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# An Exploration Of Factors Related To Alcohol Consumption Among Female Student-Athletes In Higher Education

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*Eastern Illinois University*

This research is a product of the graduate program in [Counseling and Student Development](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

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An Exploration of Factors Related to Alcohol Consumption

Among Female Student-Athletes in Higher Education

(TITLE)

BY

Holly Ruth Hooe

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF


Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2010

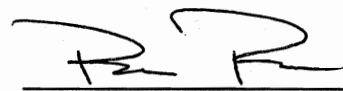
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## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: An Exploration of Factors Related to Alcohol Consumption Among Female Student-Athletes in Higher Education

Holly Ruth Hooe, Master of Science in College Student Affairs, 2010

Directed by: Richard L. Roberts, Ph. D.  
Chair of the Department of Counseling and Student Development

This study examined the perceptions of female student-athletes at a mid-sized Midwest university. The current study aims to better understand the reasons for alcohol consumption by female student-athletes. This study will examine these reasons and help put in place predictors of extreme alcohol consumption by female student-athletes.

Results of this study were limited based on outside roles of the primary investigator. Five female student-athletes were interviewed about their experiences. The findings of this study will guide future research in the area. Future research for this topic should be done in greater numbers and use mixed methods.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Alcohol plays an increasing role in the athletic arena. According to Brenner and Swanik (2007) 81% of male athletes and 68% of female athletes reported using alcohol in the past year. One study reported that 38.5% of student-athletes consume alcohol and 23.1% of student-athletes “become drunk on a weekly basis” (Thombs, 2000, p. 3). Eighty-four percent of team sport athletes report high-risk drinking and 57% of individual sport athletes report the same behavior (Brenner & Swanik, 2007). Male (60%) and female (50%) college athletes are significantly more likely to binge drink within a two week period than the average college student (44%) (Brenner & Swanik, 2007). Fifty-six percent of college athletes reported binge drinking while out of season while still 35% of athletes reported binge drinking during their competitive season (Ford, 2007).

The use of alcohol has a significant impact on the lives of student-athletes. So what does this mean for their status as a student-athlete? The impact by some accounts is reaching a critical stage. Studies show many negative consequences involved in student-athlete binge-drinking. These negative consequences can include hangovers, heightened aggression and vandalism, missing classes and DUIs (Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Horton, 2008). Within the past year, college students have reported doing poorly on a test (22.1%), becoming ill (54.1%), and experiencing memory loss (33.9%) (SIU-C CORE data).



Studies have also consistently shown that the level of athletic involvement is an important factor in determining the amount of alcohol that a student-athlete will consume. Those students involved in team sports are significantly more likely to consume alcohol on a regular basis (Brenner & Swanik, 2007) and the specific team affiliation can also have an impact on the amount of alcohol consumed by a student-athlete. Ford (2007) found that runners and swimmers/divers were the least likely of team sport athletes to report substance use. In another study, swimming and diving teams reported the highest rate of alcohol use (Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Horton, 2008).

Student-athletes experience the same developmental changes as non-athletes; the difference is the added stressors that student-athletes experience. Student-athletes take on the burden of sport participation in addition to the daily stressors experienced by college students (Loughran & Etzel, 2008). Some stressors include fear of success, fear of failure, identity conflict, social isolation, body image, alcohol abuse, and sport related injuries (Loughran & Etzel, 2008). Athletes may also feel less involved on campus due to their busy schedules and competitions away from campus (Storch, Storch, & Killiany, 2005). In addition, female athletes may be under more stress than male athletes during their collegiate careers. This stress may be a result of internalizing their athletic experience differently than male student-athletes. For example, female athletes may internalize negative feedback more harshly creating added stress for themselves. Additionally, female athletes reported more difficulty getting professors to take them seriously than their male counterparts (Storch, et al.).

### Purpose of the Study

Research indicates that student-athletes report higher rates of alcohol consumption than their non-athlete peers (Brenner, 2007; Ford, 2007; Thombs, 2000). The current study aims to better understand the female student-athletes' perceptions of their alcohol consumption during their collegiate experience.

### Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the current study:

1. What are your perceptions of alcohol consumption related to the presence of male athletes (Brenner, & Swanik, 2007; Ford, 2007)?
2. What stressors do you perceive in yourself and/or others who consume large amounts of alcohol on a regular basis (Bower, & Martin, 1999)?
3. What are some issues related to a female student-athlete's social community and it's relation to alcohol consumption (Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Horton 2008; Martens, M.P., Dams-O'Connor, K., Duffy-Paiement, C., & Gibson, J.T., 2006)?
4. How do your habits, with regard to alcohol consumption, compare to non-athletes (Thombs, 2000)?

### Significance of the Study

Though there is much research on the alcohol consumption of collegiate student-athletes, there is little information pertaining specifically to the perceptions of female student-athletes' alcohol consumption within the athletic lifestyle. Often, studies combine male and female athletes to make generalizations about athletes as a homogeneous group. Other studies contrast female student-athletes against their non-

athlete counterparts. This study will benefit university professionals by providing an understanding of the challenges that female collegiate student-athletes face. By understanding this information, progress can be made toward the decline of alcohol consumption by female student-athletes.

### Limitations

While completing this study, some limitations were of note. The primary investigator (PI) was currently employed as a graduate assistant within the athletics department. The PI was also a past student-athlete at the university where the study was conducted. As a result, the interviewee may have assumed that the PI had special knowledge of the athletic structure of the university and therefore left out information based on this knowledge. Only five athletes were interviewed in this study. No attempt should be made to generalize these results to the greater athletic population. Other schools may have different sports to offer female student-athletes and the culture may differ among sports at that university.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Available literature on the perceptions of alcohol consumption by female student-athletes at the collegiate level is limited. However, research about alcohol consumption of college students, student-athletes, sport team affiliation, and athletes, gender and ethnicity were available for research. This chapter will review the current literature relating to the present study.

