DEFINING SUCCESS: STUDENT-ATHLETE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

With numbers over half a million, student-athletes are a significant, yet unique, population on college campuses. They encounter unique experiences and face unique challenges, not the least of which is navigating the competing roles of student and athlete. Navigating these roles within the high-stakes and competitive world of collegiate athletics is the context in which student-athletes must develop a definition of success.

Based on the theoretical framework of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors of establishing identity and developing purpose, the purpose of this qualitative, descriptive study was to determine how student-athletes define success from their personal perspective and move toward a more nuanced understanding of how the development of their student-athlete identity and perspective on career transition informed their definition of success. Seventeen former student-athletes were interviewed utilizing a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. Themes related to the student-athletes' definitions of success, how the definitions changed over time, and how their definitions of success impacted their career transition were identified from the responses.

The results of the study suggest student-athletes participate in an iterative process of developing and refining their definition of success as they progress through various experiences and developmental stages. The process is largely reactive and highlighted by an overwhelming lack of intentional decision-making. Recommendations are made for how institutions can more fully support student-athletes through a proactive process of defining success.

This dissertation is dedicated to H, A, and E.
You are ‘mazing and I love you!

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Thank you, to each of the participants, for taking the time to share your story and perspective. My hope is your collective insight will make a difference in the experience of future student-athletes as they embark on their journey of discovering success.

And finally, to my family, thank you for sticking this out. I know we thought this day would never come and "daddy's paper" would never be finished – but WE did it!

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

As an administrator in higher education, I work directly with students on a daily basis and have for over 20 years. Each meeting and interaction is unique and provides insight into the students' world. Several years ago, I met with a first-year student and asked him why he was at college and what he hoped to accomplish. He told me he would like to participate in research projects, take as many science-related classes as possible, and then go to physical therapy school immediately after graduation, with the goal of becoming a physical therapist. During the same week, I sat down with a heavily recruited first-year gymnast who insisted on taking courses that would help him be more successful in the gym and ultimately lead to a spot on the Olympic team. When I asked him what types of classes he meant, the only example he could provide was he wanted to take a psychology class that would help him focus during his events. A few weeks later, I met with a third-year hockey player. As we discussed his classes for the next semester, I asked him what he wanted to do after college. He proceeded to explain to me he hoped to play professional hockey immediately after graduation. After a minute or two of describing what being a hockey player in the National Hockey League (NHL) might be like, he said, "But after a few years, I really want to go to medical school." I knew he had been taking some science courses, but I had no idea this was the path he hoped to follow. The rest of our conversation revolved around organic chemistry, the MCAT, and medical school admissions.

During these conversations, I did not directly ask any of the students about their personal definition of success. However, I quickly came to my own conclusions about what

success meant to them. I determined the first student defined success according to his academic performance and scholarly work. The second student defined success based solely on his athletic performance and, ultimately, his ability to participate in the Olympics. Academics were simply an afterthought. I then made an initial determination the hockey player defined success based on whether or not he was able to play in the NHL. While I may have been right or wrong about the first two students, I was definitely wrong about the third.

College student success is an important topic in higher education literature and in the day-to-day operation of colleges and universities. Student success has implications for all facets of the institution including departments, administrators, faculty, staff, and, students (Tinto, 1993). Regarding institutions and departments, retention and graduation rates are oftentimes used as benchmarks to evaluate the overall effectiveness of academic instruction and student services. Administrators, faculty, and staff are held responsible for retention and graduation rates. They also look to the success of students to highlight their achievements and validate their work on behalf of the students. As Tinto (2012) notes, student success does not happen by accident or chance. Instead, "[I]t is the result of intentional, structured, and proactive actions and policies directed toward the success of all students" (p. 117).

Student success, and specifically student-athlete success, has implications for college and university athletic departments. These implications are particularly salient regarding academic success and meeting eligibility criteria. Both the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA - college athletics' governing body) and regional conferences, such as the Big Ten, continue to increase the academic criteria for student-athletes, placing

pressure directly on athletic directors, coaches, and academic support staff to keep players progressing toward their degree and eligible for competition. These criteria affect individual student-athletes and entire teams. The NCAA calculates the Academic Progress Rate (APR) of each team in order to determine eligibility for championship participation (NCAA, 2014a). This attempt at reform followed the now two-decade old initiation of the minimum SAT score (820) required for eligibility and the 40-60-80 rule related to progress toward degree (NCAA, 2015). These programs were instituted in an attempt to raise retention, academic performance, and graduation rates, particularly in revenue generating sports. In short, failure in the classroom, individually or as a team, could lead to ineligibility on the athletic field. With the increasing degree of accountability and visibility, a greater number of resources, both human and financial, are being spent on the academic and athletic success of student-athletes – particularly at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions (Desrochers, 2013).

In recent years, the NCAA implemented name, image, and likeness (NIL) opportunities for student-athletes, which allows them to profit financially from their personal brand. This practice, hitherto prohibited by their amateur status and NCAA regulations, has provided a new challenge for the NCAA and its member institutions to navigate. NIL will also likely have ramifications on the real and perceived perspectives of success for individuals, teams, and institutions.

For individual students, including student-athletes, success has educational, financial, vocational, emotional, and familial implications impacted by, but not solely defined by, persistence and graduation (Tinto, 2012). For example, failure can lead to short-term consequences such as probation, dismissal, or the loss of scholarship moneys.

Failure can also have long-term effects such as hindering a student's ability to enter their chosen vocation or impacting them emotionally in a negative way (Bartels & Herman, 2011).

The worlds of student success and intercollegiate athletics collide within the high-stakes context of being a student-athlete. As students and athletes, they must engage their academic and athletic experiences. Throughout this process they will develop their own ideas about success or adopt the views of others around them. The unique experiences and challenges, including identity development and career transition issues, student-athletes encounter, provide the context in which this research is conducted. The current study focuses on this unique population of students and addresses the definition of success from their perspective.

Statement of the Problem

The following sections develop the context for the research problem within the current higher education landscape and provide a framework for the research questions. First, I provide a brief overview of student success as defined in higher education research literature, and second, I identify student-athletes as a unique population on college and university campuses facing challenges related to their identity development and career transition. These topics are more fully developed in the literature review.

Defining College Student Success

When referring to student success in the context of higher education, the most common definition is related specifically to academic performance and achievement (Calfree, 2007). In fact, the ACT (2007) went so far as to state, "by definition, success in

college means fulfilling academic requirements: a student earns a degree by taking and passing courses" (p. 1).

While passing courses and earning a degree are certainly a large part of academic success, others have moved beyond these strict confines to define student success based on other factors such as persistence and retention (Jones-White et al., 2010; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) specifically contends integration into the college community is essential to persistence and, therefore, success. Other researchers have expanded Tinto's theory of persistence to include such indicators of success as academic fit (DeLong et al., 2007; Radcliffe et al., 2009); background, demographics, and incoming academic ability (Ishitani, 2003; Ishitani & Snider, 2006; Perkhounkova et al., 2006; Tinto, 1998); social fit (Matthews, 1996; Tinto, 1998); and sense of belonging (Gaston-Gayles, et al., 2016). These concepts add some breadth to the definition of persistence and success because they are not strictly tied to academics.

For student-athletes, success on the athletic field is a major priority. This prioritization can be true both as an individual and as a member of a team. The research shows student-athletes tend to be highly motivated (Gaston-Gayles, 2004), which can contribute to their desire for success. While success is typically associated with winning, the fact student-athletes can differ in their perspective of what actually constitutes success on the athletic field is likely. And since the vast majority of the research tends to focus on one of two definitions of success – either academic success or persistence to graduation – the perspective of the student has been missed. This missed perspective is important to consider because it can provide insight into what student-athletes believe they need to do or be in order to achieve success. Their insight can subsequently be used to inform and

shape the services provided to student-athletes. In order to address the topic of college student success related to student-athletes, highlighting the unique nature of the student-athlete role is important. The characteristics setting student-athletes apart from other students are discussed in the following sections.

Student-Athlete Population

The relationship between higher education and intercollegiate athletics is a dynamic unique to American colleges and universities (Chu, 1989). Athletics are a significant part of campus culture and have a positive influence by providing a unifying experience for the student body and community (Thelin, 2004), and in many instances providing student-athletes with educational opportunities they may not otherwise have (Duderstadt, 2003). There are also clear challenges accompanying intercollegiate athletics, such as the difficulty of controlling programs and maintaining NCAA compliance and eligibility standards (Gurney, Lopiano, & Zimbalist, 2017). Further, intercollegiate athletics, particularly at schools whose teams participate in the Bowl Championship Series (BCS), are considered big business (Desrochers, 2013; Duderstadt, 2003; Grant, 1979), adding a complicated layer to the challenges already existing. With athletic department budgets in the tens of millions of dollars, programs, coaches, and athletes are under tremendous pressure to provide a successful product by winning games on the field or court.

Although student-athletes share certain characteristics and experiences with non-athlete students, there are a number of dynamics that set them apart and serve to frame their unique experiences. Some of these differences include: the potentially conflicting worlds (i.e., academics and athletics) in which they must operate (Duderstadt, 2003; Hamilton 2005; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 2000); the significant time commitment

required by their sport (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Maloney & McCormick 1992; Storey, Hewitt, & Ogrodniczuk, 2022; Wolverton, 2008); the unique and separate culture created by their time together as a team (Eiche, Sedlacek, & Adams-Gaston, 1997; Sedlacek, 2004; Sowa & Gressard, 1983) and the influence of the coach (Adler & Adler, 1991; Raunig & Coggins, 2018); the prejudice and discrimination they must endure from other students (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1989; Simons et al., 2007) and from faculty (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1995); and their classification as nontraditional students (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Sedlacek, 2004).

Immersion in all of these specific experiences has an influence on two developmental processes further contributing to the uniqueness of student-athletes – athletic identity development (Brewer et al., 1993; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Melendez, 2010; Murphy et al., 1996; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005) and career transition/retirement development (Huang et al., 2016; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sandstedt et al., 2004). These processes are foundational to how student-athletes develop their perceptions and definition of success and are used to frame the discussion surrounding their definition.

To summarize, multiple entities, including institutions, researchers, athletic organizations, and conferences have defined success. These definitions are based on the traditional definition of student success in the literature and have not taken into consideration the unique nature of the student-athlete experience, as described above. While these traditional definitions may include aspects of success espoused by student-athletes, there is a distinct possibility student-athletes operate under a unique definition of success throughout their collegiate career. The literature does not currently address the

perspective of the student-athlete in relation to success and the factors contributing to their definition. More information is needed to identify definitions and key aspects of success as defined by the student-athletes.

Purpose of the Study

In the scenarios presented at the beginning of this chapter, I presumed to know what success meant to each of these students. Researchers and college administrators, similarly, tend to place success in one of two categories: grades and/or persistence to graduation. The purpose of this study was to define success from the student-athletes' perspective and gain a better understanding of how their student-athlete identity and perspective on career transition informed this definition. The goal of this research was to present qualitative data that will help universities and athletic personnel understand student success from the student-athlete's perspective and result in improvements for the student-athlete experience.

Given the pressure to succeed and the unique situation in which student-athletes find themselves (e.g., competing role of student and athlete; demanding schedules; treatment by faculty and other students; and other factors discussed in Chapter 2), as well as the pressures placed on universities to help them succeed, this group of students warrants further consideration.

Research Questions

To determine how student-athletes define success and the factors to which they attribute their current and future success, the following questions were used to guide the research:

1. How do student-athletes define success?

2. How has the student-athlete's identity influenced their definition of success?
3. How has the student-athlete's definition of success informed their career transition?

Significance of the Study

Student-athletes are a significant group to study for several reasons. First, they are a very large population group in higher education. In 1981-1982, when participation statistics were first tracked on an annual basis, there were only 244,000 student-athletes participating in women's and men's sports across all three divisions of the NCAA. In the 2021-2022 academic year, participation increased to a record number of over 528,000 student-athletes. At the nearly 350 Division I schools, there are approximately 6,600 athletic teams, and more than 192,000 student-athletes (NCAA, 2022). Second, student-athletes are a significant population group because they are some of the most visible students on campus, particularly in the revenue-generating sports like men's basketball and football. And third, millions of dollars are spent on intercollegiate sports every year. The average athletic department budget at Football Bowl Subdivision schools was $65.9 million in 2016-2017 (NCAA, 2017a). Millions more are generated through athletics – particularly in men's football (Jessop, 2014). This trend continues to rise with the increased revenue from lucrative television contracts and the subsequent realignment of athletic conferences. Some of this revenue is invested back into the athletic department to support programming related specifically to academic success. Some of the money is invested into practice facilities and athletic equipment in order to promote athletic success. These investments are crucial because academic success can have a direct influence on athletic success by determining player eligibility. All of the money, time, and effort spent

on ensuring the success of this large, highly visible student-athlete population raises a fundamental question – do student-athletes see themselves as successful if and when they are successful by the athletic program's standards? By asking student-athletes directly how they define success and framing it within their student-athlete identity and career transition, I provide insight into their experiences, goals, and needs. Therefore, this study is significant for three reasons.

