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## Introduction to the Special Issue: NCAA Division III College Athlete Development and Experience

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## Introduction to the Special Issue: NCAA Division III College Athlete Development and Experience

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There is abundant literature on a plethora of topics associated with intercollegiate athletics. Yet, when one begins to dig deeply into the previous literature, it becomes apparent that most of the attention of this work has focused on Division I (DI) of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Given that the NCAA is comprised of three separate divisions of play, it is critically important that research focus on the unique aspects of each level. Even though the NCAA Division III (DIII) level contains a greater number of institutions and more athletes than either of the other divisions of play, this group largely has been ignored throughout the previous literature (NCAA, 2021a; NCAA, 2021b; Williams et al., 2020). The absence of athletics scholarships likely is the most familiar hallmark of the DIII level, and as this sets it apart from its DI and DII counterparts, it provides another distinct area of opportunity to examine the experiences of DIII collegiate athletes. This lack of previous literature, combined with the fact that each NCAA division has its own unique characteristics, underscores the need for additional research throughout intercollegiate sport levels of play.

As a result, this special issue sought to fill gaps in the previous research by providing an opportunity to focus specifically on DIII collegiate athletes. As former Division III athletes and co-directors of the newly-established Institute for Division III Athlete Wellbeing and Athletic Leadership at the State University of New York - College at Cortland, we eagerly welcomed the opportunity to put together this special issue of the *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*. We sought to identify and showcase work being done to understand the well-being challenges and initiatives to enhance the Division III athlete's experience.

This special issue begins with an article by Hodges that provides an overview of athlete well-being challenges at one large Division III program, while also offering a framework for how other DIII programs and conferences might explore the well-being of their own athletes. The results of a study by Rubin and colleagues provide insight into the Black male Division III athlete experience at two rural institutions.

Reflecting what the NCAA and others have acknowledged is a priority for college athlete well-being across divisions, we include three papers that examine mental health for DIII athletes. Valster and colleagues examined the prevalence of self-reported mental health symptoms and uncovered clinical levels of distress along with sub-clinical levels of other mental health conditions. In looking at the prevalence and predictors of depressive symptoms in DIII athletes, Wilson and collaborators found similarities to the DI athlete population in the prevalence of mental health concerns including stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. On the other hand, Stokowski and colleagues did not find stress, anxiety, or depression levels of concern in a sample of DIII athletes from across the country, suggesting athletic participation at the DIII level might provide some protective factors.

Support services and mentorship are the topics of the last two papers. Mitchell and Barrett explored the experiences of athletes as their institution made the decision to transition from the DIII to DII level of play. They determined the change in divisions was disruptive for many athletes and concluded programs and institutions may need to provide support services to assist athletes in

managing their stressors during such a transition. Swim and colleagues explored mentoring of female athletes into the coaching profession. They found female athletes reported mostly positive mentoring experiences with female coaches, but a mix of positive and negative mentoring experiences with male coaches. Their results suggest the need for more intentional mentoring from coaches and for athletics departments to assist male coaches in creating positive experiences for female athletes.

It is our hope that this special issue on DIII athletes will inspire and motivate researchers to continue to explore the abundance of additional research questions specific to this division of intercollegiate sport.

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