#### Alcohol Consumption Among College Students

Porter & Pryor (2007) researched the relationships between students' heavy episodic alcohol use and their engagement, academic performance, and time use. They surveyed over 40,000 students at 28 private institutions. Results showed that students that engaged in heavy drinking had lower GPAs and that the more often these students engaged in heavy episodic drinking, the more likely they were to have lower grades. They found that more students drank heavily at the coed institutions than at the women's colleges, and that women were less likely to binge than men at the coed schools. Also, they found that students that engage in heavy episodic alcohol use spend less time on academics and more time on recreation and sports.

Grossbard, Geisner, Neighbors, Kilmer, and Larimer (2007) conducted a study to understand drinking games and negative consequences in relation to alcohol consumption among college athletes and intramural athletes as compared to non-athletes. The study revealed that intercollegiate athletes as well as intramural athletes self-reported greater "alcohol consumption, drinking game participation and negative

alcohol-related consequences" (p. 103) when compared to those students not involved in either group.

Yusko, Buckman, White, and Padine (2008) compared the habits and patterns of undergraduate athletes and non-athletes from 2005-2006. This study specifically deals with the relationship between male student-athletes and male non-athletes and the distinct relationship between female student-athletes and female non-athletes. While results showed that male student-athletes consumed alcohol in greater amounts than male non-athletes, it also found that female student-athletes consumed more moderate amounts of alcohol than their non-athlete peers. "These data offer initial evidence that the social environment of female athletics is distinct from that of male athletics, and that, although sport involvement appears to serve a protective function for women, female student-athletes would benefit from more tailored prevention programs." (p. 8).

Neighbors, Fossos, Woods, Fabiano, Sledge, and Frost (2007) studied the relationships of three variables: social anxiety, perceived norms, and alcohol consumption. Results implied that men experienced a stronger relationship between the variables than did women. The authors argued that alcohol consumption is more important to the social identity of male students than female students in the college setting. Students concerned with the impressions that they give to others are more likely to fall to peer pressure to drink. Men also find it difficult to avoid drinking as they feel that they will be judged more harshly than women for not participating and that their excuses will not be accepted by their peers as a woman's excuses would be.

Powell, Williams, and Wechsler (2004) examined the relationship between alcohol use and the study habits of college students. They found that where a student lives can significantly affect their study habits. Those students residing on-campus have a lower probability of missing a class than their off-campus peers. Also, students living in a single-sex situation will reduce the probability of falling behind in their classes. The researchers also established that students with parents that have a college degree are significantly more likely to have poor study habits. They attribute this relationship to the idea that first-generation students place more value on their education and are less likely to miss class or fall behind on their school work. Overall, they concluded that the amount of alcohol consumed is not directly related to poor study habits.

Wechsler and Kuo (2000) examined the way in which college students define binge drinking. They found a distinct correlation between the number of drinks that a student considers binge drinking and the amount of alcohol that the student consumes. One of every three binge drinkers defines the term as ten or more drinks per sitting for men. This number is much higher than the actual definition that cites five drinks in a row as binge drinking for men. By applying the social norms approach, Wechsler and Kuo implied that most students overestimate binge drinking on their campus and drink more to fit in with their perception of drinking behaviors across campus.

#### Alcohol Consumption of Male and Female Student-Athletes

Miller, Miller, Verhegge, Linville, and Pumariega (2002) surveyed college student-athletes for alcohol abuse and several psychiatric symptoms. Students self-reporting alcohol abuse were more likely to also report high levels of depressive

symptoms along with other psychiatric symptoms. The authors also found that students with severe psychiatric symptoms were more likely to consume great amounts of alcohol. Though this relationship between alcohol misuse and psychiatric symptoms is positively correlated, "this data does not clearly reveal a causal relationship between alcohol and mental illness, i.e. which comes first? Are these presumably healthy college athletes misusing alcohol for self-medication reasons? Alternatively, does their excessive drinking itself produce secondary effects on their mood?" (p. 49).

Leichliter, Meilman, Presley, and Cashin (1998) studied the difference in alcohol consumption for students with varying levels of involvement in college athletics. Their findings showed that athletes consumed more alcohol than non-athletes and that those athletes in team leadership positions consumed more alcohol than other teammates. The number of alcoholic drinks consumed per week was found to increase as the level of athletic involvement increased between non-athletes (6.37), athletes (9.66) and team leaders (10.47). The authors also found that, on average, team leaders (64.2%) more often reported binge drinking in the previous two weeks than team members (60.6%) and non-athletes (45.3%).

Wilson, Pritchard, and Schaffer (2004) found that, in general, college men consume more alcohol than college women. They also noted that college athletes consumed more alcohol than non-athletes. From their study, they concluded that male athletes were more likely than any other group to drink socially and in order to get high. They also found a similarity between female student-athletes and male non-athletes in that they tend to use alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism. For female athletes,

the degree to which alcohol consumption was used as a coping strategy determined the amount and frequency in which that group consumed alcohol.

Issari and Coombs (1998) assessed and compared drug-related attitudes and behaviors of women participating in intercollegiate athletics as well as their views on drug-testing. Findings suggested that female athletes' attitudes towards drug use and drug testing are related to the gender-related expectations from the general population. They found that 51.4% of women did not find drug testing to be an invasion of their personal privacy, but 34.5% of women felt that drug testing was an intrusion on their civil rights. When compared to men (14.1%), more women felt that drug users should be banned from the team when they are identified (18.8%). Of the female athletes surveyed, 82.5% reported using alcohol. Socialization has been suggested to play an important role in different gender preferences and attitudes with relation to drug use and drug testing. The authors imply that women are socialized to be more accepting and cooperative when it comes to drug testing and are therefore more willing to comply and hold others accountable for their test results.

