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Morality in Sport: Student-Athletes' Perceptions of Coaches' Abilities to Instill Moral and Character Development

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MORALITY IN SPORT: STUDENT-ATHLETES' PERCEPTIONS OF COACHES'
ABILITIES TO INSTILL MORAL AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

A thesis

Presented to

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Taylor University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the degree

Masters of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Jake W. McCurry

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

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entitled

Morality in Sport: Student-Athletes' Perceptions of Coaches'
Abilities to Instill Moral and Character Development

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

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Abstract

The current study looked at the perceptions student-athletes held of the impact of their coaches in regards to moral and character development. Through a qualitative systematic grounded theory approach, the study strove to answer the questions “What perceptions do student-athletes hold of their coaches’ moral development and character building efforts?” and “Do coaches have positive or negative impacts on their teams’ moral development?” Eight athletes from a private, faith-based institution in the Midwest participated in interviews. Findings of this study suggest that student-athletes hold positive perceptions of their coaches’ moral and character development abilities. Student-athletes specifically highlighted well-communicated expectations, intentional mentorship, and the integration of faith as being key contributors to their positive experiences. The theory that intentional mentorship of athletes by coaches leads to students’ positive character development emerged directly from the data. This finding highlights the significance of mentorship roles coaches can often play and that athletic departments should encourage this mentorship practice.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Sports also serve a significant moral function to the society at large. I have argued that in its dramatization and active reflection, sports may spur moral change. But while sports may be the ‘art of the people,’ they may also serve as the moral opium of the people.” (Boxill, 2003, n.p.)

Finding Virtue and Character Building in Sport

One of the most devastating scandals involving collegiate athletics came to light on November 4th, 2011, when a grand jury released a report indicting Penn State Assistant Football Coach Jerry Sandusky on numerous accounts of sexual deviancy and molestation of children (Attorney General, 2011). The charges and trial sent shockwaves throughout the entire nation and greatly impacted the Penn State campus. During this episode, aspects of Head Coach Joe Paterno’s involvement and influence on campus that had been previously overlooked came to light.

Through interviews with former and current employees, the investigation into the Penn State scandal revealed to the public that Joe Paterno may not have been the model citizen presumed by so many. A CNN interview with Vicky Triponey, the former head of student affairs at Penn State, shed light onto alleged unethical actions in which Paterno had partaken (O’Neill, 2012). Triponey reported that, during her tenure at Penn State, multiple conflicts between the president, Paterno, and herself originated from Paterno’s need to handle the disciplinary sanctions of his athletes. He reportedly pressured the administration to “treat players in ways that would maintain their ability to play sports,” which included the reduction of disciplinary sanctions (O’Neill, 2012, para. 24). The

release of the Triponey interview may shed light into the values of the former Penn State head football coach. These values appear to directly contradict the athletic program's expressed values, which include honor, integrity, family, respect, and tradition (Penn State Athletics Department, 2008).

The Penn State situation highlights the fact that a collegiate coach can have tremendous negative impact on both the university and its student-athletes. The current research seeks to better understand the impact coaches have on student-athletes' moral development.

Coaches heavily influence student-athletes. Every coach, whether conscious of it or not, instills certain morals and values in his or her players through each interaction with those players (Bloom et al., 1998; Kavussanu, Roberts, & Ntoumanis, 2002). The roles coaches play in this realm prove formational as student-athletes begin to face significant ethical decisions during their time in college (Pelaez, 2011).

The collegiate experience for student-athletes becomes arguably most valuable when conducted holistically. Students develop in a variety of different ways pertaining to sports, academics, sociability, morality, and life skills. While in college, many students face difficult questions and situations surrounding morality, giving them the opportunity to test and develop their own moral decision making process. The current study aims to evaluate student-athletes' perceptions of the moral character their coaches may or may not instill in them, specifically at a small Midwest institution.

Coaching Impact on Moral Development

The issue of coaching impact on student-athletes' moral development has not adequately been explored in existing research. However, significant research does focus

on athletes' alcohol abuse and drug use (Green et al., 2001; Marcello et al., 1989; Thombs & Hamilton, 2002; Tricker & Connolly, 1997; Yusko et al. 2010), academic competence and academic standard keeping (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2010), and student-athletes' wagering on collegiate sports (Ellenbogen et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2007; National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2009; Temcheff et al., 2011). Each of these research topics plays an integral role in understanding the student-athlete better and how the student affairs professional can work alongside student-athletes. However, a gap exists considering athletes' perceptions of their coaches' moral development abilities and strategies.

A review of relevant research reveals this gap in the literature, which explores the student-athlete's perception of the coach's process of instilling moral character. The gap is surprising when one considers the relevance of ethical and moral development and the sheer number of college students participating in athletics. Leading theorists such as Kohlberg, Perry, and Chickering have all developed moral or ethical developmental theories that aid in the understanding of the college student's university experience, but exploration remains necessary to better understand how the collegiate athletic experience impacts the moral development of student-athletes (Evans et al., 2009).

The significant role that college plays in the ethical and moral development of college students coupled with the large number of student-athletes on college campuses makes it hard to ignore the importance of studying this phenomenon. The current research explores student-athletes' perception of their coaches' impact on their own moral development.

Benefits of Study

Research on this topic has the potential to change how student development professionals and coaches interact with college student-athletes altogether. Gaining insight into how student-athletes perceive their coaches' ability to stimulate moral development in turn provides insight into how professionals on campuses interact with both the student-athlete and coaching staffs. Without research, uncertainty regarding whether coaches have an overall negative or positive influence on their student-athletes' moral development will remain. If research finds a balance of negative and positive factors within coach's influences, college leaders will have the opportunity to react appropriately to enhance the positive influence and eliminate the negative elements. In general, research on this topic would educate and make student affairs professionals aware of certain aspects of the student-athlete's moral development.

The significance of this topic is illustrated by the number of student-athletes in the higher education system and the reality that college students operate in an important stage of moral development. These particulars have inspired two research questions: What are the student athletes' perceptions of their coaches' moral development and character building efforts? And is the overall impact of coaches on their student-athletes' moral development predominantly positive or negative?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

It is important to understand that the influences on student-athletes' morality represent a critical area of research. Even the mild sports fan knows that many college competitions often lack sportsmanship. However, despite possibly highlighting negative factors of moral functioning, sports are known as an excellent arena for building character (Maclean & Hamm, 2008; Sullivan, 2006).

