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# **Creating Change in Intercollegiate Athletics: The Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm for Athletic Departments**

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## Abstract

In 2011, the Office for Civil Rights issued a “Dear Colleague Letter” instructing universities to take action regarding sexual assault on college campuses. Specifically, universities must better educate students on the prevention of sexual assault, in the hope of reducing violence against women. Previous research is inconclusive on the involvement of intercollegiate student-athletes in incidences of sexual assault; however, recent high-profile cases of sexual misconduct at universities indicate that student-athletes are not immune to this issue. The purpose of this study was to explore how sexual assault is viewed within the culture of intercollegiate athletics, including education, occurrence, and prevention. Through interviews with former intercollegiate athletes, three main findings emerged: (1) *Participant Knowledge*, (2) *Sexual Assault Within the Context of College Athletics*; and (3) *Creating Change in Athletic Department Culture*. Using grounded theory, these themes were combined to create the Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm for Athletic Departments.

*Keywords:* policy, sexual assault, student-athletes

## Introduction

Prior to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, sexual assault, rape, and other forms of violence against women were rarely discussed in public forums, let alone studied in academic settings. During this era of the women's rights movement, rape crisis centers and other support mechanisms for women were created nationwide, though little research into either victimization or perpetration was conducted during this time (Sable, Danis, Mauzy & Gallagher, 2006). The 1980s began to see general research in the field of violence against women. After a multitude of high-profile athletes garnered media attention specifically for violent acts against women in the 1980s and 1990s (see Benedict, 1997), researchers in fields ranging from psychology to higher education took notice and began conducting studies to assess the prevalence of student-athlete violence against women (i.e., Crosset, Ptacek, McDonald, & Benedict, 1996; Koss & Gaines, 1993).

Empirical results regarding the prevalence of student-athlete violence against women from the 1990s were mixed, and, as such, were subject to criticisms from the field. Further, there is a definitive gap in the literature in the 2000s. In April 2011, however, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) issued a "Dear Colleague Letter" (DCL) as a call for universities to more swiftly and adequately address incidences of sexual assault by students, though there is little current research on student-athlete populations (Ali, 2011). In the wake of the DCL, universities must have a fuller picture, not only of student sexual assault in general, but also of student-athlete involvement as they begin implementing or revamping programs to reduce sexual assault on campus. Due to the relative lack of current research, and considering past criticisms on methodology and theoretical frameworks, it is imperative to study sexual assault within intercollegiate athletics to adequately address the problem.

## Background

Until the 1990s, research in the field of student-athlete violence against women was nonexistent. Melnick (1992) was one of the first in the field of sports to call upon colleagues to examine the relationship between intercollegiate athletic participation and sexual assault by male student-athletes. Perhaps in direct response to Melnick's (1992) call to action, researchers in the mid-1990s began examining violence against women perpetrated by male athletes, particularly intercollegiate student-athletes. Mostly quantitative in nature, empirical findings were mixed. Crosset and colleagues (1996) found an overrepresentation of male student-athletes as perpetrators of sexual assault in reports to campus judicial affairs, and Koss and Gaines (1993) reported a low but significant relationship in the self-reports of sexual aggression by student-athletes. Further, one study documented a disproportionate identification of student-athletes as perpetrators by college women (Fritner & Rubinson, 1993), and another showed student-athletes had higher levels of self-reported sexual aggression as compared to non-athletes (Boeringer, 1996). In contrast, Crosset, Benedict and McDonald (1995) found that student-athletes were not represented at higher rates in campus police reports, and while they self-reported higher levels of sexually aggressive attitudes (Boeringer, 1996; 1999), they did not self-report higher levels of aggressive acts against women (Boeringer, 1996; Schwartz & Nogrady, 1996). Further, Crosset (1999) and Koss and Cleveland (1996) detailed the methodological and conceptual concerns with the studies that led to such mixed empirical results, including calls for more qualitative research.

In the last 15 years, only two studies sought to question whether male student-athletes are more likely to perpetrate sexual assault (Sawyer, Thompson, & Chicorelli, 2002; Young, Desmarais, Baldwin, & Chandler, 2017) and many studies have documented the generally positive effects of sexual assault prevention programming with student-athletes (Foubert & Perry, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; McMahon & Farmer, 2009; Moynihan & Banyard, 2008; Moynihan, Banyard, Arnold, Eckstein, & Stapleton, 2010). Most recently, Young and colleagues (2017) discovered that intercollegiate student-athletes and recreational athletes exhibited similar rates of sexual coercion, with notably higher rates than non-athletes.

## Rape Culture

Prior to the 1980s, rape was assumed to be a consequence of human nature, in that men were “programmed for rape” (Sanday, 1981, p. 6). However, through her study of 156 tribal societies, Sanday (1981) posited that rape is not a biological need, but something that can be attributed a society’s culture; thus, the term *rape culture* was born. Herman (1984) was the first to capture America as a rape culture. In a society where the majority of the nation’s leaders, both in the workplace and in elected government are men, “the eroticization of male dominance means that whenever women are in a subordinate position to men, the likelihood for sexual assault is great” (p. 52). Herman concluded, “To end rape, people must be able to envision a relationship between the sexes that involves sharing, warmth, and equality, and to bring about a social system in which those values are fostered” (Herman, 1984, p. 52). The ideal of a rape-free environment was supported by Messner and Sabo (1994), who wrote:

Compelling as the evidence is, we want to emphasize two points. First, *nothing inherent in men leads them to rape women*. Peggy Sanday, an anthropologist, and other researchers have found that there *are* rape-free societies in the world, and that they tend to be characterized by low levels of militarization, high levels of respect for women, high levels of participation by women in the economy and the political system, and high levels of male involvement in child care. (p. 34; emphasis original)

Thus, rape cultures are often characterized by high levels of tolerance for violence and strict sex segregation and gender roles, which foster lack of respect for women.

These characteristics of a rape culture are often cultivated and supported by rape myths. According to Burt (1980), these are “stereotypes and myths—defined as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists—in creating a climate hostile to rape victims” (p. 217). Examples of rape myths are “look at how she was dressed, she was asking for it” or “he couldn’t help himself, he’s a guy just following his sexual urges.” Rape myths include stereotypes about both victims and perpetrators, but hold only the victim accountable for the sexual assault (Burt, 1980). Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) further defined rape myths, noting they are “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (p. 134).

Rape myths and stereotypes often uphold traditional Western views on sex, gender and masculinity (i.e., women are to be virginal and chaste, men are celebrated for sexual conquest).

Burt's (1980) groundbreaking findings indicated that rape myth acceptance is "strongly connected to other deeply held and pervasive attitudes such as sex role stereotyping, distrust of the opposite sex (adversarial sexual beliefs), and acceptance of interpersonal violence" (p. 229). This last finding is particularly worrisome, as the acceptance of interpersonal violence was found to be the strongest predictor of rape myth support. In sum, rape myths and their acceptance contribute to a culture that is supportive of rape (i.e., a rape culture).

