PLAYING A DIFFERENT GAME: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FACTORS DRIVING INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS AT DIVISION III INSTITUTIONS

by

DAVID HOMBS DIAL, JR.

(Under the Direction of James Hearn)

ABSTRACT

In recent years, college athletics have become increasingly popular at many colleges and universities across the country. For large institutions which compete at the NCAA Division I level and maintain nationally prominent athletic programs, the hope for increased revenue plays a significant role in investment decisions related to the campus athletic department. However, Division III institutions do not enjoy the same number of potential revenue sources related to college athletics. Thus, this study employed a qualitative methodology to investigate why private, elite, liberal arts colleges at the Division III level choose to invest in athletics. Interestingly, the driving factors behind athletic investment at these institutions are increased prestige, publicity, and alumni relations, each of which also plays a significant role at the Division I level. However, the successful accomplishment of these objectives at the elite, liberal arts colleges in this study is markedly different than at Division I institutions. The three research questions which guided this study are:

(1) What factors drive institutional investment into athletics at private, Division III colleges and universities?
(2) What does the amount of money spent per student athlete reveal about the way a college views its athletic program?

(3) How do theories of neoinstitutionalism and principal-agency apply to athletics at private, Division III colleges and universities?

INDEX WORDS: Intercollegiate Athletics, Higher Education, Division III, Student Athlete, Principal-Agent Theory, Neoinstitutionalism
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by

DAVID HOMBS DIAL, JR.
A.B., Duke University, 2002
M.L.A., Louisiana State University, 2006

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by

DAVID HOMBS DIAL, JR.

Major Professor: James Hearn
Committee: Richard Mullendore
Erik Ness

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

When casually flipping through a college viewbook, the primary visual images which endure are those of students playing Frisbee on large quads, studying under grand oak trees, and collaborating closely with world-renowned faculty members. Also prevalent in the pages of viewbooks are depictions of athletic events and tales of the college’s dominance in one or more sports. Among other things, these pictures reveal the prevalence of college athletics within the world of modern higher education. In fact, one needs only to visit a large, state university on a Saturday in October to witness the importance of college sports to not only the student body, but members of the surrounding community as well. Indeed, college athletics have played a key role in higher education ever since Amos Alonzo Stagg turned the football program at the University of Chicago into a veritable juggernaut in the late 1800’s. William Rainey Harper, the president of the university at the time, wanted to develop an elite team which he could “send around the country and knock out all the colleges” (Smith, 1988, p. 163). In this way, amateur athletics have been used as a source of pride and a means of advertisement and recruitment for large colleges and universities for well over a century.

If parents and prospective students relied entirely on the messages communicated in viewbooks and other admissions materials, they would be left with an inadequate picture of American college life (Hartley and Morphew, 2008). Among other things, these media fail to accurately depict the true nature of collegiate athletics. Viewbooks often show students participating in athletics or cheering their beloved team to victory against a cross-town rival.
However, the realities of collegiate athletics may indeed be far less glamorous, especially at smaller colleges whose athletic programs do not enjoy national recognition. More specifically, a number of smaller institutions have recently begun to invest significant amounts of money in their athletic programs in an attempt to capitalize on the fervent popularity which college athletics enjoys in modern society. Indeed, 14 of the 50 most recent athletic facilities constructed around the country have been completed at Division III institutions at an average cost of $20 million per building (Kelderman, 2008). Emulating their older and more established cousins is proving costly, however, and smaller colleges are becoming increasingly willing to borrow significantly to acquire the sums necessary for state-of-the-art athletic facilities. For instance, Ursinus College, located in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, recently issued $4 million in bonds to pay for an athletic center. Similarly, nearby Gettysburg College is considering increasing student fees by $150 per semester to fund the yearly operating costs of their new center. As one Gettysburg alumnus noted when he donated a large sum of money for the new building, “To be able to attract students and their parents, you have to have a place that’s more than just great science buildings” (Kelderman, p. 3). Given the sizable investments that many smaller colleges are putting into their athletic programs and facilities, the question emerges as to whether these funds are being spent wisely.

Before addressing the specific research questions which guided this study, it is important to briefly review the guiding principles behind Division III athletics and how athletic competition at this level differs from competition at the Division I level. With nearly 450 colleges competing at the Division III level, this sector marks the largest of the NCAA’s three levels. Nearly 80% of Division III institutions are private, and enrollments range from a few hundred to 22,000 students (NCAA.org, 2012). One of the most distinguishing features of
Division III athletics is the simple fact that the focus is on providing extracurricular activities for students as opposed to generating revenues for the institution. Indeed, the NCAA Division III manual explicitly states that Division III institutions should “place highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students’ academic programs” (NCAA, p. 183, 2011). In keeping with this philosophy, Division III athletic programs do not offer athletic scholarships and cannot provide financial aid to any student on the “basis of athletics leadership, ability, participation or performance.” Student athletes at the Division III level can still receive financial aid, but the awarding of such aid should follow the same processes as those for the general student body. Thus, athletic competition at the Division III level is entirely removed from financial incentives, and student athletes are expected to place high emphasis on their academic goals in addition to athletic achievements.

For big-time Division I programs, the potential rewards associated with athletic success are great, including most notably the national publicity which comes with appearances in BCS bowl games or the Final Four. However, this same reward structure is not in place at Division III institutions where athletic championships are rarely, if ever, televised or discussed in the national media. Even though presidents at all levels of higher education continue to question the financial stability of their athletic programs, an increasing number of these leaders are turning towards athletics in hopes that this sector will bring new life to their institutions and provide a competitive edge over their peers. Several studies have investigated the strategic rationale of athletics at large Division I institutions, but there remains a lack of data on this topic for the Division III level. Interestingly, more colleges and universities compete in Division III than in Division I, yet the literature in this field is heavily weighted towards the Division I level.
Therefore, this study marks an attempt to identify the importance of athletic programs at private, elite Division III institutions.

Given the current scarcity of literature on this topic, this study employed standard qualitative methods to explore the factors driving investments in athletics at smaller colleges. Personal interviews were conducted at three, private, Division III institutions located in the northeastern United States. Site observations and document analyses were also used to supplement the interview data. Each of these qualitative techniques helped identify the factors which drive institutional investment into athletics at these three Division III colleges. More directly, the research questions which guided this study are:

1. What factors drive institutional investment into athletics at private, Division III colleges and universities?
2. What does the amount of money spent per student athlete reveal about the way a college views its athletic program?
3. How do theories of neoinstitutionalism and principal-agency apply to athletics at private, Division III colleges and universities?

Before delving into the subject of how athletics can be used as an institutional strategy at smaller colleges, it is first important to review the current and previous literature surrounding this topic, both of which can be found in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 addresses the theoretical conceptualization which undergirds this study. The research methodology is then discussed in Chapter 4, while Chapter 5 contains the study’s findings. Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion of implications and limitations as well as opportunities for future research in this field.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of literature argues that athletic departments not only are associated with their colleges in name only, but also pursue wildly different goals from their academic counterparts (Sperber, 1990; Fried, 2007; Denhart, Villwook, & Veddar, 2009). More specifically, these critics point to the rising costs and falling academic standards associated with big-time athletic programs. However, an equally substantial corps of respondents uses prestige and legitimacy arguments to show that athletics can indeed provide substantial benefits for many colleges and universities. As this debate has developed, the scholarly and popular literatures regarding the advantages and disadvantages of college athletics have grown significantly in the past two decades. The bulk of this literature addresses the ways in which collegiate athletics affect notable institutional objectives, such as improved external relations, enrollments, and finances. Although the literature largely fails to address the factors which drive investment into Division III athletic programs, it is worth noting that several authors have considered whether trends at the Division I level are trickling down to Division III.

External Relations

As discussed later in this chapter, college presidents and other senior leaders certainly hope that investments into athletics result in direct financial gains for their institution. However, beginning as early as the late nineteenth century, “institutional leaders in higher education recognized that public visibility was a crucial means to status and financial resources and that such visibility had value in its own right” (Washington and V entresca, 2004, p. 94). Thus, other
goals, such as increased prestige, publicity, and enrollments, are also key elements which must be considered when attempting to explain the decision-making process related to college athletics.

**Prestige**

There are many types of colleges and universities, and each group follows a unique mission and fulfills a specific need within the greater society of higher education. In recent years, elite institutions in particular have become increasingly competitive in order to attract the best and brightest students. Given the substantial competition within this segment of higher education, the academic offerings at many prestigious institutions have become essentially equivalent (Toma, 2011). Therefore, a number of colleges and universities have turned towards non-academic initiatives in hopes of gaining an edge over peer institutions. Such initiatives include honors colleges, study abroad opportunities, and athletic programs. Indeed, college athletics do have the ability to provide an institution with increased name recognition amongst the general public (Toma, 2003). More specifically, much of the research and instruction which occurs at a college not only takes place behind closed doors but is also difficult for the public to comprehend. Instead, college athletics, which are widely understood and appreciated within American society, provide institutions with a means of connecting with members of the community who otherwise would have no relationship to the college. Interestingly enough, this analogy was confirmed by a study in 2006 which found that members of the general public do in fact associate the academic quality of an institution with the superiority of that institution’s athletic program (Goidel and Oakview, 2006). Similarly, Louisiana State University recently attempted to capitalize on this connection by launching a marketing campaign entitled LSU: A Great Game Plan On and Off the Field (Chenevert, 2004).
In addition to fielding winning teams, athletic conference alignments also provide colleges with an opportunity to increase their prestige, and in turn advance their academic initiatives. For instance, when the University of South Florida joined the Big East Conference in 2003, the president of the institution noted that the other members of the conference would “be solid partners over the next decades, and... affiliation with them will advance our brand as a national research university” (Sweitzer, 2009). Thus, in a higher education market where institutions are becoming increasingly similar, athletics provides colleges and universities with a means of differentiating themselves and hopefully becoming more prestigious. Although elusive, prestige can provide institutions with better students, greater resources, and the all-important increased autonomy (Toma, 2008). Prestige can therefore be likened to profits within corporations as both provide significant flexibility in achieving goals and solidifying one’s share of the market.

Publicity

As the president of the University of New Mexico recently noted, the publicity associated with college athletics can provide an institution with substantial benefits. “One of the most effective ways to market your university nationally is to have a really quality athletic program. It helps recruit faculty, students, and donors. It helps with the image of the whole university” (Zengerle, 2010). Similarly, Mike Krzyzewski, the longtime men’s basketball coach at Duke University, commented recently that “Duke basketball is the biggest marketing arm of this university” (Booher, 2012, p. 28). As coaches, administrators, and everyone else familiar with intercollegiate athletics can attest, college sports have become wildly popular in recent years. Indeed, college basketball’s March Madness and college football’s Bowl Season are among the most anticipated yearly events in all of sports. For instance, in 2010, 55 million households
tuned in to watch one of the five BCS bowl games (Nielsen Media Research, 2010). Given that each household likely included multiple viewers, these bowl games were seen by an incredible number of people. As many colleges are beginning to realize, no other marketing plan can come close to reaching these numbers.

Aside from the innate exposure which comes from simply participating in one of these highly publicized events, colleges are also provided with time slots during commercials for institutional advertisements. A recent analysis of these commercials, or public-service announcements, found that they portrayed the undergraduate experience as a diverse learning environment where students appeared happy and eager to engage in academic pursuits (Tobolowsky and Lowery, 2006). Furthermore, more than half of these announcements show undergraduate students engaged in cutting edge research with world-renowned faculty members. Although these institutional infomercials may be a bit glorified, the simple fact remains that they are viewed by thousands of people who otherwise know nothing about an institution outside of its athletic program.

As college athletics continue to become increasingly popular within American culture, ESPN and other sports networks are more than happy to provide the public with additional programming. Many of these contests are now aired during times which were previously unheard of for college sports. Colleges, particularly those in smaller conferences, are more than happy to rearrange their athletic calendars in order to secure nationally televised games, even if the events occur at 10:00pm on a Tuesday night. Thus, in many ways, college athletics represent a viable mass-marketing opportunity for institutions whose advertisements would otherwise be unable to reach a significant percentage of the American public.
Enrollment

Aside from the possible prestige and publicity advantages described above, college athletics can also provide assistance with several key metrics of success within higher education. Mintzberg (1987) defines strategy as the way in which a firm positions itself relative to its competitors in the market. Applied to college athletics, nowhere can this definition be seen more clearly than at Adrian College in Michigan. Like many smaller Division III colleges, Adrian has experienced falling demand and decreasing enrollments in recent years. However, in 2006, the new president launched an innovative campaign to revitalize the institution, and a large-scale overhaul of the athletic program served as a cornerstone for this initiative. More specifically, the college added several key sports, including ice hockey and lacrosse, in hopes of gaining access to new market segments. The somewhat daring plan appears to have worked as applications and enrollments at Adrian College have risen significantly since the plan was implemented (Sander, 2008). The Adrian College example confirms Toma’s (2011) prediction that athletics and other non-academic initiatives will begin playing a more important role in students’ college choice decisions.

The question of whether college athletics can produce higher application rates has been studied several times, although the research focuses solely on Division I institutions. In 1996, Toma and Cross found that applications do in fact increase in the two-year period following a national championship or otherwise notable sports moment. This phenomenon was nicknamed the “Flutie Factor” in reference to the increased applications at Boston College following quarterback Doug Flutie’s “Hail Mary” pass which led to a victory over the University of Miami in a 1984 bowl game. Moreover, it appears that this trend may still exist as applications at the University of Florida increased from 23,000 to 28,000 per year following the institution’s great
success in both football and basketball (Hiassen, 2008). Similarly, a former athletic director at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff noted that the university received the highest number of applications ever in the year after the men’s basketball team participated in its first NCAA basketball tournament (Fuller, 2011). Nevertheless, several authors have noted that such results occur only at institutions whose athletic teams have achieved a nationally acclaimed status (Chressanthis & Grimes, 1993; Murphy & Trandel, 1994; McAvoy, 2005). Furthermore, reaching this elite plateau is not easy as greatness is often associated with significant financial costs, a topic which is addressed later in this chapter. Many institutions with nationally recognized athletic departments have also discovered that scandals can occur which can seriously damage the institution’s reputation. Finally, it is also worth noting that a causality problem exists as it is impossible to determine whether athletic success itself leads to increased applications, or whether athletic success provides more opportunities for publicity, which in turn leads to increased applications. Nevertheless, despite these potential pitfalls, it appears that success on the playing field can indeed produce positive outcomes for the institution as a whole.

**Finances**

**Donations**

In addition to the somewhat intangible outcomes described above, the literature is replete with studies related to whether successful athletic programs can provide direct financial assistance to colleges or universities. Common sense might suggest that athletic programs may increase pride among alumni and others, thus leading to increased financial donations. Anecdotal evidence backs this belief as well as several instances exist where individuals have donated significant sums of money in support of a university’s athletic program. Most notably, Oklahoma State alumnus T. Boone Pickens gave $165 million to the college’s athletic
department in 2006, marking the largest single gift ever given to an NCAA athletic program. At the time, Oklahoma State’s president remarked that Pickens’ gift would impact the whole university. “It’ll make it easier for us to recruit students, it’ll help us recruit faculty. Every aspect of the university is going to benefit from this” (ESPN, 2006).

Despite such instances of large financial gifts, however, empirical research into this topic shows that the connection between athletics and donations to the college is anything but clear. Indeed, researchers have yet to reach a consensus regarding the impact of athletics on institutional donations. The topic has been studied at various points for over seventy-five years, and a number of researchers have found no connection between athletics and alumni donations (Marts, 1934; Sigelman & Carter, 1979; Turner, Meserve, & Bowen, 2001). Contrary to these findings, however, some scholars have suggested that elite athletic programs can indeed lead to increased donations among alumni (McCormick & Tinsley, 1987; Baade & Sunderberg, 1996). A 2008 study by Stinson and Howard confirms this finding at smaller, Division III colleges as well. The key factor in these reports, though, is not just strong winning percentages, but also appearances in elite athletic events, such as the Final Four or national championship bowl games. Despite this apparently weak relationship, several of the studies note that although athletics might not produce increased donations, successful programs can help advertise the university to a national audience, thus supporting the above discussion regarding athletics and increased publicity.

