

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES OF ATHLETICS DIRECTORS IN FAITH-BASED SMALL  
COLLEGE DEPARTMENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Michael Jeffrey Brooks Teague

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the leadership experiences of intercollegiate athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities throughout the United States. The theory guiding this study was Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, as it explores how leaders can most effectively lead and engage their employees given unique circumstances and how those types of leaders are found within the faith-based, small college and university intercollegiate athletics departments. The central research question in this study is: How do athletics directors describe their leadership experiences in a faith-based, small college intercollegiate athletics setting? The phenomenological research using the hermeneutic approach explores the shared leadership experiences of 10 faith-based, small college and university athletics directors to understand those leadership settings and how they differ from those in larger institutions. The setting was within faith-based, small college and university athletics departments throughout the United States. The three data collection methods included individual interviews, focus groups, and an online survey of the selected participants. The data was analyzed through textural descriptions, bracketing, and data triangulation, resulting in five themes: relationship-driven environments, commitment to academic success, pressure to maintain or improve enrollment at the institution, financial challenges, and spiritual integration and missional alignment. In addition to the findings, limitations, implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for future studies were presented.

*Keywords:* situational leadership, athletics, higher education, athletics director, coach, organizational leadership, faith-based education

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, as this would not have been possible without their love and support.

To my wife, Grace, you showed love, compassion, and support when I was at my lowest. You were the source of motivation I needed when I did not want to continue. Thank you for your sacrifices throughout this process and for being the most incredible partner in this journey. I love you.

To my beautiful children, Brooks and Jordyn, you were both born during this process, and you each served as added motivation to complete what I started. I hope you will see this one day and understand that Dad worked very hard for something and that hard work pays off. Keep dreaming big dreams, working hard at everything you do, and giving all the glory to the Lord. I love you both!

To my parents, Mike and Christy Teague, you showed me the value of hard work and humility. You have always allowed me to chase my dreams and have been so supportive of those ambitions. Thank you for your love and support and for teaching me the power of humility through the lens of living like Jesus.

To all of my friends, co-workers, relatives, and others who knew about this journey and provided encouragement and support, thank you.

Most importantly, I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without the strength He provides and my faith in Him, this would not have been possible. His strength and wisdom throughout this process pushed me further than I could have gone on my own.

## **Acknowledgments**

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To the participants in this study, I am profoundly thankful. Without your participation, I would not be able to showcase the important work of athletics directors who serve at institutions that are not household names. Thank you for the work you all do and for the profound impact you are making for the Kingdom at your institutions and in your community.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL)

National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA)

National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Understanding the leadership experiences among faith-based, small college athletics directors requires a close examination of the relational qualities and situational leadership of those in leadership positions. Positive relationships are essential to successful intercollegiate athletics (Armstrong, 2021). The relationship with their athletics director influences coaches in the college setting and can positively impact their leadership abilities (Turpin & Koven, 2020). Coaches tremendously influence their student-athletes (White & Rezania, 2019), and the athletics director's ability to influence coaches can affect the entire department. The relationship between the athletics director and coach could influence the coach's direction and how they perform in their duties (Lee & Cho, 2021). There has been an evolution in the importance of establishing positive relationships within athletics, as these organizations have become multi-million-dollar enterprises, providing resources and marketing to institutions (Rich, 2021). This chapter covers the historical background, social context, and theoretical context of the importance of the leadership experiences of athletics directors within faith-based, small college and university intercollegiate athletics departments. This chapter explores the problem statement and purpose of this study and provides the significance of the research, including the empirical, practical, and theoretical significance. The research questions gather insights on how the shared experiences of these athletics directors were understood further. This chapter introduces the study and how it adds to the current research surrounding leadership, specifically within intercollegiate athletics.

### **Background**

Understanding the background of the study, including the historical, social, and



theoretical contexts of the problem, helps to establish this study's relevance. Each context provides a great depth of knowledge about the study. First, the historical context explains the connection between intercollegiate athletics and leadership. Next, the social context shows the connection to society and the impact of athletics on society. Finally, the theoretical context shows how various theories have been applied in intercollegiate athletics and the effectiveness of those theories.

### **Historical Context**

The growth in intercollegiate athletics since the 1940s until the present day, specifically within the NCAA, has made college sports become a multi-million-dollar business, which has caused a tremendous amount of economic, political, and legal pressure among these institutions regarding how they run their athletics departments (Zimbalist, 2018). The introduction of organized athletics teams at the collegiate level revolutionized the landscape of colleges around the country and has changed the look and feel of college campuses and their culture (Lewis, 1970). There has been increased pressure from the growth of these athletics departments to be filled with capable leaders who can connect with their staff and lead effectively. The pressure for growth in athletics departments creates intense workplace demands that can cause emotional and mental exhaustion if not led correctly (Ott & Beaumont, 2020). This pressure has not always been as significant for leadership in intercollegiate athletics, and it was not until the 1960s that leaders needed greater leadership capability across multiple levels of this complex industry (Lewis, 1970).

Intercollegiate athletics has been a mainstay in higher education since the 1840s, when crew competitions between Harvard and Yale began (Smith, 2000). Athletics did not always have a prominent voice on college campuses, with concerns expressed in the early 1900s from

academic institutions expressing the fear that athletics activities would take away from the primary function of academic integrity and learning (Smith, 1991). Those fears of early university administrators were dismissed in the 1910s-1940s when businesses started to see the potential revenue expansion of partnering with college athletics (Smith, 1990). The college landscape throughout the country changed in the 1940s with the establishment of many rules and regulations as college campuses started to feel more pride in athletic achievements woven throughout campus culture (Lewis, 1970). Since its establishment in 1910 and subsequent rules and regulations established in the 1940s, the NCAA has had trouble regulating its numerous rules and regulations placed on members to protect student-athletes, with ethical standards not always being upheld by member institutions (Kinghorn, 2021). The athletics director position has needed to evolve with the ongoing complexities of intercollegiate athletics. Institutions must have a person in the athletics director role who has strong relational abilities, administrative functionality, and fiscal responsibility (Rich, 2021).

Institutions with faith-based identities have the same ethical challenges to consider when managing their athletics departments, especially as the athletics culture places winning as the most important piece in an athletics experience (Kinghorn, 2021). The culture of pushing ethical boundaries is not isolated to non-faith-based colleges, as faith-based colleges have had their share of scandals due to failure to live up to the faith-based and general ethical standards of a religious institution, including substantial institutional sexual violence cover-ups at faith-based institutions such as the Baylor football scandal in 2017-18 (Solomon, 2018). Colleges and universities have recently placed significant resources towards training coaches and staff to help stop the abuse that can occur in sports, which is a significant shift in what used to be a culture of silence in the 1960s until the early 2000s when unethical treatment was

identified (Nite & Nauright, 2020).

Determining the correct leadership style for these groups and understanding how leadership has historically been perceived is an essential piece of the background for this study. Within the last decade, the transformational leader has been established in numerous industries and has helped create success among organizations (Seitz & Owens, 2021). However, while this leadership style is effective in many industries, the athletics industry has notably been filled with transactional leaders and coaches who develop and establish relationships only to the level needed to achieve the desired results (Tetteh-Opai & Omoregie, 2015). Within the last decade, the athletics industry has begun to emphasize transformational leadership and how this leadership style can be a powerful method for growth in intercollegiate sports. Transactional leadership may be more effective in creative settings, but researchers have noted the importance of relationships, how these can help build cohesive teams, and the positive effects of the transformational leadership style (Xifang & Jiang, 2018). Leaders must be equipped to handle the problems associated with the complexities of the modern intercollegiate athletics director position,

### **Social Context**

From a social standpoint, the athletics department at colleges and universities is frequently the most visible department on campus (Burkitt et al., 2021). The pressure is continual for an athletics director to succeed in competition and maintain high graduation rates, improve department GPA, and appease internal and external constituents (Robinson et al., 2019; Southall et al., 2015). These leaders are tasked with being the most visible individuals of a department and face the pressures to hire and retain highly paid employees whose success reflects on the athletics director's leadership. The leadership of the athletics director has direct implications on

the success of the department as they look to create a quality entertainment product for the fans and a supportive academic environment for the student-athletes (Greenberg & Evrard, 2016). Toxic leaders in these positions can affect the local community of fans as well as the cultural environment of the university system. The social implications are important when exploring how to build quality relationships and guide coaches to be positive influences on their communities. A quality research study may encourage the development of more quality leaders in this field. The leader's ability to connect with donors and fans at a small college and university, as well as their leadership style, is important to developing an understanding of the dynamics of athletics departments at these institutions.

College administrators, Presidents, and Vice Presidents who oversee athletics could also benefit from understanding the problem. These individuals have direct authority over the athletics director and would benefit from understanding how the leaders of their athletics departments experience the unique challenges of leading one of the most influential areas of their institution. The relationship between the athletics director and the athletics director's direct report is important, and transparency in the experiences of both the athletics director and the direct report can improve results and meet the expectations set by the athletics director (Elliott et al., 2023). Through a shared understanding of the challenges faced in faith-based small colleges and universities, institutional administrators can help the athletics director succeed in their department leadership.

Athletics directors have an array of expectations placed on them and must display leadership at multiple levels. They are responsible for the oversight of the business operations of the athletics department, as well as the overall success of the department's leadership initiatives as they pertain to coaches and staff members (Rich, 2021). The athletics department at the large

college and university looks different than the small college and university, especially from a financial standpoint, and when comparing the leadership between these two settings, the small college and university leaders were responsible for more areas than those in large college and university settings (Walker & Misawa, 2018). The leadership experiences of the small college and university athletics director will be explored to further understand how these leaders navigate their own department struggles that are unlikely present in larger college and university systems.

### **Theoretical Context**

Various leadership theories have been associated with intercollegiate athletics and they all serve their purpose in navigating leadership experiences within this industry. Burns's (1978) transformational leadership theory and Bass's (1985) work examined leadership through the lens of close relationships and the willingness to be transformed while leading others, as opposed to the transactional leadership style also mentioned. While establishing this kind of leadership style can take time, it has been shown to be effective in the athletics setting (Álvarez et al., 2016). A more results-driven leadership theory, the transactional leadership theory, is based on achievement and is seen as a deal between the leader and their followers to achieve certain results (Bass, 1985). The transactional leadership theory is a popular leadership style when seeking results only, especially within athletic settings (Tetteh-Opai & Omoregie, 2015). Leadership within small college settings, specifically within NCAA Division III institutions, has also seen the importance of servant leadership, which is a leadership style that focuses on the employee and where the athletics director attempts to meet the needs of the staff within the department (Burton & Welty Peachey, 2013; Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2016). The NCAA Division III institutions and their emphasis on academics are similar to those being examined in

this study, and the servant leadership theory is one that has been shown to be popular and effective within the associations philosophy (Nixon, 2021). Several leadership styles and theories have been examined and utilized in intercollegiate athletics to reveal examples of successful leadership within the organization.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that faith-based, small college intercollegiate athletics directors face the complex challenge of administering athletics programs with reliability, increasing enrollment, and maintaining the academic and spiritual integrity of the institution. The athletics directors at these levels must maintain the ability to establish relationships with their coaches and respond to the varying needs that come with managing an athletics department (Lee, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019). Small colleges and universities with intercollegiate programs rely largely on the athletics department's success and commitment to help fund the initiatives and gain support from donors and alumni (Kim et al., 2019). The integrity of higher education institutions has been questioned as admissions scandals and improper use of funds in athletics departments has come to light, and there is a need to understand how leaders experience their departments and navigate these types of hurdles in their daily workplace (Thelin, 2019). With the primary research focused on large NCAA institutions (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2018), small colleges and universities throughout the country seek to manage their departments much differently with fewer resources.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the leadership experiences of intercollegiate athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities and the complexities that these leaders face. The theory guiding this study is the situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). At this stage in the research, leadership

experiences of athletics directors are defined as a way in which they display leadership due to their appointment to oversee the athletics department and to direct the department in a way that provides leadership and proper oversight in the dynamic intercollegiate athletics environment (Woolf et al., 2019).

### **Significance of the Study**

The phenomenological study helps enhance the body of knowledge in the field of leadership within intercollegiate athletics by examining the leadership experience of athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities. These shared experiences and data from the study provide an understanding of how athletics directors can best lead in the intercollegiate setting with unique pressure to increase enrollment and maintain the academic and spiritual integrity of the institution. The significance of this study is that it uses the foundations of the existing research to create an understanding of the faith-based, small college and university intercollegiate athletics departments and the forms of leadership that are currently effectively.

### **Theoretical**

Leadership theory and the various models associated with the differences in leadership cover multiple ways in which leaders can lead in various situations. The situational leadership theory suggests that leaders should be aware of their situation and adjust their leadership styles to these differing circumstances (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). With athletics directors being required to be advanced in their understanding of multiple levels of a complex department, situational leadership theory lends itself to best understanding how athletics directors can lead in each situation (Rich, 2021). From a theoretical standpoint, this study provides additional insights into how situational leadership theory applies to the leadership qualities of athletics directors at small colleges and universities.

**Empirical**

The empirical significance of this study includes the necessity of looking deeper into the importance of the leadership qualities of an athletics director within faith-based, small colleges and universities. This unique perspective is highlighted in this phenomenological study and showcases the importance of relationships in the intercollegiate setting among athletics directors (Dahlin & Schroeder, 2022). Understanding that there is a focus on the holistic development of student-athletes and coaches in the small college athletics setting, there is evidence that the leadership of the athletics director at these levels contributes to the overall experience of those in the department (Burkitt et al., 2021). The leadership roles of athletics directors are influential in the ethical challenges faced within intercollegiate athletics (Caulfield et al., 2023), and this study will contribute to the literature exploring athletics directors who are actively pursuing academic and spiritual integrity within their departments. Through understanding the shared experiences of the athletics director at the faith-based, small college and university level, there can be more understanding among research in regard to the complexities of these leadership roles and how significant they can be within the greater university setting.

**Practical**

The practical significance of this study is that the findings will contribute to research on the leadership experiences of athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities and can provide a practical understanding of the challenges that these individuals face. Similar studies have shown that the athletics director plays a vital role in the influence and success of programs within the athletics department (Cotterill et al., 2022), and this study contributes to a greater understanding of athletics administrators and university administration at faith-based, small colleges and universities. Targeting the athletics directors in the small college and



university departments at faith-based universities provided the relevant data for this study and further explored the differences this group faces compared to athletic directors leading larger institutions (Daniels et al., 2019). While there are associations that provide insights into the unique challenges of small college athletics directors, this study defines and describes the experiences of this smaller subset of leaders. Being able to understand the shared experiences of athletics directors at small, faith-based colleges and universities allows for a greater understanding of the challenges these leaders face when compared to others in the industry the university systems, and such findings may help support this group of leaders long-term. In addition to athletics directors, coaches can benefit from understanding the general leadership challenges faced by their leadership and the importance of relationships built between the athletics director and the coaches (Robinson et al., 2019).

### **Research Questions**

Identifying the central research question is essential to understanding the problem and formulating the research study. Along with the central research question, multiple sub-questions are presented to further gather information and understand the experiences of the coaches and the athletics directors as they pertain to leadership within the intercollegiate athletics department.

#### **Central Research Question**

How do athletics directors describe their leadership experiences in a faith-based, small college intercollegiate athletics setting?

#### **Sub-Question One**

How does the culture in the faith-based, small college intercollegiate athletics setting affect the ways athletics directors make decisions?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

In what ways do athletics directors demonstrate situational leadership at their college or university?

### **Sub-Question Three**

How do athletics directors experience pressure from the college or university to maintain academic and spiritual integrity while increasing enrollment?

#### **Definitions**

1. *Athletics director* – An individual responsible for administering the overall athletics program of an educational institution and someone who has the oversight and responsibility to make the decisions in guiding the vision and values of the department (Oregon State Legislation, 2019).
2. *Coach* – Someone who trains a person or team of people in a particular sport and who is responsible for the development of student-athletes in the skill of their sport, character development, and physical development (Collins, 2022).
3. *Faith-based college or university* – A distinctly Christian institution that requires students to sign or adhere to a statement of faith and a code of conduct (Daniels & Gustafson, 2011).
4. *Situational leadership* – The ability to adapt to different leadership needs in various settings to best lead the group of people in those situations (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977).
5. *Small college or university* – An institution that has an undergraduate enrollment of less than 5,000 students (Livingston et al., 2023).

#### **Summary**

Athletics directors hold significant positions within a college or university, and at a small college and university, they are responsible for multiple functions on any given day. The

athletics directors at these institutions understand their ability to influence and lead and how that leadership can span across the university. Understanding the leadership experiences of intercollegiate athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities is important to learn more about the unique complexities they face within their organizational structure. Quality research questions that drive the research and explore the major and minor themes of the problem foster an awareness of how to understand the experiences of these leaders. Through an understanding of the background of the problem, this research creates a thorough look into this group of leaders and provides social and theoretical contexts for future studies. The study provides insight into the complexities in leadership for faith-based, small college and university intercollegiate athletics departments throughout the country and adds to the research in this field. This phenomenological study provides a description of the complexities of the leadership experiences of intercollegiate athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Identifying related literature that can adequately provide context to the small-college, faith-based intercollegiate athletics director position and how that position has come to be, as well as the challenges they face in driving enrollment and maintaining academic and spiritual integrity, is an important part of understanding this unique group of leaders. The related literature was explored to identify the leadership qualities of intercollegiate athletics directors and to understand how this group's leadership experiences are unique in the intercollegiate athletics industry. This section provides a description of the theoretical framework on which the study was based. The next section of the review focuses on the integration of institutional academic integrity and athletics philosophies, and how those align. Literature related to the emergence of faith-based institutions and the difference in athletics philosophy was also explored, as well as how faith-based, small colleges and universities operate and how they differ from their large university counterparts. Next, a review of the pressure to increase and retain enrollment in these settings was conducted, as well as how such pressures present at faith-based colleges. Further, leadership themes were reviewed to provide a comprehensive look at the most current research regarding the most effective leadership styles and how those methods can affect the perceptions and understanding of the athletics department and university. These leadership themes were discovered at the athletics director's level and illustrate how the athletics director can influence coaches within the department. Finally, an exploration of motivation within athletics department settings was conducted to understand how motivation differs among coaches, student-athletes, and athletics directors. This literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of the current research and exploration of this topic and a baseline understanding of this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The situational leadership theory was utilized to gain an understanding of the experiences of faith-based, small college athletics directors (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). This theory focuses on the components of leadership and the situation in which the leader finds themselves, allowing themselves to adapt to their situations. Situational leadership theory emphasizes how the leader behaves in any given situation relative to their followers and how the leader responds to task and relationship behaviors (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). Within the situational leadership theory, the leader understands the differences in each situation, the abilities of the followers tasked with completing the situation, and the leader's ability to be effective given each situation (Henkel & Bourdeau, 2018). The leader will be able to assign tasks or lead in a different way depending on the level of achievement that is possible from the follower, and where the leader can adapt and respond to each specific problem based on their ability to relate to the followers in their own leadership maturity (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). This theory will help solve problems and provide a framework for understanding leadership values and how leaders approach tasks and behaviors associated with their employees (Hersey et al., 2013). Four key leadership styles are used within the situational leadership theory framework: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating (Arora & Baronikian, 2013; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). Each of these leadership behaviors is determined by the level of relationship established and the direction needed from each task that needs to be accomplished (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, 1997).