First, this study fills a significant gap in the literature by providing a different lens with which to view current student-athlete development theory and practice. Studies have been conducted regarding academic success, athletic identity, and campus engagement of student-athletes, most of which are quantitative in nature. In addition, there is a substantial amount of literature related to student-athletes, student success, and the theory surrounding these topics. However, no current research identifies how the student-athletes define success – particularly related to their student-athlete identity and career transition – via a qualitative methodology. Further, Ronkainen, Kavoura, and Ryba (2016) identify the need for more research examining the personal and individual meanings student-athletes attribute to their experiences.

Second, this study is intended to encourage the use of a holistic developmental perspective by those who work directly with student-athletes. The study engaged student affairs professionals, and athletic and academic administrators, in considering how student-athletes personally define success and influence the ways in which they relate to and motivate student-athletes. If student-athletes are able to articulate their ideas regarding success and the specific factors influencing their definition, the programming through which they are advised and served can be adapted to address their particular

needs and goals. Specifically, this study served to inform student affairs personnel and athletic administration regarding the structure and delivery methods of programs and services available to student-athletes and consider the student-athlete perspective. This change of framework encouraged questions to be considered, such as, are current academic success programs effective in helping student-athletes achieve success as the student-athlete defines it or as the school defines it for them? And are all of the services offered necessary or could they be reimagined to more effectively serve the student-athletes and move them toward their goals? Questions like these can foster a more holistic student-athlete service model.

And third, the study provided students with an opportunity for cognitive and personal development since many student-athletes have not consciously given thought or actively engaged in a discussion as to how they define success. Student-athletes may operate on a daily basis according to an internal, subconscious understanding of what it means to be successful, but have not purposively considered their own philosophy. As student-athletes participated in this study, it was beneficial for them to intentionally consider how they define success and how those definitions may have changed over time. This study also provided a voice for the student-athletes to express their perspective and to be heard regarding their experiences as a student-athlete and the potential challenges they have faced.

This chapter outlined the statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, and the resulting research questions. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the relevant literature, including the identification of the theoretical framework around which the research is situated.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between intercollegiate athletics and higher education is a dynamic unique to American colleges and universities (Chu, 1989; Thelin, 2004) causing controversy regarding the positive and negative influence on the student-athletes and the institutions. Bridging the gap between athletics and academics is becoming increasingly difficult for colleges and universities (Sharp & Sheilley, 2008). Authors such as Duderstadt (2003), Gurney et al. (2017), Sperber (2000), Shulman and Bowen (2001), and Zimbalist (1999) have addressed the dilemma of bridging this gap and acknowledged the difficulty of merging the world of big-time college athletics with the concept of educational primacy.

On the positive side, intercollegiate athletics provides student-athletes with an educational opportunity they might not otherwise have (Duderstadt, 2000). Collegiate athletics produce greater levels of self-confidence, opportunities for social interactions (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988), development of leadership skills, and stronger institutional attachment (Melendez, 2008) for student-athletes. Other positive influences of intercollegiate athletics include its influence on campus culture and students' campus involvement, institutional success, and the local community (Chu, 1989). These are the reasons, Chu argues, the relationship between higher education and sports should be perpetuated – their impact on campus spirit and the larger culture outside of the university walls. Collegiate sports act as a system of symbols used to bring a community together and make sense of an environment made up of diverse individuals and groups. Chu says, "through sport, especially the seemingly innocent intercollegiate variant, we see what we can be and what the American dream says we are capable of becoming" (p. 182).

Student-athletes also face challenges contributing to a more negative view of intercollegiate athletics. These challenges include increased demands on their time, missed classes due to travel and competition, lower grade point averages and graduation rates, and increased scrutiny of misconduct off the field. Further, the complex relationship with policies related to name, image, and likeness and professional agents continues to increase.

While there is ongoing discussion and research results related to the positive and negative influences of intercollegiate athletics, there is substantial research suggesting student-athletes are a unique population and face unique challenges. In the following review of the literature, I examined the specific factors and experiences making student-athletes unique. Athletic identity, career development and maturity, and athletic retirement are given special attention since they provide a context in which student-athletes must decide what success means to them. I also present the theoretical framework in which the research questions are situated. The framework is based on two of Chickering's vectors – establishing identity and developing purpose. Finally, I provide an overview of services typically offered by student-athlete success programs in NCAA Division I athletic departments. Chapter 1 established definitions of success associated with student-athletes – sufficient grades, persistence to graduation, and success on the field. Throughout the literature review, these themes will surface as they relate to the various topics covered.

Student-Athletes as a Unique Population

During the 2021-2022 academic year, a staggering 528,000 student-athletes participated in sporting events sponsored by the NCAA (NCAA, 2022). Each of these student-athletes have unique experiences and face unique challenges that are different

from other students and require them to perform a delicate balancing act between what can be dueling commitments involving many facets of their lives: athletic, academic, social, physical, relational, and vocational.

There are significant factors contributing to the overall uniqueness of the student-athlete population. First and foremost, student-athletes are required to navigate the worlds of academics and athletics and are often caught in the dilemma of trying to be both a student and an athlete (Hamilton, 2005; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013; O'Neil, Amorose, & Pierce, 2021). "Indeed, the case could be made that [first-year] athletes have such different experiences from mainstream college [first-year students] that the entire context of their college experience is qualitatively different" (Eiche, Sedlacek, & Adams-Gaston, 1997b). Additionally, the identity of student-athletes as students and athletes may oftentimes come into conflict with each other (Adler & Adler, 1987; O'Neil, Amorose, & Pierce, 2021). Balancing these two roles is necessary to successfully meet the simultaneous demands of athletics and academics (Aquilina, 2013).

Due to their dual role, the time commitment required of being both a student and an athlete has a significant impact on the student-athlete experience (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; O'Neil, Amorose, & Pierce, 2021) and can ultimately have an influence on their academics, resulting in underperformance in the classroom (Comeaux, 2010) and moderate levels of conflict between their athletic and academic goals (Healy et al., 2016). A study conducted by Maloney and McCormick (1992) found when student-athletes were in-season, particularly in men's basketball and football, there was a drop in average GPAs due to the significant time demands. When obtaining a measure of first-year student athletes' expectations, attitudes, and needs related to their college

experience, compared to a random sample of non-athlete first-year students, Eiche, Sedlacek, and Adams-Gaston (1997a) discovered time demands were most frequently cited by athletes as a barrier to adjusting to college. This discovery continues to be true more than two decades later. When surveyed in 2018, NCAA coaches identified time commitment and demands on time as the leading theme for what they want faculty to be aware of regarding their student-athletes (Raunig & Coggins, 2018).

While time commitments are a contributing factor to academic underperformance, student-athletes demonstrate other characteristics can have a positive impact on their academic performance. Bailey and Bhattacharyya (2017) utilized the Academic Progress Rate (APR) to compare the academic performance of teams who performed at a high level athletically (top eight teams in each sport) with teams who performed at a lower level (bottom eight teams in each sport). Results of the study indicated high performing athletic teams also perform better academically than their less athletically successful counterparts. Likely characteristics contributing to this difference in performance are internal and include motivation, work-ethic, commitment, determination, and confidence (Giacobbi, 2002).

Also resulting from the significant time spent in their sport, student-athletes tend to have their own unique social experiences and, consequently, develop a distinct culture that further distinguishes them from other students and groups on campus (Sowa & Gressard, 1983). Studies show student-athletes spend much of their social time with teammates and often have difficulty engaging in social relationships outside of the athletic context (Bell, 2009; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Further, these unique experiences and limited relationships can produce like-minded goals and values among the student-athletes (Sedlacek, 2004). A

primary contributor to the experiences forming this culture is the coach. Adler and Adler (1991) identified the attitude of the coach as a significant influence on the student-athletes' perception of academics as important and, ultimately, whether or not they were academically successful.

The significance of the time commitment required of student-athletes cannot be disputed; however, there is conflicting evidence regarding the experiences of student-athletes produced over the last three decades. The following studies highlight the conflicting evidence. Astin (1984) and Ryan (1989) determined being a student athlete is a positive predictor of overall satisfaction. Astin (1984) showed four areas of satisfaction particularly high in student-athletes: (a) the institution's academic reputation, (b) the intellectual environment, (c) student friendships, and (d) the institutional administration. This satisfaction may be due to the fact athletes spend much more time on campus than traditional student and, therefore, have increased contact and interaction with the institution and administration. Ryan's study (1989) revealed four different positive outcomes of the student athlete experience: (a) overall satisfaction with college, (b) motivation to complete a bachelor's degree, (c) an increase in interpersonal skills, and (d) an increase in leadership ability. Pascarella and Smart's (1991) study, on the other hand, was inconclusive, finding no evidence for correlation among overall satisfaction, persistence, and participation in athletics. Simons and colleagues (1999) found participation on a collegiate athletic team, coupled with the time commitment and fatigue experienced, can detract from the student-athlete's satisfaction and educational experience. More recent research continues to show varying results, particularly related to high-profile student-athletes, although the overall experience of student-athletes seems to

be positive. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) found student-athletes have an overall positive perspective on their college experience and value commitment to sports based on the skills they learn and the values they acquire, even though they admit to missing out on curricular and co-curricular aspects of college life. Rettig and Hu (2016) determined student-athletes' overall campus engagement is similar to non-athlete students. However, they assert high-profile student-athletes have a lower level of achievement related to educational outcomes than their non-athlete counterparts, suggesting significant challenges within the culture of revenue-generating sports. "Lower overall satisfaction and grades for high-profile student-athletes further supports the notion that high-profile student-athletes are a distinct subpopulation of college students" (p. 444). Based in the psychological framework of commitment theory, O'Neil and colleagues (2021) explored the commitment level of student athletes to academics and sports with the intention of identifying the extent to which the two are compatible or in conflict. They identified four unique profiles providing evidence "for both compatibility and conflict within student-athletes' dual commitment to school and sport" (p. 7). Interestingly, they did not find a group following an "educational pathway," in which the student-athletes were strongly committed to academics and weakly committed to sports.

In spite of this variation in the research related to the student-athlete experience, one example of a benefit of being involved in intercollegiate athletics is the opportunity for involvement in multicultural interactions (Hirko, 2009). In fact, athletic teams are an ideal place for these interactions to occur. But while teams might be a natural location for these types of interactions, most of the opportunities happen informally and without specific

direction from coaches or administrators. This lack of intentionality can limit the effectiveness of an otherwise ideal situation.

With the commercialization of college sports and the creation of celebrity players (Duderstadt, 2003), the pressure on athletes, particularly in revenue-generating sports, to perform has intensified and the time commitment required to succeed has increased significantly. Because of their high-profile position, athletes also tend to be some of the most recognizable students on campus. As a result, the off-the-field activity of student athletes is more closely scrutinized than for other students. Student-athletes are constantly evaluated, criticized, and praised by the media, student body, administration, and public.

Stereotypes

The negative side of this increased attention is student-athletes are often the target, both individually and collectively, of negative stereotyping (Engstrom et al., 1995; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1989; Haslerig, 2017; Lawrence, 2009; Simons et al., 2007). Negative stereotypes, particularly when they are internalized, can lead to reduced effort and investment (Massey & Owens, 2014; Riciputi & Erdal, 2017). Although student-athletes tend to be very popular on the athletic field, they face significant resistance and opposition from others in the campus environment, even beyond the "dumb jock" stereotype (Simons et al., 2007). Since student-athletes tend to be stigmatized in higher education and student-athlete identity has a positive correlation to stereotype threat (Feltz et al., 2013), their social identity is devalued in a very specific context. Simons and colleagues (2007) conducted a study containing data related to the treatment and perceptions of student athletes by faculty and non-athlete students. While some of the responses to the survey

indicated positive comments and perceptions related to student athletes, the majority were considered negative and reinforcing of the "dumb jock" stereotype. Hawley and colleagues (2014) found non-athlete students judge student-athletes more harshly for perceived negative behaviors, than do student-athletes. Some studies indicate the experience of being negatively stereotyped can be significantly increased for student-athletes of Color (Martin et al., 2010; Oseguara, 2010; Stone et al., 2012).

Studies using the Situational Attitude Scale (SAS) show residence hall students (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1989) demonstrate a negative bias toward student-athletes, particularly related to academic performance (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991). For example, students are more concerned when a student-athlete receives an "A" in class, than when a non-athlete student does. This particular study was conducted with first-year students, and the results may be influenced by the fact first-year students are more prone to stereotypical thinking.

