Primarily due to an increasing number of troubling ethical issues within college athletics, Burton and Peachey (2013) posited that intercollegiate athletic leadership is failing and is in dire need of a change of focus. Advances in leadership research within the sport domain have been made as much of the leadership research pertaining to intercollegiate athletic administrators has evolved from focusing on the wants and needs of the leader and the organization to those of the follower (Burton & Peachey, 2009; Burton & Peachey, 2013). A leadership style that has become increasingly popular in management literature is servant leadership, so named due to a focus on serving others, particularly one’s followers (Mayer, 2010). First introduced in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf, servant leadership research has experienced an increase of late, paralleling the interest in positive psychology and positive organizational research (Rodriguez-Carvajal, Moreno-Jimenez, de Rivas-Hermosilla, Alvarez-Bejarano, & Isabel Sanz Vergel, 2010). However, despite the increased interest and research, servant leadership knowledge is still in its nascent stages. (Liden, Panaccio, Meuser, Hu, & Wayne, 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011)

Despite the renewed interest in servant leadership there is no consensus on a definition of the construct (Parris & Peachey, 2013). For example, Greenleaf’s original research identified ten characteristics of the servant leader (van Dierendonck, 2011), Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008) operationalized servant leadership with seven dimensions and Barbuto, Gottfredson, and Searle (2014) measured five dimensions. However, there is some agreement in the literature about servant leader commonalities; servant leadership has been shown to be empirically distinct from other types of leadership particularly transformational leadership, authentic leadership, leader-member exchange, and other leadership models (Beck, 2014; Hunter et al, 2013; Liden et al, 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011). The unifying feature of all of the servant leader research remains the leader’s focus on the needs of the follower. Liden et al (2014) found that focusing on the needs of followers led to a number of positive follower outcomes. In particular, trust, empowerment, autonomous motivation, increasing follower pro-social moral identity, and increased core self-evaluation led to enhanced creativity, proactive problem solving, enhanced self-esteem, self-efficacy, and organizational citizenship behaviors (that contribute to ethical behavior and organizational effectiveness).

To date, there has been scant research into the antecedents of servant leadership Beck 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011). Barbuto, Gottfredson, and Searle (2014) investigated emotional intelligence as a potential antecedent but found no evidence for any relation to any of the follower’s perceptions of servant leader behaviors. Beck (2014), in a mixed methods study, posited that servant leadership comes from a sense of purpose and an intrinsic motivation stemming from prior life experiences and van Dierendonck (2011) opined that the desire to both lead and serve created the motivation for servant leadership. In their exploration of servant leader antecedents, Hunter et al (2013) discovered that agreeableness (generosity and a greater willingness) was positively associated with servant leadership while extraversion was negatively related.

In attempting to learn more about the potential antecedents of servant leadership perhaps positive psychology and in particular, well-being theory (Seligman, 2011) provides some fertile ground. Well-being is comprised of five elements: positive emotion, engagement, (positive) relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA; Seligman, 2011). Each element contributes to well-being, each is pursued independently and for its intrinsic value, and each can be defined and measured independently (Seligman, 2011). Foundational to well-being theory is the use of personal virtues and strengths. Through intensive research of philosophical and religious teachings, positive psychology researchers, led by Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson, identified six virtues that have been valued through the ages and cross-culturally (Niemiec, 2013). These six virtues (i.e., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) spawned 24 pathways, or character strengths, to these virtues. Seligman (2011) posited that implementation of one’s specific character strengths leads to higher levels of positive emotion, meaning, accomplishment, and positive relationships. The goal of positive psychology is to extend all of the recognized and useful tools of psychology, largely used for curative measures, to be employed to explore and understand well-being. Essential to that goal is the use of recognized science; Peterson (2013) claimed it is a new way to use old tools and of
checking theories against evidence so it is not confused with self-help. Through the employment of empirical science to test and apply various interventions, well-being can be increased and meet the superordinate goal to increase the amount of flourishing individually and collectively around the world (Seligman, 2011). Most relevant to this research is the importance of connectedness with others that provide the foundation for the PERMA elements. When asked to provide a three-word summary of positive psychology, Peterson (2013) provided a response that serves as the vision for many well-being researchers and practitioners when he simply yet eloquently stated, “other people matter” (p. 249).

As this is a developing body of research, the connection to well-being and servant leadership needs to be investigated as the concept that other people matter is also foundational to servant leadership. Parris and Peachey (2013) stated that servant leadership is more a way of life than a leadership style and emanates not only from a motivation to serve but one’s self-construction or who they are. At the core of servant leadership is the need and willingness to serve and that comes intrinsically to the servant leader (Beck, 2014). Further, the importance of increased well-being through virtues and character strengths requires further study as Patterson (2003) stated that servant leadership is also about virtues.

In this study, college athletic leaders will be measured, via an online survey, for their levels of PERMA using the PERMA-Profiler which measures flourishing in terms of 5 domains: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Butler & Kern, 2016). Servant leadership will also be measured via the same online survey using (modified for leaders) Servant Leadership Survey (SLS: van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Canonical correlation analysis will be used to analyze both sets of data simultaneously to examine the relationships of the numerous dimensions of each construct. Leaders will be asked to identify 4-6 followers who will be asked to respond to the SLS measuring their perception of servant leadership characteristics. Additional canonical correlation analysis will be performed to analyze leader and follower data as well as a series of regression analyses to analyze the relationship between well-being and servant leadership.