Who Are Athletic Advisors? State of the Profession

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The field of athletic advising has existed since the 1970s. In the early 1990s, the National Collegiate Athletic Association mandated that higher education institutions provide academic support for student-athletes. Few researchers have identified those serving as athletic advisors, so the literature features little data on advisor demographics, training, education, and work responsibilities. Therefore, the background and experiences of 277 members of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics, who responded to a survey, were explored. Specifically, athletic advisor educational and training background, burnout levels, meaning of the profession as participants describe it, advice for prospective advisors, and the knowledge they wish they had gained before entering the field are addressed. Dramaturgy was utilized as a framework for analyzing this research.

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Literature Review

Athletic advising has been practiced formally since the 1970s after the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) imposed regulations that required students to maintain minimum academic standards to compete at the college level. The NCAA was formed in 1906 as a group of institutions to regulate college athletics (Smith, 2011). Originally organized by students, the NCAA initially deferred to institutions to set academic standards through a home rule policy (Blackman, 2008; Smith, 2011). The first NCAA attempt at regulating academics and student–athlete behavior dates to 1948 with the sanity code, which failed miserably and was repealed in 1951 (Blackman, 2008; Smith 2011). In 1965, the NCAA implemented the 1.6 rule, which required high school athletes to demonstrate a 1.6 grade-point average (GPA) (out of 4.0) upon graduation and through college for seeking and maintaining eligibility to play college sport (Blackman, 2008); in 1973, the NCAA raised this to a minimum GPA of 2.0 (Blackman, 2008). To enforce these initial academic regulations, athletic departments created athletic advising positions. In 1986 and 1989, the NCAA instituted new academic regulations, Propositions 48 and 16, that mandated new minimum GPAs and standardized test scores (Blackman, 2008). In the early 1990s, as these academic reforms affected incoming student-athletes, the NCAA mandated that higher education institutions provide academic support for student-athletes (Meyer, 2005).

Athletic support professionals are academic advisors who work individually with student-athletes. They provide several facets of support to students: academic (e.g., exploring interests, study skills), athletic (e.g., understanding NCAA eligibility rules), and life (e.g., time management, personal development). In almost four decades since the first athletic advisors emerged to help incoming student-athletes with eligibility requirements, few researchers have undertaken studies to identify and characterize these athletic advising professionals by determining their demographics, training, education, or work responsibilities. In one of the few extant studies, Brooks, Etzel, and Ostrow (1987) conducted a survey of 134 athletic advising professionals at NCAA Division I institutions. They described the profile of the athletic advisors who participated in their study: men with a master's degree who had participated as college athletes and had been out of college for 10 years. The professionals at the time of this study (almost 40 years ago) worked primarily with participants in men's revenue sports (e.g., football and basketball). Brooks et al. concluded that the participating advisors demonstrated limited knowledge of education or counseling and needed additional training. They also advocated for services that included all athletes in addition to those for only men in a few sports.

Because of limited research conducted on athletic advisors or other student–athlete support services, the nature of athletic advising practice or the means to secure a position helping student-athletes remain unclear. A few published studies shed some light on the field of athletic advising. According to Meyer (2005), athletic advising professionals have "one of the most challenging jobs in higher education" (p. 15). Specifically, they work to help students grow academically as well as transition to and persist through college toward

graduation; they also help students develop life skills (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Meyer, 2005). Despite these multiple, complicated objectives, many people outside of athletic departments believe that athletic advisors focus solely on keeping student-athletes eligible for competition (Gaston-Gayles, 2003; Meyer, 2005). In an interesting study, McDowell, Cunningham, and Singer (2008) explained that many athletic advisors are matched to teams on the basis of their race and the majority race of the athletic teams. They argued that racial minorities proliferate athletic advising positions because these advisors can relate to the student-athletes as a result of their shared race.

In contrast to the findings of McDowell et al. (2008), many athletic advisors come from backgrounds that differ from each other and the athletes they advise. In addition, many possess limited knowledge about NCAA rules, which evolve on a regular basis such that athletic advisors must receive specialized training and education to benefit the profession. In 2011, the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) (2014) instituted individual and program certification programs to "create baseline standards in the field recognized as core competencies, elevate the Association's national reputation as THE Association for athletics academic support, establish a method to differentiate between employee skills, [and] create a uniform set of standards for employment" (para. 2). No research has been conducted to determine the number of N4A members who pursue certification as part of their professional development either through a test or continuing education units. As of 2016, the N4A placed a moratorium on individual certification programs while a five-year analysis is conducted on the program.

