The purpose of this study was to explore role strain among a population of women’s collegiate rugby student-athletes. The stress experienced by these student-athletes for this research was defined through the insight and application of Goode’s (1960) theory of role strain. This research considered role strain to have occurred when student-athletes reported that they were unable to meet all of what was expected of them competing in women’s rugby at the intercollegiate level. This research is important as a means for better understanding why some female collegiate student-athletes experience discord between what they believe is expected of them and what they are actually capable of doing, especially in terms of socially and psychologically navigating which aspects of their role are most important (Goode, 1960).

Extant literature related to role strain in sport and physical activity deals with issues of strain felt by professionals, such as physical educators who are also athletic trainers (Pitney, Stuart, & Parker, 2008), full time collegiate certified athletic trainers that get burned out (Capel, 1986; Hendrix, Acevedo, & Hebert, 2000; Henning & Weidner, 2008), and high school and youth sport coaches struggling with multiple role demands (McCallister, Blinde, & Kolenbrander, 200; Sage, 1987). Research involving role strain among athletes has focused on the strain experienced by athletes versus non-athletes (Stein & Hoffman, 1980), as well as the strain felt by athletes of specific genders (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1992; Dietz & Breen, 1975), and the strain reported by athletes who are non-starters on their sport teams (Adachi & Bredemier, 1981).

Research specific to the experience of women’s collegiate rugby student-athletes is scant. In fact, only one such study can be located at this time. In this study, Buchmiller, Carlson, and Stokowski (2013) explored how rugby student-athletes perceive themselves and how they feel others perceive them regarding their gender and sport participation. Their data revealed that female collegiate rugby players view themselves almost entirely as students, and not so much as athletes, who perceive that others see them as more masculine due to their participation in a sport that might not be perceived as socially acceptable for females (Buchmiller et al., 2013). These findings lend support to other sport management scholarship that has noted that female athletes might feel negatively stereotyped because of their participation in a combative sport (Cunningham, 2010).

Within these existing research studies on role strain in sport and physical activity there is a general absence of recent literature, as evidenced by the fact that most of the studies cited above took place more than a decade ago. Additionally, there is a noticeable gap in empirical data related to the role strain experienced by athletes competing in emerging sports. Thus, the aim of this research was not only to illuminate the levels and types of role strain felt by female collegiate rugby student-athletes, but also to do so using qualitative data collection and analysis procedures that advance the limited recent body of literature through in-depth interviews that allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of the athletes’ environment (Merrian, 2009).

The research questions addressed in this study included: a) How do women’s collegiate rugby players view themselves, including their roles as a student-athlete?; b) What are the sources of strain experienced by rugby student-athletes, and how do they manage such stressors?; and c) What do these student-athletes believe is the student body’s and athletic department’s perception of rugby and those that participate in this sport?

Data were collected via audio recorded in-depth, semi-structured interviews that took place early in fall semester 2014. A convenient sample population (N= 10) of women’s collegiate rugby student-athletes at a mid-sized, Midwestern university participated in the study. Five open-ended questions such as, “how has rugby participation influenced your academic performance?” and “in your opinion, where does rugby fit in with the overall athletic department?” were asked of each respondent. After each response to an open-ended question, the rugby student-athletes were given follow up questions based on their responses, usually related to providing more detail or giving a
specific example to support their expressed attitude or opinion. Additionally, student-athletes were also asked to complete a short questionnaire with questions pertaining to individual demographics.

Once interview notes and audio transcriptions were completed, initial data analysis for this study included the use of graphical summary tables that are standard in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). This type of data analysis was aimed at discovering patterns among respondents, relative to frequent types of responses to individual open-ended questions (Bernard, 2011). Finally, after placing the most common themes from respondents into table format, a data “tree” was created in order to more thoroughly illustrate the interconnectedness of thematic responses (Wolcott, 2001) that were illuminated among the research participants. For example, every respondent noted that she had never played rugby before college, but she had been a highly competitive basketball, softball, or track athlete (every participant played at the high school varsity level for at least two of these sports). This type of common response led to a deeper understanding about the athletic background and identity of each one of these collegiate athletes and their experience being recruited to play rugby even though they had never done so before. Thus, one of the roots of this data “tree” included being a highly competitive athlete that was chosen from a limited number of select other established (non-emerging) sports. Therefore, these student-athletes all noted some role strain related to not knowing the rules or strategy of rugby, yet they individually possessed tremendous athleticism originating in other sport experiences. This “root” of the women’s student-athlete rugby experience “tree” indicated at least one of the sources of rugby player role strain, while offering insight into how these female athletes deal with such strain (i.e., in order to mollify some of this felt role strain due to inexperience in the sport, players rely on skill, athleticism, and confidence gained from being successful in other sports).

The general results of this study indicated that women’s collegiate rugby student-athletes experience role strain related to the following: inexperience in the sport, social identity norms involving stereotypical masculine sport, challenges balancing academics/athletics, frequent injuries of a certain nature, and feeling unimportant in the eyes of everyone else at the university. These results are an important means for better understanding the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of female student-athletes that participate in an emerging NCAA sport. Additionally, the insights from this research can be used by coaches, athletic administrators, and academic counselors in helping female rugby student-athletes navigate the challenging experience of participating in a non-popular sport that is not only rarely publicized, but also finds its players injured, struggling with identity stress and academic pressure due to the masculine perception of the sport and the extensive weekend travel to find other collegiate rugby opponents. Future research recommendations will be discussed during the presentation, including the applicability and limits of study results to other institutions that offer women’s collegiate rugby.