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Leveling the Playing Field: Examining the Perceptions of Social Justice and Activism Among DIII College Athletes

Raymond Ni '24
Hamilton College

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Student: Raymond Ni '24
Advisor: Chenyu Wang
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INTRODUCTION

Historically, college campuses have stood as hotbeds for activism and agents of social change. From pivotal moments such as the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War protests, or the women's liberation movement, college communities have often been at the vanguard of various social and political causes. Being a college student, in many instances, is associated with having a vested interest in social activism. However, while college activism has been extensively studied, the intersection of college activism and college athletics remains a relatively unexplored territory.

When examining the relationship between social activism and athletics, much of the existing research focuses on professional sports or Division I (DI) schools, while Division III (DIII) athletics often remain overlooked. Although DIII schools constitute the highest concentration of institutions within the National Collegiate Athletic Association or the NCAA (NCSA Sports 2023), they currently lack the same level of scholarly attention as their DI counterparts. This research deficit presents a valuable opportunity to explore and understand the unique dynamics of social activism within the context of DIII athletics.

While the greater reputation and prestige of DI athletics make them vital choices when studying social activism, studying DIII athletics provides an alternative perspective that opens a new lens of inquiry for several reasons. Firstly, in comparison to DI athletics, DIII athletics are renowned to have a better balance between academics and athletics, making them a notable

space to investigate how student-athletes perceive social activism amidst their competing responsibilities. Additionally, while DI teams may wield influence on a wider scale, DIII teams are renowned to have profound impacts on their respective campuses. For instance, while 1 in 23 students in a DI school are athletes, the number is much higher in DIII schools where 1 in 4 students are varsity athletes (NCSA Sports 2023). Furthermore, unlike DI schools, DIII schools do not currently provide athletic scholarships based on athletic ability (NCAA 2023).

This research aims to address this research gap by exploring the perceptions and understandings of social activism among college athletes in a Division III (DIII) institution. By delving into this territory, I seek to shed light on the unique factors that influence DIII athletes' understanding and willingness to engage in social activism. Specifically, I will focus on addressing the research question: How do college athletes in a DIII college understand and perceive social justice and activism in relation to athletics? By understanding the perspectives of DIII athletes, I intend to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how student-athletes from Division III schools navigate their roles as activists and advocates of social justice to foster a more inclusive and well-rounded understanding of college sports in the context of social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEI and the Neoliberal Framework

In many instances, driving social justice within a particular field is often associated with the advancement of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices. While DEI practices have the potential, in some cases, to serve as a mechanism for addressing longstanding historical and systemic inequalities and fostering change, they have not been immune to criticism. Critiques of DEI often center on its potential for being self-serving. As highlighted by Mayorga-Gallo (2019) "diversity ideology creates space for minor acknowledgment of structural inequality in the

abstract" while "centering White people's desires and feelings." While colorblind racism may downplay or minimize the significance of race, diversity ideology frames exclusion as the cause of racial inequality and adequate representation of people from different backgrounds as the solution. Under this framework, the act of increasing the visibility of non-majority members is perceived as a means to address inequity. Although seeking improved representation is not inherently problematic, the issue arises when such efforts are undertaken to cater to the desires, intentions, and comfort of white individuals, while hindering deeper conversations about power dynamics and systemic racism.

To underscore her argument, Mayorga-Gallo delineates what she identifies to be the four tenets driving diversity ideology: acceptance, commodity, intent, and liability. Diversity as acceptance, also known as "diversity without oppression," calls for the broad tolerance and inclusion of differences which can span from substantial societal disparities like race and sexuality to more individualistic divergences such as hobbies or personality traits. Within this framework, inclusion shifts away from addressing prevailing power structures, focusing instead on the "celebration of difference" for the sake of acknowledging differences. Diversity of intent refers to how diversity is recentered to focus on good intentions during discussions of diversity issues and initiatives. Instead of structural changes and equitable results, the focus turns to identity constructions of being "not racist" or progressive. Diversity of commodification, on the other hand, is a manner of practicing diversity by reducing people of color into objects rather than humans for the benefit and satisfaction of others, namely white people. Within this process, the presence of individuals of color and their cultural creations are treated as a form of currency, serving to gauge an organization's level of "non-racism."

Social Justice Activism

For the scope of this project, I have decided to use Lee Anne Bell's theory of social justice as a framework. In her work, Bell (2016) outlines the concept of social justice through three components: recognizing inequality, acknowledging that something should be done, and fostering a willingness to engage in action to make a difference. Social justice, in this scenario, is both a goal and a process. The goal of social justice is "the full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (Bell 2016). The process of advancing social justice involves collective endeavors aimed at eliminating injustice created when power, social, and economic advantages are unequally distributed and perpetuated by an artificially constructed social hierarchy (Bell 2016).