Citing practitioners' educational backgrounds in physical education, some in the counseling profession have cautioned that athletic advisors may not receive adequate training on student development issues (Watson, 2003). The N4A (2011) *Code of Ethics* stated that athletic advisors

> [possess] a body of specialized knowledge, skills, and attitudes known and practiced by its members. These are acquired through professional preparation, generally through graduation study, in an appropriate academic discipline at a college or university. Additionally, they are acquired through experience, in-service training and personal development after the completion of formal education. (para. 2)

N4A (2013) also developed "Best Practices for Promoting and Maintaining a Culture of Student-Athlete Success, Accountability, and Academic Integrity" in which hiring practices of athletic advisors (among others providing support to student-athletes, such as tutors) were suggested.

Research Questions

To explore the backgrounds and experiences of N4A professionals who identify in student–athlete support positions, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1. What are the educational backgrounds of N4A members?
RQ2. What kinds of training and experience do student–athlete support professionals receive prior to obtaining a full-time, permanent position?
RQ3. What does the profession mean to athletic advisors?
RQ4. What advice do athletic advisors suggest for people considering the profession as a career?
RQ5. What do members in this field of athletic advising wish they had known before starting this career?

Theoretical Framework: Dramaturgy

The sociological theory of dramaturgy offers the framework for this study. Goffman (1950) introduced the foundations of dramaturgy by explaining the premise that people play a role in their professional lives that differs from their actual personas. Dramaturgy ties into the Johari window, a model of self-awareness introduced by Luft and Ingham in 1955 to describe the known and unknown aspects of one's self as well as known and unknown facets about one's self as seen by others (Shenton, 2007). The four panes of the Johari window, as situated in a 2×2 matrix, include

> Arena—known to one's self and others,
> Façade—known to one's self but not known to others,
> Blind spot—not known to one's self but known to others, and

> Unknown—not known to one's self and not known to others (Shenton, 2007, p. 489).

Dramaturgy in Sports

When people are playing a role and hiding their true selves, they only show their façade outwardly. Knowledge and experiences exclusive to those participating in or associated with the program separate those inside and outside of the group (Goffman, 1950). College athletics exists in a high-pressure environment with a strong insider culture, and athletic advisors, like other higher education professionals, are bound by laws to protect student rights and information, such as health records (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) and academic records (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act). Positions in college athletics often come with very desirable perks as well as intrigue and status. Goffman (1950) explained, "Performers often foster the impression that they had ideal motives for acquiring the role in which they are performing, that they have ideal qualifications for the role" and thus deserve the position (p. 46). Goffman added, "There are many individuals who sincerely believe that the definition of the situation they habitually project is the real reality" (p. 70). This explanation indicates that people may not distinguish between their work role and self-identity, especially when the work role confers importance or status to the person.

According to dramaturgy, as workers delve deeper into their roles, they set a stage with personal props that helps them "[believe] in what [they] imagine" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 44). However, maintaining a role can try people emotionally. Both Goffman (1950) and Hochschild (2003) warned that people can internalize their real self so deeply in their subconscious that they rarely distinguish it from the role they are playing until they come to a moral roadblock. In athletics, people frequently move to different institutions for more experience, another title, a raise, or other reasons. Hochschild (2003) described how these high turnover rates challenge one's identity:

> We make up an idea of our "real self," an inner jewel that remains our unique possession no matter whose billboard is on our back or whose smile is on our face. We push this "real self" further inside, making it more inaccessible. (p. 34)

Hochschild (2003) further explained the troubling ability of individuals to hold so tightly to the "illusion" that they begin to distrust their "sense of what is true" (p. 43). Because they perform to fit into their work environment and culture, people try to avoid "being phony" (Hochschild, p. 134). Peers and the team environment also influence individuals' performances.

Impact of Team Environment

The world of sports consists of teams that extend beyond those of each institution to include professional organizations related to the niche positions within athletic departments. Teams consist of people who "cooperate in staging a single routine" (Goffman, 1950, p. 79). To preserve the insider feel of working in college athletics, people feel pressured to play their roles to benefit colleagues and maintain a positive image. Goffman (1950) found that people in unique roles often form professional organizations that represent the entire field. The organization faces a damaged reputation if one member is associated with a public scandal or problem; therefore, people in the field should know their place and their boundaries (Goffman). Hare and Blumberg (1988) described insiders as those with knowledge of accepted behavior patterns that remain unknown to others. Sherman (2007) explained, "If employees did not observe these norms . . . they would stick out and feel out of place" (p. 77). Furthermore, people outside of their workplace (not playing a role) or "between performances . . . must not betray the secrets of the team" by providing insider information or acting differently than their role allows; that is, they exhibit *dramaturgical loyalty* (Goffman, 1950, p. 212).