Within the situational leadership theory, leaders must have the ability to influence each relationship and task based on the overall maturity of the individual follower. Following along the theory, Hersey and Blanchard (1977) suggested that followers who have a higher degree of maturity can be led through a delegating method which is low task and low relationship. The

model has since replaced the term “maturity” with “readiness” to properly reflect the motivation and commitment to followership (Blanchard et al., 1993). The readiness of the individual assesses ability and competence from having no ability or competence to having full competence and commitment to the task (Papworth et al., 2009). Conversely, when leaders are working with those with lower maturity levels, they are often focused primarily on being a participating leader, focused on a low task and high relationship approach. These approaches, both task and relationship, are determined by the leader and their ability to execute situational leadership in the process of finding success in each situation (Hersey et al., 2013).

Situational leadership theory can also help the faith-based small college athletics director understand how being flexible with their leadership style and adapting to various situations can be an effective tool in motivating and managing a team of coaches. If an athletics director has multiple cultures or people groups within the department, they will need to be cognizant of how each culture may respond to this type of leadership, as people may respond differently given the region they come from in their past (Prochazka et al., 2018). Cultural influences and the follower’s current environment will allow for different levels of maturity, and the athletics director should be aware of the adjustments required to respond to followers in their current environment (Babbitt, 2019). The situational leadership theory is associated with success from the ability to connect with others from a relational standpoint and provide various leadership outcomes given the setting and level of direction needed from the leader (Hersey et al., 2013).

### **Related Literature**

At many colleges and universities throughout the United States, athletics departments facilitate and organize the intricacies required to manage a multi-functional department (Rich, 2021). Like many other organizations, athletics departments have clear roles, an organizational

hierarchy, and relationships among co-workers. Within the athletics department, the athletics director is the department's leader, overseeing the coaches within the department. Like leaders within other organizations, the athletics director needs to understand how to properly manage and motivate coaches (Rich, 2021). A shared vision must be established to create and manage a successful athletics department, with clear and personalized goals for coaches (Wheelan et al., 2020). The ability of the athletics director to lead and bring everyone into the shared vision of the department is essential, and as leaders they have the platform and potential to influence a group of individuals to find success as a team (Ruihley et al., 2016). The importance of the athletics director leading and managing coaches is a crucial factor in the success of the retention efforts of the student-athletes, as the coaches will have a tremendous influence on whether the student-athletes stay at the institution (McElveen & Ibele, 2019). At the NCAA Division I level, nearly 13% of student-athletes transferred in 2018-19, with many other student-athletes in the NCAA transfer portal never finding additional opportunities to transfer (Kramer & Carroll, 2019). By creating a positive culture in the athletics department, the athletics director can influence the retention of both coaches and student-athletes. The leadership of the athletics director at the faith-based, small-college intercollegiate level can be explored through an examination of the current literature to understand intercollegiate athletics and leadership within this industry, as well as understand the increased pressures on the leaders of these departments.

### **Academic Integrity within Intercollegiate Athletics**

Within higher education, academic integrity among institutions is an esteemed part of the history of colleges and universities and an important part of missional values (Taylor & Bicak, 2019). Colleges and universities provide learning opportunities for individuals who seek to continue their education in a specialized field that will help them prepare for their careers

(Paviotti, 2020). Student-athletes in the college or university setting are pursuing the same opportunities but are also utilizing their athletic talents to earn scholarships and the opportunity to compete at a higher level (Nixon et al., 2021). Research has shown that student-athletes are well-prepared for the academic rigor of higher education and balancing a busy schedule, with this demographic often outperforming their non-student-athlete peers (Pellegrini & Hesla, 2018). However, there are situations where the academic integrity of institutions has been questioned due to special treatment of student-athletes or through the lowering of standards for high-profile athletic talent (Eckenrod & Nam, 2021). This creates pressure on athletics directors to lead the coaches in a way that helps them adhere to the mission and integrity of the college or university.

### ***Academic Success in Intercollegiate Athletics***

Athletics departments across the country have demonstrated the success of their student-athletes and commitment toward high achievement in the classroom (McElveen & Ibele, 2019). Athletics departments and student-athletes have shown a greater GPA than the general student body due to support systems in place for student-athletes (Pellegrini & Hesla, 2018). Student-athletes at the NCAA Division III level have also demonstrated an increased focus on academics that can be observed in the academic achievements of those institutions (Cooper et al., 2017). Most institutions at all levels of intercollegiate athletics provide academic and other support services to help assist student-athletes. With increased demands on student-athlete schedules, the ability to manage their time and their responsibilities as students and athletes is important, and services provided to student-athletes help provide frameworks for success in their academic pursuits (Vogel et al., 2019). Many student-athletes find themselves well-prepared for their careers due to having a sense of optimism, the ability to adapt to new situations, and resiliency when setbacks occur (August, 2020). Academic success for student-athletes has shown to be



positive in career development, especially for institutions using cross-departmental collaboration in their efforts (Coffin et al., 2021). The success of athletics departments can partially be attributed to the checks and balances required of institutions in order to adhere to national governing bodies. Required academic services and continuous monitoring of student-athlete performance in the classroom provides support to the student-athlete and holds them accountable to more than just their professors (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019).

### ***Intercollegiate Athletics and Lack of Academic Integrity***

Academic integrity has been questioned within intercollegiate athletics as many institutions have lowered their academic standards in an effort to achieve athletic success and drive revenue, often catering to the revenue-generating sports of football and basketball (Thelin, 2019). Additionally, some institutions offer student-athletes preferential treatment due to their status as student-athlete, with more flexibility regarding grading standards and class absence policies (Saffici & Pellegrino, 2012). This is not exclusive to student-athletes who are already part of the university system, with some institutions accused of using athletics affiliation to help prospective students gain admission to elite institutions. Many institutions allow athletics programs to have priority admission for prospective student-athletes, and for elite institutions with low admissions rates, this allows student-athletes to gain admission and compete for the university (Orim & Glendinning, 2023). However, there have been instances where coaches and administrators have abused this power and taken bribes from families to mark their son or daughter as a recruit to help them gain admission to an elite school, with those students never actually being recruits (Eaton & Carmichael, 2023). These actions were due to a lack of institutional control within the athletics department, with the institution's reputation being harmed because of these actions. This behavior resulted in legal implications, and coaches,

parents, and administrators were fined or imprisoned because of the lack of integrity in the admission process at their respective institutions (Orim & Glendinning, 2023).

### ***Pressure to Maintain Academic Integrity in Intercollegiate Athletics***

Colleges and universities face pressure to increase the budgets of athletics programs but also scale back on academic budgets, which creates a reliance on academic standards set in place by the NCAA instead of the institution itself (Brooks et al., 2021). The pressure to maintain academic standards increases for elite institutions such as Ivy League schools or other top-ranked institutions, as the academic experience is prioritized even more than in other institutions (Fried, 2007). Academics are prioritized at Ivy League institutions to the level that there are no athletic scholarships given at these colleges and universities, so students' focus must be on their academic pursuits (Kotlyarenko & Ehrenberg, 2000). This type of mentality is also found at the NCAA Division III level, as the whole division does not allow student-athletes to receive athletic institutional aid or added benefits as a student-athlete (Dahlin & Schroeder, 2022). NCAA member institutions must adhere to the standards set by the association and maintain institutional control over the academic and athletics processes at their institution (Osborne et al., 2019). For some athletics departments, the drive to stay competitive can conflict with the academic priorities of the institution, and the pressure to be successful in competition can conflict with the pressure to maintain academic achievement (Smith, 2019).

### **Faith-Based Institutions and Intercollegiate Athletics**

The introduction of organized athletics teams at the collegiate level revolutionized the landscape of colleges around the country and has changed the look and feel of college campuses and their culture (Lewis, 1970). However, with the increased visibility of the athletics department, along with the amount of time needed to properly administer a healthy culture in the

department, many colleges and universities have moved towards hiring experienced leaders to dedicate themselves to the leadership of the athletics department (Rich, 2021). The unique challenges of faith-based colleges and universities compared to non-faith-based colleges and universities can be seen through the differences in institutional philosophies and missional values (Daniels et al., 2019). These types of universities have similar educational goals but different ways of providing co-curricular outcomes, with faith-based colleges having a larger identity associated with the overall growth of spirituality (Dahlin & Schroeder, 2022). Faith-based colleges and universities also have different athletics philosophies and ways the athletics department aligns with the university's mission and vision.

### ***Differences in Athletics Philosophies***

Athletics philosophies vary across each institution, with some colleges and universities focused on creating revenue and notoriety for their institutions through athletics (Rich, 2021) and other institutions focused on providing opportunities for students to compete, with a focus on holistic development (Burkitt et al., 2021). Faith-based institutions have philosophies that are tied to the spiritual health and development of students, including student-athletes (Dahlin & Schroeder, 2022). The concept of Christian higher education is to impact the mind and the heart, following in the steps of Jesus and his teachings (Daniels, 2022). Faith-based colleges and universities emphasize character and faith development through participation in athletics (Burkitt et al., 2021). The values within the small colleges and universities at the NAIA and NCAA Division III levels are character-driven, and many of these institutions focus on the faith development of their student-athletes. Many coaches at this level seek to show student-athletes that their identity is not tied to their sport but instead is connected to their faith or another part of their personal identity (Strehlow, 2023).

Participation in intercollegiate athletics is another way for these colleges to express their beliefs and showcase the talents of their faith-based student-athletes. Many large, faith-based colleges and universities even utilize their platform to showcase their faith in the form of commercials, advertisements, and to help boost enrollment within their institutions (Dahlin & Schroeder, 2022). For many faith-based institutions, the general morality and ethos of the athletics department reflect the culture and values of the college or university (Strehlow, 2023). These philosophies set apart faith-based colleges and universities and provide alternative opportunities to share the Gospel message and reach an audience or demographic that may not have heard that message if not for the athletics competition.

### ***Maintaining Faith and Integrity in Competition***

Among college athletics there is a culture and desire to make winning the most important part of the athletics experience (Kinghorn, 2021). Many colleges and universities will terminate coaches and their staff if they are unable to meet those expectations, and there are times when athletic directors are fired due to the lack of success within their department (Brooks et al., 2021). Often, coaches have been found guilty of breaking institutional rules or athletics association rules to increase their chances of winning, and there is a culture of pushing ethical boundaries to find success (Caulfield et al., 2023). Maintaining faith-based values and integrity in competition sets many distinctly faith-based colleges and universities apart and produces an attractive destination for prospective student-athletes (Burkitt et al., 2021). These institutions are focused on the ability to develop character and faith through athletics and encourage using competition to bring positive attention to their faith (Blazer, 2019). A study found that student-athletes show a higher sense of religious identity than the non-student-athlete population, and student-athletes could have the ability to respond more to faith-based institutional

values (Allen et al., 2022). The study suggested that coaches and administrators could lean into the religious and character development of student-athletes and influence them at a greater capacity than non-student-athletes (Ronkainen et al., 2020). However, there are tensions between faith-based character and maintaining character in competition among faith-based student-athletes who compete at a high level and how they separate their values from secular competition (Ronkainen et al., 2020). These conflicting values within competition can create division among teams and organizations, with the culture of the team driven primarily by either the coach or the leader of the organization, and it is up to the coaches or leaders to be able to step into uncomfortable situations and intervene to make a positive impact on the student-athlete's moral direction (Caulfield et al., 2023). Still, there are benefits to being able to maintain faith-based values in competition and using those values to help provide an environment that promotes the holistic growth of the athlete (Allen et al., 2022).

### **Enrollment-Driven Institutions**

Higher education has been a vital part of the American educational system and has been a pillar in the history of the nation, yet its viability is being questioned and is at a crossroads (Betts et al., 2019). The ability to pursue an education that leads to personal growth as well as applicable skills for the workplace is still an important part of society, but some challenges have arisen for many smaller colleges and universities. Many of these schools are being forced to close or are on the verge of closing due to a decline in students and financial problems that have arisen from the effects of COVID-19 (Copley & Douthett, 2020). Enrollment challenges for these institutions present exceptional challenges for leadership.

### ***Challenges for Enrollment-Driven Institutions***

Throughout the last few years, many private colleges and universities with small enrollments have faced challenges to keep their doors open. With many of these small schools reliant on tuition from students to fund their institutions, a decline in enrollment adds pressure to the organization and its sustainability (Eide, 2018). The number of campus closures over the years has continued to increase, with around one in five faith-based, small colleges and universities at risk of closure in the upcoming years (Copley & Douthett, 2020). The primary problem facing these institutions is the decreased number of students who are attending college and seeking out a faith-based environment, as well as the rising costs of higher education (Daniels et al., 2019). Another concern facing institutions is the value of higher education and whether it is needed among the younger generation. A growing number of students and professionals who did not attend college have started to question that value and whether young adults can achieve the same success as previous generations without a college education (Heckman et al., 2023; Shields, 2016). This is especially true within lower-ranked institutions where the cost can outweigh the value of the degree based on the career offerings post-graduation (Tomlinson, 2018). There are also fears among institutions of an impending enrollment cliff, with fewer students graduating from high schools than in previous years. This has been predicted for several years, and institutions that are already under pressure will need to adjust their revenue strategies to remain viable (Campion, 2020). If institutions that miss enrollment goals do not continue to attract students to their campuses, then they will need to rely on donors and other financial resources or cut back on institutional offerings. Without such measures, these institutions will continue to close across the country (Copley & Douthett, 2020). With the decreased enrollment among higher education institutions, many of these schools are

looking for different ways to attract students to their campuses. Some methods include loosening transfer credit restrictions, adding academic programs that match the current trends for the job market, and creating financial aid packages that allow incoming students to attain a degree without the burden of excess student loans (Delcours & Carmona, 2019). Many institutions are beginning to use athletics to increase enrollment and attract new students to their campus (Zvosec & Baer, 2022).

### ***Colleges and Universities Using Athletics to Drive Enrollment***

Another approach that has become popular to increase enrollment at small colleges and universities is through expanded athletics opportunities for prospective students. Within enrollment-driven institutions, pressures are felt when enrollment targets are missed, as student enrollment is the main revenue source for many of these institutions (Campion, 2020). As schools seek solutions to attract and retain students, many of these schools have turned to their athletics departments to increase the number of sports offerings and roster sizes to provide greater opportunity within each program (Zvosec & Baer, 2022). Another method of using athletics to create demand is through the creation of junior varsity programs which allow students to compete but do not provide the same high scholarships as their varsity counterparts (Moleski et al., 2023). While increased enrollment has provided benefits to the university, many schools find the retention of student-athletes worrisome, as some student-athletes come from difficult backgrounds and may have been admitted without meeting the general academic standards of the university, making the adaption process difficult to manage academically (Weaver & Reynolds, 2020). However, there are many cases where athletics have helped institutions continue to operate and avoid closing their doors, and some institutions have been built with the foundation of using student-athletes as the main student population (Burkitt et al.,

2021). Success varies among schools that utilize athletics as an enrollment tool, but the burden to increase rosters and add sports largely falls on the coaches and athletics directors at those institutions.

### **Leadership Themes in Intercollegiate Athletics**

Effective leadership in the intercollegiate athletics setting is an important piece to understand when exploring leadership experiences. Leadership in the intercollegiate setting is an important part of success, and having an established leader has been shown to be essential for developing quality teams (Cotterill et al., 2022). Departments spend lavish amounts of money (Elliot & Kellison, 2019) to find success with competition against other institutions, but many of them also spend resources on academic centers, student-athlete support services, and facilities to enhance the experience of the student-athlete, including leadership development programs aimed at helping departments improve (Beaudin, 2018). In the intercollegiate athletics setting, integrity is a key part of leadership and helps the followers move towards a shared goal (Armstrong, 2021). The athletics director is essential to the development of the department, and their leadership is what drives success. When leading in the athletics setting, the athletics director is expected to provide clear instructions and goals that align with a compelling vision to help motivate the department (Sungu et al., 2020). As the athletics director leads the department, they must balance their desire to succeed in competition with the desire to succeed in the classroom and must self-regulate those standards within their departments and with the coaches. With many athletics departments operating in isolation, without self-regulation they could be liable for violations within their institution and among their athletic association governing body (Caulfield et al., 2023). Toxic leadership in higher education and the intercollegiate setting can thrive in organizational cultures where teamwork is needed, and this type of behavior is prevalent in the



organizational culture created in higher education and intercollegiate athletics. However, a positive team culture with a strong leader can help dissolve toxic environments in higher education (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). Such leadership themes demonstrate the need for assertive leaders with high character and the ability to share a compelling vision.