In Kluch's work (2020), a comprehensive exploration emerges through interviews with collegiate athletes engaged in activism, spanning various Division I institutions nationwide. The study delves into the multifaceted interpretations of what social justice activism entails for student-athletes. Within this context, he discerns five distinct conceptual frameworks for understanding social activism: activism as social justice action, mentorship, authenticity, intervention, and public acts of resistance. The study found that out of the various conceptualizations of social activism, student-athletes saw their primary duty to be in educating people around them, intervening when they witness discrimination, and raising awareness for social injustices. While the most notable forms of athletic activism surrounded those who performed high-risk and public acts of resistance such as Colin Kaepernick, only a few student-athletes involved themselves in that form of activism. The image of an activist is not someone who engaged in street protest but someone who uses their social powers to make change in everyday situations such as conversations or interpersonal settings.

Barriers to Activism

As the body of literature addressing the increase of social activism within the athletic realm expands, research further grows focusing on the lack of such activism. This is evident in the works of Martin et al. (2022) and Kluch (2023), both of which provide an overview of the barriers to college athletes' engagement in social activism within their respective sports teams. In their study, Martin et al. (2022) highlight the experiences of white college athletes, revealing a space with more challenges than support when it comes to social activism. One significant barrier discussed across both articles is the interpersonal concerns that athletes face while engaging in activism as a consequence of the social norms or stigma attached to such engagement (Martin et al. 2022). Despite mentioning a positive sentiment, some athletes confessed to not knowing the "right" thing to say, saying the wrong thing, or overstepping boundaries (Martin et al. 2022). Others expressed a lack of support for activist activities due to their teammates' unfavorable response to activism attempts. Kluch (2023), additionally, discusses the phenomenon of teams exhibiting resistance to social activism. Because teammates may view activism as a departure from established social norms in the athletic space, activism becomes unconsciously labeled as "deviant behavior" (Kluch 2023). The social prestige associated with being an athlete on campus, some participants expressed feeling overshadowed by their athletic identity. To become something that didn't relate to athletics is seen as a threat to the athletic identity.

In addition to interpersonal concerns and general social stigmas within team environments relating to social activism, participants also observed how established norms of team dynamics can impede individuals interested in engaging in activism. For instance, participants highlighted how their team's cultural values often prioritize the collective unit over the individual team members. Expressing support for a cause or advocating for change without a

unanimous agreement could potentially cast an unfavorable light on the team as a whole (Kluch 2023). Findings also suggest, however, that when athletes and leadership figures such as coaches model activist behaviors, the acceptance of activism grows among team members (Martin et al. 2022). While team culture might initially pose a hindrance, it also serves as a motivating force for change.

METHODOLOGY

Research Site

The study was conducted during the summer of 2023, focusing on current student-athletes at Liberal Arts College. Situated in the northeastern region of the United States, Liberal Arts College is a private liberal arts institution and a member of the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC). The NESCAC comprises eleven highly selective Division III liberal arts colleges and universities in New England, all of which are affiliated with the National Collegiate Athletic Association, or the NCAA (NESCAC 2023). At Liberal Arts College, the athletic program encompasses 29 varsity sports, comprising 15 women's teams and 14 men's teams.

Liberal Arts College boasts a total student enrollment of 2,071 individuals, with a relatively balanced gender distribution, comprising 55% female and 45% male students. Within this student body, 68% of the population has engaged in athletic activities during their time on campus, participating in either varsity, club, or intramural sports teams. Varsity athletes consist of approximately 670 students. While I encountered limitations in accessing statistics regarding the racial and economic composition of the athlete population due to confidentiality constraints, it is worth noting that 27% of the entire student body identifies as individuals of color. Moreover,

it is significant to highlight that nearly half of all students enrolled at Liberal Arts College receive financial aid.

Qualitative Sample

To ensure a comprehensive assessment of my research question among college athletes at Liberal Arts College, a mixed method of convenience and somewhat purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants for this study. Drawing upon my existing interactions with student-athletes during my time at the college, I reached out to them through social media with interview requests, leading to a total of eight student-athletes who agreed to participate in the interviews.

Deliberate efforts were made to ensure diversity within the sample by selecting student-athletes from various sports teams, representing different class years and gender identities. This approach aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences regarding activism within the college's athletic community. Out of the eight interviewed participants, an equal gender representation was achieved, with four identifying as male and four as female. Moreover, the sample comprised a mix of rising seniors and rising juniors with three rising seniors and six rising juniors. Six students identified themselves as white, one identified themselves as mixed race, and one identified themselves as white Latina. The variety of sports represented within the sample included soccer, rowing, hockey, track and field, cross country, tennis, and lacrosse, each potentially influencing their perspectives on social activism.

