



## **Collegiate Athletes Engaging in Activism: Perceptions of Social Justice Causes and Support from Significant Social Agents**

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*Recently, collegiate athletes have used their platform to promote positive social change. However, few studies with large samples have investigated the demographics of collegiate athlete activities, their views toward a number of social inequities, and their perceptions of social support. The current study aimed to address those gaps and explore how these factors influenced the likelihood of collegiate athlete activism engagement. Participants ( $n = 4,473$ ) completed self-report scales on social justice causes and perceived support. For this sample, athletes who identified as male, Black, and More than One Race engaged in activism at a higher rate than expected and a majority of participants viewed all social issues as social justice causes. In terms of support, athletes viewed higher levels of general support than instrumental support and approval for engaging in activism and rated parents, friends, and teammates as most supportive in all three support categories. Activists, compared to non-activists, were more likely to view social issues as social justice related and rated most social agents as more approving of their own activism. Findings indicate that perceptions of social issues and support from social agents, especially non-sport social agents, might be one reason for collegiate athletes' participation in activism.*

*Key words: collegiate sports, activism, social justice, athlete*

Due to their roles on college campuses, collegiate athletes have greater visibility and a larger platform than their non-athlete student peers (Kluch, 2020). This platform provides collegiate athletes with unique opportunities to use their voices for the promotion of positive social change, often to an extent that is unavailable to their non-athlete counterparts (Mac Intosh et al., 2020). Given the recent national revitalization of the Black Lives Matter movement due to the brutal murders of Black Americans such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, athletes have begun to call for systemic change to eradicate social injustice. These actions have included a number of high-profile activist acts across the country. For example, athletes from Pac-12 institutions formed the #WeAreUnited group to fight for fair treatment of college athletes with regard to COVID-19 protocols, revenue sharing, racial equity, and image and likeness rights (*#WeAreUnited*, 2020). Data from a national survey conducted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) during the 2020 academic year – a time marked by increased national discourse on racial justice – also showed a significant increase in social justice engagement among collegiate athletes, with almost 90% of survey respondents having engaged in racial justice conversations (NCAA, 2020).

In spite of the recent increases in collegiate athletes' engagement in racial justice conversations, we know relatively little about which athletes are moving beyond these conversations to actual activism. Some research suggests that individuals' identities may play a role in their motivation and level of engagement in activist work (Calow, 2021; Kluch, 2021; Mac Intosh et al., 2020). Further investigating the demographic characteristics of activist athletes would allow for the development of targeted interventions to help athletes find their voice for causes that were individually relevant. In addition to the demographic makeup of these individuals, another key factor in their engagement in activism might be their own personal beliefs about various social causes. As athlete activism has been increasing at all levels, but especially at the collegiate level, understanding the athletes' perception of what constitutes a social justice issue was an important first step in better understanding what issues were important to athletes and consequently the motivation these athletes may draw upon to inform their activism. This is even more important since universities as a whole are supposed to be aiding in the holistic development of their students.

In addition to personal characteristics, another reason why collegiate athletes might be becoming more active in the social justice space could be the support they receive from coaches, academic advisors, athletic trainers, faculty, and other athletics department staff. Even though these support systems are a critical component of the athletes' environments, we know relatively little about how collegiate athletes perceive support from these various social agents when it comes to engaging in activism. Therefore, we looked at the support from significant social agents for college athletes' activist engagement to gain a better sense of how such agents may assist activist athletes in utilizing their platform for social justice efforts while also helping those closest to these athletes (e.g., coaches, administrators) understand how to better support athletes in driving action for systemic change.

### **Athlete Activism for Social Justice**

Activism, or groups applying pressure on institutions or organizations in an attempt to change practices, conditions or policies with which they do not agree (Smith, 2005), has seen an increase in recent years in the sport environment – particularly when it comes to activism for social justice. Sport scholars have defined social justice as the “embracing [of] diversity, equity,

and inclusion while recognizing the roles of privilege and power” (Camiré et al., 2021). More specifically, social justice is concerned with creating an environment in which all members of society are treated equitably, fairly, and respectfully (Culp, 2016) and are provided the same protections, opportunities, and rights (National Association of Social Workers, 2015). A commitment to social justice can range from recognizing the dignity of historically marginalized groups to redistributing economic wealth and power (Fraser, 1999). Social justice activism is often aimed at creating more equitable opportunities and outcomes for historically minoritized groups, which Tatum (1997) has identified as groups that are marginalized based on their race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, religion, age, as well as mental and physical abilities.

In this most recent new wave of social justice athlete activism led by Black athletes (Edwards, 2016), activist efforts can take multiple forms including, but not limited to, community outreach, financial contributions, public statements, wearing activist apparel (e.g., “I can’t breathe” shirts), and engaging in protests or other public displays of resistance (Mac Intosh et al., 2018). While these efforts have often taken place at the professional level, collegiate athletes have increasingly used their position on college campuses to encourage political and social change as well (Kluch, 2020). For example, in 2015, the University of Missouri’s team protested discriminatory practices and racist actions on their campus (Ferguson & Davis, 2019; Yan et al., 2018) and football players at Northwestern University led an unsuccessful attempt to unionize (Strauss, 2015). Other prominent examples of collegiate athletes utilizing their platform for social change include football players at the University of Texas leading efforts for numerous campus changes (Davis, 2020), basketball players at the University of Washington launching initiatives that focus on prison and criminal justice reform (Kirschman, 2020), and calls by athletes at the University of Texas and University of Washington to eliminate controversial landmarks, many of which celebrated the country’s racist past.