Martens, Dams-O'Connor, Duffy-Paiement, and Gibson (2006) researched the relationship between descriptive drinking norms of friends and personal alcohol consumption among athletes. They asked the question, are athletes more likely to follow social norms associated with alcohol use of their athlete friends or non-athlete friends? Results indicated a stronger overall effect on personal alcohol use in relationship to athlete norms, but non-athlete norms were stronger among women. One reason for this difference suggested that it might be more important internally for men



to identify as an athlete than it is for women. Therefore, male athletes are more willing than female athletes to align their drinking habits with what they perceive are their athletic friends' drinking habits. This may be expected because women tend to build friendships through emotional intimacy and shared activity while men tend to build friendships on shared interests or activity alone.

Thombs (2000) tested the ability of perceived drinking norms to affect the drinking patterns of student-athletes. Of the athletes surveyed, 90.2% reported to have consumed alcohol at least one time during the past year. A large number of the group (38.5%) reported that they consumed alcohol and became drunk (23.1%) at least once a week. Results found that student-athletes tend to perceive that their average teammate drinks more than they do and that the average non-athletes consume more than their average teammate. This occurs because student-athletes tend to greatly exaggerate the amount of alcohol consumed by their peers. The author refers to the perceived norms model to conclude that these perceptions increase the social pressure to consume alcohol and the students believe that alcohol abuse is accepted more widely among college students. The study also found that female athletes are more influenced by their head coach when deciding to drink than males. The researcher suggests that planning for alcohol prevention programs should include not just student-athletes, but also coaches and administrators.

Zamboanga, Rodriguez, and Horton (2008) conducted a study at an all girls Division III University to study the difference in hazardous alcohol use among sports teams, specifically through drinking games, and the social correlates among female

student-athletes. They found that more than one half (54%) of the participants had reported participating in drinking games with their teammates throughout the current semester or season. They also found a correlation between a high frequency of team social events involving alcohol and high team cohesion. The study indicated that having a higher number of team social events involving alcohol facilitated elevated alcohol use among the female student-athletes. Results also showed that high team social cohesion could be associated with high frequencies of team social events involving alcohol. This conclusion suggests that team social cohesion may be correlated with alcohol use.

Bower and Martin (1999) studied the use of alcohol and other drugs by female athletes. They found that the alcohol consumption of African-American female college basketball players in this study was very similar to those of the general student population. For the female basketball players, most cited their reasons for consuming alcohol as social influence and boredom. Other reasons cited included "drinking to feel good" and "peer influence" (p. 3). For many of the athletes who did not drink, they cited their coach and coach's rules as the major reason that they refrained from drinking. Health and sports performance were also found to be factors. Authors found that these women reflect the general population's view that alcohol use is acceptable. The study found that, though the female basketball players were aware of the short-term effects of alcohol, they were less aware of the long-term effects.

#### Athletes, Gender & Ethnicity

Mean and Kassing (2008) conducted a qualitative study on females who were competing at a professional level of athletics. Even though Title IX has helped women to

enter into the athletic arena, women are still not accepted as "normal" athletes. Stereotypes are placed on women involved in athletics and those women are being placed under more pressure to fit into the norm than their male counterparts. The authors distinguished three different themes in their study: managing gender, having an athletic identity, and having a female athletic identity. Women in the study were likely to minimize gender differences while still noting that they are, in fact, female athletes. The female athletes also separated themselves often from other women as they did not consider themselves to be "normal women." They identified a drive and a passion for their sport that other women did not possess.

Anshel, Sutarso, and Jubenville (2009) sought to explore the differences in the ways athletes cope in relation to race and gender. Research found that female athletes were more likely to be affected negatively by coach related events than male student-athletes, but that both were affected similarly by performance related events. Females reported feeling most stressed when they were arguing with their coach or felt that their coach was upset with them. Women also were more likely to perceive their coach as an intimidating person, especially if their coach was male. The authors found that females were "more inclined to cope by social support, help-seeking, and increased and more intense coping efforts toward emotion-coping functions than are men" (p. 173).

Loughran and Etzel (2008) discussed the ethical dilemmas within the athletic arena. Athletes face added pressures in the form of fear of success, identity conflict, social isolation, poor athletic performance, alcohol abuse, and body image. Though treatment is available, student-athletes often entered into treatment in a very public

manner such as referral by a coach or athletic administrator. This lack of privacy can also be difficult for a student-athlete during an already stressful time. The authors noted it is important that Student Affairs practitioners who work with student-athletes be able to understand these added stressors. In addition, they must be multiculturally competent because minority student-athletes were less likely to seek counseling than their Caucasian peers. Gender is also an issue that Loughran and Etzel found to be significant to a student-athlete's mental health. Female athletes are the minority to male athletes by an average of 210 female athletes to 266 male athletes. Many of these female athletes are coached by males. In this case, female-student-athletes can experience gender oppression and may avoid seeking assistance for fear of seeming weaker than male student-athletes.

#### Sport Team Affiliation

Brenner & Swanik (2007) used variables such as sport participation, time of year, and level of competition to explain the drinking behaviors of athletes. The authors surveyed 720 athletes at nine different colleges and universities and found that male athletes (81%) reported drinking at significantly higher levels than female athletes (68%). They also found that significantly more team sport athletes reported high-risk drinking (84%) than did individual sport athletes (57%). This difference is important because it illustrates that there is a social phenomenon associated with heavy alcohol use by college athletes. The study attributed this social phenomenon to greater bonding among members of team sports. This creates a greater acceptance of the group norms by individual team members.

