

The Most Important, But Often Forgotten Department: Sports Information. The Intersection Between Human Capital and Managerial Operations in Division II College Athletics

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Sports information operations can be crucial to the success of an athletic department; however, a review of NCAA Division II website staff directories indicated that the majority of institutions operating in this division utilize a one-person sports information operation system. The one-person operation may be considered the norm, but previous research reports sports information directors (SIDs) feel overworked and under-appreciated in their positions. With the negative perspective reported by SIDs working in the industry, an analysis exploring sports information operations management in Division II could offer innovative solutions for institutions operating with a one-person SID operation. An electronic survey was distributed to all NCAA Division II SIDs and the researchers conducted a content analysis from survey responses to identify current perceptions and experiences Division II SIDs have regarding sports information operations on campus. Results indicate that Division II SIDs are expected to perform many functions with very limited resources. Recommendations for improving working conditions for Division II SIDs are discussed and innovative solutions are offered.

Keywords: sports information directors, collegiate athletics, administration, NCAA, human capital theory

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Introduction

There has always been a lot of turnover in the athletic communications sector, but the “why” has always been a source of contention. Recent studies indicate that this trend continues as Division I and II athletic departments have turnover rates of 48% and 58%, respectively (Huml & Taylor, 2022). According to some experts, this turnover is due to a lack of work-life balance (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Weight et al., 2021), workaholicism (Huml et al., 2021; Weight et al., 2021), and sentiments of being underappreciated (Weight et al., 2021). Support for this is found in research reports that indicate that sports information directors (SIDs) feel overworked and under-appreciated in their positions (Hardin & McClung, 2002; Stoldt, 2013; Whiteside, 2014). However, with so many people interested in working in the “glamorous” sport industry (Weight et al., 2021), there appears to be little attention on addressing these issues.

These employee satisfaction and retention issues are not a new phenomenon (Taylor et al., 2019). Yet, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated the existing problems. Huml and Taylor (2022) discovered that less people are working within college athletics now compared to pre-pandemic. There are several reasons for this. For instance, the budgets for athletic departments across the country were slashed (Williams & Mathis, 2021). This required remaining staffers to add more responsibility to their already full workload, which could have also contributed to people leaving the industry. As we emerge from the pandemic, it is vital for college athletic departments to understand and consider their employees’ job satisfaction to combat the negative growth within the college athletics industry.

A day working in an athletic communications department can be long—starting the workday early with social media posts about the day’s upcoming events and concluding by writing a final recap story after the men’s and women’s basketball double header. The number of responsibilities can prove taxing—managing social media, updating the athletic website, keeping and reporting statistics, and scheduling media interviews with the school’s coaches and players. In professional sports, athletic communications personnel typically focus on one sport and are considered more specialized. However, in most small college athletic departments the operation of multiple sports is done with one full-time individual on staff with the assistance of part-time help (i.e., freelance or student workers). For some college athletic department employees, like the coaching staff, there is the possibility of a short reprieve at the end of their sport’s season. However, for other staff members (e.g., athletic trainers and SIDs), this break is often cut short due to their various responsibilities to prepare or wrap up a sports season.

Athletic departments are responsible for creating a positive work environment for their personnel. Working in collegiate athletics, on the other hand, can

be quite demanding. For example, lower division schools may host up to three activities at once, such as a field hockey game, a basketball game, and a volleyball tournament, regardless of administrative staff constraints. The SID must manage events as they are scheduled, with little influence over the schedule, which dictates the SID's workload and can lead to sentiments of being overworked, as previously reported. To reduce turnover among athletic communication professionals, it is vital to ensure that employees' requirements are addressed through a satisfying work environment (Rubin, 1993).

Athletic administrators are seen as athletic department leaders (Stoldt, 2000), yet there are conflicting messages about the managerial function of SIDs in college athletics. While SIDs assume many tasks in other sectors of athletics, Stoldt (2000) and Brewer (2000) discovered that sports information workers felt devalued by senior leadership in their roles inside their department, for which they serve a technical rather than managerial role. The precise tasks of sports information work range from preparing game releases to managing the athletic department's public image; nevertheless, the SID's ultimate purpose is to improve the athletic program's image among important constituencies such as the media, spectators, alumni, and other university officials (Stoldt, Miller, & Comfort, 2001). Despite the number of roles held, SIDs report diminishing influence as other administrators—fundraisers, senior women administrators, and business managers—are taking their seat at the decision-making table (Moore, 2012), findings that could be attributed to their diminishing role. Due to their perceived smaller value, individuals may feel excluded from senior management teams and meetings.

