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Organizational Support Factors for Minor League Baseball Player Development

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ABSTRACT

This study examines organizational support in the context of minor league baseball to better understand how organizations can support athletes' development. Exploratory results show that English and Spanish players identify salary/pay, off-season training opportunities, and nutritious food as their most important unmet development needs. English and Spanish respondents differently prioritized playing opportunities, communication with front office staff, health care, and equipment as unmet needs. Explanatory results show that organizational support factors (private problem support and second career support) explain 17% of the variation in minor league baseball players' self-perceptions of development. The results provide guidance for Major League Baseball and its affiliates as they restructure the development system and for non-profits seeking to help players. Better pay and other financial support appear to be the most critical unmet needs where organizations can better support athletes.

Keywords: athlete labor migration, financial support, minor league baseball, professional athletes

Minor league baseball is one of the largest development systems for professional athletes in the world, with around 6,000 athletes in the minors and under contract with Major League Baseball (MLB) teams in 2019. MLB teams draft amateur baseball players or sign international free agents, assign them to minor league affiliates, and pay their salaries while affiliates provide coaching, playing time, and support services (Zimbalist, 1992). Minor league baseball has been the site of many controversies between athletes and organizations. Athletes filed a class action lawsuit against MLB in 2014 accusing the league and its teams of violating minimum wage and overtime laws when paying minor leaguers (Senne et al., 2015). MLB responded by lobbying congress to pass the Save America's Pastime Act, which grants Fair Labor Standards Act exemptions for the MLB (Blum, 2018). Former and current athletes have also revealed issues related to food, housing, travel, clubhouse dues, equipment, and fair treatment that make it difficult for minor league baseball players to achieve their potential (Broshius, 2013; Carleton, 2021; Goldman, 2018; Hayhurst, 2014). MLB announced in 2020 that it was going to reduce the size of the minor league system, with part of the justification revolving around better pay and development opportunities for the athletes who remained (Blum, 2021).

Minor league baseball's labor issues can be viewed through the lens of organizational support theory. Organizational support theory proposes that employees develop a general perception of the extent to which organizations value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Sport scholars have demonstrated that organizational support is a significant factor in athletes' occupational turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and performance (Maier et al., 2016; Ströbel et al., 2018). However, research is lacking on how organizational support might influence athletes' performance development. Athlete performance development refers to development activities that improve the chances of success in international or professional competition (De Bosscher et al., 2006). Minor leaguers argue that better organizational support will help them reach their potential as professional athletes (Broshius,

2013; Carleton, 2021; Goldman, 2018). Therefore, minor league baseball is an important context to examine organizational support factors.

Organizational support is also an important topic for athlete performance development research more generally. Unlike other factors that have been identified as influencing athlete talent, such as national wealth and genetics, organizational support can be influenced by organizational strategy and national sport policy, so it is one way that stakeholders can intervene to improve athletes' experiences (De Bosscher et al., 2009; Sotiriadou & Shillbury, 2009). Therefore, research on organizational support is a critical step for stakeholders attempting to improve athlete development practices.

Scholars have recently recognized the need to consider cross-cultural perspectives and differences in athlete development research (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). A growing body of research demonstrates important differences between the experiences and perceptions of athletes from different cultures (Alfermann et al., 2004; Kuettel et al., 2017; Küttel et al., 2018), and shows that athletes go through "cultural transitions" when they join new cultures as part of their career (Ryba et al., 2016). However, cross-cultural research has been limited to research on athlete career transition and retirement, with little research considering cross-cultural perceptions of organizational support. A lack of research on this topic is surprising given many professional teams recognize the need to cater to the unique needs of foreign athletes (Ryba et al., 2016). Moreover, it is important for researchers to consider the cross-cultural transferability of their findings, especially if they intend to use research to help organizations cater to diverse populations. Like other athlete development systems, minor league baseball is increasingly diverse and includes athletes from many cultures, including approximately 47% of athletes from countries in Latin America when accounting for US-based leagues and the Dominican Summer League (Cooper, 2018). Thus, it is necessary to consider cross-cultural differences in minor league baseball players' perceptions of organizational support.

The purpose of this study was to examine organizational support for performance development from the perspective of athletes in minor league baseball. Specifically, we worked with two non-profit baseball organizations designed to support minor league baseball players through advocacy, financial support, education, and other support services (e.g., <https://www.morethanbaseball.org/>). Together, we designed a survey to examine minor league baseball players' performance developmental needs and whether they were being met by organizations. The survey was designed to answer the following research questions:

- What organizational factors do players identify as being most important to their development?
- Which organizational support needs do athletes believe are being met and which needs are unmet?
- Are there any differences between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking respondents' preferences for organizational support factors?
- How does overall organizational support influence athletes' self-perception of development?