Research Procedure

Due to the geographical distances between myself and the interviewees during the summer, interviews were conducted remotely through Zoom. This approach allowed for efficient data collection while respecting the availability and convenience of my participants. Prior

consent was obtained from each participant before conducting the interviews, and all interviews were recorded to ensure accurate representation and analysis of their responses. Furthermore, participants were provided with clear information about the voluntary nature of their involvement and assured of the confidentiality of their responses to create a safe environment to share their views openly and honestly.

To guide the interviews and ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant topics, an interview guide was prepared. The interview guide included themes related to the participants' understanding of social justice, personal engagement in activism, observations of inequalities within their team environment, and their perspectives on the role of college athletics in promoting social activism. While the interviews were guided by this interview guide, they were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing flexibility to explore emergent themes and individual insights in detail. Following the completion of the interviews, I transcribed the recordings verbatim to accurately capture participants' responses. A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the interview transcripts. This analysis method involved identifying recurring patterns, themes, and insights within the participants' responses, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Limitations

The research project faced several notable limitations that deserve consideration when interpreting the findings. First and foremost, the restricted timeframe and my non-athlete status at Liberal Arts College presented significant challenges throughout the research process. Consequently, the study primarily focused on Liberal Arts College athletes due to convenience, potentially introducing institutional bias and limiting the generalizability of the results to other Division III schools. Furthermore, as a non-athlete, my network lacked extensive connections

within the Liberal Arts College athletic community, leading to a limited pool of potential interviewees. This circumstance further impacted the racial diversity of my sample, as the predominantly white demographic of sports teams at Liberal Arts College influenced the representation of people coming from different racial backgrounds. As a result of my limited timeframe and network, I did not conduct as many interviews as I was initially hoping to at the beginning. Because of my limited sample, I also feel like not as many sports teams were represented as I originally hoped.

FINDINGS

Social Justice Understandings/Identity

To fully understand how college athletes understand social justice and activism, my first step was to ascertain how they defined those words. A recurring theme that emerged from my interviewees' responses while doing so was the overwhelmingly positive perception of the phrase "social justice." Although two of my interviewees expressed reservations about the current framing or execution of social justice initiatives, all my participants unanimously acknowledged the significance of social justice in the world. For the majority of those I interviewed, the practice of social justice holds great importance because it rectifies social inequalities by improving the lives of marginalized community members. Danny's (white, junior, male) response, for instance, effectively encapsulates the sentiment shared by many others within my study sample:

> "I would define [social justice] as making sure everyone is treated equally and fairly and providing inclusivity and opportunities for communities who have been excluded from certain things or haven't been treated fairly. It's kind of like advocating for those communities and making sure they're represented and getting proper treatment. I feel it's

really important that everyone feels cared about and loved and important on an equal playing field in society."

In Danny's perspective, social justice serves as a vehicle for attaining equitable and fair treatment for all individuals. This is underscored by his emphasis on inclusivity and creating opportunities for communities that have been historically marginalized or unfairly treated, aligning with the viewpoints of social justice expressed by other participants. For instance, Emma (white, junior, female) defines the phrase as "working towards a world where there is justice for people of all backgrounds and different groups" while Jordan (white, junior, male) speaks about "standing up for minority groups or groups that have been oppressed [to look] for equality." In these instances, social justice is conceptualized as a mechanism to rectify historical inequities and systemic disparities that have disenfranchised specific groups. Consequently, addressing these disparities becomes important to level the playing field for marginalized communities.

Upon analyzing the responses, it became apparent that with the exception of two individuals within the sample, all others identified themselves as social activists or advocates. Notably, even among those who did not explicitly label themselves as activists, every participant expressed favorable views toward the fundamental principles of social justice. Furthermore, while most participants considered themselves activists or advocates and emphasized the importance of social justice, a common sentiment was shared across the group: a sense that they fell short or were sufficient in their efforts. For example, Rachel (white, senior, female) describes her relationship with activism:

> "I would definitely consider myself an advocate based on my definition, but I don't feel at times I'm as active as I would like to be. Like I wouldn't consider myself as much of an activist on campus, for example, but I'm certainly an advocate and I stand with social justice movements."

In this response, Rachel shares a sentiment that resonates with several other interviewees. She exhibits a positive attitude toward social justice causes and acknowledges their significance. However, while Rachel understands social activism's importance, she admits that she sometimes falls short of the level of engagement that she aspires to achieve. This viewpoint is also reflected in the accounts of other participants such as Danny, who notes that he "can definitely get involved more," and Emma who articulates her desire to progressively integrate social justice into her life, aiming for it to be "a larger part of [her] life" someday. Despite identifying as social activists or advocates, both of them acknowledge the room for growth in their involvement. While many of the student-athletes that I spoke with see the importance of social justice activism or have already engaged in it, they simultaneously admit that the principles of social justice must be more actively integrated into their lives.