Despite the well-documented stigma attached to activism in the arena of sport (Kaufman, 2008; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010), the recent reemergence of the activist athlete is informed by a rich history of athlete activists from historically minoritized and marginalized populations who have leveraged their power to challenge the institution of sport to call attention to injustices (Wiggins, 1992). For example, scholars have long shown the central roles Black athletes have played during the Civil Rights Movement (Agyemang et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2019; Edwards, 2016; Edwards, 1969) and, more recently, the Black Lives Matter movement (Sarver Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Similarly, women have played crucial roles in advancing feminist movements in and beyond sport, as each wave of feminism often coincided with advances in women’s empowerment informed by female athleticism (Cooky, 2017). Scholars have also examined the leadership of queer sportspeople in advancing the rights and inclusion of athletes who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community (Anderson, 2002; Anderson et al., 2016; Griffin, 1998). The leadership of athletes from minoritized groups to advance social justice agendas is not surprising, given that they are often motivated by a desire to provide visibility to minoritized voices, serve as role models, eliminate discrimination, and promote more inclusive environments both in and beyond sport (Kluch, 2021). However, even though this area of research is beginning to receive additional attention, large scale studies that have looked at exactly *who* is participating in activism and *why*, especially at the collegiate level, are rare. Therefore, the first purpose of the current study was to investigate the demographics of collegiate athletes engaging in activism and explore how athlete identities (demographics) might influence an athlete’s likelihood to engage in social justice activism.

As an athlete's demographic background is only part of what would make one engage in activism, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) might also provide insight into why athletes decide to engage, or not engage, in social justice activism. Specifically, the TPB predicts an athlete's attitudes and normative beliefs will influence their intention to engage in an activity, which will ultimately influence their engagement in the behavior. One aspect that could influence one's attitude toward engaging in social justice activism are one's beliefs about various social inequities. Specifically, if an athlete views a specific cause as being a social justice issue, they would be more likely to engage in action that would illuminate that cause and bring change to the matter. For example, if an athlete viewed racism as something that is personally relevant and influencing them or their significant others, they would be more likely to engage in action to bring attention to the issue. On the other hand, if they perceived the cause as unrelated to themselves or those they care about, they would be less likely to engage in activist behavior. A similar pattern was recently identified by Mac Intosh et al. (2020), who found that collegiate athletes who held minoritized gender or racial identities were more likely to engage in activism than their non-minoritized peers. However, currently no studies have investigated collegiate athletes' perceptions of social justice issues. Therefore, the second purpose of this study was to (a) investigate collegiate athletes' perceptions toward various social justice issues, and (b) explore if there were differences in these perceptions between activist and non-activist athletes.

### **Social Support**

In addition to attitudes influencing individuals' likelihood to engage in activism, the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) also predicts that subjective norms will influence their intentions to engage in the behavior. As subjective norm beliefs focus on how an individual perceives others, these beliefs would be closely connected to athlete's perceptions of social support. Social support, or "verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (MacGeorge, et al., 2011, p. 317), influences a number of behaviors and personal outcomes. Specifically, social support influences feelings of value, acceptance and love, perceptions of belonging, as well as mutual obligation and communication (MacGeorge et al., 2011). A network of support includes relationships in all areas of one's life such as family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, clubs, church, social groups, political groups, and many others (MacGeorge et al., 2011). For college athletes, this network also encompasses those involved in the sport environment and includes coaches, peers, athletic trainers, dieticians, sport psychologists, medical practitioners, and other athletic department staff (Freeman, 2020).

Although initially thought to be a unidimensional construct, recent studies have shown social support to be multidimensional with four functional aspects (Freeman, 2020; MacGeorge et al., 2011). Primary types of support include emotional support (e.g., reassurance, comfort), instrumental support (e.g., material goods, services), informational support (e.g., advice, feedback), and esteem support (e.g., validation, value assurance; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2011). The multidimensional nature of social support allows for a more nuanced understanding of the construct, as individuals will need different types and levels of each type of support largely dependent on their circumstances. However, even though the multidimensional nature of social support allows for a range of possibilities in research studies, studies examining the various types of social support from multiple social agents are not numerous (Freeman, 2020). Studies that investigate more than one type of social support and perceptions of how multiple social agents provide that support offer an opportunity to expand understanding of their

individual impacts, especially in the sport realm that has typically utilized social support in very specific situations. This multidimensional support may also be critical to understanding when and why athletes engage in specific activist behaviors.

In the sport context, several studies have explicitly investigated social support, with a majority of those studies investigating collegiate athlete perceptions of general support. For example, multiple studies have demonstrated that high levels of perceived social support from teammates, coaches, athletics department staff, family, and friends have positive impacts on mental health and well-being as well as were related to lower levels of burnout (Cho et al., 2020; DeFreese & Smith, 2013, 2014; Gabana et al., 2017; Hagiwara et al., 2017; Sullivan et al., 2020). Further, higher levels of perceived social support from strength and conditioning coaches, athletic trainers, coaches, and teammates were recognized by athletes as having a large impact on their recovery, value of rehabilitation, feelings of well-being, and overall satisfaction (Barefield & McCallister, 1997; Bone & Fry, 2006; Corbillon et al., 2008; Judge et al., 2012; Lu & Hsu, 2013). Clearly, the perceptions of support for collegiate athletes have shown to be related to a large number of positive outcomes – and the lack of perceived support, in turn, to be related to more detrimental outcomes.