### ***Relational Influence in Intercollegiate Athletics***

Previous research has noted the importance of relationships within the intercollegiate setting, with these types of relationships proving to be fruitful in the creation and implementation of high-performance athletics departments (Armstrong, 2021; Cotterill et al., 2022; Penney & McMahon, 2016). The athletics director is required to have relational abilities that impact several constituents, including coaches, donors, student-athletes, and other administrators across the campus (Robinson et al., 2019). The athletics directors and leaders of the athletics department who have been the most effective are those that care for their coaches and have relational abilities. When looking at the type of leader that has been the most impactful, those who exhibit transformational leadership qualities, which include a high focus on relationships, have been the most successful and effective (Northouse, 2019). The transformational leadership style in athletics has a significant focus on the professional relationships built around knowing and understanding each individual and has been successful in its ability to motivate athletes to accomplish their goals, although this style of leadership takes time to develop (Álvarez et al., 2016). Athletics directors looking to build a high-performance team by establishing quality relationships among their coaches and staff should be aware of the time and effort required to build those relationships and establish the trust necessary to create a cohesive unit of coaches moving towards the same shared vision. Once cohesion and trust have been established within the development of positive relationships among the team, team members' satisfaction also

increases, and the overall commitment of the individuals toward the tasks becomes more evident (Wheelan et al., 2020). The influence of positive relationships within the context of motivation in an athletics setting can be correlated with how relationships influence positive outcomes in other industries. In the athletics setting, the relational abilities of the coaches and athletics directors can lead to success, and the leaders who understand how to build quality relationships are generally successful in their ability to manage their teams. One study showed a difference in response based on gender, with a more positive relationship and correlation towards listening and response when there is coaching from an opposite gender (Cruz & Hyun-Duck, 2017). Relationships are full of many complexities which are important to understand. Within the literature, there are multiple perspectives on what could be the most effective method of relational influence (Northington, 2016; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020), but in the context of athletics, there is more evidence of the positive effects of relationships when an athletics director is seeking to motivate their team of coaches (Fraina & Hodge, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018). By building a relational perspective in the athletics department, a foundation is set for greater understanding and a culture of learning within a high-performance team (Penney & McMahon, 2016). The relational influences can lead to greater motivation within the department, which is key to the overall success of the athletics department at the college level.

### ***Leadership Methods***

Building professional relationships across various external and internal constituents within the intercollegiate athletics context are an important part of an athletics director's responsibilities as they look to lead their departments. These relationships allow for deeper trust and understanding of what coaches are going through and help in the overall leadership of the department (Fraina & Hodge, 2020). These relationships begin in the hiring process, where

establishing connections and early relationships can be an important factor as coaches are hired into the department (Johnson et al., 2018). However, these relationships can either be transformational or transactional, and both are seen in the athletics industry. The transactional leadership model is an effective and often-used method in many organizations and can help drive results quickly and in a manner that expects success early and where relationships are established at only the level needed to achieve the desired results (Cho et al., 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2022). Conversely, transformational leadership establishes relationships as essential, and has been successful within the athletics context where relationships can help drive success; however, it is often more time consuming to establish transformational leadership into a department (Kovach, 2018). Relationships are important to the overall success of the athletics department, and the literature has demonstrated that success can be found in both the transformational and transactional methods of building relationships within the athletics setting.

### ***Perceptions of Athletics Directors and Coaches***

The perceptions of those not in intercollegiate athletics regarding the athletics director and coach positions at the college level vary with each group that is surveyed. Some studies have shown a largely positive perception of coaches in the eyes of student-athletes, as coaches can have the greatest impact on their development both in their sport and their personal growth (Rich, 2021; Tredinnick & McMahon, 2021). The coach can have the greatest impact on the development of the student-athlete in a college experience, and is often seen as a mentor figure among the student-athlete demographic (Powers et al., 2020; Rich, 2021; Wallace & Shipherd, 2020). However, student-athletes can also have negative perceptions of their coaches based on the coach's style of coaching and their ability to connect with the student-athletes (Tran & Vu, 2021). This perception is largely based on the inability to have a connection outside of the sport

or competition and if the coach has a transactional leadership style of coaching (Tran & Vu, 2021). The student-athletes' perspectives of coaches is an important perception to understand, as much of the success of coaches comes from the performance of their student-athletes, both in and out of competition (Misasi et al., 2016). Perceptions of coaches can also be developed by multiple outside constituents, including donors, faculty, parents, and other members of the community. These perceptions are dependent on how the coach can connect with those groups and if the coach can properly convey their vision (Huffman et al., 2016).

The athletics director may also be perceived in many ways. This highly visible position must have the ability to connect with multiple people who are connected to the athletics department, including coaches, student-athletes, donors, university staff and faculty, and parents (Rich, 2021). This creates a complex perception of the position that can be seen differently based on each of those groups. Among the university administration, the position is perceived as the main gatekeeper for the institutional athletics department, with the sole responsibility falling on the athletics director (Smith, 2000). The position can also be seen by others as overpaid (Kovach, 2018), essential (Ott & Beaumont, 2020), the culture-setter for the department (Greenberg & Evrard, 2016), and the manager of the coaches within the department (Rich, 2021). While the perception is viewed differently among various groups, the importance of the position is clear and it is essential to the overall success of the athletics department at a college or university (Ott & Beaumont, 2020).

### **Athletics Directors' Leadership**

The leadership of athletics directors in the modern collegiate athletics environment is an important task and one that has tremendous pressure. Nearly every athletics department in the country at the NCAA Division I level is a multi-million-dollar business, and athletics directors

need to have administrative quality and elite relational abilities mixed with a high level of business acumen (Rich, 2021). The political skills of athletics directors are an important piece of keeping highly-paid employees and coaches happy and committed to their jobs, as well as helping with any potential public relations problems that arise (Robinson et al., 2019). Athletics directors and administrators who have a sense of servant leadership in addition to the business qualities needed are effective leaders within these athletics contexts (Robinson et al., 2021). The literature has shown the importance of athletics directors in the overall success of the department as they lead their coaches and fellow administrators to provide a quality product for the student-athlete and fan alike (Greenberg & Evrard, 2016). The influence of the athletics director is monumental within these departments, and if there is destructive leadership within these positions, the department and community may experience significant disruption (Powers et al., 2016). Leadership in the intercollegiate athletics setting is not solely the responsibility of the athletics director, but requires complete institutional buy-in to build a successful athletics program (Osborne et al., 2019). Even in this context, where transactional leadership is needed, those athletic directors who show transformational leadership qualities are effective and successful in the collegiate athletics industry (Northouse, 2019).

The effectiveness of leadership qualities in athletics administrators is an important topic, especially within higher education. Athletics directors are running businesses worth millions of dollars, and because of this, they need to have quality business acumen to be successful and care well for their employees, the coaches (Rich, 2021). Traditionally, effective leaders in athletics were transactional leaders who only required results as a means for success. However, this model has changed in recent years to apply various types of leadership as an effective model that can be used as a standard for success if done correctly. The relationships in athletics settings have been

shown to be vital to the success of programs, and more athletics environments are beginning to adopt this type of thinking (Northington, 2016).

A level of self-efficacy is also required among coaches and within athletics when looking to promote interdepartmental success, with research demonstrating how coaches who have high self-efficacy are more successful with their programs (Myers et al., 2017; Wells et al., 2016). Researchers have examined the validity and practical applicability of transformational leadership theory, which identifies the leader as someone who helps develop or transform the employee in both their technical skills and their character and leadership abilities (Northouse, 2019).

The leadership qualities of an athletics director are essential to a successful athletics department, and those experiences must be understood and explored at the small college and university levels. These leaders provide the foundational support systems for the rest of the department, and their experiences must be documented (Robinson et al., 2019). Participation in athletics in any capacity, either as an administrator, a coach, or a student-athlete, can provide emotions that come from passion and a desire to be successful. These emotions can be powerful motivational tools but can also lead to high levels of burnout among these groups if the athletics director is unable to manage the emotions of the coaches (Lee & Cho, 2021). Managing the coaching demographic is not an easy task, and the athletics director must understand how to lead their charges.

### ***Athletics Directors Leading and Managing Coaches***

Managing and leading coaches from the role of an athletics director is an important trait that must be understood by those in positions of power. The relationships that are built within the context of athletics are essential for the athletics director to understand as they lead their department. When an athletics director can build trust through relationship and understanding,

coaches respond better and their opinion of the athletics director is enhanced (Misasi et al., 2016). Creating these connections should be established while an athletics director is hiring a coach or taking over a program. When connections and relational qualities are built early, coaches can feel comfortable and integrated into the department (Pierce et al., 2017). At the highest level of intercollegiate athletics, the department operates similarly to a multi-million-dollar corporation, and the athletics director must be able to blend elite-level administrative qualities with the relational and business aptitude to be successful (Rich, 2021). The athletics director needs to be able to manage and lead a high-performance team of coaches and then empower those coaches to move on and create their own high-performance teams. The political abilities and the emotional intelligence of the athletics director are essential contributors to the coach's desire to be connected with their manager and committed to and engaged in their work (Robinson et al., 2019). However, this shifts at the lower levels of intercollegiate athletics in NCAA Division III, where academics are more prominent and demographics require a more acute focus on the academic experience and motivation through those pursuits (Cooper et al., 2017). While the focus is still on the relational abilities of the athletics director, there is a deeper focus on the performance of the programs in the classroom, and the athletics director can support the vision and mission of the university by pursuing those goals with their coaches. The athletics director has a tremendous influence on the coaches within the department, and poor relational abilities or damaging leadership qualities from the athletics director can cause disturbance within the athletics department and the university (Powers et al., 2016). While leading and managing coaches, an athletics director must be focused on the coaches relationally to find greater success (Northington, 2016). These qualities will allow coaches to respond effectively to the needs of the athletics director, the athletics department, and the university.

### ***Athletics Department's Role in Impacting Coaches***

When looking to influence and impact coaches, the athletics department can have a positive impact on the team dynamics within the coaching staff and in developing their motivations as a high-performance team (Wheelan et al., 2020). By developing an organizational culture that focuses on the shared beliefs of the department and the various expectations, values, and norms within the team, the department can point coaches toward their goals (Jones & George, 2021). The ability of an athletics department to impact a coach is similar to an organization's ability to impact an employee. Within the field of higher education, when a quality culture has been established, the organizational culture and leadership can impact the productivity and satisfaction of its employees (Singh, 2020). An athletics department can make an impact on the coaches by providing a workplace culture that is conducive to high-performing individuals that come together to create a high-performance team. A key component in impacting coaches is to establish a culture where the group can come together and discuss any disagreements (Wheelan et al., 2020). An effective team is a team that can establish trust and conflict management, and an athletics department can impact a coach by facilitating trust and cohesion among team members. The impact an athletics department has when establishing a positive culture will help drive the coaches towards commitment to the goals and vision of the department, allowing for more positive relationships between the coaches and the department and greater feelings of security in their employment (Nikpour, 2017). The impact that an athletics department can have on coaches by creating a quality workplace culture is pivotal in understanding how the athletics department can support the efforts of the coaches. By continuing to support the work of the coaches who are on the front lines of the customer service being



provided to the student-athletes, the athletics department can directly impact the morale of the coaches by providing organizational support and commitment to their efforts (Chen et al., 2020). There is a connection between the overall organizational culture, organizational support, and leadership of the organization as it relates to the impact the athletics department can have on the coaches. When developing a team of coaches, the athletics director should be focused on establishing a culture within the department that supports the efforts of the coaches and where the coaches feel as if they are supported from an organizational and relational level. These efforts have been shown in the literature to have an impact on the coach's morale and organizational effectiveness and output.

### **Motivation within Athletics Department Settings**

The motivation required for coaches in the intercollegiate athletics setting varies by institution. Some institutions have a "win at all costs" mentality, while others adopt the model of holistically developing their student-athletes in a manner that prepares them for life after athletics (Huffman et al., 2016). Establishing the proper motivation can be established through the goal-setting theory, which provides goals that are specific and provide a challenge for the coaches (Jones & George, 2021). With challenging goals in place, the athletics director can utilize the competitive nature of the coach to help them perform at a high level. In creating a high-performance team, the athletics director establishes themselves as the leader of the department and provides accountability when setting the goals to achieve the desired outcomes (Wheelan et al., 2020). While each coach may be motivated differently, the ability to have a shared vision and goal for the team is an important part of creating motivation among the coaches in the athletics department.

It has been shown that having a clear and common goal as well as shared values across a team helps teams come together and pursue their tasks (Jansen & Searle, 2021). Establishing clear goals helps the athletics director set a direct path toward success for the individual athletics programs, as well as provide a clear expectation for the coaches to perform at a high level (Sungu et al., 2020). Athletics directors who can instill a sense of commitment and motivation through a shared vision will be able to motivate their teams more effectively than those who do not continually share a vision. This is a business principle that translates into the athletics department. In intercollegiate athletics, the idea of followership, when individuals have a strong desire and motivation to follow their superiors, is something many respond to in motivational tactics (Armstrong, 2021). The desire to follow a strong leader is powerful in the intercollegiate athletics setting, and an athletics director can use those types of motivating factors when looking to motivate the coaches they are leading.

Developing motivational strategies for coaches within the athletics setting is similar to those seen within other organizations, and the athletics director must provide the proper tools to motivate their coaches—a clear and compelling vision, a strong sense of leadership, and the ability to connect on a relational level. These techniques have been shown to be effective methods of leading and motivating coaches in an athletics department (Lee, 2019). Biblical literature has also highlighted the importance of reading Scripture and gleaning wisdom from the truth found in the stories of the many leaders in those texts (Merida, 2015). Understanding how Jesus led his followers effectively provides further context into how athletics directors can lead a small group of followers, their coaches, in an applicable manner.

The motivation of those in athletics settings can be different and vary based on the constituent group within the intercollegiate athletics setting and can be either intrinsic or

extrinsic (Moradi et al., 2020). The motivations among groups of coaches, student-athletes, and athletics directors will differ, and personal motivation within each of those groups can also be different based on a few factors. Motivation around winning is one of the primary motivations within athletics (Tudor & Ridpath, 2018). However, there is also motivation that stems from personal fulfillment in achievement and pushing the body to its limit (Coker-Cranney et al., 2018). Additionally, the college athletics industry has motivations surrounding career advancement for both coaches and student-athletes (Armstrong, 2021; Farmer, 2019). In the small college setting, the desire to pursue athletics comes from the love of the sport and the ability to participate in that activity (Strehlow, 2023).

### ***Winning***

One of the core components in many athletics settings is the desire to compete and find methods to be successful in competition through winning those competitions. There is satisfaction among those who achieve success in meeting their personal or team goals, and the ability to win is a quantifiable measurement of the continued growth within an individual or a team (Jordalen et al., 2020). In intercollegiate athletics, this is an opportunity for student-athletes and coaches to compete at the highest level and to find satisfaction in winning matches. For the athletics director, while they may not be directly involved with winning in competition, there is satisfaction in understanding that the administrative foundation provided the support and functions for the teams of student-athletes and coaches to be successful (Robinson et al., 2021). Winning is a key driver in many ego-driven settings and can be seen as a primary motivator, especially for those with a competitive mindset (Tudor & Ridpath, 2018). By engaging motivation through the hope of winning matches, the coaches and athletics directors can wield strong desire from student-athletes and support staff. Coaches may take fulfillment in having a

winning program and building a program that can be consistently successful through strong recruiting and proper coaching, but also face pressure from many areas to build and maintain a winning program (Vogel et al., 2019). Team goals are set each year and every individual will also have personal goals to pursue, with many goals including winning at some level (Tudor & Ridpath, 2018).

### ***Personal Fulfillment***

The personal fulfillment of working hard and pushing oneself is another motivation within the intercollegiate athletics setting (Coker-Cranney et al., 2018; Raabe & Readdy, 2016). For coaches, it is the fulfillment seen in helping their student-athletes improve, both athletically and personally, and coaches who are close and committed to their student-athletes can motivate better than those who do not have the same commitment (Camiré et al., 2019). There is a strong motivation within coaches to positively impact student-athletes in a manner that helps them become better athletes and people along their journey.

Coaches also feel a sense of fulfillment if the team can come together to achieve the goals that they set out to accomplish, both inside and outside of competition (Davis et al., 2022). For student-athletes, there is a similar motivation for personal fulfillment, but the fulfillment comes from the ability to develop themselves in their sport fully, given their time at the institution and within the program. Within the short time that they are involved with the athletic programs, student-athletes push themselves to their fullest potential and may enjoy the satisfaction of competing at a high level. Student athletes may also be motivated to earn a college degree and by understanding the importance of that pursuit (Love & Rufer, 2021). For the athletics director, personal fulfillment can be found in the ability to make an impact on an entire department through the vision and mission of the department and by being a servant-leader. By setting up

frameworks for success, the athletics director is an important piece of the overall success of the department and its ability to make an impact on individuals (Lee, 2019).

### ***Career Advancement***

As with many other organizational structures, the ability to advance in one's career serves as an important motivation to perform at a high level (Tovmasyan & Minasyan, 2020). For the athletics director, the success of the department relies on the success of the administrative qualities, competitive success, and academic success of the department and its programs. These are largely out of the control of the athletics director, but the person in charge has a tremendous influence on the ability to succeed in those areas (Lee, 2019). The greater the success within the department, the greater the chance of success in achieving a promotion, a pay raise, or recognition within the industry, despite the toll that these pursuits can take on administrators relationally and emotionally (Hancock et al., 2019).

The motivations of the coaches in college athletics departments are similar to those of an athletics director regarding career advancement but with a greater focus on the competitive success within their programs. Often, coaches are seen by their wins and losses, with the potential for greater positions and opportunities to advance in their coaching based on how their teams perform in competition (Caulfield et al., 2023). This can sometimes cloud the good judgment of coaches if this is their primary motivation, as this motivation tends to be selfish and not focused on the development of the student-athletes, which is what many athletics departments desire (Armstrong, 2021).

Student-athletes who are motivated by career advancement see their sport as their career or profession once they finish at their institution. If the performance of the student-athlete is at a high enough level, they would likely be recruited to participate in professional athletics and be

allowed to make a career out of their sport. Despite only 2% of student-athletes continuing to professional sports, this remains a significant motivation to perform at a high level in intercollegiate athletics (Farmer, 2019). There is also the possibility of student-athletes seeking motivation to participate in order to enhance a potential coaching career. This type of career motivation is different among student-athletes, as the skills they are developing within their sport are not just physical, but include other soft skills that can benefit the student-athlete in their career when they are finished playing their sport. The skills of teamwork, communication, working through adversity, and working under pressure can help collegiate student-athletes advance further in their careers at a quicker pace than those who did not participate in intercollegiate athletics (Camiré et al., 2019).

### ***Love of the Sport***

A further motivation within intercollegiate athletics is the love of the sport in which they are participating. This is especially seen with the student-athlete population, where the love of the sport is one of the largest drivers of participation and in the pursuit of improving in that sport. Those who are intrinsically motivated by this are also more likely to be successful in their academic pursuits (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2021). There is a passion seen among student-athletes, and they enjoy sharing that passion for competition with others and within the community of their team. This is similar within the coaching population, as there is a drive to stay part of a community of coaches and remain connected to a sport that they are passionate about. Within the coaching profession, the majority of those in the profession played the sport they coach. This passion and love for the sport translated into a career for many coaches (Blackett et al., 2021).