Aside from general alumni donations, it appears that student-athletes are more willing to donate to their alma mater following graduation (Wunnava and Lauze, 2001; Clotfelter, 2003). Interestingly, this same trend holds true for Division III institutions as a recent study at by Holmes, Meditz, and Sommers (2008) found that former student-athletes at Middlebury College
were both more likely to donate as well as more generous than alumni who did not participate in a varsity sport. More specifically, former athletes are 22% more willing to donate, and their donations are approximately 20% greater than those made by non-athletes. As opposed to the inconclusive evidence above regarding general alumni donations, it appears that colleges and universities at all levels can realize economic gains through donations made by former student-athletes.

In addition to direct donations from alumni and others, many institutions also rely heavily on governmental financial support, including most notably state subsidies. Once again, it appears that athletics can aid colleges and universities in their quest to secure additional resources from their state legislature. For instance, University of Connecticut officials used the success of their men’s and women’s basketball teams to secure an additional one billion dollars from state legislators (Allen, 1999). Connecticut state senator Kevin Sullivan noted that UConn’s basketball dominance helped win support for the financial package which provided $100 million to the university per year for ten years. Similarly, Humphreys (2006) found that institutions with a Division I football program receive approximately six percent more state appropriations than colleges without Division I football. Thus, athletic success as well as the mere presence of a big-time athletic program can positively impact the amount of state aid received by an institution.

Rising Costs

In order to reap some of the benefits described above, however, colleges must be willing to invest significant financial resources into their athletic departments. More specifically, a recent report commissioned by the NCAA found that the operating budgets of athletic departments at Division I institutions grew by nearly 11% per year between 2004 and 2007.
(Orszag and Israel, 2009). Conversely, total spending for universities increased by just 5% per year over the same time period. Furthermore, athletic budgets represent an even greater share of the overall institutional budget at smaller colleges due to the substantial fixed costs associated with operating an athletic department (Orszag and Orszag, 2005). Even more surprising is the fact that only about a dozen Division I athletic programs across the entire country are profitable. Taken together, these data reveal that although spending within big-time college athletics is skyrocketing, most athletic associations are still not profitable and universities themselves are being asked to provide subsidies to cover the difference. Indeed, total institutional subsidies in 2008 for Division I institutions alone surpassed $800 million (Gillium, Upton, and Berkowitz, 2010).

In analyzing why college athletic spending has grown so precipitously, one budget line in particular is somewhat surprising. More specifically, the costs associated with supporting student-athletes have risen substantially in recent years. Universities in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), a subgroup which includes the largest and more elite athletic programs, enroll on average 500 student-athletes, and several of the largest institutions host as many as 900 student-athletes (Knight Commission, 2009). Many of these students receive full scholarships, which include not only tuition and fees, but also room, board, and book expenses. Over the past decade, tuition costs within both public and private sectors of higher education have grown at an average of 4.9% per year after adjusting for inflation (College Board, 2009). Similarly, college textbook prices, which more than tripled between 1986 and 2004, have also significantly outpaced national inflation rates (Government Accountability Office, 2005). Indeed, in an effort to defend his ever-increasing budget requests, Georgia Tech Athletic Director Dan Radakovich observed, “We in the Athletic Association are the biggest parent on campus. We have 375
student-athletes and about 220 full scholarships, and we are the chief financial resource for most of them. It creates an awful lot of obligation on our part” (Winkeljohn, 2010, p.1). Thus, in order to keep pace with these rising costs, college athletic associations are being asked to dip further into their coffers than ever before. For a very few Division I institutions, this means overall profits are shrinking. However, for most, this means debts, and therefore the need for additional institutional subsidizations, are increasing.

The pressures that college athletic associations currently face to employ the best coaches and maintain the best facilities in hopes of fielding the best teams provide a second explanation for why costs have risen so dramatically within this segment of higher education. Recent data released by the NCAA revealed that total salaries for coaches employed within the top ten percent of college athletic programs increased by a shocking 25 percent between 2005 and 2007 (Knight Commission, 2009). These incredible salaries are perhaps most obvious within college football where head coaches at Division I institutions now boast an average salary of $1.36 million with wages for nine coaches topping three million dollars per year in 2009 (Wieberg, Upton, Perez, and Berkowitz, 2009). In conjunction with these rising salaries, college athletic programs are constantly upgrading their facilities in order to gain perceived recruiting advantages over rival institutions. In fact, the 2005 NCAA Presidential Task Force on the Future of Intercollegiate Athletics found that approximately 20 percent of annual spending within college athletics is related to facility expansion and capital debt (Knight Commission, 2009). In most of these situations, the current athletic facilities are more than adequate, but colleges clearly believe that having the newest and largest facilities creates the perception that their program is more prestigious than that of their peer institutions. Thus, an arms race of sorts has developed
within college athletics where institutions are pressured to spend significant sums of money simply to remain competitive with other top programs in the country.

Although the dominant trend within college athletics at every level is to invest substantial financial resources in hopes of fielding competitive teams, it is worth noting that several smaller institutions have been able to build their athletic programs with relatively little financial investment. For example, Guilford Tech, a two-year community college located in central North Carolina, ventured into the world of intercollegiate athletics in 2006 by adding women’s volleyball and men’s basketball teams. Both of these sports were able to utilize existing facilities on campus, thus decreasing the amount of start-up capital. Indeed, Guilford Tech’s president estimated that his athletic program costs less than $200,000 per year (Ashburn, 2007). A similar story exists in Indiana, where Indiana University East, a four-year regional campus in the Indiana University system, launched its athletic program by avoiding football, baseball, and softball as these sports have relatively high operation and equipment costs. A side from selecting sports which did not require on-campus facilities, IU East also targeted sports where success could be realized relatively quickly. “If just one golfer or track athlete makes nationals, that brings publicity and instant credibility to the program” (Wright, 2010, p. 55). In addition to using nearby high school facilities to reduce the program’s cost, IU East has been careful to keep its staff small as well, as evidenced by the fact that the athletic director also doubles as the men’s basketball coach. Thus, these two colleges are paving the way for low-cost athletic departments, and the presidents of both have noted that a number of other smaller colleges have contacted them for advice on how to start similar programs.
**Trickle Down Effect**

Although data regarding athletic trends at smaller colleges do exist, the topic is much more obscure than literature related to Division I athletics. However, Suggs (2004) notes that it is critical for leaders of smaller colleges to have accurate information because anecdotal stories from Division I programs may be unreliable. Data on the impact of athletics at both Division III and community colleges is becoming more accessible in recent years, and initial results show that these institutions are struggling with the same topics as those found in Division I. More specifically, scholars, administrators, and supporters of smaller colleges have begun to disagree over the role of athletics as it relates to funding, institutional pride, enrollments, and of course mission. Either way, presidents and leaders of Division III and community colleges are certainly becoming more aware of both the positive and negative effects which athletics can have on their institutions.

Given the increasing importance of athletics at all levels of higher education, two studies published within the last several years shed light on community college presidents’ perceptions of intercollegiate athletics. The results of both of these studies are strikingly similar to those of Division I presidents which were included in a recent Knight Commission report on the state of collegiate athletics. For instance, 85% of community college presidents believed that the current funding for athletics at their college was not secure, and 78% predicted that opportunities for future funding were weak as well (Williams, Byrd, and Pennington, 2008). Similarly, presidents at Division I institutions also worry about the financial stability of athletics on their respective campuses. As one president noted, “We’ll get to the point where we literally can’t do it... TV contracts won’t continue to grow. The money will cut itself off” (Art & Science Group, 2009).
Despite their discouraging outlooks regarding the costs of their athletic programs, presidents and leaders at all levels of higher education are increasingly turning towards athletics in hopes that this sector will bring new life to their institutions and provide a competitive edge over their peers. For instance, 86% of Division I presidents who participated in the study by the Knight Commission believe that a successful athletics program yields higher numbers of applicants. One leader stated, “Athletics has always played a major role in advancing us academically. Since we [won the bowl game], I can tell you, we’ve been in enrollment growth” (Art & Science Group, 2009). Although similar qualitative data have not yet been gathered from presidents at smaller colleges, the quantitative data reveals striking similarities. More specifically, 59% of community college presidents believe athletics can increase the college’s reputation and lead to higher enrollments (Williams et al., 2008). Although this percentage is noticeably lower than that of their Division I counterparts, it is clear that leaders of smaller institutions believe that athletics have the ability to produce positive outcomes on the academic side of the house.

As a result of this growing commitment towards athletics, a number of smaller institutions have already realized positive outcomes on account of their athletic programs. Robert Keys, president of Rockingham Community College, believes that adding an athletics department provided greater legitimacy for his institution. “We live in an athletics-minded world. A lot of people think that if you don’t have an athletics program, you are not a real college” (Ashburn, 2007). Similarly, administrators at IU East noted that prospective students would no longer be able to dismiss them “as not a traditional college... because the school lacked intercollegiate sports” (Wright, 2010). However, as noted above, perhaps the single-most astonishing example of institutional improvement due to athletics comes from Adrian College in Michigan. In 2005, enrollment at the private, liberal arts college had fallen to just 935 despite its
capacity for 1,400 students. Jeffrey Docking, Adrian’s new president, decided to pursue athletics as a strategy for reinvigorating the struggling college. In addition to creating awareness within the community, Docking saw the creation of an athletics program as a means for enrolling more students. “We say to [our] coaches, ‘You have one job: recruit.’ We’ve had to let go of coaches who haven’t made their numbers” (Sander, 2008). Furthermore, Adrian made the strategic decision to include ice hockey and lacrosse as part of the expansion because both sports are popular among affluent families and provided Adrian with a way to begin recruiting students from New England and the mid-Atlantic. Docking’s plan called for a risky $30 million investment, but the expenditure paid off as Adrian witnessed a 57% increase in enrollment in the three years following the addition of its athletic department. Moreover, applications increased from 1,200 to 4,200 over the same period. Although Adrian’s success is admittedly unique and athletics was only one piece of the strategic plan, it does suggest that athletics can play a role in substantial institutional change, even at the Division III level.

Although athletics can indeed transform an institution, a growing number of criticisms are emerging which focus on the detrimental effects of adding athletics at smaller colleges. In many ways, these critiques take the same forms of those directed at larger, Division I institutions. Eugene Tobin (2005), one of the more vocal detractors of the recent growth in athletics at Division III institutions, notes that “the athletics ‘arms race,’ once seen exclusively as a Division I phenomenon, is now very much a part of the Division III culture, and it shows no signs of abating” (p. 25). This argument is similar to the one advanced by Shulman and Bowen (2001) in their book The Game of Life where they argue that trends in athletics trickle down from high-profile sports to low-profile sports and from larger colleges to smaller colleges. Partially in response to the criticisms levied in Shulman and Bowen’s book, 130 Division III colleges
banded together in 2003 to create the College Sports Project. The organization, headed by Tobin himself, believes that student-athletes are students first and those “who participate on intercollegiate athletic teams should do so in an environment that is integrated with and complementary to the educational values of the institution” (Gann, 2008). By gathering data and trends regarding the academic preparation of student-athletes who compete at the Division III level, the group hopes to provide presidents with the necessary information to make informed decisions about the future of athletics at their institutions. Thus, the College Sports Project is similar to the Knight Commission at the Division I level in that both are independent bodies seeking to bring about change within the world of collegiate athletics.

Although the scholarly literature related to trends within Division I athletics has grown steadily in recent years, the same cannot be said about Division III institutions. Indeed, the majority of literature regarding Division III athletics is largely medical in nature and addresses topics related to the physical performance of athletes. Studies which focus on the strategic rationale and effects of athletics at Division III colleges are scarce at best, even within popular media outlets. Indeed, similar to the way in which the national media covers Division I more often than Division III, the scholarly literature related to athletics is also heavily weighted towards Division I. Until this lack of research regarding Division III athletics is filled, leaders at smaller colleges will be left emulating their Division I cousins in hopes of realizing similar outcomes at their own institutions. With this in mind, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning Division III athletics and the ways in which these programs can affect the institution as a whole.
CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION

Until recently, much of literature on organizational relationships within college athletics has focused on how colleges enter into the arena of big-time athletics. More specifically, this literature advances the idea that entry into college athletics is somewhat akin to entry into a cartel (Fleisher, Goff, & Tollison, 1992; Eckard, 1998). This largely economics based approach argues that NCAA rules act as barriers which prevent participation by colleges with fewer resources. In effect, the NCAA’s efforts to set minimum academic and behavioral standards combined with its ability to penalize colleges which break the rules creates a cartel in the market for collegiate athletics.

Although some aspects of the cartel analogy do provide clarification to this topic, other elements of the logic are somewhat faulty. For instance, DeSchriver and Stotlar (1996) assert that most violations of NCAA policies occur because individual colleges believe that violating the rules will result in economic gain for their program. While there is some merit in DeSchriver and Stotlar’s argument, their logic is far too simplistic as it assumes that colleges and universities are solely concerned with money. The mere fact that most institutions’ athletic programs fail to produce a profit reveals that non-financial factors also play important roles in colleges’ decisions regarding athletics. Moreover, a key element of the cartel argument is the fear that “the NCAA will detect the rules violations and levy some type of penalty against the violator” (DeSchriver and Stotlar, p. 389). In reality, the NCAA does not detect most of the rules violations which occur within college athletics. Instead, these violations are reported by compliance officials at
the colleges themselves. Thus, while certain elements of the cartel argument do hold true, colleges and universities use athletics as more than economic investments. With this in mind, behavioral theories drawn from fields outside of economics may prove to be more insightful for not only how colleges decide to start an athletics program but also the relationship between the athletics department and the rest of the campus.

Although the primary research question for this study focuses on the factors which drive institutional investment into athletics at smaller colleges, it is important to consider the ways in which these decisions are impacted by NCAA rules and regulations. As the foremost organizing and governing body of college athletics, the NCAA has significant influence on athletic decisions which are made at each of its member institutions. For instance, in their quest to maintain eligibility or increase their relative status, colleges and universities seek to legitimize themselves by mimicking the actions of their peer institutions. This never-ending cycle falls within neoinstitutionalism, a school of thought which seeks to explain why organizations gradually become increasingly similar over time despite their unique histories.

A second behavioral theory, the principal-agent relationship, is perhaps an even more applicable theory describing athletic decisions at individual colleges and universities. This theory, which arose primarily from political economics, argues that in situations where information is incomplete, a principal often hires agents to accomplish certain objectives. For instance, if a college is interested in improving its perceived public image, senior administrators may turn to other parties, such as the campus’ athletic department, to help accomplish this goal. College athletics are incredibly popular in American culture, and Toma (2003) notes that colleges and universities can capitalize on this popularity by using their athletic departments as agents of the institution. References to athletic superiority in viewbooks, advertisements, and
even donor requests are all examples of how a college can use its athletic department as a strategic agent for the institution as a whole. The college is thus in a unique position in that its athletic department, along with other key departments on campus, has significant control over how the institution is viewed publicly. In this way, a complicated symbiotic relationship exists between the two parties.

**Neoinstitutionalism**

The ways in which individuals adapt to new environments have been researched extensively and form the basis for the field of sociology. Similarly, significant efforts have been directed towards understanding how entire organizations respond upon entering new environments. John Van Maanen, an eminent organization theorist, observes that organizational socialization “is a theory about how new skills, belief systems, patterns of action and, occasionally, personal identities are acquired (or not acquired) by people as they move into new social settings” (p. 211, 1984). Although Van Maanen’s research focuses on how individuals respond to changing social situations, the same principles can be used to describe how organizations change upon joining new settings. Van Maanen observes the existence of two primary forms of socialization. Under one form, organizational cultures change when new individuals with unique skills and knowledge join the group. Alternatively, some cultures force new entrants to adapt to the dominant culture in order to join. Applying Van Maanen’s framework to college athletics, it appears that the second form is certainly more dominant within this setting.

Writing at the same time as Van Maanen (1984), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified a paradox within organizational behavior in that “rational actors make their organizations increasingly similar as they try to change them.” This paradox has now evolved into an
independent theory known as isomorphism, which focuses on why organizations appear collectively similar despite their unique individual histories. In their seminal work, DiMaggio and Powell argued that three processes (coercive, mimetic, and normative) contribute to organizational isomorphism, and each of these three elements can be seen within the behaviors of college athletic associations.