In addition to the perceptions of general support, several studies have investigated support in regards to the four functional aspects of support (Freeman, 2020; MacGeorge et al., 2011) and found that, typically, these more specific forms of support also led to positive outcomes for athletes. For example, Sullivan and colleagues (2020) found that tangible support strongly negatively related to depressive symptoms as athletes were more able to handle stress because of the tangible support available (e.g., tutoring, health services, and a supportive network of family and friends). Finally, one study by Corbillon and colleagues (2008) investigated types of support from various social agents and found that injured athletes perceived emotional support from teammates to be stronger than that from coaches, indicating that assessing social support from a variety of social agents can be informative in certain events and inform best practices for how to help athletes in these circumstances. In total, these studies indicate that measuring both general support and specific types of support might be beneficial to understand the impact of support for collegiate athletes better.

### **Social Support for Activism**

In many of the examples of athlete activism, support from the public was mixed (Sarver Coombs et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2008). Often, athletes are expected to focus solely on sport and not use their platform for influencing social change (Kaufman, 2008). However, the presence of social support from key social agents can influence athletes to engage in social justice movements. For example, Havana McElvaine, a collegiate athlete who kneeled to protest police brutality, indicated her coach's support was one reason for her actions (University of Washington, 2017). Similarly, Kluch (2020) found that athletes draw heavily from mentorship in their activism. Conversely, several athletes who acted without support of their coaches or individuals at their institution faced backlash that included loss of playing time and scholarship, and even suspension or removal of the team (Kaufman, 2008). In the research domain, a number of studies have looked at how perceptions of support have influenced engaging in activism. Fuller and Agyemang (2018) interviewed Black Division III male collegiate athletes in terms of their attitudes toward activism, perceptions of social support, and ability to engage in activism. Athletes in the study indicated that perceived social support, or lack of support, would influence

their actions toward activism (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018). Specifically, these collegiate athletes voiced that even though coaches pushed them to engage in community service activities, they felt like the coaches would not support engaging in activism because of negative impacts to the program and institution “image”.

A recent study by Mac Intosh et al. (2020) utilized the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and found that collegiate athletes’ intention to engage in activism was influenced by their own attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms. While not explicitly investigating social support, this study supports the idea that significant others will impact athletes’ intentions to engage in activism. However, even though these two studies provide some support for the influence of others on collegiate athlete intentions to engage in activism, Fuller and Agyemang (2018) investigated a small group of Division III athletes while MacIntosh et al. (2020) did not explicitly measure perceptions of support. Whereas past studies have investigated perceived support for athletes in a number of settings and activities, collegiate athletes’ perceptions of support to engage in activism on different social justice issues is relatively unexplored, especially with consideration to individual factors that might influence these perceptions. Therefore, the third and final purpose of this study was to investigate athletes’ perceptions of support in terms of general support, instrumental support, and support to engage in activism from a variety of significant social agents (i.e., parents, friends, teammates, coaches, athletic department employees, professors, university administration).

As such, our study had three primary purposes. First, we aimed to assess the demographic characteristics of collegiate athletes who are engaging in activism (gender, year in school, race/ethnicity, self-identified socio-economic status, and parental level of education) and investigate if those demographic characteristics influenced athletes’ engagement in activism. Second, we looked to explore athletes’ perceptions of current social inequities (e.g., racism, sexism, health) and how these perceptions differ between activist and non-activist athletes. Finally, we aimed to investigate collegiate athletes’ perceptions of support, specifically their perceptions of both general and instrumental support, as well as perceived approval to engage in activism from a number of social agents that included parents, non-teammate friends, teammates, coaches, athletics department employees, faculty, and university administrators. By investigating these questions, we aimed to better understand athletes’ decision to engage (or not engage) in activism and provide suggestions for social agents about the ways they can best support athletes in engaging in activism moving forward.

## Methods

### Participant Recruitment, Data Collection & Procedure

The current study is a secondary analysis of data collected by (organization focused on racial justice through sport that has been redacted for peer review). The initial data collection involved collegiate athletes completing an online survey sent to them by their athletic directors or other athletics staff member at each university. In some cases, the survey was shared with certain teams or athlete groups at the school (e.g., Student-Athlete Advisory Committee) while other times contact individuals sent the survey to the entire athlete population at a school. Once respondents accessed the survey, they were asked to give consent and proceeded to complete the survey, which took approximately 15 minutes. The survey contained sections focused on demographic information, the extent to which respondents viewed issues as social justice causes,

and perceptions of support from a variety of individuals close to the athletes. Only after all athletes had completed the survey, (organization redacted for peer review) provided school-specific reports of school-wide responses to the athletics departments and, in many cases, completed programming on race and racism with the athletes. In addition, (organization redacted for peer review) created an initial report outlining some descriptive statistics that was made available directly to their stakeholders and posted on their website. For the current project, the (organization redacted for peer review) reached out to the research team to complete additional data analyses on the de-identified data set.

## Measures

### Demographics

Participants responded to a number of demographic questions including age, gender, race and ethnicity, class standing, engagement in previous activism, sport, economic background, parents' educational attainment, and engagement in activities outside of sport. For previous engagement in activism, we asked athletes to indicate "Prior to campus" and "Since coming to campus" if they had participated in a social justice initiative. If athletes answered yes to either/both of the questions, we classified them as activist athletes.