Faculty are also guilty of negatively stereotyping student-athletes (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Baucom & Lantz, 2001). According to the study conducted by Engstrom and her colleagues (1995), faculty perception of male athletes (in both revenue-generating and nonrevenue-generating sports) is negative and prejudiced, specifically related to academic competence. For example, faculty displayed surprise and suspicion when an athlete received an "A" grade. Additionally, results of a survey of over 2,000 faculty members at NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision schools were shared at the Faculty Summit on Intercollegiate Athletics, held by the Knight Commission in 2007. Results indicated 61% of those surveyed thought student-athletes are motivated to earn their

degree (Knight Commission, 2007), which seems to infer 39% do not think student-athletes are academically motivated.

Factors further influencing faculty perspective on intercollegiate athletics are: faculty feel disconnected regarding athletics; faculty are largely displeased with their governance roles in athletics; a large percentage of faculty are interested in governance issues related to athletics, but rate it second to last in a list of 13 important issues; and many facutly lack sufficient knowledge of athletics governance issues which would prohibit them from participating in reform initiatives (Lawrence, 2009).

Regardless of the source or intentionality, this negative perspective toward athletics and stereotype toward student-athletes can be internalized and become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). Student-athletes respond to this type of treatment in a variety of ways, including: trying to hide their identity as an athlete; working harder to overcome the stereotype; or giving in to the stereotype and acting accordingly (Simons et al., 2007).

Noncognitive Variables

There is a considerable amount of research on the development of student-athletes, particularly as it relates to noncognitive development. Rather than simply relying on traditional cognitive measures (verbal and quantitative reasoning), noncognitive factors relate to "adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions" (Sedlacek, 2004, p. 7). The following section highlights some of this research.

Sowa and Gressard (1983) conducted a study based on Chickering's vectors and found there was no difference in the overall achievement of athletes and non-athletes, although some developmental tasks proved more difficult for those involved in athletics.

Student-athletes showed more difficulty developing an individual purpose, which could be a result of their "coachability" and orientation to team mentality. According to Eiche, Sedlacek, and Adams-Gaston (1997b), the difficulty in developing purpose has a negative impact on a student-athlete's ability to develop well-defined educational goals and vocational plans, as compared to a non-athlete student. This difficulty can also produce a lack of satisfaction in the educational experience and limit their exploration of skills beyond athletics. In addition to the difficulty in defining educational and vocational goals, student-athletes reported difficulty getting good grades, were less concerned with paying for school, and identified a lack of time as a barrier to adjustment to college life (Eiche et al., 1997b).

Student-athletes scored high on realistic self-appraisal when tested on non-cognitive variables (Eiche, Sedlacek, & Adams-Gaston, 1997c). Eiche and associates (1997c) proposed the high realistic self-appraisal may be because they are constantly evaluating and assessing their physical performance, and conversely, having it evaluated by others. This practice could translate into accurate self-assessment in other areas of life, including academics. Eiche and associates (1997b; 1997c) also found student-athletes reported greater leadership scores and scored higher on leadership experience. Two interesting reasons for this result were proposed. On the one hand, student-athletes may have more opportunities to participate in meaningful leadership as a result of their participation in sports. On the other hand, students with an affinity for leadership may naturally be drawn to athletics and the challenges of leadership available in this arena. Regardless of the reason, the difficulty student-athletes face is they may over-commit in their leadership roles.

Rather than focus on the more common predictors of academic performance of student athletes such as high school GPA, standardized test scores, and parental education, Gaston Gayles (2004) examined athletic and academic motivation as a noncognitive variable and looked at its influence in the prediction of academic performance. This study found ACT score, ethnicity, and academic motivation were significant predictors of academic performance and contradicts earlier literature (Sellers, 1992) suggesting academic motivation is unrelated to academic performance. Another finding that does not concur with earlier studies (Simons et al., 1999) is athletic motivation and the desire to pursue a career in professional sports does not detract from academic success. A recent study by Hart and colleagues (2024) indicates, "Athletes pusuing a STEM major may show higher academic motivation than athletes pursing non-STEM majors" (p. 196). While they recognize further study is required, Hart and colleagues (2024) also suggest, "Encouraging student-athlete learning autonomy via education/intervention could improve intrinsic motivation in sport and classes" (p. 196).

Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) also argue student-athletes' academic success can be much more accurately predicted by noncognitive variables than by standardized tests. Results of their study show first semester grades for student-athletes are much more highly correlated with noncognitive variables than SAT scores The noncognitive variables with the highest correlation to first semester grades were self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, availability of a support person, and community.

Noncognitive variables appropriately identify student-athletes as nontraditional students by both predicting their abilities (Sedlacek, 2004) and by examining their unique culture, experiences that are different from other students, difficulty relating to the larger

campus society, and the less stable context in which they generally operate (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992).

Comparing more traditional predictors of success with noncognitive variables, Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) studied student-athletes in revenue and nonrevenue sports at the University of Maryland. First semester grades were not correlated with SAT math and verbal scores. Conversely, first semester grades were significantly correlated with noncognitive factors including: strong support person, self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, and community (Sedlacek, 2004). All of these variables are consistent with nontraditional student groups. Eiche and associates (1997c) also "noted that using noncognitive variables taps experiential and contextual intelligence which is important in working with and making decisions concerning nontraditional students" (p. 5). The one other identifier that placed student-athletes in the nontraditional student category was the prejudicial attitudes and discrimination against them (Sedlacek, 2004).

Student-Athlete Experience

In addition to the factors already discussed, the overall student-athlete experience is substantially different from the non-athlete student. The following section highlights research and findings related to this experience and its influence on the student-athletes.

There are varying opinions on whether or not the experiences of student-athletes are somehow deficient due to their participation in athletics, but scholars have suggested the experience of student-athletes can be enhanced when both their personal and academic development are nurtured (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Melendez, 2008). Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) surveyed over 900 student-athletes regarding their experiences as college students and found student-athletes are generally positive about their college experience.

The majority of student-athletes surveyed believed participation in athletics contributed to a rich multicultural experience and to the development of particular skills and traits that would pay off upon entering the work force after college. These student-athletes also indicated a strong sense of support throughout their time in college.

These findings are supported by a recent Gallup (2020) survey of almost 5,000 individuals who participated as student-athletes between 1975 and 2020. Compared to college graduates who did not participate as student-athletes (N=~69,000), the student-athletes were more likely to have had a mentor who encouraged the pursuit of their goals (27% vs 23%) and were also more likely to feel their instructors cared about them as people (35% vs 28%).

Although the student-athletes in the Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) survey reported an overall positive experience, they consistently felt there were trade-offs and missed opportunities as a result of their participation in athletics, including not majoring in what they really wanted, not taking specific courses in which they were interested, not spending as much time on academics as they would like, and not spending sufficient time with non-athlete students. Further, Foster and Huml (2017) noted student-athletes with more prominent athletic identities had a higher likelihood of selecting a major with less academic rigor. And while these trade-offs are significant, the student-athletes surveyed overwhelmingly concluded the trade-offs were acceptable under the circumstances.

How actively students engage in the college experience is crucial to the overall experience and is no different for student-athletes. Stone and Strange (1989) found first-year student-athletes are less likely to be involved on campus than nonathletes. Umbach et al. (2006) utilized the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement and

determined student-athletes are as involved in educationally purposeful activities as their peers; report more support (academic and social) than non-athletes; and report greater gains, particularly in practical competence and personal/social development than non-athletes. Brown and colleagues (2015) cited time management as a challenge to balancing dual roles and disengagement from academics and class as a coping strategy.

Gaston-Gayles and Hu (2009a) utilized the Basic Academic Skills Study, specifically the Progress in College and Social and Group Experiences subscales, designed by the NCAA, to answer research questions related to student athletes' background characteristics influence on engagement in educationally purposeful activities; the extent to which these activities influence their cognitive and affective outcomes; and whether or not their engagement is influcenced by the profile (high or low) of their particular sport. Four areas of student engagement (closely related to what are generally considered educationally purposeful activities) were studied including "(a) interaction with faculty, (b) interaction with students other than teammates, (c) participation in student groups, organiztions, and other service activies, (d) and participation in academic related activies" (p. 320). Of these four measures, the study found student-athletes most frequently interacted with students other than their teammates, counter to the prevelant criticism related to a strong athletic sub-culture on college campuses. However, male and high-profile athletes interact less compared to female and low-profile athletes. The background of students was not significantly influential, while increased engagement in educationally purposeful activities has a positive and significant impact. The type of sport (high or low profile) does influence student engagement on cognitive outcomes.

In 1985, Adler and Adler conducted a study examining the relationship between academic performance and athletic participation in male student-athletes. They found while most student-athletes began college with idealistic attitudes and expectations about their academic experiences, most eventually transitioned to a state of "pragmatic detachment, " as well as "diminished interest and effort" (p. 248) as a result of several experiential factors. These factors include: the demands of athletics on their time, social isolation, and the gap (perceived or real) between their academic ability and the university's requirements. Meyer (1990) conducted a similar study with female collegiate athletes regarding their academic expectations, athletic experiences, attitudes of self and others, and classroom and academic experiences. She compared the results with the Adler Study (1985) and the comparison indicated the women generally had high expectations and positive attitudes that persisted, and even increased, throughout their college career, while the men in the Adler Study started positive, but quickly lost interest and became less idealistic. Meyer (1990) suggested one of the major reasons for this difference was the different athletic subcultures that exist for both men and women. While men and women participate and operate in an athletic subculture, the female subculture seems to be more pro-intellectual and academically encouraging.

More recent research is inconclusive regarding this potential difference between male and female student-athletes. Some studies suggest females identify more strongly with their academic identity and, therefore, prioritize academic pursuits more so than their male counterparts (Fuches et al., 2016; Sturm et al., 2011; Tekavc, Wylleman, & Erpic, 2015). Other studies did not reveal these gender-based differences (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Lupo et al., 2017; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014).

There has been inconsistency in the research related to determining the impact of intercollegiate athletics on standardized measures of learning and cognitive development. Pascarella and colleagues (1995) used a large sample (over 2,400) to address this inconsistency. The authors used longitudinal performance (over the first year) in reading comprehension, mathematics, and critical thinking as indicators of the influence of athletics rather than grades/GPA, since there are so many additional factors related to GPA. They also controlled for pre-college differences. The results indicated there were "significant consequences for the general cognitive development of both men and women during the first year of college" (p. 380). Male football and basketball players actually showed net losses in the cognitive dimensions related to mathematics and reading comprehension, while non-athlete students and non-revenue student-athletes showed modest gains. Female student-athletes showed less development in reading comprehension than non-athlete students, but both groups were similar in mathematics and critical thinking. The authors suggest the choice of academic majors (applied/pre-professional areas) placing less of an emphasis on reading and mathematics may play a role in this disparity. This effect may also be intrinsic to basketball and football since the outcomes were consistent independent of institutional type (NCAA Division I, II, and III). The authors' concern is these disadvantages are easily seen in the first year and may be cumulative over four years.

Having established the student-athlete population is, in fact, unique, the following sections focus on additional developmental challenges faced by student-athletes. These challenges include identity and career development.

Athletic Identity Development

During late adolescence, individuals typically engage in the process of establishing their personal identity (Chickering, 1969). This process requires "an active exploration of possible roles and behaviors, followed by a commitment to the occupational and ideological options that are most consistent with an individual's values, needs, interests, and skills" (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). Identity development, consequently, is essential to nurturing the development of college students (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

Student-athletes encounter this process too. However, they face the added layer of athletic identity development. Athletic identity is defined as the extent to which an individual identifies with the role of athlete, with an emphasis on membership in a group and social relatedness (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993); that is, the strength and exclusivity with which the athlete role is associated with identity development (Good et al., 1993).

The research has established student-athletes have to deal with competing, and potentially conflicting, identities (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Healy, Ntoumanis, and Duda (2016) suggest the academic and athletic identities necessarily exist in competition and commitment to both roles is very difficult to maintain. Yopyk and Prentice (2005), in their study on identity salience and stereotype threat of student-athletes highlight this idea of competing identities. "By virtue of their identity as college students, they are assumed to be high in academic ability and motivation. By virtue of their identity as athletes, they are assumed to be somewhat lacking in these qualities" (p. 329). Lu and colleagues (2018), in their study on identity salience and conflict, not only found identity conflict in student-athletes is relatively high, but it is likely increasing over time. However, Lu and colleagues

(2018) also found a positive correlation between performance and identity salience, specifically "academic performance was a positive and significant predictor of student identity salience, and that athletic performance predicted athlete identity salience" (p. 234).

Over half of the student-athletes surveyed by Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) indicated they viewed themselves more as athletes than as students. Antshel and colleagues (2016) found student-athletes identified more with their athletic role than with their academic role, but only slightly so. Factors contributing to this identity include the time and effort devoted to athletics, the financial support offered by athletics, interactions with individuals or groups who also view them as athletes rather than students, and interactions with other athletes. Further, student-athletes who compete at an elite level tend to report a higher connection with the athletic aspect of their identity, versus those who compete at a sub-elite level (Lupo et al., 2017; van Rens, Ashley, & Steele, 2019; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014).