Coercive processes develop from both formal and informal pressures which organizations within a group place on one another. Within athletics, the lowering of academic standards for student-athletes can be viewed as tacit coercion since institutions are forced to ignore the academic backgrounds of athletically talented students in order to field competitive teams and squads. Revealing the pressures related to academic standards, T. K. Wetherell, the former president of Florida State University, noted that “it’s not uncommon for a coach to come over and say, ‘You’ve got to let this one in. He can go to Washington or Ohio State” (Alesia, 2008). In addition to these inter-organizational pressures, organizations often receive external coercive pressures as a result of societal and cultural expectations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The social expectation to field successful athletic teams can be seen in former Georgetown basketball coach Craig Esherick’s observation that, “coaches have been told many times, ‘If you don’t win, you’re going to get fired.’ I was never told, ‘If you don’t graduate players, you’ll get fired” (Alesia). This same expectation was seen at Adrian College where the president informed the athletic coaches that they would be fired if they did not recruit enough players. Thus, internal and external coercive processes place significant pressures on college athletic associations to behave in certain isomorphic manners.

Mimetic behavior, the second of DiMaggio and Powell’s processes, occurs when goals are ambiguous and environments are uncertain. The athletics arms race is a perfect example of
mimetic behavior because universities pursue a variety of goals and therefore choose to mimic their peer institutions in order to appear legitimate. In the recent Knight Commission study regarding college presidents’ beliefs about athletics, one president stated, “The pressure to join the arms race is a real concern, especially for very successful mid-major [colleges]. How do you keep up with the big dogs?” (Art & Science Group, 2009). Not surprisingly, the pressure to mimic their aspirational institutions has extended down into many of the smaller Division III colleges. As the athletic donor at Gettysburg College noted, “You’ve got to have [impressive facilities]... and if you don’t have it, you’re at a competitive disadvantage” (Kelderman, 2008). Furthermore, it appears that these pressures are beginning to reach into the community college sector as well as nearly two-thirds of community college presidents believe that athletics enhance their institution’s reputation (Williams, Byrd, & Pennington, 2008). The ubiquitous prevalence of mimetic behavior is not surprising given the uncertainty surrounding goals and expectations within college athletics.

Finally, normative behaviors arise as a result of increased professionalization and the creation of cross-institutional networks within a society. The very existence of the NCAA as a network which spans intercollegiate athletics and creates standards is an example of a normative process. Interestingly, a growing number of people believe that the normative processes created by the NCAA are too burdensome. As part of the Knight Commission’s recent study, one president remarked that the “huge array of rules in intercollegiate athletics has become virtually unmanageable... the NCAA has created the largest rule-bound bureaucracy on the face of the earth” (Art & Science Group, 2009). Additionally, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) theorize that “universities and professional training institutions are important centers for the development of organizational norms among professional managers and their staff” (p. 152). The growth of
academic preparation programs for athletic management, including fields such as Sports Medicine and Sport Administration, further ensure that new professionals who embark on careers in athletic management are entering with similar thought processes and beliefs. Thus, the presence of the NCAA along with the growth in these academic programs reveals that normative isomorphic practices are already firmly entrenched in college athletics. Although some of DiMaggio and Powell’s three mechanisms are more recognizable than others, each provides insight into how college athletic associations have evolved into such an isomorphic society.

In any discussion regarding neoinstitutionalism, it is always important to consider why institutions place so much value into attaining legitimacy. As the famed sociologist Max Weber observed many years ago, “legitimacy is an important variable in the political process that shapes action, interpretation, and identity of competing groups in the various spheres of society” (as cited in Baxter, Margavio, & Lambert, 1996). Weber’s statement certainly holds true in athletics as new entrants invest significant resources and alter their organizational culture in order to look like other institutions and thus acquire what they perceive to be greater legitimacy. However, successful athletic programs have been shown to produce a number of positive outcomes for universities, thus explaining the desire to invest so heavily in this sector. For instance, Toma (1999) likens spectator sports at large institutions to front doors in that “they are what people on the outside see and what eventually gets them inside” (81). Even more directly, Carter (2001) argues that “parents, convinced by their teens and by marketing-savvy sports universities, spend billions to send their kids to such colleges without even recognizing that sports have closed the sale.” The social pressures described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) are arguably substantial enough alone to force change within institutions. However, when coupled with the willingness
to change for reasons described by Toma, Carter, and many others, the isomorphism amongst college athletic associations is no longer surprising but instead rather predictable.

**Principal-Agent Theory**

A second behavioral theory borrowed from disciplines outside of higher education may in fact provide the most accurate description of institutional activity related to college athletics. Principal-agent theory depicts a relationship wherein a principal employs an agent to act on its behalf. More specifically, this theory suggests that each party needs the other in order to succeed, yet the principal will encounter significant difficulty in controlling the agent due to the fact that the agent possesses more knowledge than the principal. Thus, the central component of agency theory is the tactics used by the principal to control the behavior of its agents. While this theory relies heavily on the economic and political science disciplines, it has been used to explain relationships in a wide variety of fields. In 1996, Ortmann and Squire proposed that principal-agent theory is a valuable tool for describing the organization of higher education. Indeed, since then several authors have applied the principal-agent model to topics within higher education (Liefner, 2003; Lane, 2005; Lane and Kivistö, 2008).

Given that no research currently exists relating the principal-agent framework to college athletics, the connection between universities and governments is perhaps the next closest body of research. Kivistö (2008) notes, “according to agency theory, governments do not trust universities, simply because universities are likely to behave opportunistically if they are not held accountable for the resources they have” (p. 340). Although this approach leans heavily on a negative perception of human behavior, the same logic can nevertheless be used to describe the relationship between the college (principal) and its athletic department (agent). If given the opportunity, college athletic associations would likely push the boundaries of acceptable
behavior in hopes of gaining a competitive advantage over their peer institutions and other rivals. Examples of this type of behavior are numerous in collegiate athletics. For instance, the University of Michigan football program has been under intense criticism in recent months for allowing its student-athletes to practice more than the allowable hours determined by the NCAA. Similarly, the academic support program within the University of North Carolina’s athletic association has been heavily scrutinized following the recent discovery that one of its tutors was writing papers for members of the university’s football team. Given the proclivity of college athletic associations to behave in self-serving manners, the college is forced to expend significant resources monitoring its agent.

In applying the principal-agent framework to collegiate athletics, it is important to note that two key assumptions undergird the theory. More specifically, the agent must have access to better information, and the goals of the principal and its agents must inherently be at odds with one another (Kivistö, 2008). The first assumption, known as information asymmetry, certainly applies as the athletic departments themselves are often the only ones who have complete knowledge of what is and is not occurring within their areas. Goal conflicts, the second assumption, also apply to intercollegiate athletics as the primary goal of the college is to increase its reputation and perception within the community, thus hopefully boosting donations, application rates, and other key metrics of institutional stability. Given the popularity of collegiate sports, the college is able to use its athletic department as an agent which can help the college achieve its goals. Thus, the athletic department, along with the alumni association, office of institutional development and others, become agents “employed” by the principal. However, the primary goal for athletic departments is to produce successful athletic teams and hopefully championships. Thus, principal-agent theory, which Kivistö notes is “characterized by mistrust,
control, and compliance,” is often a quite appropriate descriptor of the relationship between colleges and their athletic programs.

As noted above, information asymmetry and goal conflict combine to create the central problem with principal-agent theory: the difficulty which the principal faces in controlling its agents. More specifically, this agency problem arises for a number of reasons, including the inability of the principal to directly monitor its agents’ activities, the temptation for the agents to pursue their private goals which are often at odds with the principal’s goal, and the hesitancy of the agents to supply full information to the principal (Kivistö, 2008). As Eisenhardt (1989) first noted, “Because the unit of analysis is the contract governing the relationship between the principal and the agent, the focus of the theory is on determining the most efficient contract given assumptions about people, organizations, and information” (p. 58). Thus, in order to prevent, or at least contain, the agency problem, the principal must identify the appropriate balance between monitoring its agents’ behaviors while providing them with enough autonomy to successfully accomplish the principal’s goals.

Although principal-agent theory itself is not terribly controversial, a great deal of disagreement exists in identifying the most efficient method to solve the agency problem described above. The two primary courses of action involve the creation of either behavioral-based contracts or output-based contracts (Eisenhardt, 1989). Although colleges rely on both methods to monitor the behaviors of their athletic departments, output-based contracts are perhaps somewhat more prevalent. Most notably, performance-based funding represents a common example of an output-based contract. Such formulas may be tied to a variety of academic benchmarks, such as overall graduation rates of student-athletes or grade point
averages for certain teams. Thus, colleges are able to use financial incentives to control actions within athletic departments.

Aside from being a fitting descriptor of the interactions between colleges and their athletic departments, principal-agent theory also introduces the idea of agency costs, a concept which may prove particularly useful in future research regarding this topic. As outlined in Jensen and Meckling (1976), three types of agency costs exist, and the first involves the monitoring costs paid by the principal in overseeing its agents. Applied to the world of college athletics, the institutional subsidies which colleges give to their athletic departments represent this form of agency cost. Without these subsidies, most athletic departments would be unable to meet their financial demands, thus preventing both the college as well as the athletic department from accomplishing their respective goals of increased prestige and athletic championships.

Bonding costs, the second type of cost, are incurred by the agent in order to appear credible to the principal. All staff and training costs associated with individual institutions' compliance offices fall within this category. The third and final agency cost is the “dollar equivalent of the reduction cost in welfare experienced by the principal” when an agent acts in any self-serving manner which differs from actions which would maximize the principal’s welfare (Jensen and Meckling, p. 308). In other words, this cost can be viewed as losses due to inefficiency within the principal-agent relationship. Within intercollegiate athletics, the NCAA’s cost of maintaining a positive public image in the face of repeated scandals at its member institutions falls within this category. Among the most noticeable examples of these costs are the television spots that air during NCAA contests describing how most student-athletes will “go pro in something other than sports.” Also included in this third category are the non-financial costs
associated with the growing number of reports which suggest that college athletic associations no longer support the academic missions of their respective universities.

As a whole, agency theory offers a valuable new perspective on how to view relationships within intercollegiate athletics. As Eisenhardt (1989) observed, “agency theory reminds us that much of organizational life, whether we like it or not, is based on self-interest” (p. 64). Perhaps more so than any other sector of higher education, athletic associations invest significant resources into achieving their self-interested goals. Indeed, the financial windfalls associated with fielding successful teams and winning championships are significant enough to tempt athletic departments to pursue these goals, often regardless of financial, moral and educational costs. At the same time, the college has a vested interest in maintaining a positive public perception of its athletic department. Thus, principal-agent theory not only reveals the odd symbiotic relationship which exists between colleges and athletic departments, but it also partially explains the frequently puzzling behaviors of both.

It is important to recognize that the relationships between athletic departments and colleges take different forms based on level of athletic competition. For instance, generating institutional revenue is a visible goal of Division I athletic departments, and this objective greatly shapes the behaviors of both parties. In Division III, institutional presidents and athletic directors are often closer in the organizational chart than their peers at the Division I level. Indeed, the NCAA adopted a new policy for Division III institutions in 2010 whereby “institutional presidents and chancellors have the ultimate responsibility and final authority for the conduct of the intercollegiate athletics program at the institutional, conference, and national governance levels” (NCAA, p. 184, 2011). While these differences are important, they alone
cannot fully explain the behaviors of athletic departments and colleges, and thus principal-agent theory remains a viable tool for explaining the behaviors of both parties.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the general lack of published research regarding Division III athletics, a qualitative design provided the opportunity to interact directly with administrators and other key stakeholders, thus producing a better understanding of the factors which drive athletic investment at smaller colleges. As noted above, the research questions which guided this study are:

(1) What factors drive institutional investment into athletics at private, Division III colleges and universities?

(2) What does the amount of money spent per student athlete reveal about the way a college views its athletic program?

(3) How do theories of neoinstitutionalism and principal-agency apply to athletics at private, Division III colleges and universities?

At its core, the goal of qualitative research is to explain and produce a full understanding of a research problem. Van Maanen (1979) notes that qualitative research is an umbrella term for a multitude of techniques which seek to decode, describe, or otherwise shed light upon a topic which is understudied or not well understood. Although related, qualitative research is quite distinct from its quantitative cousin, and qualitative researchers employ different techniques and methods in order to generate meaning from the data. Although most qualitative studies are not designed to be generalized to larger populations, this style of research can provide insight into the relationships and structures surrounding key topics, including institutional investment into Division III athletic programs. Merriam (1998) writes that qualitative
researchers are primarily interested in the meaning which people construct around a topic. In order to obtain this understanding for the current study, the researcher entered the field and personally collected data directly from faculty, staff, student-athletes, alumni, and other key stakeholders from the three selected institutions. Furthermore, as qualitative research typically involves the collection of data from multiple sources, the researcher also gathered data from documents related to the current topic, including primarily newspapers and other campus publications. Since the factors that drive investment in college athletics at the Division III level remain poorly understood, this qualitative approach provided the researcher with the flexibility needed to gain a full understanding of the topic.

**Case Selection**

Given that well over four hundred colleges compete at the Division III level, it was necessary to limit the current study in order to obtain the depth of data needed to provide insight into this topic. Case studies, one of the primary types of qualitative research, are used when a researcher desires a deep and thorough understanding of a singular topic (Merriam, 1998). In an effort to identify the various strategies which institutions employ regarding athletics, the current study examined three, private NCAA Division III institutions located within approximately one hundred miles of each other. Furthermore, private institutions were chosen for this study simply because private colleges and universities often have more autonomy related to financial decisions as compared to their counterparts in the public sector. Moreover, the intricacies related to state funding as well as responsiveness to state lawmakers would certainly have complicated the research topic. Two of the institutions in this study compete in the same athletic conference, while the third institution (Oakview College) recently transitioned away from that conference into a different one. The Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act provides detailed data on athletic
participation, revenues, and expenses, and this database was used to identify the three cases for this study. More specifically, Collington Institute of Technology featured a relatively high expense per athlete ratio whereas Oakview College featured a relatively low ratio. In fact, Collington’s expenses per athlete are more than double those at Oakview College. Woods College, whose ratio of expenditures per athlete fell somewhere in between the other two, provided an example of a somewhat average institution based on expenses per student athlete. All three of the institutions are highly regarded academically and regularly appear in the top fifty in US News & World Report’s list of the nation’s best colleges and universities. Thus, these three institutions are seemingly rather similar, yet the range of athletic expenditures suggests the existence of differing approaches regarding the use of intercollegiate athletics as an institutional strategy. A more detailed overview of each institution is provided at the beginning of the next chapter.

Participant Selection

Once the three individual cases for this study were determined, the researcher then turned to participant selection within each of the institutions. In quantitative studies, much care is taken to ensure a random selection of participants so that the resulting conclusions can be generalized to a larger population. Since qualitative research is not concerned with such generalizations, the researcher instead sought participants whose experiences could best inform the current study, a method known as purposeful selection. As the primary objective for this study was to gain a thorough understanding of the rationales which drive investment into Division III athletic programs, it was therefore necessary to select a sample which could best inform this topic. In doing so, the researcher selected participants with typical experiences, such as senior athletic administrators, recent alumni, and current student-athletes. However, Patton (1990) also
suggests the selection of participants whose experiences are unique in some way, a strategy known as maximum variation sampling. Thus, themes which develop across the participants despite their differences will hold significant value in gaining an insider’s perspective of the research problem. Applied to the current study, examples of participants with somewhat unique perspectives included recent student government leaders as well as senior staff members within offices of institutional development and student leadership. This variety among participants led to a more complete understanding of the factors which drive each college’s investment in its respective athletic program.

In selecting participants, the researcher employed snowball sampling, a technique whereby each participant was asked to recommend others whose experiences might prove valuable to the topic being studied. The simple logic of this method is that the participants themselves hold the best knowledge of the topic, and thus can point the researcher to other key participants. Convenience sampling is a second method for participant selection which was also used in conjunction with snowball sampling. Because qualitative researchers typically enter the field for prolonged periods of time in order to collect data, the costs associated with qualitative research can grow quickly. One way to minimize costs is through the use of convenience sampling, a method in which the researcher selects those participants who are most accessible based on factors such as cost, time, and distance. Of course, the researcher was cautious to only select those participants whose experiences contributed to a thorough understanding of the topic being studied.

Data Analysis

In keeping with one of Creswell’s (2007) characteristics of qualitative research, data analysis occurs throughout the data collection process. In this way, qualitative methodologies
rarely unfold in a purely linear fashion. For instance, the researcher may select and interview several participants, analyze the data, review pertinent documents, select more interview participants, and so on until he or she feels that a full understanding of the topic has been obtained. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that researchers collect data until they reach the point of saturation, or the point at which new information provides little or no additional insight into the topic. For the current study, the saturation point became noticeable at around twenty individual interviews. Although a total of twenty-four interviews were completed, the data obtained during the last several noticeably overlapped the data collected previously. Once this saturation point was achieved, the researcher identified themes and sub-themes within each data set, and then these themes were combined to create larger categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to this technique as the constant comparative method, and their process eventually became known as grounded theory. Although this study does not seek to generate theories, the constant comparative method did provide the necessary framework for understanding the current research problem.