The athletics director is similarly driven by the love for sport and competition and remaining in the athletics community. These professionals are essentially the CEOs of their athletics departments and require an elite business mindset, but they generally are doing this to provide a quality experience for the student-athlete and to pursue their love of sport (Wood et al., 2019). From the love of the sport, the athletics director also sees the value in participating in intercollegiate athletics, especially among NAIA and NCAA Division III institutions (Strehlow, 2023).

### ***Financial Gain***

A final motivation among intercollegiate athletics is the motivation of financial gain. Student-athletes can gain financially through the scholarships or financial aid that they receive due to their athletic abilities and talent. This financial aid provides much of the ability to attend college for many student-athletes and is a means of setting up student-athletes to help assist with the burden of the cost associated with many colleges and universities (Nixon et al., 2021). Currently, student-athletes can also receive financial gain through their name, image, and likeness (NIL), which is a form of payment given to the student-athlete in exchange for using their notoriety as a student-athlete to market a product or to represent a company or corporation. The NIL financial assistance that is being offered can be across various sports and has determined where student-athletes attend college, in addition to increasing their motivation to perform at a high level (Fort, 2018).

Coaches can be motivated by financial gain as well and are often among the highest-paid employees at large colleges and universities. In addition to the base salary, many coaches will have bonuses in their contracts tied to winning, which provide additional motivation to achieve (Brook, 2021). The athletics director at colleges and universities will also be motivated to have

their programs and department perform at a high level, as their employment can be directly affected by the overall success of the department, and they may receive bonuses if they do find success within competition.

There is also an opportunity to generate revenue for the college or university, which can be seen as financial gain. Many large colleges or universities can benefit financially from the revenue made from ticket sales, concessions, and merchandising, with the large majority of these institutions making the most revenue through football and basketball programs (Collins, 2022). Small colleges and universities do not have the same type of financial opportunities as large colleges through ticketing, concessions, or merchandising, but these universities can benefit from increased enrollment, increased retention, and greater notoriety in the community (Grimes & Lin, 2020). These institutions gamble on athletics in hopes that the university stays sustainable financially through increased enrollment and endowments that can help sustain the athletics programs as well as the university as a whole (Burkitt et al., 2021).

### **Summary**

The literature has shown the importance of building relationships between the athletics director and coaches, as well as being able to build trust in the group to maximize cohesiveness and cooperation from the group (Wheelan et al., 2020). The transformational qualities of the athletics director can also have a tremendous effect on the dedication and commitment of the coaches, as those behaviors foster more cohesion among the group (Lee et al., 2018).

Additionally, the literature has provided the frameworks needed for the athletics director to best manage the team of coaches by demonstrating leadership theories that can be used in athletics departments. Using many of the leadership theories in place, such as the situational leadership



theory, will help clarify the athletics directors' leadership experiences and provide the framework necessary to explore those leadership phenomena.

While all the literature points to relationships being the most important method of managing and leading coaches, an athletics director must be aware that the process is difficult to implement. There is a difference between a workgroup of individuals pursuing their tasks and a team of individuals coming together towards a shared vision and goal (Wheelan et al., 2020). Intentional effort is required and will push an athletics director to be uncomfortable in leading their team. However, if successful, an athletics director will have a tremendous opportunity to build a group of individual coaches into a team that is empowered to take the vision and values of the department and push them toward their goals. An athletics director who understands their leadership experiences and can build on those experiences to establish a quality team has the opportunity to impact an entire college or university.

Athletics directors have been studied frequently, especially at the college level, but little research exists to show how faith-based, small college and university athletics directors are experiencing leadership at their levels and how they can grow in their leadership capacity. The importance of the athletics director position is well-researched and shows how athletics directors have a direct impact on the department at the macro level (Greenberg & Evrard, 2016). By examining the levels of leadership experiences from the athletics directors at the faith-based, small college and university level in intercollegiate athletics, opportunity exists to provide insight into a specific demographic that can deeply impact their campus.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

In this chapter, the research design, procedures, and data analysis are covered to provide context for the study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the leadership experiences of intercollegiate athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities as they managed the expectations of their universities in increasing enrollment while maintaining the spiritual and academic integrity of the institutions. This chapter details the research design, methods, and questions that this study is based on, including how those methods affected the data collection and analysis.

### **Research Design**

Researching in the social science setting and within higher education allows for various methods of design for individual reasons, depending on the intent of the study. Using qualitative research is the best pathway for this study as it is designed to understand detailed descriptions of experiences as opposed to the quantitative method, which is heavy on statistics and cannot fully understand lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within the intercollegiate setting there is a heavy focus on quantitative research, but these studies lack the necessary understanding that comes from using the qualitative method. Qualitative research was the best method to examine the ideas that surfaced as multiple athletics directors shared their experiences through interviews.

Phenomenology is a method supported through social sciences and sociology for educational research that is focused on the shared experiences of the study's participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study examined the shared experiences of faith-based, small college and university athletics directors and their lived experiences in their unique leadership settings. Using the phenomenological research method targeted that specific phenomena through

a qualitative manner that would not be able to be achieved as successfully using a quantitative method of research. The ability to hear the stories in a more in-depth manner and use the interview settings to understand those shared leadership experiences was critical in this method. The study adds to the knowledge of the phenomena and does not provide any answers to a specific question or hypothesis (van Manen, 2017). The motivation for the research was to further understand the experiences of each participant based on their unique lens, but the study does not explain the experiences in a manner that speaks for all athletics directors.

Within the phenomenological research method, the hermeneutic approach was used in this study. The hermeneutic approach is meant to explore deeper meanings of experiences and explain the depth of the descriptions given in the shared experiences (van Manen, 2017). With the hermeneutic approach I was able to interpret my findings based on my experiences. The hermeneutic approach is a more effective method than the transcendental method, which focuses purely on description without interpretation of the data (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This research method provides the opportunity to set aside any bias I had towards the lived experiences of the athletics directors and allow intuition to be used to fully understand those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allowed for deeper explanations of the participants' stories, and the interview questions and qualitative approach clarified the meaning behind the answers and provided rich descriptions of the leaders' experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions supported the study to further explore the leadership experiences of athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities. These questions provided the structure for the developed inquiries and follow-up questions that guided participants in sharing how they experienced their campus and profession. The central research

question sought to discover the macro understanding of leadership experiences, with the sub-questions exploring the secondary experiences faced by faith-based, small college athletics directors.

### **Central Research Question**

How do athletics directors describe their leadership experiences in a faith-based, small college intercollegiate athletics setting?

### **Sub-Question One**

How does the culture in the faith-based, small college intercollegiate athletics setting affect the ways athletics directors make decisions?

### **Sub-Question Two**

In what ways do athletics directors demonstrate situational leadership at their college or university?

### **Sub-Question Three**

How do athletics directors experience additional pressures from the college or university to maintain academic and spiritual integrity while increasing enrollment?

## **Setting and Participants**

To gather the required information for the successful completion of this study, the proper site and participants were identified. These settings and participants were selected to accurately represent the desired demographic and results from the study. Each of the athletics directors at the faith-based, small college or university were selected to provide the most authentic understanding for the study.

### **Setting**

The setting of this study took place within faith-based, small college and university

athletics departments throughout the United States. Those with the title and responsibilities of an athletics director at small, faith-based colleges and universities qualified to be participants in the study. Small-colleges and universities were defined as schools that have an enrollment of fewer than 3,000 undergraduate students (Carnegie Classifications, 2022). Each of these institutions had established intercollegiate athletics programs within the NAIA or NCAA, which had more than 10 years of athletics history. The institutions were selected for the study due to the elements that aligned with the proposed research questions in the study and their athletic success and achievements over the past years. Gathering data using this leadership framework allowed for proper data collection to answer the questions posed about the leadership experiences of athletics directors at this level and within the settings and framework of this study.

Each university was similar and provided an opportunity to garner results from multiple environments, but with the same shared phenomena of working as an intercollegiate athletics director at a faith-based, small college or university. The institutions also had a leadership structure in place where the athletics director oversees the leadership of the athletics department and was responsible for the management of coaches and staff members within the athletics department. The universities shared a geographic similarity of being within the United States, and the athletics directors shared the same geographical understanding and athletics culture within the region. With each of the organizations having the same or similar leadership structures in place, these sites provided an understanding of the shared experiences among athletics directors at multiple universities.

## **Participants**

Selecting the participants in this study was done through a purposeful sampling technique. This allowed for participants to be selected in a manner that aligned with the study

and the specific experiences that were being examined (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants in this study were the athletics directors of intercollegiate athletics programs at each institution. There were 10 total participants in this study, all of whom were athletics directors in the faith-based, small college or university environment. In phenomenological studies it is recommended to use a restricted number of participants and to be selective with those who participate in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These participants were selected based on their status as the athletics directors of their institutions, as well as their leadership title within the organizational structures of each university. Each of the athletics directors have coaches and staff who report directly to them at their institution. The athletics directors within this study share their lived experiences as leaders of multiple coaches as well as staff members, and have direct lines of communication with the institution's president or chancellor.

From a demographics standpoint, the athletics directors who participated in this study were all males. These athletics directors also ranged in experience, from one year of experience to 15 years of experience as athletics directors in the college and university setting. The ethnicity was primarily white, and the majority of those who qualified for the study were identified as white males, as this study was primary demographics-based on recent NCAA survey data on athletics directors (Schultz, 2022). The participants were able to provide the necessary information needed to answer the questions in the research and all interviews were conducted in a virtual environment over Zoom.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Each of the 10 participants in this study were athletics directors at a faith-based, small college or university. The participants were selected based on their status as the leaders of the athletics programs at their institutions, as well as their leadership title within the organizational

structures of each college or university. The participants were identified using personal connections that I have already established through my experiences networking with colleagues, and they were asked to participate through an introductory email. There were 96 institutions that fit the parameters of this study and were considered for the pool of participants. Upon Liberty University IRB approval (Appendix A), an initial email was sent out to 15 individuals I knew personally, and in this email I explained the nature of the study and the time commitment needed. From that initial round of emails, I was able to secure five participants for the study. I sent at least two follow-up emails to those that did not commit to the initial email,. Once the initial round of individuals committed to the study, an additional 30 potential participants were contacted through email. After another round of follow-up emails, five additional participants agreed to participate in the study. Each of the participants were provided a consent form (Appendix B) and a further explanation of the study. Participants were notified that they could opt-out of the study at any point.

### **Researcher's Positionality**

This research was motivated by a desire to understand the experiences of a demographic of leaders that has not been fully explored, the faith-based, small university or college (Rich, 2021). This study will allow for a better understanding of the leadership experiences in these settings and enhance the ability to help this demographic of athletics leaders. I am currently employed in the intercollegiate athletics field and understand many of the details that go into leading an athletics department effectively, and I believe that the new understanding of the faith-based, small college and university athletics department adds to the overall body of research. I did not hold any authority or supervisory relationship with any of the participants, and the participants were not pressured to complete the study based on my current position.

## **Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework used in this study was social constructivism, a method used to understand the experiences of individuals where they live and work (Boyland, 2019). The social constructivist framework allowed for a broader understanding and data collection process that allowed for me to listen to the individuals and how they processed their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By using the social constructivist framework, I was able to gain a broad understanding of the leadership experiences of athletics directors in small college and university intercollegiate settings and provide the ideal framework for understanding these experiences. The social constructivist framework also provided insight on current industry beliefs and experiences and broadened the depth of knowledge towards different leadership styles and how those can be effective in the intercollegiate athletics setting.

## **Philosophical Assumptions**

The philosophical assumptions were explored to understand and articulate positions on specific topics. These topics included ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions about the study. The assumptions allowed insights into the lens in which the research was conducted and how to understand those contexts. By examining these assumptions, I was able to provide a depth of understanding into how the findings were viewed.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

The ontological assumption in qualitative studies allows for the researcher to understand and adopt the idea that there are multiples realities within the lived experiences of participants. Each of these experiences were gathered through the selected data collection processes and allowed for the comparison of the participants' reality within the faith-based, small college and university intercollegiate athletics environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The athletics directors



being studied provided unique realities and leadership experiences based on their surroundings and environment. These multiple realities helped establish the ontological assumptions of the different perspectives within the leadership experiences in these settings.

As a follower of Christ and someone who has a strong faith in God, I examined my research through the lens of biblical principles and leadership. While I do believe that there is only one reality in which humans live, the one that God has created for mankind, I also believe that God provided humanity with unique perspectives and understanding of his creation. Because of this, I believe that there are multiple ways in which a leader can lead, and those leadership styles could change based on the setting. Ultimately, leadership is about pointing others to Christ through my leadership style, and regardless of the leadership style, if there is a way to point someone towards Christ in leadership, I would count that a success as I lead others.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

By using the epistemological framework, I built trust with the participants in this study, which provided greater results and raw data that was seen as trustworthy. The research allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the individuals I interviewed and afforded me the time needed to gain a greater perspective on this topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The epistemological framework shaped the understanding of knowledge on this subject. I believe that the leaders in small-college, faith-based intercollegiate athletics require a highly relational and administrative skillset, and those experiences provide a unique leadership experience among intercollegiate athletics.

Using epistemological philosophies allowed for me to get close to the participants and spend an adequate amount of time within the athletics department settings to gather information on their experiences. The epistemological assumption allowed me to spend meaningful time with

the participants and provided a deep understanding of their leadership experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The assumption was that leadership models need to be challenged and that cultural norms regarding leadership should be explored further to understand how to lead most effectively. I sought to examine how various leadership styles could be utilized within the intercollegiate athletics setting and provided insights on those experiences through situational leadership theory.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

The axiological assumption calls for the acknowledgement that the research conducted involved some form of bias in relation to my role in the context of the study. This allowed me to discuss the values that shaped the narrative and forced me to understand how their interpretation may align with or be different than the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am currently involved in intercollegiate athletics at a faith-based, small college, and I have seen how impactful the leaders of this profession can be as they influence a department. Athletics directors have the tremendous opportunity to positively influence those around them through their leadership, and I have observed multiple supervisors who have each led in different ways but have also been successful. However, I have also witnessed supervisors who have not been as effective and have had negative experiences within their leadership styles. There are many athletics directors who have been successful in leading through situational leadership and whose departments would not be the same without that style of leadership. However, I am aware that there are leaders who do not understand leadership models and theories and only work with what has been shown to them or what has been most effective for them personally. In my experience, these unaware leaders lead through a more transactional method of leadership with an acute focus on the results.

These assumptions are recognized and understood, and I examined my research with the

knowledge that I have a deeper understanding of leadership theory than some participants in the study and an awareness of my preferred method of leadership. I was also self-aware of those biases when examining the data. When looking at the leadership experiences of the athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities, I wanted to be aware of how they functioned in their settings and how those settings may have influenced their leadership styles as they aimed to maintain the academic and spiritual integrity of the institution, while also supporting the enrollment goals of the college or university.

### **Researcher's Role**

Throughout the research process I served as the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of the data throughout the study. I provided questions and data collection that pointed toward understanding the leadership experiences of the participants to support the research and the design. My role within the setting and research site was to provide a comfortable environment in which participants were able to share their leadership experiences in a fluid and free manner, and by using epistemological assumptions I was able to minimize the distance between the participants and myself. Any bias was eliminated using the axiological method that allowed for an understanding of the presence of bias and its role in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As the researcher, I am fully aware of the role I had in this study. I needed to understand my philosophical assumptions as well as my relationship with the participants. I currently work within the athletics department of a peer institution of many of the research sites and had a pre-existing relationship with the many of the athletics directors who were surveyed. I do not have direct authority over the athletics directors and did not have any level of influence that put pressure on participants to participate in the study. I understand their day-to-day responsibilities

and work and have a basic understanding of each of the institutions in which they work, as well as their settings. This did not affect my ability to understand and synthesize the data in a proper manner. I was also able to consider my leadership experiences and how those have shaped who I am as a leader today. These experiences provided me a different lens and understanding of the various leadership experiences. While examining other research styles and what is most effective in the athletics setting, I was aware of that bias. My role in this study was to be as unbiased as possible while seeking to further understand the leadership experiences of faith-based small college and university athletics directors.

### **Procedures**

This section includes the procedures that were conducted throughout the study. Upon securing Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A) through Liberty University, initial outreach began as stated in the recruitment plan. The study was not held on the campus of any institution, and no campus was engaged in the study. Participants shared their own leadership experiences; therefore, site permission were not required for this study.

Initial data collection began with individual interviews, each of which was scheduled for one hour. These interviews were conducted through Zoom video software and were recorded for transcription purposes. Once the initial interviews were completed, focus groups were created and an email was sent to each participant selected to attend. After the participants agreed to a time for the focus group interviews, additional video conferences were held for an hour. Finally, an online survey was sent to each of the participants as the final step in data collection. This process was recorded through an audit trail (Appendix C), which allowed for the procedures to be followed for replication of this study. These procedures showcase the steps and care taken to adhere to a high standard of research.

### **Data Collection Plan**

Building a quality data collection plan is an essential part of fully understanding the voices and experiences of the athletics directors in this setting. The data collection plan allowed for a depth of information to provide a full understanding of experiences from multiple perspectives and different settings. There were three methods of data collection utilized in this study: individual interviews, focus groups, and an online survey. Each of these methods built on one another and continued to provide more details and the desired data for this qualitative study. The alternate methods of focus groups and an open-ended survey provided by the qualitative method helped to add to the standard interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **Individual Interviews**

The first data collection method used was individual interviews involving athletics directors at multiple faith-based small colleges and universities. Using this method, the researcher sought to gain an understanding of each athletics director and how they responded to their current leadership experiences and pressures surrounding enrollment at their institutions, as well as maintaining the academic and spiritual integrity of the college or university. The individual interview process is one of the most common methods of qualitative research and this process provided rich data and an understanding of the personal experiences of the participants in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The semi-structured method allowed each athletics director to answer specific questions and included additional follow-up questions for more explanation if there was further data that could have been extracted by asking for more details in their experience. If certain topics resonated more with those being interviewed, I explored why those topics were more interesting and what participants felt when those questions were posed.