As the level of athletic competition increases (i.e., high school to college and college to professional), so does the time commitment and skill level required to remain competitive. Student-athletes who dedicate the amount of time necessary have made sports a central and prominent part of their lives. "Subsequently, for most elite athletes, the time and effort dedicated to sport comprises a significant portion, or the majority of their social and personal identity" (Harrison et al., 2011, p. 94). Additionally, research has shown many student-athletes describe having to make a difficult choice between their academic and athletic responsibilities. The result is they have to sacrifice one for the other.

This sacrifice not only promotes identity conflict, but also increases the level of stress student-athletes feel (Lu et al., 2018).

The opportunities for student-athletes to participate in the exploration of possible roles experienced by non-athlete students may be limited due to the commitment level required for success in their sport (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990) and the young age at which athletic identity is often developed (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). This lack of opportunity can, consequently, have an impact on their personal and career identity development (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). Identity foreclosure occurs when commitment is made to a role without engaging in the exploratory process (Petitpas, 1978). Researchers suggest the dynamics of the student-athlete role along with a very restrictive athletic program, could engender identity foreclosure (Chartrand & Lent, 1987) and result in underdeveloped educational and career planning (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Sowa & Gressard, 1983). Additionally, athletic identity is a contributing factor to the student-athlete's career decision-making process and is positively associated with identity foreclosure (Good et al., 1993).

Murphy and colleagues (1996) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between identity foreclosure and athletic identiy, and career maturity (i.e., the extent to which career planning has taken place). The measures used were the Foreclosure subscale of the Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status (for identity foreclosure), the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (for athletic identity), and the Attitude scale of the Career Maturity Inventory (for career maturity). The results showed both identity foreclosure and athletic identity were inversely related to career maturity. The highest risk for impeded career developement is for male varsity athletes who participate in revenue-generating

sports. Those who identify most strongly with the role of athlete are much less likely to explore the possibilities of non-sport related career options.

Research shows seniors in high school who are athletes are more highly developed in desirable social and personal traits, while seniors in college who are non-athletes tend to be more advanced in these areas (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988). The authors suggest college athletes experience identity foreclosure, as discussed above, which limits exploratory behavior related to occupation and/or identity.

High levels of athletic identity are associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Positive outcomes of athletic identity include enhanced athletic performance, increased body image, and positive psychological outcomes during training exercises (Horton & Mack, 2000). According to English and Kruger (2020), student-athletes score significantly higher on academic tests when they display higher academic self-concept.

Conversely, a student-athlete's athletic identity is negatively related to multiple factors, including academic and personal-emotional adjustment (Melendez, 2009), academic mastery, academic goals, and even ethical sporting conduct (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). Additional negative outcomes include academic disengagement (Adler & Adler, 1985), sacrifice of other means of identity development and self-fulfillment (Webb et al., 1998), decreased career maturity attitudes and increased identity foreclosure (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010), increased identity depression, and difficulty disengaging from participation in athletics, particularly when an injury is involved (Brewer, Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Tshube & Feltz, 2015). Similarly, one of the major psychosocial differences between student-athletes and non-athletes is

student-athletes indicate a lower level of purpose development (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009b).

Racial identity is linked to both athletic identity and identity foreclosure. Harrison and his colleagues (2011) made a strong case for a relationship between athletic identity development and racial identity development in Black males. Their study found Black student-athletes playing Division I football reported much higher levels of athletic identity than White student-athletes. Bimper (2014) found the athletic identity of African-American student-athletes negatively predicted academic outcomes. Other differences between White and Black student-athletes, related to identity, have been cited – Black student-athletes felt others viewed them primarily, and sometimes only, as athletes; and felt sports were more central to their lives than did their White counterparts (Harrison et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 1996). Fuller and colleagues (2017) analyzed the impact of racial and athletic identity on educational performance and found student-athletes who identified strongly with their racial group had higher levels of academic self-concept.

A large body of research indicates identity development, particularly for African American males, begins at a young age and is influenced and nurtured by their community (Beamon, 2008; Beamon & Bell, 2002; Beamon & Bell 2006; Eitle & Eitle, 2002; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Smith, 2007), making this particular group highly susceptible to identity foreclosure at an early age.

Athletic Career Development, Maturity, and Retirement

According to the NCAA (2017) and others (Coakley, 2009), only 1 to 2% of student-athletes go on to play their sport at the professional level, and their average professional career lasts approximately three and a half years. This result means the vast majority of

collegiate student-athletes, even in the revenue-generating sports, will need to identify a career other than professional athlete.

Beyond the decision or desire to play professional sports, there is a strong relationship between athletic identity and career-related decision-making, career maturity, and retirement from athletics. The following sections review the literature related to these relationships.

Career Development and Maturity

Two of the main factors influencing career decisions are identity development and involvement in activities associated with future career choices. These processes are most influential during adolescence and between the ages of 18 and 24 respectively (Super, 1990) – the age range of traditional college students and student-athletes. Involvement in these activities allows the individual to explore and develop skills related to their potential future occupation, while simultaneously setting goals and expectations for the future (Cabrita et al., 2014), which can relate to profitability of the career (Saunders & Fogarty, 2001) and the emotional value the career holds (Husman & Shell, 2008). At this point, career development and athletic identity development collide.

Since athletic identity is directly related to the amount of time and effort devoted to the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993), the consistent presence of athletics in an individual's life can result in the athletic identity becoming inseparable from the athletic role (Cabrita et al., 2014). This inseparability can potentially result in the limitation of career development to include only careers within the realm of sports (Griffith & Johnson, 2002). Watson and Kissinger (2007) suggest student-athletes are more likely than their non-athlete peers to struggle with developing career maturity and clear educational plans.

There is a significant amount of evidence in studies looking at the relationship between athletic identity and career development of student-athletes that the relationship between the two is inversely correlated – the greater degree to which a student-athlete develops their athletic identity, the higher the risk of underdeveloped career maturity. Below are examples from this body of research. There are, however, at least two studies that contradict, or at least challenge, the notion there is a direct correlation between athletic identity and career maturity.

First, I address the studies indicating higher levels of athletic identity are associated with lower levels of career maturity and development. Gaston-Gayles and Hu (2009) report "[S]everal studies have focused on the career maturity of athletes relative to their non-athlete peers, and the evidence in general suggests that athletes tend to differ from their non-athlete peers in their levels of career maturity and psychosocial development" (p. 35). That is, they demonstrate a lower level of career maturity. Others have also suggested student-athletes, especially those in revenue-generating sports, have been identified as being slower to develop in regard to career planning than are their non-athlete peers (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimmick, 1987; Sowa & Gressard, 1983).

Kennedy and Dimick (1987) used the Career Maturity Inventory to look at the career maturity of college football and basketball players who were on scholarship and compared them to nonathletes. Findings indicated student athletes were much lower in career maturity than nonathletes, although there was no significant difference between Caucasian and African American athletes. About 48% of athletes expected to play their sport professionally, while statistics show, and the NCAA (2017) confirms, only approximately 2% will actually achieve this goal.

Further evidence higher levels of athletic identity are associated with lower levels of career development and maturity is provided by Blann (1985) who starts with the premise "sport participation over an extended time can be dysfunctional to the individual" (p. 115). He collected data from student-athletes who participated in high-level (scholarship) athletics and low-level (non-scholarship) athletics, as well as non-athletes, based on the Student Developmental Task Inventory - specifically task 2, "Developing Purpose." In general, juniors and seniors scored higher than first-year students and sophomores, and low-level athletes scored higher than high-level athletes. Specifically, results indicated underclass male athletes who participate in both high- and low-level athletics did not score as high (i.e., had not formulated educational and career goals to the extent) as underclass male non-athletes. Upperclass athletes (at both competitive levels) and non-athletes scored similarly. These results indicate either male athletes become more focused on career and educational goals after their sophomore year or those who do not focus on these goals do not persist to their junior and senior year.

The following two studies provide evidence there may not always be a direct correlation between high athletic identity and low career maturity. Brown and Hartley's (1998) research indicated a specific sub-population of student-athletes who were more susceptible to lower levels of career maturity – student-athletes whose preference in career choice was to participate in professional sports were more likely to have lower career maturity levels than their peers who indicated interest in other occupations. They suggest the level to which the student-athlete identifies as a student (i.e., the student idenity) could be a moderating variable and, as a result, a direct relationship between athletic identity and career maturity might not exist. Brown continued to posit this idea in

later research (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000), saying, "it is possible for a student-athlete to express high athletic identity while also possessing a strong commitment to his/her student role identity. Doing so would likely allow for exploration in other life and career domains" (p. 60).

Similarly, Kornspan and Etzel (2001) looked at both demographic and psychological variables and how they relate to career maturity. They found while career locus of control (the extent to which an individual believes outcomes of career choices result from their own choices and behaviors [internal] or from outside forces[external]), gender, and career self-efficacy were the three most significant predictors of career maturity, athletic identity was not a predictor. This study was conducted with junior college student-athletes, and the authors suggest, consistent with Brown and Hartley (1998), future research account for the student identity level of the student-athletes, since this level could be a mitigating factor.

Two possiblities for why there are varations in the research related to the relationship between athletic identity and career development are described below.

First, one of the distinguishing factors these studies highlight is the difference between looking strictly at athletic identity as it relates to career development and looking at whether or not the student-athlete believes there is a high probablility of advancing to the professional level (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Student-athletes who possess a relatively high athletic identity, but who do not believe they will play their sport professionally, may be forced to identify alternative career choices; whereras, those who do intend to play professionally are more prone to identity and career foreclosure.

Second, although much of the research points to the fact there is at least a moderate inverse correlation between athletic identity and career development, the variations in the

results of these studies, at the very least, "impl[ies] that some athletes may be less prepared than others to make career choices and will consequently perform more poorly on tasks assessing career choice exploration" (Cabrita et al., 2014, pp. 473-474). Cabrita and colleagues (2014) use Taylor and Betz's (1983) model of career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE) to explain the discrepancy in research results related to athletic identity and career development. Taylor and Betz (1983) define CDMSE as an individual's belief in his or her ability to be successful in completing the tasks essential to making a career decision and include five specific competencies: (a) the ability to accurately self-appraise, (b) the ability to gather appropriate occupational information (related to professions being considered), (c) the ability to select goals, (d) the ability to make plans for the future in order to attain goals, and (e) the ability to problem solve. Therefore, student-athletes who are able to master these competencies, regardless of their level of athletic-identity, can develop a higher level of career maturity.

Athletic Retirement

Athletes have a tendency to experience events and issues different from the typical transitions faced during adolescence. Pearson and Petitpas (1990) focus on three specific transitions frequently faced by athletes: not making the team, injury, and retirement from sport. Athletes are particularly vulnerable to these transitions because they have potentially narrowed their focus and found their sense of identity only in athletics. This narrowing of focus happens through increasing levels of athletic competition and shifting developmental tasks away from those typically experienced by college age students, such as: discovery of a personal identity, exploratory behavior, and learning life skills. Common barriers to successful transitions include the unpredictability of injury, lack of supportive

relationships, and individual attitude (i.e., willingness to ask for help). When a student-athlete is almost solely focused on athletics, the transition to retirement can result in burnout and psychological distress (Wylleman, Rosier, & De Knop, 2015).

Chartrand and Lent (1987) identified a need for more research on the long-term impact of participation in athletics on the psychological development of student-athletes. In addition to the conflict in roles student-athletes face (i.e., student vs. athlete), the other significant problem they identified was the idea of retirement from athletics, noting the distress evident in student-athletes when sports end and it is necessary to move on. These results relate very closely to Sowa and Gressard's (1983) findings regarding the difficulty of athletes finding individual purpose beyond the sports in which they are involved. In her ethnographic study, Beamon (2012) found former student-athletes who participated in Division I basketball and football (some played sports professionally), had a very difficult time with athletic retirement due to their extremely high level of athletic identity. Alternatively, some student-athletes choose to re-prioritize academics after suffering a career ending injury, making it easier to transition out of sports (Stoltenburg et al., 2011) and away from their athletic identity.

Three theoretical models are discussed as potential interventions and options for counseling student-athletes who find this transition challenging. First, the psychoeducational model (Danish & Hale, 1981; Guerney et al., 1971) offers a holisitic approach emphasizing the acquisition of a broad range of skills and the development of personal competencies. Second, the Integrative-Behavioral Model (Brown & Heath, 1984) focuses on the emotional and behavioral responses to major/critical life events, such as athletic retirement. According to this model, an adequate coping strategy includes

expectedness and preparedness for these events. Third, the conflict theory (Janis & Mann, 1977) promotes "proactive decisional behavior" (p. 165) encouraging a commitment to the development of nonathletic skills without undermining the student-athletes commitment to sport.