Another key feature of qualitative research is the use of multiple sources. Interview data along with document analysis represent the most common sources of qualitative data, and the current study utilized both forms heavily. For the personal interviews, the researcher employed a general interview guide, a strategy whereby the researcher maintained a pre-determined list of questions, but the wording of the questions, along with their order, was altered as necessary (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, as the constant comparative method predicts, the researcher also added new questions to the interview protocol in response to the initial phases of data collection. Finally, it is worth noting that the initial general questions were constructed around the themes which emerged from the previous literature on this topic. Thus, the researcher employed a priori
techniques to formulate the initial questions, and the interviews then progressed in a semi-structured manner. Throughout the interviews and data analysis, the researcher remained open to emergent themes in addition to the topics identified in the previous literature. Although the questions varied based on the course of each interview, a prototypical interview guide is included in Appendix A.

The interview strategy aided in creating a rich data set which in turn yielded clear themes in response to the research questions guiding this study. In identifying the themes, the researcher broke each set of interview data into smaller segments which were then aligned with other segments of a similar nature. Taylor and Bogdan note that themes should capture patterns “that cut across the preponderance of the data” (as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 179), thus themes were only selected if they occurred repeatedly throughout the interview data. These themes and other findings are discussed in the following chapter.

Document analysis represents another key source of data within qualitative studies. For the current study, examples of documents used included local newspapers, student newspapers, multiple campus publications, and various websites associated with the three colleges. One important caveat regarding document analysis is that all documents are inherently biased, and thus the researcher considered both the source and the context of each document when utilizing this form of data. Taken together, the interview data and the document analysis combine to create a deep understanding of the current topic.

**Trustworthiness**

Regardless of whether research is categorized as quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, it must contain elements of rigor in order to be considered legitimate. In their seminal work on qualitative methodologies, Lincoln and Guba (1985) established trustworthiness as a
key element for this style of research. When applied to qualitative research, trustworthiness is typically comprised of three distinct elements: internal validity, external validity, and reliability. The first component, internal validity, relates to whether the research findings are congruent with reality. In other words, internal validity is concerned with how well the researcher captures the reality of the topic being studied. This component is a notable strength of qualitative research as the researcher typically spends extended amounts of time in the field collecting data and, as such, has the opportunity to gain a true insider’s perspective on the issue. The researcher also employed several additional strategies to help strengthen this study’s internal validity, including the use of multiple sources as well as frequent consultation with participants throughout the research process.

External validity, the second component of trustworthiness, is more difficult for qualitative researchers as it focuses on whether the research is generalizable outside of the current case. Since generalizability is not a goal of qualitative researchers, the accepted method to ensure external validity within qualitative research is to provide the reader with thick, rich descriptions of the case, thus allowing the reader to determine whether the findings of the study can apply to their own situation. For this reason, the findings chapter includes great detail of the three institutions as well as numerous direct quotations from the participants themselves.

The third and final component of trustworthiness is reliability, which deals with the question of whether the study can be replicated. As human nature is constantly changing, it is difficult (if not impossible) for researchers of social topics to replicate a qualitative study exactly. Instead, reliability within qualitative research focuses on whether the researcher’s findings are consistent with the data. Strategies for protecting reliability include the use of a general interview guide as well as maintaining detailed researcher notes regarding decisions
made and methods used throughout the research process. In addition to these strategies, the researcher also took notes during the interviews in order to capture facial expressions or other unusual occurrences which may not have been captured by the audio recorders. Similarly, transcriptions of the interviews were created as soon as possible, typically within just one to two days, in order to improve the accuracy of the data. Finally, peer review, a technique which involves the researcher asking a colleague to review the findings in light of the data to ensure the accuracy of the conclusions, was also employed in this study.

Finally, because qualitative research is highly dependent on the individual researcher, it is important for that individual to disclose and clarify any sources of potential bias. For instance, in the current study, the researcher was previously employed by a large, Division I athletic association which had a multitude of resources, including a large number of employees as well as substantial financial capital. Although the researcher was careful to separate previous experiences from the current study, one can never entirely disregard previous experiences, and therefore it is important to recognize the researcher’s prior involvement at the Division I level.

Conducting valuable qualitative research can be time-consuming and expensive, but this style of research can explore new subjects and shed light on topics which were previously not well understood. Through the use of the strategies and techniques described above, qualitative researchers can ensure that their resulting reports are not only accurate, but also rigorous. Qualitative research is easy to do, but difficult to do well. Nevertheless, this style of research can make substantial contributions to the body of knowledge on a wide array of topics, including how and why administrators at private, elite, Division III colleges choose to invest in their campus athletic programs.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

Collegiate athletics have steadily become more and more popular within American society in recent years, and leaders at colleges and universities across the county have taken notice. Institutions both large and small have launched aggressive building projects in hopes of boasting that their state of the art facilities are bigger and better than those of their rivals. This focus on college athletics has led to not only increased athletic staffs at many colleges, but substantially larger salaries for key athletic personnel. Not surprisingly, budgets for college athletic departments nationwide have grown considerably in order to fund these new facilities and enhanced salaries. While such expenditures have been widely questioned by popular media, faculty members, and even the general public, athletic success often brings increased publicity and thus possible justification for using athletics as a strategy for institutional enhancement. However, this increased publicity relies on national media outlets such as ESPN and CBS, and appearances on these networks and others are almost exclusively reserved for large, Division I programs. Nevertheless, many leaders at Division III colleges and universities have steadfastly shown a commitment towards enhancing their athletic departments. Although the academic literature addressing the possible institutional effects of college athletics is replete with studies from the Division I level, the literature related to this topic at the Division III level remains quite sparse. Thus, the current study seeks to identify the primary factors which drive institutional investments into athletic programs at elite, private, liberal arts colleges. Related to this question is whether an institution’s athletic expenses per student athlete offer any insight into how the
institution views its athletic program from a strategic perspective. Finally, this study also tests the validity of neoinstitutionalism and principal-agency as suitable theories for explaining the institutional support of athletics within this subset of Division III institutions.

**Case Overviews**

Prior to discussing the actual cases, it is important to recognize that pseudonyms have been used in place of the actual names of the three institutions. Given the potentially sensitive nature of financially related topics, employing pseudonyms for both individuals and institutions certainly aided in the free-flowing nature of each interview. Similarly, some position titles have altered slightly to protect the identities of participants while still conveying the true nature of their roles within their respective campus communities.

As noted above, this study focuses solely on three private, elite, liberal arts institutions located within approximately one hundred miles of each other. Until 2011, all three colleges competed in the same athletic conference, which featured a total of ten institutions. However, beginning in the fall of 2011, Oakview College began competing in a different athletic conference, a topic which will be discussed later in this chapter. The 2009-2010 athletic spending records for each of these colleges were obtained through the Equity in Athletics database. While total athletic expenses represent a valuable statistic, selecting cases based on these data alone would be flawed as each of the institutions sponsors a different number of athletes. With this mind, the institutions in this study were selected in part based on overall spending per student athlete. More specifically, Collington Institute of Technology had one of the highest expenses per athlete within the conference, while Oakview College had the lowest. Woods College’s expenses per athlete were comparatively moderate, thus placing the institution in the middle of the league.
Collington Institute of Technology

Collington Institute of Technology is located in a city with a population of about 50,000, although the total population of the region is over 800,000. The college has been in existence for nearly two hundred years, and it features a number of highly ranked science and technology programs. Collington enrolls about 5,300 undergraduate students, with about ten percent of these participating in varsity athletics. In 2009, the Institute completed an extensive renovation of its athletic facilities, including the construction of an athletic complex comprised of a 5,200 seat football stadium and a 1,200 seat basketball arena. The ice rink, which currently seats 4,800 people, has also seen extensive upgrades in recent years, including the addition of new locker rooms, press box, and luxury seats. Collington is one of a handful of colleges which competes at the Division III level in most sports, but also fields a couple of Division I teams. Like many institutions, the college’s athletic department prides itself on the quality of both its academic and athletic achievements while simultaneously creating opportunities for personal growth for its student athletes.

Woods College

Located just sixteen miles from Collington, Woods College is a private, liberal arts college which has been in existence for over two hundred years and is now home to over two thousand undergraduate students. Despite this relatively smaller student body, Woods features approximately the same number of student athletes as Collington, which translates to about one in four Woods College students participating in varsity athletics. Woods is quite proud of its athletic heritage as the college began competing in the early 1860’s, thus placing it among the first American colleges to field athletic teams. Similar to Collington, Woods also competes primarily at the Division III level, but also hosts two Division I sports. The gymnasium, which
houses a campus-wide fitness center, a state of the art swimming and diving facility, and offices for athletic administrators opened in the spring of 2006.

**Oakview College**

Although Oakview College is similar in many ways to Collington and Woods, it is also the most distinct of the three institutions in this study. The college is located approximately one hundred miles from Collington and Woods and is situated in a rural town with a population of just several thousand residents. With an undergraduate enrollment of around eighteen hundred students, the college itself is also the smallest of the three institutions in this study. Nevertheless, nearly thirty percent of the student body competes at the varsity level as Oakview’s athletic department is home to over five hundred student athletes. Unlike the previous two institutions, Oakview competes solely at the Division III level. Furthermore, the college recently chose to leave the athletic conference in which Collington and Woods compete in favor of joining a conference comprised entirely of smaller, liberal arts colleges spread across a five state region. Oakview College is widely considered one of the most elite liberal arts colleges in the country.

Before reviewing the themes which emerged from these cases, it is important to briefly review the participants who took part in this study. As noted above, participants with both typical and unique experiences related to athletics were chosen in order to gain a thorough understanding of the athletic departments and their interaction with their respective campuses. Table 1 provides a complete list of participants who aided in this study. In order to preserve anonymity, the participants are identified only by their position or role within their respective campus community. Similarly, position titles have been changed to further protect the identities of the participants.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Position Title/Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Collington Institute of Technology (9) | Associate Director of Center for Student Leadership  
Senior Advancement Officer for Athletics  
Associate Advancement Officer for Alumni Relations  
Current student athlete (2)  
Director of Athletics  
Associate Director of Athletics  
Director of Undergraduate Admissions  
Associate Registrar |
| Woods College (9) | Alumnus and former Student Body President  
Alumnus and former Student Athlete  
Associate Professor of Mechanical Engineering  
Professor of Art History/Representative on Faculty Athletic Committee  
Associate Director of Admissions  
Senior Director of Marketing  
Director of Athletics  
Director of Alumni Relations  
Director of Institutional Advancement |
| Oakview College (6) | Alumnus and former Director of Institutional Advancement  
Associate Director of Athletics  
Associate Director of Undergraduate Admissions/Athletic Liaison  
Director of Center for Student Leadership  
Professor of Philosophy and Representative on Faculty Athletic Committee  
Professor of Geosciences and Representative on Faculty Athletic Committee |

**Themes**

Over the course of this study, several noticeable themes emerged which help explain why Division III institutions have continually chosen to invest substantial resources in their athletic departments. In many ways, these themes mirror those found in the academic literature, even though these previous studies have focused largely on the Division I level. Most notably, athletics at the Division III level is seen as an avenue for increased enrollments, alumni relations, and institutional prestige. However, one theme which arose in each of the twenty-four interviews was the importance of academics, and, interesting enough, there was very little disagreement about the role which academics plays within Division III athletics. Thus, this
section begins with a discussion of the interaction between academics and athletics at Division III institutions.

**Importance of Academics**

While winning games and fielding championship athletic teams is always an attractive goal, student athletes, administrators, and faculty alike at these elite Division III colleges are quick to observe that success in the classroom is more important than success on the field. Despite the presence of new facilities and state of the art equipment, private Division III institutions seem to still have much in common with their early collegiate predecessors. More specifically, one of the driving forces behind the creation of intercollegiate athletics was students’ needs for physical opportunities outside of the classroom. In many ways, this original purpose still holds true at these three institutions where athletic programs are just part of the larger picture of campus life. Although Division III colleges appear to be mimicking their Division I counterparts in a number of ways, administrators at the campuses in this study are adamant that academics remain the primary goal. For instance, a professor of art history at Woods College encapsulated this belief in her remarks that the institution only wants those students who can appreciate academics as much as, if not more than, athletics. “It pretty much guarantees that we won’t end up on ESPN, but quite frankly, we don’t want to. I mean, sure, we would love to have some of that money. We all would. But it is not worth it. It’s too much of a sacrifice.” Thus, even though this unwavering commitment to academics possibly means foregoing some financial resources, the three Division III institutions in this study showed a determination to maintain the academic excellence for which they are known.

Despite the obvious focus on academics, Division III athletics remain highly competitive. An admissions officer at one of the institutions commented that his college strives to achieve
both high quality academics as well as athletics. “That is the epitome of Division III. Students can come here and get a great education while still competing in a sport that they love.” He also noted that students occasionally think that earning a spot on a team will be easier because the school competes in Division III. Those students quickly realize that tryouts are rigorous and the level of competition is quite high. Aside from their athletic prowess, a senior athletics administrator at Collington observed that athletes are often more likely to participate in class or take a leadership role simply because they are accustomed to being vocal on the field. Similarly, the athletic director at another institution remarked that student-athletes at his institution were known for more than just their athletic abilities. “It is a culture that we have where our student athletes do well on the field and in the classroom while also being leaders on campus.”

Indeed, the combination of academic and athletic abilities has become so ingrained with these Division III institutions that students have begun seeking out these colleges for that very experience. As the Director of Communications at Woods College noted, “The quintessential Woods student is an engineer who plays jazz music on the side and is also captain of the volleyball team. We get these really renaissance types of students here, and the athletic piece fits right into that story.” Ultimately, it takes commitment from institutional leaders across campus to create a culture which values athletics equally with academics and other extracurricular activities. The athletic director at one of the institutions commented that he takes great pride in his student-athletes’ accomplishments off the field. “It’s not just how many games or championships you win. Of course we want to win championships, but it’s so much bigger than that. We’re here to develop great students and great graduates.”

Regardless of the level of athletic competition, the stereotype that athletes are “dumb jocks” is a ubiquitous, dark cloud which hangs over the heads of student athletes everywhere.
Indeed, a recent report by the Indianapolis Star found that an astonishingly high percentage of Division I institutions grant special admission to academically marginal students solely as a result of athletic ability (Alesia, 2008). However, administrators at the three Division III institutions in this study were quick to show that their student athletes face the same academic demands as every other student. An admissions officer at Oakview College summed up how his office handles student athletes’ applications for admission: “While this person might be an excellent athlete, we of course look at who that student would be on campus and whether they would be successful. We absolutely do not relax admissions standards for student athletes as we don’t want to set a student up for failure.” Perhaps because of similar policies at each of the three institutions, administrators are able to boast that their student-athletes consistently maintain an average GPA that is higher than that of the general student body. One athletic director noted that he holds a reception for all student athletes at the beginning of the year where he recognizes the teams whose average GPA’s are over 3.0 for the previous year. In fact, all but three teams were recognized at this past year’s reception, and the athletic director believes that his athletes’ desire to compete was the driving force behind the impressive academic marks. “Last year, one of the teams that did not get to stand up was softball, and their rallying cry for the entire year was we want to be standing when the AD recognizes teams at the social. They had a party when they found out that their GPA was over 3.0 for the year.” Thus, student athletes at elite, private Division III institutions are not afforded any concessions in the admissions process, and the students who are admitted appear to bring the same commitment to both the classroom and the playing field.

Whenever discussing student athlete grade point averages, one must also consider the types of classes that these students are taking. A 2009 report by USA Today found evidence of
course clustering at a number of Division I institutions (Steeg, Upton, Bohn, Berkowitz). The authors suggested that this sort of clustering can occur for a variety of reasons, including ease of committing academic fraud as well as faculty members who are overly friendly towards student-athletes. Similarly, when discussing this “hideaway curriculum” in his book, Beer and Circus, Sperber implies that many college athletes are directed to enroll in easier courses primarily because they are unable to keep pace with regular courses. However, for student athletes at private, Division III colleges, these practices appear to be nonexistent. A faculty member at CIT remarked that athletes at his institution were not being directed towards certain courses. “I have seen student athletes in all of the schools, including a women’s basketball player who majored in architecture, which is a notoriously time consuming major here. There are athletes in all of the academic programs.” A staff member at Woods confirmed this practice for her institution when she recalled attending the student-athlete awards banquet the previous year.