Thus, rape cultures are those that (1) "display a high level of tolerance for violence, male dominance, and sexual segregation" and (2) "lack the social constraints that discourage sexual aggression or contain social arrangements that encourage it" (Crosset, 1999, p. 245). In the realm of higher education, Sanday (1990) conducted additional research that examined college fraternities and rape culture. She found that many facets of American society, including intercollegiate athletics, are often considered to be rape cultures or display elements of rape culture. Curry (2002) exposed rape culture in college athletics, finding that locker room talk about women "promotes harmful attitudes and creates an environment supportive of sexual assault and rape" (p. 183). Messner and Sabo (1994) connected locker room talk to peer support of violence:

And when verbal sparring and bragging about sexual conquests led to actual behavior, peer group values encouraged these young men to treat females as objects of conquest. This sort of masculine peer group dynamic is at the heart of what feminists have called "the rape culture." (p. 50)

Peer support of violence is cited as the main reason for acting in a sexually aggressive way. According to Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1997), "North America is a 'rape-supportive culture,' where values and beliefs that support and encourage the sexual victimization of women are widely available to all men" (p. 52). However, just because someone is supportive of rape myths does not necessarily mean they act upon those beliefs; as such, the authors proposed that perpetrators of sexual assault do so based on perceived peer support for violence against women (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997).

## **Rationale**

Despite the somewhat mixed findings, as well as the documented successes of some prevention programs, incidences of student-athlete violence against women surged in media coverage during the last decade. Throughout 2010, multiple University of Montana football players were investigated and/or charged with sexual assault (Robbins, 2012), leading to the first sexual assault Title IX investigation by OCR. More recently, Florida State University's star quarterback and Heisman trophy winner, Jameis Winston, was investigated by the State Attorney General for sexual assault, although charges were not filed (Schlabach, 2013). Despite the lack of charges in the criminal case, the victim filed a Title IX complaint against Winston, ending with a campus code of conduct hearing that cleared Winston of the allegations (Axon, 2015). Further, the victim filed a Title IX lawsuit against Florida State, which settled out of court in January 2016 (Axon, 2016). Multiple cases of sexual assault by student-athletes continued to proliferate in the media throughout 2017 and 2018, notably at Baylor University, where the head football coach was fired in the aftermath of such crimes (Kirk, 2016), and at Michigan State

University, where the men's basketball and football programs have been under fire for their handling of violence against women (Lavigne & Noren, 2018).

While there is concern that student-athletes face unfair scrutiny in and by the media due to their higher-profile status when compared to non-athletes on college campuses (Coakley, 2009; Melnick, 1992), it remains that student-athletes do commit violence against women. Whether they do so *more* than non-athletes is not the focus of this study; the fact is, student-athletes perpetrate sexual assault, as do other students on college campuses, and this needs to be addressed for the safety of student-athletes and other students on campus. In 2007, one in five undergraduate female students were the victims of attempted or completed sexual assault while in college (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007), which prompted the OCR to release the 2011 DCL instructing universities to take more decisive action to combat sexual assault among students. While calling for institutions to more appropriately investigate and sanction perpetrators of sexual assault, the DCL also mandates that universities provide prevention education to reduce the incidences of sexual assault. Unfortunately, however, universities have struggled with complying with the new requirements set forth in the DCL, as the language of the document is both broad and vague, and many universities lack the oversight, resources, and funding to appropriately comply with the new regulations (Kelderman, 2012).

Despite the confusion, university efforts are crucial, given the devastating effects of sexual assault on its victims. College women who have experienced sexual assault were more likely than their non-victimized peers to engage in drinking and driving, binge drinking, marijuana usage, and suicidal ideation (Brener, McMahon, Warren & Douglas, 1999). Additionally, victims were more likely than non-victims to report difficulty sleeping, activity limitations, chronic pain, and frequent headaches (Black et al., 2011). More than 90% of sexual assault victims experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including nightmares and flashbacks, anxiety and irritability, and depression (Langton & Truman, 2014; Riggs, Murdock, & Walsh, 1992; U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs). Due to these debilitating and often lifelong effects, further study of sexual assault, and the implementation of evidence-based prevention activities, should seek to eliminate sexual assault entirely to make colleges, including intercollegiate athletics, a better place for young men and women. This cultural change will require continued research to explore not only the occurrence, predictors, and risk factors for student-athletes, but also the efficacy of education and prevention programming. This study fills a gap in the literature on sexual assault within college athletics and contributes to bettering the lives of student-athletes by reducing sexual assault through an evaluation of the policies and programs in intercollegiate athletics.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which former student-athletes understand sexual assault, as well as their perceptions of their athletic department's response to occurrences and prevention. Once a fuller picture is painted of the environments in which student-athletes play, practice, study, and live, prevention efforts can be tailored to help reduce sexual assault within athletic departments. The research questions for this study were:

1. What do student-athletes know about sexual assault?
2. In what ways does sexual assault occur among or between the student-athlete population?
  - a. In what ways does the occurrence of sexual assault impact student-athletes' personal lives, academic performance, and/or athletic performance?
3. What actions (i.e., programs or policies) are taken within athletic departments to prevent sexual assault?
  - a. In what ways are these effective or not effective?
4. What support is necessary to provide an optimal, sexual assault-free environment for student-athletes?

Through semi-structured interviews with former student-athletes, this study sought to understand the ways in which intercollegiate athletic departments respond to occurrences of sexual assault and work to prevent future assaults from occurring.

### **Research Design**

This study explored sexual assault in college athletics by employing qualitative research methods using a grounded theory methodology. Though a theoretical framework may influence the study (i.e., rape culture; see Sanday, 1990), grounded theory does not set out to prove an *a priori* theory and instead allows the researcher freedom in exploring the themes that emerge from participants' narratives. These themes are then combined into a story line or narrative that may be converted into a theory or paradigm model (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Participant Interviews**

Former student-athletes who have graduated, rather than current student-athletes, were recruited for this study. This decision was made for several reasons, the most important influenced by Galletta (2013): it was crucial to consider what types of participants were able to offer responses most useful to the research questions. Former student-athletes might feel a greater freedom in answering questions honestly, without fear of repercussion if their responses criticize their former athletic department. To ensure transferability and continuity, the sample was limited to student-athletes who left their institutions within the last five years. Prior to contacting former student-athletes, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, which informed the study's informed consent procedures. To insure confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms for their names and their schools.

Participants were 15 former intercollegiate student-athletes from "Big Time" athletics departments at American universities, such as those in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), the top tier of NCAA competition. Participants were purposefully recruited using snowball sampling. Though it was not intentional to specifically seek out survivors of sexual assault, four participants disclosed past sexual abuse and sexual assault, mostly occurring prior to beginning college. (See Table 1 for more information on participant demographics.) Participants engaged in two semi-structured interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed with their permission. Interviews ranged from 15 to 120 minutes, with most interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes. When possible, interviews were conducted in person, but were also completed via Skype/FaceTime or over the telephone due to geographic limitations.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics* (Note: Institution acronyms are pseudonyms)

