Globally there is growing trend affording athletes legitimate representation within their sports’ governing bodies including involvement in policy development and decision making (Bogdan, Thibault, & Kihl, 2014, in press; Thibault, Kihl, & Babiak, 2010). For example, athletes serve as voting members on executive councils and/ or are members of athletes’ commissions/councils within the International Olympic Committee, many international sport federations (e.g., International Association of Athletics Federations), and national Olympic committees (e.g., United States Olympic Committee Athletes Advisory Council). In the context of college sport in the United States, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the Division I five Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Conferences have shifted their approach to increase student-athlete representation in response to athletes’ demands for a legitimate voice (i.e., voting rights) in decisions impacting them. Previously, athlete power was limited and the shift has resulted in improved representation at the national (e.g., Division I Board of Directors) (Hosick, 2014) and the conference governance level (e.g., Pacific 12, 2015). The NCAA’s recent changes in governance providing student-athletes legitimate representation is laudable, however, it is still unclear how student-athletes are using their legitimate voice or what impact they have had in NCAA policy and decision making. Therefore, it is important to understand the role of student-athletes in this new NCAA governance structure.

Extending the work on legitimate athlete representation in international sport contexts (Thibault, et al., 2010), the purpose of this study is to understand the role of student-athletes in NCAA governance. Deliberative democratic theory (Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1996) and the principle of representation (Birch, 1971; Parkinson, 2006) are the theoretical lens that frame our work. Deliberative democracy is a participatory approach to governance that emphasizes participation and collective decision making and policy development by involving stakeholders affected by a decision (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Deliberation is an essential activity for seeking policy solutions (Habermas, 1996). Individuals (and their representatives) engage in a deliberative process of problem framing, identifying practical considerations in understanding policy issues, and selecting decisions solutions (Innes & Booher, 2003) that are justified based on mutually acceptable reasons (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Representation in participatory approaches to governance (i.e., what process is used to determine selection, and what stakeholders are represented) is determined by the purpose of the deliberative body (Parkinson, 2006). Therefore, the following research questions were posed to address our study’s purpose: 1) what types of athlete representation exists within NCAA governance? 2) what is the level of athlete participation in NCAA governance structures (i.e., boards of directors, executive committees, and other committees)? and 3) what impact have athletes had on NCAA decisions and/or policies?

Data collection for this study is ongoing. Multiple forms of data are being collected including website information, organizational documents, and approximately 20-25 qualitative semi-structured interviews with student-athletes, institutional personnel (e.g., administrators, staff and faculty), and NCAA administrators. Data will be analyzed using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to generate broad categories and themes associated with participations’ perceptions of athlete representation in NCAA governance. Properties and dimensions will also be identified during open coding to further define concepts. Axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) will be used to pinpoint relationship between categories and to connect concepts to existing literature and theoretical constructs (Boyatzis, 1998).

Initial findings show that the type of athlete representation is legitimate at the NCAA governance level; however, barring one major conference, athletes are not afforded voting rights at conference and institutional level. Despite the legitimate athlete representation at the NCAA governance level, athletes are appointed to the different NCAA committees. Thibault et al. (2010) point out the limitations of appointed representation as it “lacks a legitimizing bond where the stakeholders being represented lack the authority to hold the representatives accountable” (p. 293).
The findings also show athletes’ roles in NCAA governance is to solicit a range of student-athlete viewpoints and represent them in discussions about NCAA policies and decisions. Athlete representation is focused on influencing areas of student-athlete welfare, promoting a positive student-athlete image, creating an inclusive student-athlete environment, and engagement at the national, conference, and institutional levels. Priorities identified include student-athlete time demands, financial literacy, and mental health. While athletes believe they have a representative voice, some participants perceive their role to be tempered by the perceived status (i.e., revenue/non-revenue) of their sport. Initially, it appears that student-athletes have an active legitimate role in NCAA governance and are involved in policies and decisions that impact them. However at the conference and institutional levels, student-athletes do not experience the same level of legitimacy in governance.

Findings will be further presented and discussed in relation to the literature. Theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of this study will also be explained in greater detail, in particular, the level of athlete representation and the impact of athlete participation in NCAA governance.