Ford (2007) studied the relationship between athletes' particular sport and their drinking habits. He sought to determine which sports were at the highest risk for substance use. Results of the chi-square analysis showed that there was a statistically significant difference in substance use on the basis of sport/team affiliation. Findings showed that male hockey players and female soccer athletes were the most likely to report substance use and that male basketball and cross-country athletes were more likely to report lower levels of substance use. Specifically for female athletes, findings indicated that runners (cross-country and track athletes) and swimming/diving athletes were the female athletes least likely to report substance use. Of runners surveyed, 26.6% reported binge drinking when surveyed. Ford's study concluded that there is a variation in substance abuse based on the type of sport or team in which an athlete participates.

Peretti-Watel Guagliardo, Verger, Pruvost, Mignon, and Obadia (2003) studied the relationship between sporting activity and alcohol by focusing specifically on elite student-athletes (e.g. Olympians). Results showed that older elite student-athletes were more likely to consume alcohol at least once a month than their younger counterparts. And that those athletes involved in team sports were more likely to consume alcohol than those in an individual sport. This study showed that for elite female athletes, there was a negative correlation between the amount of athletic activity and the amount of alcohol consumed.

### Summary

Research about alcohol consumption of college students, student-athletes, sport team affiliation, and athletes' gender and ethnicity has been reviewed in this chapter. This review of literature is meant to inform the reader on topics surrounding the reasons that female student-athletes are likely to consume alcohol. Chapter III will discuss the methodology of the current study. Chapter IV will present the results of this study, and Chapter V will discuss the implications of the results.

## Chapter III

### METHODOLOGY

This study utilized qualitative research methodology. A qualitative study was beneficial to this particular research because it allowed the researcher to obtain rich data and a better understanding of the social phenomenon of the topic through total immersion in the area of study (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996). The qualitative nature of this research also allowed an “understanding [of] the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 3).

The focus of this qualitative study aimed to better understand the female student-athletes’ perceptions of their alcohol consumption during their collegiate experience. A focused interview technique was used on five female student-athletes from five different sports at a midsize Midwestern university.

#### Participants

Participants for the study were drawn from junior and senior level student-athletes from a mid-sized Midwest campus. Subjects were students living on and off campus and were all above the age of 21. Athletes were selected because they were members of a collegiate athletic team. Interviews were conducted during the spring semester. Snowball and purposeful sampling techniques were utilized to gather participants. Five athletes from five different sports were interviewed to explore the differences in alcohol use among different sports teams and their separate social communities.

Participant 1 is a senior Family and Consumer Sciences major with teacher certification. She currently participates in a team sport on this campus.

Participant 2 is a junior Kinesiology major focusing on exercise science. She is specializing in personal training and double majoring in Sport Management with a business administration minor. She is currently a member of a team sport on campus.

Participant 3 is a senior Journalism major with a Spanish minor. She is a member of an individual sport on the campus.

Participant 4 is a senior psychology major with a concentration in physical therapy and a minor in Biology and Chemistry. She is a member of a team sport at the university.

Participant 5 is a senior sociology major. She participates on an individual sport program.

### Site

Interviews were conducted with five female student-athletes attending a mid-sized, public institution in the Midwest campus. Student enrollment is approximately 12,000 students including both undergraduate and graduate students.

### Data Collection

For this study, snowball and purposeful sampling techniques were used to gather participants. Snowball sampling is helpful in that "subjects may be able to recommend useful potential candidates for study" (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Additionally, purposeful sampling allows "the researcher [to] select people according to the aims of the research" (Coyne, 1997, p. 624). One student-athlete was chosen and that student-



athlete introduced other participants that fit the criteria for the study. Five student-athletes from five different sports were chosen to explore the differences in alcohol use among different sports teams and their separate social communities.

### Treatment of Data

Interviews were video recorded and then transcribed to evaluate their content. Now that the study is complete, the videos and transcriptions will be locked in a desk for three years. Access to the data is limited to the primary researcher and the thesis committee. After the three years, the researcher will destroy the information to protect the participants involved.

Interview protocol questions were designed using a “standardized open-ended interview” (McMillan, & Schumacher, 2001, p. 444). All participants answered the same questions in the same order thus increasing the consistency of each interview. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are your perceptions of alcohol consumption related to the presence of male athletes (Brenner, & Swanik, 2007; Ford, 2007)?
2. What stressors do you perceive in yourself and/or others who consume large amounts of alcohol on a regular basis (Bower, & Martin, 1999)?
3. What are some issues related to a female student-athlete’s social community and it’s relation to alcohol consumption (Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Horton 2008; Martens, M.P., Dams-O'Connor, K., Duffy-Paiement, C., & Gibson, J.T., 2006)?
4. How do your habits, with regard to alcohol consumption, compare to non-athletes (Thombs, 2000)?

## Chapter IV

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter will present the results of the interviews conducted in this study. Each of the female student-athletes responded to four major interview questions administered by the primary investigator. Each student-athlete offered unique observations about the presence of alcohol in collegiate athletics.

#### Results

Four interview questions were asked of the five female student-athletes. All interviews were conducted in a quiet private room on the campus of a mid-sized Midwestern university.

