A recent shift has occurred in collegiate athletic departments toward a holistic care paradigm for student-athletes with the increased visibility of suicide, depression, and anxiety among collegiate student-athletes. This paradigm considers not only the physical well-being, but also the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of athletes (Barkley, Taliaferro, Baker, & Garcia, 2018; Huffman, 2014). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has recommended strategies to address mental health issues of student-athletes (Thompson & Sherman, 2007), and even has released a best-practices guide for member institutions (Klenck, 2014). However, there is limited research examining if and how member institutions are implementing such programs. Furthermore, the majority of academic research on mental health services for college student-athletes has focused on the sport psychologists and performance consultants (Connole et al., 2014; Hayden, Kornspan, Bruback, & Parent, 2013; Wrisberg, Loberg, Simpon, Withycrombe, & Reed, 2010). There is confusion in the athletic world surrounding the clinical role of psychologists, and ethical issues can occur when the two services are combined (Carr & Davidson, 2014). Student-athletes may also turn to other athletic personnel not qualified to offer mental health services, such as athletic trainers, academic counselors and chaplains, when there is a mental health need (Bird, Chow, Lily, & Freeman, 2018; Waller, Huffman, & Hardin, 2016). Harmful effects to clients, even if unintentional, occur when psychotherapy is administered without proper skills and training (Hardy et al., 2017). It is thus becoming increasingly important to explore ways to ensure competent mental health treatment for student-athletes.

Social workers, trained and licensed specifically in clinical counseling, have become an avenue for providing mental health services to college student-athletes. Currently, there are 14 licensed social workers in Division I athletic departments. While there are limited academic discussions of social work in sport (Gill, 2008; Miller & Buttell, 2018), no study has examined what exactly social workers do within athletic departments, and what their role is in addressing the mental health of student-athletes. Consequently, there is limited visibility of social work within the purview of athletic department administrators. This qualitative analysis seeks to fill this gap in research by interviewing licensed social workers within collegiate athletic department to determine their roles and responsibilities. This will provide a foundation to determine the effectiveness of social workers being introduced into the collegiate athletic environment.

The current study is comprised of qualitative interviews with licensed social workers employed in NCAA Division I athletic departments. Interviews focused on themes of career path, role within the athletic department, and competence for clinical work with student-athletes. The synthesized results of the interviews provide a better understanding of the function of social workers in collegiate athletics, as well as the benefits of having a social worker on staff. There are important implications both practically and theoretically. Practically, the study brings light to an emerging profession within college athletics for athletic administrators to consider for hiring purposes. Theoretically, the study adds to the growing literature on the holistic care of athletes, specifically on who is providing such care, and how they are doing it.