### Social Justice Causes

We asked participants about a number of possible social justice causes with a stem of "Which of the following types of causes would you consider social justice causes?" These causes included racism, mental health, health/disease, sexism, poverty, LGBTQ+, and disability. Participants responded on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1–4 (1 = Definitely not; 2 = Probably not; 3 = Probably yes; 4 = Definitely yes). For the current study, responses from this scale were reported for each social justice cause in terms of athletes' perceptions of *yes* and *no* as well as mean responses. Specifically, we classified athletes who answered "definitely not" or "probably not" as not viewing the cause as social justice-oriented and those who answered "probably yes" or "definitely yes" as viewing the cause as social justice-oriented.

### Perceived Support

We asked participants to indicate their perceptions of support from various key stakeholders (parents, teammates, friends, athletics department employees, coach, professors, and university administrators) in their lives in three dimensions of support. For general support, we asked athletes to "indicate how supportive in general you would consider the following persons." For instrumental support, we asked athletes "how likely you would be to go to one of the following persons for assistance if you had a problem." Finally, for support for engaging in activism, we asked athletes "how likely you believe the following persons would be to support your involvement in social justice initiatives." For each section, athletes answered questions about all seven social agents on a six-point Likert scale that ranged from extremely supportive/unlikely to extremely supportive/likely. Participants rated each social agent on three dimensions.

## Participants

In total, 4,473 participants completed the online survey. Participant' average age was 19.65 ( $SD = 1.34$ ) and the sample was closely split between athletes identifying as men ( $n = 2,588$ ; 57.8%) and athletes identifying as women ( $n = 1,884$ ; 42.1%), with one athlete identifying as gender-queer. In terms of race and ethnicity<sup>1</sup>, there was a high percentage of athletes who identified as Caucasian/white ( $n = 3,398$ ; 75.9%), with other athletes identifying as Black/African American ( $n = 387$ ; 8.6%), More Than One Race ( $n = 295$ ; 6.6%), Hispanic ( $n = 193$ ; 4.3%), Asian ( $n = 137$ ; 3.1%), Pacific Islander ( $n = 20$ ; .4%), Native American ( $n = 18$ ; .4%), and Other ( $n = 25$ ; .6%). Participants represented a variety of class standings with the highest number indicating they were first-year students (first-year students  $n = 1714$ , 38.3%; sophomore  $n = 995$ , 22.2%; junior  $n = 939$ , 21.0%; senior  $n = 772$ , 17.2%; graduate student  $n = 21$ , .5%; not indicated  $n = 35$ , .8%). Participants represented 42 schools from all three NCAA divisions. In terms of previous activism, over two-thirds of participants had not engaged in social justice activism in the past ( $n = 3206$ ; 71.6%) with the remaining collegiate athletes reporting participation in high school ( $n = 385$ ; 8.6%), college ( $n = 442$ ; 9.9%), or during both high school and college ( $n = 443$ ; 9.9%)

Collegiate athletes were drawn from a wide variety of sports in the sample. Groups representing more than 5% of the sample included cross country and track and field ( $n = 649$ ; 14.5%), soccer ( $n = 601$ ; 13.4%), football ( $n = 460$ ; 10.3%), lacrosse ( $n = 365$ ; 8.2%), swimming and diving ( $n = 346$ ; 7.7%), softball ( $n = 302$ ; 6.7%), basketball ( $n = 296$ ; 6.6%), baseball ( $n = 257$ ; 5.7%) and volleyball ( $n = 252$ ; 5.6%). When self-identifying their background, athletes overwhelmingly identified as middle class ( $n = 3325$ ; 74.3%) with others identifying as working class ( $n = 662$ ; 14.86%) and upper class ( $n = 433$ ; 9.7%). Participants also reported their parents' education background with a majority reporting they had two parents who had graduated with a college degree ( $n = 2704$ ; 60.4%), while others indicated that one parent had a college degree ( $n = 1104$ ; 24.7%), neither parent had a degree ( $n = 634$ ; 14.2%), or that they did not know their parents' educational background ( $n = 34$ ; .8%). Participants were also involved in a variety of other activities outside of sport including a volunteer organization ( $n = 850$ ; 19.0%), religious organization ( $n = 559$ ; 12.5%), academic honors society ( $n = 520$ ; 11.6%), Greek Life ( $n = 348$ ; 7.8%), political organization ( $n = 173$ ; 3.9%), and performing arts organization ( $n = 92$ ; 2.1%)

## Statistical Analyses

We conducted statistical analyses that aligned with our three primary research purposes. First, to answer which athletes were engaged in activism and whether various demographic characteristics (year in school, gender identity, ethnicity/race, self-assessed socio-economic status, and parental level of education) influenced that engagement, we calculated descriptive statistics and conducted chi-square analyses. Second, to understand how college athletes viewed a number of social issues and if those views differed between activist and non-activist athletes, we calculated descriptive statistics and again conducted chi-square analyses. For both research

<sup>1</sup> Even though we combined both in one question for analysis purposes, we recognize that *race* and *ethnicity* are two separate social constructs. Participants were given the option to choose one or more of the following descriptors when asked about their racial and ethnic identities: Black/African-American, White/Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, East Indian, Pacific Islander, and More Than One Race, Other.



purposes 1 and 2, we utilized standardized residuals to indicate whether the actual number of athletes engaging or not engaging in activism was significantly more or less than would be expected for the current sample. In these analyses, we used a threshold of  $p < .05$  to determine overall significance of the chi-square test and a threshold of (+/-) 1.96, as suggested by Field (2013), that would indicate that the actual count in a cell was significantly different (more or less) than what would be expected for the current sample. Finally, to explore collegiate athletes' perceptions of support from a number of social agents (the third research purpose), we conducted a series of repeated measures ANOVAs for each of the social agents. In each of these repeated measure ANOVAs, the type of support (general support, instrumental support, and approval to engage in activism) was the main effect and activist status was used as a between subject factor. In these analyses, we used a criterion of  $p < .05$  for both the main effect (general support, instrumental support, and approval to engage in activism) and the interaction effect (activist and non-activist X support).