Since the transition from the role of athlete to non-athlete can be difficult for many student-athletes and because previous career inventories were designed for the general public, Sandstedt and colleagues (2004) developed the Student-Athlete Career Situation Inventory (SACSI) specifically for student-athletes in order to gage their attitudes, beliefs, and interests related to career preparation. They identified five factors found to be significant: (a) Career Development Self-efficacy – "the degree to which a student-athlete feels confident in his or her ability to engage in career development tasks" (p. 90); (b) Career versus Sport Identity Factor – the "propensity to see himself or herself more as a student seeking academic and career achievement as opposed to athletic achievement" (p. 90); (c) Locus of Control – "the degree to which a student-athlete feels that he or she has the power to make decisions regarding his or her career development" (p. 90-91); (d) Barriers to Career Development – "the numerous aspects that are inherent within the role of a student-athlete that may hinder career development" (p. 91); and (e) Sport to Work Relationship – the "ability to recognize valuable skills that can be taken from their sport experience and used in career settings" (p. 91). These five factors are consistent with the athletic retirement literature and make the SACSI a reliable tool.

Theoretical Framework

This study generally relies on student development theory and more specifically on the theory espoused by Chickering and Reisser (1993) in their collective work on the seven

vectors of student development. Chickering and Reisser's work was selected as the general theoretical framework of the study because it not only provides a holistic, whole-person perspective on student development, but also engages readers and practitioners in a deep-dive into seven highly specific aspects of the developmental experience.

Two of the vectors – establishing identity and developing purpose – serve as the primary theoretical foundation for the analysis of defining student-athlete success. While all of the vectors are present to some extent during college, these two resonate the most with the focus of this study and are most salient as they relate to developing and identifying a definition of success. Within this broader context, certain aspects of identity theory (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013) offer a more focused perspective on the experience of student-athletes and the creation of their success definition. The following section provides context for the theoretical framework by outlining brief history of student development theory, detailing an analysis of the work of Chickering and Reisser, and introducing identity and purpose development.

Student Development Theory

Student development theory, in general, describes how students make meaning of their individual and collective experiences and encompasses specific areas such as intellectual, spiritual, psychosocial, sexual, and racial development (Wilson & Wolf-Wendel, 2005). As with other theoretical frameworks, student development theory has its roots in the theory of other disciplines and has evolved over the years. Prior to the work of early student development theorists, it was Erik Erikson's work in psychology (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) and his development of the psychosocial stages that helped explain the progressive change and development of college age individuals. Nevitt Sanford (1962,

1966) was one of the first individuals to consider the connection between the development of individual students and the role colleges could play in their development. He suggested colleges foster an environment of challenge and support. "Sanford knew that disequilibrium was an essential catalyst for learning new skills and knowledge, for differentiation and integration" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 1). After Sanford, student development theorists began to posit their ideas through a variety of lenses.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) outlined many of these theories, categorizing them into four major clusters: (1) psychosocial, (2) cognitive-structural, (3) typological, and (4) person-environment interaction. The psychosocial theories are those that see development as a sequential process through which individuals progress as they accomplish certain "developmental tasks" (p. 19). Examples of psychosocial theorists are Chickering (seven vectors) and Marcia (ego identity status).

For the purposes of this study, the psychosocial theory of Chickering and Reisser (1993) is used as a lens through which to view student-athlete development and their definition of success.

Chickering and Reisser's Student Development Theory

Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified seven "vectors" providing a theoretical model designed to educate the whole student, stating, "colleges must hire and reinforce staff members who understand what student development looks like and how to foster it" (p. 44). Without this holistic perspective on student development, institutions "can become a dispensary of services, a training ground for jobs that may not exist, or a holding tank for those not sure what to do next" (p. 44). With these warnings in mind, the seven vectors play a significant role in framing the development of the whole student. Developing

competence (Vector 1) is practical in nature, highlighting the need for intellectual, interpersonal, and physical skill competence. Managing emotions (Vector 2) helps the student navigate the educational process while dealing with negative and positive emotions. Moving through autonomy toward interdependence (Vector 3) describes the process through which students become appropriately independent while recognizing their need for new and iterative relationships. Developing mature interpersonal relationships (Vector 4) means students are able to not only tolerate, but appreciate, differences with others and increase in their capacity for intimate relationships. Establishing identity (Vector 5) is the complex process of developing a sense of self in a variety of areas including body image, sexuality, social settings, and self-acceptance. Developing purpose (Vector 6) is the establishment of an intentional plan of action regarding vocational, personal, and interpersonal priorities. Developing integrity (Vector 7) is the process of evaluating blindly held beliefs, affirming core beliefs, and "matching personal values with socially responsible behavior" (pg. 51).

While each of Chickering and Reisser's vectors have significant application for an individual student's development, and each emerged to a limited extent in the interviews, two of the vectors – establishing identity and developing purpose – are of particular importance to this study. These two specific vectors were selected as the context for this study for several reasons.

First, a theme surfacing over and over again in the literature is the centrality of the development of the athletic identity for student-athletes. There is a social aspect to identity, but it can also become a cognitive structure operating within a student and can have a significant impact on other aspects of identity, depending on how deeply it is

engaged and ingrained. Additionally, the vector of establishing identity is important due to the complexity of the student-athlete identity. There is, at best, a duality to the identity, and at worst, a conflict within the identity – being both a student and an athlete.

The vector of developing purpose is closely tied to establishing identity and brings other aspects of the individual into play, including their aspirations and priorities, that are central to this study. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), these aspirations and priorities can be personal (recreational and avocational), vocational (educational and career), and interpersonal (relational). This vector is important as a measure of how the student-athlete identity manifests itself in the individual's life and goals and contributes to their definition of success.

The following sections describe these two vectors in greater detail, provide a framework for understanding the context of the student-athlete's definition of success, place them in the larger context of identity and purpose development, and explain how these concepts apply specifically to student-athletes.

Establishing (Athletic) Identity

Identity theorists view a person's self-concept or identity as "a multidimensional structure that is composed of his or her feelings and thoughts about the self within various aspects of life" (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013, p. 143). Since identity is multidimensional, individuals process these feelings and thoughts through different perspectives, and at different times, in order to make sense of them. Identity salience occurs when a particular dimension of the identity is activated and reinforced over time. Heird and Steinfeldt (2013) state,

> "identity salience can be conceptualized as the probability that a given identity will be activated in a given situation. The importance of a given role begins to define

people's core identity through with they interpret most, if not all, situations" (p. 144).

College provides a unique opportunity for students to develop their identity in many ways, including personally, socially, and psychologically. Chickering and Reiser (1993) describe identity as,

> "that solid sense of self, that inner feeling of mastery and ownership that takes shape as the developmental tasks for competence, emotions, autonomy, and relationships are undertaken with some success, and that, as it becomes firmer, provides a framework for purpose and integrity" (p. 181).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) go on to identify specific components contributing to the "solid sense of self." First are students' comfort with their body and appearance. While self-consciousness is an issue that can be perpetuated on a college campus, there are many opportunities for growth and the acceptance of one's body. With an intense focus on health and fitness, student-athletes can be extremely successful, but also very vulnerable, regarding the acceptance of their physical characteristics. The second component of establishing identity moves beyond the physical, to a student's comfort with gender and sexual orientation. For many students comfort involves a process of awareness, exploration, and, ultimately, acceptance of both gender and sexual orientation. Developing a sense of self in social, historical, and cultural contexts is the third component of establishing identity. Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggest a positive identity requires "a sense of one's roots in a particular cultural, historical, and social context" (p. 194) so they are able to value their own values and traditions, and those of others. Another component of identity development is the ability to clarify self-concept through roles and lifestyle. Students have many opportunities to try out different lifestyles and roles in an effort to clarify who they are. Student-athletes take on a role and lifestyle particular to their set of

circumstances and that, many times, are established by the culture of intercollegiate athletics (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013; Meyer, 1990). The next component of identity development Chickering and Reisser (1993) propose is the establishment of a sense of self in response to feedback received from those we value. The feedback allows students to form a picture of how others perceive them. Again, this component is relevant to student-athletes who constantly receive feedback from academic staff regarding their grades and eligibility and from athletic staff regarding performance in their particular sport. A student-athlete's perception of how the coach, in turn, perceives them is especially impactful (Adler & Adler, 1991). The next component in the identity development process involves self-acceptance and self-esteem. Students begin to develop greater confidence and a stronger sense of self-worth based on their own personal standards, rather than always comparing themselves with others. The final component of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) identity development is a sense of stability and integration, which means the student has a "sense of balance and perspective" (p. 201) regarding their identity and values and are aware of the systems and communities of which they are a part.

As a result of considering these seven components of identity development, questions can be posed such as, "What roles best fit my sense of self?...What roles are genuine expressions or extensions of myself, helping me to define more sharply who I am?...How stable and clear am I about who I am and what is important?" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 182). Students answer these types of identity-related questions as they navigate their way through college and progressively develop their own sense of identity.

While identity development is a complicated process, dealing with multiple identities and their potential conflicts can be even more challenging. Watt and Moore

(2001) point out participation in intercollegiate athletics can add a layer of complexity to the identity development process that is many times unanticipated by student-athletes. In its broadest senses, athletic identity is a social role student-athletes assume. In its most narrow sense, athletic identity becomes a cognitive structure (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Some research points to the fact student-athletes can develop such strong athletic identities (Adler & Adler, 1991; Sparkes, 1998) they have a "tendency to commit exclusively to a single athletic role at the expense of meaningful exploration of other available roles" (Lally & Kerr, 2005, p. 276). Development of such a strong athletic identity can potentially have a negative influence on their academic performance (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990) and their career development (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Martens & Cox, 2000). Many student-athletes, particularly in revenue-generating sports, identify so exclusively with their sport they are much less likely to explore the possibilities of non-sport related career options (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996).

Newton, Gill, and Reifsteck (2020) identified three broad themes that help explain how student-athletes ascribe meaning to their athletic identity. First, student-athletes weave their athletic identity with their personality over time, so they see their athletic identity as "Part of Me" (Newton, Gill, & Reifsteck, 2020, p. 73). There is an ownership of the role fostered through continued involvement in athletics and the central place this involvement occupies in their lives. Second, student-athletes see their commitment to this identity as occurring throughout a journey. The journey includes both long- and short-range experiences, negative and positive, with a particular focus on their daily routine and athletic performance. And third, student-athletes recognized their identity was socially reinforced, describing their athletic community as family.

Such a strong connection to identity development, and the related impact on career development, are important foundational concepts in how student-athletes define success.

Chapter 2 provides further consideration to student-athlete identity development, including research on positive and negative outcomes, competing identities, identity foreclosure, racial identity, and intersectionality.

Developing Purpose

As college students progress in their development of identity, they also begin to develop an increasing sense of purpose, defined as the "ability to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 209). Chickering and Reisser (1993) state in order to clarify purpose, it is essential students develop action plans and priorities related to vocational plans and aspirations, personal interests, and interpersonal and family commitments.

Vocational plans are not simply about finding a job or career. Students "discover [their] vocation by discovering what [they] love to do…and what actualizes [their] potential for excellence" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 212). This concept can be difficult to master since many students entering college are doing so with the goal of getting a job and making money. But this concept resonates with many student-athletes since they would love for their passion, sports, to also be their vocation. However, the number of student-athletes who ultimately progress to the paid, professional level of their sport is minimal (Coakley, 2009; NCAA, 2013).

Building on vocational plans and aspirations, personal interests shape each student's decisions regarding time spent on avocational and recreational activities (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). When a student discovers a new interest or chooses to

continue an existing interest, the time spent on other activities tends to decrease. This decrease is highly relevant to student-athletes who want to excel in their sport and must, therefore, intentionally dedicate more and more time to it – oftentimes at the expense of other interests (Carodine et al., 2001; Eiche et al., 1997a).

The final piece of developing purpose is the consideration of interpersonal and family commitments (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). These commitments provide an added layer of complexity to a student's decision of where to spend their time and effort. As students progress through college, they make choices such as whether or not to pursue a romantic relationship and whether or not to move home after graduation. They must also make compromises in order to allow for the implications of these and other decisions related to the people in their life.

Developing intentional action plans around vocational aspirations, personal interests, and interpersonal commitments, coupled with the establishment of identity discussed above, can be used as a framework for identifying and explaining the development of a student-athlete's definition of success. This theoretical model is highlighted in the next section.

Theoretical Model

Based on Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors of establishing identity and developing purpose, the model below (Figure 1) outlines the iterative process students, and student-athletes in particular, follow in the development of their definition of success.