<b>Name</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Graduation</b>
Rebecca	Caucasian	28	Female	Rowing	WU	2009
Elizabeth	Caucasian	27	Female	Rowing	WU	2010
Kelly	Caucasian	26	Female	Rowing	WU	2011
Melissa	Caucasian	25	Female	Rowing	WU	2013
Nicole	African-American	23	Female	Volleyball	AU	2013
Karen	Caucasian	23	Female	Swimming	IU	2013
Gina	Unknown	25	Female	Softball	PU	2011
Julie	Caucasian	25	Female	Field Hockey	MU	2011
Gail	Caucasian/Jewish	26	Female	Soccer	MU	2011
Michael	Caucasian	26	Male	Track & Field	MU	2012
Amy	African-American	23	Female	Rowing	MU	2013
Kim	Caucasian	26	Female	Fencing	MU	2013
Jason	Caucasian	25	Male	Ice Hockey	MU	2013
James	Caucasian	22	Male	Baseball	MU	2014
Paul	Caucasian	23	Male	Volleyball	MU	2014

### **Data Analysis**

According to Galletta (2013), data analysis should be ongoing and iterative. Therefore, interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after conducting them and data analysis began at that time in order to track how research categories, concepts, and ideas were evolving. In conducting a grounded theory study, data analysis and data collection were not two separate actions but one intertwined process. Initial data from the interviews were immediately analyzed for emerging categories and ideas (i.e., open coding). Once ideas began to surface, these categories were used to guide further data collection (i.e., axial coding), and the process continued until the data were saturated—that is, until no new information could be gleaned from further data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At the point of saturation, selective coding was conducted, which “treats the various code clusters in a selective fashion, deciding how they



relate to each other and what stories they tell” (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005, p. 5). Selective coding allowed the final themes to emerge. In seeking the relationship between the themes, the researcher produces a theory or paradigm model. The final steps in analysis were to develop a paradigm model and then present the theory via a visual model or chart (Creswell, 1998). This last step, according to Scott and Howell (2008), “is ultimately designed to paint a picture of the central phenomenon, defining and describing it in a manner sufficient to account for the study data holistically as a narrative” (p. 8). Thus, the Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm for Athletic Departments was created to finalize the data analysis process.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided the basics for qualitative trustworthiness. To establish this, the researcher engaged in triangulation of sources, interviewing a variety of former student-athletes, including both men and women. This triangulation provided a fuller picture of big-time athletics, and the various programs, policies, and responses employed, by not limiting participants to a particular school or sports team. Credibility was further established through peer debriefings. Peer debriefers are usually those with an expertise in one or more areas of the research study. For this study, the researcher conducted regular and multiple peer debriefing sessions with sport management faculty and qualitative researchers and mentors. In addition, there was strong engagement with peer debriefers in the field of rape prevention education.

The researcher also engaged in member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), allowing participants to review the transcriptions of their interviews. This allowed them to make clarifications or corrections on what they said, further allowing for richer description of their stories and experiences. In addition to member checks of the transcripts, the selective coding themes were sent to four participants. These four women had indicated an interest in the findings, thus they were sent the initial findings to garner feedback. This feedback and involvement from participants in member checking the selective coding themes was critical to ensuring credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Researcher Positionality**

According to Lincoln (1995), it is critical for researchers to be clear about their stance or position on any research subject, calling positionality a “kind of quality criteria” (p. 280). Researchers must “come clean” about their position in relation to a variety of research characteristics (i.e., race, gender, social class, education) that may influence both the researcher and participants. In previous sociological works, researchers claimed they could produce a “whole and complete truth” (Lincoln, p. 280), but this is not possible due to the varying positions taken by both researchers and participants. As such, it is critical for researchers to examine their positionality in relation to their work.

Positionality is not bias. It is reflexivity on behalf of the researcher to determine how— not if—she may influence the research based on her own background, identities, and beliefs. To explore researcher positionality in relation to this study, it is important to disclose the main researcher’s identity and characteristics that may influence participants. She is a white woman, as were the bulk of the study’s participants. She was never a Division I student-athlete, as all of the participants were. However, she worked as an academic advisor for student-athletes at a

Division I university, so she possesses a good understanding of the many demands often placed on them by their universities, coaches, and sports. While working as an academic advisor, the main researcher volunteered for a local rape crisis center, later accepting a position as Executive Director of this agency. In her role there, she regularly discussed and provided education on sexual assault to a variety of people, including college students. These experiences have ensured that she feels comfortable discussing sexual assault, a very difficult subject for many people.

As noted by Lincoln (1995), considering these topics does not invalidate or “bias” the research. If anything, having complete “detachment and author objectivity are barriers to quality, not insurance of having achieved it” (p. 280). No one is truly objective at all times and disclosing the main researcher’s role as a former sexual assault educator ensures that her voice is acknowledged in the work as separate and distinct from that of the participants.

### Findings

Based on interviews with 15 former student-athletes, three main themes emerged: (1) *Participant Knowledge*, (2) *Sexual Assault Within the Context of College Athletics*; and (3) *Creating Change in Athletic Department Culture*. Findings and sub-themes may overlap between some areas, but these are the major areas. What follows is a brief overview of each theme, which are then shaped into the paradigm model as instructed by grounded theory methodology.

#### Participant Knowledge: What They Know

The first theme, *Participant Knowledge*, directly answers Research Question 1, what do student-athletes know about sexual assault? In addition to learning *what* former student-athletes know about sexual assault, findings also indicate *how* they have come to that knowledge. Thus, the theme of *Participant Knowledge* is, quite simply, broken into the two sub-themes of what they know and how they know it.

**Defining sexual assault.** Each participant was asked to both describe and define sexual assault, as well as name the necessary components of sexual assault. They were also asked to give scenarios or situations that would be considered sexual assault. By asking these varied yet similar questions, a full picture emerged on what former student-athletes know sexual assault to be. The majority of participants responded in a way that combined both sexual assault and sexual harassment into one. Of the 15 participants, nine of them lumped assault and harassment together. Two former athletes included *all* forms of violence against women in what they knew sexual assault to be. Thus, only four participants defined sexual assault as a physical, sexual act without consent, as is the definition used in this study as well as in the field of sexual assault prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Definitions of sexual assault that include those used in the field were demonstrated by participants like Gina, who said, “I would say sexual assault is any sexual contact and the recipient has not given consent.” Most participants included both physical and verbal manifestations of nonconsensual activity. For example, Kelly said:

*Probably anytime that someone...does something that another person...um...doesn't consent to, but I don't necessarily think that consent has to be verbal. ...Um, and I don't think it, I don't think it has to be physical either. Like, I think you can be, well, obviously you can be verbally sexually assaulted.*

These varied definitions of sexual assault, including all forms of violence against women as well as sexual harassment, indicate that former student-athletes have a wide array of knowledge, some of which overlaps.

**Alcohol's influence.** When asked to describe and/or define sexual assault, many student-athletes turned to alcohol as a factor. When asked what the necessary components of sexual assault would be, James said, "I think, as a student, it's not *necessary*, but a common component is alcohol." When discussing the difference between drug-facilitated sexual assault (i.e., roofies, ketamine), he also said, "I think that alcohol plays a way bigger factor than drugged sexual assault." Participants did not touch on the issue of drugs, but alcohol was a common factor in their stories, scenarios, and descriptions. Alcohol was seen as problematic, helping enforce gray areas, blurry lines, or inability to have sound judgment, both as a victim and/or as a perpetrator. Examples of the problematic influence of alcohol included statements such as this one, from Nicole, "Because consent shouldn't be blurry, but for some reason, it is, especially on a college campus like ours, where drinking is so heavy," as well as this from Julie:

*Unfortunately this has happened to multiple friends of mine, you're so drunk, like in college, **so** drunk, and a guy takes you home and they clearly know you're not in a state where you can either consent or, um, **not** consent, and they still, uh, do sexual things to you.*

These statements on alcohol reflect its pervasive nature in sexual assault on college campuses. It also reflects an amount of confusion or uncertainty, which can lead to shifting views on sexual assault, the next theme.

