic progress; but stressed the necessity of their reliance on Athletic Department advising when it came to criteria and academic progress metrics associated with determining and maintaining intercollegiate athletic eligibility. Regarding institution-based (external to athletics) wellbeing supports (e.g., seminars/workshops, etc.) the interviewees admitted they did not avail themselves of these support options and opportunities unless scheduled and/or specifically directed by their coach and/or the Athletic Department. These findings imply the need to either alter the Athletic Department advising process to better stagger or sequence student-athlete advisee influx, and/or increase staff support during these sessions to allow for more advisee-advisor access. Further, Athletic Department administrators and staff/coaches must be explicit and directive if they truly want student-athletes to make use of institution-based wellbeing supports.

2. Relative to wellbeing and Educational Characteristics, while survey respondents' expressed general satisfaction regarding their interactions with faculty and quality of instruction, it seems clear that more could be done to proactively enhance student engagement in terms of: (a) prompting consistent student-athlete initiated

communication with instructional faculty; and (b) positive student-athlete to student (peer-to-peer) connections (Comeaux, 2005; Comeaux & Harrision, 2007; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Hathaway, 2005; Kuh et al., 2006). Student-athlete leaders and mentors, such as coaches, may be particularly well situated to promote and/or support enhanced development in this area.

3. Relative to wellbeing and Institutional Services and Facilities, in general survey respondents expressed satisfaction regarding support services and campus facilities (note: Some gender-based disparities were evidenced in terms of facilities, with female student-athletes being notably less satisfied than male student-athletes. These findings were analyzed and presented through the broader quantitative study report and were not the focus of this paper). When probed through the interview process findings revealed that while student-athletes were satisfied with the supports available and their access to these services; consistent with the findings noted above, they acknowledged their responsibility in terms of making use of these services, and admitted reliance on Athletic Department staff/coaches in terms of pushing them to "…explore the different things the university has to offer" (Respondent C).

4. Overall, the student-athletes interviewed were clear in their self-perception as both students and athletes, and committed to succeeding in both the academic and athletic arena—inclusive of degree attainment and persistence at ISU.

In closing, these findings support the importance of "initiatives focusing on [both] the individual student-athlete (personal/internal factors) and the external (institutional/environmental factors) that may impact student athletes' dual mission on campus" (Simiyu, 2010, p. 23). The student-athletes in this study: (a) recognized, albeit at times somewhat reluctantly, their role,

responsibilities and agency in terms of their academic progress, and instructional (faculty to student-athlete and non-athlete to student-athlete) communications and relationships; (b) acknowledged reliance, appropriately so, on the Athletic Department (administrators and staff/coaches) in terms of assistance in understanding and complying with NCAA rules, regulations and eligibility requirements; (c) were at least somewhat aware and made use of institution-based academic content support services; and (d) saw and valued themselves as students and student-athletes. Probably the most relevant take away from these findings was that these student-athletes knew they could and should be more self-reliant and responsible for their academic progress, success and integration; yet admitted needing their coaches to push them as students as well as athletes. Although these findings are a reflection of what goes on at ISU, similar institutions within the Big Sky conference can pay more attention to persistence rates. According to Ishler and Upcraft (2005), the 2001 persistence rate from the freshman year to the sophomore year in four-year colleges was 73.9 percent, and 54.1 percent in two-year colleges. This means there was a dropout rate of 26.1 percent in four-year colleges and 45.9 percent in two-year colleges. This study sample of student-athletes had over twice as many freshmen as sophomores, interventions and/or inquiry directed at the beginning of the sophomore year maybe too late—that is, attrition, by that point had already occurred.

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