While the relatively new technology of social media is almost universally used by university athletic departments, a review of academic literature and popular commentary suggests deployment of resources, and analysis of their effectiveness, is still very much in its preliminary stages. Given the financial pressures university athletic departments face (Hesel & Perko, 2010; Sander, 2011; Sparvero & Warner, 2013); it could be assumed that they have made effective use of these new promotional tools. That is not the case, according to Kevin DeShazo, founder and CEO of social media strategy company Fieldhouse Media:

“We recently started offering social media strategy services to athletic departments. Of the 20 or so departments I've spoken with over the past two months about strategy, less than 5% have a documented social media marketing strategy… I had a conversation with one who said, ‘We have all of these fans and followers, but now what? We don't know what to do next/how to engage with them.’ It’s a common theme.” (DeShazo, personal communication May 29, 2014)

Research suggests many industries and organizational sectors are wrestling with the concept of how to use social media to do more than collect “followers.” Naylor, Lamberton and West (2012) posit that mere virtual presence by brands on social media can translate into better brand evaluations and purchase intentions from consumers. Studies of electronic word-of-mouth advertising (eWOM) indicate many social media posts contain references to products or services (Lee et al. 2009; Yan, 2011). Yet, according to social media research, efforts to do more than garner social media mentions have been difficult.

A 2012 survey of American companies’ social media marketing efforts found that 57% of them collected social media metrics — quantitative tabulations of social media engagement — no deeper than counting their number of Facebook friends, Twitter followers, and their time spent on social pages, and qualitatively analyzing their user-generated content (Funk, 2013). That type of analysis is also commonplace in the academic field of program evaluation. Evaluators of food safety programs (James, Albrecht, Litchfield & Weishaar, 2013), those analyzing the effectiveness of social media use in sales forces (Groza, Peterson, Sullivan & Krishnan, 2012), and the utility of smoking-cessation programs (Mahoney, et al., 2014) do little more than collect descriptive information and asking utility-based questions of practitioners in creating their reports.

Within the field of university sport research, social media policies of university athletic departments have been studied (Sanderson, 2011), content analyses have been conducted of athletic department pages (Wallace, 2011), and the relationship student-athletes and their followers share on Twitter has been analyzed (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). There has been little academic study on the effectiveness of social media campaigns. While many university athletic marketing directors feel they are effective at designing and evaluating social media marketing campaigns (Martin, Miller, Elsisi, Bowers, & Hall, 2011), Popp and McEvoy (2014) found that university athletic departments have so far been able to leverage their investment in social media campaigns into financial return.

Seeking to explore this gap in the academic literature, the purpose of this study is to provide a template for athletic departments utilizing social media. We explore this utilization through a case study of the social media efforts of a single, mid-sized American college athletic department, which we have called Striver University (SU). SU is a mid-sized public university with just over 25,000 students, and an athletic budget of approximately $36 million per year (Minium, 2013). With that budget, SU competes in almost 20 sports in Division I of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, or NCAA.
The funds to support Striver University's intercollegiate athletic efforts are acquired from a combination of ticket sales, corporate sponsorships, athletic giving, with the largest proportion (more than 70 percent) derived from mandatory student fees (Teel, 2014). Given the myriad financial pressures facing all university athletic departments, there is a steady search for new, affordable tools to provide publicity and marketing, notably social media.

Striver University, like peer institutions, maintains social media sites to provide exposure to its athletes and coaches, and assist with marketing and public relations efforts. Its staff maintains official SU Athletics Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest accounts. The sites are used to promote attendance at SU sporting events, inform publics about the efforts of SU varsity athletes on and off the field of play, seek sponsorships from individuals and companies that wish to tie their brand to SU Athletics, and help foster a sense of community about the school’s intercollegiate teams. In addition to the central sites, each of Strivers’s sports has both a Twitter feed and a Facebook page.

By analyzing content on the 40 social media pages run by SU Athletics in comparison to peer institutions, by interviewing practitioners in the department, and by conducting a focus group with Striver fans, the authors propose a list of best practices that could be generalizable to assist similar athletic departments in their use of social media.

Based on the emerging consensus in the academic and popular literature, this applied study proposes a template for the university to follow, known by the acronym S-T-E-A-M. By STEALING ideas that work from other institutions, by better branding Strivers’ TEAMS as a collective entity, by ENGAGING more effectively with fans and followers, by making better use of ANALYTICS to determine what posts are garnering the best response, and by relying on MAVENS or super-fans of the university to spread the message on social media, SU could better utilize this new technology as a communications and marketing tool.

Because of the absence of academic literature on the effectiveness of social media campaigns from a communication and marketing standpoint, this study fills a needed gap by evaluating a university athletic department social media campaign against emerging best practices, seeking to provide useful guidance that can be implemented at comparable institutions.