All interviews were held over Zoom and were recorded for later transcription. The interviews were held at various times throughout the day in order to accommodate the participants' schedules. A one-hour time block provided optimal opportunities for in-depth responses without the need to feel rushed, and even with that time blocked out, some interviews went longer than an hour. The questions were based on exploring leadership practices and understanding how the athletics directors felt about their shared leadership experiences as leaders in the faith-based small college settings. The following semi-structured interview questions provided the data needed to understand the leadership experiences of the athletics directors in this study.

### *Individual Interview Questions*

1. Please describe your leadership background and your athletics leadership career from the start of your career until the present. CRQ
2. Why did you want to be an athletics director? SQ1
3. How would you describe success in your profession? RQ3
4. What does effective leadership mean to you? RQ2
5. Describe what your leadership experience is like within your institution. RQ1
6. Describe what you define as successful leadership in your position. RQ3
7. Describe a time you felt pressure to increase or maintain university enrollment. SQ2
8. Describe how you help support the academic integrity of the institution. SQ2
9. Describe how you help support the spiritual integrity of the institution. SQ2
10. Describe a time where you felt you needed more from your college or university. SQ2
11. What leadership style seems to be the most effective in your position? RQ2
12. Describe your challenges when working with your president or vice president. RQ1

These questions started with understanding why the athletics directors became involved with their profession, and moved on to develop further understanding regarding what they described as success within the profession. This helped provide a baseline answer for what success looks like at a macro-level, while also building rapport with the interviewee. From there, the questions went deeper into the history of the athletics directors' leadership experiences, as well as pointed questions about their current leadership experiences. These questions continued to explore the phenomena of shared leadership experiences of this specific group in intercollegiate athletics and how they worked through the enrollment challenges at their institutions, as well as how they maintained the academic and spiritual integrity of the institution within their department.

These questions were reviewed by a dissertation committee, as well as professionals within the intercollegiate athletics industry. The importance of having quality questions was pivotal, and I continued to revise and refine the questions to provide quality data to answer the research questions.

### **Focus Groups**

The second method of data collection was through focus groups with athletics directors who were identified to have similarities, either through their region, their experience, or their gender. These groups sought to understand how their experiences may be different surrounding their leadership experiences and challenges faced at their institutions based on their specific subgroup, and if there was any difference in those experiences and challenges due to unique political or geographical challenges. The data from the initial individual interviews were already transcribed and analyzed briefly, so these questions provided further clarity and more information. As focus groups can be a rich source of data, I explored the shared feelings and

experiences of a sub-group within a larger community and how those sub-groups might feel differently when brought together (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The focus group interviews were conducted in a video conference setting on Zoom, with participants each having their cameras on and sharing experiences in the digital setting. Each focus group was recorded to capture the audio and video for further transcription. The semi-structured format not only allowed for similar questions to be asked during the research, but also allowed for further explanation on the topics that sparked discussion among the group. The focus group setting also drew deeper answers as the groups felt a camaraderie and connection with each other, as well as a safety in sharing their personal and shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There were sub-group-specific questions asked that were slightly different from those posed in the individual interviews, allowing for greater depth in understanding the shared experiences within the specific groups and how those differences contributed to leadership experiences.

#### *Focus Group Questions*

1. How would you describe your current leadership experience at your university? RQ3
2. Based on where your school is located, what challenges are unique to your location? SQ1
3. Describe your support of university enrollment over the last three years. SQ2
4. What has been the most beneficial leadership training experience provided by your university? RQ2
5. When do you feel like you are at your best as a leader? RQ2
6. Describe the current enrollment challenges faced in your region. SQ3
7. Describe your most influential leadership mentor and how they have impacted your leadership style. RQ3



8. What does the ideal faith-based leader look like to you? SQ1
9. Describe a time where you needed to change your leadership to adapt to a situation. SQ4
10. How do you handle conflict between staff members or coaches? SQ1

The questions posed first explored how each group defined success and determined if there was a difference in what success looked like in the specific group setting. The experiences of the athletics directors in each group were important as another form of data for the study. Each of these questions provided data for the holistic study, as well as insights into the differences of the focus group demographics.

### **Online Survey**

The online survey was the final method of data collection and was used to further understand the initial answers provided in the individual interviews and the focus groups. The data collected through online surveys provided an opportunity for the participants' flexibility and space to reflect on the questions and provide deeper insights than were provided in the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The survey was sent to each athletics director, and the questions were open-ended and similar to those provided in the individual interviews. The purpose of this was to extract answers that may have been missed in the initial interview and focus group settings. Although the online survey is generally seen as a quantitative method, the way in which the questions were structured captured data similar to an individual interview and provided qualitative data through the collection method and the ability for the answers to be given in an open text format.

### *Online Survey Questions*

1. How would you describe your leadership style? RQ2
2. What is the most important leadership attributes for athletics directors at a small faith-based college or university? SQ2
3. Describe your experience with any pressure to increase enrollment at your institution. SQ3
4. Define what success looks like in your position of leadership. RQ3

Some of the questions asked in this method were intentionally similar to those posed in the individual interview. This allowed for the data to be captured through a different means of collection and for the potential to clarify some of the information provided in the individual interview settings. This also provided further data in a non-pressure situation where participants could fully understand the question and then formulate an answer after further thought exploration in an open-ended method of collection.

### **Data Analysis**

All data was gathered into a singular document for synthesis and maximum comprehension of the data gathered. The results were manually coded to fully immerse myself into the data and to be able to note any nonverbal mannerisms within the interviews. Bracketing was used to help in setting aside any previous experience and bias, and to look at the data from a fresh perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bracketing helped me understand and view the data from a different perspective to help bring the proper results and conclusions throughout the analysis. The second method of analysis came through building textural descriptions, a process that takes the data and condenses it into significant statements and quotes that present themes which accurately represent the feelings of the participants. These condensed themes allowed for

greater synthesis of the information and helped me further understand the experiences of the participants and their responses to the research questions.

Within the data analysis, it was not assumed that themes would inevitably emerge. Instead, I understood that the density of the answers and insights provided were intricate and complex (van Manen, 2017). I had an open mind throughout the analysis instead of using a pre-dictated process so that the responses were understood with their true intent. Using a triangulation of the data gathered through the individual interviews, the focus group interviews, and the survey, a full analysis was available that allowed the experiences to be understood altogether. The triangulation was meant to merge all of the data into common themes and ensure that there was a detailed and thick description of the data present in the qualitative study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The use of a Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) was not applied to the data analysis process, and I manually transcribed the data from the interview and focus group settings to analyze themes that surfaced. The data from each method of collection was stored in a document with multiple sections reflecting each code and potential theme, which allowed for organization and ease of access throughout the data analysis.

The data collected through the individual interview process was analyzed in two different ways. Each of these methods helped provide the necessary information to come to a conclusion on the data collection process. The first method of analysis was through bracketing, which allowed me to set aside my experience and bias and look at the data with a fresh perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I needed to understand my personal experience and become self-aware of the bias that I brought into the data analysis, also known as epoché (Moustakas, 1994). This step was important for me to understand how I may have viewed the data differently, and to embrace that knowing my bias helped the study come to its desired conclusions.

The second form of analysis was through textural descriptions of the interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, I took the data and condensed it into significant statements and quotes that represented themes that the interviewees felt about their perceived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this method of analysis, I needed to be able to take the rich data collected through the interviews and condense it into specific themes to allow for the greatest synthesis for those reading the research. The textural descriptions were an important step in data analysis so that I could also begin to organize each of the interviews into different areas or themes, and to help show how the research supported the research questions.

The data analysis of the focus groups was identical to the analysis from the individual interviews, even though the focus groups were analyzed in two different ways. Each of these methods provided the necessary information to form a conclusion on the data collection process. The first method of analysis was through bracketing, which allowed for me to set aside my experience and bias and look to the data with a fresh perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I needed to understand my own personal experience and become aware of the bias that I brought to the data analysis. This step was important for me to understand how I may view the data differently, and to embrace that knowing my bias helped the study come to its desired conclusions.

The second form of analysis was through textural descriptions of the focus groups that identified the themes of each group. Upon completion of the focus groups, I condensed the data into significant statements and quotes that represented themes from each group's perceived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this method of analysis, I needed to take the rich data and condense it into specific themes to allow for the greatest synthesis of this research. Textural descriptions were an important step in the data analysis so I could begin to organize each focus

group into different themes and show how the research would provide an understanding of the findings and research questions through those sub-groups.

The online survey data analysis involved an overview of the data collected by means similar to the individual interviews and focus groups. However, the data analysis here was used to verify the data collected in the first two data collection methods. The online survey results did not need to be transcribed, and instead the data was collected immediately and formulated into specific themes. This was done through a textural description and pulled the information from statements provided in the surveys to develop themes and experiences felt by each of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The triangulation of data to verify the two other methods of data collection helped further identify specific themes regarding the leadership experiences of the athletics directors in the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

The research is credible and trustworthy based on multiple factors in which I identified how the research was perceived. This section will provide the different ways in which the research was assured to be trustworthy and credible. Within this section, the research was analyzed for trustworthiness based on credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The final section includes information on how the study was cognizant of ethical considerations when conducting the research.

### **Credibility**

Establishing credibility in this study was important so that the findings were able to further illuminate the athletics directors' leadership experiences in an accurate manner. Credibility allowed for the study and its findings to be aligned with reality. The credibility of this study was examined through four different means: data triangulation, an audit trail, member

checking, and clarifying the researcher bias. These four means provided the depth of understanding needed to fully become aware of the shared experiences of this group of athletics directors. In addition, using these methods helped validate the research, which affirmed the study's credibility.

Through data triangulation, the study's credibility was enhanced by cross-checking the three sources of data: individual interviews, focus group interviews, and an online survey method. Triangulation helped compensate for the weaknesses in each data collection method and filled in for any shortcomings (Cohen et al., 2002). Triangulation enhanced the quality of the data and the results of the study through understanding each collection method.

Individual interviews were conducted with athletics directors in the small, faith-based college or university setting to hear more about their experiences and how they faced pressures to maintain the academic and spiritual integrity of the institution. Focus group interviews were used to understand a particular subgroup of experiences from these leaders. Online data collection was used for textual analysis and descriptions to understand the experiences in a written manner. This method of triangulation helped confirm that a reliable description of the experiences were detailed in a manner that captured the intended meaning from the participants (Cohen et al., 2002).

In this study, an audit trail of the data was established to allow for the validation of the data collected. A digital audit trail is an important component to allow for the data to be examined and validated through documentation, notes, and the various procedures conducted throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This collection method allowed for the validation of the research for anyone looking to understand and see the raw data. An audit trail (Appendix C) provided further reassurance of the trustworthiness of the data, as the data was available to

examine the procedures at a deeper level and for others to understand the timeline of the study.

A further method of establishing trustworthiness in the study was through member checking. This method of credibility allows for participants to view the data and seek the assurance of credibility within the data that is presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I have experience within the collegiate athletics industry, which helped validate the findings and allowed for a deeper understanding of the shared language and experiences from the participants. Member checking is important as it validates the interpretation of the data straight from the source of the data. Once the data was coded and themes were developed, each participant validated the themes and was also available to provide more input if they felt their experiences were not properly captured. Each participant was provided themes via email to clarify the main points found in the interviews and check for accuracy.

Within this study, I did have a bias towards a preferred leadership style, and it is important to continue to clarify that bias throughout the study. This process was meant to disclose the my personal biases and how I brought those viewpoints to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is an important method, as it allowed for my personal credibility to be established and for them to comment on previous experiences which may have led to this particular bias. I have been affected by the transformational leadership style and feels I exemplify this leadership style best. Therefore, I believe that the transformational leadership style is the best method to lead people, regardless of the industry, and understood that when examining the data they should not classify every leader as a transformational leader based on personal experiences. Understanding this bias allowed for transparency throughout the examination of the data and allowed both myself and the participants to understand the researcher's connection towards the transformational leadership style. The continual

acknowledging of the bias helped me to understand how they could put that bias aside and move towards an unbiased result. Using reflection, I was able to take the aspects of the lived experiences of the participants and fully understand and grasp the concepts of those experiences (van Manen, 2014).

### **Transferability**

The transferability of this study cannot be assumed within every industry but should still paint a picture on how leadership styles and experiences can affect various organizations. By using thick descriptions, the research can be judged to be transferable or not through the lens of potential researchers in other industries (Anney, 2014). The study's rich descriptions and thoroughness supported how the athletics directors' leadership experiences provided an understanding for others in different industries. This study was conducted in an environment where results matter and there are clear winners and losers. As such, the study may be able to be replicated in industries where there are clear winners and losers or in highly competitive organizations. While this study should not speak for the entire intercollegiate athletics industry, it can help faith-based, small college and university athletics directors gauge how their leadership style can affect the coaches they manage and help them understand the desired leadership qualities in the athletics director. This study provided the foundation for understanding the shared leadership experiences of faith-based, small college and university athletics directors. Ultimately, it is up to the reader to determine if the study and its individual parameters are transferable into different settings (de Leeuw et al., 2022).

### **Dependability**

The dependability of this study allows for the findings and methods of the study to be



repeatable for others seeking to create a similar study. An inquiry audit was used with my committee member and director to review the work and validate the dependability of the study. The audit trail allowed for the research decisions, collected data, and activities to be recorded and for the cross-checking of the research process. The raw data from interviews and observation notes were kept in order for the audit trail to establish the dependability of the study (Anney, 2014). The descriptions provided should allow for replication of the study in a manner which is dependable across multiple studies. This research was reviewed and the procedures examined by a committee that provided feedback to confirm the credibility and dependability of the research design methods.

### **Confirmability**

As previously noted, two of the methods undertaken to help provide credibility were establishing an audit trail and understanding my own bias. The scope of the study was shaped by the responding parties and not through any of my preconceived notions or biases towards athletics directors. The method of an audit trail, as described previously, allowed for me to be held accountable for the data collected and provided the clear ability to confirm the data throughout the research study. A detailed audit trail allows for an examination of the raw data, the analysis of the data, and the processes and procedures in collecting the data. Triangulation of the data was also utilized as this method allows for compensation for any weaknesses in the varying research methods (Anney, 2014). The confirmation of my own bias also provided a way for the confirmability of the study, where I could fully examine and explain my own bias going into the study. By confirming the bias, it enhanced the confirmability of the study and established the trustworthiness needed to confirm a quality study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Within this study, there was sensitive data shared with me, and that data was secured across each collection method. The study examined how athletics directors feel about their leadership experiences, and because of this, relational problems could arise if the data was released with every detail transcribed. When conducting qualitative research, it is imperative that the participants are informed of the ethical considerations as well as the voluntary nature of the study (Arifin, 2018). Participants were obtained through consent forms and confirmation that any answers provided would remain confidential. Each participant was given the risks and benefits of the study through the consent form before the research was conducted and was informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The use of pseudonyms throughout the process, as well as the redacting of any personal information or descriptions from the data, was done so only I was aware of the detailed responses. Data was stored in a secure digital locker as well as a secured laptop, both with password protection that was only accessible to the researcher. If an inquiry is made to access the raw data to confirm the trustworthiness of the study, I will make sure the data does not include any personal information or potential to reveal the identity of the athletics directors.

### ***Permissions***

Liberty University IRB approval was obtained as the first step towards gaining permission for this study (Appendix A). Emails were sent to the athletics directors at the colleges and universities that matched the study profile, and confirmation was received as formal approval to conduct the study. Permission was granted by the participants through a consent form that detailed the study information (Appendix B). It covered all of the information participants needed to know about the study, including the background of the study, the benefits to the participant, any risks involved, personal identity protections, compensation information,

notice of voluntary participation, who to contact with any concerns about the study or to withdraw, and participants' rights.

### **Summary**

The research methods in this chapter helped to provide the necessary data that produced quality results and information to understand the leadership experiences of intercollegiate athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities as they managed the expectations of their universities in increasing enrollment, while also maintaining the spiritual and academic integrity of the institutions. This chapter examined the problem and purpose of the study while providing a research question that guided the research plan. A research method was examined through the understanding of the design and rationale of the approaches used in the study, as well as why those approaches were used to gather the needed data. The site and participants were selected through an alignment with the goals of the study, and I was able to provide their personal bias and understanding of the research. The data collection methods and models were selected to provide optimal data in the qualitative methodology, and an analysis of the data was conducted using techniques to best understand the shared leadership experiences of the group of athletics directors. Finally, trustworthiness in the study and ethical considerations were explored to provide how I considered the participants and to protect them from any potential risks. This study was thoroughly examined and designed to provide quality data and results that would help examine the research question and sub- questions posed. By using these methods, there was enough quality data to help athletics directors understand the leadership experiences that are faced in the faith-based, small college and university intercollegiate athletics department.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the leadership experiences of intercollegiate athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities and the complexities that these leaders face. In this study, I examined the lived experiences of athletics directors in the faith-based, small college setting and how they provide leadership in their unique settings. For many faith-based institutions, the general morality and ethos of the athletics department reflects the culture and values of the college or university (Strehlow, 2023). This chapter begins with rich descriptions of participants' experiences. The findings were then presented in various themes, with outliers identified. Each of the research questions were answered and supported by the theoretical framework.

### **Participants**

The participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method as well as the snowball sampling method. I researched and identified participants who fit the criteria for the study—athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges or universities. During the interview process, I asked participants if they had any suggestions on individuals who might also be willing to assist with the study. Each athletics director who agreed to participate was presented with a recruitment email (Appendix D), and then provided with a consent document (Appendix B) before the interviews were conducted. Participants scheduled interviews with the researcher through an online calendaring platform. There were 10 faith-based, small college or university athletics directors from across the United States who participated in this study. Table 4 provides an outline of the participants and their descriptions.

**Table 1***Participant Descriptions*

Athletics Director Participant	Years Experience	Geographic Location in United States	Athletics Association	Gender
Adam	10	South	NCAA Division III	Male
Brandon	8	West	NAIA	Male
Cooper	5	West	NCAA Division II	Male
Daniel	13	West	NCAA Division II	Male
Ethan	5	Southwest	NAIA	Male
Finley	1	Northwest	NCAA Division II	Male
Graham	4	Northwest	NAIA	Male
Harold	15	Northwest	NAIA	Male
Isaac	1	West	NAIA	Male
Jordan	8	West	NAIA	Male

**Adam**

Adam has been an athletics director for 10 years total, with two years at his current NCAA Division III institution in the Southern United States. He wanted to be an athletics director to use his spiritual gifts of teaching and leadership and administration, as well as his personal interest in sports, and is a strong advocate for Christian higher education. Adam focuses on integrating faith in the recruiting process and then utilizing campus resources such as Bible classes and discipleship groups. In terms of leadership style, Adam aims to be highly relational, getting to know coaches personally and building trust. His leadership approach depends on the experience level of each coach, being more hands-on with newer hires and giving more freedom to veteran coaches.