According to human capital theory (Becker, 1975), people invest in capital (e.g., training, education, and experience) to develop their abilities and careers. For example, advancement can look like invitations to leadership meetings or having a voice at the table when making athletic department expansion decisions. With previous research showing how SIDs feel undervalued in their daily positions (Brewer, 2000; Stoldt, 2000), human capital theory illustrates the usefulness of determining how departments can better assist their SID. In doing so, it would help both individuals, who are serving as SIDs, and their organizations (Fulmer & Ployhart, 2014).

The present study focuses on Division II sports information directors given that the majority of the institutions operating in this division utilize a one-person sports information operation system. Division II is a collection of 300 colleges and universities under the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) that offers the best championships-participant ratio among the NCAA's three divisions (NCAA, n.d.,a).

Previous studies have shown sentiments of being overworked and under-valued among SIDs, yet little is known on how smaller athletic departments should define the SID role (Neupauer, 1999). This study elicited survey responses from current Division II SIDs to explore their current perceptions of working on their campuses and within college athletics. By providing insight into their experiences, this research aims to provide a call to action to various college athletic administration leaders to improve SID satisfaction.

Method

With the exploratory nature of this study, the researchers compiled questions for an electronic survey to solicit information on the current Division II sports information operation practices and perceptions of current practices. An electronic survey was distributed to all NCAA Division II SIDs ($N = 314$). Email addresses for the SIDs were obtained from member institutions' staff directory pages online, and each SID was sent an email invitation containing information about the study and a hyperlink to the online survey. The study contained 19 open-ended items related to the current perceptions and experiences employees designated as SIDs working at Division II institutions have regarding sports information operations on campus.

Qualitative methods were used as the exploratory nature of the study could yield several concepts and/or unknown variables (Ajagbe et al., 2015; Sofaer, 1999) and the purpose of the study was to understand more from participants prior to designing a more predictive study (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 2009). The survey was open for two weeks with the principal researcher sending a reminder email to respondents to complete the survey after week one. After the survey data was collected, content analysis (Cavanagh, 1997; Krippendorff, 1989; Neundorff, 2002) of the responses were used to identify themes and patterns within the data. The researchers followed a data-driven coding process (Brinkmann, 2013) and the first author consulted with the study's co-authors throughout the coding process to ensure reliability in the results (Saldaña, 2016).

Results

In total, 92 ($N = 92$) participants completed the survey for a response rate of 29.3%. Starting with a review of the current title of the designated sports information director on campus at an NCAA Division II institution, the results from the survey indicated SIDs were commonly given the title of Assistant Athletic Director ($n = 28$) or Sports Information Director ($n = 25$). A list of all titles indicated from participants is listed in Table 1. On average, participants in

Table 1. Title of Participants

Title of Participant	Count
Assistant Athletic Director	28
Sports Information Director	25
Director of Athletic Communication	12
Associate Athletic Director	6
Assistant Director	4
Athletic Media Relations Director	3
Coordinator	2
Athletics Communications Director	2
Senior Associate Athletic Director	2
Media Relations Coordinator	1
Senior Communication Specialist	1

Table 2. Summary of Reasons for Overwork

Reason	Count
Limited help/Personnel	42
Work hours	38
Extended job demands	17
Added responsibilities	16
Workload	12
Resources	6
Overlapping seasons	5
Limited/no vacation time	4
Lack of support	2
Lack of quality candidates	1

this study have worked as an SID for about 14 years, for a total number of 1,299.5 years of experience included in this study.

Of the participants that submitted completed surveys, the majority ($n = 59$) had a graduate degree. The most common degree completed by participants was a degree in sport management ($n = 24$). Participants also held degrees in communications ($n = 13$) and journalism ($n = 12$). Many participants had previous work experience that included a graduate assistant position ($n = 23$), internship ($n = 19$), or being a student worker ($n = 19$).

Participants were asked to provide a list of all functions they perform for the athletic department. Many participants indicated being responsible for marketing ($n = 47$), social media ($n = 44$), statistics ($n = 36$), the athletic department website ($n = 35$), and writing stories ($n = 27$). A full list of all functions reported by participants is listed in Appendix A. After a review and analysis of the data submitted by participants, the common themes of being overworked, dealing with a limited staff, and recommendations for the position emerged.