In reference to the Johari window, individuals stay in role and thus protect the interests of the collective (i.e., everyone in the profession) by keeping their arena in check while managing their façade to the public. The ideas of the dramaturgical framework coupled with descriptions of the Johari window offer a lens to view the results of this study on professionals in athletic advising.

Methods

After obtaining permission from the N4A president, I compiled a list of background and

experience attributes to explore through a survey to N4A members. The initial items included years in the profession, number of institutions where one worked in an athletic advising role, number of N4A conferences attended, leadership roles in N4A, salary range of current position, experience as a student-athlete, and others. The N4A Research Committee was consulted for input on the items developed for the survey. The finished questionnaire, created on Qualtrics, featured 37 items, with some contingent on responses to previous queries. The instrument included multiple choice and open-ended items drawn from my collaborations with the N4A Research Committee experts and the limited literature available on this population of advisors. Athletic advisors, including members of the N4A Board of Directors and Research Committee, completed a pilot test of the survey. The feedback from the pilot test included the suggestions to add items about salary range, N4A individual certification (before this process was paused for review), member opinion on helpful aspects of conferences they had attended, and members' long-term career goals. The Appendix features the final instrument.

After reviewing the informed consent form, participants could opt out of the study. A debriefing statement was provided upon completion of the survey, which was distributed to N4A members via the association Listserv: once in December 2014 and once in January 2015. The entire N4A membership could have accessed the survey, but an unknown number may have opted out of the Listserv. Of the possible 1,400 registered, 277 members responded for a response rate of approximately 20%. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), 20% is an appropriate sample size for a total population of approximately 1,500.

Using precoding strategies to identify responses that stood out immediately (as per Saldaña, 2013), I analyzed the multiple choice items and then reviewed the open-ended items in a two-part process. After this initial process, I determined that responses to RQs 4 and 5 were so broad that further coding may diminish the richness and meaning in the participants' responses. I utilized focused coding on the responses to RQ3, from which three themes emerged (Saldaña, 2013).

Results

In this study, I used a 37-item survey to explore the backgrounds and experiences of N4A members who identify with student-athlete support positions. Participants responded to the first survey question on the length of time they had been in the profession as follows:

29% served 0 to 3 years,
23% served 4 to 6 years,
21% served 7 to 9 years, and
27% served 10 or more years.

Advisors also listed their current professional roles. Participants listed 28 different job titles or duties. In addition to advising student-athletes, some of the professional duties identified included tutor coordinator, study hall monitor, event planner, class instructor, orientation organizer, recruiter, data collector, community outreach coordinator, staff trainer, and diversity programming specialist.

Research Question 1: Background

The first research question addressed the educational backgrounds of N4A members. Because athletic advisors do not pursue predetermined routes to positions in the field, the educational background of N4A members provides useful information on the starting point for these advisors. The highest level of education reported by respondents is as follows: 87% master's degree, 8% doctoral degree, and 5% bachelor's degree. In response to an open-ended question featured at the end of the list of options, several participants shared that they were enrolled in doctoral programs while working in the profession. In response to an item asking for descriptions on the type of training undertaken to pursue a position as an athletic advisor, 43% reported enrollment in graduate programs. According to responses given at the end of this open-ended item, the N4A members completed graduate programs in the following disciplines: higher education/student affairs, athletic counseling, college student personnel/development, athletic administration, sport management/administration/leadership, school counseling/counselor, education/counseling psychology, educational administration, exercise science/kinesiology, student–athlete development, academic advising, business administration, secondary/special education, and public administration.

Research Question 2: Experience

The second research question asked, "What kinds of training and experience do student–athlete support professionals receive prior to obtaining a full-time, permanent position?" For job-related experience, the responses included

graduate assistantship (41%), internship during school (31%), internship after graduating from school (25%), and other (27%). The majority of responses in the *other* category were campus advisor or former student-athlete.