**Brandon**

Brandon has been an athletics director for eight years, all at his current NAIA institution in the Western United States, where he also served as head men's basketball coach until this year when he stepped away from coaching to focus on his role as athletics director. Brandon describes having always felt compelled to lead and bring people together around common goals. His

leadership philosophy is centered around culture, alignment of vision, hiring committed and compelled people, and empowering them based on their individual strengths. At his institution, key metrics for success include caring for and developing student-athletes, delivering return on investment for the university, and representing the “front porch” of the university through branding and community engagement. Brandon also emphasizes the alignment between his and the university’s belief systems in focusing on developing student athletes’ character and faith.

### **Cooper**

Cooper has been an athletics director for five years, two of which have been at his current NCAA Division II institution in the Western United States. He has worked in athletics administration and coaching for several years, including as an athletics director at another institution. Cooper believes the focus should be on developing student-athletes into good spouses, parents, and community members rather than just winning games. Cooper aims to have a staff of coaches who can disciple student-athletes spiritually. He described himself as a situational leader, combining servant leadership, democratic leadership through consensus building, and decisive leadership when needed. Cooper feels empowered in his role and feels that he has strong leadership above him that will help him establish his culture and vision for the athletics department.

### **Daniel**

Daniel has been an athletics director for 13 years, all at his current NCAA Division II institution in the Western United States. Daniel said he aims to create a culture where athletics is integrated into the fabric of the institution. He sees himself as a “first pastor” to the student-athletes, emphasizing their spiritual development and identity in Christ over sports results. Daniel described his leadership style as relational, collaborative, and thoughtful in decision-

making. He aims to speak truthfully but also lovingly when evaluating coaches. Overall, Daniel finds meaning in developing student-athletes holistically and spiritually during their time at his institution.

### **Ethan**

Ethan has been an athletics director for five years, all at his current NAIA institution in the Southwest United States. Before that, Ethan was in a leadership role and a coach at another small, faith-based university for five years. He got into athletic administration through coaching in college until someone saw his potential and gave him a chance to step into a greater leadership role. As an athletics director, Ethan defines success by the success of those he leads, including administrators, coaches, and student-athletes. He aims to set them up to advance professionally and personally and focuses on missional alignment, clarity in expectations, and open communication. Ethan wants to help coaches find balance and lead healthy lives, not just succeed professionally. Ethan has learned to adapt and communicate expectations clearly with his university leadership. His current supervisors give him autonomy while also being open to learning more about intercollegiate athletics.

### **Finley**

Finley has been an athletics director for less than one year and previously served as the basketball coach at his current NCAA Division II institution in the Northwest United States. Finley decided to become an athletics director because of the leadership challenge, reduced travel, and seeing the athletic department as a ministry opportunity. Success in his mind includes the financial stability of the department, adding value to the student experience and community engagement, and winning games and championships. Effective leadership for Finley means loving and supporting people to increase their capacity while also holding them to high

standards. He wants to hold coaches accountable beyond just winning games, including things like discipling athletes, recruiting “high level people” who will positively impact the campus and community long-term, and building trust between himself and the coaches.

### **Graham**

Graham has been an athletics director for five years, with two years at his current NAIA institution in the Northwest United States. He has over 23 years of experience as an athletic director at faith-based organizations. Graham became an athletics director because he sees it as a ministry to serve others, especially the “fatherless generation” that is facing many challenges like anxiety, anger, and violence. He aims to help students find their worth, meaning, and purpose through sports. Success in his profession involves high graduation and retention rates, as well as talent deployment and preparing students for professional, emotional, and spiritual success. Effective leadership to Graham means accomplishing goals set in strategic plans, as well as creating an environment that nurtures relationships and promotes the flow of information through trust and collaboration.

### **Harold**

Harold has been an athletics director for 15 years, all at his current NAIA institution in the Northwest United States. Harold has felt called to leadership since childhood, often taking on leadership roles in teams and groups as he tries to lead by serving as an example. Harold became a coach at his institution in 2003 and was asked to step into the athletics director role in 2008. He was offered the athletic director position because he accomplished goals while building relationships across his institution. Harold defines success as graduating student athletes and supporting their spiritual, academic, and personal growth into good people. He described his



leadership style as servant leadership, where he tries to support and care for the coaches and players. Harold loves working at a Christian school and being able to openly talk about his faith.

### **Isaac**

Isaac has been an athletics director for one year at his current NAIA institution in the Western United States. Isaac has 25 years of experience working in athletics leadership roles, including eight years in an executive leadership position, overseeing budgets, coaches, and athletes. Isaac was recruited for the athletics director role at his institution and saw the position as an opportunity to have a broader ministry impact on coaches and athletes. Isaac believes success in athletics is measured by honoring God in words and actions both on and off the court, while also striving for excellence and giving full effort on the court. Isaac wants coaches to back up the spiritual values of the university and give practical examples to athletes of living those values out on the field and court. He does not expect coaches to act as theologians but wants them to teach athletes to glorify God through their gifts and abilities.

### **Jordan**

Jordan has been an athletics director for eight years, with six years at his current NAIA institution in the Western United States. After a career in coaching, he felt called by God to pursue athletic administration full-time. Jordan transitioned into athletic administration because he enjoyed leading and developing people and programs. Jordan explained that being an effective athletic director means listening and empathizing with coaches and staff to understand their full perspectives on personal and professional challenges. Jordan stressed the importance of uncommon, steadfast faith and a positive attitude amidst difficult circumstances like budget constraints. He focuses on the blessings God has provided the department financially and relationally to stay encouraged.

## Results

The results of the data analysis from the interview transcripts, focus group session transcripts, and individual surveys are presented in this section. Interviews were conducted with 10 athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities, and those transcripts were transcribed manually. Focus groups were conducted with the athletics directors in this study, and the interview transcripts were transcribed manually. These transcripts were used to analyze and identify themes that emerged through the interviews. A final survey was sent to all participants to capture additional data regarding the leadership experiences of the participants. Using each of these collection methods allowed for themes to emerge and to help answer the central research question and sub-questions. The research findings and answers to the research questions will be presented. The five themes and subsequent subthemes that emerged are: Relationship Driven Environments with the sub-theme Collaboration, Commitment to Academic Success with the sub-theme Supporting Academic Integrity, Pressure to Maintain or Improve Enrollment at the Institution, Financial Challenges with the sub-theme Resource Management, and Spiritual Integration and Missional Alignment with the sub-theme Discipleship. Table 5 offers a summary of the themes and sub-themes.

**Table 2***Themes and Sub-themes*

Theme	Sub-Themes	Contributing Codes
Relationship Driven Environments	Collaboration	Relational, relationships, transparent and relationship-based leadership, professional networking, building institutional relationships and visibility, building relationships with academic faculty, emphasis on relationships, developing deep connections, building rapport across campus, strategic networking, interdepartmental connection
Commitment to Academic Success	Supporting Academic Integrity	Emphasis on academic success, degree, graduation, GPA, academic policies, commitment to academics, commitment to the classroom, academics over athletics, missed classes, academics first, full faculty support, faculty athletics representative, relationships with professors, don't miss class for practice
Pressure to Maintain or Improve Enrollment at the Institution		Enrollment through athletics, roster targets, enrollment goals, decreased students on campus, strategic growth, addition of athletics programs, athletics growth, inflated rosters, collaboration with enrollment management, quotas
Financial Challenges	Resource Management	Decreased resources, COVID-19 fallout, discount rate, poor financial decisions, budget control, budget management, increased travel costs, cuts of budgets over the years, resource allocation, always asking for more, no innovation without finances
Spiritual Integration and Missional Alignment	Discipleship	Faith-based environment, Jesus is the most important, integration of faith into everything, God's calling, intentional integration, higher purpose, coming alongside to disciple, walking with students, walking with coaches, authentic faith, spiritual formation, small groups, spiritual growth

## **Relationship Driven Environments**

Each of the 10 participants in this study cited building relationships with coaches, athletics staff, administrative staff on campus, and other professionals in the industry as a key to success in their positions. The words “relationship” or “relational” were coded 92 times throughout the data. There was an emphasis on how having quality and established relationships are important in the small college environment and can help push initiatives forward when relational equity is built. Participants mentioned that relationships with coaches were key in understanding them, with Jordan stating, “...I get the sense that I’ve got good relationships with coaches here and I know that there’s other items out there impacting their mood or their mode.” In his interview, Daniel, a longtime athletics administrator, said:

As I became the athletic director here, I realized that visually I needed to place myself in certain places, not for the sake of promoting athletics but because I was the director of athletics and it was wise for me to be in certain places and certain spaces at certain times. Adam believes that relationships are a key component in the faith-based college, “I think it’d be really hard to not be relational in a Christian college campus because I think it just lends itself towards that.” Relationships spanned across campus, and Adam went on to explain his ability to lead coaches well is from building relationships with them:

That conversation is a lot easier because our relationship has been built, and now we have to have a hard conversation, but it’s framed by, “Okay, I know Adam thinks I do a good job. I know he cares about me. I know he plays with my kids,” and in the absence of that, those conversations can still happen, but it’s a lot harder, and I would say don’t have the potential to go as well.

Within his survey, Isaac wrote about his ability to lead through building relationships with

others:

I try to walk around, I don't sit in my office very often. I'm walking around. Sometimes I shut my door to get stuff done, but I'm trying to be in their office. I'm trying to be across campus and be seen. So, I have some relational currency with people. I affectionately call it leading by wandering, that people see you and it's not an email. It's not a text message saying I need to just get this done. It's more of a conversation.

There was also the importance of building relationships from a professional networking standpoint. Cooper said in the focus group that "the relationships with fellow athletics directors are helpful anytime we do anything on our campus." He went on to say, "I am a relational person, and I need the time to be with people to be filled up." All 10 of the participants mentioned the importance of establishing relationships within their institutions, either with coaches, administrative staff, or faculty to help in their success. From this theme a sub-theme emerged around collaboration.

### ***Collaboration***

The athletics directors in this study expressed the importance of collaboration with other departments on their campuses. The majority of the participants expressed collaboration with other faculty as an important part of their role. Throughout the research, faculty were coded 44 times. Harold valued the collaboration with the faculty at his institution, especially as it pertained to communication regarding travel to competition:

Our shortest trip is three and a half hours, and our longest trip is 14 hours. So, we do a really good job in communicating with professors. We get out in front with the provost and professors early on things. We talk through stuff and listen to what the faculty are saying about missed class time. What are the issues? How do we address them? What do

we need to do to support the athletes, but at the same time support the faculty?

Many leaders expressed that collaboration across key departments was foundational to their success. The leadership role of the athletics director asks for those who serve in that position of leadership to collaborate with multiple areas of campus and to have influence on the entire university. Graham mentioned the importance of collaboration with enrollment in his focus group, stating, “We have a lot of communication with enrollment. It’s thoughtful and strategic and will likely continue.” In his focus group, Brandon discussed how he collaborated with his enrollment and financial aid team, saying “I think that it’s just a really collaborative effort.” Brandon also stated:

Being an athletics director allows me to serve on the senior leadership team for the university and allows me to serve on the executive team of the university and [in] the president’s cabinet, and to be a part of process mapping and different really high-level senior leadership stuff for the university to make sure that we’re not siloed off but we’re part of the conversation and how this organization and this university grows.

Participants understood the importance of collaborating with their colleagues across campus and within the athletics industry. There was a desire to work as a collective team to help push the institutions towards their missional goals.

### **Commitment to Academic Success**

The commitment to academic success was outlined by each athletics director throughout the interviews. Participants stated that academics were more important than athletics, with all of them having established policies that support the focus on academic success. Within the data, the term “academic” was coded 93 times, with the term “student” coded 298 times. When speaking about some of the academic policies in place, Graham discussed a firm policy on academics:

It's okay if you miss a game or two because of your academics. Do I want to win every game? It's important. Yes. But academics come first. So there have been at least 10, 15 games that we probably could have won but we didn't because we placed academic success ahead of winning and some coaches were not happy about that. I explained to them when they asked me, "What's your vision?" Academics first and the well-being of the student.

The purpose of all of the athletics directors was to help students graduate from their college or university. Cooper was clear on this, saying, "I don't ever want to give a scholarship to a student who doesn't want to graduate from here." Nine of the 10 participants also said that their student-athlete population achieved a higher GPA than the general student population. There were consistencies among every participant that the commitment to student-athletes graduating was key, with Jordan stating, "For me, it's not the athletic success that we had, success is seeing them walk across that stage. That's what I cry about." Academic success also indicates success as an athletics director, as Ethan stated in his survey, "I believe my position is to help others [students] be successful in areas we are entrusted [academic]." All participants were keenly aware of their influence in helping student-athletes achieve in the classroom.

### ***Supporting Academic Integrity***

Each of the participants expressed a deep commitment towards supporting the academic integrity of their college or university. There is a deep respect among each athletics director for the faculty and not allowing for class time to be missed for reasons that were not necessary.

Ethan supports this through scheduling:

We schedule specifically, if a coach comes and says, 'Hey, I want to play a Tuesday game at noon,' likely we're gonna say no. They should be in class. We're not going to

schedule a game if we don't need to at a certain time. So, we work to make sure that we're scheduling and we're keeping kids in class as much as possible.

The athletics directors were supportive of faculty and the decisions they made regarding supporting academic integrity. Each athletics director mentioned that they have constant conversations with the faculty or chief academic officers surrounding how they can work together to support academics for the student-athletes at their institutions. Adam had a conversation with a theology faculty member to support this:

I'm walking back from lunch and he comes alongside me and says, "Hey, I think we got a men's basketball player that used AI to write this essay." And so I'm saying who, when, what do you want to do? We're going to support you a thousand percent. I'm not saying, "man, that's a great player and we really need to play him this weekend."

The code "supporting academics" appeared 19 times throughout the research between the interviews, focus groups, and the survey. "Academic integrity" appeared in the research 22 times through each of the data methods. Participants understood they are essential to their institutions and wished to support the integrity of those efforts.

### **Pressure to Maintain or Improve Enrollment at the Institution**

Nine of the 10 participants in this study felt pressure from their colleges or universities to help increase or maintain the institutional enrollment. The term "enrollment" was present 91 times throughout the research. Participants stated that athletics had been asked to increase their roster sizes or add new programs to attract more students to the institution, with the expectation that they would be able to easily attract new students in a way that academic programs were not able to do. Graham bluntly stated, "Oh yeah, the pressure is always there" to help increase the



enrollment of the institution. Participants also mentioned athletics increased and helped support the enrollment strategies to support diversity, with Adam stating:

And so right now we have four sports that are majority minority, but we want to extrapolate that across our institution as well, not just because we want to grow in our enrollment, because we're in a really healthy place, but we believe that our campus probably doesn't accurately reflect what God's kingdom looks like and so we want to do a better job with that.

Nine of the 10 participants in the study were at institutions with significant enrollment challenges, and those challenges were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some institutions would have been required to cut or furlough staff or coaches during the pandemic if they had not helped increase enrollment. Jordan said, "I knew how much was on the line for our staff. And I had literally had to fight to keep them employed." The pressure is also felt for schools that have equity problems which fall under Title IX and need to add more opportunities for a specific gender. Finley was adding sports at his institution due to this problem, stating, "There's not a directive from our university to say you need to grow enrollment there, but there's the Title IX issue that we're going to have to add sports."

Some universities used athletics as a strategy to help the institution grow, with the increase being as much as 100% in growth over the course of just a few years. This created challenges for support staff as well as in space across campus. There was also a cultural shift on the campuses where athletics was a primary driver of enrollment. However, this was strategic among colleges who used athletics as a growth tool. Ethan said, "We have strategically decided to grow the university by offering different programs that attracts 'new' students to the

institution.” In his survey response, Brandon believed that this is the direction for many small, faith-based colleges:

I believe the first thing you have to do is change your perspective on the “pressure” to increase enrollment and understand it is part of the job description...increasing enrollment is a reality for most small, private Christian colleges so being strategic in your sport [and] add[ing] timing, Title IX, facilities, resources, demand, etc., all play a role in increasing enrollment.

Within the focus groups, a group of participants based in California discussed the challenges not just with enrollment, but with an increased demand to commute and the rising cost of higher education within the state. One participant stated, “We’re becoming more of a commuter school. We’re probably 50% commuter and we’ve always strived for 75% residential.” The same group noted that they were having a harder time attracting students who wanted to attend a faith-based institution in California, noting the political climate of the state and how private, faith-based colleges are not as attractive. However, this group said that while challenges were present, they found many students out of state willing to try school in California for four years and then move back to their home states.

### **Financial Challenges**

Of all the participants in the study, nine of the 10 made comments about the financial difficulties their college or university was facing. The decrease in enrollment across each institution was the main source of financial distress, with the rising cost of business due to inflation also playing a significant role in athletics directors feeling additional pressure. In the focus group, Daniel mentioned that decreased enrollment and increased costs of doing business has forced his institution to lay off hundreds of staff members over the last few years. Small

endowments at these institutions also play a role in the financial challenges they face. Brandon stated, “We don’t have a large endowment” and “all of our accomplishments have been with a shoestring budget.” The majority of the athletics directors stated that they need to fundraise a large part of their operating budgets, with Jordan saying, “We raise nearly half of our athletics operations budget through fundraising.” The budget challenges have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, with budgets being strained further due to travel cost increases and other travel-related expenses. Finley said in his interview, “Financially, things have gotten tighter for us over the last couple years, and there are things I want to do, but can only do it if I come up with the money.” While there are challenges within the institution, there is an understanding that athletics can help support those challenges. In his survey, Brandon was realistic regarding the expectations placed upon athletic directors:

The athletic department needs to understand the whole ecosystem and what role athletics plays within that ecosystem. Athletics needs to be a part of the success story so that the doors stay open and the school can thrive.