Literature Review

Organizational support theory proposes that employees develop a general perception of the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Organizational support theory is built on social exchange theory and need fulfillment theory (Kurtessis et al., 2015). Social exchanges involve a series of interactions that generate obligations and interdependencies between actors (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When applied to organizational behavior, employees and other organizational members can feel an obligation to help exchange partners, such as employers or leaders, and believe that increased performance and extra role behaviors will be noticed and rewarded in employment relationships (Wu & Lee, 2017). Organizational support theory builds on social exchange theory by explaining that employees who perceive organizational support will feel obligated to help the organization in return, which establishes a social exchange process between the worker and the organization (Kurtessis et al., 2015).

Need fulfillment theories posit that material, social, or psychological needs are critical motives of human behavior. Two oft-used need fulfillment theories are hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943) and self-determination theory (Deci et al., 2017). According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory, people must fulfill basic biological needs first, but will seek to fulfill increasingly higher order needs such as self-actualization after their basic needs are satisfied. Self-determination theory holds that employees have three basic psychological needs— competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017). Satisfaction of these three needs will promote autonomous motivation, performance, and well-being (Deci et al., 2017). Perceived organizational support theory tends to focus on psychosocial need fulfillment as described in self-determination theory rather than basic biological need fulfillment as in hierarchy of needs theory (Kurtessis et al., 2015). Employees that perceive organizational support are thought to fulfill their socioemotional needs, such as esteem, autonomy, and relatedness, resulting in greater identification with, and commitment to, the organization and greater psychological well-being (Kurtessis et al., 2015). Meta-analytic results show that organization support theory predicts the antecedents and consequences of perceived organizational support as well as the relative magnitudes of different relationships, the influence of process variables, and mediating effects (Kurtessis et al., 2015; Rhoads & Eisenberger, 2002; Riggle, et al, 2009).

Ströbel et al. (2018) extended perceived organizational support to professional athletes. The authors used a two-part, mixed-method study to identify support factors that applied to professional athletes and then measured whether these factors predicted athletes' intentions to leave teams. Three organizational support factors—integration of family, second career support, and private problem support—all had a negative effect on athletes' turnover intentions in association football, handball, and ice hockey. In a second study published based on the same data, Maier et al. (2016) found that bonuses and two organizational support factors (integration of family and private problem support) were positively related to overall job satisfaction and together explained 46% of the variance in job satisfaction. The model also explained 13% of the variance in athletes' performance. However, salary and the remaining organizational support factor (second career support) were not significantly related to overall job satisfaction. Maier et al. (2016) interpret the results to show that organizational support is a relatively important component of athletes' work and performance when compared with more often studied variables like salary.

These studies on German professional athletes are also consistent with other literature in sport management. Perceived organizational support is positively related to satisfaction in university coaches and volunteers (Aisbett & Hoye, 2015; Dixon & Sagas, 2007), and is negatively related to gender-related barriers and positively related to women's intentions to stay in sport organizations (Spoor & Hoye, 2014). Qualitative research also suggests that athletes' work may be enhanced by organizational support in the form of off-field player development (Dowell & Singer, 2011; Pink, et al., 2015) and social support (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Nicolson, et al., 2011).

However, it is unclear how organizational support applies to athlete development. Strobel et al.'s (2018) measure was devised for athletes at the top professional level so it might not be an adequate measure for athletes at the development levels. Moreover, Strobel et al.'s (2018) measure was developed and tested in the German context. Organizational support factors will likely be different in other countries and other professional sport systems. For example, minor league baseball players do not receive any support for their families, so Strobel et al.'s (2018) measure is unlikely to apply to minor league baseball. Therefore, it is important to examine organizational support in athlete development contexts and in a cross-cultural labor market like minor league baseball to test the transferability of their measure.

Cross-Cultural Athlete Research

Cultural and cross-cultural perspectives have become more important in athlete-centered research as scholars have recognized the need to embrace diversity and be attuned to cultural context (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). Researchers have discovered differences as well as similarities between athletes' career developments and transitions in different countries (Alfermann et al., 2004; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). For example, Kuettel et al. (2017) examined the transitions of Swiss, Danish, and Polish athletes. Noting differences between athletes from each country, the authors recommend a culturally

sensitive approach when studying athletic retirement in different contexts (see also Küttel et al., 2018).

One concept that has emerged out of cross-cultural research is the cultural transition, which refers to the psychological adjustment and developmental tasks necessary to transition from a home culture to a new culture (Ryba et al., 2016). Social support, especially from family members is often found to be especially salient during cultural transitions. Blodgett and Schinke (2015) described how Aboriginal hockey players who relocated to Euro-Canadian cultural contexts found it especially difficult to navigate a loss of social support and Samuel et al. (2019) explained that Israeli handball players training in Germany struggled most with the distance from their family and partners.

Organizational support has only been considered peripherally in cross-cultural athlete research. Stambulova et al. (2007) conducted a comparative study of 69 French and 88 Swedish athletes and found that both sets of athletes perceived high organizational and financial support for their retirement. Ryba et al. (2016) noted that high-revenue sports clubs and teams provided more support for cultural transitions such as interpreters, drivers, and ethnic cooks, but that support was contingent on athletes performing well immediately. However, researchers have not examined whether athletes from different cultural backgrounds have different organizational support needs and preferences. Minor league baseball is an important context to consider cross-cultural interpretations of organizational support because approximately 47% of players are foreign-born, and many athletes emigrate from countries where Spanish is their first language and must undergo cultural transitions.