**Shifting views.** Most participants defined sexual assault to include sexual harassment, and some were able to expand on their definitions through noting key elements, such as power and control, fear, and pain. Some participants also noted that their definitions or understanding of sexual assault had shifted over time. For some, this happened during the course of the interview. Near the end of the first interview, when Julie was asked if she knew any survivors of sexual assault, she replied:

*I mean, I wouldn't have said that an hour ago. But...now that I've talked to you about what I really, what shapes everything that I think of is wrong, I guess, is the word that I'm gonna use, is wrong. Because I know it used to be like, this, like domestic abuse, uh...you know, like those key words and like actions were considered sexually assaulting, but now I think the definition has really broadened because of what's been happening with, you know, our cell phones and texting.*

Over the course of approximately 40 minutes, Julie herself could see how what she believes sexual assault to be has shifted and changed. She followed that up a bit later with, “A lot of times, I didn’t want to have sex with him but I still did. So, those kinds of things? Yeah. Like, literally, I’m not kidding you, before this conversation I would’ve said no [it was not sexual assault].” Nicole and Rebecca, two women who describe themselves as feminist, could specifically see how their views of sexual assault have changed over the course of years, both during and after college. Rebecca said:

*Um, now I see it as a much broader thing and a lot more things as not being acceptable in terms of how it’s talked about and how we see sexual assault. But when I was in college, I fell into more of that category of, you know, there has to be more requirements for something to count as sexual assault.*

Even Rebecca, who could identify that she experienced a change in her definition over the course of many years, still grappled with this shift in real time during the interview.

**Ambivalent, gray areas.** These shifting views on sexual assault connect with the gray areas and ambivalence some participants expressed about the topic. Many participants expressed the difficulty with defining sexual assault, the room for blurry lines, gray areas, or confusion. For example, Kim struggled with the difference between sexual harassment and sexual assault: “Maybe it’s because, when I think, even say, sexual assault, there’s kind of, it sounds pretty much like the same thing. ‘Cause you’re already feeling uncomfortable.” Nicole, a self-described feminist, was even willing to categorize sexual assault in two ways: the sexual assault that “you’re talked into” versus “the sexual assault that’s problematic is when someone says no and you don’t care.” James’s ambivalence was evident when he discussed the ongoing case of Jameis Winston at Florida State:

*And you need to, you know...you shouldn’t be in that place anyway! I mean, he obviously did something, like some random girl’s gonna say something? Obviously they have done something, I think. Or he—did something stupid to where she could say something. So I’m not saying that he’s—I’m not saying that he’s right or she’s right, but I’m saying that he probably did something that, you know...I don’t know.*

Even as he was acknowledging that Jameis Winston likely is guilty (i.e., “he obviously did something”) and the survivor is not lying (i.e., “like some random girl’s gonna say something?”), he followed immediately with, “I’m not saying that he’s right or she’s right, but I’m saying that he probably did something that, you know...I don’t know.” James clearly could not reconcile his ambivalent feelings over Winston’s guilt or innocence.

**Rape myths: Upheld.** A few rape myths, or stereotypes that are commonly held about sexual assault, were displayed by participants throughout the interviews. The two most common were victim blaming and use of force as necessary for sexual assault to occur. Victim blaming attitudes and beliefs operate under the assumption that, in some way, no matter how small, the victim is to blame for what happened. Victim blaming takes the form of criticizing the victim’s actions, as if something she or he did contributed to the assault or caused it to happen. Further, assuming that a woman can and should avoid sexual assault puts the onus on her to stop

something from happening, removing the blame from the person truly responsible for sexual assault, the perpetrator. An example of victim blaming came from Elizabeth, who believed that women can “avoid” sexual assault if “they see it going in that direction.” Michael said, “You saw all the girls stumbling around [the bars] and you’re like, ‘This is gonna happen to her.’” Another common type of victim blaming is to assume that the victim is lying in some way or to connect her previous actions to her current situation. Amy described the story of a teammate who was assaulted at a party but was afraid to tell anyone because “she got a bad label for being a party girl, so she didn’t think anyone would believe her.”

Another common rape myth is to assume that sexual assault requires some sort of force, as evidenced by some form of physical resistance, fighting, or pushing back from the survivor. This came up in many ways throughout the interviews. Julie said, “...grabbing you and...kind of forcing you, like, even forcing hands down, forcing your wrists,” while Paul noted, “...they’re like...fighting back the resistance that the...the victim is putting up.” Many participants did use the word “force” to indicate it as such and other simply described the use of force, resistance, and fighting back. Without using the word, Jason described “force” through this example, when he said, “Ryan goes up to Jenny at a party, grabs her butt. Jenny says, ‘Hey, stop that’ and Ryan then gropes the girl and she pushes him off and he tries to kiss her and she pushes him off again.” By indicating that Jenny is pushing Ryan away, there is an assumption that victims must resist or fight back in some way, rather than assuming Ryan is responsible for asking Jenny for consent first.

**Rape myths: Refuted.** Despite the prevalence of rape myths upheld by former student-athletes, there were a few ways that participants pushed back against, or refuted, stereotypes around sexual assault, mostly around the gender assumptions of victims and perpetrators. First, many participants were able to get outside the traditional viewpoint of a male perpetrator-female victim dichotomy. This was sometimes less explicit, when participants used both female and male pronouns when telling a story. This was also explicitly stated, such as by Michael, when he mentioned, “Anybody can victimize anybody. Maybe bring a male victim forward. Say something happened to him. You know? I mean, there’s no reason that can’t be the face of somebody too.” Some participants were clear in the fact that sexual assault is a more gender-neutral act and/or does not just happen in the context of heterosexuality. For example, Gail said, “Sexual assault, it can be same-sex or it can be opposite sex,” while Jason said, “Um...I think sexual assault can be, could happen to, by male or female.” These participant quotes demonstrate that many are willing to go beyond assumptions that sexual assault is typically heterosexual, occurring with male perpetrators and female victims. According to the National Institute of Justice (2010), most victims are women and most perpetrators are men. However, acknowledgment that sexual assault goes beyond the male-assaulting-female paradigm is helpful in allowing victims who are male and/or victims of same-sex assault to come forward and seek services.

Throughout interviews with the former student-athletes, it became apparent that they knew a lot about sexual assault and consent, even if they felt ambivalent or unclear about these issues. They often lumped sexual assault and sexual harassment together, and could acknowledge the problematic issues that alcohol brings to these already confusing situations. They also both upheld and refuted rape myths that are pervasive in society. While it is important to know *what*

former student-athletes know about sexual assault, it is equally as critical to learn *how* they have come to this knowledge. The next section addresses who and what has shaped their knowledge of sexual assault.