Overworked

Data indicated that of the 92 responses coded, more sports information directors felt overworked within their role ($n = 79$) than those that did not ($n = 13$). A review of the data and number of explanations presented in

Table 2 show the general themes of reasons why SIDs feel overworked, indicating limited help/personnel and work hours as key factors.

Although participants overwhelmingly indicated that they felt overworked, when asked if they felt supported in their current role, 63% of participants ($n = 58$) indicated they did feel supported. For those participants that did not feel supported, 11 indicated they felt they worked in an environment that provided very limited funds and resources. Additionally, 9.7% of participants ($n = 9$) indicated they did not feel financially compensated for the work performed at the institution. One participant described their perspective:

Our athletic director makes more than \$30,000 more than our two full-time members of our SID staff when you combine their two salaries together. Most of our head coaches are paid significantly higher salaries. When just looking at the numbers, it is sometimes hard to feel supported or valued.

Seven participants indicated there are growing demands of the job to include adding sport programs to the athletic department as well as requiring more content creation for social media and websites. Five participants did note that they felt supported by their senior athletic department staff but did not feel supported by the university administration outside of athletics.

Only one participant indicated that it was efficient to have one SID on staff. Limited respondents ($n = 9$) thought it depended on the needs of the athletics department. A vast majority of participants ($n = 82$) believed it was inefficient to only have one SID for four primary reasons: the rise in technology, the list of responsibilities for SIDs is growing, sport sponsorship growth, and SID well-being.

Participants indicated the number of sports sponsored by Division II athletics departments made having a one-person shop inefficient. It is difficult to maintain the same level of coverage across multiple sports, inevitably overworking or making the SID choose which sport garners more of their attention. One participant stated, "The way the world has gone more digital, I feel like that actually asks more of sports information directors, rather than making it easier."

Lastly, participants worried about the well-being of SIDs who do not have additional support. SIDs cannot control when sporting events occur, and with multiple sports there are typically several events on a given day. Therefore, SIDs often jeopardize their personal relationships, as one participant indicated, "Inevitably, important events must be moved, holidays shortened or eliminated, or personal plans changed because a solo SID is the only person on staff who does their role." While other respondents worried about being overwhelmed or burnt out, one participant wrote, "Burnout comes really fast and there aren't any real incentives to offset the number of hours of demanding work that is required."

Table 3. Assistants

Assistants	Count
Student Workers	58
Graduate Assistant	40
Full Time	38
Interns	23
Outsourced (Third) Party	10
Part Time	10
Other Sports Staff	6
Volunteers	6
Community Members	2
None	2
Coaches	1

Limited Staffing

When it comes to the Division II sports information operations, the most common assistance comes in the form of student workers ($n = 58$). Participants also indicated that graduate assistants ($n = 40$) and full-time staff ($n = 38$) assist with daily operations on campus. A list of all sports information operation assistants reported by participants is listed in Table 3.

Participants' Recommendations

SIDs provided recommendations on skills that are important for new SIDs to possess, which roles should no longer be performed by SIDs, and other recommendations related to the

position. Myriad job responsibilities were mentioned by participants, ranging from skilled duties such as videography to administrative tasks including game-day management. Understanding how to take and compile statistics was one of the most frequently mentioned duties of a SID ($n = 54$). Writing ability ($n = 52$), social media management ($n = 36$), and website maintenance ($n = 30$) were also frequently mentioned.

Participants additionally provided insight on which of their roles should not be required. The participants primarily mentioned their dislike of handling game-day operations and facilities maintenance ($n = 32$). Although some listed photography and videography as essential functions of the SID, others believed that SIDs should not shoulder these responsibilities ($n = 13$). Lastly, SIDs wanted more distinction between the responsibilities of their department and that of the marketing staff ($n = 12$).

The participants offered several suggestions to improve the SID role. Most of these recommendations were directed at the administration. One suggestion involved staffing, as 16.3% of participants ($n = 15$) believe more staff could prove useful to sports information operations, which is not surprising due to the fact that a large majority of participants did not favor the one-person SID staff. Many noted a need for increased pay. Additionally, there was a desire for the administration and other athletics department staff to have a better understanding and appreciation of the job of SIDs. One participant stated:

Across the board, there is an active lack of respect (or even disrespect) for people who work in athletic communications. As a group, SIDs probably know more about more athletes on their campuses than anyone else, but rarely if ever are they given a seat at the table to share their knowledge, opinions, and expertise.