Because we also wanted to get a better understanding of how an individual's identity influenced their participation in social justice activism, we conducted a series of chi-square analyses. Due to the concerns about unequal group sizes and the necessary power to detect group differences, we did not include any individuals who identified as a classification that had low representation in the overall sample (e.g., graduate student).

## Results

### Who Engages in Activism?

When investigating those individuals who participated in social justice initiatives in the past, several demographic groups were overrepresented in relation to the total population (see Table 1). Specifically, collegiate athletes identifying as men participated in social justice initiatives at a higher rate than expected for the sample while collegiate athletes identifying as women participated at a significantly lower rate than expected for the sample. In terms of grade classification, the chi-square test was also significant,  $\chi^2(3, n = 4420) = 9.71, p < .05$ . Participants who identified as seniors reported they were less likely to have engaged in social justice initiatives than expected for the sample. Finally, the chi-square test analyzing race was significant,  $\chi^2(8, n = 4476) = 48.85, p < .001$ . More specifically, athletes who identified as Black/African American and More Than One Race indicated that they engaged in social justice initiatives at a higher rate than expected, while athletes identified as white engaged in social justice initiatives at a lower rate than expected. In terms of gender identity, the chi-square test was also significant,  $\chi^2(1, n = 4472) = 46.74, p < .001$ . The chi-square analysis for both self-identified socioeconomic status  $\chi^2(2, n = 4420) = 8.052, p < .05$  and parental education level  $\chi^2(1, n = 4442) = 10.97, p < .01$  were significant but no individual cells reached the threshold for significance indicating that these groups had unexpected variation, but not sufficient variation in any one grouping to demonstrate significant differences.

Table 1.

*Demographic information for total sample and in relation to past activism experience.*

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>n (%)</b>	<b>Activist</b>	<b>Non-Activist</b>
Total Participants	4476	828 (18.5)	3648 (81.5)
Gender			
Male	2588 (57.8)	565 (21.8)	2023 (78.2)
Female	1884 (42.1)	260 (13.9)	1624 (86.1)
Year in School			
First year	1714 (38.3)	342 (20.0)	1372 (80.0)
Sophomore	995 (22.2)	192 (19.3)	803 (80.7)
Junior	939 (21.0)	168 (17.9)	771 (82.1)
Senior	772 (17.2)	115 (14.9)	657 (85.1)
Race/Ethnicity			
White	3398 (75.9)	561 (16.5)	2837 (83.5)
Black	387 (8.6)	99 (25.6)	288 (74.4)
More than one Race	295 (6.6)	83 (28.1)	241 (71.9)
Hispanic	193 (4.3)	39 (20.2)	154 (79.8)
Asian	137 (3.1)	31 (22.6)	106 (77.4)
Pacific Islander	20 (.4)	8 (40.0)	12 (60.0)
Native American	18 (.4)	4 (22.2)	14 (77.8)
Self-identified Socioeconomic Status			
Working Class	662 (15.0)	137 (20.7)	525 (79.3)
Middle Class	3325 (74.3)	583 (17.5)	2742 (82.5)
Upper Class	433 (9.8)	96 (22.2)	337 (77.8)
Parent Education Levels			
Both parents have a college degree	2704 (60.9)	543 (20.1)	2161 (79.9)
One parent has a college degree	1104 (24.9)	185 (16.8)	919 (83.2)
Neither Parent has a college degree	634 (14.3)	97 (15.2)	537 (84.8)

Note: Percentages might not add up to exactly 100% because of those not included in the chi-square analyses and due to rounding.

### **What do Collegiate Athletes View as a Social Justice Cause?**

In terms of what type of issues collegiate athletes perceive to be social justice causes, a majority of participants indicated that all provided topics were social justice causes (see Table 2). Specifically, over 90% of collegiate athletes in the study perceived that racism and sexism were social justice causes while just under 70% of participants perceived health issues to be a social justice cause. When comparing collegiate athletes who had participated in social justice activism to those who had not engaged in activism, all chi-square tests for each type of activism were significant. These significant chi-square tests indicate that collegiate athlete activists perceived all of the topics as social justice issues at a higher rate than what would be expected for the sample.

Table 2.

*Perceptions of various societal issues as social justice causes by the total sample, activist athletes, and non-activist athletes and results from the chi-Square tests between activist and non-activist athletes.*

	Total	Activist	Non-Activist	F value	p- value
Racism	94.4%	97.2%	93.8%	15.37	$p < .001$
Sexism	93.2%	95.8%	92.6%	10.56	$p < .001$
Mental Health	87.6%	93.5%	86.3%	32.12	$p < .001$
LGTBQ	86.2%	93.0%	84.6%	39.71	$p < .001$
Disability	85.7%	93.1%	84.0%	45.79	$p < .001$
Poverty	85.2%	92.6%	83.5%	44.84	$p < .001$
Health	69.5%	75.8%	68.1%	19.27	$p < .001$

Note:  $\chi^2$  (1, n = 4476); Athletes who answered “definitely not” or “probably not” were classified as not viewing the cause as social justice-oriented and those who answered “probably yes” or “definitely yes” were classified as viewing the cause as social justice-oriented.