### **Participant Knowledge: How They Know It**

Participants' ideas of sexual assault were shaped by educational experiences, team and/or peer influence, family background, and media. This section explores participant answers to the question, "What has shaped or influenced your knowledge of sexual assault?" as well as information gleaned from other parts of the interviews.

**Educational experiences.** Many participants cited educational experiences, or educational settings, as influencers and shapers of sexual assault knowledge. Some of this education began before college. James first learned of sexual assault during a health class in high school and Gail remembered something from middle school but not much of the details of the program. For most participants, though, the bulk of educational experiences came during college.

Many participants remembered or named university-wide programming or campaigns. Karen recalled emails from IU with information about sexual assault, as well as attending a program during freshmen orientation. Kim also mentioned a program on sexual assault that was optional during freshmen orientation, but she did not attend it. Paul remembered a program from his residence hall, as well as brochures on sexual assault: "I think in the dorm there was a, like a brief meeting about that or RAs mentioned it at the beginning of the year. There's like, there's pamphlets all over the place about it." Two participants were able to describe specific educational campaigns on campus. Karen remembered IU's "Consent is Sexy" campaign, and Nicole recalled AU's "I Don't Say" campaign. For some participants, their recollection was just that a campaign or education existed. Others, like Nicole, reaped tangible educational benefits.

Other educational experiences at the university level included those offered by athletics departments. Melissa said:

*At [WU], we talked about it more often. We could see the, uh, presentations. Like even in the athletic department there was uh, you know like, kind of, a poster, like everybody has to be treated equally, doesn't matter what, whether it's race or religion or gender, everything else. And uh...there's even like a [WU athletes] code, and you say, "We are [WU athletes], we don't do this, we don't do that, this and that" and then they say, you would never take sexual advantage of someone without permission, or someone who is, uh, not conscious.*

James, who is the most recent graduate in this study, actually said athletics was a main influencer and, "I don't, I don't recall it being addressed much out[side] of athletics."

Other factors for educational experiences included classroom learning experiences at the college, high school, and middle school levels. Some were less likely to be remembered, such as at the middle school level, but most participants could identify some way in which education through their university and/or athletic department influenced them.

**Peers and teammates.** Beyond direct personal experiences with sexual assault, many participants relied upon experiences with friends and/or teammates as sources of information. Sometimes this information was knowledge of someone else's experiences, as Rebecca said, "So, I don't know, like...I feel like for me, there's a lot going into how I define it. Um, a lot of that's also my own history with sexual experiences and the sexual experiences that my friends have had." Elizabeth described a scenario of a friend who experienced sexual harassment at work. This no doubt influenced the fact that she often lumped sexual assault and sexual harassment together. Similarly, Gail's teammate who accused a coach of sexual harassment was a defining feature of both of her interviews, including the fact that she defined sexual assault to include harassment. Other experiences, however, were more about team culture or peer circles. James discussed his team, saying, "It kind of goes back to the group I hang out with, it's just taught, or it [sexual assault] is not acceptable." Karen said, "It was never talked about negatively, among my friends, it was always something that was a very sensitive topic, and something that needed to be addressed and fixed." These are some of the ways that peers or teammates had an influence on participant knowledge.

**Family and background.** Beyond friends, teammates, and other peers, participants cited their parents, families, or other factors from their background and upbringing. Participants said that family and their backgrounds influenced their knowledge. James explained, "Just morally I was taught that it was wrong and we [my brother and I] were raised morally correct." And Gina said:

*My parents were, well I was raised to be a good kid. You're supposed to ask for consent and you're not supposed to do things, you're not supposed to force someone into things they don't want to do. Um, you're not supposed to take advantage of others. So I would say my upbringing helped me define parts of my morality decisions on whether sexual assault is permissible. So I would think that no, it isn't something that should happen.*

In addition to comments such as these, Kelly's mother gave her books on sexual assault as a teen. She also had talks with her mother after being assaulted when she an adolescent. According to Kelly, "She knows it was a really bad experience, but she, well, she was giving me advice for, you know, avoid people I don't know, and to be safe." Her mom was engaging in risk reduction behavior in teaching her daughter how to avoid potentially unsafe situations. Whether in the aftermath of a sexual assault, or proactively through parenting, families helped to shape the student-athletes' knowledge of sexual assault.

**Media.** The last major influence on how former student-athletes know what they know about sexual assault is the media. Media included social media (e.g., Twitter or Facebook), movies, news outlets (e.g., ESPN), television shows (both scripted and reality-based), articles and blogs on the internet, and books. Much of what is known from media could be categorized as upholding rape myths, like when Melissa said, "But I've seen movies and uh, there are some people just walking on the street, it's night, you know, dark outside, and then somebody runs after them and they rape them." However, some of the participants were able to point out how media upholds these misconceptions on their own. As Gail said:

*I think the media, the media shaped what I know in terms of sexual assault being very much so male on female. And making the male the perpetrator and the female the victim. It **always** includes intercourse, um, or...intercourse/rape.*

James said, “I think it’s not taken as seriously as it should [be].” He also noted, “The media has way too much power of this stuff,” citing the narratives of the Duke lacrosse scandal and the Jameis Winston case at Florida State. It is critical to recognize, as James said, that the media have a lot of power to shape the narrative and decide how and what is shown to viewers and readers. A lot of interpretation and education may be needed to ensure that we are moving beyond and rejecting some of the rape myths that are perpetrated through the media.

### **Sexual Assault Within the Context of College Athletics**

The second theme, sexual assault within the context of college athletics, directly answers Research Questions 2 and 3, which focused on sexual assault in athletics, the impact on student-athletes, and preventative action taken by athletic departments. Most participants had very little or no real knowledge of policies, rules, or procedures, but many did have a strong sense or assumption that the athletic department tried to prevent sexual assault, wanted to support survivors, and would take action against perpetrators. Not all agreed with this assumption of a supportive stance, however. Throughout data analysis, three types of athletic department cultures became evident: (1) Zero Tolerance Culture; (2) Checkbox Culture; and (3) Rape Culture. It is important to note that these cultures are based upon participants’ understandings and/or perceptions of the athletic department.

**Zero tolerance culture.** A Zero Tolerance Culture was demonstrated by an athletic department that took swift action against perpetrators, provided support for survivors, worked to prevent sexual assault through educating student-athletes, and created a strong message that sexual assault is not acceptable. Elements of the Zero Tolerance Culture were present at Atlantic University (AU) and Midwestern University (MU), based on statements made by Nicole, James, Julie, and Paul (respective to their universities).

Nicole described AU as swift to take action against perpetrators. Before she arrived at AU, the athletic department faced a sexual assault scandal. The alleged perpetrators, members of a men’s athletic team, were swiftly punished by the athletic department and removed from school. Nicole described this, saying, “Their season ended, you know, all the boys were immediately expelled.” This swift action was demonstrated in 2015, when another male student-athlete was released from his team due to allegations of sexual assault. Taking quick and decisive measures against perpetrators counters the “appearance of respectability” as noted by Benedict (1997), who wrote, “To continually excuse criminal violence by troubled athletes...and the willingness of coaches to maintain scholarships for athletes with a clear disdain for the law serves the athletic program, but hurts the athlete and puts the community at risk” (p. 147). Nicole’s recollection of how AU handled perpetration runs counter to Benedict’s notion of the mere appearance of respectability.



