Intercollegiate athletics is an understudied context of public relations research. Most studies in this field have associated public relations exclusively with media relations/sports information (e.g., Hardin & McClung, 2002; Stoldt, 2000). However, athletics directors (ADs) and head coaches are also high-profile spokespersons for their programs, departments and institutions. ADs have power over finances, structures, priorities, policies and management (e.g., Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004). Studies about ADs and public relations typically focus on their attitudes toward their sports information departments (e.g., Doherty, 1997; Swalls, 2004). These studies tend to focus on management roles and technical responsibilities of sports information directors, but do not extend to other types of employees (e.g., Stoldt, 2000; Stoldt, et al., 2001).

High-profile head coaches assume a similar position in relation to their own programs. Studies show that men's and women's basketball together bring in more revenues, media attention and event attendance than any other intercollegiate sport with male and female counterparts (e.g., Anderson, 2007; Fulks, 2010). The media coverage that coaches of major programs receive at the national level exposes them to a high degree of scrutiny. This exposure can work in coaches' favor when their teams are performing well, but can work against them if anything goes awry in their programs, such as NCAA violations or other misconduct (e.g., Katz, 2008; O’Neil, 2010; Voepel, 2010). However, there are few studies about public relations and coaching. Coaches are mentioned in some crisis case studies, for example, but are rarely the focus (e.g., Genshaft & Wheat, 2004).

The purpose of this paper is to examine how ADs of NCAA Division I institutions with major basketball programs understand public relations, in the context of expectations that they have of their head basketball coaches. A grounded theory approach and semi-structured interview format was used for this study (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Gurwitsch, 1974; McCracken, 1988). This format allowed for the researcher to start with a broad question, and follow the conversation (Munhall, 2007). Sample questions included, "What does public relations mean to you?" and "What does public relations mean to you in the context of your men’s and women’s basketball coaches?" Twelve participants, who were all NCAA Division I ADs from institutions with well-regarded basketball programs, agreed to be interviewed. The interview transcripts were analyzed using comparative analysis procedures, which require the researcher to look for "conceptual categories" within the text of each interview transcript, and then for confirmation of the conceptual categories between the texts of all interviews (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The data from the lived experiences of the participants was then used for "grounding" the theory that emerged from the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4).

Themes from the findings indicate that ADs understand public relations in regards to their basketball coaches' jobs as image, message and action/interaction, with publics who are internal, external, influential, and in relationship with athletics programs. The ADs also understand public relations as dealing with issues and challenges, most notably media relations, crisis and evaluation. The findings show that the participant ADs viewed public relations as an integral part of basketball coaches' jobs, but varied in their approach to how it should be integrated into their coaches' jobs. Some participants even made distinctions between men's and women's basketball coaches regarding public relations. The study concludes with suggestions for ADs, basketball coaches, and other athletics and media employees regarding public relations. It also addresses limitations of the current study, and future research ideas related to this study's findings.