### Do Collegiate Athletes’ Feel Supported in Activism?

Collegiate athletes perceived relatively high levels of support from all significant social agents (see Table 3). However, athlete perceptions did differ with the perception of the highest levels of support, in all three dimensions, from family and friends and the lowest support from professors and university administration. In terms of how the types of support differed from each other in relation to all social agents, all repeated measure ANOVAs were significant (see Table 3 for all main effect and interaction effect values). From nearly every significant social agent, collegiate athletes perceived the highest levels of general support, followed by instrumental support, and the lowest support in terms of approval for engaging in activism. Of note, the only social agent that collegiate athletes perceived as providing the same levels of general and approval to engage in activism was from athletics department employees. When investigating the interaction effects for the significant social agents and differences in the collegiate athlete activist and non-activist groups, the groups perceived the level of general and instrumental support similarly, but the activists perceived greater approval for engaging in activism than non-activists from parents, friends, and teammates. The interaction effect was non-significant for athletics department employees, professors, and university administration indicating similar patterns of support across the three types that we measured.

### Discussion

As one of the first large-scale studies investigating a large number of collegiate athletes (i.e., over 4,000 participants) in a systematic way to measure the level of engagement in activism, we conducted the current study to investigate three research questions: Specifically, we wanted to know (1) if certain demographic characteristics were related to an athlete’s engagement in activism, (2) what social issues athletes viewed as social justice causes, and (3) what social agents athletes perceived as being supportive of engaging in activism. While previous events surrounding activism have been covered in the media (e.g., football players at

the University of Missouri and Northwestern University; basketball players at University of Washington), this study indicates that collegiate athletes beyond the (most visible) Power 5 level are engaging in activist behavior and deserve further attention and study. Our study adds to the growing literature on athletes' activism at the college level, some of which has shown that activism among collegiate athletes is becoming increasingly popular (Mac Intosh et al., 2020) and that athletes are often very motivated to improve their campus communities via activist actions (Kluch, 2021). It would be useful for future studies to investigate exactly what type of activism collegiate athletes are engaging to understand better both what they perceive as activism, how frequently they are participating in activism, and what events require support so collegiate athletes can utilize their platform for various social changes more effectively.

In terms of specific characteristics of those who engaged in activism and those who did not engage in activism, several relationships stood out as noteworthy. First, collegiate athletes who identified as seniors were less likely to have participated in activism than expected. This is counter to expectations in multiple manners. First, as these college athletes were older compared to other athletes in the sample, they would have had more opportunities to engage in activism as the question was focused on any previous engagement and not focused on previous engagement in a set time period (e.g., in the last year). Second, we hoped that as collegiate athletes moved through their academic and athletic systems, they would have begun to find a cause that was personally significant to them that would spur action and engagement. It is possible that with the current wave of activism, especially among athletes, those individuals with less seniority on their team, even if that difference was just one or two years, were more likely to engage in activism. Further, it is possible that those collegiate athletes who engaged in activism during their first few years had withdrawn from the sport entirely and only those hyper-focused on their sport participation remained in organized athletics. Given the well-documented stigma attached to activism in the sport literature (Kaufman, 2008; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010; Kluch, 2020), further investigation for this relationship would be beneficial to indicate if activism truly is more prevalent in this younger cohort or if there are some forces that exist that are pulling collegiate athletes who engage in activism early in their college career out of sport. One possibility for this lack of activism in these older individuals is a perceived lack of support.

In addition to differences in the collegiate athletes' year in school and their engagement in activism, we found significant differences in engagement of activism depending on athlete race/ethnicity and gender identity, although the findings were somewhat contrary to each other. Unsurprisingly, those individuals who identified as Black/African American or as More Than One Race were overrepresented in the activist category and those who identified as white were underrepresented in the sample. Because racially minoritized athletes such as Black athletes have been at the forefront of many activist movements (Agyemang et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2019; Edwards, 2016; Edwards, 1969; Peterson, 2009; Sarver Coombs & Cassilo, 2017), this finding is in line with the established literature on athlete activism. What was somewhat surprising, however, was that collegiate athletes identifying as men were more active in engaging in activism than collegiate athletes identifying as women. Because women continue to represent a marginalized group both in sport in general and in athlete activism specifically (Cooky, 2017), which makes them more likely to turn to activism to fight the inequities they face (Mac Intosh et al., 2020), these two findings seem to run counterintuitively to each other.

Indeed, previous research has indicated that groups that hold more privilege in a society often are the groups who resist social change (Ruparelia, 2014). How come, then, that men in our study seemed more likely to engage in activism than women? One possibility for the greater than

expected level of activism for men in the study might be that these athletes and their teams receive greater support, both on campus and in their communities – making them more poised to engage in the activism of their choice. Further, it might be possible that because two of the primary sports that receive the most attention and support, men's basketball and football, often have an overrepresentation of Black male athletes. These findings might indicate that individuals hold more power in the sport ecosystem and further studies should investigate how these aspects arise in NCAA sport. Another important element to consider is that our study focused on perceptions of activism. Therefore, it might not be that collegiate athletes identifying as women are engaging in less activism, but their perceptions of what qualifies as activism might differ from their male counterparts. The role of gender identity in activist engagement should be further investigated to better understand the gendered differences in activist perceptions and behavior. Further, the lower rate of activism for white collegiate athletes should also be investigated more as there might be specific barriers, both internal and external to intercollegiate athletics, for white athletes to engage in activism (e.g., racial privilege). This is particularly important given the most recent NCAA demographic information indicated that 63% of collegiate athletes identified as white (NCAA, 2021), yet this group continues to be the racial group that engages in activism the least compared to other racial groups (NCAA, 2020). Specific research, as such, should look at how to engage white collegiate activists in particular in social justice activism.