Sportsmanship, character, virtue, moral values, and ethical behavior function synonymously in the arena of sport. For centuries, societies have noted the important role sports play in the development of these principles. North Americans have placed value on what sport can ingrain in and teach people about character or virtue. This literature review examines how character and virtue exist in sport, the significance of understanding moral development of the athlete, and why more research should address the coach's impact on the athlete.

Moral Thought in Sport

One of the earliest thinkers to connect character development and sport was Plato in *The Republic*, written in 380 BC (Bloom, 1968; Reid, 2007). Reid (2007) quotes Plato as saying that athletic programs in fact "build character and serve the educational objectives of personal virtue, intellectual achievement, and political harmony" (p. 160).

Reid also established that sport contributes to Plato's ordering of the three parts of the soul by cultivating controlled aggression, spurring one towards knowledge, and enabling one to become communally accountable.

One of the leading experts on sport ethics, Jennifer Beller of Washington State University, identified that sport programs representing strong belief systems have the ability to promote the development of ethical decision-making skills and moral character development (Beller, 2002). Beller claims that character development through sport can come systematically or non-systematically, formally or informally. Beller explains that sport also provides "powerful contexts for the teaching and learning of good moral habits," which can be attributed in large part to the coaches on a team (n.p.).

Another study, which examined over one thousand college athletes, assessed the values reinforced in and by sport participation. This study found that, of 18 different values ranked important by the participants, sportsmanship emerged second only to self-actualization (Maclean, 2008). Another study by Park (2010) maintained that qualities such as justice, courage, honesty, generosity, fairness, and impartiality are imbedded in athletes when sport and coaches work at their best. The author also claimed support from other researchers, saying that "there are few activities or situations in daily life that demand or teach the virtues that are commonplace and necessary to partake in sport" (p. 125). This study found a logical connection between moral education and sport.

Deviant Morality in Sport

Virtues are not the only aspects of morality found in sport. Deviant morality exists as well. A study by Hughes and Coakley (1991) examined the idea of "positive deviance," or over-conformity, in sports. Hughes and Coakley explain the term by saying

that much of the deviance seen in athletes today results from their over-conforming to sport ethic. Sport ethic reinforces taking risks, seeking distinction, challenging limits, and sacrificing for the sake of the game. These behaviors all normally function positively in sport; however, the authors agree that this ethic can become the exclusive focus of many athletes. Throughout their careers, athletes hear that they need to be dedicated, set goals, persevere, view adversity as a challenge, and subjugate other valuable life experiences all so they can reach their maximum athletic potential. Over-conformity occurs when the constant pressure to live up to these athletic ideas leads to funneling one's goals and motivations in life into one "sport ethic": the root of positive deviance, the negative side of uncritical adherence to values in sport. This unfortunate side of the values and character traits can become instilled in athletes during sports participation.

The above literature supports the notion that there exists in sport a certain attainment of virtues and strengthening of character for athletes. It is also important in understanding the developmental experiences of moral reasoning for student-athletes.

Relevance of Studying Student-Athlete Moral Development

The study of the moral development of college student-athletes is gaining popularity within professional literature. The following section examines some of the more important literature on student-athlete moral development.

It is essential to acknowledge of the current population of student-athletes. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, 444,077 student-athletes participate on over 18,000 teams, and these numbers have steadily increased over the past decade (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2012).

Long, Pantaleon, Bruant, and d'Arripe-Longueville (2006) examined young athletes' perceptions of rules and whether they complied to or transgressed against those rules. They found that athletes' respect for rules depended heavily upon individual differences. This research has implications for the current study, particularly in that coaching pressures and perceived sport ethic of the athlete's particular sport emerged as large contributing factors toward rule following.

Kavussanu et al. (2002) examined the role of moral atmosphere and perceived moral climate on the actual moral functioning of 199 college basketball players. This research found that perceptions of moral atmosphere had a significant effect on moral functioning in the individual. Burwell (1996) focused on Christian higher education with his research on moral development. This study examined whether or not Christian college environments changed the previously found patterns of moral reasoning for student-athletes. This study found no significant difference in moral reasoning between athletes at secular colleges and Christian institutions. This finding raises the question of why religious moral sensitivities do not carry over from the institutional mission to athletic departments (Burwell, 1996). The study by itself lays the ground work for future research by showing that environment readily influences moral functioning and that Christian schools' core values do not penetrate athletic departments. Boxill (2003) spoke to the significance of moral character in sport when he offered the following statement:

Sports also serve a significant moral function to the society at large. I have argued that in its dramatization and active reflection, sports may spur moral change. But while sports may be the "art of the people," they may also serve as the moral opium of the people. (p. 6)

Boxill's thoughts highlight the relevance of the study of student-athlete moral development.

Sport can reflect moral change in people and serve as a moral foundation for people groups as sport can reinforce moral behavior. This relevance is highlighted by multiple theories revolving around the development of college students.

Theories

An important portion of the known literature focuses on the theoretical. Scholars forming theories on the development of college students are of particular use in the current study.

Perhaps the two theories most relevant to this investigation come from Kohlberg and Perry. Highlighted by structure, sequence, and hierarchy, Kohlberg's (1976) six stages of moral development include punishment and obedience, instrumental exchange, interpersonal conformity, law and order, prior rights and social contract, and universal moral principles. In this, theory development occurs when cognitive structures and social perspective take place together. Equally as important to the current study is Perry's (1968) theory of intellectual and ethical development. Perry explains intellectual and ethical development through nine positions within four separate categories: dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. A key concept in Perry's theory is that people move from dualism to multiplicity, from multiplicity to relativism, and from relativism to commitment. Dualism represents a mode of "meaning making in which the world is viewed dichotomously: good or bad" (Evans et al., 2009, p. 86). Multiplicity is characterized as honoring diverse views. In relativism, all opinions no longer appear

equally valid. Finally, moving from relativism to commitment indicates a shift from cognitive development to ethical development.