Latin America and Minor League Baseball

Although there is a growing body of research on minor league baseball, scholars often focus on domestic players rather than foreign players because datasets are built around the MLB draft, whereas foreign players enter the system as free agents (e.g., Pifer et al., 2020). Research on Latin American baseball tends to focus on MLB's exploitation of talent in developing countries (Klein, 1989; Marcano & Fidler, 1999, 2004; Ottenson, 2014; Regalado, 2000). Scholars have critiqued MLB for taking advantage of the economic hardships in many developing Latin American countries to recruit cheap talent (Klein, 1989; Marcano & Fidler, 1999, 2004; Regalado, 2000). Marcano and Fidler (1999, 2004) further critiqued MLB for treating Latino players in ways that would not be tolerated in the US, including flouting child labor laws, discouraging young Latino players from using agents, and tolerating the predatory *buscone* system (Regalado, 2000). Although they noted regulatory changes by the MLB, Marcano and Fidler (2004) maintain that organizations have not fixed any fundamental problems and more recent research continues to highlight the social costs of MLB recruitment in Latin America (Ottenson, 2014). This critical research paints an overall picture of unfair labor practices that exploit the relative deprivation faced by many Latino youth.

One of the few studies on Latin American baseball players' experiences was conducted by Ruiz et al. (2020) on academy players in the Dominican Republic. Ruiz et al. (2020) identified cultural influences on athletes' transitions into and out of academies, including the importance of collectivism and faith, and a desire to provide financially for their families. Players also lacked resources needed for development in their pre-professional years, although they received more organizational support when they were selected for an academy. Collectively, this research has detailed the different culture and developmental conditions experienced by baseball players in Latin America. However, we are not aware of any research that has considered players' perspectives while they are in the minor league system.

Method

To examine organizational support for minor league baseball players' development, we designed a player survey with input from two non-profit organizations that support minor league baseball players. More Than Baseball (<https://www.morethanbaseball.org/>) was started by former and current minor league baseball players to provide support services for minor leaguers. We also partnered with another organization that declined to be named in the published version of this

study. The goal of the survey was to blend academic theory and practical thinking to understand how minor league baseball players could be better served by organizations, including minor league baseball franchises and the MLB.

Participants

We collaborated with the same two non-profit organizations to distribute an online survey to the organizations' email lists. The organizations had approximately 1,600 current players subscribed to their services. Respondents had the option of taking the survey in Spanish or English, and they returned a total of 344 total surveys. No questions forced a response because of the precarity of minor league baseball players' jobs—consequently, we had 184 complete responses for the exploratory results, 169 complete responses for the explanatory results, and 256 responses for the open-ended questions. Data were collected in 2019 and part of 2020, but every question instructed participants to consider the 2019 season.

Survey Development

The survey consisted of two parts: an exploratory part with open-ended questions and an explanatory part with close-ended survey scales. The exploratory part of our survey investigated the gap between baseball players' developmental needs and organizational support based on Chen et al.'s (2004) study of gaps between career needs and development programs. We developed a list of 15 organizational support factors based on a review of prior studies and with input and feedback from the non-profit partners. Example factors include quality coaching, wages/salary, playing opportunities, health care benefits, quality facilities, and communication between the front office and players. Athletes were asked to "please select the 5 most important areas to your development as a baseball player in 2019." We also asked athletes to indicate whether their developmental needs were met in the same 15 factors using the question, "indicate whether your developmental needs were met in the following areas in 2019." Combining these two questions allowed us to identify whether any important needs were not being met by organizational support. Our exploratory section also included open-ended questions to capture athletes' perspectives on organizational support factors. We asked, "if there is anything that affected your developmental needs not on this list, please comment on it here" and "what change would you most like to see in minor league baseball?"

The explanatory part of our survey examined the relationship between overall organizational support and athletes' perceptions of development. Our dependent variable was athletes' perceptions of their performance development measured by Kuhn and Rundle-Thiele's (2009) self-perception of learning achievement scale, which asks respondents to rate their progress on specific learning outcomes. Although the scale has not been used in sport contexts before, it was the best scale to use in this study for the following reasons. First, existing development and training scales in organizational behavior are unsuited for measuring perceptions of development because they focus on satisfaction with training experiences rather than perceptions of development. Second, Kuhn and Rundle-Thiele (2009) found that perceptions of learning achievement were correlated with actual test scores, suggesting that trainees' perceptions of learning achievement are based on actual learning and are, therefore, an accurate measure of development. Third, the scale could be modified to examine specific learning outcomes in baseball, ensuring that we were able to report practically relevant results to our collaborators. Thus, respondents were asked to rate their progress in five separate areas: physical skills, mental skills, on-field ability, health, and consistency. Responses were measured on a 5-point scale where 1 = no progress and 5 = extraordinary progress.

