Although cheerleading was at one time an all-male activity ("invented" in the late 1800s to increase spectator involvement in collegiate football), it has become progressively dominated by women for the past 60 years (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Hanson, 1995). Historically, cheer has been portrayed more as entertainment than a sport activity. Cheerleaders directed pep rallies, decorated school halls, and led spectators in supporting the players on the field. It has been one of the most popular activities for young girls and women since the late 1800's (Gartner, 2010; Shields & Smith, 2006). However, cheerleading has recently evolved into an activity requiring a great deal of athleticism and physical strength. Cheerleaders today perform tumbling skills that can rival gymnastics routines, air skills often seen in diving competitions, dance routines and power lifting.

Arguably, Biediger v. Quinnipiac University (2010) generated more media coverage than other recent Title IX compliance cases. The Biediger court rejected Quinnipiac University's participation formula. As a result the court ruled that cheerleading could not be recognized as a varsity sport for purposes of Title IX compliance. Thus, much of the discussion surrounding the case was more focused on whether cheerleading is a sport (Associated Press, 2010). The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of Division I athletic administrators regarding cheerleading as a sport.

The senior athletic director and the senior women’s athletic director at six major conferences (Atlantic Coast Conference, Big East, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac 10, and Southeastern Conference) were contact to participate in an online survey. The questionnaire included six closed answer and ten Likert scale (1=strongly agree to 5= strongly disagree) statements. Of the potential 72 senior athletic directors and 72 senior women’s athletic directors (n=144), 57 responded to the survey for response rate of 40%. The results indicated that cheerleading was considered part of the athletic department (M=1.14, SD=.06). The respondents disagreed that cheer should be considered a sport (M=3.75, SD=.17) as well as being an emerging sport (M=3.65, SD=.17). The respondents were rather ambivalent that cheerleading would allow the institution in being Title IX compliant by creating more opportunities to participate (M=3.11, SD=.17). However, the respondents agreed that cheerleading could have a defined competitive season (M=2.86, SD=.17). Interestingly despite not being certain the institution would be able to field a competitive and sideline cheer squad (M=3.18, SD=.17), the respondents disagreed that it would be feasible for their institution to provide, scholarships, monetary stipends or any other benefits for a cheerleading team (M=3.50, SD=.16).

Obtaining standing for cheerleading as a varsity sport may require separation from the traditional image of cheerleading (Hanson, 1995). Because of the changes that cheerleading has undergone over the past decade, the investigators employed a Pearson chi-square at the .05 level of significance to determine if the length of time a person served as being an athletic director affected their perception of cheer as an intercollegiate sport. Two groups were dichotomized as being an athletic director for 1-15 years or 16 or more years. The most outstanding result revealed a significant difference existed between the overall length of time the person had been an athletic director and believing that cheer could be a sport ($x^2 = 11.805, (1, N=56), p = .019$). In other words, the respondents who had been an athletic director for a less than 15 years were more receptive of cheerleading becoming a competitive intercollegiate sport. In fact, 25% of athletic directors with 15 year or less of experience strongly agreed that cheer should be a sport, while 47% of athletic directors with 16 years or more experience strongly disagreed.

Cheerleading occupies a disputed place in American culture and a crucial detail of controversy is whether it ought to be considered a sport. Cheerleading has become increasingly demanding athletically with partner stunts, pyramids and advanced tumbling (Grindstaff & West, 2006). In fact, many cheer squads focus on competitive championships rather than simply generating school spirit from the sidelines. Moreover, cheerleaders often refer to themselves as “cheer athletes” and the “team” is applied interchangeably with “squad” (Grindstaff & West, 2006). As stipulated by the Biediger court, cheerleading cannot be recognized as a varsity sport for purposes of Title IX compliance.

The results of this study support the ruling as most of the senior athletic directors disagreed that it should be considered a sport nor an emerging sport, although it was clearly under the auspices of the nearly all of the athletic
departments. Moreover, the respondents were unsure as to whether the addition of cheerleading would permit institutions to be more compliant to Title IX. However, other results revealed future implications. Primarily, the results indicated that those who had been athletic directors in the future may be more accepting of cheerleading as an intercollegiate sport.