Although not exclusively focused on moral development, Chickering's (1969) work speaks to this study. His theory describes seven vectors, including developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy to interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. These concepts constitute vectors because people do not necessarily go through them in a linear fashion; each vector has its own direction and magnitude. Chickering's seventh vector, integrity, contains three sequential yet overlapping phases: humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). When considering Chickering's model of development, one easily sees how an athlete's integrity ties directly to sport. Athletes humanize and personalize values they learn from sport. Again, the purpose of the current study is to understand the impact coaches have on this aspect of development. Chickering's seventh vector of developing integrity provides an important context for the topic of this thesis.

Another prominent developmental theorist is Erikson. Erikson's theory exhibits a main theme of development based on the influence of one's environment (Evans et al., 2009). Erikson focuses on how environmental factors in one's life assist in developing the whole person. He argues people go through eight significant crises on the way to adulthood. Environmental influence determines how someone reacts to these crises. The current study explores the idea that coaches represent an environmental impact on student-athletes.

When combined, these theories set the stage for this research study, highlighting the importance of studying moral development and environmental elements of personal development.

Coaches as Moral Authority

This review so far has focused on what current research has found about virtue in sport, moral development and the student-athlete, and prominent relevant theories. Though important, the literature lacks substantial research on the coach's impact on student-athlete commitment to codes of conduct and moral/ethical behavior. This portion of the review highlights literature pertaining to coach-athlete relationships and moral behavior while at the same time revealing the need for additional research in this area.

The previous discussion of the research by Kavussanu et al. (2002) noted that the perceived moral climate of a team significantly influences how an individual player's moral behavior. These authors also prescribe significance to a team's teachers, parents, and coaches as the people who build the moral context for the team, which is also the moral atmosphere. Essentially, the coach must set the moral climate for the team. This study also found that most of the athletes surveyed did not perceive their coach as encouraging inappropriate behavior.

Pelaez (2011) conducted some of the most influential research on the impact of coaching on the athlete's moral development. He conducted two separate studies examining collegiate coaches' self-efficacy in instilling morality in their athletes. The findings included four major themes: coaches as important moral influences, coaches' conceptions of morality entail four aspects (elite sport involvement, game, interaction with others, self-related), participants' past moral influences reflections in their

conceptions of morality, and the increased understanding of morality in sport when examining different theories together, (Pelaez, 2011).

A study by Yow, Humphrey, and Bowden (2011) examined many aspects of the coaching process. The athlete behavioral elements found to cause the greatest stress to coaches included selfishness, dissension, irresponsibility, insubordination, and apathy (Yow et al., 2011). Further research should study whether these characteristics of athletes would diminish if coaches specifically coached morality.

Tuncel (2009) developed a scale to measure unethical behavior of coaches. This study reported a coach's ability to address ethical issues with a team as absolutely essential for the athletes' well-being. Drug use, cheating, bullying, harassment, and eating disorders represented some of the issues which Tuncel recommended coaches take more active roles in addressing. With this study as the first of its kind, Tuncel strongly supports the idea of more research addressing the subject.

Conclusion

Sport has served as one of mankind's fascinations since the time of the early Greeks. Morality has been a discussion even longer, still functions as an important conversation, and receives attention in the professional literature. In our modern day, literature surrounds the debates on whether virtue and character can form through sport participation and on what level student-athletes develop morality on their collegiate teams. The gap in literature, which has just begun to be explored in recent years, pertains to the impact of collegiate coaches on their athletes' commitment to morality, and more specifically, the impact coaches have on their athletes' moral development.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Approach

The current study utilized a qualitative approach with a systematic grounded theory design. Grounded theory design employs three coding phases in order to tease out a theory directly from the data, with the emphasis on the data (and not the researcher) developing the theory. This specific design was chosen because the rigor, organization, and procedures it offers best fit a new researcher (Creswell, 2008). Variables linked with this study include student-athletes' perceptions of the moral teaching ability of their coaches, coaching styles and life modeling, and student-athletes' personal interactions with their coaches. In essence, this study sought to understand how student-athletes' perceive and are morally impacted by their coaches' actions.

Context

The research for this study took place at a private faith-based institution located in the Midwest. This proposal submitted to this university's athletic department sought to garner support and advice towards which teams the study should involve, resulting in the selection of four athletic teams for participation in the study. One element of the team selection attempted to gain an approximately equal gender balance. Two athletes were chosen from each team to participate in the study. Coaches served as a resource for finding athletes willing to participate.

Participants

Participants consisted of two athletes from four different athletic teams, totaling eight student-athletes. The participant pool excluded freshman and new transfers because the studied experiences came from the previous academic/athletic year, and these groups did not participate on the university's teams during that time. The researcher interviewed the athletes in person using a series of questions designed to determine the perceptions they held of their coaches' abilities to instill moral and character development (Appendix A).

Procedure

This study took place between November 2013 and February 2014. The researcher conducted interviews by asking participants about experiences on their university athletic teams. It was particularly necessary to understand the students' perceptions of their coaches' moral capabilities and whether or not they felt they had been influenced by them.

After coding and categorizing the results, findings revealed the perceptions athletes held of their coaches' ability to affect their moral development. Using the grounded theory technique also helped develop a theory on the interactions between students and coaches pertaining to moral development.

Data Analysis

The interviews with each student-athlete were coded and themed per the systematic grounded theory design. The analysis for this design progressed in three phases. In the first phase—open coding—initial categories and subcategories formed based on the raw data. During the second phase—axial coding—the researcher selected

one category from the open coding phase as the category to which other categories related. This category is also called the phenomenon. In the third phase—selective coding—the researcher developed a theory relating previous categories by imputing the data into a coding paradigm. This theory serves as an abstract concept of the moral development relationship between coaches and student-athletes as perceived by athletes (Creswell, 2008).