While there are financial challenges present among athletics directors at faith-based colleges and universities, the participants understood the importance of athletics to campus culture and in attracting students to their institutions to help with those financial challenges. Jordan stated, “We’re all private Christian colleges dealing with budget issues in some ways, and sometimes it looks bleak, but I really have got to dig deep and trust the Lord in that process.” These benefits cannot be quantified, but the institutions where the participants were employed appeared to understand how athletics can impact the financial sustainability of an institution.

### ***Resource Management***

There were eight participants who specifically indicated that resource management was

one of the most important aspects of their position. They emphasized the importance of stewarding the funds they are given well and to be realistic with their coaches and staff about budget inefficiencies. Managing resources can mean making tough decisions if the institution is not within its budget and cuts need to be implemented across campus. There were multiple participants who needed to cut athletics programs, but Daniel described the process when he needed to cut a program to help save the department's budgets: "I'd already laid off people. There wasn't any fat to cut. And now it's either trim something from every sport and [the department] would become very average across the board, or you just get rid of one sport."

There were four participants who mentioned sports that do not produce revenue and the need to balance continuing those programs or cutting them. While the public may think the athletics department makes the decision to add or cut sports, it is generally the upper administration. Proposals are drafted to university leadership to add or remove sports and show the revenue that can be generated. Once those decisions are made, the athletics directors ones allocate resources from the addition of students to disperse throughout the athletics department.

### **Spiritual Integration and Missional Alignment**

All of the participants in the study were unwavering in their leadership that the spiritual formation of the student-athletes in the department was essential in deeming what qualified as success in their positions. This theme was present throughout each of the interviews, the focus groups, and in the surveys, and was important in the leadership experience of the participants. In his interview, Adam noted, "We are looking for Christian student athletes, and in that order." Each participant described the integration of Christ into their leadership of their coaches and staff and the importance of aligning with the missional goals of the university. When asked what the most important leadership quality was for an athletics director at a small, faith-based college,

Finley said, “Appropriate integration of faith, servant leadership, and adaptability. We can’t go anywhere without being mission-driven and glorifying God, so keep that first.” There was a healthy understanding that the Lord was the main priority, and Ethan stated that in his focus group:

I do think keeping the main thing the main thing, always coming back to how does this impact our relationship with the Lord? How does this impact our ministry and not letting other things get in the way of that priority?

The values that were drawn from following the teachings of Jesus were present in the participants, and the servant-leadership that Jesus demonstrated is how each participant sought to lead their department.

### ***Discipleship***

Across most of the participants, the ability to disciple within their leadership style and to display that discipleship for coaches was a sub-theme. The idea of discipleship appeared 24 times throughout the individual interviews. For the participants, the ability to step into discipleship with coaches as a form of leadership was present, as well as to encourage discipleship across the department. Cooper said, “The plan is to help disciple my coaches and for them to disciple their students,” and “our top priority is spiritual growth of our students.” This ability to disciple was seen as unique among faith-based colleges and universities, and why many of the participants enjoyed working in those environments. Adam said, “We have the additional piece in Christian higher ed where we would say the integration of our faith and opportunity to disciple is actually the highest calling.” Graham further noted, “It’s not just forcing our student athletes to achieve a certain number of worship credits, but to show how through sports they can live the gospel.” There was a clear desire among the participants to walk alongside students and

coaches in their relationships with Christ and to use athletics as a form of discipleship.

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

In the interviews with the participants, five participants felt they were required to advocate for the athletics department more frequently, specifically when there were changes in leadership on campus. After a transition in his direct report, Jordan said, “I had to basically start all over, so it’s just been different, it’s reeducating.” In the focus group, Cooper noted that there was a complete transition in the president’s cabinet and he needed to reimagine athletics at his institution. There was an assumption that athletics would be universally understood, but administrative leadership at the colleges and universities did not always understand the purpose of athletics at each institution. Ethan specifically noted turnover within the university administrators at the cabinet level and each time needed to explain how athletics impacted the campus, specifically saying, “It’s a challenge to bring someone new in to catch them up to speed on our specific culture and environment.” This causes the athletics directors to feel the continual need to advocate for the department and the impact that they make on their campus and in the community. This was primarily driven by the turnover in administrative staff at the cabinet level, specifically those who oversaw the athletics department on each respective campus.

### **Research Question Responses**

This study examined one central research question and three sub-questions to address the current literature and theories surrounding the leadership experiences of athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities. The research questions and sub-questions were addressed using the data collected from participants through individual interviews, focus group sessions, and a survey.

### **Central Research Question**

The central research question asked: How do athletics directors describe their leadership experiences in a faith-based, small college intercollegiate athletics setting? Each of the themes presented answered this question. The participants' general perspective was that working in these environments requires a level of relational ability mixed with the willingness to help their department grow in faith. Each of the leaders in the study understood that they were serving their institutions in their position of leadership, and that alignment with the university was the most important aspect of their leadership. The experience of working in a faith-based, small college presented challenges regarding the resources available to their departments, as well as the pressures faced by decreased enrollment within Christian higher education. There was also the experience that these leaders could only lead as far as their supervisors gave them the autonomy, with participants seeing themselves as middle-managers in some cases. One of the participants stated, "This job really is middle management" when asked about their influence within the department and university. However, the participants all understood the eternal impact of their positions of leadership and that winning is important but not what will define success in their positions. They also felt that they could grow in their leadership through professional development opportunities. In the focus group, Brandon had an on-campus experience that provided him a clear improvement of his leadership and understanding of how he could lead within the university, while also connecting with other leaders on his campus.

### **Sub-Question One**

The first sub-question was: How does the culture in the faith-based, small college intercollegiate athletics setting affect the ways athletics directors make decisions? The theme that answered this question was spiritual integration and missional alignment, and the sub-theme was discipleship. Each of the participants was influenced by their faith in their decision-making, and

the focus in the faith-based, small college athletics departments was the development and growth of the student-athletes. Cooper said, “Our top priority is the spiritual growth of our students,” and this was a consistent sentiment across participants. Participants confirmed making decisions using the lens of helping the student-athletes grow in their faith and as men and women. In his focus group, Ethan explained how he make decisions with this guiding question: “How can we grow the kingdom and how can we make disciples and how can we influence people around us for the glory of God?” Using the platform of their position, participants understood their impact potential. Brandon said:

I intentionally employ transformational leadership. I love casting vision, inspiring growth (organizationally, collectively, and individually), and embracing change. Invest in your people [by] unlocking their potential that many times they didn’t even know was there. Seeing the big picture but also having a strategic plan to get where you are going.

The culture within the faith-based, small college athletics department was classified by the participants as a relational culture with a high value placed on the transformation found through the unique opportunities that athletics can provide. There was a deep connection between the leaders of these departments and their staff, coaches, and at some level, the student-athletes. This is different than the culture found in larger universities that do not share the same values as those experienced by the participants at their institution.

### **Sub-Question Two**

The second sub-question was: In what ways do athletics directors demonstrate situational leadership at their college or university? The theme that answered this question was relationship-driven environments. Each of the study participants displayed some level of situational leadership, even if they were not aware of doing so. The participants understood that they needed



to show up as leaders in different ways based on the experience level of those they were leading, as well as how they were going to direct or support their coaches and staff. While discussing situational leadership in his focus group, Ethan said:

I'd say being adaptable is important as it relates to the pulse of the team that you're leading. So what comes to mind for me is sometimes we get into stressful stretches that I need to back off a little bit. Other times I tend to go, go, go and follow up and want to see that things are moving and progressing. But there are times when I get the sense that I need to slow down and just spend time and listen and hear and empathize a little bit and back off.

One of the participants said in his interview, "Situational leadership is very important, I can't treat my football coach and my athletic training staff and my sports information director all the same." Adam noted:

My general approach is I'm super hands-on with a first-year hire, whether it's a first-year head coach or not. But if I hire someone the first year, they're with me. I'm super hands-on because I want to make them feel supported and I want them to learn our institution.

The participants all understood that each individual they were leading needed to be led in a manner that worked best for the follower and that allowed for growth in those staff or coaches.

In the focus group, Daniel said:

I have 15 coaches, and they are all CEOs and have their own leadership style. They all have a way of how to get things done and achieve the big goal and none of them are alike. They all go in 15 different directions, and part of my job is to corral them.

There was also the understanding among participants that being able to adapt was critical to finding success, with Jordan saying, "You always got to be willing to adapt because you

know, in college athletics, it is always changing. You have to have the courage to meet the demands of reality.” Within the situational leadership theory, participants ranged in how they lead but were generally in the coaching phase of the continuum, where they provided high directive and high supportive behaviors.

### **Sub-Question Three**

The third sub-question was: How do athletics directors experience additional pressures from the college or university to maintain academic and spiritual integrity while increasing enrollment? The themes that answered this question were commitment to academic success, pressure to maintain or improve enrollment at the institution, and spiritual integration and missional alignment. Throughout the course of this study, it was clear that the participants were fully committed to supporting the academic integrity of their institutions, as well as the spiritual integrity to support the college or university mission. Even while their institutions expected them to help with enrollment, the participants did not allow this growth to affect the culture within their departments, enacting policies that showed how serious they were about academic integrity. In his interview, Brandon said:

We put in a policy immediately that said if you get caught for plagiarism, it’s a minimum of a one game suspension automatically. You’re sitting out and it could be longer than that depending on the severity. So, we’ve had two-game, three-game, five-game, six-game, eight-game suspensions because we take it that seriously.

There were not any additional pressures that the leaders in this study felt, because their institutions values and commitment to growth, both academically and spiritual, aligned with their own personal values and beliefs. As Daniel said in his survey, success is “positively impacting for eternity the lives on young men and women through the arena of intercollegiate

sports competition.” This was echoed by Finley, who responded that success was, “changing eternity through the lives impacted in our department and our surrounding community.” The majority of the participants did feel pressure to increase enrollment, but none of them felt that they needed to sacrifice the academic quality of the student-athletes, nor did they feel they would waver on the spiritual integration of the institution.

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the participants in the study, followed by the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis after conducting research through individual interviews, a focus group, and a survey. This analysis of the leadership experiences of the faith-based, small college or university athletics director clarified the experiences that these leaders face in their daily leadership. The description of each participant was provided to allow for an understanding of each participant through a rich and thick description. The five themes and subsequent sub-themes that emerged were: relationship-driven environments with the sub-theme collaboration, commitment to academic success with the sub-theme supporting academic integrity, pressure to maintain or improve enrollment at the institution, financial challenges with the sub-theme resource management, and spiritual integration and missional alignment with the sub-theme discipleship. After the themes were explored, the outlier data and findings from the research were shared. The chapter concluded with answering the central research questions and sub-questions using the data collected from the research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the leadership experiences of intercollegiate athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities and the complexities that these leaders face. For the purpose of this study, small colleges and universities were defined using Carnegie Classifications (2022) as schools that have an enrollment of less than 3,000 undergraduate students. Within this study, data was collected from 10 faith-based, small college or university athletics directors using individual interviews, focus group sessions, and surveys of the 10 participants. The collected data was then analyzed using manual transcription and coding, with five themes emerging from the data analysis. This chapter includes a summary and an interpretation of the findings of the study. Implications for policy and practice are expressed, followed by a discussion of theoretical and empirical implications. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations and delimitations of this study, as well as recommendations for future research and a summary.

### **Discussion**

Through this phenomenological study I explored the lived experiences of athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges and universities. I conducted individual interviews, facilitated focus group interviews, and collected surveys to answer the central research question and three sub-questions. The following five themes emerged from the analysis: relationship driven environments, commitment to academic success, pressure to maintain or improve enrollment at the institution, financial challenges, and spiritual integration and missional alignment. In this section, the findings of the analysis are reinforced with empirical and theoretical implications, and suggestions for policy and practice are discussed.

## **Summary of Thematic Findings**

The following five themes emerged after the analysis: relationship driven environments, commitment to academic success, pressure to maintain or improve enrollment at the institution, financial challenges, and spiritual integration and missional alignment. Each of these themes describes parts of the leadership experience of athletics directors in the faith-based, small college environment. These experiences were documented through the findings of the data analysis and through the experiences that each of the 10 participants conveyed throughout the research.

The first theme was surrounding relationship-driven environments. The leaders who participated in this study described their reliance on building quality relationships with individuals within their organization and with fellow colleagues in the intercollegiate athletics profession. The relationships built with coaches and staff within their department helped provide a foundation for trust and a clear direction for the department. The leaders also understood the importance of building internal relationships across their campus with key stakeholders in departments that were connected with the athletics department processes. The need to collaborate was essential to determine the overall success of the leader.

Another theme that emerged was the commitment to academic success within the athletics department. All of the leaders in this study had the understanding that their primary goal was to help student-athletes graduate and to set up policies that would steer them in that direction. There was unwavering support from the faculty in supporting the school in its educational mission. To support the academic integrity of the institutions, many of the leaders had policies in place that placed the educational experience above the athletics experience.

Pressure to maintain or improve enrollment at the institution was a noticeable topic of discussion throughout the research and within the data analysis. The athletics directors who

participated in this study regularly discussed the roster goals institutions placed on each program or the athletics department's requirement to add additional athletics programs in order to boost the enrollment of the institution. The pressure that faith-based, small colleges faced in decreased enrollment filtered down to the athletics departments, and many times the athletics opportunities operated as a way to attract new students to their college or university. The athletics directors understood the importance of their role in attracting students to their institution, and while this created pressure it also helped to showcase the importance of their departments in times where other departments could not attract students to the college or university.

Another theme that emerged was the financial challenge that the participants in the faith-based, small college or university faced. The leaders in this study were affected by the financial struggles of the institutions of which they were a part, with many leaders expressing increased challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic. With the rising cost of conducting business due to inflation and increased travel expenses, the participants utilized fundraising and cost-saving measures to counter some of the pressure they were feeling. This group of leaders also placed an emphasis on making sure they were utilizing their resources well as a key to their success.

Participants in this study also had a deep desire to integrate their faith into their departments and align with the mission of their faith-based institution. Along with academic success, the next key indicator of success expressed by the participants was the spiritual growth of the student-athletes. The athletics directors felt it was their responsibility to utilize their influence to help direct student-athletes, staff, and coaches towards a deeper relationship with Christ. This was accomplished through discipleship of the coaches and student-athletes, as well as spaces where individuals could learn and grow in their faith. Participants expressed that seeing students grow in their faith and helping to provide environments for that growth brought joy into

their work and provided a deeper sense of purpose.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

There are five interpretations of the themes present when examining the management traits of this unique group of leaders. Each interpretation provides an understanding of the leadership experiences faced by faith-based, small college athletics directors.

#### ***Managing Multiple Responsibilities***

The athletics directors in this study provided clear examples of the number of responsibilities that they were required to oversee. Leaders at faith-based, small college environments have responsibilities that athletics leaders at larger institutions may never experience. Athletics directors in this environment can be in a meeting discussing the curriculum of the institution in the morning, and then have another meeting immediately afterwards at an athletics field about the type of seeds and grass needed. The range of responsibilities for athletics directors at this level span across the campus, and these leaders often find themselves using their influence on campus to help shape university policy and strategies. Conversations with the athletics directors exposed the immense reach that these individuals had across their campuses. This also demonstrated that the athletics directors at smaller, faith-based institutions had fewer administrators supporting the athletics department compared to larger institutions.

#### ***Desire to Make a Kingdom Impact/Not High Profile but High Impact***

All of the leaders in this study had a deep desire to make an impact on the kingdom of God and push people towards a deeper relationship with him. There was an understanding that the influence each leader had within their department was a responsibility to create opportunities and conversations that built the faith of everyone within the department. Each leader also wanted their institutions to be well represented in competition so that they could showcase their faith via

the platform of athletics. While none of these schools would be universally recognized or even recognized within their region, their impact on the students' faith development made a deep impression that was more meaningful than having their school on television or in the news regularly. These institutions are making improvements in their local communities and helping individuals see how God can have an impact on the lives of his people. The athletics directors understood this mission and aimed to influence the lives of others as well.

### ***Purity of College Athletics***

Considering all of the changes present in college athletics in the United States, the leaders within these institutions displayed what college athletics was initially designed to provide—an education and the opportunity to continue to compete in sport. None of the leaders brought up the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) conversations that are saturating the discussions amongst college athletics administrators across the country presently (Green, 2023; Moody, 2023). The leaders in this study were focused on helping students receive a quality education while developing them into the men and women that God created them to be. Athletics competition and winning is important, but it is not the most important function in defining success in the faith-based, small college environment. There was a purity in the conversations with the leaders that showcased their care in stewarding their leadership positions and in developing everyone within the athletics department.

### ***Elite Leadership Qualities***

Throughout the conversations with each of these leaders, it was clear that these individuals had remarkable leadership capacity and understood how to provide quality leadership in a complex environment. The athletics directors understood and displayed many leadership theories and abilities in their leadership styles, and each leader has had great success at each of



their institutions. There is a complex leadership structure within higher education, and within the small college environment the athletics director is required to step into conversations throughout the campus meant to shape and guide the institution forward. Many of the leaders managed multiple coaches and staff of varying personalities and leadership styles, and the athletics director had to master the ability to lead each of these unique personalities, knowing that every individual responds differently to their leadership. The leadership principles and actions that are displayed by athletics directors in the faith-based, small college or university environment are elite and have immense influence within their campus communities.

### ***High Emotional Intelligence***

Each of the participants in this study displayed a high level of emotional intelligence and an ability to deeply understand people and their needs. The leaders exhibited a perceptive ability to anticipate the needs of those they lead, as well as come alongside those who might need more support. The leaders in this study were all self-aware regarding their strengths, and even shared areas they still needed growth. This ability to understand their own emotions while also responding to the emotions of others was a clear indicator that these leaders had high emotional intelligence. The athletics directors would enter into the spaces of need with coaches, administrators, and student-athletes and provide the support needed to find success. There was also an understanding when coaches or staff would not develop or thrive in their environment and a change was required. Overall, there was a strong awareness of the departments' needs and how those within the department were feeling. Unlike larger institutions, the athletics director was involved in every facet of department operations, allowing for that connection to the needs of the department.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

This section will present the implications for policy and practice resulting from the data analysis and themes presented in the findings. Recommendations for policymakers that work with athletics legislation are offered. Additionally, this section provides recommendations for leaders and administrators at faith-based, small colleges or universities to help support the leaders of their athletics departments.

