Within the last 25 years, a trend to eliminate Olympic sport teams has swept the college athletics landscape in the United States leaving few NCAA athletic programs unaffected (NCAA Sports Sponsorship, 2008). While several men’s and women’s teams have been negatively impacted, the NCAA Sports Sponsorship and Participation Rates Report (2008) illustrates that a few men’s Olympic sport teams (wrestling [1043 student-athletes], gymnastics [1043 student-athletes], fencing [788 student-athletes], and rowing [598 student-athletes]) have suffered the most severe program eliminations.

As the number of Olympic sport programs have steadily declined (Frauenheim & Skoda, 2008; NCAA Sports Sponsorship, 2008), there has been a growing emphasis by scholars to identify the reasons why these programs are being eliminated (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Zimbalist, 2003). As explained by Ridpath, Yiamouyiannis, Lawrence, and Galles (2008), there is often misplaced blame on Title IX and its “proportionality” prong when discussing program eliminations. However, a growing body of literature supports the notion that Title IX does not in any way support the elimination of sport teams (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), and the program losses are instead due to the decision by athletic departments to engage in the “arms race” (Marburger and Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Marburger et al., 2003, Knight Commission, 2004; Ridpath et al., 2008; Zimbalist, 2003).

In response to the varying perspectives on program eliminations, several scholars have attempted to understand this phenomenon by surveying athletic directors on the criteria implemented when cutting sport teams (Carroll & Humphreys, 2000; Gray and Pelzer, 1995). While these studies have provided valuable insights, the research has not taken a proactive approach to address the potential value that Olympic sport teams hold within their athletic departments in the eyes of their administrators. With an understanding of the elements that are most important to athletic directors, coaches are afforded the opportunity to develop plans to improve the value of their program within their coinciding athletic department. For example, if revenue is paramount for administrators, coaches can take the pursuit of increasing demand of their sport into their own hands as they view the value of budgetary decisions contingent on fan support (Weight, 2009; Weight & Cooper, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to explore NCAA Division I athletic director perceptions of Olympic sport program value within the current college athletic landscape. Utilizing the theoretical foundation of intercollegiate sport purpose – to provide an educational opportunity for student-athletes, the issues surrounding program value are juxtaposed with the theoretical purpose of intercollegiate athletics. Supporting this juxtaposition, the following research questions have been addressed.

RQ 1: What are the elements of Olympic sport programs (e.g., revenues, Academic Performance Rating, image) that NCAA Division I athletic directors value most within their corresponding departments?

RQ 2: What are the most effective strategies that Olympic sport coaches can implement to enhance the value of their program in the eyes of their athletic director?

The current research will implement a variety of data collection methods to understand the program elements that athletic directors value most. Empirical data collection using a multiple-embedded case study with the use of survey will be utilized. The survey will be sent to each of the NCAA Division I athletic directors. Subsequent to survey data analysis, case studies will focus on clusters of data surrounding two to four athletic departments with unique perspectives on Olympic sport value. The case study data will include interview, on-site observation, and document analysis.

This presentation will report findings from this study and discuss implications for the future of Olympic sport sponsorship.