One student was captain of the volleyball team and carried a 3.8 in mechanical engineering. One of our star hockey players came to Woods with limited English abilities. He graduated with a 3.4 in neuroscience, and now he is pursuing an M.D. This isn’t the type of place where you can find Basket Weaving 101.

Thus, student athletes at these Division III institutions do not gravitate towards easier curriculums, but rather challenge themselves with course loads similar to those taken by non-athletes. A former student body president at one of the institutions recalled seeing student athletes in many of his higher level courses. “Athletes here are visible all over campus, including in the classroom. You might look over during a Physics test, and say, ’Hey, I know that kid.’”

For student athletes at the three institutions in this study, financial incentives do not factor into why they choose to compete as there are no athletic scholarships in Division III.
Instead, these students commit a significant portion of their collegiate career to training and competing simply because they enjoy their sport. As the Associate Athletic Director at Oakview College observed, “They are doing it knowing what they have academically and knowing what other responsibilities they have on campus.” A staff member in student leadership added that student athletes at her institution are involved in a number of activities outside of varsity athletics. “These students aren’t coming here to play basketball. They are playing basketball because they enjoy it. They are quite talented and competitive, but athletics is not their whole life.” Indeed, a current softball player stated that she had known her whole life that she wanted to play in college, but the unique majors offered at Collington is why she choose that institution. In fact, the ability to study her passions combined with the opportunity to play her favorite sport prompted her to select Collington over a number of other colleges, including a Division I and several Division II schools. She went on to point out that there are very few opportunities to play softball professionally after college, so her academic coursework is ultimately more important. “A D1 school wanted me, but I knew there was pretty much nothing I could do afterwards with a degree from that school, so it didn’t seem worth it to me.” Similarly, a current lacrosse player commented that he had a friend in high school who chose to play at the Division I level despite the fact that the school did not have a very good academic reputation. “He tells me about the classes he takes, and I wonder what he’s going to do after he gets out. I think he’s going to be in trouble when he starts looking for a job.” In this way, the type of student who elects to compete at an elite Division III institution does so because they enjoy their sport, but they also do so knowing that academics is the cornerstone of their collegiate experience.

Aside from the high admissions standards and the academic abilities of these students, there are a number of support structures in place which are designed to help student-athletes at
these three institutions succeed in the classroom. For instance, Collington has an early warning system in place where professors can alert academic advisors if they suspect that any student is in trouble academically. A junior lacrosse player at Collington noted that early warnings are given as a result of missing too many classes or failing a test. He went on to add,

If you get an early warning, coach will find out about it immediately. There are always one or two, though. Last year, there was a freshman that got in trouble for missing classes. Coach told him if he got one more early warning, then he was off the team.

Similarly, staff members at other institutions pointed out the high level of communication and cooperation between coaches and faculty. As an Associate Professor of Geology at Oakview College remarked, “My experiences with our coaches has been really good. If I have a student who misses class and it becomes a problem, then I can call the coach and the problem goes away.” A faculty member in Mechanical Engineering at Woods College recalled an instance where a professional licensure exam conflicted with an athletic event, and the coaches and athletic staff rescheduled the athletic event to avoid conflict. “You’ve got to have reasonable people in the room to make something like that happen.”

One of the recurring themes throughout this topic is the importance of having good coaches who understand the academic rigors at private, Division III institutions. As the athletic director at Woods noted, a key metric he uses when evaluating his coaches is not their winning percentage on the field, but rather the performance of their student athletes in the classroom and their behavior on campus.

I don’t tell my coaches ‘Look, if you go 2-7 again this year, then we are going to have to go in a different direction.’ We don’t have those conversations. But, the conversations that we do have are ‘Your students are in the dean’s office twice a week and that is a real problem.'
Similarly, athletic coaches at Oakview College are members of the academic faculty, and they participate in academic processions with other faculty members. One staff member suggested that this practice aids in the communication and understanding between faculty and coaches. In this way, student athletes at private, Division III institutions must earn their admission, but they can enroll with the knowledge that their future coaches have their academic success in mind just as much as their athletic accomplishments.

Statistics are the dominant language of athletics. Common figures include tackles made, goals scored, and of course number of wins. However, for athletic directors and coaches at these private, Division III institutions, academic statistics are equally, if not more, important than athletic statistics. For instance, Collington’s athletic director tracks how many consecutive terms his student-athletes have achieved a higher GPA than the campus average (the streak is twenty semesters and counting). Similarly, Woods’ athletic director tracks whether student athletes perform better in season or out of season (last semester, eighty percent of his teams had higher GPA’s in season). He further noted that the smaller size of his institutions enabled student athletes to reach the pinnacles of success in both athletics as well as academics. “When you can show how we are excelling both in the water and in the classroom, that’s what matters. That’s what will separate our students when they go on a job interview and are asked about a leadership role they’ve had.” Division III athletic programs at these three private institutions thus epitomize balance. Success in athletics is important, but so is success in the classroom. At these institutions, coaches not only push their students to succeed on the field, but they also push them to do well off the field. Faculty members not only teach student-athletes in the classroom, but they also regularly attend sporting events to support their students’ athletic accomplishments. Athletes not only excel at their sports, but they also are tremendously driven to succeed as
students in the classroom and as leaders on campus. As a former student athlete at Woods remarked, “We want to have success, and we are competitive. But we don’t eat, breathe, and sleep our sports.”

**Athletics as a Source for Institutional Prestige**

Although private, Division III institutions may be adamant about the importance of maintaining academic excellence, administrators are also keenly aware that athletics can be a powerful source of fame and notoriety. As noted in the academic literature, athletic prestige at the Division I level largely arises from achievements earned on the field of play. Successful teams are likely to earn prime television slots for their games as well as invitations to celebrated bowl games and national tournaments, and these accomplishments certainly help advertise a college in the eyes of viewers. Although athletic prestige still exists at the Division III level, it takes a different form, largely due to the lack of televised games and national media attention. Private, Division III schools instead seek prestige through conference affiliations and state of the art athletic facilities.

While winning percentages might not be the ultimate goal at these elite liberal arts institutions, faculty and administrators alike discussed the importance of fielding competitive teams. As a senior development officer at Oakview College noted, “We don’t want to be the athletic doormat of the conference, but at the same time we don’t need to be winning championships in order to be successful.” A faculty member at the same school observed that athletic success can breed name recognition which in turn can breed academic success in the form of higher institutional rankings. Although there are currently no studies which confirm this conjecture at the Division III level, the perception clearly exists on campus that athletic success can indeed aid other institutional goals. Ultimately, it seems that the strategy for these colleges
is simply to remain respectable on the athletic field. Although administrators recognize that championships are not necessary, they also perceptively recognize that their athletic teams need to remain minimally competitive. An alumni relations officer at one of the institutions summed up this philosophy when he remarked, “We don’t want to sell our souls to athletics, but we also don’t want to be a doormat.”

One of the ways in which leaders at these three Division III institutions seek institutional prestige through athletics is by means of conference affiliations. As noted above, Woods College and Collington both compete in the same athletic conference. Additionally, both institutions have elected to compete at the Division I level in ice hockey, and thus the schools compete in a different league in these sports only. Their Division I hockey league includes a number of other institutions whose academic reputations are nationally acclaimed. In reference to joining this hockey league, a professor at Woods quipped, “We wanted to be in that league because it put our name up there with some really elite schools. We would not have wanted to join the SEC.” Oakview College also competed in the same Division III conference as Woods and CTI until last year when the institution joined a new league comprised of nationally renowned liberal arts colleges. Hence, in the absence of national media attention related to athletics, administrators are instead using athletics to strategically link themselves with other elite academic institutions.

As evidenced by recent history at the Division I level, one might think that changing conference affiliations would be a difficult choice for institutional leaders. However, for Oakview College, the choice was relatively easy. Several faculty and staff at Oakview noted that the new conference requires more travel time for their teams simply because the institutions are quite diverse geographically. Indeed, the average distance from Oakview to other colleges in
their new college is nearly three hundred miles whereas the average distance in their previous
conference was just over one hundred miles. Nevertheless, even with these distances in mind,
administrators at Oakview had nothing but positive thoughts about joining the new conference.

As one faculty member noted,

the decision to [join that conference] was driven by admissions and prestige.
It was almost a business decision in a way. We had to balance the additional
travel time and costs, but our admissions office was very favorable to the idea
as it lets them brag that we are a member.

Another administrator added, “We want to recruit the kind of kids who want to go to schools [in
that conference]. We already compete academically with those colleges, so it’s about who we
are as an institution.” Despite the advantages which come from competing in an academically
elite league, there are some downsides to consider as well. For instance, a senior alumni
relations officer at Woods interestingly noted that strong academic institutions compete well
against one another, but often perform poorly against out of conference opponents.

Take the national hockey tournament. We lost to a team that had eleven or
twelve picks in the NHL draft. We had zero. Should we be able to beat that
team? Probably not. Instead, we expect the kids who come here to focus on
their academics and graduate in four years.

Thus, private, Division III institutions have carved out a distinct niche in an American higher
education marketplace that is loaded with educational opportunities. Although national
recognition for their athletic programs might be rare, these institutions are instead able to enjoy
the privileges which come from being in a league with the best academic colleges and
universities in the country.

Athletics does indeed play a key role for institutions looking to align themselves with
other elite colleges and universities. At one time, Woods College was a member of the elite
conference which Oakview just joined, however an athletic scandal led to their dismissal from
this group of prestigious liberal arts colleges. Even though this event occurred several decades ago, alumni and others at Woods College still regret the mistake that was made. As a communications officer at Woods noted, older alumni “still get upset that Woods is not in [that] league anymore. You are sort of judged by the company you keep, and part of that is the league you play in. Alumni ask if we are ever going to get back into [that league] because they think it will do more for our reputation than anything else.” An alumni affairs administrator at Woods also remarked,

I think who you compete against is important in the public eye. If we are playing a rival or another good school, alumni can identify with that. But if you throw another school in there, alumni will question that, especially if that school is not seen in the same academic limelight as us.

However, alumni are not the only population who recalls Woods’ dismissal from that conference. An art history professor candidly shared that people all over campus still lament the fact that Woods is no longer in that league. She further noted that the college is still suffering from the mistake, even though it occurred several decades earlier. Despite these regrets, administrators at both Woods and Collington proudly tout the academic reputations of other colleges in their current conference as well as condemn the travel times associated with Oakview’s new conference. However, there is little doubt that both institutions would gladly follow in Oakview’s footsteps should the opportunity ever present itself.

Another sector where private, Division III colleges are attempting to seek institutional prestige is through the quality of their athletic facilities. In many ways, this strategy is similar to the one being pursued at the Division I level. However, unlike the facilities at a number of large, Division I institutions, athletic facilities at private, Division III colleges are open to the entire campus and occasionally to the general public as well. As described in the case overviews, all three institutions in this study have completed extensive overhauls of at least some of their
athletic facilities within the past five years. Hence, the trend towards state-of-the-art facilities at private, Division III institutions is a relatively recent development. An admissions officer at Woods laughed as he recalled a football game he attended about ten years ago when he was a freshman at the college. “One of the bolts in the goalpost gave in. A crew ran out and pulled the goalpost back up, but it leaned over again. Someone had to hold it up until halftime when they could fix it.” Although comic, this incident reveals just how far the athletic facilities at these institutions have come in just a few years. Not surprisingly, administrators have high hopes for returns on the investments made into the new, state-of-the-art athletic facilities. A faculty member at Collington remarked, “When you want to recruit great student athletes, you need to be able to show them where they will play and the resources they will have. The new facilities are leaps and bounds nicer than what we had before. That will help us recruit better athletes here for sure.” Needless to say, Collington is hoping that their facilities will not only help recruit better athletes, but better overall students as well. As a senior athletic administrator confirmed, “One of the goals of this facility is to allow us to recruit against Ivy League schools. We want to show that we have a commitment to athletics.” Thus, while it is still too soon to determine the actual recruiting and advertising effect of these facilities, administrators certainly have lofty expectations for their new buildings.

In order to fund such grand construction projects, administrators are quick to acknowledge the commitment from senior institutional leaders. Collington recently concluded a nearly one hundred million dollar athletic facility at a time when the American economy, and higher education budgets in particular, are under intense scrutiny. Collington’s athletic director applauded his president’s decision to continue funding this project despite the economic recession. “If you look across the country, there are many projects half-completed where
presidents just said, ‘Stop. We are not doing another thing.’ Our president said, ‘We decided to build this for a reason, and it made perfect sense. We are going to continue what we started.’

One way that senior institutional leaders have been able to justify such great expenditures is the fact that the athletic facilities at these private, Division III colleges are open to the entire campus. At Oakview College, even the expanded strength and conditioning staff is willing to help anyone, not just student athletes. A senior athletic administrator at one of the institutions added,

> We have been able to leverage these new facilities to help with recruiting. It’s not just recruiting of varsity athletes, but all students who want to compete in some form of organized sports. By adding this facility, we went from 50 to 79 intramural soccer teams alone.

Similarly, the associate athletic director at Collington added, “We didn’t build new athletic facilities because they are glitzy and glamorous and a way to get on ESPN. We built them because our students are using our facilities, and not just varsity athletes.” He went on to estimate that about 75% of the student body at Collington participates in some form of organized athletics which uses the campus facilities.

Aside from opening the new athletic facilities to the entire campus, another way in which administrations are able to justify these expensive ventures is by using them to host other campus-wide events. The director of student leadership at Oakview College remarked that the campus’ basketball arena is the only venue large enough to host an annual speaker series which has featured such names as Jon Stewart and former President Bill Clinton. She noted that booking such nationally known speakers often means that she has to reserve the arena on short notice.

> I have had to go to the basketball coach and tell him he can’t use his court. While he didn’t like it, he said he was fine, and I think that is one big difference between athletics at Division III versus athletics at Division I. There was commitment both from the coach and the athletic director that this was a school-wide event.
Interestingly, Collington has decided to go one step further and occasionally open their primary athletic facility to the entire city. More specifically, in recent years, the athletic facilities have been home to a yearly community street festival that is open to the general public. This event serves several strategic purposes, not the least of which is displaying their state-of-the-art facilities to people who would otherwise not be affiliated with the institute. Furthermore, by occasionally opening their campus and facilities to the general public, Collington is able to reaffirm its commitment to being a “communiversity.” As one staff member observed, “Our facilities are beautiful. For high school students, they have to wonder how much playing time they would get at a Division I school. After they visit here, they realize that they could play in these great facilities and earn an excellent education at the same time.” Of course, the admissions offices at each of these colleges support the construction of new, impressive athletic facilities. A faculty member at Oakview remarked that the new gym is a “prime stop on all campus tours now.” Thus, aside from their primary function of providing competition and practice spaces for varsity athletes, these new athletic facilities also provide venues for increased campus programming as well as opportunities for these institutions to market themselves to prospective students.

Aside from the many positive aspects which come with state-of-the-art facilities, institutional leaders have had to face some criticism as well. As one faculty member reflected, “Anytime a college makes commitments and expansions beyond the classroom, there will be critics who ask whether the new facilities are really needed. Athletics is often an easy and visible target for criticism.” Athletic staff members at each of the three institutions acknowledged that they faced some campus criticism related to the new construction. However, each credited their respective presidents for remaining committed to the facilities despite the
economic downturn in higher education. In the end, each college’s decision to upgrade their athletic facilities hinged on more than just athletics. A senior staff member within Alumni Relations at Woods College observed, “In order to be competitive as an institution, we have to have... facilities that are as attractive as our peers. When the schools are equal academically, students might turn to the quality of facilities to help make the decision.” In this way, administrators at private, Division III institutions are hoping that their state-of-the-art facilities will lead to success not only in athletics, but also in enrollment.

**Increased Publicity and Enrollment as a Result of Athletics**

Regardless of the level of athletic competition, administrators have long surmised that college athletics can serve as a vehicle for institutional publicity and consequently higher enrollments. Indeed, the validity of this strategy remains highly contested within the academic literature related to Division I athletic programs. While Division I colleges and universities view athletics as a way to advertise their institution via televised games and national media, the three institutions in this study do not typically have access to those same publicity outlets. Nevertheless, athletics remains a key component for enrollment management strategies at the three, Division III institutions. The difference is that colleges at this level view athletics more as a means for increased enrollment as opposed to increased publicity. Elite, liberal arts, Division III colleges still utilize athletics as a vehicle for publicity. However, the more critical element is the simple fact that fielding twenty or twenty-five athletic teams requires a substantial number of student athletes, which translates into a substantial increase in institutional enrollment.