Others offered recommendations for SIDs. Aside from specific career-related advice such as “hone skills” or “do your research before taking a job,” there was a call to action for SIDs to stand up for themselves to help their personal well-being ($n = 8$). This could take several forms, such as saying no to asks, speaking up in meetings, and negotiating for better work-life balance. One participant stated:

I’ve seen too many other SIDs just get more and more work dumped in their area ... most with things the AD doesn’t want to deal with, like figuring out how the videoboard needs to work, or dealing with the alumni office for various events. There have been some phenomenal people leaving the SID world in the last 2-3 years because they’ve been burned out, overworked, and not treated well by their administrations.

Participating SIDs stressed the fact that they are overworked and understaffed. Not only was this a concern for the present state of sports communications, but many staffers thought this will affect the future of the industry. Furthermore, participants emphasized being underpaid and underappreciated with increasing expectations and demands. Lastly, there was a salient desire for a voice within administration and support.

Discussion of the Reported Problem and Innovative Solutions

In comparison to NCAA Division I, NCAA Division II member schools are smaller in size, which also applies to their athletic department staffing. Many SIDs find it challenging to balance their already growing responsibilities of “public relation specialists, event managers, media liaisons, and publication and web professionals and administrators” (Moore, 2012). With greater access to new technologies and a focus on staying connected, sport fans rely on the internet for news and information, which calls for a change in how it’s managed. Despite this increasing demand, the majority of Division II campuses appear to have a similar structure of a one-person sports information department, which Jackowski (2007) identified as not suitable for a profession charged with “keeping pace.” Not “keeping pace” in the athletic communications field could result in loss of fans, which could result in loss of revenue for the department. This ultimately could lead to the elimination of programs. While there are no explicit rules or regulations governing athletic departments’ sports information management practices in relation to the number of sponsored sports, this department is viewed

as critical to the athletic department but is not consulted when departments feel compelled to expand their program. Based on human capital theory (Becker, 1975), it is crucial for organizations to invest in SIDs. This extra level of support will not only improve their satisfaction, but performance as well.

Support from Governing Bodies

Fortunately, in the intercollegiate athletic space, there are many governing bodies that have a vested interest in seeing the role of SIDs improve. Some of these governing bodies include the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA), College Sport Communicators (CSC), and conference offices. Across each of the governing bodies, it is imperative to reimagine the role of the SID, from simply a member of the staff to a critical leader in the department. Those in current leadership positions should provide more opportunities for SIDs at the decision-making table. Although assuming these responsibilities could increase the SID's workload, these leadership opportunities would allow the SID to provide input and feel valued within the organization. A discussion of how each of the previously mentioned governing bodies specifically can help improve the working conditions for SIDs and reimagine their role are included in the following sections.

NCAA

The NCAA published a strategic guide to help Division III sport communicators, "Guide to Strategic Athletics Communication on Campus." The guide included best practices for sports information operations on Division III member institution campuses. Three of the best practices discussed include the SID being a part of the athletic department senior staff, the SID being involved in master game scheduling, and including the SID when evaluating staffing needs in relation to sponsored sports. With the NCAA Division III Strategic Communications Working Group publishing these important recommendations, it may be useful for NCAA Division II leaders to consider implementation of these practices into a best practice guide, if not policy for their member institutions. Division II institutions are required to conduct an institution self-study at least once every five years. The NCAA created the Institutional Self Study Guide (ISSG) to aid member institutions in satisfying completion of a self-study, "The ISSG has been designed to satisfy the requirements of Constitution 6.3.1. When institutional administrators certify that they have completed a self-study in accordance with Constitution 6.3.1, it will be necessary for them to have access to their completed ISSG (and documentation for their answers)" (NCAA, n.d.,b). The NCAA Division II leadership could consider adding questions to the ISSG relating

to sports information operations with the goal of reaching the best practice of ensuring their SID is a part of athletic department senior staff, is involved in master game scheduling, and is included when evaluating staffing needs in relation to current and possibly increased sport sponsorship opportunities.

NACDA

Another governing body that could aid in the improvement of the SID role is NACDA. Each year NACDA hosts a convention, and that would present a great opportunity to hold joint sessions between the sports information directors and athletic directors. During a joint session, both SIDs and athletic directors can talk through their perspectives of the role of the SID and discuss practical ways to implement positive and necessary change for the position. The meeting should be more than just an opportunity for SIDs to vent their frustration. The meetings should focus on identifying solutions to real concerns raised by the SID group.