*Research Question #1: What are your perceptions of alcohol consumption related to the presence of male athletes?*

When discussing the perceptions of alcohol consumption related to the presence of male athletes in the sport, the participants had different perspectives from which to share their experiences. Most of the student-athletes answered that the male presence plays a noticeable role in alcohol consumption of female student-athletes. The participants agreed that male presence encourages female student-athletes to consume more alcohol. Participant 3 is an athlete involved in a team sport who offered the following response:

We had a big problem with our freshmen this year. We would go out and it would just be us and everything would be fun, as soon as you added male

athletes to the picture, they wanted to look big and bad and got themselves into some big trouble. I think not having that working relationship [with the men's team]. And not that that carries over into your extra-curriculars, but you have a different relationship with someone that you're practicing with, that you're working towards a common goal with than someone that's like "oh wow, they're cute, they're on the guys [sport] team. I'm going to drink more cause I'm going to impress them." I mean I think, I think it almost makes people drink more because they're trying to impress the opposite sex and want to show off and whatnot.

When males and females are on the same team they share common goals and expectations that may mitigate alcohol use. The participants indicated there was less pressure to drink when male and female athletes were working toward a shared team outcome.

However, when the men and women are not on the same team, participants indicated there was more pressure to consume alcohol. Participant 1 indicated that when the male and female athletes are not on the same team, a party-like atmosphere may ensue:

The reason would be if the boys and the girls [get] together it's more of a party type atmosphere so it's more of social drinking I guess you would call it. It's just more people are doing it so it's more of a social thing instead of just hanging out and getting ready to go out.

Working together on a daily basis allows for interaction in non-party type situations and the team members relate to each other in a social setting unrelated to alcohol use.

Therefore, behavioral norms are expanded and include a wider range of acceptable non-alcohol related interaction.

*Research Question #2: What stressors do you perceive in yourself and/or others who consume large amounts of alcohol on a regular basis?*

The student-athletes interviewed mentioned various factors that lead to stress and may contribute to student-athletes' alcohol consumption. The first factor mentioned was scheduling.

Participant 2 stated:

I would say not necessarily time management, but scheduling. As an athlete, they pretty much have you; you earn every penny of your scholarship. It's not free money, and when you're booked from 6AM conditioning until a practice that doesn't get out until 8:30 at night, I think that's the biggest stressor.

The participants were aware that with scholarships comes a certain lack of freedom. Like any job, athletes are aware that they owe a certain amount of commitment to the school. Athletes are not free to structure their time or make a decision on a whim to hang out or go somewhere. This lack of freedom is one factor that contributes to an overall sense of pressure.

Likewise the participants indicated travel is another factor that may lead to increased alcohol use. As participant 5 stated:

Some people get depressed if they don't travel [with the team to away competitions]. The [sport] team, you don't have to worry about that. Whether you're going to ride the bench or not they're still going to travel with the team. If you're not good enough, our budget doesn't allow [us] to take the people that

are not that good. So, they're like "ok, I'm coming in here every single day like you are and you get to go to every meet but I don't."

So the participants experienced traveling as a major indicator if they are "good enough" or feel part of the team. The pressure to maintain the strict discipline to compete at a high level is not always rewarded and one of those rewards is travel. The female participants internalize this as rejection or lack of talent and this becomes another factor leading to increased alcohol use.

Some of the participants mentioned family of origin issues as another source of stress that may lead to increased alcohol use. Again Participant 5: "A lot of people have a ton of family issues that I've never even heard of..." Issues at home are not left behind when female athletes come to college. If an athlete's family life is in turmoil, it adds pressure to not only maintain a high intensity of performance, but also requires that the student bracket off the family issues long enough to perform. As Participant 1 stated:

I feel like once you're away from home, you're in a whole new world. I'm in my own world and you know everybody has their things and issues and whatnot at home, but we're here and so that's our home world but now we're at school and our school world and we've got a lot going on other than everything else that is in our lives.

*Research Question #3: What are some issues related to a female student-athlete's social community and its relation to alcohol consumption?*

The response to this research question was very similar between all of the participants. While some teams promote team drinking, others use their social community to persuade teammates to focus on athletics and academics. In either

situation, the teams' attitudes toward drinking play a large role in the decisions of student-athletes to drink. Participant 1 addressed the positive team atmosphere surrounding her team sport:

We don't have a specific rule, but we all have a basic understanding and commitment to each other and our [team] goals and practicing. We depend on each other for our own success. We're not just going to go out and go party the night before a game or even practice weeks.

Here is an example of positive social pressure that assists the athlete in monitoring and possibly reducing or maintaining healthy alcohol consumption.

Participant 4 suggested an alternate example of how a student-athlete's social community can impact their drinking habits:

[If] one person goes out, then everyone's going out so I have to go out too. When you have a group, you don't want to be left out of the group so, everyone else is doing it so ok I'll do it too and it makes it ok even though they don't have a test at 10AM and I do. I don't have to go out, but the next day everyone's talking about it. So the next time you [want to] go out. I don't know, I think peer pressure in groups is pretty heavy.

All of the athletes interviewed implied peer pressure in their response. While some athletes expressed a positive peer influence, encouraging a healthy lifestyle and study habits, others expressed pressure to drink and felt like a team outlier if they expressed rejection of those norms. This would make it difficult to impossible for one person to change the drinking norms of the team.

*Research Question #4: How do your habits, with regard to alcohol consumption, compare to non-athletes'?*

Some of the participants in this study perceived that athletes were likely to consume less alcohol than a non-athlete in any given week. Many of them mentioned that being at their best physical condition was important to their sport. Participant 2 suggested that:

Non-athletes don't have to think about performing or being at your best level possible all the time. I have some teammates that don't hold it as in high regards, but I do. Somebody that knows they have to do well and be successful isn't going to go out and do that to their body over and over again. And I think you see a success rate in the athletes that don't [drink heavily on a regular basis] and that's why that's such a trend. The people that really struggle off the court, don't just flip a switch and perform all the time [on the court]. It's a completely different mindset [between athletes and non-athletes]. A non-athlete might think about the hangover their going to have, but it's not going to affect their practice or performance, it's all emphasized with athletes that you can be replaced by someone else, if you're not at your best all the time.