While a majority of the students within my sample identified as social activists or advocates, a diverse spectrum emerged for the type of activities that they interpreted as activism For example, while some people in my sample found engaging in difficult conversations relating to social justice as a form of activism, others found it too passive. Similarly, while some individuals considered protesting a form of activism, others found activism in alternative activities such as community service or involvement in nonprofit work. Despite the differing interpretations of activism, however, certain consistencies emerged for what the athletes in my study sought to be the goal or outcome of social initiatives. For many participants, a triad of ideas came to mind: 1) increased representation of minority groups on their teams, 2) better accessibility of their sport to disenfranchised groups, and 3) better awareness of social justice issues among their teammates. Natalie's (white, female, senior) response, for instance, articulates what she perceives to be a great issue within her sport:

"[Sport] has become, it seems, confined to one certain demographic because you don't really see female or male [sport] players of any race that isn't white. It's interesting to see how the game has become this way, and how there are implications for how systemic racism plays into creating this bubble for all white athletes essentially. I would say that it goes back to looking at the trends between sports that are expensive and what type of person has access to that."

Natalie's perspective brings light to the interconnectedness between systemic racism, socioeconomic disparities, and the accessibility of sports to diverse communities. By emphasizing the lack of representation of non-white athletes, she draws attention, in particular, to the systemic barriers that have limited opportunities for students from marginalized backgrounds to participate in sports which she claims to not be discussed at all by her teammates. Similar sentiments can be seen when Danny mentions the underrepresentation of minority groups within his team and the lack of opportunities they have, or when Tyler (white, male, junior) explains how white his sport is due to how expensive it is to both participate and play it at the competitive level.

While acknowledging the lack of representation for minoritized identities is an important step in the process of social justice, scholars have taken note of how solely focusing on representation can limit the potential for social transformation. As Mayorga-Gallo points out, achieving diverse representation in superficial ways without addressing structural issues within an environment can result in diversity being framed as broad acceptance or as a commodity (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). As Natalie mentions in her answer, because systemic racism plays a major part in the racial makeup of sports teams, it requires deeper changes that challenge the foundation that athletics is built upon. When the intentionality of widening access and giving representation to people of marginalized identities is to simply have a diverse-looking team without addressing the prevailing power structures, whiteness is upheld. Activism must transcend surface-level gestures and focus on transformation rather than mere representation.

Examining the self-identification and perception of social justice and activism shows that while my participants held strong beliefs in the principles of social justice, there's a prevailing sense of inadequacy in the current amount of effort each of them is dedicating to engagement. While there is a diversity of perspectives regarding the range of activities within activism, a shared vision remains for the athletes in the end goal of social justice: increased representation, better accessibility, and heightened awareness of social justice issues among teammates.

Team Perceptions of Social Justice

To delve deeper into understanding the dynamics of how social justice discourse is perceived within sports teams, I further asked my interviewees how discussions relating to social issues took place among their teammates and how these dialogues unfold. Upon analyzing their responses, I noticed a common trend echoing the pattern observed during interviews with individual athletes. A significant number of interviewees held a general belief that, despite many of their teammates aligning ideologically with social justice causes, these causes were not prioritized enough within the team context. Social justice is treated as a "check-box" item, not a topic of discussion at all, or in a few other cases, a subject of ridicule, characterized as a "laughing stock." Natalie, for example, criticizes how social justice is discussed within her sports team:

> "I think it's funny because we would have a discussion about it. Every time there's a DEI initiative or we read some book that enlightens us every year, we'll discuss it, but then it's forgotten. It's not prioritized or it doesn't seem to be a care to anyone else. Even when we discuss, they're very surface-level discussions and it just sort of is to check a box is what it feels like personally."

Although Natalie mentions feeling comfortable discussing social issues with her teammates during her interview, she expresses reservations about the underlying motivations driving these

discussions. In particular, Natalie's skepticism of her team's DEI initiative draws parallels to the critiques of white-centering diversity initiatives, which often prioritize the comfort and preferences of white audiences over the needs of marginalized communities (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). Natalie's testimony thoroughly illustrates the concept of "diversity as intent" where DEI can sometimes be adopted merely to allow white individuals to self-identify as "nonracist" or "inclusive" (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). While it is undoubtedly crucial to acknowledge and hold a well-informed understanding of social inequalities as a foundational step towards achieving social justice, the issue arises when these efforts remain stopped at recognition alone. This is evident when Natalie mentions efforts being "forgotten" after they are completed. As Bell points out, social justice is a process that transcends mere acknowledgment and includes active engagement in ongoing actions (Bell 2016). Although recognizing inequality and self-reflection is an important first step, it needs to be followed up with concrete actions and engagement for tangible changes to be made (Bell 2016).

Other participants also express how discussions of social justice were rarely present within their team dynamics. Emma's perspective, for instance, sheds light on her experience in trying to change the culture of social justice among her teammates:

> "On my team, in particular, I would not really say that [social justice] prioritized at all. I've had ideas to do volunteer work or whatever it may be– like doing drives for equipment, or doing lessons for free, or even just talking about diversity. I think a lot of times, unfortunately, it's lost on my teammates a little bit. I think sometimes, especially with college athletes, people are so focused on practicing, playing, and winning that a lot of that stuff is kind of forgotten."