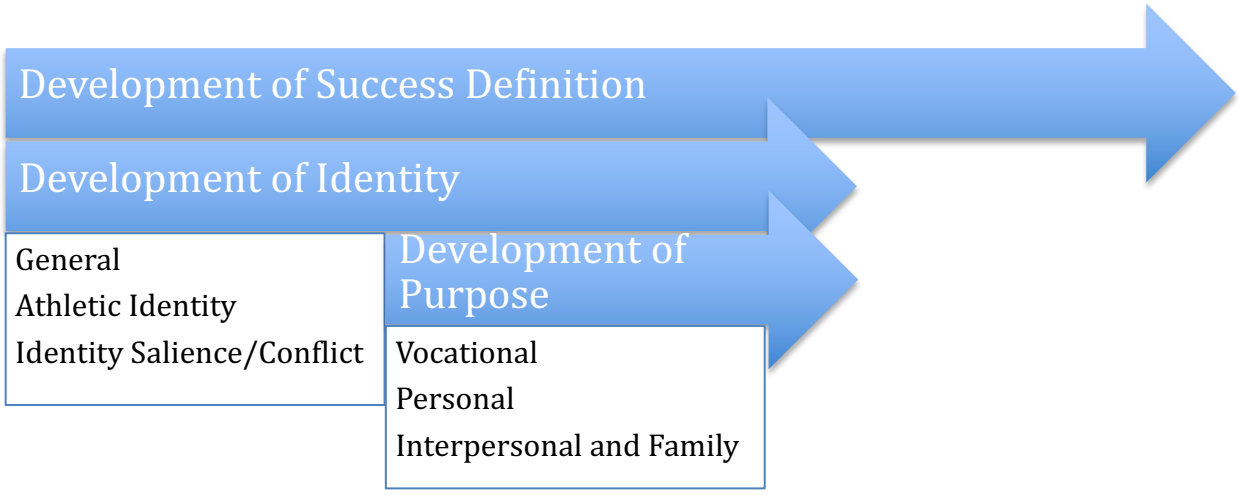

Figure 1: Theoretical Model

The literature cited above provides extensive examples of the centrality of student development to the overall student experience. As such, establishing identity and developing purpose, the two most salient developmental processes for student-athletes at this stage, provide a framework for understanding the context of the student-athlete's definition of success. First, student-athletes engage the process of establishing their own identity, as a person and as a student-athlete, while navigating the potential conflict these multiple identities present. Second, the process of developing purpose emerges as their identity informs vocational aspirations, personal interests, and interpersonal relationships. While these processes are occurring, the student-athlete's personal definition of success is changing and adjusting as they make intentional choices regarding their developed identity and purpose.

For the purposes of this study, success defined relative to vocational purpose includes both educational (e.g., grades, graduation, and credentialing) and career related

goals (e.g., athletic career, non-athletic career, or a combination of both). Success defined relative to purpose in personal interests includes avocational and recreational goals. And success defined relative to purpose in interpersonal and family commitments includes relational goals. While purpose related to personal and interpersonal development is important, this study focused on the vocational purpose, which provides a framework for assessing and categorizing how student-athletes define success.

Academic Success Programs

Other factors that contribute to the uniqueness of student-athletes are the multi-million-dollar practice facilities and academic buildings built and devoted solely to the athletic and academic success of student-athletes. In addition to these brick and mortar structures, programs such as the NCAA's Life Skills (NCAA, 2017c; Ward, 1999) have been created to increase the overall success of student-athletes. A partnership between the NCAA's national office and its member institutions, the Life Skills program was established to emulate Dr. Homer Rice's "Total Person Project" at Georgia Institute of Technology. The program provides student-athletes with leadership development and skills to assist them in college and beyond through annual conferences, internship opportunities, test prep services, and behavior assessments. While much of the focus of the literature is on a pre-defined definition of success, which includes academic success or persistence to graduation, programs such as NCAA Life Skills begin to move beyond this definition to a more comprehensive understanding of success.

In recent years, institutional programs devoted specifically to the support and success of student-athletes have become increasingly prevalent on university campuses, particularly Bowl Championship Series Division I schools with large athletic programs and

budgets. These programs are referred to by different names on each campus, but their titles typically refer to the program's focus on student-athlete academic success; therefore I refer to them as Student-Athlete Success Programs, or SASPs.

One of the main reasons for the initial growth of SASPs was the ever-increasing standards of requirement for athletic eligibility imposed by the NCAA and the individual athletic conferences. And while eligibility continues to be a major driving force (Broughton & Neyer, 2001), many programs are looking at student-athlete success and development from a more holistic perspective – and developing programming to match this perspective. This type of programming, though, requires certain components in order to be successful. Based largely on the research of Gunn and Eddy (1989), Hollis (2001) suggests SASPs "need specifically trained personnel, services, and university presidential support to effectively create equal opportunity for student athletes" (pp. 271-272).

The specific services offered by SASPs vary from program to program, but oftentimes include: academic support services and advising, orientation, career development (planning and placement), life skills development, academic advising, and eligibility monitoring. The following sections provide a brief overview of these services offered to student-athletes through SASPs.

Academic Support, Advising, and Eligibility Monitoring

Central to most SASPs is the broad range of academic support services offered to student-athletes. These services can include: advising, study skills development, tutoring, group study sessions, mentor programs, assessment, and eligibility monitoring. Due to the high priority of maintaining eligibility and academic standards, these services are not

optional for student-athletes at many institutions. In fact, each athlete's participation and attendance is very closely monitored by coaches and athletic support staff.

Academic advisors and academic support staff must work together to be sure student-athletes remain academically eligible for competition. Course load, term and cumulative grade point averages, graduation requirements, and satisfactory academic progress must all be monitored so NCAA and conference regulations can be maintained.

Orientation

Tinto (1993) highlighted the value of new student orientation and transition program for all students. Benefits include meeting other students, learning to navigate campus, and experiencing the school's culture. To take advantage of these benefits, most universities require their student-athletes to participate in the standard orientation programming along with the non-athlete students. This collaboration is designed to foster retention and graduation of student-athletes (Tinto, 1993).

Student-athletes, however, need additional information related specifically to athletics and are generally required to attend a separate orientation (or series of events), sponsored by the SASP, designed to help them navigate the complex world of intercollegiate athletics, including NCAA and conference rules, regulations, and eligibility requirements.

Some have recommended athletic programs partner with academic departments and offer credit-bearing courses covering topics related to current events in athletics (Gerdy, 1997). Michigan State University, for example, offers a one semester hour course every fall titled, "KIN 171: Athletics in Higher Education." The course is described as covering, "Philosophy and organization of athletics. Athletics and academic achievement.

Ethical issues, legal issues, social conduct, eligibility, athlete's rights and responsibilities" (Michigan State University, 2023).

Career Development

The research showing the importance of career development and maturity has been highlighted above. Since student-athletes will likely not seek out the services of university-related career services on a voluntary basis (Martens & Lee, 1998), and since these career centers may not have the expertise to assist student-athletes with their specific needs (Martinelli, 2000), SASPs have been increasing their focus on career development and career decision-making programming, rather than just academics. SASPs have accomplished this increase by implementing career development programs and interventions within the SASPs. The purpose of these programs is to "enhance student-athletes' understanding of the range of their abilities and the opportunities available to them outside of athletics" (Brown & Glastetter-Fender, 2000, p. 59).

Also discussed above, career decision-making self-efficacy has been shown to be a key factor in developing career maturity and a skill with which student-athletes tend to find challenging. Research has shown, though, career decision-making self-efficacy is able to be increased with the help of workshops designed to assist students with their career decision-making processes (Fouad, Cotter, & Kantamneni, 2009; Scott & Ciani, 2008).

Gaps in the career maturity of student-athletes and non-athlete students have been decreasing, suggesting this closing of the gap may be due to the increased level of programming offered by academic and career support centers for student-athletes (Rivas-Quinones, 2003).

Life Skills Development

While career development is an essential skill, SASPs also assist students with valuable skills such as leadership and financial literacy, and provide opportunities for service and community outreach, as well as experiences focused on multiculturalism and diversity.

Many SASPs offer student-athletes the opportunity to participate in leadership councils, serve as representatives on various advisory boards and assemblies, and attend conferences focused on leadership development and application. For example, two student-athletes from each varsity team at the University of Michigan are selected to sit on the Student-Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC). These representatives have "an opportunity to shape the landscape of intercollegiate athletics, through communication with each other, the Big Ten Conference, and the NCAA." Further, the "aim is to improve student-athletes' experience and promote growth and education through sports participation" (University of Michigan, 2023). At Duke University, student-athletes participate in a leadership program extending throughout all four years. During year one, the student-athletes are required to participate in the *1st Year Action Program*. This program has a variety of foci: effective transition skills, role acceptance, being a good teammate, and initial leadership development (Duke University, 2015).

With the continued increase in student debt (Chen & Wiederspan, 2014), some SASPs are beginning to include financial literacy as part of their program. In fact, in 2014 the University of Texas at Austin launched The Center for Sports Leadership and Innovation, in order to "develop leaders and cultivate integrity" (University of Texas at

Austin, 2014) within the athletic program. A major piece of the Center's programming is financial literacy.

Service and community outreach are essential pieces of many SASPs, providing students with the opportunity to move outside their comfort zone and experience events promoting multiculturalism and celebrate diversity. An example of a community outreach opportunity can be found at the University of Southern California (University of Southern California, 2015). Student-athletes at the University of Southern California are encouraged, but not required, to participate in at least five hours of community service each academic year. Community service provides "an opportunity to give back to the greater community, while simultaneously providing invaluable life opportunities. Many Student-Athletes do not get the chance to maintain a job or internship during their college career. Giving back through community service helps Student-Athletes gain crucial volunteer experience and provides great resume building opportunities" (University of Southern California, 2015).

Conceptualized in 1991, and operationalized in 1994, the Challenging Athletic Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS)/Life Skills Program was designed "to create a total development program for student-athletes" (NCAA, 2008, p. 3) centered around five key commitments: academic excellence, athletic excellence, personal development, career development, and service. This holistic approach was modeled after Dr. Homer Rice's "Total Person Project" (NCAA, 2017b) and was focused on enhancing the quality of the student-athlete experience. Dr. Rice, a former athletic director at Georgia Tech University, believed excellence was the result of a life in balance, encompassed by academic excellence, athletic achievement, and personal well-being (Georgia Tech website, 2015). Specific outcomes of the program were to encourage student-athletes to take greater ownership of

their responsibilities; identify and meet the changing needs of student-athletes; promote a healthy respect for and dialogue around issues of diversity and inclusion; help student-athletes to identify and utilize the transferable skills they obtain through their participation in athletics; enhance connections with the community for educational purposes; and create an environment encouraging student-athletes to effectively seek out and utilize campus resources (NCAA, 2008).

To accomplish these goals, the NCAA provided member institutions with instruction materials and supplemental resources, including a needs assessment instrument, a program administration guide, supplemental materials to accompany the instructional materials, as well as access to the CHAMPS/Life Skills list-serv and online resource room. While membership continued to grow, the NCAA determined the program needed to be overhauled and, in 2014, renamed it the NCAA Life Skills program. Administrators were recruited to join three action teams (Yearly Initiatives, Life Skills Academy, and Mental Health) tasked with "defining the profession, bettering the emerging lives of NCAA student-athletes, supporting membership professionals, as well as providing both student-athletes and administrators with tools to be successful" (NCAA, 2014a).

Summary

The recent literature suggests student-athletes are a unique population facing a variety of unique experiences and challenges, particularly related to their identity and career development. Athletic departments have attempted to address these, and other, challenges by establishing elaborate student-athlete success programs.

These challenges and programs provide a unique context in which student-athletes attempt to be successful – academically, athletically, personally, and vocationally. This

qualitative study was an initial attempt to bridge the gap between what the researchers and administrators have declared is important and what student-athletes personally believe is important. Further, it utilized a model based on student development theory, particularly related to student-athlete identity and purpose. The study provided an opportunity for student-athletes to share their thoughts and opinions on what it meant to them to be successful in these areas and what adjustments can be made to the services and programming offered in order to make the impact more personal, relevant, and effective. The following chapter outlines the methodology used for this study.

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to identify how student-athletes define success. The framework within which this topic was addressed was the student-athletes' perspective on their establishment of identity and purpose and how these processes informed their definition of success related to vocational, personal, and relational goals. The goal of the research was threefold: (1) to highlight the student-athlete perspective by providing them with the opportunity to discuss their success definition; (2) to identify specific ways, including structure and programming, by which student-athlete support services can more effectively serve the student-athlete population; and (3) to encourage cognitive and personal development through the process of considering their success definition. As noted in Chapter 1, the following three questions guided the research:

1. How do student-athletes define success?
2. How has the student-athletes' identity influenced their definition of success?
3. How do the student-athletes anticipate their definition of success will inform their career transition?