Participant 1 added:

We don't really have the time or energy to go out and celebrate everyday that ends in a "Y" with a drink in our hand. We all have friends that aren't in sports and they go out and they enjoy the social scene. They're different worlds. [It's] a responsibility to our team and goals and most of our time is spent practicing and

playing instead of going out and partying. So it's definitely much much less.

That's just not something that fits into our agenda.

So the pressure of being replaced by their coach or teammates acts as a deterrent to abusing alcohol for these participants. As with the first question, they realize non-athletes have a different lifestyle with more freedom to decide on whether a "hang-over" will impede their responsibility. The abuse of alcohol may negatively impact a non-athlete's day, but for an athlete, a hang-over could impact the team and their membership in it.

Others however mentioned that they actually consumed equal amounts of alcohol, but did so in a shorter period of time. For instance, "Sunday Funday" was used as an example of a time to "catch up" with non-athletes who have the freedom to drink on any given day. As Participant 2 stated:

I think that the type of drinking that we do is very, very different. Non-athletes might drink 5 days out of the week and drink this amount (amount shown by hands) and athletes will get to drink 2 nights out of the week and drink the exact same amount... So the quantity can be pretty comparable, but the nights that they do it is a lot more spread out.

#### Additional Themes

During the administration of the interview protocol, the participants identified several additional themes related to the drinking habits of female student-athletes that were not part of the original questions.

All five of the student-athletes mentioned their coaches and upperclassmen as a mitigating factor in regard to team alcohol use. All of the student-athletes recognized a



huge impact that the coach brought to the team through attitudes or rules. They mentioned that a coach who is strict and regards alcohol use as negative and relates that attitude toward the team can influence a team to maintain acceptable alcohol use. Some participants mentioned the respect that the team has for their coach's rules regarding drinking before a competition or practice. Participant 4 offered:

During season we have a 48 hour rule. You cannot drink, be at a party where they are having alcohol or anything before a game and then 72 hours during conference season. She's supportive of [drinking] if you're of age, be responsible they don't completely [say] don't drink because when people say don't drink all people want to do is drink, but they're definitely a stickler about underage drinking. This is [our coach's] first year here, [our last coach] was hard on underage drinking. You got in trouble for it, you got caught in the dorms, you ran your butt off the next day. There was punishment if you did get caught drinking and we had a player suspended this year for drinking, so they don't take that lightly if you're underage.

Participant 4 agreed that coaches have a large impact on teams and that their attitudes can make the difference in the social environment of the team. She shared her experience with two different coaches and their impacts on the team:

[Coaches] absolutely have an effect on you and you can see it from team to team too. You can tell team to team exactly what their coach is like and what kind of influence they have on them. And, I've had three coaches in three years and they have all [had] very different teams. I've had coaches that were very open about alcohol, they would talk about them drinking, [and] they would talk

about us going out. They made it seem very relaxed and ok to drink. Even with the same bunch of girls the drinking habits were completely different with that coach. It was a lot more drinking and it was a bigger deal to drink all the time and that's what we talked about in the locker room, as soon as the game was over with, girls weren't afraid to start talking about [drinking] and it's a culture and that [team had] a drinking culture because of the way that the coach acted.

I've also had coaches that warned us that we had a serious responsibility to portray an image that is associated with anything negative. That means drinking, or boyfriends, or the [people] that we hang out with, it's all a reflection on our program whether we realize it now or not. We've been threatened before that if we go out and they find out about it after games they've threatened [our] scholarships. Again, the culture is completely different. We've had girls on our team kicked off because of their drinking habits. And, when scholarships are taken away, they're gone. And that's plenty to make you scared. You already take [your coach] seriously just because they're an authoritative figure but for them to actually follow through with it and take a girl's scholarship away because she didn't control her drinking it really makes you sit back and look at whether drinking is really necessary or if you really need to do that and every time the answer is no. So, again that culture turns into a very sober one really fast [depending on the coach].

When asked if coaches have the largest impact on a team's drinking behaviors, most of the girls said that it was a tie between the coaches and the upperclassmen on the team. They expressed that while many of the student-athletes respect their coach's

rules, that the upperclassmen on the team also provided a source of leadership.

Participant 5 discussed the relationship between upperclassmen and underclassmen:

Maybe a senior or maybe a captain [has more influence on the team than a coach]. I know my freshmen always come to talk to me about any problems they have because they'll be scared to talk to a coach, because I'm going through the same thing as them, but I'm just older. And they'll be like "well, how do you feel about this?" and "how do you think I should do this?" "How should I come to coach about that?" so I think the senior has a just a little bit more influence on them.

Participant 5 is talking about a team relationship that gives upperclassmen on the team the chance to be leaders for the team. By having the ability to lead, these student-athletes have the ability to dictate the team norm in regard to alcohol consumption.

Participant 2 illustrated the capabilities of the upperclassmen to lead the team in either direction:

If a senior, or even a junior, makes it seem like it's ok to be talking about what you're doing that night everyone follows suit. Sometimes you take the leaders on your team more seriously than your coach. You take what [upperclassmen] have to say and what they consider a lot more seriously sometimes just [they are] your peers and someone that you really look up to. And they don't piss you off like your coach does, so you listen to them a lot more.

Another theme that emerged was the role scholarships play in the dedication of a student-athlete. In research question two it was implied that students under athletic scholarship felt "owned" by the university. This lack of freedom and strict structure

caused stress for some which they attributed as a factor to increased alcohol use.