Our independent variable was organizational support for professional athletes measured using two factors from Strobel et al.'s (2018) organizational support scale—second career support and private problem support. Our non-profit partners explained that families were not integrated into minor league baseball, so the integration of family factor did not apply and was excluded from the survey. Our non-profit partners also questioned the applicability of some other items in the organizational support scale, such as "my club helps me find employment out of season." We decided to include one item regarding stress for private problem support based on the

recommendations of our non-profit partners (“my organization helped me deal with stress”). All items were measured on a 5-point scale where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

Exploratory Data Analysis

We analyzed how many athletes rated a given developmental need in their top five developmental needs and in their top five unmet developmental needs to determine gaps in organizational support. Additionally, content analyses were conducted for 26 responses to the question, “If there is anything that affected your developmental needs not on this list, please comment on it here” and 256 responses to the question “What change would you most like to see in minor league baseball?”. The first round of open-coding was used to inductively identify themes in the responses and then the second round of deductive coding was used to count the number of responses referring to each theme. Coding was performed non-exclusively so that one response could include multiple themes. For example, a response such as, “salaries are so low that they're barely enough to support us, and if we have families, it's even worse,” was coded and counted as including two themes: *pay/salary/financial support* and *family*. After discovering the importance of wages/salary as an unmet need for all players, we conducted post hoc analyses to explore whether there were correlations between wages/salary and other basic needs such as sleep and nutrition.

Cultural psychologists recognize that language and country are the two main sources of cross-cultural difference (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009); therefore, it is important to consider such differences when examining organizational support in minor league baseball to make sure that the findings are transferable across cultural groups. We split the respondents into sub-groups based on whether they answered the survey in Spanish or English and based on whether they indicated their country of origin to be in Latin America or North America. Splitting respondents based on country of origin gave the same overall results as splitting respondents by language because 99% of players indicating a country of origin in North America took the survey in English and 88% of players indicating a country of origin in Latin America took the survey in Spanish. Therefore, we focus on response language when reporting the results to keep the results concise.

Explanatory Data Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed on the two Strobel et al. (2018) factors of second career support and private problem support using data from 169 minor league baseball respondents. Standard Hu and Bentler (1999) cutoffs for model fit were applied. To better reflect the context of a North American private development system, one item was dropped from second career support (“my club helps me find employment out of season”) and one item was added to private problem support (“my organization helped me deal with stress”) and assessed for improved model fit. Next, the five items used to quantify self-perception of learning achievement were averaged to create an overall measure of athlete development. Finally, ordinary least squares regression was used to test the influence of the improved organizational support factors on the dependent variable of self-perception of learning achievement.

Results

Sample Characteristics

The sample characteristics are shown in Table 1, which also provides population estimates of the prevalence of demographic variables in minor league baseball. Table 1 demonstrates that our sample was representative of the racial composition of the minors. The sample also included players distributed roughly proportionally across professional draft and the minor league levels although players are underrepresented from the lowest levels in minor league baseball. Lastly, the sample contained approximately 43% of players born outside of the United States, including many players from Latin American countries that supply labor to MLB such as Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Cuba.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics and Population Estimates in Minor League Baseball

	Sample characteristics	Population estimates
Number	344	6,000
Race		
White	62.9%	63.7% ^a
Non-White	37.1%	36.3% ^a
Country of birth		
United States	57.3%	51.0% ^b
Venezuela	16.9%	24.9% ^b
Dominican Republic	12.7%	18.5% ^b
Colombia	4.2%	0.9% ^b
Mexico	2.3%	1.2% ^b
Panama	1.2%	0.9% ^b
Cuba	0.4%	0.7% ^b
Other non-US countries	5.0%	1.9% ^b
Highest level achieved		
MLB	2.7%	-
AAA	13.0%	11.1% ^c
AA	14.6%	11.1% ^c
High A	15.0%	11.9% ^c
Low A	17.6%	11.9% ^c
Short-season A	13.8%	8.4% ^c
Rookie and summer leagues	23.4%	45.7% ^c
Undrafted	31.5%	-
Drafted	68.5%	-
Round 1-10	31.1%	25% ^d
Round 11-20	31.8%	25% ^d
Round 21-30	22.2%	25% ^d
Round 31-40	14.8%	25% ^d

Note: ^adata from Armour & Levitt's (2016) study of demographics in MLB; ^bdata from Cooper's (2018) analysis of minor league demographics adjusted to include Dominican Summer League players; ^cauthors' calculations; ^dbased on number of players drafted in each round—higher rounds will have proportion of players adjusted up and lower rounds adjusted down due to signing choices and attrition consistent with sample characteristics.

Exploratory Results

English and Spanish respondents shared four of the top five developmental needs: quality coaching, wages/salary, playing opportunities, and nutritious food (see Table 2). English respondents reported quality coaching (71%) and wages/salary (65%) as their top two development needs whereas Spanish respondents report quality coaching (65%) and playing opportunities (65%) as most important. English and Spanish respondents also shared three of the least frequently rated needs: quality of clubhouse staff (5%), ease of travel (9%), and in-season housing (17%). Interestingly, travel and housing are often listed in player grievances with minor league baseball (Broshius, 2013; Hayhurst, 2014). Our results suggest that although players might see difficult travel and substandard housing as problems, they do not always see them as relevant to their development when compared with other needs. The biggest differences between respondent groups were that Spanish-speaking respondents ranked equipment and health care higher than English-speaking respondents, whereas English respondents ranked communication between the front office and players higher than Spanish respondents (see Table 2).