“The thing that drives CIT as an institution is prestige and creating one of the best engineering programs in the country. As a leading academic institution, a lot of students want to come here and be a part of that. But many of these kids are also athletes, and that in turn drives
our athletic department.” As the newly hired Chief Advancement Officer for athletics at CIT described, athletics is a key element of the institution’s strategy to attract the best and brightest students in the country. In this way, CIT and other private, Division III colleges are hoping to recruit those highly talented students who are looking for an elite academic institution but also want to compete athletically at the collegiate level. Approximately one-quarter of the student body at each of the colleges in this study competes at the varsity level, thus revealing the key role which athletics plays in institutional enrollment.

Aside from its ability to attract talented students to campus, athletics also provides an opportunity for institutions to target certain populations which may be underrepresented within the student body. For instance, a former admissions officer at Woods College noted that athletics played a key role when the institution was looking for ways to recruit more women to campus. He added that Woods made a stronger financial commitment to its women’s sports programs, and as a result his office began to have more success in attracting women to the institution. The associate athletic director at Collington confirmed that his college employs the same strategy in order to recruit women to the historically male-dominated student body at CIT. “If we didn’t have the women’s sports, would we have as many women? I doubt it.”

In addition to balancing gender on campus, athletics also provides enrollment management officers with an opportunity to recruit students from certain geographic areas. A director of undergraduate admissions at one of the institutions commented, “If you look at our athletic rosters, some are very geographically diverse. [My staff] might not have been able to build those relationships, but athletic coaches are able to attract students from areas outside of our traditional recruitment regions.” Finally, other than creating enhanced opportunities for gender and
geographic diversity, an athletics staff member at Collington speculated that student athletes bring additional leadership abilities to campus.

Student athletes here definitely serve a purpose on campus outside of just throwing a ball or making a basket. They are oftentimes the ones leading a group project in class. Without athletics, you wouldn’t have the same well-rounded students that provide the leadership qualities and life to campus.

In this way, athletic programs at private, Division III colleges represent a somewhat symbiotic relationship between highly intelligent student athletes and a student body in need of greater diversity. As a faculty member at Oakview College pointed out, “If a student comes out of high school and isn’t getting interest from D1 programs, then Division III provides a chance to play while earning a great degree. And the institute gets to use it to balance whatever ratio they need.”

Given the important role which athletics plays in enrollment management at private, Division III colleges, it is not surprising that administrators across campus stress the importance of fostering a strong relationship between the athletic department and the admissions office. Collington’s director of admissions has helped forge this relationship on her campus by meeting with athletic staff and coaches frequently to update them with the latest changes in her office.

We try to have a good relationship and clear communication. The last thing I want is for them to find a great recruit who can’t make it academically. We tell our coaches that we have a unique product here, and we have coaches who really understand the institution’s goals and bring in great student athletes.

She added that she feels so confident with the coaches’ understanding of the institutional mission that several coaches actually work in her office leading information sessions for interested students, which include both athletes and non-athletes. However, the relationship between athletics and admissions is one which does not just come naturally. Instead, it must be fostered by staff members who understand the importance of academics and how athletics fits within the
larger campus environment. Woods' athletic director challenges his coaching staff to view this relationship from the perspective of the admissions office.

I am clear with our coaches that while they may have goals, our admissions staff has goals, too. You may be trying to get to twenty wins while they may be trying to reach an average SAT score of 1400. So if you want to bring in that star point guard with a 900 SAT (which isn’t happening here, by the way), then that doesn’t help [the admissions office] reach their goals.

Another somewhat unique way in which athletics can aid institutional recruitment goals is through summer camps for middle and high school students. As a faculty member at Collington remarked, “These [camps] draw potential students to campus. Even if the student doesn’t want to compete at the collegiate level, they are still a potential student who has been to campus.” In this way, strong partnerships between athletics and admissions staff can yield a variety of positive benefits for the entire campus.

Separate from the obvious varsity-level opportunities, athletics also plays host to a number of other campus activities. As an admissions officer at Oakview College noted, “Non-student athletes frequently ask about teams, offerings, and opportunities to participate in non-varsity sports. Many of our applicants want to know that there are athletic opportunities for them should they enroll at Oakview.” Indeed, intramurals and club sports are broadly popular at these colleges, and administrators estimate that close to 80% of the student body is active at some level of athletic competition. The director of admissions at CIT similarly reflected on the significant role which athletics has played at her campus in recent years. “Our student body as a whole has changed, and our students really strive for a well-rounded education. Athletics has helped us develop a better student experience, from varsity athletics down to intramurals.” In addition to the physical outlets which athletics affords to a campus, games and other contests also provide venues for other student activities. More specifically, the director of student leadership at
Oakview College observed that student government leaders on her campus use home hockey games to organize a variety of events geared towards student involvement, including raffles, give-aways, and other similar contests. Perhaps even more meaningful, she noted that a group of students recently organized the college’s first step team. “We don’t have any historically black fraternities or sororities, so they chose to perform at halftime of basketball games. Basketball provided them with an opportunity to perform.” Athletics thus functions as a means for getting students involved who might otherwise not be involved on campus.

Whether a result of tradition, smaller campus size or some other factor, college athletics has become engrained as an integral component of campus life at these private, Division III institutions. Collington’s athletic director eloquently encapsulated the role which his department plays on campus. “Our campus values incredibly the overall experience of students. That experience takes many different forms. Arts. Research. There are so many components of one’s experience in college. I think our president realized early in her tenure that athletics is another incredible piece of that experience.” These thoughts confirm the literature regarding Indiana University East where administrators perceived that potential applicants were dismissing the college due to the lack of an athletic program (Wright, 2010). Indeed, a faculty member in Oakview’s geology department conveyed similar feelings during a recent trip to visit potential colleges with his son. “Students want athletics. It’s part of the collegiate culture. It isn’t as large as at Texas, but it’s still there. Looking at colleges with my son, it is a different culture for colleges that don’t have athletics. It’s hard to articulate, but I wasn’t drawn to those schools. Parents want to make sure that when their kids are at college, their whole person is being taken care of.”
Expanding on the idea that college athletics play a critical role for private, Division III colleges, administrators also argued that athletics are an integral part of the campus community. A former student government president at Woods College observed that, “Woods is a fairly small and tight-knit campus. The absence of athletics would make a huge difference.” Similarly, the associate athletic director at Collington remarked, “Athletics provide a level of interest into the campus itself. Without athletics, campus would be a much duller place to be. It would be more of a workplace than a college learning environment.” Indeed, another administrator pointed out that athletics impacts nearly every student’s collegiate experience in some meaningful way. More specifically, at many colleges, a number of traditions and memorable moments in campus history revolve around athletics. “Participating in homecoming activities. Attending games against a rival school. These are the moments that students remember long after they graduate and leave campus.” A Woods admissions officer added, “Athletics are one of those classic collegiate things. Ivy on the buildings, the all-male a cappella group singing in the quad, and the homecoming football game. It gives a way to continue to build school pride, whether its 100,000 people in a stadium screaming or just you and 15 friends.” However, he also noted that while athletics is important, “it is not the be-all, end-all. [Applicants] want to find a place where they can be happy and be challenged, and if sports happen to play a role in that, then that’s better.” To be sure, classes would still be held and campuses would still function without sports, but athletics and associated activities breathe valuable life into these small, elite, Division III institutions.

A part from their ability to expose a college to prospective students, athletics can be used to generate increased publicity as well. Division I colleges and universities frequently take advantage of this technique, as noted in the above literature. However, administrators at private,
Division III colleges are quickly realizing the powerful advertising ability that is college athletics. While their jobs might be a bit harder as compared to those of their colleagues at the Division I level, athletics still provide numerous opportunities for appealing stories which can then translate into institutional publicity for these three elite institutions. As a senior faculty member at Oakview College noted,

Sports are another way for our college to be known. It’s very different than Division I and television, but stories go into the newspaper and onto the web every day. This is secondary to getting a faculty member quoted in the New York Times, but it is still very important.

Indeed, Division III athletic contests, especially ones featuring smaller, private institutions such as those in this study, are rarely televised. For instance, Woods College’s men’s hockey team last year enjoyed a successful season, spending much of it ranked in the top 25 nationally. Nevertheless, the team was never invited to play in a nationally televised, primetime game, primarily because those slots were allotted for big-time, Division I college basketball matchups. The team did get some national recognition when they were asked to play on ESPN2 at 1:00pm on a weekday. As a director of communications and marketing at Woods College noted, “Sports is one of the areas where we can get easy publicity. It would be so much harder for our office to get a two-minute spot on a national television station than if the hockey team did it through the NCAA tournament. We are in the mode of getting brand awareness nationally, and athletics can help with that.” Thus, while widespread media exposure is somewhat rare for private, Division III institutions, athletics remain a viable marketing option for attracting national attention to these small colleges.

Staff members in institutional marketing and communications are not the only administrators who have recognized the publicity power associated with college athletics, even at
As Woods College’s faculty representative to the athletic department quipped,

Our trustees definitely look at athletics as strategic. The trustees think athletics is our calling card. They want us to go play more games in Virginia and Washington so that kids will begin recognizing the Woods name. They want to get our name out so that we are more of a national school rather than a regional one.

Interestingly, despite their aspirations for national media attention due to athletics, the colleges in this study face difficulties in attracting a steady fan base to their home contests. As one alumnus observed, “It is quite laid back here. That’s not to say that our fans don’t care, but they don’t come out at 7am to stake out their tailgating spot. It’s more like, ‘Oh, the game started five minutes ago, let’s head over and see Mike play’.” A former student-athlete noted that people in the stands are usually there because of a personal connection to one of the student athletes. Similarly, a current lacrosse player at Collington remarked, “For specific games, we get big crowds. But for the average game, it is usually parents, roommates, and girlfriends. I am sure we all want to have more fans at games, but there are other things that are more important.”

Indeed, a dedicated fan base is almost a necessity in order to start garnering the increased media exposure which these colleges desire. Collington recently took a significant step by creating a position solely dedicated to raising money for the institution’s athletic program and, connectedly, increasing attendance at home games. In this way, opportunities for publicity may be harder to come by in Division III as compared to Division I, but these institutions can in fact use athletics to generate increased publicity if they are willing to commit the necessary resources.

At the end of the day, what drives Division III athletics are the people who play the sports. There is strong enough interest that the kids want to play, so that brings admissions into it. We want to be attractive to a kid who wants to play. We need those students who will be in student government. We need those who will be in theater. And another activity we offer is sports.
As this quote from a Woods College administrator reveals, small, private institutions often view Division III athletics as a recruitment tool. Athletics at these colleges are thus not the ultimate goal, but instead a strategy used to achieve the desired goal of increased student enrollment. An admissions officer at Oakview noted, “Oakview has great academics, and athletics is a bonus. People won’t come for athletics alone, but it enhances the educational experience.” Nevertheless, partly due to their popularity within American society, college athletics, even at elite, liberal arts, Division III institutions, can produce the valuable side effect of increased institutional publicity. As an institution, Collington has recently made several key moves which utilize athletics to enhance the college’s regional and national profile. A senior athletics staff member at Collington astutely observed that

the athletic department is the front porch of the institution. Every day, when you pick up the newspaper, how often do you flip to the science or history section? Every day, you can flip to the sports section. To say that athletics has no bearing on the institution as a whole is obviously false. I have yet to see EngineeringCenter like I see SportsCenter.

Division III athletics at these private institutions thus serves a number of functions. It provides opportunities for student involvement and physical activity. It has the power to create lasting student memories of their collegiate experiences. Perhaps most importantly, it also offers increased visibility which in turn helps these colleges accomplish several key institutional goals. As a distinguished professor of philosophy at Oakview College remarked, “Visibility in Division III is important for recruiting new students as well as keeping alumni interested in the institution, and athletics provides that visibility.”

Connections between Athletics, Alumni Relations, and Financial Donations

It has long been known that alumni typically harbor strong affinities for their alma maters, and athletics is one of the more common ways in which alumni can express these
feelings. However, the realization that these Division III colleges can actively use the connection between athletics and alumni appears to have developed only in the last ten to fifteen years. Indeed, at a Collington alumni event about fifteen years ago, a prominent alumnus asked how the college’s football team was performing that year, and the alumni staff did not have an immediate answer for him. “This person did not play football, but he was an informed and interested alumnus who wanted to know what was happening everywhere on campus. We realized we needed to figure it out.” In response, Collington’s office of alumni relations created a new position designed solely to work with former students who were involved with athletics or various social groups during their time on campus. This scenario is similar at the other schools in this study, as administrators at all three colleges have realized the power of athletics not only for alumni communications, but for fundraising as well. Although such strategies may seem commonplace at Division I institutions, it is important to remember that the popularity of athletics at the three Division III institutions in this study has grown noticeably only in the past couple decades.

In many ways, athletics provides relatively easy ways for alumni to stay connected with their alma maters while also fostering a sense of school pride. An admissions officer at Oakview College remarked that hockey games are events for the entire campus community, including not only current students and faculty, but local (and sometimes non-local) alumni as well. In fact, he feels that these games have become so important that Oakview’s institutional identity is tied to athletics in some fashion. In this way, athletics plays yet another vital role for these small, private, Division III institutions. As the athletic director at Collington noted,

Athletics is of course another way to develop students, but it is also unifying. Some of our biggest events as a department are also campus unification events. Homecoming has a football game. Family weekend has hockey and football. All of these events bring people back to campus.
Furthermore, due to the nature of traveling to other colleges and cities for competition, athletics provides dozens of opportunities each year for alumni to interact with their alma maters without the need to travel back to the campus itself. The director of alumni relations at Woods College pointed out that her office uses athletic events as opportunities to connect with alumni who may no longer live nearby. “Whenever the crew team travels to Boston, there are always alumni there with Woods shirts yelling ‘Go Woods!’ Alumni in other cities often have athletic affinities, and it provides chances for us to connect with them.” A staff member in Woods’ office of marketing and communications commented,

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\text{We don’t always know where alumni formed their relationship with the college. It might have been through their dorms, on study abroad, on the field, or in the stands. We want to find whatever that strongest connection is, and then we use that to remind alumni of their Woods experience.}
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Thus, since upwards of a third of the student body at private, Division III colleges participate in varsity athletics, there is a strong likelihood that athletics will serve as a powerful connection back to campus once these students become alumni. Not surprisingly, administrators at Woods noted that athletic alumni reunions for all sports are always well attended.

As an athlete, you develop an affinity for your school when you put those colors on and compete against peer schools in hostile environments. You might also be a member of a Greek organization or another group, but during the season, you are an athlete. Athletics creates a strong bond to the institution, and this bond provides us with an opportunity to interact with our alumni.

In addition to the enhanced bond between alumni and the institution, college athletics also provides various opportunities for staff members to communicate and establish relationships with alumni and other key stakeholders. As an Oakview College faculty member who has worked with the campus’ athletic department for many years pointed out, “Communications emails go out to regional areas based on where Oakview’s teams are traveling. These contests
provide the chance for us to connect with our alumni in areas which may be many miles away from campus.” The newly hired athletic development officer at Collington similarly noted that the athletic department has more ways to reach out to alumni than probably any other office on campus.

Alumni have good memories, and it is about finding ways to bring them back into the fold. When you have transitions in leadership, a lot of alumni and former student athletes tend to fall by the wayside. Competitions, both home and away, allow us to reestablish those relationships.

Aside from the contests themselves, athletics also provides institutions with various opportunities to host team reunions as well as anniversaries of league championships or other notable accomplishments. A staff member in Collington’s office of alumni relations confirmed that the institution fully utilizes the athletic department’s ability to draw alumni back to campus. “We did several anniversary events recently, and they were phenomenal. Alumni and former student athletes came out of the woodwork for those.” The events were so successful that he went on to add that he asked each of the coaches to find something in their team’s history that could be celebrated. “We did a program celebrating 30 years of women’s basketball on campus. It was something to celebrate. We had a couple of undefeated football or basketball teams that went to championships. We are celebrating that stuff as it gets alumni back to campus.”

In today’s fast-paced society where students, alumni, and others check social media outlets multiple times daily, the most important story or event is quite often the most recent. Indeed, all three colleges in this study have established Facebook pages and Twitter accounts solely devoted to promoting their athletic departments. A former student government president and recent alumnus of Woods College recalled that athletics served as a tool for keeping the institution on the “front burner” of social media sites and other news outlets. A senior marketing
and communications administrator at Woods confirmed that athletic teams provide excellent publicity opportunities for the institution, particularly when the teams are successful.