However, they also mentioned that due to this “ownership”, some participants felt that athletes on scholarship were actually less likely to abuse alcohol because of their obligation to the school. For instance, two of the student-athletes talked about the idea that by receiving a scholarship, the rules that the coach or university sets are more likely to be followed. Participant 4 said:

I think everyone is pretty supportive [of the rules] because we’re here to play [our sport]. I’m a student and I want to have a good time, but you’re here to play [your sport]. It’s paying for school, you sign your little life away so you’ve got to abide by the rules.

Participant 2 also mentioned a difference that she noticed between scholarship athletes and non-scholarship athletes and their dedication to their sport:

Scholarship athletes are on scholarship for a reason. And I think that the girls that get [a larger] scholarship or do have the full scholarship versus nothing at all, they take everything they do a lot more seriously. They take into consideration what the alcohol is going to do to their body and how you’re going to feel at practice and the way that you’re going to perform and how it’s going to affect your school. They think about that stuff all the time, whereas, that may be the reason that some athletes aren’t on full scholarship because they let all the extra stuff interfere with their school work and their performance.

## Chapter V

### DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the female student-athletes' perceptions of their alcohol consumption during their collegiate experience. This section addresses my conclusions from analyzing the results.

*Research Question #1: What are your perceptions of alcohol consumption related to the presence of male athletes?*

Most participants of the current study expressed that they notice a difference in alcohol consumption depending on the presence of male student-athletes. They agreed that the male presence encourages a greater intake of alcohol by female student-athletes. Brenner & Swanik (2007) found that 81% of male student-athletes reported drinking while only 68% of female student-athletes reported similar behavior. The results of this study may help to explain the results of the current study. Being around a group of male athletes that statistically consume more alcohol than the average female athlete may increase the female athlete's probability of consumption.

Additionally Ford (2007) found that male hockey players and female soccer players were the most likely to report substance abuse while running (cross-country and track) and swimming/diving were the least likely to engage in substance abuse. Likewise, the participants in this study indicated that female student-athletes involved in a sport where men and women share a common goal were less likely to engage in "party-like" alcohol use. Female athletes in sports where men were not part of the overall team (e.g. soccer) indicated that there was more social pressure to engage in

excessive alcohol. Team sports that include both men and women allow opportunities to engage in interactions that exclude alcohol and may mitigate the pressure to abuse it.

*Research Question #2: What stressors do you perceive in yourself and/or others who consume large amounts of alcohol on a regular basis?*

Bower and Martin (1999) noted that female basketball players cited social motives, boredom, and peer influence as their reasoning for alcohol consumption. Interviewees of the current study did not mention these as the most influential sources of stress leading to increased alcohol use. What they did cite in themselves or others they knew was a different trilogy of stressors. The three mentioned were scheduling, team travel and family or origin issues. By scheduling, the participants indicated that feeling “owned” through their awarded scholarship meant that freedom was impeded and their days were not their own. Traveling was another source of consternation for some of the participants or those they knew since those who were not allowed to travel felt they worked equally as hard as those who did. This sense of unfairness and feelings of not belonging to the team increased their overall sense of stress. Lastly, issues related to their family or origin traveled with them to campus. Trying to manage campus and home life often left the participants feeling overwhelmed.

*Research Question #3: What are some issues related to a female student-athlete’s social community and its relation to alcohol consumption?*

A study conducted by Zamboanga, Rodriguez, and Horton (2008) concluded that team social cohesion may be correlated to alcohol use. The results of the current study were split between participants. All participants noted that there are both positive and

negative pressures related to team cohesiveness. On the one hand, some participants indicated that team culture went a long way to setting the tone for appropriate drinking behavior and socializing. On the other hand, other participants witnessed the negative aspect of this phenomenon. In teams where socializing and team culture emphasized an abuse of alcohol, there was added pressure to fit in.

Martens, Dams-O'Connor, Duffy-Paiement, and Gibson (2006) found that men were more likely to follow athlete norms pertaining to drinking while female athletes were more likely to follow the norms of non-athletes. In the current study, the women interviewed seemed to identify strongly with their athletic teammates and mentioned non-athletes as their "other friends". Unlike previous research, these female participants actually had a stronger connection to their athletics teams and related to its norms more than any other.

*Research Question #4: How do your habits, with regard to alcohol consumption, compare to non-athletes'?*

Results from Thombs' (2000) study found that student-athletes tend to perceive that their average teammate drinks more than they do and that the average non-athletes consume more than their average teammate. This occurs because student-athletes tend to greatly exaggerate the amount of alcohol that their peers are consuming. However, in this study the research found that some participants felt that athletes consume less alcohol than do non-athletes because of training requirements and team norms and have fewer opportunities to consume it. Other participants stated

that in fact athletes consumed alcohol less often but might in fact drink more in any given sitting due to the limited opportunities to consume.

### Additional Themes

Anshel, Sutarso, and Jubenville (2009) found that females reported feeling most stressed when they were arguing with their coach or felt that their coach was upset with them. Women also were more likely to relate their coach to an intimidating person, especially if their coach was male. This aligns with the current study. The student-athletes interviewed all mentioned their coach as a source of stress or as someone that had a negative or positive influence on the team's alcohol consumption.

Leichliter, Meilman, Presley, and Cashin (1998) found that the more involved a student-athlete is in athletics, the more alcohol they are likely to consume. Also, athletes in team leadership positions are more likely to consume more alcohol than other teammates. The student-athletes interviewed during the current study expressed that scholarship athletes were less likely to embrace alcohol as a part of their athletic culture. They mentioned a state of ownership that the university gains over its athletes by paying for their education. They expressed also that they were expected to perform at peak levels during and out of season in the classroom and athletically.