Out of all the social issues provided to survey respondents, collegiate athletes overwhelmingly viewed a majority of the issues as social justice causes (with a range of 69.5% to 94.4% identifying the issues as social justice causes). It is positive that so many collegiate athletes see nearly all social issues as social justice causes, yet it continues to be concerning that over 5% of individuals did not perceive issues such as racism and sexism as social justice causes. Further, even though more than 80% of the collegiate athletes perceived that a majority of these social issues were social justice causes, one was perceived by less than 70% of athletes as a social justice cause: health. As findings consistently have shown that socioeconomic status, race, and gender interact to influence health-related outcomes (Barr, 2014; Laveist, 2011), greater emphasis should be placed on helping youth draw these links to social justice causes – particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has revealed persistent health inequities in the U.S. (Bushana et al., 2020). Finally, respondents who had engaged in activism before perceived each social issue as a social justice cause at a higher than expected rate than those who identified as non-activists. Future studies should explore these relationships further to determine if activist collegiate athletes are more active due to their beliefs or if their beliefs are shaped by their engagement in some form of activism.

In terms of perceptions of support from significant social agents, collegiate athletes perceived relatively high levels of support from all significant social agents with every measure coming in above the midpoint of the scale. The athletes perceived parents, friends, and teammates as providing the highest level of all three types of support. This finding speaks to the importance of support from non-athletic department sources, even for collegiate athletes, and supports the idea that these individuals might be the most influential when athletes are deciding on whether or not to engage in activism. Specifically, these social agents are the ones who are most likely to influence athlete attitudes and shape their subjective norms, both aspects that were shown to influence athletes' intentions to engage in activism in the future. Not surprisingly, when comparing perceptions of support between athletes who have engaged in activism in the past and those who had not, athletes who had engaged in activism perceived significantly higher levels of support from family and friends and, to a lesser extent, teammates. This indicates that collegiate

athletes' perceptions of these three social agents is important for their actions promoting social justice. As such, investigating what these actions look like in practice might help better understand how to create a more accepting climate for those interested in navigating activist spaces.

It is also interesting to note, when investigating the total sample, that there was a large drop in the level of support between parents, friends, and teammates and other social agents. Specifically, collegiate athletes perceived lower levels of instrumental support and approval of activism from coaches and athletics department employees, individuals who they interact with consistently in the athletics space. As previous studies have indicated that support from coaches is critical to collegiate athletes' engagement in activism (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018), investigation on how to increase coaches' support for athletes could have significant impact on the athletes' activist behavior. In addition, individuals associated with the university but not situated in the athletics department (such as professors or university administration) were perceived to provide positive support to a much less degree than the other social agents. As these individuals typically have less frequent interactions with athletes, the fact that the perceptions of their support are lower is not unexpected, but it is positive to see that collegiate athletes still perceived the support to be beneficial. These results seem to contradict previous large-scale studies that have shown that two-thirds of participants indicated they had a close personal relationship with at least one faculty member (NCAA, 2016). Even though the current study measured support in a number of different ways, these differences demonstrate how difficult it is to truly measure support and additional studies should continue to investigate athletes' perceived support from a wide range of social agents. Specifically, a more nuanced investigation into sources of support for those individuals who have engaged in activism would further our understanding of collegiate athletes' experiences engaging in social justice activism.

Finally, it is important to note that even though the collegiate athletes in the sample all engaged in some programming surrounding race and other social issues, these perceptions of support were collected from the athletes prior to engaging in any of such programming. This collection time of the data is crucial to note because it is possible that after participating in programming linked to activism, the perceptions of support might have changed. In the future, it would be beneficial to survey collegiate athletes after said programming to see if their perceptions change in regards to social justice attitudes – and what aspects of the current programming are the most helpful for athletes to understand the power they wield when it comes to their activist platforms. Collegiate athletes have an important platform for highlighting social justice issues and bringing about change (Carter-Francique et al., 2015), but these platforms can only be utilized strategically if collegiate athletes feel like they have the support needed to voice their own thoughts and opinions on matters of social justice.

### **Limitations, Implications for Praxis & Conclusion**

The current study was not without limitations. One limitation of the study is that even though these measures were collected prior to any programming focused on activism or social justice topics, this sample might have been skewed in some way. Specifically, all of the collegiate athletes attended schools that had athletics departments that were open to programming focused on race and social justice, and they were willing to have (organization redacted for anonymous review) come to their university for training. It is possible that collegiate athlete perceptions of support were high because the environments they were in were generally supportive of this type of engagement. It would be interesting to investigate programs that did not have interest in the programming to see if their athletes were as active as the current sample

and if the athletes perceived support for various types of activism in similar ways as this group. Another limitation involves the scales utilized in the current study. Although high in face validity, the scales would benefit from further psychometric testing to ensure that they are measuring what we anticipate they are measuring. Finally, collegiate athletes' engagement in activism was largely self-reported. It is possible that some athletes might not perceive their engagement in various activities (e.g., working at a women's shelter, promoting breast cancer awareness) as engaging in activism, which might possibly underestimate the total number of participant engagement.