In addition to swiftly addressing issues of sexual assault by the perpetrator, Nicole believed that the AU athletic department would immediately and adequately support survivors of sexual assault. She said:

*Our athletic department, if it were a situation where a female was sexually assaulted, I think first and foremost, they would want you to be heard... Those would definitely be the first steps, you'd probably talk to your coach, you could talk to our sports psychologist if that's something you wanna do. Um...you know, I think we would definitely be nurtured through the situation.*

She also told the stories of two female student-athletes, victims of sexual assault and stalking, and the immediate and overwhelming support they received from the athletic department. In addition to athletic department response, the athletes themselves appeared to foster a culture of support for survivors. Nicole said, "I think that the student-athletes believe the [current] stories, they believe what this girl is saying, and the reaction is, one, these poor women. Two, how could [player] do this to our university, to these girls? You know?"

Beyond swift action against perpetrators and support for survivors, Nicole outlined how the athletic department educated student-athletes. They received education during their freshmen year during a sexual assault-specific program. Further, the issue came up often in other education programs. Last, Nicole spoke often about how the athletic department at AU strongly discouraged sexual assault (i.e., through education and actions against perpetrators) but also encouraged student-athletes to have healthy relationships and feel empowered. She said that female student-athletes "feel equally as respected as a student-athlete and valuable to the university as our" star male athletes. All of these things combined (i.e., swift action against perpetrators, support for survivors, education, and strong messages of empowerment for women) helped make AU a Zero Tolerance Culture in the opinion of Nicole.

The other university whose athletic department appeared to sport a Zero Tolerance Culture was MU. Comments from Paul, James, Julie, and Jason supported this assertion. James said:

*But with this, it's like, if there's anything, you're done. And that was it. [lightly pounds desk with fist] And then it was, next topic. So there was no, "We'll give you a warning, we'll give you this," it's just...like I said last time, morally, you morally know that it's just not tolerated.*

Julie recalled signing a contract at the beginning of each school year. It outlined what student-athletes could not do, and she indicated that breaching that contract through committing something like sexual assault would be grounds for loss of scholarship money.

Participants who viewed MU as a Zero Tolerance Culture did not recall much about survivor support, likely because they did not need it. However, their recollection of prevention education was strong, and more importantly, many participants connected the programming to a strong message of a Zero Tolerance Culture. Describing the education he received, Paul said, "I know they try to take it pretty seriously, because it's obviously a serious thing, so [they] try to keep everyone aware that it can happen and try to stop it, prevent it, as much as they can." Jason

said he knew sexual assault was not tolerated because, “That’s the underlying thing that they’re conveying in the trainings. Um...that the athletic department doesn’t tolerate that.” Similarly, James directly connected the strong message of zero tolerance to the education he received. In his case, it was also due to the presence of the athletic director at educational programs. He also connected this message of zero tolerance to the assumption of consequences for perpetrating sexual assault. In addition to strong messages such as these, a Zero Tolerance Culture featured swift action against perpetrators, support for survivors, and education programs that aimed to prevent sexual assault.

**Checkbox culture.** The second and most prevalent atmosphere was the Checkbox Culture, in which the athletic departments were not actively against sexual assault or particularly “pro” prevention, but seemingly did what was necessary to reduce sexual assault, while supporting survivors. Further, they did not overtly support survivors, but provided referrals or resources when necessary. This is the type of athletic department that is simply checking a box, ensuring that it is meeting requirements set by their university or Title IX, but not actively aiming to prevent sexual assault. Features of the Checkbox Culture were found to be present at Pacific University (PU), MU, and Western University (WU), supported by the statements of Gina at PU; Amy, Kim, and Jason at MU; and Kelly, Melissa, and Elizabeth at WU. When it came to education, many participants did not remember many presentations or the content of them. For example, Gail only remembered being told by a trainer to be careful about drug-facilitated sexual assault by watching her drinks. This is a perfect example of an athletic department doing a presentation to “check” the box requiring them to provide education. Throughout conversations with these participants at PU, MU, and WU, there was a vague or assumptive attitude that sexual assault would be addressed in a punitive manner and that resources were available for survivors. There was little recollection of education or preventative programming, though some. Combined, the Checkbox Culture was simply doing the bare minimum necessary to address sexual assault under Title IX’s requirements.

**Rape culture.** The last culture was recognized as a Rape Culture. An athletic department exhibiting these traits was thought to be supportive of perpetrators (i.e., through lack of punishment) and created an atmosphere where imbalances between male and female student-athletes existed, leading to the entitlement or privilege of male student-athletes. These athletic departments were also seen as taking obviously ineffective or *no* efforts to educate student-athletes on sexual assault. Gail and Michael provided information on how MU supported a Rape Culture, while Rebecca indicated that WU’s atmosphere supported sexual assault. It is important to note that none of the study’s participants seemed to think that their athletic department was actively against survivors (i.e., retaliating against them).

Gail’s perception of MU characterized it as one that did not provide any education on sexual assault. When asked if she knew of any policies or procedures, she said, “Definitely not, because I don’t remember even having a meeting about it and what *would* be the policies if something were to have happened.” While many other participants could recall having some sort of education, even if they did not recall the content or message, Gail was certain she did not receive any education or training about sexual assault.

Beyond lack of meaningful education, a Rape Culture is one that supports perpetrators. This could be through lack of punishment or keeping incidents of sexual assault quiet and away from the media. Michael had a unique experience while in college. His girlfriend, who was not a student-athlete, was sexually harassed by a student-athlete in a low-profile sport. Michael attempted to seek punishment for the male student-athlete harassing his partner, but no one took action, including his coach, the other athlete's coach, or the athletic director. He said:

*You know, they made every effort to seem to try to dissuade [sexual assault]. I mean, my situation was harassment, but even with something that was as easily as reprimand-able as it was, nothing was done. There was no follow up done, there was no justice done. Um, I think that they cover up—I'm not gonna say cover up, that's kind of a harsh word to say, I think that they handle the situations that bring the most attention and the rest, they do things about them, I'm not saying they wouldn't, but I don't think that the punishments are as harsh or as swift given the situations...I think that, I think that it's mostly damage control as far as reprimanding comes.*

The last area to characterize Rape Culture departments is addressed by Rebecca. She noted that even when an athletic department, like WU, took action, it is still a reflection of America's response to sexual assault. She said:

*The fact that we have an American culture that's really, in some ways, a rape culture. Um, you know, I think that's kind of the difficult thing with addressing these issues. You know, the athletic department in and of itself is a reflection of what is happening in the greater American culture. And um, so, these issues can get addressed within the athletic department, but they're beating on the door of the department, constantly coming in from the outside as well.*

She linked this to a significant imbalance between male and female student-athletes, in which male athletes were privileged, particularly if they played football. Rebecca said, "There was a sense that, um, the football players could get away with a lot. It was a pretty consistent feeling of these guys are worth more on campus and the rules don't apply to them the same way."

As noted in the literature review, a rape culture is one "that display[s] a high level of tolerance for violence, male dominance, and sexual segregation...[and]...lack[s] the social constraints that discourage sexual aggression or contain[s] social arrangements that encourage it" (Crosset, 1999, p. 245). Thus, Rebecca's assertion that power imbalances at WU contributed to feelings that sexual assault was not taken seriously connect with the literature. To sum up a Rape Culture athletic department, this quote from Michael says it all. When asked, "What does the athletic department do to address sexual assault?" he said, "As far I know, nothing."