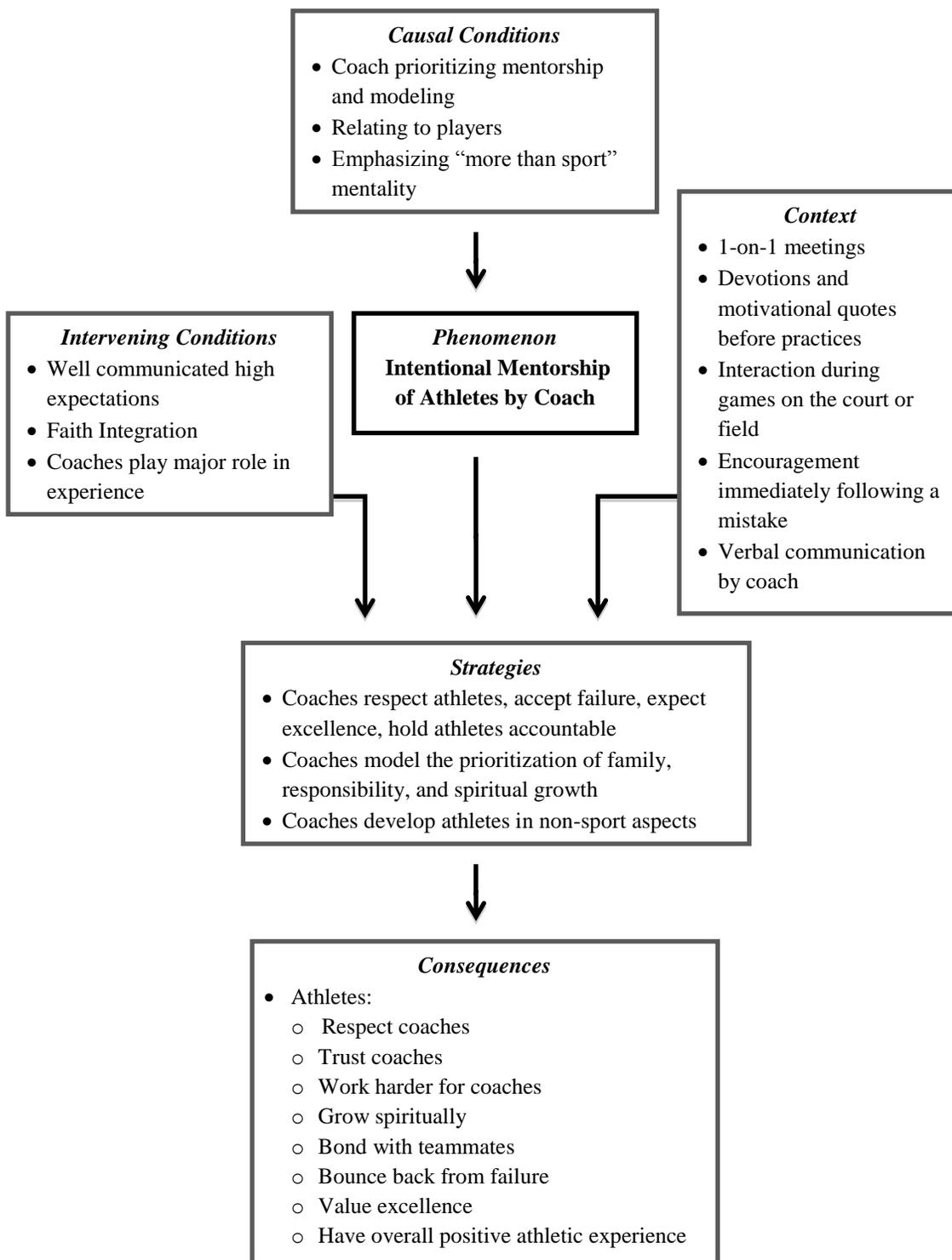
Chapter 4

Results

Three key themes and four subthemes emerged from the interviews. The second theme, intentional mentorship, serves as the central phenomenon expressed in the data. This theme lays the groundwork for and connects all the themes into the grounded theory. The first and most substantial theme, modeling by coaches, is supported by two subthemes: well-communicated high expectations and coach plays a major role in experience. The second theme, intentional mentorship, included the subtheme prioritization of mentorship. The third theme, integration of faith, was supported by subtheme God focused.

Though three key themes and four subthemes appeared, the second theme, intentional mentorship, is the central phenomenon and is quintessential to the development of this grounded theory. The theory proposes that intentional mentorship of athletes by coaches leads to the athletes' positive character development. The findings reflected in Figure 1 emerged from the data collected in the interviews. This section discusses more directly how the main themes and subthemes interrelate to create the theory (illustrated by Figure 1), as well as explain how the data answers the initial research questions.

Figure 1

Coaching Paradigm

Theory Development

In the development of the theory, the researcher used the theory development template found in Creswell's book *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (Creswell, 2008). The template allowed themes, subthemes, and raw data to be plugged into a coding paradigm in order to visually see the theory come to life. Besides themes and subthemes, the paradigm also represents common traits found in the data. The coding paradigm involves six elements, and the themes and subthemes they contain are outlined below.

The causal conditions that influence the core phenomenon (intentional mentorship of athletes by coaches) include coaches doing the following: prioritizing mentorship, relating to players, and emphasizing a "more than sport" mentality. The context that specifically influences strategies consists of one-on-one meetings between coaches and athletes, coaches employing devotions and motivational quotes, the coach-athlete interaction on and off the court/field, encouragement from coaches following a mistake, and verbal communication by the coaches. Intervening conditions, which provide the general context for the strategies, include well-communicated high expectations, faith integration, and coaches playing a major role in athlete's experience. The actual strategies resulting from the phenomenon include coaches: respecting athletes, accepting failure, expecting excellence, and holding athletes accountable; modeling the prioritization of family, responsibility, and spiritual growth; and developing athletes in non-sport aspects. Each of these aspects of the data proves representative of the student-athletes. Finally, the strategies result in athletes doing the following: respecting coaches, trusting coaches,

working harder, growing spiritually, bonding with teammates, bouncing back from failure, valuing excellence, and having an overall positive athletic experience.

In short, the causal conditions influence the phenomenon, the context and intervening conditions provide space for the strategies, the strategies directly result from the phenomenon, and the consequences are outcomes of the strategies. In other words, coaches create the space (conditions) to have interactions with their student-athletes (strategies), which directly and indirectly influence the student-athletes positively (consequences), and, throughout this process, mentorship serves as the key principle (phenomenon). All of these themes and subthemes interrelating in this way led to the development of the theory: intentional mentorship of athletes by coaches' leads to their positive character development. The following section explores in more depth how each theme emerged from the data.