Through her answer, Emma reflects on her efforts to introduce what she conceptualizes as social justice initiatives into her sports team such as volunteer work, equipment drives, and discussions about diversity. However, she notes that due to the systematic and demanding nature of college athletics, her attempts to introduce social justice initiatives clashed with the norms of the team.

Similarly to Natalie's skepticism towards her team's DEI initiatives, Emma's account

underscores the struggle to integrate social justice into the realm of college athletics. This relates

to Kluch's findings about how social norms within college athletics can affect the degree to

which people prioritize social justice initiatives. Because many athletes felt like their athletic

identity needed to be of the most priority, introducing other aspects to the realm was likely to

create disturbances (Kluch 2023). Similar to how Natalie held doubts about the effectiveness of

her team's DEI initiatives, Emma's futile attempts in trying to promote social justice initiatives

revealed the challenges of altering deeply-rooted norms within sports teams.

In contrast to the earlier examples, some interviewees expressed encountering hostility

when discussing the topic of social justice. While other participants shared accounts of

ineffective advocacy or apathy to social justice initiatives, Tyler sheds light on how social justice

is often a "laughing stock" among his teammates:

> "A great deal of [my teammates] find [social justice] to be almost something that they
> can mock because it's so far from their own reality. It's a very thin slice of the population
> that ends up playing college [sport] and all from a very similar group that deals with
> similar things and social situations surrounded by partying, alcohol, girls, and sports.
> [Social issues] are more that crazy, weird thing that's happening for *those* people over
> *there*. That's how I hear it being talked about by my teammates."

Tyler, in his response, highlights a phenomenon observed in homogenous or insulated social

groups where social issues are mocked or trivialized due to the team's limited exposure to social

justice issues. Because his team is entirely white, heterosexual, and of upper or

upper-middle-class status, topics relating to social justice are perceived as issues distant from

their reality and thus not something to take seriously. Additionally, Tyler's recounting of a

conversation about the murder of George Floyd highlights the stark contrasts in perspectives

within his team. He recalled how he felt "very shocked" at his teammates' inclination to blame

Floyd for his death, citing reasons such as "being too loud, too aggressive, or not following directions." While this example most definitely does not represent the views of all college athletes or their environments, this scenario highlights how deeply ingrained biases, influenced by the homogenous composition of a team, can perpetuate harmful narratives and lead to a lack of understanding of social justice.

A similar sentiment is expressed when Olivia (white Latina, female, senior) recalled her experience attending a DEI event hosted by a senior captain of her sports team:

> "The person that coordinated that [DEI event], after they graduated, they were spoken about on the team like they were crazy. They condemned that person for doing too much and caring about 'weird' things. They never explicitly said, 'we don't care about the initiatives that that person took,' and they were one of our captains, but I think that's sort of what it was supposed to be getting it."

Olivia's account of her teammates' reception to a DEI event hosted by a senior captain within her sports team further shows the challenges that surround athlete-driven initiatives that touch on social justice issues. The reaction Olivia describes where her teammates subtly criticized and dismissed their captain's efforts as "weird" or excessive reveals a deeper resistance to change within her team's culture. Tyler and Olivia's experiences connect to studies talking about social activism being viewed as "deviant behavior" due to its departure from the athletic space's established social norms (Kluch 2023). For Tyler, his act of bringing up a discussion about George Floyd was the "deviant" act while for Olivia, it was her teammate hosting the team-wide DEI event. However, in contrast to Tyler's account where he experienced explicit pushback, Olivia took notice of how her team environment was created without the use of overt disapproval. While her teammates did not explicitly condemn the captain's initiative, they collectively and unconsciously created a space where individuals felt discouraged from challenging the prevailing norms, showing a subtler form of resistance. Whether it is her

teammates' lack of priority towards DEI mentioned by Natalie, the pushback from Emma and

Tyler's teammates towards discussing social issues, or the subtle resistance to a DEI event by

Olivia's team, a common theme emerges: social justice fails to find a position for itself in the

athletic field.

Role of College Athletics

After asking my interviewees how they and their teammates stood regarding social justice

and activism, I transitioned the conversation to explore their perspectives on what they believed

the role of the college athlete *should* be in relation to advancing social justice. In response to this

question, every individual in my sample agreed that college athletes bear responsibility for

promoting social justice. Furthermore, every person agreed that social justice should be an

integral part of the college athletic experience. For the students in my sample, athletics is an

effective platform for driving social change due to the heightened visibility and impact they

believed student-athletes held as a collective unity. Hudson (mixed, male, junior), for instance,

captured the influence wielded by the athletics department on campus:

> "I think [athletes] can be really influential on campus just because some people follow
> sports and stuff like that, and they have a big following on social media. You can work
> through music, theater, through the Student Assembly. I think there are so many ways and
> athletics is just a good vehicle to do that because a lot of people come to the games and
> we have a big social media following between the different sports teams. I think athletes
> make up a big portion of campus too."

