Athletic administrators at the college level are faced with many administrative issues. One issue that has been around for many years relates to the disproportionate grouping of college athletes into selected college majors. This phenomenon is called "academic clustering." Athletic directors and directors of academic advisement for athletes should be knowledgeable and aware of academic clustering of athletes and why it occurs. The importance of understanding clustering was noted in a 2011 Associated Press story. The article stated that "university presidents discussed the impact that clustering has on the academic experience for student-athletes" at a Summit hosted by NCAA President Mark Emmert.

The topic of academic clustering of athletes has been studied for over 25 years. The first published study of academic clustering appeared in 1987 (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987). Since that time, at least 20 additional studies and/or conference research presentations on academic clustering have appeared in the literature. Academic clustering of athletes occurs when a certain percentage of college athletes end up in selected college majors at a disproportionate percentage when compared to other students.

The primary method of studying clustering has been to examine athletic program press guides in order to determine how many athletes from the same sport are majoring in selected academic programs. An athlete’s college major is generally listed under his or her biography or player profile in the press guide. Studies have consistently shown that academic clustering continues to exist on college campuses for college athletes (Liebengood, 2008; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Finley & Fountain, 2010; McCormick, 2010; Otto, 2010; Schneider, Ross, & Fisher, 2010; Calhoun, 2012).

Some would argue that attempts to comply with Academic Progress Rates (APR) instituted by the NCAA are only exacerbating the practice of academic clustering of athletes (Fountain & Finley, 2011). Combining APR rates with other factors such as the pressure on coaches to win, the possibility of greater TV revenues for winning programs, recent athletic program scandals, and the athletic arms race that exists at certain levels of college athletes has led to closer scrutiny of academic clustering in college athletics.

To date, no studies have examined the perceptions of academic advisors for athletes about the phenomenon of academic clustering of athletes. Academic advisors are the individuals in the front lines of advisement for athletes and they would likely have a first-hand view and knowledge of academic clustering and how it plays out in a college academic environment.

The purpose of this study was to survey and examine the perceptions of academic advisors for college athletes on a number of topics related to academic clustering. The methodology included a pilot survey instrument that was developed and based on a review of the literature as well as feedback from a jury of experts comprised of academic advisors for athletes and other sport researchers. Once the survey instrument was developed and refined -- it was sent to a randomly selected group of college academic advisors for athletes to collect pilot study data. Additional refinements to the survey instrument were made. The principal investigator of this study also has an extensive background in college athletics as a former coach and athletic director who has experience supervising academic advisors for athletes. Finally, the survey instrument was sent to a randomly selected group of Division I and Division I-AA college academic advisors for athletes.

The first part of the survey examined demographic information related to the academic advisor respondents. The second part of the survey examined the perceptions of college academic advisors for athletes on the nature and
scope of academic clustering for athletes. (For example, does it exist? How widespread is it?) The third and final part of the survey looked at the causes of academic clustering in college athletics.

Questions pertaining to demographic information were asked in the first part of the survey. A total of 97 college academic advisors for athletes responded to the online survey. The age of the survey respondents ranged from 24 to 65 years with an average age of 36 years. On average, the respondents had 7 years academic advisement experience and they devote over 60% of their job duties to academic advisement of athletes. All but four of the respondents held a master's degree or higher. 66% of the respondents were female and most of the academic advisors in this study (74%) came from public institutions. 55.7% of the academic advisors indicated that their academic advising for athletes unit is located in the athletic department. When asked to identify their ethnicity, 64% of the respondents selected Caucasian. All the schools participating in the study were classified as either I-A (FBS) or I-AA (FCS). The average size of the undergraduate student enrollment at the respondent schools was listed as 18,255.

In terms of academic advisor perceptions of the existence of clustering, 84% of the advisors surveyed stated that they feel clustering does exist and it happens most often at the NCAA Division I level among male scholarship athletes in revenue sports such as basketball and football. 66% of the academic advisors stated that they have personally observed academic clustering of athletes taking place. The respondents did not feel that academic clustering existed more frequently among minority than non-minority athletes. 46% of the academic advisor respondents felt that implementing Academic Progress Rates has made clustering more prevalent. When clustering does occur, respondents noted that it is more often associated with academic majors, class times, and professors. 75% of the respondents pointed out that academic advisors for athletes are pressured to keep athletes eligible and 55% felt that the primary person responsible for placing pressure on the academic advisor is the coach.

When asked to rate the reasons or causes of academic clustering in college athletics, some of the top rated reasons included the attractiveness of the major, transfer issues and course availability, attempting to obtain and maintain eligibility, recruiting athletes with marginal academic skills, athletes pursuing a path of least resistance, and athletes attempting to comply with Academic Progress Rates requirements.