Despite these limitations, our study provides some important implications for those working with athletes in a variety of contexts. First, our findings support the idea that athletes in the contemporary cultural climate view activism as a valuable undertaking in driving systemic change. Practitioners should continue to nurture activist behaviors to drive systemic change. To nurture such behaviors, practitioners must continue to fight the stigma initially attached to social justice activism by making conversations on social justice topics part of group cultural norms and expectations. For example, they may regularly dedicate space in team meetings to the discussion of social justice topics, call out discrimination when it occurs, include bystander intervention and a commitment to matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion in documents governing team behavior, as well as provide space for athletes to receive specific training on how to utilize activist platforms. Second, while the collegiate athletes generally perceived most social agents to be supportive of activism, athletics administrators, coaches, and social workers working with athletes should continue to demonstrate their support of activism – especially because such activism disproportionately affects athletes identifying as members of minoritized groups. Such support can take the form of committing financial resources to activism, providing space (both physical and virtual) for athletes to connect with activist mentors, and engaging in strategic coalition building (e.g., connecting with on-campus resources) that can enhance the reach and impact of collegiate athletes' activism.

Finally, we close this manuscript with a call to those with institutional power to support collegiate athlete activism to continue “utilising (sic) one's privileged identities to facilitate long-term substantial gains of social justice movements in, through, and beyond sport” (Jolly et al., 2021, p. 241). While the activism of collegiate athlete activists should be applauded, these athletes often have little institutional power – unlike coaches, athletics department staff, and university administrators. Those in positions of institutional power, thus, should work towards creating an infrastructure supporting collegiate athletes' voices and activism. For example, the creation of a student-led committee or a formalized social justice position within Student-Athlete Advisory Committees (SAAC), such as a Social Justice Action Chair, is one way to provide institutional power to collegiate athletes utilizing their platform for social justice action. Similarly, staff working with athletes should strategically form partnerships with social justice offices on campus to provide collegiate athlete activists with more institutional support for their activism. One group positioned especially well to support athletes engaging in activism are social workers as these individuals are trained to respond to a crisis, typically utilize an empowerment perspective that encourages individuals to utilize their voices, and can join in advocacy for change (Mc Coy et al., 2017). We highlight a strong infrastructure as a form of support here, because such support is particularly important in times when collegiate athlete activists may feel unsupported by significant social agents such as their parents, coaches, or teammates. A comprehensive approach to athlete support for engaging in activism, therefore, takes into account

all potential areas of support, so that athletes can continue to lead the way for systemic, sustainable social change.

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Table 3.  
*Perceptions of general, instrumental, and support for engaging in activism from significant social agents for the total sample and activist and non-activist student-athletes.*

Social Agents	Total (n = 4476)			Activist (n = 828)			Non-Activist (n = 3648)			Main effect		Interaction Effect	
	GS	IS	AA	GS	IS	AA	GS	IS	AA	F d.f (2, 8948)	p-value	F d.f (2, 8948)	p-value
Parents	5.65 <sup>a</sup> (.86)	5.52 <sup>b</sup> (.97)	5.28 <sup>c</sup> (1.08)	5.60 (.93)	5.43 (1.13)	5.48 (.96)	5.67 (.85)	5.54 (.92)	5.23 (1.11)	94.35	.001	48.87	.001
Friends	5.46 <sup>a</sup> (.85)	5.47 <sup>a</sup> (.85)	5.20 <sup>b</sup> (.99)	5.48 (.82)	5.50 (.83)	5.48 (.79)	5.45 (.86)	5.46 (.85)	5.13 (1.02)	53.72	.001	46.71	.001
Teammates	5.26 <sup>a</sup> (.96)	4.99 <sup>b</sup> (1.18)	5.08 <sup>c</sup> (1.05)	5.18 (1.01)	4.90 (1.27)	5.17 (1.07)	5.27 (.94)	5.01 (1.15)	5.06 (1.05)	87.87	.001	17.82	.001
Coaches	5.12 <sup>a</sup> (1.06)	4.27 <sup>b</sup> (1.46)	4.93 <sup>c</sup> (1.18)	5.05 (1.14)	4.20 (1.51)	4.97 (1.18)	5.13 (1.12)	4.29 (1.45)	4.92 (1.18)	690.72	.001	5.08	.02
Athletic Department Employees	4.90 <sup>a</sup> (1.11)	3.66 <sup>b</sup> (1.45)	4.87 <sup>a</sup> (1.20)	4.81 (1.12)	3.59 (1.47)	4.86 (1.21)	4.92 (1.11)	3.67 (1.45)	4.87 (1.20)	1457.17	.001	2.13	.12 (NSD)
Professors	4.63 <sup>a</sup> (1.06)	3.29 <sup>b</sup> (1.53)	4.73 <sup>c</sup> (1.24)	4.68 (1.06)	3.36 (1.54)	4.84 (1.24)	4.62 (1.06)	3.28 (1.53)	4.71 (1.24)	1724.23	.001	.96	.39 (NSD)
University Administration	4.46 <sup>a</sup> (1.20)	3.02 <sup>b</sup> (1.57)	4.68 <sup>c</sup> (1.33)	4.35 (1.22)	2.96 (1.55)	4.61 (1.41)	4.49 (1.20)	3.03 (1.57)	4.69 (1.31)	1914.44	.001	.87	.42 (NSD)

Note: GS = General Support, IS = Instrumental Support; AA = Approval to engage in Activism; different subscript in the total column indicates significant differences between the types of support at the  $p < .05$  criterion level in a repeated measures ANOVA.