Additional types of training methods and the percentages of respondents who chose them included specific graduate programs (43%), N4A individual certification (44%), NACADA Academic Success and the Student-Athlete course (8%), N4A Professional Development Institute (PDI)–new practitioner track (9%), N4A PDI–learning specialist track (4%), N4A PDI–director track (12%), NCAA Life Skills Symposium (18%), NCAA Regional Rules Seminar (37%), attendance at related conferences (42%), and other (15%). Those who reportedly attended related conferences were asked to specify the conferences they attended. The survey included the following in their responses: N4A (national and regional); NACADA (national, regional, and local); National Association of College Women Athletic Administrators (NACWAA) [now Women Leaders in College Sports]; National Consortium for Academics & Sport; Association of Applied Sport Psychology; American College Personnel Association; NCAA (Step Up! and leadership symposium); Association on Higher Education and Disability; APPLE (Promoting Student–Athlete Wellness & Substance Abuse Prevention); Athletic conference (e.g., Big 10, Southeastern Conference); College Reading & Learning Association; ADD Resources; and United Across Campuses.

The respondents who selected *other* training options reported to have participated in their institution's advising workshops and webinars as well as social work licensure, doctoral studies, NCAA Minority Leadership Institute, and Landmark programs. Status as a previous student-athlete also serves as an important source of experience, and according to a survey item ("Were you a student-athlete at the college level?"), 49% of respondents were college student-athletes and 51% were not. Of the 49% former student-athletes, 63% had competed in NCAA Division I, 12% in NCAA Division II, 22% in NCAA Division III, 3% in National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, and 1% in National Junior College Athletic Association institutions. Of the 129 survey participants who played a sport, 125 reported that they had participated as a college student-athlete in track and field/cross country ($n = 23$), basketball ($n = 16$), football ($n = 16$), dual/multisports ($n = 15$), swimming/diving ($n = 14$), baseball ($n = 11$), softball ($n = 11$), soccer ($n = 10$), volleyball ($n = 8$), field hockey ($n = 7$), tennis ($n = 5$), lacrosse ($n = 3$), rugby ($n = 3$), golf ($n = 2$), rowing ($n = 2$), water polo ($n = 1$), ice hockey ($n = 1$), bowling ($n = 1$), and cheerleading ($n = 1$).

Research Question 3: Perspective

The third research question ("What does the profession mean to athletic advisors?") was posed to understand the field from the practitioner perspective. From the survey responses, three themes surfaced: helping student-athletes, rewarding career, and challenging work/lack of respect for position/profession. Each of these themes was derived on the basis of open-ended responses in the survey.

Helping student-athletes. One of the three themes that emerged from the survey was classified as helping student-athletes. For example, a respondent shared, "I just love to help students and love the feeling of being part of a team greater than myself." Another participant commented, "I love working with student-athletes and helping them achieve something outside of their sport."

Rewarding career. Along with excitement about helping student-athletes, respondents indicated that the position offers many rewards. The following statements from three different survey participants illustrate the statements that contributed to this theme:

> "It is the only job I have ever thought about having."
> "I think it is a fun job with many benefits."
> "I can't imagine doing anything else!"

Challenging work/lack of respect for position/profession. The third theme came from responses that included the challenging nature of the work and the lack of respect for the role of athletic advisor. A participant summed up the experience: "I do not think that we receive the respect that we often deserve in our role with these students and I think we are often the scapegoats for decisions made by coaches and administrators." Another respondent took a global perspective of the issues faced in the position: "Students are coming to college less prepared and the system is slow to adapt to the needs of this generation of students." Another survey response addressed the shortfalls of a position in athletic advising: "This is

definitely not the most lucrative profession and can be a very thankless job."

The follow-up survey items prompted responses about burnout in the profession. A total of 91% of respondents have noticed colleagues in the profession experiencing burnout, and 9% have not. Sixty percent of the respondents answered "Yes" to the question "Have you ever considered leaving the profession?" Forty percent answered "No."

Research Question 4: Advice

"What advice do athletic advisors suggest for people considering the profession as a career?" Some responses follow:

> "Have fun with what you do, or otherwise you won't last."
> "Don't try to change things that you do not control."
> "Keep your values. Sports needs people of integrity."
> "It is okay to allow the student to learn from mistakes."
> "Keep a 'bad day box' with thank you notes, etc. to pull out and read when you have a bad day."
> "Don't do it for the money or the recognition."
> "The intercollegiate athletics world seems very large at times, but secretly it is small, with many people knowing each other across the nation."
> "The real impact that takes place oftentimes happens after graduation or much later in life."
> "Treat each student like an individual and not a number."
> "Develop a tough skin, learn how to document."
> "Remember that these are NOT YOUR CHILDREN no matter how attached you become!"