CSC

In addition to the athletic directors taking interest and initiative to make positive change for the SID position, the CSC could use the findings from the results of this study to create best practice documents for their members. In 2013, College Sport Communicators, known as the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) from its founding 1957 until 2022, created a Division II Strategic Communications Toolkit. The toolkit provided general guidelines for SIDs to follow. For example, the toolkit included a sample Division II campus communication plan that included strategies, target audiences, key messages, and tactics. Although this document provides a start for guiding SIDs, it appears there is an even greater need for templates to help SIDs who are stretched thin. For example, if a membership with CSC provided templates for SIDs such as graphic templates for game recaps, player of the week, and weekly schedules, SIDs might be able to save time by only uploading their team's logos, pictures, and color to an existing template instead of creating one from scratch. The more resources provided to SIDs through CSC could make membership with the association more appealing, and institutions might be more willing to pay for their SID to have membership to get access to resources they can actually use on campus.

Conference Offices

Another avenue that should be explored is institution collaboration with their conference office. Each conference office in the NCAA membership has a liaison to the SIDs on their member institutions' campuses. The conference SID liaison could be used as a resource for institutions operating with a one-person

SID operation. For example, the conference office could sign conference-wide streaming partnerships and outsource videographers paid by the conference office in a similar manner to how a conference office manages officials. Although this innovative practice may create a slight increase in membership dues each year, the burden of streaming games could be removed from the SID already juggling game management and statistics.

Use of Technological Tools

An SID's job could improve, not only through their athletic department reimagining leadership opportunities and expectations, but also with increased use of technological tools. Currently, there are a variety of artificial intelligence mechanisms that could lessen the burden placed on SIDs. In terms of game recaps, automation software exists that can write based on provided analytics. For instance, the Associated Press has utilized WordSmith to assist with their recaps. Although these sometimes result in less personal stories, they help complete the job (Crouch, 2015). ScoreShot and Box Out are tools that can help accelerate the graphic-making process. Meanwhile, Pixellot or Playsight can assist in automated video production. Further, Sizzle or Reely can be utilized to generate game highlights. Each of these softwares vary in price. However, athletic departments should explore implementing some of these tools to help lighten the SID's workload. This could lead to better work-life balance outcomes for SIDs, while allowing them to spend more energy on tasks that an automated tool cannot assist with.

Limitations and Future Research

With the limited resources Division II athletic departments have, there is a need to ensure that if the employees are making an investment in capital (i.e., education, experience, personal development), they should have an opportunity to advance within their career. In this case, examples of advancement can be invitations to leadership meetings or having a voice at the table when making athletic department expansion decisions. Our preliminary study indicated that despite the limited support found at the Division II level, SIDs have a desire to improve their position in the future.

There are various limitations and opportunities for future research in light of these findings. The SID participants in this study indicated they want to be involved in studies that can help give improved resources for campus operations. Future studies could include an analysis of those SIDs in leadership positions with College Sport Communicators, with the hope of getting a broader view of the position by those that view and interact with multiple campuses. The current

study only examined current on-campus Division II sports information directors. A future study could also include SID liaisons at the conference office level, as these individuals might be able to provide a more holistic perspective of the position, because these individuals work with multiple SIDs daily. Additionally, the study did not include SIDs at the Division I or III level. Future research might consider examining this further, and possibly adapting different research designs, using the results from this exploratory study to develop a quantitative survey instrument that could indicate best practices for sports information operations. Furthermore, while the existing data show that directors are satisfied with their current roles, we did not investigate what balanced sports information management looks like in Division II athletic departments from decision-making administrators' perspective. Future research can continue to help SIDs by finding recommendations and best practices that can provide guidance for senior athletic administrators overseeing sports information operations.

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Appendix A

List of job responsibilities reported by participants.

Alumni Relations	Internship Coordinator	SAAC
Archives	IT	Scheduling
Awards	Laundry Operations	Social Media
Branding	Licensing	Sport Program
Broadcasting	Live Streaming	Oversight
Budget	Marketing	Staff table
Community Engagement	Media Relations	Statistics
Community Service	Newsletter	Stats
COVID Testing	Officials	Stories
Creative Content	Operations	Student life
Development	Public Address	Student Workers
Diversity and Inclusion	Announcing	Senior Women's Administrator
Facilities	Payroll	Ticketing
Game Contracts	Photography	Travel
Game Management	Press Conferences	Video Content
Graphic Design	Promotions	Video Production
Hall of Fame	Public relations	Video Streaming
Historian	Publications	Webmaster
Hudl	Radio	Website
	Rosters	