Hudson's response resonates with a sentiment shared by a substantial portion of my interviewees.

He contends that student-athletes should assume a major role in driving social activism because

of their potential to enact profound change both within the campus environment and the wider

community. Similar to how college student organizations can spread messages because of the

audience and platform they hold, Hudson suggests that the same principles can apply to athletes because of their significant presence on campus. Social activism, in this scenario, is understood as raising awareness for social injustice because of their platform. This sentiment is further shared in Natalie's observation that "athletics hold a great deal of social influence and power" and in Tyler's assertion that college athletes hold a status socially as a "popular group." Because of the collective recognition that student-athletes hold a substantial platform in addition to widespread familiarity across campus, most of the individuals I interviewed concluded that social activism must be integrated into the realm of athletics.

While a consensus prevails regarding the significance of integrating social activism into athletics, a divergence becomes evident among the interviewees concerning the extent of impact attributed to the athletic program. Some individuals expressed reservations about the degree of impact athletics had as a platform, considering the college's DIII status. Rachel, for example, describes the contrasting levels of influence observed between DIII athletics and professional sports:

> "When we're comparing the influence of a [Liberal Arts College] athlete's voice to a professional athlete, I think they're two very different spheres. Your influence in that way, I think, is a lot different from a [Liberal Arts College] athletics event. I think that [engaging college athletes in social activism] is not a bad idea, but I think it's a better idea at a more national or professional sport athletic level."

While Rachel acknowledges that athletics can be an effective platform because of the audience and social circle that they garner, she maintains reservations about the degree of influence DIII college athletes have in comparison to professional athletes or those participating in higher divisions of schools. Adding to this discourse, Jordan expresses his belief that because "everybody's involved in something," DIII sports teams, while not exempt from social justice, do not wield more influence than certain non-athletic student organizations on campus. Unlike their

counterparts, the two students' viewpoints diverged from the notion that athletes inherently

possess an amplified voice. Instead, their perspectives are influenced by the fundamental

principles of activism which they believe organizations, in general, should ascribe to.

Moving beyond the discourse of student-athletes in social activism, I further inquired

about what my participants believed the role of the coach to be in promoting social justice in an

athletic context. While the majority of my interviewees believed that athletes ultimately had the

responsibility of educating themselves and participating in social justice, they emphasized the

drastic impact of team coaches in shaping the team environment. Emma's response exemplifies

this sentiment:

> "I think the coach makes or breaks [the promotion of social justice] honestly because the
> coach fosters the sense of how the team is going to be, what values are appreciated, and
> what values define your team. If your coach supports and allows you to participate in
> activism or encourages you, then your team is going to be more open in that way."

To Emma, because coaches are perceived to be the leaders for the athletic teams, they play a

pivotal role in creating the type of atmosphere shared among the teammates. If values of social

justice and activism are promoted and upheld by the team coach, the team environment becomes

much more conducive to social justice efforts. This belief is further expressed by Natalie, who

describes coaches as the people that "players are looking up to lead them" and Hudson who

describes them as the people with "the most authority on the team." While the students agree that

the onus of education and participation in social justice rests on the athletes, they recognize the

unique role that coaches play in influencing teamwide attitudes, behaviors, and engagement in

matters of social justice. Because athletic coaches have leadership roles that involve constructing

and maintaining a certain set of values among their team, they can play a pivotal role in the

awareness and advancement of social justice.

Challenges to Social Justice

To gain deeper insights into how social justice and activism are understood by college athletes, I decided to explore what my participants believed to be the challenges that they associated with the practice. The first major trend I noticed as I inquired about the obstacles they perceived was the significant number of athletes within my sample who expressed apprehension about the potential judgment that could arise if they were to take a stance on social issues. Hudson, for instance, took note of the possible repercussions of advocating for social justice matters onto one's public perception:

> "I think a lot of athletes are focused on their image and don't want to say the wrong thing or don't want to say something that's socially unacceptable when that's not always the case. There's definitely a lot of judgment that goes into it. People don't want to be judged by their peers, especially athletes."

Within his response, Hudson demonstrates the social and interpersonal dynamics that he perceives athletes to navigate when considering involvement in social justice matters. He brings up the idea of a "social image," which he believes athletes feel pressured to uphold within their positions. While athletes may hold a genuine passion for social causes, the desire to maintain a positive self-image and avoid mistakes while advocating for social justice can lead to a form of self-censorship. Similar to Martin et al.'s findings regarding how athletes feared not knowing the "right" thing to say or saying the wrong thing (Martin et al. 2022), many participants in my sample similarly mentioned how they wanted to avoid saying the wrong thing. For some, such as Rachel, saying something offensive can not only "improperly represent the individual but the team that the individual is a part of." Because of the collectivist mindset present in college athletics, the team is often considered a priority in comparison to individual athletes (Kluch 2023). Pursuing or discussing social justice issues would come with many ramifications because

of its ability to not only cast an individual in an unfavorable light but additionally the team to which they belong.

