The conceptualization of justice, and in turn fairness, is a philosophical principle that dates back to the writings of Plato, Socrates (Colquitt et al., 2001) and Aristotle (Cropanzano & Stein, 2009). Under their early explorations, the theoretical principle grew into an ethical construct defined in the essence of one’s quest for “righteousness” (Colquitt et al., 2001). Accordingly, they deemed righteousness to be present when an act met a preconceived notion of just philosophical perspective (Colquitt et al., 2001).

As time passed, various deviations of this conceptualization developed. Adopting the notion, as many scholars had, social scientists looked to gain insight into the idea of justice and comprehend the construct in terms of “general social interactions,” (Greenberg, 1990, p. 400). Scholars such as Homans and Adams produced theoretical pieces in the mid-twentieth century that worked around the guiding principles of social science (Greenberg, 1990) and more specifically, behavioral ethics (Cropanzano & Stein, 2009). In the end, their work, as well as the work of others looked to use individual theoretical justice constructs “to describe and explain how individuals actually behaved in their... lives,” (Cropanzano & Stein, 2009, p. 194).

Researchers focused on organizations soon looked to adapt and apply social science's depictions of fairness into their own work. Evolving from Adams’s and Leventhal’s conception of the “fairness of the ends achieved” (Greenberg, 1990, p. 400) and Thibaut and Walker and Leventhal’s conceptions of “fairness of the means used to achieve an ends” (Greenberg, 1990, p. 400) organizational justice was first viewed in terms of distributive and procedural perceptions. More specifically, in terms of the fairness of the outcomes received (i.e., distributive justice) and the process used to determine the distribution of said outcomes (i.e., procedural justice). Further research led to the identification of the importance of a “decision maker’s behavior during the enactment of procedures...,” (Bies & Shapiro, 1987, p. 201), as well as the availability of information for why a decision was made (Greenberg, 1993). Termed interpersonal and information justice respectively, these constructs, when combined with the notions of distributive and procedural justice form the four factor model of justice commonly cited today.

Like so many other organizations and scholars, sport has looked to apply various ideological and structural components of organizational justice to its own practices and studies. One area in which a plethora of research on justice has been produced is in the study of intercollegiate athletics. Beginning with the work of Hums and Chelladurai (1994a; 1994b) and expanding to the recent analysis of Mahony and colleagues (2010), scholarship looking at the application of organizational justice principles to various actors in the intercollegiate sport setting has been vast and multifaceted. Hums and Chelladurai (1994b) original findings on the perceptions of distributive justice in coaches and athletic administrators has expanded (see Mahony & Pastore, 1998; Mahony et. al, 2005; and Patrick et. al., 2008) and the actors in question have grown (see Mahony et. al. 2006; and Kim et. al., 2008). Furthermore the study of justice has grown additional subsets beyond merely distributive justice (see Jordan, Gillentien, & Hunt, 2004; and Whisenant, 2005).

Having established the presence of other forms of justice in sport and intercollegiate athletics, scholars have also moved to include various outcome variables within it there work. Accordingly, variables such as athlete enjoyment of the sport (Whisenant & Jordan, 2008), performances (Whisenant & Jordan, 2006; and Colquitt et. al., 2001) job satisfaction (Jordan et. al, 2007; Whisenant & Smucker, 2007; and Whisenant & Smucker, 2009), perceived organizational support (Jordan, Turner & Pack, 2009), affective commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (Andrew et. al., 2009) have all been explored in relation to justice. Such work has helped add understanding to the consequences of justice perceptions in sport.

While the scholarship noted here has led to an increase in the understanding of organizational justice and the affect organizational justice has on numerous variables in sport, Mahony, Hums, Andrew, and Dittmore (2010) suggested, “it is important to note that a considerable amount is still unknown about the relationship among... dimensions of
organizational justice and various outcome variables,” (p. 100). In response to such a declaration and in an attempt to continue the advancement in the understanding of organizational justice principles in sport, this work will look to examine the four factor model of organizational justice within an intercollegiate student-athletes population. Applying the theoretical principles of the Social Exchange Theory the work will further the field of study through an examination of the role organizational justice plays in student-athletes’ perceptions of trust in their coaches. In this manner the work will explore a foundation link between Homans (1961) and Blau’s (1963) theory of social exchange and the foundational bases of organizational justice as proposed by the Homans (1961), Adams (1963; 1965), Leventhal (1976; 1980), and Thibaut and Walker (1978).

Taking such theories into consideration, we hypothesized that student-athletes with greater perceptions of justice in their head coach will have higher levels of trust, and thus more quality exchange relationships with their head coaches than student-athletes with lower perceptions of justice.

To test our hypothesis an instrument was established to measure student-athletes perceptions of justice, and their overall trust of, and exchange with their head coaches. The instrument was then administered to all student-athletes participating in sports at a large Division 1 institution. Based on the fact that the instrument will be distributed to student-athletes in person with the support of the athletic department, we anticipate responses from more than 300 student-athletes representing a combination of over 20 team and individual sports.

Working under the ideological principles of the four factor model of justice, Colquitt’s (2001) Justice Measure Items were adapted and used to measure student-athletes’ perception of distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and information justice. Within the current study’s context modifications were made to each item as a means to better define the outcome gained by the individuals being surveyed.

The outcome variable trust was measured using Barnhill, Czekanski, and Turner’s (2010) instrument for measuring the level of trust student-athletes have in their coaches. Furthermore the LMX 7 drawn from Scandura and Graen (1984) was utilized to measure the exchange relationships between intercollegiate student-athletes and coaches. Changes were made to the wording of the LMX 7 as needed to allow questions to better fit the context of the studied dyad.

Upon collection of the data, regression analysis will be run to test the relationships between the four factors of justice and trust and in turn trust and exchange relationships. Additionally, variances in student-athletes perceptions will be examined in relation to gender, year in school, and sport. We anticipate that a strong relationship will be found between those student-athletes who deem their coach to be just in all four factors and those student-athletes who deem their coach trustworthy. Furthermore, we anticipate that the more trust a student-athlete has in their head coach the greater quality of the exchange relationship between the two actors. Finally it is believed that gender, year in school, and sport will have only minor influences on student-athletes perceptions. Following the analysis of data in relation to our hypotheses and anticipated results, practical implications will be discussed. More specifically we will look at the implications the findings have on the link between organization justice and social exchange in sport and offer suggestions to intercollegiate athletic coaches’ regarding their interactional behavior with student-athletes. Finally, potential future studies will be discussed.