Research Question 5: Retrospective

The fifth research question solicited responses for improving the field for others: "What do members in this field of athletic advising wish they had known before starting this career?" The responses included

> "Not a 9–5."
> "Athletics works hard to make everything seem fun, but there is a lot of turmoil going on behind the scenes."
> "You will never please everyone."
> "I wish that I had had a mentor to help guide me as a young professional."
> "How to communicate with coaches. Understanding the culture in athletics."
> "Have an open mind and be willing to move anywhere."
> "APR [Academic Progress Rate, see LaForge & Hodge, 2011] and GSR [Graduation Success Rate, see LaForge & Hodge, 2011] success is more important than the actual future success of student-athletes."
> "I wish I knew how to work through difficult situations with a supervisor who I didn't agree with."
> "More on NCAA bylaws."

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations characterize this study. First, the limited literature on athletic advisors provided a small foundation for this research; therefore, in addition to those published accounts, my personal experiences were considered for determining the research questions. Also, this research was based on self-reported data. Although the sample size was appropriate for the study of this type, more responses from N4A members would have provided more robust data and results.

Discussion

Professionals in the student-athlete services field, especially athletic academic advisors, take on many challenges in their work. These challenges include securing a position; according to the survey responses, no clear pathway leads to this profession. One respondent articulated the situation:

> I wish there was more awareness about the profession as an undergraduate. I didn't realize I wanted to do this "when I grew up" until I had already enrolled in graduate school in a sports management program rather than [a] college student personnel program. I knew I wanted to work with student-athletes, but didn't realize see a path to "academic advising" as an undergrad or early grad student.

Many professionals fulfill several different roles, and they are relatively unprepared for this type of work, a situation compounded by little

training or educational background in advising. The professionals who leverage their own background as student-athletes come from diverse sport and team experiences, and although prior sports involvement helps these advisors relate to student-athletes, those without such a history can find a rewarding position in the field. According to the survey results, people from a variety of disciplines work in athletic advising. Sometimes job postings list preferred disciplines for applicants, but athletic advisors as well as life skills coordinators and learning specialists come from a range of academic backgrounds. As determined from the responses as well as job postings, the master's degree appears to be the educational standard. Although the preferred discipline, if any, remains undefined, a meaningful number of responses indicated that many athletic advisors hold advanced degrees in counseling, education, or student affairs. This finding suggests that athletic advisors use tools and demonstrate knowledge more closely related to educator roles than to those acquired through athletic-related experience.

Because of the need for education-related expertise, some athletic advisors may maintain the façade of the Johari window to hide their lack of knowledge or to navigate the athletic department culture, which may promote an agenda that clashes with the academic goals of the unit. They also may have blind spots created by their own insider knowledge that other professionals do not possess. As a result, they do not offer or gain from collaboration with outsiders. Furthermore, they may maintain a façade so any lacking knowledge remains hidden (Halpern, 2009; Shenton, 2007). Goffman (1950) explained, "When an individual plays a part he implicity requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess" (p. 17).

Athletic advisors experience many opportunities to take on the Johari window façade. Because every day brings new challenges, athletic advisors bear a range of responsibilities in their mulitple roles. For example, some days coaches blame the advisor for a student's failed eligibility, and on other days the coach expects the advisor to find a way to get an academically ineligible prospective student-athlete admitted into the institution. Regardless of the applied pressure, the role requires that advisors communicate complete control of the situation and confidence that they will accomplish their work. Goffman (1950) asserted, "Performers may even attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had and that they have never had to fumble their way through a learning period" (p. 47). However, the examination of the background of N4A members reveals that most respondents learned their craft through diverse professional development opportunities; that is, they did not apprehend the knowledge from a single source. Although a large influx of new professionals enter the field, a cycle of balance among professionals with various levels of experience persists. Because of the continuous NCAA rules changes and the varied backgrounds of N4A members, the new hires, in particular, may populate the Unknown quadrant of the Johari window; they may not know the expertise they or others lack, and if they perform their roles as if they are highly knowledgeable, areas of knowledge deficiencies may remain undetected (Halpern, 2009; Shenton, 2007).