### Recommendations

Based on the data presented in this research, the following recommendations are offered to Student Affairs Professionals:



For Student Affairs Professionals:

1. The participants identified scheduling, team travel and family as three major stressors that female student-athletes face. Coaches, athletic support staff, and university employees should be aware of these stressors and acknowledge the added pressure that student-athletes incur.
2. Coaches were a major source of either positive or negative influence regarding alcohol use according to participants. It is important for coaches to take a firm stand and enforce drinking policies that will be beneficial to the student-athletes. It is important for coaches to know that they can make a difference in the lives of their female student-athletes.
3. Upperclassmen have the ability to trump a coach's rules when the team socially accepts them as leaders. Upperclassmen should be involved in the process of setting limits pertaining to the alcohol consumption of the team. The upperclassmen will be more likely to support and defend the rules that they have helped to create for themselves.

For Researchers:

1. Include more athletes across more sports. Five athletes were selected for this study from five different sports on campus.
2. Future research should explore season status and peer pressure as themes. One participant mentioned that during season she feels much more overwhelmed than out of season and another mentioned teammates as a major influence on

her alcohol consumption. While these ideas were mentioned in single interviews, they were not found to be a common theme in the current study.

3. Interviewing male athletes to examine their perceptions of female student-athlete alcohol use may be useful to understand the outside perspective.

### Limitations

While completing this study, some limitations were of note. The primary investigator (PI) was currently employed as a graduate assistant within the athletics department. The PI was also a past student-athlete at the university where the study was conducted. As a result, the interviewee may have assumed that the PI had special knowledge of the athletic structure of the university and therefore left out information based on this knowledge. Only five athletes were interviewed in this study. No attempt should be made to generalize these results to the greater athletic population. Other schools may have different sports to offer female student-athletes and the culture may differ among sports at that university.

### Conclusions

The goal of this study was to better understand the female student-athletes' perceptions of their alcohol consumption during their collegiate experience. This study provides an understanding of the challenges that female collegiate student-athletes face. By understanding this information, progress can be made toward the decline of alcohol consumption by female student-athletes.

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APPENDICES



**APPENDIX A**

**Introduction Email to Female Student-Athletes**

Hello!

My name is Holly Hooe and I am a graduate student in the Counseling & Student Development program at Eastern Illinois University. I am in my second year of my master's study and am working on a thesis to complete the requirements for the program. I was a member of the EIU swim team from 2004-2008 and am currently serving as the Graduate Assistant Coach for the team.

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study! I have attached the informed consent to this e-mail for your benefit. The study will be An Exploration of Factors Related to Alcohol Consumption Among Female Student-Athletes in Higher Education. I will be interviewing 5 female student-athletes from different sports team on campus. Each interview should take no more than one hour of your time and your participation in the study will be completely confidential and voluntary.

The first step will be to find a time that works with our schedules. Just let me know when you can be available and I can work my schedule out to fit with yours.

I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you might have about participating. Please feel free to call or e-mail me at any time.

Thank you again so much for volunteering your time and knowledge to this study.

Holly Hooe  
618.267.8701  
hrhooe@eiu.edu

**APPENDIX B**  
**Informed Consent**

## Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of alcohol consumption by female student-athletes in a university setting. As the primary investigator, I hope to gain a better understanding of your perceptions and experiences as a female student-athlete relating to your own alcohol consumption and/or that of your peers.

Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to interview with the primary investigator of the study for approximately one hour on the topic of alcohol consumption of female student-athletes. There are no foreseeable risks or ill effects from participating in this study. Benefits may include a better understanding of your own perceptions relating to alcohol consumption by female student-athletes.

The interview will be video recorded, but the researchers will not place your name on any documents resulting from the interview. Any information obtained during this study will be confidential and will be viewed only by the primary investigator and the thesis advisor. This informed consent document will be kept separate from interview data. All video recordings as well as transcripts of the recordings will be kept locked in a cabinet for three years and will then be destroyed to protect your privacy.

Your participation in this research project will help gather information about your experiences and/or expectations about the part that alcohol plays in the lives of female student athletes in a university setting. Your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to discontinue participation at any time. You will receive a copy of this consent form for future reference. Please feel free to ask any questions of the primary investigator before signing this form or at any time during the interview.

Should you communicate to the researcher that you have violated the Eastern Illinois University Code of Conduct, I will be obligated to report that information to the Office of Student Standards.

Should you experience psychological problems resulting from the research, referral information will be provided for the Eastern Illinois University Counseling Center. Contact information will be provided at your request.

If you have any questions, please contact me, Holly Hooe, at [hrhooe@eiu.edu](mailto:hrhooe@eiu.edu) at any time.

.....  
 I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this study. I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this study and given my consent to participate. You may withdraw at any time from this study without penalty or loss of benefits. If you have any questions about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write: Institutional Review Board, Eastern Illinois University, 600 Lincoln Ave., Charleston, IL, 61920, (217) 581-8576, [eiuirb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@www.eiu.edu).

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Primary Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

Faculty Supervisor:  
 Dr. Richard Roberts  
 Counseling & Student Development  
 Eastern Illinois University  
 Charleston, IL 61920  
 (217) 581-2400 / [rroberts@eiu.edu](mailto:rroberts@eiu.edu)

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol Questions

Interview Questions:

- 1) What are your perceptions of alcohol consumption related to the presence of male athletes (Brenner, & Swanik, 2007; Ford, 2007)?
- 2) What stressors do you perceive in yourself and/or others who consume large amounts of alcohol on a regular basis (Bower, & Martin, 1999)?
- 3) What are some issues related to a female student-athlete's social community and its relation to alcohol consumption (Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Horton 2008; Martens, M.P., Dams-O'Connor, K., Duffy-Paiement, C., & Gibson, J.T., 2006)?
- 4) How do your habits, with regard to alcohol consumption, compare to non-athletes (Thombs, 2000)?