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, a significant amount of research is devoted to the student-athlete population, covering a variety of topics. In the early years of research involving sport and exercise psychology, the studies were predominantly quantitative in nature (Van Etten et al., 2008). However, over the last couple of decades, the number of studies utilizing qualitative research methods related to sports and student-athletes has increased significantly (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In a similar vein, this study was

conducted using qualitative methods to establish a richer understanding of how student-athletes define success.

The following sections outline the research methodology utilized for this study. First, I discuss the overall research design, including the unique characteristics of qualitative research and the specific research paradigm and interpretive framework used. Second, I identify and define the research participants and explain the rationale and process through which the sample was selected. Third, I cover the data collection via interviews and subsequent analysis. Fourth, I highlight issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as well as the limitations of the study. Finally, I provide a brief summary of this chapter.

Research Design

The following section outlines the rationale for the use of qualitative descriptive research methods as the foundation for this study. I describe the constructivist interpretive framework utilized to gather and share the experiences of student-athletes related to their definition of success and I further discuss my role as the researcher.

Qualitative Research

Interest in conducting qualitative research has significantly increased in recent decades due to the pluralization of the world and a "growing sensitivity to the empirical study of issues" (Flick, 2006, p. 12). As methodologies continue to develop to accommodate these changes, several unique characteristics defining qualitative research, and distinguishing it from quantitative research, have emerged.

First, qualitative research is contextual (Mertens, 1998), whereby data tend to be collected in the participant's natural setting, rather than in a lab or other unnatural

location. This collection allows the researcher an opportunity for face-to-face contact and the ability to observe behavior while gathering data within the natural context including the subjects sociological, economic, cultural, and political milieu (Creswell & Poth 2018; Glesne, 2006).

Second, the researcher plays an integral role in the research as the instrument through which data are collected, documents are examined, and words and behaviors are documented and observed. As a result, the qualitative researcher should have a process through which they reflect on their assumptions, biases, and beliefs, so they are accounted for. This process is typically accomplished through journaling or debriefing with a peer (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 1998).

Third, qualitative researchers many times utilize more than one source of data (e.g., observations, documents, or interviews) that can be organized into categories or themes by employing both inductive and deductive analysis of the data. The inductive approach, in particular, allows the researcher to develop general patterns, analytic categories, and themes developed from specific observations (Mertens, 1998), which is demonstrative of the variation in perspectives of the problem and the subjective meanings related to it. In short, the strategy of an inductive approach "is to allow the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be" (Patton, 1990, pg. 44).

Fourth, qualitative research is not strictly prescribed, that is, it does not necessarily "begin from a predetermined starting point or proceed through a fixed sequence of steps, but involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 3). As such, qualitative research is emergent and reflexive. An emergent

research design allows for changes and adjustments to the process after the collection of data has begun so the researcher can "learn about the problem or issue from the participants," and "address the research to obtain that information" (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). Reflexive research provides an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on how their own experiences and background may shape the direction and interpretation of the study and even become part of the research process.

And finally, qualitative research develops a holistic, complex perspective of the issue or problem because most phenomena are complex and are not able to be explained in isolation (Flick, 2006). The goal of quantitative research "is less to test what is already known (for example, theories already formulated in advance), but to discover and develop the new…" (Fick, 2006, p. 15).

Research Design

Multiple approaches to qualitative research exist and are utilized by researchers for a variety of reasons. For the purposes of this study, a qualitative, descriptive approach was selected as the optimal way to learn about the experiences of the selected student-athletes.

The purpose of qualitative description research is to provide rich description of a particular experience leading to an understanding of the perspective or worldview of the people involved (Caelli et al., 2003). "The focus on producing rich description about the phenomenon from those who have the experience offers a unique opportunity to gain inside or emic knowledge and learn how they see their world" (Bradshaw, Atkinson, & Doody, 2017, Methodological Assumptions section, para. 3). Although interpretation is unavoidable, "qualitative description is not highly interpretive in the sense that a researcher deliberately chooses to describe an event in terms of a conceptual,

philosophical, or other highly abstract framework or system. The description in qualitative descriptive studies entails the presentation of the facts of the case in everyday language" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336).

Surveys, including personal interviews, are a common way to conduct descriptive research. Data were collected via open-ended questions in personal interviews with each participant. These data were analyzed to identify specific statements or phrases from individual participants pointing the researcher to themes or "clusters of meaning" (Creswell, 2006, p. 61). These themes, in turn, help provide the researcher with an understanding of the shared experience related and allow them to write a description of these experiences. Data collection and analysis are discussed in further detail below.

As a complementary lens through which to view this study, a social constructivist paradigm was used as an interpretive framework. Creswell and Poth describe social constructivism as the way in which "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (2018, p. 23). The result of using this paradigm is multiple meanings are constructed from the interviews, rather than a very narrow meaning, since the interpretation relies heavily on the interviewee's perspective.

Providing a window into the individual experiences of the student-athlete population, particularly as they relate to their definition of success and career transition, is crucial to developing a deeper understanding of the shared experiences common within the student-athlete population. Understanding these shared experiences is also important for the development of institutional interventions, policies, and procedures that can positively impact the student-athlete experience.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a critical role in the collection and interpretation of data. In order to best convey how individuals experience a particular phenomenon, as discussed above, the researcher should bracket out their own experiences, to the extent possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell explains the concept of epoch as the process by which "investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (2006, pp. 59-60). Epoch as bracketing is further defined by Tufford and Newman as "a method used by some researchers to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project" (2012, p. 80).

For the purposes of being forthright regarding how I am situated as a researcher, I provide the following. I am a White, cis-gendered man and higher education administrator with over two decades of experience in student and academic affairs. While I did not participate in college athletics, I have worked extensively with student-athletes at both public and private institutions in settings related to academic advising, disciplinary procedures, and success programming. I have also spent a significant amount of time building out student success and intervention programs for non-athlete students. In order to bracket my own assumptions and experiences, I kept a reflective journal to note my assumptions and biases related to the study.

Research Sample

Participants in this qualitative study were identified via purposeful selection (Light et al., 1990; Maxwell, 2005). Also referred to as purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), this process allows individuals to be deliberately selected in order to provide specific

information that cannot be retrieved from other sources. According to Patton (1990), "[t]he logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* [italics the author's] for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" and "whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (p. 169).

Maxwell (2005) suggests four possible reasons for employing purposeful selection. For the scope of this study, the reason that resonated was purposeful selection helps to attain representativeness – deliberately selecting individuals who "adequately represent the average members of the population" (p. 89). Since time and resources did not allow me to study a large, randomly sampled group, I wanted to be confident typical members of the population were exemplified in the small group.

For this particular study, participants were selected using the typical case sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) of purposeful selection. Due to the nature of the research questions, specifically related to student-athlete identity and career development, participants in this study were former student-athletes who attended a variety of NCAA Division I, Division II, and Division III universities. These student-athletes were ideal for this study for several reasons. First, they had the time during college to utilize and experience student-athlete support services. Second, they had the time since graduation to obtain a broader perspective and reflect on their personal experiences in relation to the resources and programming offered to student-athletes through the student-athlete support services. And third, they had a greater amount of time to progress in their identity, purpose, and career development and to potentially develop a more refined definition of success.

To recruit participants, an email, briefly explaining the study and highlighted the purpose and goals, was distributed to a targeted group of administrators for distribution to potential participants. Those who participated also assisted with identifying and recruiting additional participants. Gift cards with a value of $25 were offered upon completion of the interview. Each of the respondents who met the criteria listed above were contacted and scheduled for an online interview. The student-athletes' names were changed to protect their identities.

The sample size was not pre-determined, but was instead decided by information redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), also known as data saturation. Sample size is discussed in further detail in the section below focused on data analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using qualitative analysis, the focus of this study was on establishing a more in-depth understanding of how student-athletes define success. The research spanned an eight-week period during which individual interviews were conducted in an online format with each of the participants. The following section explains the interview process and briefly addresses the advantages and challenges associated with the virtual nature of the interviews.

Interviews

Individual, semi-structured, online interviews were conducted with each of the respondents. According to Charmaz (2015), interviews are the most common method to collect qualitative data. Interviews are also generally thought to have the most potential to produce rich, thick descriptions of the subject at hand.

The utilization of remote interviews expanded even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (Lee et al., 2017). However, the isolation and social distancing brought about by the pandemic increased the use and highlighted the advantages of remote interviewing. Online interviews are accessible, cost- and time-effective, and allow research to be conducted across great geographical distances. Recent studies indicate there are additional advantages to online interviews. Howlett (2022) suggests interviewees are more comfortable in a location of their choice and the sense of intimacy is enhanced by seeing into their personal space. Others posit interviewees have a greater feeling of agency and the online setting creats a more equal power dynamic (Hanna & Mwale, 2017). Virtual interviews also carry inherent challenges. These challenges include basic technological issues, such as lack of a reliable internet connection, and more substantive issues, such as difficulty establishing rapport through an electronic medium (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Taking all of this information into consideration, in particular the geographic distance between myself and the interviewees, I elected to conduct this study using virutal interviews.

Utilizing semi-structured interviews allowed me to maintain a particular set of questions asked in each interview, for consistency (Johnson & Christensen, 2020), while also providing respondents with latitude to expound on particular answers and speak in more depth about what was important to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This methodology was preferred because it allowed the opportunity to engage with the student-athletes regarding self-perceptions of their identity and to more fully explain their definition of success. Individual, in-depth interviews provide the opportunity to capture an interviewee's perspective of an event, and also gain access to their individual experiences

and feelings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Additionally, Patton (1990) summed up the advantages of in-depth interviews nicely when he said,

> "The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone's mind…We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions…We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people quesitons about those things" (p. 278).

A standardized open-ended interview format was selected for several reasons. First, this method allowed me to keep the interview systematic and focused without being overly rigid. Second, this format provided consistency in the material covered and questions asked. With a small sample size, asking the same questions of each interviewee was important in order to gather comparable, credible data. "When using qualitative data-collection procedures for evaluation purposes, it can be helpful to minimize issues of legitimacy and credibility by carefully collecting the same information from everyone who is interviewed" (Patton, 1990, p. 286). And finally, standardized open-ended interviews were used in order to reduce the need for judgment on my part in the middle of the interview. While follow-up questions were asked in certain cases, the overall structure of the interview was set and the questions were worded exactly as they were written. Each interview utilized the interview guide in Apendix A.

Once the participants were identified, remote, synchronous, video interviews were scheduled with each student-athlete via email. Prior to each interview, I provided participants with the consent form stating the purpose and structure of the study, along with a brief summary. I also provided them with a demographic questionnaire collecting basic personal and athletic-related information. With the permission of each interviewee, interviews were recorded for later transcription and evaluation.

Data Analysis

The number of participants in this study was determined by information redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), also known as data saturation. Data saturation is considered the point at which the data does not produce any new information or themes. Constantinou and colleagues (2017), reflect Guba's work by stating saturation has occurred when, "the appropriate depth has been reached and therefore it is there for the social scientist to make sense and describe" (p. 573).

Since saturation cannot be predetermined, it is very difficult to determine sample size prior to conducting the research (Sim et al., 2018). Although a specific number of participants for this study was not targeted ahead of time, 17 student-athletes were interviewed.

The process by which I reached data saturation involved the transcription and analysis of each interview. Specifically, each of the video interviews was transcribed by Zoom. I double-checked each transcript for accuracy by reading alongside the recording. Following this check, the process of data analysis, as outlined by Creswell and Roth (2018), was commenced to identify themes identified throughout the interviews. First, I reviewed the interview transcripts for significant statements highlighting each student-athlete's experience related to their definition of success. I grouped these statements into "clusters of meaning" (Creswell & Roth, 2018, p. 79) to determine constructed themes and significant differences in responses. I then reported the "essence" (p. 79) of the resulting common experiences by writing a narrative description of both what the student-athletes experienced and how they experienced it. The clusters of meaning and the essence of the constructed themes are detailed in Chapter 4. Once I determined no new themes were

identified, I stopped conducting interviews. While clusters of meaning were constructed for most of the topics covered in the interviews, there were responses to some questions that garnered much more individualistic responses. Where the highly individualized responses occurred, and no clear themes were identified, I reported on the experiences of each participant.

Trustworthiness

Quantitative studies have long used the concepts of validity and reliability to support the quality of research results. They are not, however, a good fit for qualitative research. Parallel criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative studies including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were suggested by authors such as Guba and Lincoln (1989, 2000) and Stainback and Stainback (1988). The concept of rigor in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010) is a similar idea incorporating each of these categories. This section addresses how trustworthiness and rigor were demonstrated in this study and concludes with a description of the limitations of the study.