The response that informed RQ4, the comment—"Sports needs people of integrity"— points to an interesting situation for advisors. All professionals who work in the athletic department or with student-athletes represent the institution and the powerful sports unit. The media and public attention on college athletics adds another layer of pressure on student–athlete services professionals. The expectations for proffering error-free academic advice; effectively navigating the student-athlete through NCAA, conference, and institutional eligibility rules; and working in the best interest of the both the student and the program, even when these conflict, create a challenging role that takes a toll on athletic advisors. The public revelation of the athletic advisors' private work creates a performance standard that likely contributes to the high percentage of responses (91%) indicating colleague burnout and self-reports from 60% of survey takers who considered leaving the profession. Hare and Blumberg (1988) called the outcomes of pressured performance like that experienced by athletic advisors as *role fatigue*, a phenomenon "observed especially in the helping professions, which seem to require a person to give until they have no more to give" (p. 87). They also characterized role fatigue as a "loss of energy available for a role . . . accompanied by a sense of physical, emotional, and intellectual exhaustion" (Hare & Blumberg, 1988, p. 87). Hochschild (2003) noted that where emotions are muted for the benefit of organizations or profits, workers suppress their feelings (and sometimes morals), which leads to burnout. More than one half of the

respondents have considered leaving athletic advising, and the prospect of any or all of them quitting the profession makes for an alarming consideration.

Sometimes those who burn out will switch institutions or leave the field entirely. However, some try to initiate change to improve policy or to earn recognition. Goffman (1950) labeled these people as *renegades*, who "often take a moral stand, saying that it is better to be true to the ideals of the role than to the performers who falsely present themselves in it" (p. 165). In my experience, I have seen that some fight for changes to benefit students and may be motivated by sentiments like those expressed by the respondent who commented about working with students who do not fit into the current educational system; some think that others serve in the professions for the wrong reasons (e.g., tangible perks) rather than for student–athlete well-being and success; some go to the media and other public forums to bring up troubling issues and thereby the collective notices their complaints. However, many remain silent and work in spite of areas of disagreements or points of contention with others. Goffman (1950) commented,

> From a consideration of make-work[,] it is only a step to consideration of other standards of work activity for which appearance must be maintained, such as pace, personal interest[,] economy, accuracy. . . . From a consideration of work standards in general[,] it is only a step to consideration of other major aspects of decorum, instrumental and moral. (p. 110)

The position of athletic advisor requires a performance through "deep acting" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 35).

Despite potential for burnout, study respondents expressed their appreciation for the rewarding opportunity to work with the unique student–athlete population. Responses to RQ3, in which *love* was mentioned multiple times to refer to this profession, demonstrated that advisors show passion for their work with student-athletes. Respondents also emphasized the value they place on their position and enjoy the benefits of the career. Despite the stated rewards, responses show that lack of respect for the athletic advising position colors the most glowing responses with negativity.

Terms such as *scapegoat,* although harsh, indicate a broad issue within the culture of big-time college sports. As institutions compete for athletic talent, the workload for athletic advisors increases and the challenges grow increasingly complicated. In response to the inquiry on the meaning of the profession to the practitioner, one advisor pointed out that many student-athletes come to college underprepared for the rigor of college-level work. Although the respondent did not elaborate on the exact nature of this situation and ways it affects daily work, the comment indicates that student underpreparedness comprises part of this advisor's struggles. Although NCAA academic standards evolving over the past few decades have continuously raised the academic preparation demands on college hopefuls, the requirements do not meet the same standards as some institutions' demand for admittance. When it implemented the sanity code in 1948, the NCAA abolished the home rule that preserved institutional power to set academic standards (Blackman, 2008). However, as institutions participate in the athletics arms race to attract the best recruits, some students who do not meet institutional admissions standards are admitted to the college (Bok, 2003). Also, when transfer students bring complex sets of transcripts to advisors, athletic advisors must exert significant effort to ensure these students' eligibility to compete.

Many participants responded to the survey questions by recognizing the rewarding aspects of their career while also articulating frustrations with low pay and lack of recognition. These responses, including those expressing considerations of leaving the institution, show that these student–athlete services professionals enjoy their work with students despite struggles related to lack of respect, low pay, and unfair shouldering of blame. Certainly the athletic side of the athletic department features unglamorous problems that the advisor must solve. This snapshot of athletic advisors provides an overview of those in this career that has been absent in the literature.

Implications for Advising Practice

Academic advisors across campus may not work exclusively with student-athletes, but will likely meet with several in their practice. At many institutions, student-athletes work with both an athletic advisor and an academic advisor in their major, department, or college. By knowing the backgrounds, challenges, and experiences of their counterparts in athletics, advisors in academic units can build and maintain strong working relationships that benefit the student-athlete.