### ***Implications for Policy***

Policy for athletics departments are largely dictated by the governing body in which their institutions are members. Within the faith-based, small college and university setting, the governing bodies are either the NAIA or the NCAA, specifically Division II and Division III. Policies differ among each of these governing bodies; however, there are policies that could be recommended within each association to attract and maintain quality leaders at this level of intercollegiate competition.

Two of the most visible policies being discussed within the intercollegiate athletics landscape right now are NIL policies and whether student-athletes could be classified as employees of the university with the ability to form a worker's union (Cooley et al., 2022; Jessop, 2023). Either of these could be detrimental to faith-based, small colleges and universities. There are not enough resources allocated within these environments to support the athletics department if student-athletes are deemed employees of the university required to be paid in excess of their allocated scholarships. Based on the experiences provided by the leaders in this study, I would strongly recommend that policymakers at the federal level do not grant employee status to student-athletes. I would also recommend that the NIL legislation be determined by a federal body such as congress to categorize what is allowed and not allowed in NIL legislation.

These policies would help shape the college athletics landscape and provide clarity for administrators seeking to develop NIL policies at their institutions. Once that clarity has been determined, I would also recommend the establishment of a new governing body outside of the NCAA for the large universities that use athletics as a revenue generator and see it as a business. This policy change would allow for institutions not in the large athletics business to compete fairly with each other, while also focusing on the student-athlete experience instead of how much revenue is generated for the university brand at a national level.

The next recommendation would be to develop guidelines and standards for mentorship programs, as well as conflict resolution strategies for the membership. In a relational environment, it is easy to create a false sense of harmony and to avoid problems, and having policies in place that require training in how to develop coaches or manage conflict within the collegiate athletics setting could be a beneficial change. Another policy that would be beneficial is enhanced penalties for institutions that do not promote the academic success of students across the department. If institutions continually fall below a specific threshold or benchmark, they could face suspension from the governing body. This policy would help enhance the focus on academic success and promote emphasis on the ethos of college athletics, which demonstrates a commitment to the student-athlete. With continued inquiry from non-faith-based groups on faith-based entities, policies that continue to protect the religious freedom of institutions while also accommodating religious practices and traditions should be enacted. This policy should be recommended at the federal government level as well as supported by state legislation to help protect religious freedoms on college campuses across the country.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Colleges and universities, specifically the athletics departments, have a responsibility to

care well for their student-athletes, coaches, and staff. While it is clear that relationships are essential for an athletics department to be successful, they may also be the key to success for every department within the higher education structure. Collaboration is essential to manage an effective athletics department, and participants recognized the importance of interdepartmental collaboration. It may be possible that if other departments within colleges and universities approached their work with this mindset, that they could find improvement in meeting their department goals while also aligning with the greater mission of the institution. It could be beneficial to facilitate more active listening opportunities across the campus, as well as developing trust and healthy conflict within each department. Collaboration among the campus includes having difficult conversations, but also being empathetic towards what other departments are experiencing. Participants expressed using active listening techniques, seeking to hear the viewpoints of colleagues across their campuses to understand how they could partner with them on various initiatives. They also expressed that being empathetic is part of that process, trying to see the university from a different vantage point.

With enrollment challenges likely to continue in the future at faith-based, small colleges and universities, it is important for athletics departments to leverage themselves strategically with the enrollment management staff as a primary area for recruitment and retention on their campuses. Faith-based colleges and universities may also be able to emphasize the unique appeal and opportunities for personal and spiritual growth through participation in athletics within their institution. There may be a benefit in developing programs such as leadership academies, spiritual formation curriculum, and discipleship opportunities built-in to the experience of the student-athlete. It could also be beneficial to ensure the athletics department is accurately representing the college or university from a missional perspective, and not trying to achieve its

own goals that are separate from those of the institution. This could cause confusion amongst the staff, coaches, and student-athletes within the athletics department and may lead to retention problems. Participants discussed their experiences with making sure the department was aligned with the mission and vision of the institution, noting that when there has been disalignment, it hurts the institutional reputation. The athletics department needs to operate at the same level of commitment to the mission as the rest of the college or university. The athletics director is responsible for the changing of culture in the department and should help align the department with the mission of the university.

With the continued financial challenges within faith-based, small colleges and universities, it may be wise to develop alternative revenue streams to mitigate financial challenges. This may involve diversifying revenue streams through enhanced fundraising initiatives, developing sponsorship programs, and building strategic financial partnerships with local businesses and community organizations to offset budget constraints. The participants in the study understood the importance of diversifying their revenue streams and needing to improve on fundraising, ticketing, and other sponsorships. Another practice that could also help with cost-savings is through sharing facilities or equipment with local organizations and maximizing revenue in the summer through athletics camps and experiences. Each year, financial audits could also be beneficial to continue to identify continued stewardship of the resources provided by the university and athletics donors. Participants noted the importance of collaboration on campus to work with campus partners on sharing resources as well as understanding how to maximize their resources on campus.

### **Empirical and Theoretical Implications**

The study data does suggest that the current literature on leadership in faith-based small

college athletics is accurate, and that the theoretical framework of the study aligns with the results. This section addresses the empirical and theoretical implications of the study. This study built on the literature related to the leadership experiences of athletics directors. The findings support the available literature. Themes that emerged from the study described the leadership experiences of faith-based, small college or university athletics directors and confirmed the situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) that guided this study.

### ***Empirical Implications***

Empirical implications connect this study to the current literature on the leadership experiences of faith-based, small college or university athletics directors. Relationships being vital to success, academics first, and enrollment being essential are topics that align with the literature on the leadership experiences of faith-based, small college athletics directors. Faith inspired leadership is a novel contribution of this study, showcasing the importance for leaders at the small college level to be skilled budget managers.

**Relationships are Vital to Success.** Throughout the literature there was an emphasis on the importance of building relationships to develop high-performance teams and departments (Armstrong, 2021; Cotterill et al., 2022; Penney & McMahon, 2016). The participants in this study all expressed the value of building relationships within the athletics department and their institutions. Relationships were as important as any other strategic pillar in the success of their leadership. The leaders exhibited the qualities of a transformational leadership style, which was described as being highly focused on relationships (Northouse, 2019). The leaders in this study were committed to taking the time and effort to build intentional relationships with coaches, staff, and fellow administrators, which helps drive motivation for individuals to accomplish their goals (Álvarez et al., 2016). The motivation of coaches was especially impactful in relational

environments (Fraina & Hodge, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018), and each of the leaders in this study were understanding of their role in helping coaches achieve their goals through established rapport and relationships.

**Academics Come First.** The study confirmed the focus on academics within intercollegiate athletics, with athletics departments often achieving at high rates of success compared to the general student population (Pellegrini & Hesla, 2018). Further, the one Division III institution that was involved in this study confirmed the academic achievement at their institution compared to other similar institutions outside of NCAA Division III (Cooper et al., 2017). The importance of academics and working with academic faculty was expressed throughout the study. Participants outlined the support services they provide to student-athletes, as well as the monitoring of academic progress throughout the year. This aligned with the findings in previous research that outlined the services that colleges and universities provide for student-athletes (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019).

**Enrollment is Essential.** There is an understanding at small colleges that enrollment is trending down at most institutions of higher learning and that colleges have faced challenges to remain sustainable (Eide, 2018). Campuses across the United States have closed their doors, with one in five faith-based, small colleges at risk of closure (Copley & Douthett, 2020). The participants in this study were acutely aware of the pressure that their institutions faced to attract more students, as well as the challenges of enrollment at their institutions. Colleges throughout the country have been seeking out ways to adjust their revenue strategies to remain viable and maintain or increase their enrollment (Campion, 2020; Delcours & Carmona, 2019). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic also increased the pressure on institutions to remain open (Copley & Douthett, 2020). The participants in this study cited the pressure they felt during the pandemic

and the challenges that each of their campuses faced in those times. Institutions have started to use athletics to help boost enrollment through the addition of sports and increased rosters (Zvosec & Baer, 2022). This was confirmed in a study by athletics directors who were faced with pressure from their institutions to help drive enrollment through increasing the student-athlete population. The leaders in this study set roster minimums for each sport and added brand new programs to help increase enrollment at their institution.

**Faith Inspired Leadership.** The study extended previous research on leadership in faith-based environments and contributed new information on athletics directors at the small college level, a demographic that has not been explored previously. Current literature points to the pressures athletics directors feel from internal and external factors, including pressures to win, pressure to meet the expectations of the university, and pressure to recruit and admit students that align with the academic quality of the institution (Brooks et al., 2021; Caulfield et al., 2023; Eaton & Carmichael, 2023; Kinghorn, 2021). In the faith-based, small college environment, the leaders at these institutions exhibited a higher calling and seemed to feel different pressure in their leadership. Faith-based colleges and universities do have the overarching goal to transform the lives of their students through holistic methods, and other university goals are tied to the spiritual health and development of the students (Burkitt et al., 2021; Dahlin & Schroeder, 2022). The leaders in this study expressed that they were the primary drivers of the spiritual and holistic development of student-athletes, and the environments they created would directly impact the culture that allows for the cultivation of growth in students. The dynamic spiritual discipleship and mentorship provided by athletics directors in faith-based, small colleges is not represented in current research. The leadership experiences from athletics directors in these environments are inspired by their faith and as they seek to lead from that place of calling to make an impact for



the kingdom of God.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The theoretical framework that was used to guide this study was the situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). This theory suggests that leaders have four areas or components of leadership that allow them to adapt to various situations. The theory helps leaders understand how they associate with their employees and solve problems based on their ability to understand their follower's level of leadership maturity (Hersey et al., 2013). There are four main leadership styles within the situational leadership theory, including directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Each of these leadership styles is dictated by the level of relationship established and the direction needed to help followers accomplish a task (Arora & Baronikian, 2013; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977; 1997). This study showcased the leadership abilities of the participants and how they demonstrated situational leadership in their athletics departments. Most of the leaders within the study described leadership experiences that aligned with the situational leadership theory. Participants described how they come alongside their coaches and seek to understand if a more hands-on approach is necessary or if they can allow greater autonomy as a delegating leader. The majority of the athletics directors seemed to be comfortable in the supporting role, providing high supportive and low directive behaviors when managing their staff and coaches. However, for coaches with less experience, this study also revealed the use of the coaching leadership style, showing high directive behaviors mixed with high supportive behaviors in mentoring coaches who were competent in their positions but still learning what it means to commit to the department's mission and vision.

The findings of this study were consistent with transformational leadership, a theory proposed that examines leadership through the lens of close relationships and the willingness to

be transformed while leading others (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). A deep commitment to building relationships in order to find success is an indicator of the transformational leadership approach (Northouse, 2019), and the leaders in this study were deeply committed to relational connections as part of their leadership style.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This section will address the limitations and delimitations within this study. Throughout the study many limitations and delimitations were identified. Four potential limitations were identified—participants declining to participate, a lack of regional representation, a lack of gender diversity, and a limited sample size. In addition to the limitations, the three delimitations were: selecting a hermeneutic phenomenological study, a focus on colleges and universities under 3,000 students, and selecting colleges with a faith-based educational curriculum and mission.

#### ***Limitations***

This study had four main contributions to limitations within the research: participants declining to participate, a lack of regional representation, a lack of gender diversity, and a limited sample size. After sending nearly 100 emails to over 50 potential participants over the course of nearly three months, only 10 participants committed to the study. Some individuals were unable to commit to the time, but the majority of the potential participants simply did not respond, which was a surprise and not anticipated. There was also a lack of regional representation for those that committed to the study, with nine of the 10 participants located in the Western United States and five participants from California. Another limitation was the lack of gender diversity in the study, as every participant was male. This limited the understanding of female athletics directors and if their experiences differ from male experiences. The final limitation was the small

sample size of 10 participants. With 92 colleges or universities that qualified for the study, the sample size may not fully capture the experiences of the target research demographic.

### ***Delimitations***

Delimitations are the purposeful decisions that were made to define the boundaries of the study. The four delimitations were selecting a hermeneutic, phenomenological study, a focus on colleges and universities under 3,000 students, and selecting colleges with a faith-based educational curriculum and mission. Selecting a hermeneutic, phenomenological design was due to my professional orientation to the topic of study. Each of the participants were athletics directors at small colleges and universities per the 3,000 students established as necessary by the Carnegie Classifications (2022). The study also was designed to focus on colleges and universities that had distinct faith-based values associated with their mission and vision, and whose curriculum included faith development. The purpose of the study was to understand a targeted group of athletics administrators, so participants were not included if they did not meet those standards of the study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

After conducting this study, many recommendations for future research are suggested. First, by using the qualitative design I was able to understand the experiences of athletics directors in a rich manner; however, future research should be conducted using a quantitative design, which would allow for a greater understanding of the broad challenges faced by athletics directors in the faith-based, small college setting and include a larger sample size. Future studies should focus on the various diversity experiences, including female athletics directors, non-white athletics directors, and athletics directors under a specific age. Other recommended future studies would be to understand small colleges and universities in the non-faith-based setting, as well as

large, faith-based colleges and universities. This study was primarily focused on colleges and universities within the NCAA Division II, NCAA Division III, and NAIA, and future studies are recommended to expand parameters to understand leadership experiences of athletics directors at the NCAA Division I level based on size or conference affiliation.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the leadership experiences of athletics directors at faith-based, small colleges or universities. The situational leadership theory served as the theoretical framework for this study (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). A purposeful sampling of faith-based, small college or university athletics directors was chosen. Participants were required to be the athletics director at their institution and the institution was required to be a member of the NCAA or the NAIA. The pool of participants included athletics directors from five different states. Data was collected through 10 athletics directors and was provided through individual interviews, focus groups, and surveys. All of the data was manually transcribed and coded to provide a more immersive experience during the research. After the coding process, five themes emerged: relationship-driven environments, commitment to academic success, pressure to maintain or improve enrollment at the institution, financial challenges, and spiritual integration and missional alignment. From the themes, three implications developed: relationships being vital to success, academics coming first, and enrollment being essential. Faith inspired leadership is a novel contribution of this study. Further, the theoretical framework was corroborated by the data analysis and the themes within the study, showing that situational leadership was utilized by the participants through connections with followers in their directive or supportive behaviors. Additionally, there are multiple recommendations for future research to continue the expansion of knowledge on this subject,

including exploring a more diverse participant pool and surveying additional experiences using a quantitative study.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval Letter

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 29, 2023

Michael Teague  
Christine Saba

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-624 LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES OF ATHLETICS DIRECTORS IN FAITH-BASED SMALL COLLEGE DEPARTMENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Michael Teague, Christine Saba,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.**

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,  
**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair*  
**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

**Title of the Project:** Leadership experiences of athletics directors in faith-based small college intercollegiate athletics departments: A phenomenological study

**Principal Investigator:** Michael Teague, Ph.D Candidate, Director of Athletics Development, Biola University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a current head coach or athletics director in the collegiate athletics setting. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the connection between transformational leadership qualities in athletics directors, and if that contributes to the success of athletics programs in the collegiate setting. This study is being done to understand how athletics directors can best serve their coaches and create an environment conducive to success.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Conduct an in-person interview to last at least one hour while being recorded via video.
2. Be available for a follow-up survey after the in-person interview has been completed.
3. Be willing to participate in a focus group video call to last at least one hour while being recorded via video.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a deeper understanding of how differing leadership styles can be effective in the athletics environment.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Participant responses will be confidential, and participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

#### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

#### **Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?**

The researcher serves as a supervisor at Biola University. To limit potential or perceived conflicts the study will limit the data available to only the researcher, so the researcher will be the only one who sees the raw data. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Biola University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. If selected for a focus group, the data will not be destroyed, however the data will not be used in the study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Michael Teague. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Christine Saba at [REDACTED].

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered*

*and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

<b>Your Consent</b>
---------------------

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

☐ The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

## Appendix C

### Audit Trail

Proposal defense completed	October 19, 2023
Study sent for IRB approval	October 20, 2023
IRB response with request for edit	November 10, 2023
IRB edits sent back to IRB for approval	November 11, 2023
IRB approval received	November 29, 2023
Sent email request to potential participants	November 30, 2023
First interview conducted	December 5, 2023
Second interview conducted	December 8, 2023
Sent an email request to potential participants	December 11, 2023
Third interview conducted	December 12, 2023
Fourth interview conducted	December 15, 2023
Sent an email request to potential participants	December 18, 2023
Fifth interview conducted	December 20, 2023
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 2, 2024
Transcribed two interviews	January 2, 2024
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 3, 2024
Transcribed two interviews	January 4, 2024
Transcribed one interview	January 5, 2024
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 9, 2024
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 11, 2024
Began to write participant profiles	January 12, 2024

Sent an email request to potential participants	January 20, 2024
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 23, 2024
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 24, 2024
Sixth interview conducted	January 26, 2023
Sent an email request to potential participants	January 30, 2024
Seventh interview conducted	January 31, 2024
Sent an email request to potential participants	February 6, 2024
Transcribed two interviews	February 7, 2024
Sent an email request to potential participants	February 13, 2024
Sent survey to all seven participants	February 13, 2024
Eighth interview conducted	February 14, 2024
Ninth interview conducted	February 14, 2024
Focus group interview conducted	February 14, 2024
Transcribed two interviews	February 15, 2024
Tenth interview conducted	February 16, 2024
Transcribed final interview	February 16, 2024
Sent survey to final three participants	February 16, 2024
Read transcripts and first round coding	February 17, 2024
Re-read transcripts and second round coding	February 18, 2024
Eight surveys collected by this point	February 19, 2024
Started writing of Chapter 4	February 19, 2024
Focus group interview conducted	March 5, 2024

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand a leadership phenomenon. The purpose of my research is to understand the leadership experiences of athletics directors in the faith-based small college environment, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be currently serving as an athletics director who is responsible for the management and leadership of an athletics department. They must work at a faith-based college or university with a total undergraduate enrollment of less than 3,000 students within the United States. The athletics department must be a member of the NCAA or NAIA with at least 10 years of athletics competition. Participants will be asked to take part in a one-on-one video and audio recorded interview, an audio and video-recorded focus group and participate in an online survey. The focus group will be selected based on a criteria where multiple participants have similarities (region, gender, institution size, denominational affiliation, etc.). It should take approximately one hour for each of these procedures, with a total of three hours to complete the procedures listed. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcript and themes to check for accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed in the final research.

To participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] to schedule an interview.

A consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Michael Teague  
Ph.D. Candidate

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]