In addition to the concerns about how individuals might be perceived by non-athletes when engaging in social justice efforts, I observed an additional layer of stigma associated with altering the team dynamics. This is seen, for instance, when Danny expresses his thoughts regarding the stigma he notices within his team:

> "There might be the kind of typical athlete stigma of not wanting to get too deep and kind of trying to keep things surface level. I guess not trying to rock the boat or whatever. They're trying to focus on playing their sport or having fun. You could maybe be perceived as too serious or like you're trying to dive too deep."

Similar to many others I interviewed, Danny points out that while there's no outright dissuasion from engaging in social justice conversations among teammates, a pervasive assumption persists within his team that these discussions stand apart from the roster of activities typically associated with athletics. Because sports often carry a connotation of "fun" while matters of social justice are seen as "serious," there is an implicit consensus that social issues should be compartmentalized into a separate sphere, existing and tackled independently outside the athletic realm. This reinforces Kluch's (2023) findings about the "athlete first" mentality found within college athletes. The notion of "rocking the boat" plays a prevalent role in this context. It implies a disruption or challenge to the problematic foundations that college athletics is built upon by subjecting it to scrutiny. It requires confronting the established status quo and the discomfort that accompanies the environment. In essence, an unspoken division between sports and social justice, in addition to the hesitancy to disrupt the norms, reflects a broader challenged within the athletic landscape in higher education.

Besides fear, a few of the participants pointed to the lack of diverse representation within their team as a possible barrier to their team's lack of engagement in social justice. Because

almost everyone (if not everyone) within a team belongs to non-marginalized identity groups, the team is less likely to be aware or inclined to engage in activism as some interviewees note. This is apparent, for example, when Jordan highlights the homogeneity within his team:

> "There isn't a lot of diversity. We all come from relatively similar backgrounds and it just doesn't feel like there's something to remind us of the fact that we're in a lucky position compared to other people or that our lifestyle is different than theirs because we're all in the same boat."

From Jordan's perspective, the relative homogeneity within his team appears to lead to fewer conflicts stemming from differences in identity. However, this homogeneity also hinders the need to address social justice issues, as the absence of athletes with diverse identities hinders discussions and initiative in this realm. Although my participants identify the lack of diversity within their team as the primary barrier, I assert that the true barrier lies in the underlying perception that "having diversity" is a prerequisite for initiating progress. While homogeneity might make social issues *appear* hidden or less urgent than they are, this perception only serves to leave problems unaddressed, especially concerning how homogeneity in itself is a product of systemic inequality.

DISCUSSION/ CONCLUSION

To sum up and answer my research question, while the DIII college athletes in my sample possess an overwhelmingly favorable outlook on social justice and activism, their understanding of the concept as it applies to college athletics is more nuanced. While they acknowledge the significance of social justice and of supporting social causes, they struggle with the practical implications and ramifications associated with actualizing their justice-oriented beliefs into practice within the context of college athletics and the broader athletic landscape.

My interviews show that while my participants voiced their support for the concept of social justice, coupled with the importance of integrating it into college athletics, it is apparent that the depth of acknowledgment often marked the limits of social justice among the majority of teams represented within my sample. Applying this to Bell (2016)'s understanding of the process of social justice, two components are touched upon: recognizing inequality and acknowledging something should be done. When I explored further teamwide perspectives, a similar pattern emerged where many of my participants would note how their teammates might conceptually support the idea of social justice but lack practical action on these beliefs. When instances do occur where individuals try to translate these beliefs into action whether through DEI initiatives or steps such as conversation, interviewees mention the superficial nature of the project or the collective response from the team that hinders the impact of said initiatives. Similarly to Martin et al.'s findings, athletes in my study cited social and interpersonal barriers to social justice which included concerns about how others perceive them and how their teammates react to them and their efforts. Furthermore, the perception of social justice and activism seems to contrast with the emotions often associated with athletics and sports. While athletics is often seen as a unifying activity that gathers individuals of common interests together to enjoy themselves in a lighthearted manner, social justice often carries a weight of seriousness, scrutiny, and potential for divisiveness. Because of this contrast, while not explicitly stated, social justice and activism are often seen as practices that belong to a separate space from the realm of college athletics, making the concepts difficult to integrate.

In retrospect, college campuses have historically acted as vital hubs for activism and catalysts for social change. While the narrative of social activism typically revolves around student organizations and advocacy groups, it is imperative to acknowledge that college athletics

also occupies an essential role within this narrative. While Division I institutions are often the center of focus when exploring the interconnectedness between college athletics and student activism, much can be learned from a Division III school due to their higher presence, lessened focus on athletics, and the large proportion of students per campus who identify as athletes.