Table 2*Percentage of Respondents Rating Need as Top Five Developmental Need*

	All (n = 184)	English (n = 121)	Spanish (n = 63)
Quality coaching	69%	71%	65%
Wages/salary	61%	65%	54%
Playing opportunities	57%	53%	65%
Nutritious food	52%	50%	56%
Quality of training/strength and conditioning staff	44%	43%	46%
Communication between coaching staff and players	43%	41%	48%
Sleep	33%	39%	22%
Quality facilities	27%	28%	24%
Off-season training opportunities	26%	31%	16%
Communication between front office and players	23%	31%	8%
Health care benefits	20%	11%	38%
In-season housing	17%	19%	14%
Equipment	14%	7%	27%
Ease of travel	9%	10%	6%
Quality of clubhouse staff	5%	2%	11%

Table 3 shows that English and Spanish respondents shared three of the five most frequently unmet needs: wages/salary (73%), offseason training opportunities (55%), and nutritious food (34%). For English respondents, wages/salary was by far the most frequent developmental need not met (86%). Wages/salary was also the most frequent developmental need not met (48%) for Spanish respondents although it was followed closely by offseason training opportunities (46%). For all respondents combined, two basic human necessities, nutritious food and sleep, made the top five most unmet needs, which suggests the minor league baseball system is failing to provide fundamental needs for athletes' development. However, there were only two categories where more than 50% of the total respondents reported their needs as not being met: wages/salary and offseason training opportunities.

We further examined correlations between unmet needs to determine whether a lack of nutritious food and sleep were related to having unmet wage/salary needs. Significant partial correlations were observed between wages/salary and nutritious food ($r = 0.28$, $p = .0001$) and wages/salary and sleep ($r = 0.16$, $p = .0374$) as unmet needs. Of those who said their nutritious food need was not met, 90% said their wage/salary needs were also not met. Of those who said their sleep needs were not met, 83% said their wage/salary needs were not met. However, the directionality of the relationships suggests that having unmet wage/salary needs does not necessarily mean poor nutrition and sleep; of those with unmet wage/salary needs, 43.3% said their nutritious food need was not met and 36.4% said their sleep needs were not met. Instead, it appears as though the mechanisms where pay is related to fundamental needs are complicated beyond the variables collected in this study and deserving of targeted future research.

Table 3
Top Five Unmet Needs as a Percentage of Respondents with Needs Unmet

	All (n = 184)	English (n = 121)	Spanish (n = 63)
Wages/salary	73%	86%	47%
Off-season training opportunities	55%	59%	46%
Communication between front office and players	43%	57%	-
Nutritious food	34%	37%	29%
Sleep	31%	-	27%
Ease of travel	-	39%	-
Playing opportunities	-	-	25%

Table 4 demonstrates that English and Spanish respondents shared four of the same categories as the most frequently met needs: quality coaching (86%), quality of clubhouse staff (86%), quality of training/strength and conditioning (82%), and quality of facilities (82%). For all categories, English respondents reported their needs were being met at a lower frequency than Spanish respondents. More than half of Spanish respondents reported their needs were being met in every category. The biggest difference between English and Spanish respondents is regarding communication between front office and players—57% of English players reported communication as an unmet need whereas 95% of Spanish respondents reported communication as a met need.

Table 4
Top Five Met Needs as a Percentage of Respondents with Needs Met

	All (n = 184)	English (n = 121)	Spanish (n = 63)
Quality coaching	86%	85%	89%
Quality of clubhouse staff	86%	81%	97%
Health care benefits	85%	85%	-
Quality of training/strength and conditioning staff	82%	77%	92%
Quality of facilities	82%	78%	92%
Communication between coaching staff and players	-	-	95%

When looking at each player’s unique self-reported developmental needs, we found that 28% of players report that all five of their developmental needs were being met whereas 7% report that none of their top five needs are being met. There are differences between Spanish and English respondents in their perception of whether their top five developmental needs were being met. Only 18% of English respondents report all their top five developmental needs being met compared with 46% of Spanish respondents.

Analysis of the open-ended questions revealed similar trends regarding development needs. When asked to comment on anything else that affected their developmental needs, 53% of respondents chose to elaborate on financial aspects in terms of financial support or salary. A focus on financial aspects is notable because we already included wages/salary in the survey. Players insistence on discussing finances reflected their desire to further explain their circumstances and their frustration with the status quo in minor league baseball. For example, one player explained, “Players need financial help from their organization for off-season workouts, strength and baseball. Also, they need reference and financial help to recovery and rehab facilities in order to stay healthy and stay in shape for the season.” This player, like others, recognized that financial support stretched beyond player salaries and influenced other aspects of athlete development, such as off-season training and recovery. In addition to financial aspects, playing opportunities were mentioned in 19% of open-ended responses, and issues relating to fairness and off-season support were mentioned in 15% and 12% of responses, respectively.