### **Creating Change in Athletic Department Culture**

This section addresses the last question that was asked of participants, "What support is necessary from the athletic department to provide a sexual assault-free environment for student-athletes at [your school]?" There are two main objectives in this section: attitudes and actions. Both address the proactive and reactive features of athletic departments. Proactive responses are

an attempt to change or prevent sexual assault before it occurs. Reactive measures are those taken *after* a sexual assault has already happened.

**Attitudes.** Attitudes are the intangible, behind-the-scenes elements that can affect an athletic department's culture. Two participants, Nicole and Rebecca, spoke directly to necessary change in departmental attitudes to effectively prevent sexual assault: empowering and valuing women in the athletic department. Nicole's response came from the perspective of a student-athlete in a Zero Tolerance Culture. She said:

*I definitely think the women need to feel empowered. Um, and part of that is, that completely outside of teaching us to defend each other, is that you have to feel equally as respected as a student-athlete and valuable to the university as our basketball players. As an athlete, our university is shockingly very good at that, for how amazing our basketball team and program is and are, um, our university is amazing at, our athletic director is at volleyball games all the time, you know. He knows all of our names like he knows all of the basketball player names. You know? He is calling you in for meetings also, he like, like we definitely understand that our basketball team is the team making the money and that's the team, that like, he's probably a little more concerned with their success than ours, but, um, you know you feel equally valued as part of the university.*

Nicole spoke at length about education and programming that empowered her and other female student-athletes at AU. She believed that sexual assault is prevented only when male and female athletes are equally valued, which she experienced, as noted above.

Rebecca's experiences at WU, however, were quite different. Through analyzing her interviews, it was clear that WU was a Rape Culture. Rebecca spoke at length about the perceived imbalance between female and male student-athletes at WU, particularly football players. To change attitudes, however, action must be taken, sending a strong message that sexual assault is not acceptable. Participants suggested involving department leaders, team captains, or peer leaders to help change attitudes as they are the most effective people to help create change. In addition to changing attitudes, Gail suggested that athletic departments need to inspire trust and open communication. She said:

*I think an open communication system and trust between the athletes and administration, whether it's—or superiors even. Whether it's just, like, um, teammate to teammate but then there's a trusted, open communication from the friend to like, the coach or the trainer or the athletic director or someone like that.*

Gail's suggestion of open trust and communication can be accomplished through a few actions, both proactive and reactive, to be discussed next.

**Actions.** Actions to create sexual assault-free environments for student-athletes must be done with a proactive approach. However, most participants responded with suggestions that were reactive in nature. While only proactive approaches can truly prevent sexual assault, it is important to explore the reactive responses, as they will help create a Zero Tolerance Culture.

First, the most suggested proactive measure was education for athletes, particularly that which is mandatory, in-depth or longer in time frame, and tailored to specific teams, genders, and ages. Most participants, however, suggested some sort of reactive action to answer the question, “What support is necessary from the athletic department to provide a sexual assault-free environment for student-athletes at [your school]?” Reactive items help address a sexual assault after it has already occurred. Though many suggested some sort of mandatory education for all athletes, when discussing it further, their comments leaned more toward response efforts, such as making sure survivors know where to go for resources. For example, Elizabeth said, “[It’s] making them more aware that they can really seek some support from the athletic department.” As James said, an awareness of “who you can call” is critical in reacting to sexual assault. It is important, too, that those first responders—the people “who you can call”—for help are adequately trained. Many participants suggested coaches, athletic trainers, academic counselors, or even team captains as people to turn to if one has been sexually assaulted. Ensuring adequate training in how respond in a compassionate, appropriate manner is critical.

The last reactive suggestion came from Paul, who mentioned punishing perpetrators: “I think the biggest issue to stop it is to, if it’s happening, people need to know about it and then we can make steps to I don’t know, arrest whoever did it or something like that.” This suggestion ties together both the attitudes and actions sections. As Gail suggested, open communication and trust is needed. Paul addressed this by saying, “People need to know about it,” so that action can be taken. It is interesting to note that he did not mention punishment or consequences from the athletic department, but from the law enforcement system (i.e., “arrest whoever did it”). The reactive elements of punishment for perpetrators and appropriate support for survivors may help create a Zero Tolerance Culture.

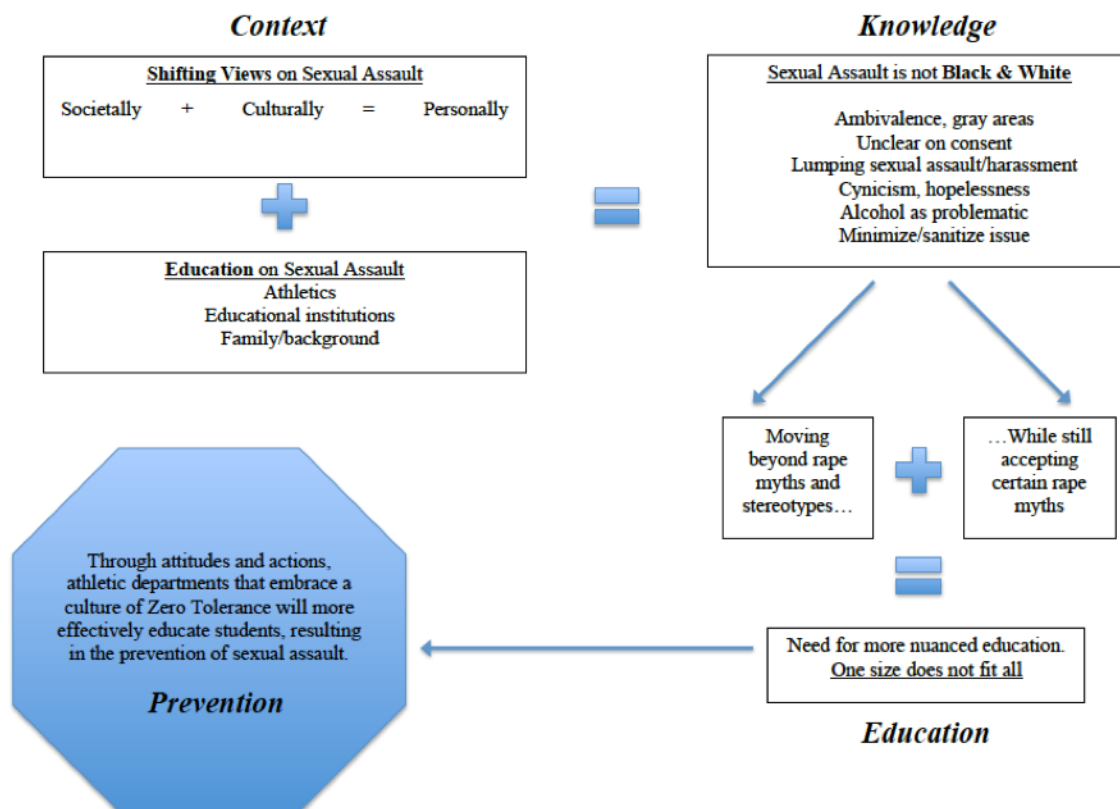
## **Implications and Conclusions**

### **Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm for Athletic Departments**

This study detailed the findings from interviews with former student-athletes, delineating their responses into three major themes: (1) *Participant Knowledge*; (2) *Sexual Assault Within the Context of Athletics*; and (3) *Creating Change in Athletic Department Culture*. First, we learned *what* student-athletes know about sexual assault as well as *how* they know it. Second, we gathered what participants knew about sexual assault within their athletic departments and found three main atmospheres to be present: (1) Zero Tolerance Culture; (2) Checkbox Culture; and (3) Rape Culture. Third, we focused on creating change in athletics, and how participants thought attitudes and actions should be changed to foster an environment that is free of sexual assault. These themes must now be shaped into a paradigm model to explain the arc of sexual assault knowledge and prevention in college athletics. The last step in grounded theory is to tell the story of the findings. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), a paradigm model is essential to the completion of a grounded theory study. In order to create a good paradigm, however, the researcher must create the “story line” of the study, combining the main themes and categories into one story.