The significance of this research project cannot be overstated, particularly in a context where the social impact of athletes is deeply ingrained. In DIII schools, where student-athletes make up almost half of the student population, prioritizing the social, emotional, and mental well-being of all students underscores the importance to ensure student-athletes from marginalized backgrounds have an equitable experience. In situations where equity is not achieved for student-athletes of all backgrounds, it becomes especially important to foster an atmosphere that embraces and encourages student activists that want to make a difference by rectifying these disparities.

POTENTIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

During this research, it has become increasingly evident that the social issues ingrained within college athletics, coupled with the lack of commitment and effort in addressing those concerns, demonstrate a systemic challenge that cannot be instantly rectified through mere policy changes or superficial commitments to change. Nevertheless, the findings presented within this study shed light on potential adjustments and new initiatives that both the athletics department and individual teams could consider to better the situation. These changes are intended to gradually instigate reforms in the current landscape of social justice engagement within collegiate sports. Presented below are recommendations I created based on my perspective after doing this project, influenced by the insights gathered from the interviews.

1) **Create Spaces for Constructive Dialogue**: Recognizing that numerous participants have pointed out the challenges in discussing social justice matters with their teammates due to associated stigma, discomfort, or team in general, it is essential to establish dedicated times and spaces to have these conversations in a safe, meaningful, and constructive way.

2) **Empower and Support Athlete-Led Initiatives**: Interviews revealed instances where participants or their peers felt like their ideas were dismissed, decreasing their motivation for future social justice endeavors. As a result, it is important to give guidance, resources, and support to student-athletes who take the lead in driving social justice initiatives. This will empower athletes to proactively engage in social change.

3) **Integrate Social Justice into Athletics Identity**: As the findings of this project state, social justice is frequently perceived as incompatible with, or separate from, the realm of athletics. The initial step towards integrating social justice principles is by embedding them within the fundamental mission and values of athletic programs. While doing this may not cause immediate observable changes, it demonstrates the alignment of athletics with the values of social justice.

4) **Purposeful Implementation and Follow-Up for DEI Initiatives**: To ensure that DEI initiatives transcend self-serving agenda and actively contribute to systemic transformation over surface-level education, a deliberate approach to implementation is necessary. This involves making sure that DEI initiatives are purposeful, for the benefit of students from marginalized backgrounds, and accompanied by mechanisms that ensure the continuous support and impact of these programs.

5) **Redefine the Athletic Focus**: Although a contentious proposition, a major step towards achieving equity for students of marginalized backgrounds in college athletics could

involve shifting the athletic emphasis away from an exclusive fixation on winning and

numbers. Instead, the focus could turn towards using athletics as an avenue to empower

students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, by ensuring there is an

equitable experience for all regardless of their backgrounds.

In conclusion, while the smaller, incremental changes and initiatives such as the ones I have

proposed have the chance to lead to progress, true social transformation is seldom attainable

through swift policy adjustment or a simple solution. While these actions can act as building

blocks, genuine and lasting change requires a unified effort and determination to dismantle the

systemic issues ingrained within college athletics.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As previously discussed, while I attempted to encompass the broad range of the athlete

population by including athletes from differing sports teams, the resources and time I was given

to complete this project were inadequate to completely represent everyone. The greatest

constraint for this project, in particular, stems from the lack of participants who identify as

members of marginalized groups, particularly athletes of color. While the conclusions drawn

from this study will find more relevance within the context of this specific school and other

institutions sharing comparable racial demographics, it is important to acknowledge that a

comprehensive understanding of the experiences of all student-athletes cannot be achieved

without considering more input from students of diverse backgrounds. As a result, if future

research were to be completed, the overall results may differ if the project was done with the

intention to draw a more diverse sample.

In addition to prioritizing a more inclusive participant representation for further

investigations into this topic, this project brought up a series of questions that can be explored in

future research. First, while I have reported on the prevalent trends and patterns from analyzing the interview data, it is noteworthy that a few responses from the interviewees deviated from these trends. Given that the scope of this project centered around the general perception of social justice and activism held among student-athletes in a DIII school, limited attention was given to understanding the underlying cause-and-effect relationship between various identity markers and interview responses. For instance, student-athletes who belong to certain sports teams might answer differently in comparison to their counterparts from other teams. Furthermore, while my primary focus was on student-athletes for the scope of this project, I also garnered responses regarding the influence of athletic heads and coaches on promoting social justice. Thus, to achieve a complete and comprehensive understanding of this topic, it is insufficient to only study students but essential to involve other important figures within the realm of athletics. This could involve investigating the roles and viewpoints of coaches, athletics administrators, and other key leaders to gain a deeper understanding of the factors shaping social engagement within the athletic world.

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