Prospective advisors should heed the advice offered by N4A members who participated in this study. They should also consider the variety of graduate programs, professional organizations, conferences, and other training opportunities useful for pursuing a position in this field. Like athletic services professionals come from a range of educational backgrounds, no single pathway or training regimen leads directly to a position in the field. The wide variety of training opportunities also indicates lack of definitive means for preparing professionally as an athletic services professional. Advisors interested in transitioning to work with the student–athlete population might consider opportunities such as shadowing advisors on their own or nearby campuses, taking a full-time internship or assistant advisor role for a year or two in an athletic advising unit; if enrolled in graduate school, prospects could seek a graduate assistantship in an athletic department. By attending conferences one can learn more about the intricacies of the profession as well as network with athletic advisors and other student–athlete services staff. Survey participants pointed to networking as the main benefit of going to regional and national N4A conventions. Advisors also mentioned attending NACADA conferences at every level for professional development. The NACADA Advising Student Athletes Commission serves as an excellent resource for advisors who may advise student-athletes or are considering a change to a full-time role in athletic advising.

The responses to the prompt to "share any recommendations or advice to develop and inspire future athletic advisors" reflected the many roles and personal qualities held by the professionals in the role of athletic advisor. In considering the knowledge that they wish they had known before they started a career as an athletic advisor, all respondents offered intriguing answers, summed up as the ins and outs of athletic department culture and ways to interact with coaches, that reflect the insider knowledge and culture to which Hare and Blumberg (1988) referred. The suggestion by a respondent to seek a mentor was helpful and practical as many of the professional organizations and conferences mentioned by the survey participants offer mentor programs, including N4A and NACADA.

Future Research

The results shared in this study reveal information from part of the 37-item survey. Other aspects of this profession can be explored and offered as contributions to the literature. Evaluation of athletic advisors and other student–athlete services professionals remains a major area of concern. Anecdotal evidence suggests that athletic advisors may not know or understand the criteria on which they are evaluated or the ways the assessment process of their unit or department fits into their institutional human resources process. Athletic advisors experience frustrations with the structure and practices of the profession, which may factor into the burnout numbers found in the results. Knowledge about causes of burnout in the student–athlete services profession may lead to remedies for the high turnover in all athletics-related positions, including advising (see, e.g., Clapper & Harris, 2008).

A concern that surfaced in the survey relates to coddling or enabling student-athletes. Although referred to as *kids*, like most other college students, student-athletes are adults over 18 years old. Despite the culture of babying student-athletes known in the profession, not every professional treats these advisees as children. Additional studies about the student–athlete culture would benefit advisors in and out of athletics. In another direction for future research, scholars can review mentoring between athletic leaders and student–athlete services professionals interested in pursuing leadership roles. In addition to formal mentoring programs in professional organizations, other opportunities available within athletic departments should be identified and explored.

Among the larger group of academic advisors worldwide, including primary-role, faculty, peer, and other academic advisors who experience similar pressures and guide a variety of different student populations, few hold the position of the athletic advisor. In the future, researchers may explore application of dramaturgy to the many in advising roles or to the few who advise other specific student populations. As a reviewer of this article explained, the academic advising profession hosts many whose roles in the academy, not only those who work in athletics, diverge from their true personas.

Conclusion

Since the 1970s, athletic advising professionals have worked at higher education institutions, and the NCAA mandated academic support for student-athletes in the 1990s. However, these advisors had been surveyed only once, in 1987 by Brooks et al., and only those at Division I institutions were included in the research. As academic regulations

for student-athletes have evolved since their introduction in 1948, the athletic advising field has expanded and the job duties have grown more complex. Student services professionals in athletics now come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but the majority have earned a master's degree in education, counseling, or sport administration. Athletic advisors currently represent a range of field-specific experience, approximately one fourth fall in each 3-year range and another one fourth have served over 10 years in practice. According to survey respondents, those seeking to enter the profession benefit most from specific graduate programs and assistantships. Also, approximately one half of the study participants identify as former student-athletes, a status they considered a provision of job-related training. As they plan for a rewarding and challenging career, prospective athletic advisors would benefit from the advice of the respondents as well as implications from this study on advising practice.

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Author's Note

In June 2017, the organization formerly known as National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics changed its name to N4A: National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals.

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Appendix. Athletic advisor survey

How long have you been in the profession?

- ○ 0–3 years
- ○ 4–6 years
- ○ 7–9 years
- ○ 10 + years

How many institutions have you worked at in this profession (including your current role)?

