The ability to lead a successful athletic department in North America requires plenty of skills, given the complexity and breadth of business foci these departments encompass (Wong, 2014). Athletic Directors (ADs) are tasked with managing the interests of numerous stakeholder groups including athletes, coaches, administrators, consumers, corporate partners, and government agencies. To manage these relatively complex business units, the role of AD requires individuals with a unique set of skills and experience. Here, Barney (1991) states that a “firm’s resources include all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, info, knowledge, etc. controlled by a firm that enable the firm to conceive of and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness” (p. 101). In the context of the current investigation, the AD is seen as one of the athletic department’s greatest assets. Given that “college athletics is more businesslike, and the individuals hired as ADs have the experience, skills and/or education to manage today’s athletic departments” (Wong, 2014, p. 32), understanding necessary competencies to not only manage but properly lead, is crucial.

According to Welty Peachey et al. (2015), various studies have focused on leadership. Sport leadership specifically, has involved investigating styles, behaviours and their relationship to the context of both on-the-field and the off-the-field conventional management of the organization itself. Upon completion of the first review of sport specific literature on leadership in the on-the-field context of sport performance by Chelladurai (1990), the majority of research involved the study of coaching behaviours. While this research was valuable, Chelladurai (1990) encouraged scholars to explore other dynamics that could have an influence in measuring leadership and expand on what had been found.

The purpose of this research was to understand the competencies required of Ontario University Athletics (OUA) ADs to best perform in their critical leadership role at university athletic departments in Canada. Most of the existing literature on intercollegiate athletics focuses on the NCAA; thus, research on the competencies needed by ADs within the U SPORTS context represents an opportunity to expand knowledge in the post-secondary athletics environment. Specifically, the current investigation aims to answer one essential overarching question: What are the relevant competencies an OUA AD must possess to perform effectively in their position?

Using 15 semi-structured interviews, the ADs in the current investigation noted several competencies – skills, behaviours, and experiences – that, when integrated, contribute to effective management in the OUA. These competencies formed the basis for the proposed framework. The pillars of leadership and multi-tasking are the foundational supports in this study. Further, participants not only stressed the need for specific leadership competencies, but also highlighted the critical aspect of how they lead in the current OUA environment. Competencies in four main areas and subsequent sub-areas are identified as key pillars to successfully managing an athletic department in the OUA. In line with what scholars have previously discussed, competency-based analysis provided an exceptional opportunity to update an understanding of the requirements of a specific role (AD), within a specific organizational context in order to be effective.