When asked what they would change about the minor league system (see Table 5), a striking 94% of English respondents and 76% of Spanish respondents mentioned something related to finances, usually increased pay, or year-long salaries. Off-season support and better food and nutrition were also mentioned by 5% of English respondents and 8% of Spanish respondents. Spanish respondents also favored more opportunities for play and promotion (13%) and better treatment and care (8%), whereas English respondents desired better communication from the front office (6%) and less arduous travel (6%).

Table 5

Content Analysis of What Minor League Baseball Players Would Change about the Minor Leagues

	All (n = 235)	English (n = 156)	Spanish (n = 79)
Pay/salary/financial support	89%	94%	76%
Off-season	7%	8%	5%
Food/nutrition	7%	8%	5%
Opportunities	6%	2%	13%
Fairness	6%	5%	6%
Housing/accommodation	6%	5%	6%
Travel	5%	6%	4%
Communication	4%	6%	1%
Treatment/care	4%	2%	8%
Coaching/training	4%	4%	4%
Quality of life/well-being	3%	4%	3%
Facilities	3%	5%	0%
Work/financial stress	2%	3%	1%
Family	2%	0%	5%
Education/career/personal development	2%	0%	5%
Physical health/safety/rehab	1%	1%	1%
Race/ethnicity	1%	1%	3%
Fewer teams/restructuring	1%	2%	0%
Other	4%	3%	5%

Note: content is not cumulative because each response could include multiple content codes.

Developmental needs that emerged from the open-ended questions included *fairness*, *treatment/care*, *family*, *race/ethnicity*, and *education/career/personal development*. Issues of fairness pervaded many responses, including issues of unfair pay, unfair treatment from coaches, and unfair treatment of lower draft picks. Players also identified issues around treatment and care with a player writing that he would like to improve the “overall treatment of players. Players need to be treated as humans and not as property.” Some Spanish respondents included their families in their responses, such as “Also, salaries are so low that they’re barely enough to support us, and if we have families, it’s even worse.” Issues of race and ethnicity were also present in the responses with a player writing he would like to change “Equality for people of color and Latinos and not being, in the eyes of the coaches, inferior or superior to Americans.” Lastly, five percent of Spanish respondents requested more support for education, post-baseball careers, and personal development.

Explanatory Results

In the CFA of the Strobel et al. (2018) model applied to MiLB, the results in Table 6 indicate an acceptable model fit for some measures ($\chi^2/df = 3.107$, CFI = .936, TLI = .906, SRMR = .050) and an unacceptable fit for others (RMSEA = .085). The CR for both factors exceed 0.70, but the

AVE both fall under 0.5. In particular, the standardized factor loading for the item “My club helps me find employment out of season” does not exceed 0.5.

Table 6
Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Items	M	SD	Strobel model in MiLB			New Model in MiLB		
			λ	CR	AVE	λ	CR	AVE
Second Career Support				0.71	0.40		0.74	0.49
My club supports me if I try to build up a professional career besides my career as a player	3.12	1.30	0.72			0.71		
My club provides me with opportunities to build up prospects for life after my active sports career	2.26	1.36	0.72			0.71		
My club offers structures which enable me to achieve further education and qualification besides my active sports career	3.49	1.41	0.66			0.68		
My club helps me find employment out of season	1.35	0.85	0.35			n/a		
Private Problem Support				0.79	0.49		0.85	0.52
The club helps me by solving my non-sports-related problems	3.00	1.34	0.72			0.70		
I can count on the person in the club to support me if I have problems	3.49	1.33	0.65			0.67		
The club helps me with organizational or administrative matters and paperwork	3.25	1.35	0.66			0.65		
I feel that I can always turn to the club when I have problems	2.81	1.43	0.76			0.77		
My organization helped me deal with stress	3.10	1.35	n/a			0.82		

To adapt the organizational support measures to the U.S. context we dropped the role of the organization in finding employment out of season and added the role of the organization in providing support for player stress. In this model, the χ^2/df measure improves, three measures shift from acceptable to close-fitting (CFI = .967, TLI = .951, SRMR = .042), and RMSEA changes from an unacceptable to acceptable fit. In terms of construct validity, CR and AVE values are higher than the Strobel model for both factors and exceed acceptable limits except for the AVE of second career support which is just below the cut-off at 0.49. Overall, the findings suggest that the Strobel et al. (2018) measure of organizational support suffers when translated to the US context, and although some improvements can be made (such as including stress items), a more general measure is needed to capture organizational support in different professional sport systems.

The regression to test the influence of organizational support on athletes’ self-perception of learning achievement used the improved factors for private problem support and second career support. The model R^2 was .169, and both private problem support ($\beta=0.149$, $p=0.049$) and second career support ($\beta=0.235$, $p=.001$) were associated with increases in self-perception of learning achievement (on a 5-point scale).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine organizational support for athletes’ development in minor league baseball. Our results show that organizational support is positively and significantly related to minor league baseball players’ perceptions of development. However, our results also identify important unmet developmental needs, identify differences between English and Spanish respondents’ perceptions, and show that existing measures of organizational support need to be improved for future research on professional athletes and athlete development.