Intentional Mentorship

The theme intentional mentorship clearly emerged as the central phenomenon in this study and also served to link each of the three other themes. The data indicates that the majority of athletes viewed their relationship with their coach as mentor and mentee. Seven of the eight interviewed specifically spoke to the mentorship role their coaches played. One student said:

I really think that [coach] coming in and having an open door policy and knowing that we can come to him for anything, whether it's [the sport] or not related, we can come to him at any time and he'll be there to talk and to support us, because he is our biggest supporter.

Student-athletes also mentioned multiple times that “[Coach] is like the ultimate mentor.” The mentor/mentee relationship student-athletes spoke of so frequently highlights the intentional nature coaches’ exhibit in their coaching styles. These perceptions of the mentorship relationship led to the strong supporting subtheme the prioritization of mentorship. Student-athletes consistently stated that one of their coaches’ top priorities was the relationship with their athletes. Coaches exhibit tangible evidence towards intentional mentorship relationships while also speaking of and displaying a priority of such relationships.

Prioritization of mentorship. Coaches’ prioritizing their mentorship role emerged as the most frequent subtheme from the data. Seven out of eight student-athletes mentioned or alluded to their coaches’ mentor role at least once, with six out of eight participants doing so multiple times. Student-athletes mentioned their coaches’ willingness and desire to talk about life and support them in ways other than athletics. One participant said,

It made me appreciate my coaches taking time for me outside of volleyball.

Making sure that everything is good about life. [Coach] wants to know whether I’m doing well, are struggling spiritually, or with things off the court. I know that I can go to her for that.

The participants also noted that coaches set up individual meetings and kept open-door policies so athletes could access them whenever they needed. One student-athlete expressed this availability by saying: “I have enjoyed being able to meet with him one-on-one; he encourages us if we want to meet with an open-door policy.” Participants noted that one demonstration of this prioritization of mentorship was that coaches wanted

to get to know the student-athletes on a personal level. One student said, “He wants to get to know us, he knows us on a personal level which [is] something we didn’t have in the past.” These quotes exemplify the most significant and frequent subtheme to come from the data. A strong subtheme within the prioritization of mentorship was coaches’ emphasis on more than sport alone.

Student-athletes spoke about their coaches not only being interested in developing their athletic skills and pursuing athletic related goals but also valuing the development of their personhood. The data showed an attitude that character and life preparedness after college was equally important to coaches as athletic endeavors. Two student-athletes said make the following statements: “I mean, I want to win—don’t get me wrong—but it’s nice that [sport] isn’t everything and they know that and they care about us and they genuinely want what’s best for us,” and “There’s a sense that this is so much more than [sport].”

Participants recognized, through their coaches, that team membership entailed more than just sport. One participant said, “But she doesn’t see [sport] as just a game, it’s definitely about us as women of Christ, and developing us and teaching us in more than just a game...but their focus is so much more than the game. They want to pour into men.” Perhaps the statement from the data that most adequately portrays this subtheme is the following: “To keep in mind that this is more than [sport] but it’s about character. And whether we win or lose this is growing us for the rest of our lives.” A large majority of athletes expressed these ideas when interviewed. Coaches strongly portrayed to their student-athletes that they (the coaches) value the mentorship role and that they are there

for purposes other than just to win games. How the central phenomenon links to each of the following themes is discussed towards end of the chapter.

Modeling by Coaches

This theme emerged from the data with the highest occurrence rate at a total of 110 times and also occurred in every interview conducted. It was supported by subthemes *well-communicated high expectations* and *coach plays a major role in experience*.

Athletes stated that their current coaches communicated expectations well and then modeled those expectations in their own lives. Among the communicated expectations emerged respect, accountability, living in excellence, and keeping high standards.

Well-communicated high expectations. Student-athletes observed several well-communicated high expectations. Accountability stood out as one of the coaches' highest valued expectations. Coaches not only hold their student-athletes accountable but expect teammates to hold each other accountable as well. They emphasize this mutual support by publically holding themselves accountable to standards they voice to the team.

Multiple student-athletes had similar sentiments as the following:

They give us a lot of responsibility. They let us hold each other accountable. I mean [coach] will call you out in the middle practice like if you're not doing something or like doing something right or if you've done it wrong she will hold you accountable for that.

Another participant stated, “[Coach values] accountability and just calling each other out, and being able to have that freedom, and also call each other out and ourselves out.” The participants recognized coaches as holding student-athletes accountable to character and not just sport related actions.

Another factor of this subtheme was respect. Student-athletes identified respect as being mutually earned between players and coaches. They readily give their coaches respect if the coaches first respected them. However, this respect becomes best understood and observed through two key quotes:

We've developed a trust, a mutual trust and a mutual respect; it's like [coach] respects us to the point where when we feel something should be changed [coach] respects our opinion enough to change it, which we didn't have in the past.

[Coach] just like demands a lot and that makes us want to do what she asks because we don't want to disappoint her. And it's such a respect thing. We value her so much that we don't want to let her down or let it seem like we disappointed her in that way by not doing something.

Mutual respect and accountability frequently arose as topics in the data, and they set the scene for coaches to call student-athletes to excellence and high standards.

Accountability and respect both emerged as contributing factors to the subtheme well-communicated high expectations. However, they also complement two other contributing factors, excellence and high standards.

The data showed that the importance of excellence and high standards were both communicated well by coaches. Coaches placed an emphasis on them in their speech and actions. They informed their teams from the very beginning of the expectations held for them, especially with regard to striving for excellence. The coaches do not hold high standards of excellence for the players alone; the participants indicated that their coaches held themselves to extremely high standards as well. This modeling by the coaches encouraged the student-athletes to desire to do the same. Student-athletes spoke

specifically about their coaches and excellence. One student-athlete stated, “I would say there is a high focus to be excellent on and off the field, and it’s not just to perform athletically or perfectly.” Another said, “[Coach] talks about living a life of excellence all the time. That’s one of his most important values is living a life of excellence.”

The majority of participants felt their coaches lived with an image of excellence and desired that for them as well. One student said, “So I think that especially for coach, he wants to establish that image of excellence, and he is trying to instill the same things into us.” Student-athletes perceived their coaches as desiring to model living excellently when people looked at their lives.

Alongside excellence, high standards contributed greatly to the well-communicated high expectations theme. Participants recognized that coaches held themselves to high standards as a way of modeling. Another student stated:

So now we are definitely held to a higher standard because her standards are out of this world even for herself. But now we want to rise up there because she’s such a good example of both of those things for us.

