College campuses are microcosms of society and following trends in the larger U.S. population, a sense of community is diminishing on campuses while social isolation is increasing (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Olds & Schwartz, 2010). The increasing mental health issues in society at large and on college campuses are also of great concern (Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010). Although sense of community is vital for students and can likely aid in addressing some concerns related to mental health, building and maintaining community has been challenging. Fostering a sense of community is especially important for student-athletes, as they have been shown to face greater athletic and academic stress due to their sport participation (e.g., Beauchemin, 2014; Lu et al., 2012). Like other units on university campuses (e.g., campus recreation, Greek organizations, etc.) the out-of-class experiences that athletic departments provide can help integrate and establish social ties, which have been linked to student retention and persistence (Elkins et al., 2011; Thomas, 2000; Townley et al., 2013). Given that sport continues to be recognized as one of the few arenas for fostering a sense of community (Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2016) and the increasing scrutiny surrounding college sport, understanding the outcomes of experiencing a sense of community for athletes on campuses is a timely and worthwhile endeavor. In an effort to address how sport managers can better serve athletes in this regard, it is important to firmly establish the outcomes associated with sense of community for athletes.

Based on literature, we hypothesized that (1) sense of community will be positively associated with sport participation benefits, (2) sense of community will be positively associated with university outcomes, and (3) sport participation benefits will be positively related to university outcomes. An online survey consisted of the 21-item Sense of Community in Sport Scale (SCS; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013), five items regarding university outcomes (i.e., attachment to the university, enjoyment at the university, would recommend the university, plan to give alumni contributions, satisfaction with the university), five items of sport participation benefits (i.e., participation in sport has directly contributed to a) commitment to obtaining degree, b) improved educational experience, c) improved grades, d) enhanced interest in volunteering, e) improved health), demographics, and three open-ended questions related to their sport experience. The survey was widely distributed to college athletes in a NCAA Division I Conference. A total of 776 completed surveys were returned, which represented approximately 14.5% of total student-athletes in the conference. Most respondents were on the athletic scholarship (79%) and were female (64%). The number of respondents by academic class status was equally distributed.

To examine the relationships of three hypothesized latent constructs in this study, we employed a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) fits of three latent constructs showed the appropriateness of structural model analysis as the next step. In the final Sense of Community-Sport-University Outcome SEM model, several well established indices and criteria were used to assess the goodness of fit of a model. The model displayed acceptable levels of fit with RMSEA of 0.059, CFI of 0.914 TLI of 0.906, and SRMR of 0.059. In the model, all paths had significant factor loadings. Results suggested that both university outcome and sports benefits were significantly predicted by Sense of Community ( = .408, p < .001; = .785, p < .001, respectively) and also, sport benefits exert significant positive effect on university outcome ( = .347, p < .001). Overall, the quantitative results illustrate the importance of fostering a sense of community to achieve various university and sport benefits.

To gain a better understanding of the environment for student-athletes, three open-ended questions were then analyzed using open coding. Of the 560 responses to “How has your student-athlete experience impacted your current overall well-being and health (e.g., physical health, mental health, emotional health)?” 75.3% clearly indicated that their student-athlete experience positively improved their overall well-being and/or health. However, 18.9% of
the responses suggested a negative impact on their mental health. Of these responses 11.8% specifically mentioned, “stress.” Interestingly when asked, “If you could change anything about your sport experience, what would it be?” the majority of text responses (40.7%) indicated that they wouldn’t change anything. Of the remaining responses, 12.5% indicated they would change something regarding coaching they received, 12.2% mentioned they would change the amount of “time” dedicated to their sport, and 7.6% mentioned more community involvement/engagement. Lastly, when asked “How, if at all, has your participation in sport helped prepare you for your future career?” the majority of responses were related to time management (30.8%), teamwork (24.3%), work ethic (21.9%), and leadership (14%).

The results align with the previous literature (e.g., Lu et al., 2012, Warner et al., 2017; Weight et al., 2014) and lend further insight into the current outcomes for student-athletes. Specifically, the quantitative results suggest that higher education institutions desiring to improve university outcomes of student-athletes should consider more intentional efforts to facilitate a greater sense of community while the open-ended results point to potential areas of improvement. This study not only provides current insight into how Division I student-athletes are socially developing, but may also stimulate practical changes regarding how this can be better accomplished. Given the empirical evidence found in this study, ensuring healthier community for student-athletes should be a top priority considering all the outcomes that are impacted by an improved sense of community. Additional implications for university administrators and ideas for future research using this model will also be discussed.