Thus, the narrative for this story goes as such: The context (i.e., “setting”) for this story comprises two major elements, shifting views on sexual assault, as well as education received on sexual assault. Societal changes in how sexual assault is viewed (e.g., the 2011 DCL on Title IX) plus cultural changes in how sexual assault is discussed (e.g., movies, social media) are combined to influence the shifting and changing views on sexual assault of each participant. These shifting views are added to the education they receive, be it through athletics, formal education, or their families. Shifting views plus education equals a new knowledge of sexual assault, one that is not black and white. This knowledge includes multiple gray areas, such as unclear consent, varying definitions of sexual assault, and the problematic contribution of alcohol. This knowledge that sexual assault is not black and white contains a rejection of some rape myths and stereotypes, while continuing to uphold others. As such, this leads to the contention that there is a need for more nuanced education on sexual assault, as one size does not fit all (i.e., through age, gender, sport). Last, if athletic departments embrace this narrative, acknowledge the multiple gray areas, and educate accordingly, they can help embrace a Zero Tolerance Culture, shedding the existing Checkbox Culture and Rape Culture that exists at some universities and reduce sexual assault. A visual representation of the Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm Model for Athletic Departments can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Sexual Assault Prevention Paradigm for Athletic Departments



It is clear from the findings that many factors influence student-athlete knowledge about sexual assault. The participants’ knowledge did not exist in a vacuum. Despite influences from

the athletic department, student-athletes are also shaped by teammates and peers, family, educational experiences, and the media. While some participants did cite the athletic department, including its education programs, as something that shaped their definitions and views of sexual assault, not everyone did. This means two things. One, sexual assault prevention must be comprehensive; it cannot fall to the athletic department alone to educate student-athletes on sexual assault. Prevention education can, and should, also be coming from university-wide campaigns, as well as in the classroom. Further, prevention education programs in the athletic department need to acknowledge that student-athletes might be receiving different and/or contradicting information about sexual assault. Programs and educators should be ready to address and challenge the varying information that student-athletes receive from the media, their families, friends outside the athletic department, major courses, etc.

These varying educational factors, combined with shifting societal and cultural influences, indicated that student-athletes' definitions of sexual assault are similarly shifting and are no longer black and white. Therefore, the gray areas and ambivalence around sexual assault displayed by participants indicated that some prevailing rape myths are still upheld by student-athletes (e.g., victim blaming), while others are clearly rejected (e.g., only men can perpetrate against a female victim). There is a strong need, through educational programs as well as the attitudes and behaviors of those working within college athletics, to continue breaking down rape myths and stereotypes that are prevalent in society.

Last, it is important to note that three cultures were found to exist in athletic departments (i.e., Zero Tolerance, Checkbox, Rape). However, for those universities with multiple participants, their visions of how their athletics department addressed sexual assault varied. For example, based on descriptions from Melissa, Elizabeth, and Kelly, WU was a Checkbox Culture, but Rebecca characterized it as a Rape Culture. Similarly, MU was suggested to be a Zero Tolerance Culture by James, Julie and Paul; a Checkbox Culture by Amy and Kim; and a Rape Culture by Gail and Michael. Further, Jason provided an array of statements that indicated his perception of MU fit squarely into all three cultures. These varied perceptions indicated that athletic departments are not sending the same message to all student-athletes. Given the ambivalence, gray areas, and shifting views on sexual assault found by participants, it is critical that athletic departments provide a united and cohesive message to all student-athletes. One way to ensure that all involved with athletic departments (i.e., administrators, coaches, athletic trainers, student-athletes) are on the same page is by committing to a stance of zero tolerance as outlined in the paradigm model. In addition, this variance in perception of the same athletic departments lends itself to future areas of study.

### **Future Research**

As demonstrated, there is a definitive gap in the literature on sexual assault within college athletics. This study attempted to fill a gaping hole with a very small plug, but there are still three major areas of consideration for future research. First, the question still remains whether or not male student-athletes perpetrate sexual assault at higher rates than their non-athlete peers. Criticisms addressed in the literature (Crosset, 1999; Koss & Cleveland, 1996) still remain, such as needing additional data, including qualitative; desiring more consistent methodology; and wanting stronger theoretical frameworks.

Second, there is still a lack of understanding and knowledge about the occurrence of sexual assault within athletics. This might be addressed through quantitative methods, such as a survey. Many universities are undertaking campus climate surveys to assess the occurrence of sexual assault at their institutions. It would be wise for these surveys to include a section on athletics or for athletic departments themselves to administer their own version of a campus climate study. This could help address the lack of information about how many student-athletes experience sexual assault and/or experience perpetration by another student-athlete.

Third, there is no information on how sexual assault impacts student-athletes, particularly when combined with the stress of being an elite competitor at the Division I level. If a student-athlete is assaulted, does he or she seek help? Does the experience affect performance on the field or in the classroom? How might these questions be answered differently if the perpetrator is a fellow student-athlete? These questions remain critical in filling the research void.

### **Limitations**

This study provided an exploration of the ways in which former student-athletes understand sexual assault, as well as their perceptions of their athletic department's response to occurrences and prevention. Due to the nature of qualitative research, generalizability was not feasible with the responses from this sample, nor was it the goal. However, this study did provide pertinent insight into the kinds of questions that can elucidate the weaknesses of the current sexual assault prevention programming and direct future programming. In response to the snowball sampling method, the participants were mostly Caucasian, represented few sports, and did not include "big time" athletes from football or men's or women's basketball. Future studies should seek to include a more diverse participant representation, perhaps through the use of purposeful sampling.

Other limitations may include the memory and/or recall of participants. As the participants were former student-athletes who graduated between 2009 and 2014, some of them may have experienced issues with remembering details about sexual assault during their time as intercollegiate student-athletes. For example, Rebecca attended WU from 2005 to 2009. Her first semester in college was 10 years ago. However, the issue of memory is not necessarily a faulty one. The fact that some participants, such as Rebecca, can recall specific details about some programming (i.e., the "charismatic speaker" on drunk driving), and cannot recall much about sexual assault, is telling in and of itself. This points to education that was not truly effective or long lasting if participants cannot remember it one, five, or 10 years later.



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