Coaches communicated high standards as expected parts of the athletic experience: “She told us her standards for things and then she just expects us to do it. She’s told us she knows that we know our standards.”

However, student-athletes perceive that coaches do not have high standards for athletic performance alone but that they hold high standards for every part of the students’ lives. One participant mentioned:

What that means is bring in the best that you have so whatever it is, even if it's basketball, classroom, your relationships, your relationship with your girlfriend, or friends. Bring the best that you have to it. That's kind of what he expects out of us.

No matter what the circumstance, coaches communicate that they hold themselves and their student-athletes to high standards: "He'll let us know even in the face of adversity he has a high standard and he lives his life like that too."

Accountability, respect, excellence, and high standards all emerged from the data to create the theme of well-communicated high expectations. As established earlier, coaches prioritized their mentorship role through focusing on individual meetings and emphasizing the "It's about more than sport" atmosphere on the team. The coaches coming to the student-athletes and seeking a relationship outside of heading up practice and games created the space for mutual respect to develop and coaches to hold athletes accountable. With mutual respect and accountability established, student-athletes more willingly answered the call to excellence and set high standards, as they did not want to disappoint their coach. In essence, the mentorship role built the foundation for accountability, respect, excellence, and high standards to thrive on these teams through modeling by coach.

Coach plays major role in experience. The subtheme of the coach playing a major role in the experience contains two key contributing factors: recent coach turnover and coaches' modeling. The data proved the significant impact coaches have on their athletes' experiences by highlighting the extreme difference in experience student-

athletes had in recent coach turnovers. The data also showed that coaches live as examples or modeled life well in regards to responsibility, family, and servant-leadership.

It was previously discussed how accountability, respect, excellence, and high standards developed in the data. Half of the respondents directly linked that data to their head coaches. A number of participants described a situation in which previous coaches created an atmosphere of distrust, destructiveness, and hurt within the team. These past experiences pushed the student-athletes into negative attitudes, created a divided team atmosphere, diminished their love for the game, and diminished morale.

Half of the athletes interviewed indicated an extreme divergence between previous and current coaches. “We had different coaches and it was really unhealthy my first couple years,” said one student-athlete. This same student followed up:

It was just very manipulative before and they played a lot of mind games. You never knew where you were with them. They just told you a lot of things when they recruited you that they did not follow through with. So was kind of frustrating coming in.

When asked about previous years on the team, another student-athlete responded by saying it was “so destructive and my attitude was awful.”

However, even those student-athletes who appreciated their previous coaches found that their new coaches brought a positive dynamic to the team. As one student said:

But we have two new coaches this year and it has been such a radical improvement. Not that the previous coaches were terrible or anything, but these [coaches] brought not only striving for excellence, but they are such quality men of God and they form us as men.

These same coaches contributed to the dispatching of division within the team to create unity: “I think that’s really one of the biggest things which changed this year, was there was a sense of unity within the team.” These same sentiments emerged in several of the interviews.

Multiple athletes spoke about the freedom that their new coach has provided the team: a freedom to play their game without fear of failure. Instead of losing their morale and confidence with one mistake, they know their coaches will accept failure, encourage them through it, and still expect their best. This approach is best seen in two statements from one interview:

One of the biggest things that changes team morale, you know personally like I said it was tough to play for coach last year, if you weren’t playing well or if you did something [wrong] it was a rough two weeks, you know, guys were in the doghouse. He would be on you and on you and on you. It’s almost like you lose all of your morale, you lose your confidence, stuff like that.

The student-athlete followed up by remarking on having a coach who respects that he has played basketball his whole life:

[It] makes us all play a lot better to be able to make mistakes and not fear coming out. Just a freedom to do what you’ve been doing your whole life and kind of trust your instincts, you play better that way. It’s a lot of fun.

Another athlete gave an emotional testament, saying that, when she spoke with her new coach about last year’s issues, her coach strove to work through it with the team despite all the existing pain. She described one encounter with her coach like this: “When we’re playing in freedom and playing with such joy I feel like that totally changes the

atmosphere for better sportsmanship and better character than we had last year.” This student spoke about having a new coach this year who allowed more freedom for their own game: “...just the whole morale and confidence has gone way up with [our new coach], I think that’s huge for us.”

The athletes described how coaching changes had a tremendously positive impact on every aspect of the team. Part of this impact shows through ways in which coaches modeled life well. Responsibility, family, and servant-leadership all came out of the data as aspects of modeling by coaches as perceived by student-athletes.

In terms of responsibility, participants spoke about taking it on themselves, that coaches expected them to act in a responsible manner, take responsibility for every aspect of their lives, and model it to the younger players as well. Multiple student-athletes said something similar to this participant: “[Coach has] just kind of helped me to see that we have the responsibility to better ourselves on our own and make other people around us better.” Taking responsibility for oneself and bringing others into that as well proved common in the data. One student identified it as one of the strengths of the program and university:

You know your freshman year you have of all these older guys molding you teaching you so each year you get kind of moral responsibility to teach and bring those guys along, that’s the strength of Taylor and our program. It’s that were so close.

Following responsibility, the prioritization of the family also recurred as a theme.

When asked about their coaches’ top values in life, six of the eight participants immediately spoke of their coaches placing a high priority on their families. To these

student-athletes, their coaches exemplified a love for family, a prioritization of them, and a desire to bring them into the team atmosphere at some level. Numerous statements such as the following highlighted the importance of family:

I would say that he values his family especially, but something he's always talking about how important it is to be someone that people can look up to. He talks all the time how he wants to be someone that people can look up to, whether it's his children because he has an older daughter and young daughter.

The interviewees recognized family as only second to God in their coaches' values and life priorities.

One final element of coaches' modeling emerged in regards to servant-leadership. One interviewee stated: "To lead and to serve that is such a good description of all of our coaches in general." Participants reported that their coaches modeled servant-leadership well in invited them into their homes and set up services opportunities for them. One athlete said, "She wanted to show that she was willing to serve us."

Whether they came off a destructive experience last year or appreciated their experience, each participant referred to positive changes new coaches brought. These changes showed in coaches' modeling of responsibility, love of family, and servant-leadership but most closely tied to the *intentional mentorship* theme.