Our results show important areas where minor league baseball players' developmental needs are not being met. Wages/salary were the second most frequently identified important developmental need, but 73% of players reported their needs as unmet in this area. Moreover, 89% of players identified pay or salary as the change they would make in the minor league system. Pay has recently become an important issue in minor league baseball. The Blue Jays increased minor-league wages in 2020, and recent reductions to the minor league system have been justified to increase pay for the remaining players. Although commentators have often assumed pay is an issue of fairness, our results add to this debate by showing that players see pay as a necessary input to their development.

There is a lack of literature on how pay and financial support influences athlete development. While scholars typically state that financial support is necessary for athlete development (De Bosscher et al., 2006), there is little consideration of *how* financial support promotes athlete development. Similarly, there has been no research on what level of pay is necessary, sufficient, or optimal for promoting athlete development. According to social exchange theory and need fulfillment theory, the two theories underpinning organizational support theory (Kurtessis et al, 2015), there are two ways that financial support relate to athlete development. First, building on social exchange theory, athletes are likely to perceive financial support as evidence that organizations value them and care about their well-being, which promotes reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In this case, higher pay and financial support promotes development by encouraging athletes to perform better for their teams and engage in extra role behaviors. Similar predictions are made by other theories designed to explain pay issues in organizations such as equity theory (Adams, 1965) and distributive justice theory (Homans, 1961). Our results provide some support for social exchange processes because athletes interpreted their pay level using socially constructed ideas such as "fairness" and "care," and some believed they were treated like "property." Therefore, low pay is likely to inhibit the social exchange process between athletes and baseball organizations.

Second, building on need fulfillment theory, athletes will have many basic needs that require fulfillment and pay will help them satisfy those needs so that they can focus on development objectives. Scholars usually associate organizational support with higher-order need fulfillment (Kurtessis et al, 2015). However, minor league baseball players also rely on organizations to help fulfill lower order needs, such as shelter and nutrition (Maslow, 1943). Our findings provide some support for need fulfillment processes because 34% of respondents identified nutritious food as a top unmet developmental need, and many open-ended responses explained that their pay was at or below subsistence level. Furthermore, correlations between wages/salary and nutritious food and sleep illustrated that there are relationships between financial support and fundamental needs. One interpretation of these results is that financial support can help athletes meet their subsistence needs, which is a precondition for effective performance development.

However, future research is needed to unpack the complex relationship between financial support and unmet needs since we found having unmet wages/salary does not necessarily cause poor nutrition and sleep. For instance, a common complaint from minor league baseball players is that, although teams provide some meals at the club house, these meals vary in quality between teams and can be insufficient to meet players' needs (e.g., a baked potato) (Hayhurst, 2014; Verlander, 2021). Another of the main challenges to players' nutrition needs is eating while travelling when food choices can be limited to fast food restaurants (Hayhurst, 2014). Therefore, although higher pay might help players eat better, there are other organizational support challenges that must be addressed to help players meet their nutrition needs. Similarly, although some sleep challenges are likely due to players living in overcrowded and substandard housing to afford rent, there are also challenges associated with scheduling and travel that inhibit players' sleep (Hayhurst, 2014; Verlander, 2021). Thus, although the importance of finances stands out as a major finding of this study, researchers have barely considered the complex pathways whereby financial support is related to athlete development, indicating the need for future research.

Although we identified many holes in organizational support for minor league baseball players, MLB and its affiliates are fulfilling many critical developmental needs. Our results show that 28% of players report all five of their top developmental needs being met and only 7% of players report none of their top five developmental needs being met. Notably, players rated quality coaching as the most important developmental need and nearly all players rated this need as being

met. These results are consistent with Brouwers et al.'s (2015) finding that coaching provision and coach development was the most important pillar of tennis players' development. Since players agree with coaches and high-performance managers that coaching is the most important development need, scholars and practitioners can be more confident that different athlete development stakeholders will support resources being directed toward improved coaching.

There were also important differences between respondents who chose to answer the survey in English and Spanish. Overall, Spanish respondents rated more needs as being met than English respondents. It is unlikely that organizations are providing more support for Spanish-speaking players than English-speaking players for all the factors measured in this study. If critical scholars are correct that MLB exploits the relative deprivation experienced by many Latin American youth (Klein, 1989; Marcano & Fidler, 1999, 2004; Regalado, 2000), then it might be that Spanish-speaking respondents are used to receiving lower levels of organizational support and have different expectations about what they need to develop. For instance, Ruiz et al. (2020) explained how Latin American players lacked resources needed for development in their pre-professional years. On the other hand, the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) system provides high levels of organizational support to developing players in the US. It is possible that English-speaking respondents are familiar with the NCAA system and, consequently, have higher expectations about what they need to reach their potential.