- ○ 1
- ○ 2
- ○ 3
- ○ 4
- ○ 5
- ○ 6
- ○ Other (please enter number)

What are your roles in your current position? Select all that apply:

- ○ Athletic Advisor (advise teams)
- ○ Eligibility Specialist
- ○ Tutor Coordinator
- ○ Learning Specialist
- ○ Mentor Coordinator
- ○ Life Skills Coordinator
- ○ Community Outreach Coordinator
- ○ Diversity Programming Specialist
- ○ APR/GSR Data Collector
- ○ Director
- ○ Associate Director
- ○ Assistant Director
- ○ Supervise Staff
- ○ Train Staff
- ○ Nominate Athletes for Awards
- ○ Event Planner
- ○ Academic Recognition
- ○ Orientation
- ○ Create Student-Athlete Handbook
- ○ Other (please specify)

What kind of job-related experience and/or training did you receive prior to securing a full-time advising position?

- ○ Graduate Assistantship
- ○ Internship During School
- ○ Internship After Graduating from School
- ○ Served as Tutor for Athletes During/ After School
- ○ Other (please specify)

What is your salary range for your current position?

- ○ Under $30,000
- ○ $30,000–$40,000
- ○ $40,000–$50,000
- ○ $50,000–$60,000
- ○ $60,000–$70,000
- ○ $70,000–$80,000
- ○ $80,000–$90,000
- ○ $90,000+←

How much job-related experience and/or training did you receive prior to securing a full-time advising position?

- ○ Under a year
- ○ One year
- ○ Two years
- ○ Other (please specify)

What is your education level?

- ○ Some college
- ○ Associates Degree
- ○ Bachelors Degree
- ○ Masters Degree
- ○ Doctoral Degree
- ○ Professional Degree (e.g., JD)—please specify

What training have you pursued to develop as an Athletic Advisor? Select all that apply:

- ○ Specific Graduation Program (please specify program or degree name, not institution—e.g., M.S. in Intercollegiate Athletics Administration or M.Ed. in College Student Personnel)
- ○ N4A Individual Certification
- ○ NACADA Academic Success and the Student–Athlete online course
- ○ N4A Professional Development Institute (PDI)—New Practitioner Track
- ○ N4A PDI—Learning Specialist Track
- ○ N4A PDI—Director Track
- ○ NCAA Life Skills Symposium
- ○ NCAA Regional Rules Seminar
- ○ Attended Related Conferences (please specify)

Appendix. Athletic advisor survey (cont.)

- ○ Other (please specify)

Were you a student-athlete at the college level?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

What division/organization did you compete in?

- ○ NJCAA
- ○ NAIA
- ○ NCAA Division I
- ○ NCAA Division II
- ○ NCAA Division III

What sport did you compete in?

N4A

Have you achieved N4A Individual Certification?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Have you served on any N4A Committees?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Have you chaired a N4A Committee?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Have you ever served on the N4A Board of Directors?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Have you attended one or more N4A Regional Conventions?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Have you attended a N4A National Convention?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

How many National Conventions have you attended?

- ○ 1–3
- ○ 4–6
- ○ 7–9
- ○ 10+←

What is helpful to your development by attending the national conventions?
Outside of conventions, do you contact your colleagues in the field for advice or help?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

How does your contact with colleagues when seeking help or advice compare to that with your coworkers at your institution?

- ○ I contact colleagues more for advice than my coworkers
- ○ Both the same
- ○ I contact my coworkers at my institution more for advice more than my colleagues

How does your contact with colleagues when seeking help or advice compare to that with your director/supervisor at your institution?

- ○ I contact colleagues more for advice than my supervisor
- ○ Both the same
- ○ I contact my supervisor more for advice than my colleagues

Department

How often does your department have staff meetings?

What are the main criteria for evaluating Athletic Advisors at your institution?

Do you agree or disagree with the evaluation criteria?

- ○ Agree
- ○ Disagree

Appendix. Athletic advisor survey (cont.)

Why do you agree or disagree with the evaluation criteria?

Please share any comments about what the profession means to you.

Have you noticed colleagues in the profession experiencing burnout?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Have you ever considered leaving the profession?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

What are your long-term career goals?

Please share any recommendations or advice to develop and inspire future Athletic Advisors.

Please share anything you wish you knew before you started in the profession or in your specific job/role.

Please share any frustrations you have working in this profession.

Demographics

What do you identify as your race?

- ○ Black/African American
- ○ White/Caucasian
- ○ Asian
- ○ Pacific Islander
- ○ Native American
- ○ Hispanic/Latin American
- ○ Biracial
- ○ Multiracial
- ○ Other (please specify)

What is your gender?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Other (please specify)

What is your age range?

- ○ Below 22
- ○ 22–25
- ○ 26–29
- ○ 30–34
- ○ 35–39
- ○ 40–44
- ○ 45–49
- ○ 50+

Note. Survey powered by Qualtrics. Adjusted for print; respondents were given room to respond to open-ended items.