Athletes described unhealthy team atmospheres and a lack of freedom, trust, and honesty on their teams in previous years. However, with new coaches coming in and placing mentorship as a top priority, they built honesty, trust, and freedom into team dynamics. By their caring for their student-athletes through mentorship, some coaches significantly changed team dynamics for the good while others built on an existing good.

Integration of Faith

The last theme, integration of faith, with subtheme God-focused, emerged in seven out of eight interviews. Interviewees experienced spiritual growth on the team through small groups, prayer, Bible studies, and coaches bringing Bible verses to practice.

Spiritual growth clearly held the utmost importance to both players and coaches. Many of the participants cited the Christian atmosphere as a top reason they came: “[This institution] had those things and I really wanted to go to Christian college because that felt important to me” proved a common statement in the interviews. Coaches emphasized spiritual growth with expectations: “There’s a high expectation that you, no matter where you are at with your walk with the Lord for your faith, that you live that out to the fullest and you try to grow in that.” In regards to modeling, multiple students spoke about their coaches modeling spiritual growth in a manner similar to this student’s:

She brings in a Bible verse to practice every day and she shares it with us she encourages us to time every day and talks about quiet time every day. And we just see through her stories God working in her life all the time we want that too.

The emphasis on the notion of spiritual growth appeared important but not just growth—a strong focus on God existed, that is, honoring God, developing men of God, and prioritizing God.

God-focused. Honoring God through performance and sport and giving glory to God came out of the data as well. Students made the following statements about their coaches: “They want us to honor God with our performance and it’s always been there,” and “We are playing football to give glory to God.” The coaches do not settle for their

teams playing a sport to win games or to build their own reputation alone; they want sport to focus on glorifying God. “They push us to understand. What are we playing for? Are we playing for ourselves? Are we playing for selfish ambitions or are we playing to glorify God?”

Each male participant referenced the idea of being men of God multiple times. Several have similar statements to this student’s claim: “It’s [our university’s] thing, trying to live like men of God.” Developing men of God seems a coach priority, a school priority, and the athlete’s priority as well. Athletes saw their coaches as people who prioritize God and desire to give glory to Him, no matter what happens on the field or court: “And I love that our coaches will talk to us even in prayer and say Lord let us give glory to you no matter what the outcome is.”

This focus on integrating faith into sport appeared as a factor of the central theme, intentional mentorship by coach, as well. The coaches seemed intent on developing their athletes in every way. Praying before games and practices, coming along side athletes spiritually, presenting Bible verses to the team, and communicating their desire to develop players spiritually all emerged as ways in which the coaches mentor these young men and women. Evidently, for coaches at this university, faith functions as an integral part of their mentorship role. Drawing their athletes’ focus to God and their spirituality serves as a significant element of the athletes’ experience.

Conclusion

Intentional mentorship, modeling, and integration of faith by coaches emerged from the data as significant themes, which supported the theory grounded in the data. Though the participants of the current study had negative past experiences with coaches,

they experienced a positively impactful change because of recent coach turnover. In the next chapter, the discussion addresses the findings' connection to existing research, the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for practitioners.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Major Findings

The major findings of this research project support existing research, highlighting the importance of coaching influence in student-athletes' experiences and character development, as well as indicating mentorship as critical in creating space for coaches to engage athletes in this way.

The major finding is the phenomenon of mentorship in coach to student-athlete interactions. The data suggests that, when coaches intentionally mentor (modeling their life's values and integrating faith), student-athletes have highly positive perceptions of the coaches' abilities to instill moral and character development within the team atmosphere.

Discussion of Research Questions

In response to the first research question, "What perceptions do student-athletes hold of their coaches' moral development and character building efforts?" student-athlete participants indicated positive perspectives on their coaches' abilities. Student-athletes clearly stated that they perceived their coaches doing well in cultivating an atmosphere of positive moral and character development. All athletes had positive views of their current coaches' efforts. However, some student-athletes also explained that they perceived their previous coaches as negative influences on the teams moral and character development.

This report only strengthens the idea that coaches do indeed have significant impact. The second research question, “What impact do coaches have on their team’s overall moral development?” also overwhelmingly revealed coaches have significant positive impact. The student-athletes indicated that coaches have tremendous impact on the moral and character atmosphere of their teams.

Relation to Existing Research

In analyzing and interpreting the data from the current study, the researcher realized that five specific factors connect previous professional works to this data.

Beller’s (2002) work offers the first connection. Beller claims that character development in sport comes systematically or non-systematically (formally or informally). This statement also insinuates that sport provides “powerful contexts for the teaching and learning of good moral habits” between coaches and athletes. The data in this study supports Beller’s claims through the central phenomenon (intentional mentorship) and one of the six subthemes (coaches live as examples). The mentorship role coaches take, combined with student-athletes perceiving them as “living as examples,” create this powerful context Beller writes about from which the coaches teach good moral habits. Multiple student-athletes claimed that their coaches are “the ultimate mentor” while also describing the priorities (good habits) their coaches modeled: responsibility, family, and servant-leadership.

Kavussanu et al.’s (2002) findings that perceptions of moral atmosphere had a significant effect on moral functioning in the individual align with this data as well. Multiple athletes relayed that their perceptions of their coaches’ priorities and character influenced their experience and attitudes. One of those athletes said a coaching change

resulted in her attitude going from awful to new love for her coaches, teammates, and the game. Another athlete explained why he felt “the biggest thing that changes team morale” was whether they perceived their coaches punished failure or accepted it.

A third link between this data and previous works pertains to research on Christian higher education conducted by Burwell (1996). This author found no significant difference in moral reasoning between athletes at secular colleges and Christian institutions. The results of the data in this study support Burwell’s in that, even though faith offered a strong theme, students felt the most significant impact from the mentorship role coaches played. Therefore, even when faith emerges from the data, it is still not the highest qualifying factor in moral or character development within student-athletes.