This past year, our hockey program did really well. Our office used that to reach out to alumni and tell them when the games were going to be on television. We promoted that and had talking points ready for the press. This is the first year that Woods landed in the national spotlight. It was a great buzz generator, and we were able to capitalize on that from the standpoint of marketing the college.

As a result of the college’s athletic success and her office’s efforts to communicate with alumni and other stakeholders, Woods is looking into offering live video streaming of athletic contests.

Woods has a strong alumni family that is tied in to athletics. We have received a number of calls from alumni complaining that Woods’ scores are not reported in the local papers where they live. We’ve been using electronic newsletters and email blasts, and now our alumni can log in and watch the games live.

Interestingly enough, the recent athletic success and increased demands from alumni for media coverage has led to more local and even regional coverage for Woods’ athletic department.

The sports page is in the newspaper every day. Whether you played or not, you can open up the paper and see scores. Even the New York Times can have an educational section, but that is not published every day. It’s getting to where our alums can open the paper on a daily basis and see that we are winning games against some pretty good academic schools. It makes them pretty proud.

In many ways, college athletics provide administrators with opportunities for “friendraising,” or simply establishing better connections with alumni and other key stakeholders. However, athletics can often lead to fundraising as well, a trend which the colleges in this study have embraced enthusiastically in recent years. Athletic costs at the Division I level are typically substantially more than those in Division III, but popular Division I programs also have more revenue sources as compared to the private colleges in this study. Instead, the Division III programs in this study must work harder to secure funding for their athletic teams.
In fact, all three colleges rely heavily on the student athletes themselves to raise money, a phenomenon which is all but unknown in Division I. Furthermore, Collington just recently hired a development officer for its athletic department within the past several months, while the other two institutions in this study have not yet created similar positions. Indeed, CTI’s new development officer had extensive experience fundraising at the Division I level, and he has already noticed significant differences in his new role.

In Division I, you have a product to sell and a revenue to generate from that product. The fan base is huge, and many schools have waiting lists to get seats. When it comes to Division III sports, you don’t have that. A lot of Division III sports are free, so there is no revenue generated. You have a commodity in Division I, but in Division III, there is no commodity. Instead, you are trying to sell a passion.

Thus, the programs in this study have realized the importance of leveraging their athletic programs to raise money, but they appear to still be struggling with how to go about creating these fundraising opportunities.

Although Woods College has not yet created a development officer dedicated solely to athletics, several staff members in various offices noted that they work closely together to support certain initiatives. For instance, administrators from alumni relations, athletics, and institutional development all collaborated on a recent goal of endowing the college’s women’s lacrosse program. Furthermore, unlike their Division I counterparts, the Division III programs in this study can benefit greatly from a small amount of money. Indeed, a senior development officer at Woods likened Division III sports programs at elite institutions to high school teams in that a donation of just a few thousand dollars can make a substantial difference. While relationships with alumni are certainly important for fundraising, a particular interesting and quite important source of funds for teams are parents and families of the student athletes themselves. As a faculty member at Oakview observed,
Half of the students here are not on financial aid, which means their families have resources. They want their kids to have the best possible experience. This is different from Division I where all kids are on scholarships and sports budgets are major. The difference dollars at Division III often come from these affluent families. It tends not to be big money, but it makes a huge difference in the lives of our student athletes.

Athletic budgets at these private, Division III colleges are primarily allocated from each institution’s general budget, and these funds cover yearly operating expenses along with some facility improvements. However, administrators have identified a unique source for additional funds, and the money generated in this way is immediately noticeable by the individual teams involved.

Another somewhat unique fundraising strategy used at these Division III institutions is simply the student athletes themselves. More specifically, the student athletes participate in a variety of fundraising efforts in order to fund spring training trips and other perks. Common events include selling t-shirts or pies at football or hockey games or organizing phone-a-thons to reach out to former student athletes and other key alumni. An associate athletic director at Collington commented,

Students don’t come in here with their hands out looking for sneakers if they are on the basketball team. They understand that with Division III comes the expectation that you have to fundraise and do other things outside of just showing up to play basketball. I would say that, when done right, it helps the students more than just financially as it can build teamwork and show the importance of money. It’s part of the deal of playing at this level, and most people understand.

To be fair, some of these fundraising efforts go towards funding spring training trips to warmer climates, such as Florida or even the Bahamas. Woods’ athletic director pointed out that the basic needs for his teams are covered in the yearly budget, and student athlete fundraisers are used for voluntary trips or additional team clothing, such as travel outfits. As an administrator in Woods’ alumni development office commented, “The dollars do help subsidize budgets that
have not grown in recent years. Division I programs might be able to raise money a bit easier, but if our hockey team or football team started raising hundreds of thousands of dollars, then the institution would have a problem with that. That is not what we are about here.”

Although such fundraising efforts appear to be commonplace at all three colleges in this study, the student athletes themselves were certainly not too keen on the idea. A former student government president at Woods noted that student athlete fundraisers appear to becoming more commonplace around campus. “If the college wants to use these kids to help market itself through athletics, then they should not be expected to also raise money for their program. Kids are being compelled to wash cars when they should be doing other things like academics.”

Similarly, a former student athlete at Woods remarked that she wished she did not have to put as much time into fundraising as she did. “It often occurred out of season, which made it difficult to play other sports or be involved in other campus activities. I wish that some of it would be taken off the athletes’ shoulders, but we should not be entirely off the hook as it is a valuable experience.”

Although not overtly stated, CIT’s decision to create a position focused entirely on development for athletics may signal the winds of change in how athletic fundraising is conducted for elite, liberal arts institutions at the Division III level. While these student athlete fundraisers might not be wholeheartedly embraced by the athletes themselves, they are valuable in several strategic ways. Most notably, phone-a-thons and other efforts which reach out to alumni can help preserve or more importantly reestablish connections with alumni. As a development officer at Woods College observed,

This type of fundraising may be nice way to engage a former player who is not currently engaged with the institution. We actually might look at it as a strategy. We might have a former teammate or a current student-athlete call
Additionally, it appears that participating in such fundraisers while in school makes former student athletes more willing to donate once they graduate. Interestingly, CIT has found that an exceedingly high percentage of students who participated in athletic phone-a-thons have given money back to their teams after graduation. Indeed, Collington’s director of alumni affairs for athletics noted that the swimming and diving team has enjoyed 100% participation since they began using phone-a-thons. “They get the importance of it. They remember making those phone calls. We’ve created a culture of philanthropy with that program, and it works great.” This confirms the findings by Holmes, Meditz, and Sommers (2008) which asserted that Division III student athletes are more willing to donate back to the institution following graduation versus non-student athlete alumni. In the end, the money raised by the student athletes is certainly beneficial, but perhaps more meaningful is the permanent relationship that these fundraisers forge between the student athletes and their respective institutions.

Although all three colleges in this study employed the strategy of using student athletes to help raise funds, each institution differed significantly in its approach to corporate fundraising. Oakview College, which coincidentally had the lowest expenditures per student athlete of the three colleges for the 2009 academic year, has shown little interest in corporate sponsorships for its athletic program. As a senior athletic administrator at Oakview pointed out,

We’re budgeted through the main institutional budget. We don’t charge for any events, and we don’t have a lot of corporate sponsors. Our development office works with teams to help them raise money for team budgets, but the bulk of our budget comes from the college budget.

Unlike Oakview, Woods College has chosen to use some corporate sponsorships, but the overall amount of money generated from this source is somewhat minimal. Indeed, Woods’ athletic
director confirmed that his department does have a corporate sponsorship program, but it only brings in about fifty to sixty thousand dollars per year. “It’s significant money as it helps our teams, but it is far from the multi-million dollar stadium naming rights that you see at some Division I programs.” He added that the majority of his yearly budget comes through allocations from the president’s office. “We take about 2% of the overall college budget. I think that is fair. It’s not too taxing, and it is touching 600 varsity student athletes as well as the entire campus through intramurals and the fitness center.” Lastly, Collington has recently taken a more proactive stance towards fundraising and athletic development. As noted above, the institution has created a position which is solely focused on raising money for its athletic department. The position reports to the director of institutional development with a dotted line to the athletic director. Additionally, CIT has chosen to pursue corporate sponsorships as a source of significant money for the department. An associate athletic director commented,

We do a fair amount of corporate sponsorship. We have always done it, but there hasn’t been a big focus on it until recently. It took people a while to warm up to it because they saw it as selling out. But companies are willing to give us a sign to hang, and by the way they are also willing to give us cash to hang it. How do you say no to that?

Interestingly, Collington’s athletics website is the only one of the three which features several prominent ads from corporate sponsors. To be sure, all three colleges in this study still rely primarily on allocations from the general institutional budget, however CIT is aggressively pursuing corporate and alumni donations. Thus, while it is still too early to judge the success of this strategy, it appears that the future of Division III athletics at private, liberal arts institutions may soon become one step closer to their Division I counterparts.
As noted above, the possibility of reaching out to alumni to generate funds for athletics is a relatively new phenomenon for the three institutions in this study. Collington’s new athletics development officer reflected on the pioneering of this new trend at the Division III level.

Because of the economic climate of the country, there are lots of people out there who are not sinking all of their money into investments. So when Uncle Sam comes around, they are looking for ways to spend that money. That is where me, my A.D, and my president try to position ourselves to encourage those people to bring their money here.

However, as evidenced by the creation of an entire position dedicated to athletics fundraising, donations and sponsorships do not come to these private, Division III colleges without significant commitment from staff as well as senior leadership at the institution. A group of particularly important figures in this equation are the head coaches themselves. One alumnus with knowledge of Woods’ athletic program praised the men’s lacrosse coach for his ability to network and maintain relationships with his former students. In addition to leveraging these connections to raise money for his program, he also has been able to secure a number of internships and summer jobs for his current students. Similarly, a recent track and soccer alumna added that the student athletes themselves play a key role in securing corporate sponsorships and alumni donations. “It is difficult for the department to go out and seek donations when the teams are not also volunteering and giving back to the community in some way. We often visited local elementary schools to help the kids and talk about the value of teamwork.” Thus, while fundraising for the colleges in this study has truly required a department-wide and institution-wide commitment, the money raised has made an immediate and noticeable impact on the collegiate experiences of the student athletes.

One potential pitfall which comes with increased donations from alumni, corporations, and other similar sources is a disparity among teams. As one Oakview College administrator
observed, “[Donations] on some level create inequities for the institution. For example, there are donors for the football team and donors for the hockey team, but there aren’t any donors for the softball team. That can create ill will among teams, but our athletic department does a good job addressing that.” Interestingly, a faculty member at Woods described how her institution attempted to move away from booster clubs for individual sports.

[The clubs] so overwhelmingly favor male sports, and it is much harder to keep things equitable if you have booster clubs which focus solely on one sport instead of the whole department. It is an education process to try and persuade alumni that when they give money, it is not just for the boys.

In the end, Woods decided to keep its athletics booster clubs, which means that the athletics department has had to be cautious that it is supporting all of its sports equally. Similarly, an Oakview athletic administrator noted that increased alumni donations can lead to questions from members of the campus community who wonder why the institution is spending significant dollars upgrading the football turf. “What they don’t realize is that someone else gave that money. So when donations increase, you have to educate the campus or people will think you are taking academic dollars away.” Thus, one of the unforeseen side effects which these private, Division III institutions have faced as a result of increased athletics donations is the need for campus education regarding where the money is coming from and how it is being spent.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

Starting as early as the 1850’s, colleges have been competing athletically on fields and courts across America. In the 1850’s, there were no formal athletic scholarships, although rumors did abound that certain colleges hired professional athletes to help their teams win. In the 1850’s, college athletics were certainly socially popular, but they did not reach the frenzied level of popularity until the television was invented many decades later. In the 1850’s, there were no conferences or even an NCAA, although there was a surprising amount of political infighting over the creation of such alliances between colleges. In the past century and a half, college athletics have changed in many ways. Institutions now use their athletic programs as a strategic tool for increased publicity, prestige, alumni relations and financial donations. Indeed, a valid argument can be made that athletics impacts every other department and office on a modern campus. This study has certainly shown this to be true for a subset of private, Division III institutions. College athletics at this level have become increasingly valuable in recent years, and as a result, there are several theoretical as well as practical implications which institutional administrators should consider when evaluating their athletic programs. As noted previously, the research questions which guided this study and shaped these implications are:

(1) What factors drive institutional investment into athletics at private, Division III colleges and universities?

(2) What does the amount of money spent per student athlete reveal about the way a college views its athletic program?
(3) How do theories of neoinstitutionalism and principal-agency apply to athletics at private, Division III colleges and universities?

**Driving Factors**

In many ways, the factors which drive institutional investment into private, Division III athletic programs are the same factors seen at large, Division I colleges and universities. However, for the three institutions in this study, each of the factors is just slightly different than what one might expect. For instance, athletics provides a rather tangible way for college administrators to seek the elusive goal of increased prestige. For Division I institutions whose athletic teams regularly appear on television, prestige comes from the ability to field superior teams. However, the schools in this study appear to seek prestige not so much from athletic prowess as from the other institutions against which they compete. Oakview College is a perfect example of this phenomenon as this institution recently moved to a new athletic conference whose member institutions are widely recognized for their academic excellence. Similarly, Collington and Woods administrators are quick to point out that their ice hockey teams compete in the same league as several of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the country. Administrators at these private, Division III colleges are thus keenly aware of the perceived academic quality of the other institutions in their athletic conferences. In this way, the quest for prestige certainly drives athletics at this level, but in a somewhat unexpected manner.

Publicity is another key motivating factor behind athletics at all levels of competition. For Division I institutions, publicity comes from televised games and articles published through regional and national media outlets. Similarly, the colleges in this study also strategically use athletics as a publicity tool, but the publicity at this level comes from providing potential students with opportunities to compete at the collegiate level. Admissions officers at each of the
three institutions spoke about the value of athletics as a tool to recruit potential students to their respective campuses. To be sure, the more popular sports at these colleges, namely football and men’s ice hockey, do produce some regional publicity, but the institutions appear to value athletics more as a means for advertising a holistic collegiate experience to potential applicants.

As large, Division I colleges realized years ago, athletics provides a convenient way to both reach out to alumni as well as garner increased donations from alumni and other key members of the institutional family. The schools in this study also use athletics in a similar manner, but this trend appears to be relatively new within approximately the last decade. Indeed, Collington’s newly completed state-of-the-art football stadium now features a luxury suite, the first of its kind among the colleges in this study. As administrators at each of the three institutions noted, the donations received through athletics are still relatively small, but these dollars go a long way for programs which have never enjoyed this additional monetary support.

Another striking way in which athletic donations at the private, Division III level differs from that at the Division I level is the use of current student-athletes as fundraisers. It is not uncommon for teams at these colleges to host car washes or sell t-shirts at big campus events in order to raise money for team activities. While these donations are often used for superfluous activities, such as spring break training trips to Florida or the Bahamas, it is nevertheless worth noting this key difference in fundraising at private, Division III institutions. Based on new developments at Collington, including the construction of a luxury suite as well the creation of a new athletics development officer, it appears that colleges at this level are beginning to focus more on the fundraising opportunities provided by their athletic programs.

Without a doubt, the most significant theme among the colleges in this study is the importance of maintaining academic excellence. Each of the institutions desired athletic success,
but it was quite clear that such accomplishments would never come at the cost of compromising the colleges’ academic reputations. Indeed, every student, staff, faculty member and alumnus interviewed as part of this study stressed the importance of student athletes fitting into the academic fabric of campus. Furthermore, it appears that student athletes at these private, Division III colleges do not appear to be self-segregating themselves by enrolling in easier courses. This differs from Murray Sperber’s (2000) hypothesis in Beer and Circus as well as the 2008 USA Today study which both suggested that Division I student athletes major in eligibility (Steeg, Upton, Bohn, and Berkowitz, 2008). Additionally, many of the student athletes at the institutions in this study seem to play an active role in class discussions and group projects, perhaps as a result of their natural leadership abilities developed in part through participation in team sports. The “dumb jock” stereotype still lurks in the shadows at these colleges, but the faculty members interviewed as part of this study expressed high regard for the academic abilities of the student athletes in their classes. This respect undoubtedly stems from the fact that these colleges have high admissions standards for all students, including student athletes. In the end, these private, Division III institutions are using athletics to produce many of the same outcomes as their Division I counterparts, but the manner in which these institutional goals are being accomplished is quite different. Athletics play a key role at these colleges, but only to the extent that they offer a more complete and well-rounded campus environment.