Spanish respondents' reference to their families when discussing development needs was consistent with the limited research on athletes' experiences in Latin America (Ruiz et al., 2020) and with the importance of social support during cultural transitions (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Ryba et al., 2016; Samuel et al., 2019). According to Ruiz et al. (2020) family is an important theme in the motivation and experiences of Dominican players. According to Blodgett and Schinke (2015) and Samuel et al. (2019), social support from family members is especially important for athletes undergoing cultural transitions. Therefore, it is likely that family is an important factor that must be considered by organizations providing support for Latin American athletes in minor league baseball. For instance, players might send some pay to their families through remittances, and they might require extra support to bring their families with them or stay in contact during the season.

English respondents preferred communication between front office and players and most rated this need as being unmet, whereas Spanish respondents rated communication as a low need and nearly all indicated that their needs were being met. English- and Spanish-speaking respondents might interpret communication between the front office and players differently. Organizations often provide interpreters for foreign language athletes (Ryba et al., 2016), possibly explaining why Spanish-speaking respondents rated this factor highly. Future research is needed to examine how minor league baseball players and other developmental athletes perceive communication with front-office players. Lastly, although Spanish and English respondents all identified pay, salary, and financial support as the key issue in minor league development, they had different priorities for many issues, such as opportunities and communication. These findings suggest scholars and practitioners need to consider cross-cultural differences consistent with recent research on the cultural psychology and athletes (Alfermann et al., 2004; Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Kuettel et al., 2017; Küttel et al., 2018; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). However, prior research has been narrowly focused on athletes' career transitions and retirement. This study considers cross cultural implications for organizational support factors showing that a cross-cultural approach is also necessary for organizations designed to facilitate athlete development.

Two adapted factors of Strobel et al.'s (2018) organizational support measure explained 16% of the variance in athletes' perceptions of development, which suggests that organizational support is a significant variable in athlete development. However, the CFA results and discussions with our non-profit partners raise questions about the scale's generalizability. Whereas Strobel et al.'s (2018) factors refer to specific support factors, such as integrating family and finding off-season jobs, management researchers have theorized organizational support as a general perception of how organizations value workers' contributions (Eisenberger et al., 1986). We recommend new scales be developed that better capture athletes' perceptions of organizational support. General items, rather than specific organizational support factors developed by Strobel et al. (2018), will be more consistent with foundational theory and more likely to transfer to different athlete populations.

Implications for Athlete Development Professionals

These findings have implications for MLB and its affiliates, especially as the system is changed to accommodate fewer development teams (Blum, 2021). Players report that the minor league system has met their needs for traditional organizational support factors, such as quality coaching, strength and conditioning, and facilities. However, our findings suggest that baseball organizations can improve most athletes' perceptions of development by increasing wages and salaries and providing off-season training opportunities. Moreover, it seems as though many players are lacking nutritious food and sleep, which are basic human needs. MLB and its affiliates should address these unmet needs as they change the development system. Changes already include weekly minimum pay increasing 38% to 72%, which is consistent with our findings and likely to better meet players' needs (Blum, 2021). However, it should be noted that even with these pay increases the minimums for players at most levels will still be less than the US poverty threshold (Fagan, 2021). According to hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943), wages still may not be enough to satisfy basic needs and, therefore, will not be enough to contribute to greater development. Other changes included fewer teams, realignment to reduce travel, and agreements to improve facilities. However, only one percent of players mentioned reducing teams or restructuring as the change they would make to the minor leagues. Similarly, ease of travel and quality facilities had low and moderate importance in players rankings. Therefore, other types of support, such as off-season training and communication from the front office, should be prioritized instead.

Our findings also have implications for non-profit organizations that have emerged to support players' needs that are currently unmet by MLB. Financial support is critical for supporting players with insufficient wages. Therefore, grant programs and other types of financial and in-kind support are likely to have the largest perceived impact on player development. However, given MLB has recently increased wages, non-profits might also move to address other unmet needs identified in this study. For example, off-season training opportunities were a frequently unmet need that MLB and its affiliates seem unwilling or unable to provide. Therefore, non-profit organizations will be able to have a large impact on player development by providing off-season training opportunities. Lastly, organizations should recognize that English- and Spanish-speaking players might prioritize different needs in their development. In our study, English-speaking respondents were especially concerned with front office communication where Spanish-speaking respondents prioritized playing opportunities and rate health care benefits and equipment as more important than English-speakers.

Limitations and Future Research

Our explanatory model had many limitations stemming from the unsuitability of the Strobel et al. (2018) measure for the minor league baseball context. Future researchers will benefit from creating a more generalized measure. Moreover, organizational support theory is consistent with generalized measures of perceived support rather than specific measures (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kurtessis et al, 2015). Our results focused on athlete performance development; however, scholars have increasingly studied athlete development as a holistic goal. Only two percent of respondents mentioned support for education, other careers, or personal development as a change they would make to the minor league system, which suggests that players were focused on their performance development. Indeed, our non-profit partners also focused on performance development. Future research on minor league baseball should consider holistic development objectives. Lastly, this study identified a theoretical gap around the role of income in athlete development. Exploratory research on athletes' experiences is needed to theorize the mechanisms through which income affects development, followed by confirmatory research that measures the influence of income changes on objective performance measures.

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