One subtheme, recent coach turnover, supports both Erikson’s development theory and research conducted by Kavussanu et al. (2002). Erikson’s theory holds that development stems in part from the influence of one’s environment (Evans et al., 2009). The recent coach turnover subtheme demonstrated that the environment (or lack thereof) that coaches formed through mentorship and modeling influenced students quite strongly. Also in the data appeared the topic of appreciation for teammates. Both the coaches and teammates contributed positively or negatively to the team environment. Kavussanu et al. (2002) ascribed significance to a team’s teachers, parents, and coaches as the people who build the moral context for a team, which is also the moral atmosphere. Though the current study focuses only on coaches, it connects well to the 2002 report. The theory generated in the current study directly connects the moral and character development of student-athletes to their coaches, which also connects to Kavussanu et al.’s claim.

The fifth and final connection from the current study to previous works connects to Pelaez (2011). Pelaez found that coaches serve as important moral influences; that coaches' conceptions of morality entail four factors (elite sport involvement, game, interaction with others, self-related); that participants' past moral influences reflect in their conceptions of morality; and, finally, that when examining different theories together, the understanding of morality in sport increases. Likewise, the current study focusing on student-athlete perceptions of coaches' moral influence abilities exhibited that coach plays a major role in experience, ultimately supporting Pelaez's study.

The five connections mentioned above ground the study in previously developed theories and research. Fortunately, this grounding helps validate the relevance of the current study to professional practitioners in higher education. However, the current study, of course, includes the limitations discussed below.

Limitations and Future Research

Though the research questions guiding the current study were answered by significant data, this study remains imperfect. One limitation is that the study included only the student perspective. Previous research indicates that common stressors for coaches often entail athlete behavioral issues, mainly selfishness, dissension, lack of responsibility, insubordination, and apathy (Yow et al., 2011). Though our current study suggests that athletes at this university act on the contrary, researching this claim by Yow et al. at this institution would provide more depth. Therefore, a qualitative study focused on perceptions of coaches could shed light on this phenomenon.

The sample size of this study—eight students at one Midwestern university—limits the scope of the findings. Longitudinal data conducted at multiple universities and

involving a larger student-athlete sampling would provide a more applicable and accurate understanding of coaches' moral and character development efforts and efficacy.

It would also be important to extend scope and prescriptive value of the current study through additional methodology. For example, a quantitative study would provide an increased number of participants, which would then allow a better understanding of athletes' perceptions on a whole. Such a study should consider the role of gender.

Understanding the differences in experience between male and female athletes in a larger study would allow student affairs professionals to be more mindful of their athletes' experiences and to cater more specifically to their needs.

Finally, the lack of racial diversity of the interviewed athletes creates a limitation in itself, with no way to understand how race may play a role in team atmosphere, team interactions, and experiences with coaches. Future research could contribute well to the current study by having a larger sampling size that exhibits diversity of institution and race.

Implications for Practitioners

Despite these limitations, the study provides insight into the importance of coach-to-student-athlete interactions. As clear from the data, coaches have a tremendous amount of influence on student-athletes' experiences and on their moral and character development. Coaches aware of this phenomenon know the importance of their role and how they can be more intentional in their interactions with student-athletes in order to foster the best possible learning environment.

Athletic administrators and coaches alike can utilize this data to outline successful coaching methods in regards to moral and character development. Recognizing their

mentorship roles, modeling life values, integrating faith, and communicating expectations well are significant, positive, coach-based influences in the student-athlete's experience allows practitioners to consider and highlight such influences.

Several specific recommendations result from this study that coaches may consider. Coaches scheduling individual meetings with athletes at the beginning of the year set a precedent of a desire to be intentional with them. Asking thoughtful questions and bringing scripture references to practices will foster spiritual growth, as will coaches remembering to articulate what they value most. Lastly, coaches should consistently communicate their expectations to athletes from the beginning of the year. Student-athletes may then know what is expected of them and not feel surprised if they receive awards or reprimands.

Despite the need for more research in order to understand the coaches' perspective and gather a larger sampling, we see from this data that coaches who intentionally mentor, model values, integrate faith, and communicate well do a great service to their student-athletes. The higher education endeavor would greatly benefit from an increase in coaches who engage in their jobs in this way.

Conclusion

The significance of a coach's presence and interactions with student-athletes has been well documented in professional research. The current study aimed to contribute to the literature by representing the voice and perceptions of student-athletes and answering the question, "What kind of impact coaches have morally and in regards to character building?" The findings of the current study should encourage practitioners who desire a holistic education for their student-athletes, as education through their team and coaches

contribute to this. Student-athletes describe the perceptions they hold of the coaches' moral and character development abilities in a positive manner, specifically appreciating mentorship, modeling values, integrating faith, and communicating expectations well. Higher education institutions desiring the best learning environment for all their students should consider assessing coach performance through the eyes of their student-athletes regularly in order to determine the effectiveness and strength of coaches coaching and teaching philosophies.

To draw back to the original purpose of this study, the research questions posed were as follows: What perceptions do student-athletes hold of their coaches' moral development and character building efforts? And, what impact do coaches have on their team's overall moral development? With these questions in mind, two key takeaways emerged from this study. First, student-athletes hold positive perceptions of their coaches' moral development and character building efforts. Secondly, coaches have significant impact on their team's overall moral development; in the current study in particular, the impact is positive.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Introduction
 - a. Welcome/Greeting
 - b. Informed Consent
 - i. Purpose of study-Number of participants
 - ii. Interview Procedure (45 minutes)
 - iii. Potential risks and anticipated results
 - iv. Confidentiality
 - v. Freedom to withdraw
 - vi. Questions researcher contact information
2. Interview
 - a. Warm up questions
 - i. How did you come to decide to play at Taylor?
 - ii. Has the athletic experience been what you expected?
 - b. Specific open-ended questions
 - i. How would you describe the general level of character your team has?
 - ii. What do you perceive your coach values most in his/her life?
 - iii. What do you think he/she's top priority is regarding the team?
 - iv. How would you describe your his/her efforts to coach integrity and responsibility?
 - v. How would you describe his/her efforts to coach respect and sportsmanship?
 - vi. What are your thoughts on the integration of servant-leadership his/her coaching?
 - vii. What is your opinion of your coach's impact on yours and the team's overall character quality?
 - viii. Do you believe there are ways in which your coach could do more regarding character building?
 - ix. What is your opinion of a coach's responsibility to develop athlete's character?
3. Concluding
 - a. Gratitude
 - b. I will answer questions
 - c. Request how participant felt about the interview
 - d. Closing thanks