**Spending per Student Athlete**

The three institutions selected for this study were initially identified through the use of The Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act, which provides detailed records of athletic expenses and participation. Compared to other schools in their conference, Collington featured a relatively high ratio of expenses per student athlete while Oakview College’s expenses per athlete were
relatively low. Woods College’s expenses per athlete fell approximately in between those of the other two institutions. One of the research questions guiding this study focused on whether a college’s expenditures per student athlete revealed any clues as to that institution’s strategic use of its athletic program. Interestingly, despite the rather significant disparity in the ratios of athletic expenses per student athlete, no major differences surfaced regarding each college’s strategic use of its athletic program. Indeed, all three of the institutions in the study pursued similar goals related to their athletic departments. Oakview College featured the lowest ratio of the three, yet this could be explained by the simple fact that Oakview does not compete at the Division I level in any sport while Collington and Woods both field Division I men’s and women’s hockey teams. As noted in the findings, the expenses related to competition at the Division I level are noticeably higher than that of Division III, thus partially explaining the difference in expenditures per student athlete. It is arguable that Collington and Woods enjoy greater institutional exposure as a result of their two Division I sports, but other factors, including location and total enrollment among others, certainly affect the publicity afforded to these two colleges. In the end, it is clear that each of the three colleges desires similar outcomes from their athletic programs, and each appears to be successfully using its athletic department to aid other institutional goals.

**Theoretical Implications**

As described in Chapter 2, one objective of this study was to assess whether neoinstitutional or principal-agency theories provide any clarity into how college athletics fits within the institutional structure of private, Division III colleges. As applied to higher education, neoinstitutionalism focuses on why colleges and universities gradually become increasingly similar over time despite their unique histories and campus cultures. DiMaggio and Powell
(1983), both of whom are preeminent scholars in the field of organizational behavior, postulate that three processes (coercive, mimetic, and normative) each contribute to the phenomenon of institutional isomorphism. As noted above, examples of each of these three processes are easily identifiable within Division I athletic programs. However, the question remains whether DiMaggio and Powell’s theories are also valid for athletic programs at private, Division III colleges. Alternatively, principal-agent theorists study the relationship and interactions which occur when one party employs another party to accomplish a certain objective. Similar to neoinstitutionalism, examples of principal-agent relationships are plentiful within higher education, and this study examined whether principal-agency is a valid tool for understanding the relationships surrounding Division III athletic programs at private, elite colleges and universities.

**Neoinstitutionalism**

In 1984, John Van Maanen authored an article which examined the socialization process which occurs when new individuals join a pre-existing group. He hypothesized that new entrants either bring unique skills and knowledge which shift the group’s culture or more simply alter their own individual approach in order to fit within the framework of the existing group’s culture. When the current study is viewed through Van Maanen’s lens, several examples arise as to how these private, Division III colleges changed their behaviors in response to the expected cultural norms of the group. For instance, both Woods College and Collington host Division I men’s and women’s ice hockey programs. As expected, the shift from Division III to Division I competition brought a number of changes to how these teams prepare for games as well as compete. In order to be accepted for Division I competition, these colleges had to meet minimum NCAA standards, including size and quality of their ice hockey facilities. There were also several non-required changes which occurred as a result of joining a new organizational
culture. Most notably, the travel plans for ice hockey teams at both colleges changed a bit once they began competing at the Division I level. Woods’ athletic director commented, “If our swim team or field hockey team (both Division III) is playing an away game, they leave on Friday afternoon to get there. If hockey is playing an away game, they leave on Thursday. That is part of what every other institution is doing at that level.”

Interestingly enough, the predominant examples of Van Maanen’s theories within this study were related to competing at the Division I level. While administrators at each of the three colleges were keenly aware of decisions being made at their peer institutions, there did not seem to be as much pressure to change the Division III elements of their athletic programs. If anything, Van Maanen’s framework may be more applicable to the academic side as these colleges seemed more concerned about maintaining their academic reputation rather than changing their athletic program to fit within the preexisting Division III culture. As noted previously, the importance of academics was a notable theme which recurred throughout all of the interviews. This ubiquitous belief in academics at these three colleges could itself serve as an isomorphic pressure as none of the institutions showed any inclination of venturing away from the scholastic reputation upon which these institutions are built.

In regards to DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) three processes which contribute to institutional isomorphism, it appears that mimetic and normative pressures exist at these private, Division III institutions, while coercive pressures seem to be somewhat minimal. Mimetic behaviors occur when goals are ambiguous, a scenario which is applicable to all levels of college athletics. Each of these institutions has made significant improvements to their athletic facilities within the last five years, and administrators at each hoped that the quality of their facilities would help attract prospective students to their college. The fact that these improvements
occurred as close together as they did speaks to not only the presence, but also the power of mimetic processes at these institutions. Similar to their Division I colleagues, private, Division III institutions also face normative pressures as a result of the NCAA’s oversight of all collegiate athletic programs regardless of level. The NCAA’s regulations related to Division III athletics are certainly different than those for Division I, but guidelines and rules still exist, thus revealing the presence of normative processes. In many ways, the three institutions in this study actually exceed the NCAA minimums for participation in Division III athletics. For instance, Oakview College athletic administrators noted that their athletic practices do not begin before 4:00pm and many sports have shorter competition seasons than the maximums allowed by NCAA standards. Nevertheless, the mere existence of NCAA bylaws and standards create an organizational environment that is characterized by normative pressures.

Unlike the mimetic and normative processes, DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) concept of coercive pressures do not appear to play a significant role within the organizational culture of private, Division III athletic programs. At the Division I level, one could argue that the lowering of academic standards for student-athletes arises due to coercive pressures from other organizations which are willing to accept the student athlete in question. Furthermore, the social expectations to field successful college athletic teams are another form of coercive pressure which exists within Division I. Interestingly, neither of these pressures existed for the institutions in this study. In fact, the three colleges painstakingly ensured that their academic requirements were applied uniformly to all prospective students regardless of athletic ability. In terms of expectations to produce winning teams, athletic administrators at each institution confirmed that each individual coach’s ability to be a leader on campus and be a good mentor for student athletes is far more important than producing a winning team. Indeed, one of Woods
College’s coaches has won only 12 out of the last 135 games, yet the college offered the coach a contract extension recently. The private, Division III institutions in this study thus displayed a comfort and even willingness to ignore the coercive pressures which are common at other levels of collegiate athletics. When taken together, DiMaggio and Powell’s organizational pressures reveal that academic and institutional pride are more important than athletic success at these three private, Division III colleges. To be sure, athletic success is still important, but administrators at this level display a determination not to compromise other core institutional values for the sake of their institution’s athletic program.

**Principal-Agent Theory**

The concept of principal-agency is useful in describing relationships where one party (a principal) employs another party (an agent) to act on its behalf. As noted in Chapter 2, a somewhat symbiotic relationship is created in that each party needs the other in order to be successful. However, this theory is often marked by distrust between the two parties, thus giving rise to the criticism that principal-agent theory relies too heavily on a negative attitude towards human behavior. Although principal-agency does provide a unique and arguably valid lens for viewing big-time, Division I athletic programs, this theory fails to properly describe the athletic programs at the private, Division III colleges in this study. Most notably, principal-agent theory relies on two key assumptions, and only one of these is valid for the institutions in this study. More specifically, principal-agency supposes that the two parties have differing goals and are pursuing differing objectives. As described above, athletic and institutional administrators appear to share similar goals of maintaining their college’s academic excellence while making decisions which are in the best interest of the entire institution as opposed to their individual departments. For instance, Woods’ athletic director commented, “I am always cognizant of the
big picture. I am an alumnus of Woods, and I care about Woods. I don’t try to push and battle and say that we need an equipment person more than we need this person in multicultural affairs. I am aware of the big picture.” This attitude, which can also be found at the other institutions in this study, undermines the validity of principal-agent theory as it relates to athletics at private, Division III colleges. Thus, the colleges in this study seem to be marked more by true collegiality rather than the extreme self-interest which characterizes principal-agency.

**Practical Implications**

This study reveals several practical findings for administrators and others interested in Division III athletics at private colleges. Most notably, it is important to recognize that Division III athletic programs at private institutions are completely different than Division I athletic programs at large colleges and universities. While both forms appear similar in that they center on the administration of college athletics, one should be careful not to apply lessons and trends from Division I institutions to Division III colleges. Furthermore, elite, liberal arts colleges which field primarily Division III teams should use caution when elevating one or more of their teams to the Division I level. As noted above, the requirements to compete in Division I as well as the norms associated with competition at this level will most certainly lead to higher overhead expenses for the college. As evidenced by two of the institutions in this study, colleges can successfully charge for admission to Division I games, but administrators should be aware of the increased expenses and income associated with moving to Division I competition. A former student body president at Woods College noted that his institution’s Division I ice hockey team attracts a lot of attention within the community, but he also cautioned that this interest can also quickly overshadow the college’s other sports which compete at the Division III level. Elevating one or two sports to the Division I level can greatly enhance a college’s exposure, but
administrators need to be cognizant of unintended consequences such as the perception of inequality which will likely arise among student athletes as well as members of the campus community.

Regardless of the institution or department, one of the most critical elements for success is ensuring that the personnel are right for the position. This strategy is of utmost importance for private, Division III athletic programs where athletic directors, coaches, and other key administrators need to understand both the roles which athletics play as well as the importance of academics at these institutions. One of the most obvious differences between coaches at the Division III level versus those at the Division I level is the lack of athletic scholarships. As an associate athletic director at Collington observed,

In Division I, you have scholarships and it is up to the coaches to say what financial commitment they want to make to a student athlete regardless of what other schools the student is looking at. In Division III, that decision is taken out of the coaches’ hands as it is made entirely by [the] financial aid [department].

One of the difficulties which coaches at private, Division III colleges face is the simple fact that the pool of student athletes who also have the necessary academic credentials is quite small. As noted above, Collington is attempting to broaden this pool in hopes that their new state-of-the-art facilities will attract some students who otherwise might have attended Division I institutions. However, this strategy is obviously expensive and requires significant institutional investment. For private, Division III colleges, coaches who can teach and mentor their student athletes are far more valuable than coaches who can produce winning teams. Closely related to hiring the right type of coach is the need for athletic directors who understand the campus culture which exists at these private institutions. Faculty and staff at all three institutions reflected that previous athletic directors on their campuses had done more damage than good simply because
they did not understand the role that athletics plays for this subset of colleges. The current
athletic director at Woods College recalled how he went about changing the culture of athletics
when he first arrived on campus.

I met individually with each of our coaches and asked them what their goals
were. Overwhelmingly what came back to me was winning a league or
national championship. I told them that those are great ambitions, but then I
told them what my priorities and our priorities are. It’s going to be academic
success. It’s going to be compliance. It’s going to be students acting as great
citizens on this campus.

Thus, athletic success at these private, Division III colleges is not always evaluated by wins or
losses. Instead, success is measured by the ability to create a culture which focuses on the non-
athletic achievements of the individual student athletes. Victories and championships are
definitely valued, but it is clear that the role of athletics at this level is much larger than simply
winning a game or a championship.

Despite the rather obvious and unique differences which come with athletic competition
at private, Division III colleges, the athletic departments at each of the three colleges in this
study have all become more business-oriented in recent years. One of the most noticeable clues
to this transformation is the variety of athletic merchandise now available for purchase in the
campus bookstores. A faculty member at Collington mentioned that not only does the athletic
website now feature products for every sport, but the athletic department has recently approved a
standard logo for all apparel. While such changes were made many years ago at large, Division I
institutions, they have just recently occurred at private, Division III colleges. Indeed, a staff
member at Oakview College noted that the new athletic director seems to have created a more
professional department. “There seems to be an athletic identity now, whether it is uniforms,
colors, or logos. Before, I don’t think there was much cohesion between sports and coaches. We
didn’t even have a standard color until then. No one thought it was strange until we sat down
and talked about it.” She laughingly added that a former men’s basketball coach made his team uniforms powder blue for one season because he supposedly loved the University of North Carolina. Whether such changes developed independently or trickled down from the Division I level remains unclear. However, what is clear is the fact that athletic administrators at private, Division III colleges now embrace the value of consistent departmental branding. In many ways, athletics departments at these colleges still champion the goals of academic excellence and good citizenship which have been the hallmarks of these programs for over 150 years. However, in other ways, these athletic departments are also becoming increasingly similar to their counterparts at larger colleges and universities.

This discussion of the driving factors behind Division III athletics at private, liberal arts institutions would be entirely remiss to ignore the impact which the student athletes themselves have on competition at this level. Each of the current and former student athletes who participated in this study stressed that the college’s academic reputation was the deciding factor in why they chose to attend their respective institutions. However, each of the students showed an incredible amount of passion and devotion to their sport. Athletic achievements are important to this group of students, but academic success is their primary focus. As a staff member at Woods College pointed out, “When looking at what drives athletics at a place like Woods, it is the kids. They have the interest, but also the realization that Division I requires a lot of sacrifices. They wonder where the stress and sacrifices can take them professionally, so some realize that they might be better served going to a Division III school with a strong academic program.” One of the current softball players at Collington echoed this sentiment by noting that the lack of professional softball options led her to realize that she should attend a school that allowed her to follow her academic passions while also playing the game that she loves. In this
way, these private, Division III colleges have created a unique niche for those students who want to compete at the collegiate level yet still earn a degree from a highly recognized institution.

**Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

Although the findings in this study are valuable to several populations, including most notably administrators at institutions which are considering adding a Division III athletics program, it is important to recognize that several facets of this study limit its generalizability to other colleges. Primarily, this study employed a qualitative methodology, which by its very nature limits the generalizability of the findings. In keeping with a qualitative approach, the researcher endeavored to include direct quotations whenever possible so as to allow readers to determine whether this study's findings can apply to their own institutions. Furthermore, the three institutions in this study were all private, elite, liberal arts colleges located in the same general area of the country, and any attempt to extrapolate these findings to other institutional types should be done with great caution. Even within the realm of Division III athletics, there are numerous types of colleges and universities, and readers should remember that these findings were determined solely from private institutions which place great emphasis on academic excellence. Finally, the data for this study, including the amount each college spent per student athlete, focused on a one-year period. As such, the current campus climates and athletic construction debts most certainly affected the data.

For those interested in the impact of Division III athletics on the world of higher education, this study provides a number of opportunities for further research. The most obvious extension would be to repeat this study at other Division III institutions around the country, including one or more of the nearly one hundred public colleges and universities which compete at this level. Additionally, the data and findings in this study would provide a starting point for a
large-scale quantitative project focused on the role of Division III athletics. While the Division I realm has been the target of much scholarly research, Division II also remains largely untouched. It would be interesting to compare the findings in this study to those from a similar study which focuses on private, academically elite institutions which compete at the Division II level.

Finally, one of the more intriguing topics which arose from this study is the way in which Division I sports function within an otherwise Division III institution. NCAA bylaws allow Division III institutions to compete at the Division I level in a maximum of two sports. A study focusing on how these institutions navigate competition at these two very different levels would certainly yield fascinating results.
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APPENDIX A
General Interview Guide

What is your current relationship with the athletic department at ______ <insert appropriate college name>? How long have you been in this role?

How does the athletic program impact your current role on campus?

In your experiences at _____ <insert college name>, have you seen a change in how the institution views its athletic program?

What do you feel is the role of college athletics within today’s market for higher education?

Has your institution used athletics to reach out to alumni or other targeted populations? If so, how?

As you know, higher education has met intense criticism in recent years regarding how money is spent and the total cost of programs. How has the current budget climate impacted your institution’s decisions related to athletics?

As you may know, Division III colleges cannot issue athletic scholarships. Do you feel that this affects <insert college name>’s ability to build a successful athletic department?

Do you feel that <insert college name>’s athletic program affects other aspects of the institution as a whole? If so, in what areas and how?

In your opinion, do you feel that certain factors or structures are in place which prevent <insert college name> from fully developing its athletic program? Similarly, are there structures which enable the athletic program to excel at its mission and goals?

[For Collington and Woods] As you may know, <insert college name>’s hockey teams compete at the Division I level whereas the rest of the teams compete at the Division III level. Do you feel that there is a disparity in how the institution views hockey compared to other sports?

[For Oakview] As you may know, Oakview competes at the Division III level in all sports. To your knowledge, has Oakview ever considered competing at Division I in any sport?