Credibility

Credibility corresponds with internal validity in quantitative research. "The credibility test asks if there is a correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints" (Mertens, 1998, p. 181). The method of member checking was made popular by Lincoln and Guba (1985) but has more recently been called into question due to its epistemological and ontological underpinnings (McGannon & Smith, 2015) – researchers cannot achieve theory-free knowledge and therefore "…cannot deliver objective knowledge. Nor can it provide an independent foundation to adjudicate valid research from less valid research" (Smith &

McGannon, 2018, p. 104). Other practical problems with member checking include determining who is right when contradictions occur and dealing with power dynamics leading the participant to simply agree with the researcher (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Braun and Clarke (2013) offer a reframed version of member checking referred to as member reflection. Member reflections allow an opportunity for the researcher to work with the interviewee and "facilitate the inclusion of complementary or contradictory results so that a meticulous, robust, and intellectually enriched understanding of the research might be further developed" (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 108). Additionally, member reflections can contribute to a more ethical approach to qualitative research by promoting mutual respect and dignity between the researcher and interviewee.

In this study I utilized member reflection as a means of displaying credibility. I emailed a copy of the interview transcript and results to each participant to allow them the opportunity to review my results and offer additional insights or explore contradictions. They had the opportunity to email me, or set up a further time to meet online, to discuss questions or concerns regarding the transcripts and my observations. The insights and contradictions provided by the participants were included in the final version of the results. As a further measure to ensure credibility, I also engaged in peer debriefing (Creswell, 2018) with my dissertation advisor to be sure my observations resonate with other readers.

Transferability

Transferability corresponds with the concept of external validity in quantitative research and highlights the degree to which the results of a qualitative study can be generalized to similar circumstances (Mertens, 1998). One of the goals of qualitative

research is "to develop descriptive context-relevant findings that can be applicable to broader contexts while still maintaining their content-specific richness" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 205). Yin (2009) highlighted the importance of documenting as much of the research procedures as possible and in as much detail as possible, which is also referred to as rich or thick description.

In the study, I used rich, thick descriptions to provide as much detail as possible and an in-depth description of the context and culture within which the study was conducted. Purposeful sampling provided additional transferability by allowing readers to have an idea of the participants as well as their experiences.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability corresponds with qualitative reliability (Mertens, 1998) in quantitative research and is essential for tracking the processes utilized for collecting and interpreting qualitative data. Confirmability parallels the qualitative concept of objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), which means there is a significant effort to minimize the researcher's judgment. "Qualitative data can be tracked to its source, and the logic that is used to interpret the data should be made explicit" (Mertens, 1998, pg. 184). To achieve dependability and confirmability, I provided an "audit trail" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) including detailed explanations of how I collected the data, as well as available copies of detailed notes and interview transcripts.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study was the result of the methodology used for selecting participants – purposeful selection. Because the sample size utilized in purposeful selection tends to be small, they "are likely to be too small for generalization or

statistical representativeness" (Patton, 1990, p. 174). And while caution must be exercised in generalizing the results of this study to a larger population, purposeful selection provides the benefit of deliberatively selecting the participants in order to collect specific information that could not be retrieved from other sources.

Another limitation of the study was the use of online interviews. While online interviews provide a level of convenience, using technology as a medium may have placed a barrier between myself and the interviewees.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research design, the research sample, and the data collection and analysis processes of this study. I utilized a qualitative, descriptive methodology incorporating a semi-structured approach to 17 interviews. The data was analyzed using significant statements grouped into themes and common experiences. My role as the researcher, as well as factors contributing to trustworthiness and the limitations of the study were also addressed.

CHAPTER 4:

FINDINGS

This chapter provides the findings of the research designed to identify how student-athletes define success. The following sections provide an overview of the participants and a detailed accounting of their responses to a semi-structured interview comprised of open-ended interview questions (see Appendix). The interview questions were situated around the central research questions and the findings are presented utilizing the framework of these questions:

1. How do student-athletes define success?
2. How has the student-athlete's identity influenced their definition of success?
3. How has the student-athlete's definition of success informed their career transition?

Participants

Overview

A total of 17 former student-athletes participated in the study (see Table 1). Graduation years spanned over the last six years, with the most recent graduating this past academic year (Spring 2024). Six student-athletes identified as male and 11 identified as female. Seven played basketball (five female and two male), one played football (male), one played soccer (female), five participated in swimming (three female and two male), one played tennis (female), one played volleyball (female), and one participated in track and cross-country (male). Eight of the student-athletes attended NCAA Division I schools, one attended an NCAA Division II school, and eight attended an NCAA Division III school. Two student-athletes transferred to a different school, while the other 15 played their entire career at their original institution.

Table 1: Participant Information

Name	Sex	Sport	Years played before college	Years played in college
Blake	Male	Basketball	-	4
Scott	Male	Football	9	4
Chloe	Female	Basketball	13	4
Zoe	Female	Basketball	14	4
Travis	Male	Basketball	12	4
Amelia	Female	Basketball	10	5
Layla	Female	Basketball	10	2
Riley	Male	Track/CC	6	5
Jasmine	Female	Basketball	14	5
Callie	Female	Soccer	14	4
Jenny	Female	Swimming	13	4
George	Male	Swimming	11	3
Addy	Female	Swimming	10	4
Iris	Female	Tennis	12	4
Sophie	Female	Swimming	10	4
Jake	Male	Swimming	11	4
Macy	Female	Volleyball	-	4

Many of the participants played multiple sports growing up before choosing to focus on one sport in high school or college – playing their chosen sport between six and 14 years

prior to matriculating into college. Several participants described being recruited to play other sports due to their overall athletic ability or physical traits. When asked to share highlights of their athletic career at the beginning of the interview, responses included both individual and team accomplishments; memories from all levels of sport including junior high, high school, and college; and a combination of winning and losing seasons.

The student-athletes played a variety of roles on their respective teams. Eleven identified as holding leadership positions on their team by being named a captain or assistant captain, one was involved in leadership but not as a captain, and seven did not hold a formal leadership role. Of those who did not participate in swimming, 10 of the student-athletes held the status as a starter at some point in their college career. Additionally, fifteen of the participants played their sport between four and five years in college. One of the student-athletes played for two years and was forced to retire prior to their junior year due to ongoing injuries.

Meaning of Being a Student-Athlete

As an entry point into their experiences as a student-athlete, and to provide overarching context to our discussion, I asked the participants what being a student-athlete meant to them. Their responses varied significantly and represented multiple categories, including the overall significance of being a student-athlete, the qualities represented by student-athletes, the benefits and expectations experienced by student-athletes, the commitment required of student-athletes, and the culture and relationships developed by student-athletes. Each of these categories is summarized below.

General Significance

Several responses highlighted general feelings about being a student-athlete which were all positive in nature. Scott summed it simply when he said, "It meant a lot." George went even further and said, "It really meant everything…I feel like I wouldn't have been as successful just as a student." Other similar responses included they had been student-athletes in one way or another virtually their entire life, which provided them with a unique identity and meant something very special.

There was also a reflective nature to the responses, looking back with fondness and recognizing how much they appreciate the experience – more so now than in the moment. Blake said, looking back, "it was the best thing I've done in my life." Amelia highlighted the uniqueness of the experience saying she is "blessed" because others do not have the same opportunities. In the same vein, multiple participants talked about the pride they felt and the privilege it was to be recognized for their athletic and academic achievements. For example, Travis indicated it was an honor to be a student-athlete because, so few athletes are selected to play at the college level and receive scholarships.

To Macy, being a student-athlete meant excelling at her highest potential as both a student and athlete. She also highlighted the importance of going to college for the purpose of going to school and focusing on academic success.

Addy and Iris both shared unique perspectives on how they felt about being a student-athlete. Addy indicated she differentiated her experiences in high school and relied on the role in which she was not immediately situated to give her confidence and feel accomplished. Specifically, she gravitated toward her student identity when swimming, to distinguish herself from those around her, and relied on her athletic identity in school,

again, to distinguish herself from those around her. Addy shared, "So in college…I didn't feel as much of the 'athlete part' of being a student-athlete." Her perspective changed in college due to health challenges and not being able to train like she wanted to.

Iris was the only student-athlete interviewed who, when asked what being a student-athlete meant to her, expressed being a student-athlete is not how she always identified. She said, "I didn't always fully identify as a student-athlete. I'm very much, like I'm just me, and this is what I do. But this isn't who I am per se. Like it's not all of me." All of the other participants very explicitly identified as student-athletes.

Qualities

The participants identified a variety of qualities that had meaning for them as student-athletes. Among these qualities were versatility; a strong work ethic; leadership traits, including being vocal and leading by example; and the ability to take on significant responsibility.

Callie and Iris found being a student-athlete instilled in them a sense of discipline and provided them with multiple skills, such as organization and time management, that can be applied to everyday life. To George, being a student-athlete meant keeping things balanced, which meant if he was stressed in one area, academics or athletics, he had the opportunity to focus on the other to relieve the stress. Similarly, Jake identified time management as central to what it meant to be a student-athlete, suggesting an individual cannot be successful in both roles without it.

Benefits

There were also certain benefits to being a student-athlete mentioned. Several spoke of the financial importance of being on scholarship and having college tuition and

fees paid. Additionally, being a student-athlete meant having a certain amount of public exposure and a platform from which to express particular views. Jasmine was grateful for this opportunity "to glorify God and show his love as a Christian." Others expressed similar views related to their faith and religious beliefs, which will be addressed more fully when discussing the definitions of success.

Having a team and network immediately in place when arriving at college was helpful for Jenny. She said, "I couldn't have imagined succeeding the way that I did without that support system. So, I think the biggest part of being a student-athlete was just having that support system already in place." Jenny was able to step into her new environment with an added layer of confidence due to the built-in system of supportive teammates and resources.

Finally, several spoke generally of the lessons they learned; the values instilled, and the challenges that ultimately helped them grow personally, academically, and athletically.

Expectations

Being a student-athlete brought with it certain expectations. These expectations surface throughout the following sections, particularly when talking about the potential conflict between the student and athlete roles. One example of internal expectations and one example of external expectations were raised when talking about what being a student-athlete meant to the participants. Scott shared he felt a very strong external expectation to perform at a high level both on and off the field. Layla indicated she was very hard on herself as a player and became easily frustrated during practice and games, to the point of these expectations being detrimental.

Commitment

Similar to the expectations felt by the participants, the commitment necessary to being a student-athlete was a thread running throughout the entirety of each interview. Described as "huge" and a "sacrifice" by Riley, others highlighted the time commitment by discussing how hard they had to work, oftentimes without any kind of extended break. The hard work related to their athletic endeavors and to their academics as well.

Taking a positive approach, Chloe and Amelia thought the commitment required for being a student and an athlete prepared them for adulthood and the real world. Chloe commented, "Student athletics and college is your job before you get a job…so it prepares you for what you should expect in the workforce and things of that nature." Blake felt similarly and said, "I was proud of myself…but having that student-athlete sash…I went through stuff that not a lot of…regular college students go through. It's that day in, day out, grind of having, I would say, a full job of college sports, but having also classes and being able to keep up with those." Experiencing what amounted to a full-time job helped Chloe and Amelia feel more adequately prepared for life after college.

Culture and Relationships

Finally, to many of the participants, the meaning of being a student-athlete was synonymous with the culture and relationships of which they were a part. Being a member of a team was described as being part of a family, participating in a unique fellowship, and being part of something bigger than yourself.

Blake said, "It's the family aspect of being with them every single day…It was being part of a team, being part of a family…And I miss it every single day, of just being with the team. And it's something I really…appreciate now more than I was in the moment." George

shared he was inspired by the hardworking people on his team, and it caused him to "up [his] game." He went on to say, "the main takeaway I'm gonna have, like for the rest of my life, is just like being a part of, I know it's cliché, but it's something bigger than myself." Jake appreciated the built-in community of others with shared experiences available as soon as he arrived on campus his first year.

The student-athlete culture also encompassed being a good teammate. The role of teammate meant a shared sense of accountability; treating others with kindness and respect, while still being honest and pushing them to their full capabilities; and not being focused solely on the on-court successes, but the off-court as well. As an example, several participants brought up the sense of pride they felt in their high team GPA.

Conflict Between the Role of Student and Athlete

To garner understanding of the participants' unique experiences as student-athletes, I asked them if their role as student and role as athlete came into conflict with each other and why or why not. If a conflict was identified, I also inquired about whether the conflicting priorities increased, decreased, or remained consistent during their time in college.

Five of the former student-athletes felt these roles did not conflict. Layla recounted she was used to the pull of academics and athletics from high school and found it manageable to balance so academics were not compromised by sports. Riley indicated practice for his sports, track and cross country, was able to be arranged so it did not get in the way of classes. Amelia brought the conversation to faith, stating she did not feel a conflict because family and faith in God were at the top of her priority list, not student or

athlete. Interestingly, the only conflict she felt was when coaches would say the right things about priorities but would not act as though student came before athlete.

Two of the student-athletes, Jenny and Iris, explained attending an NCAA Division III school contributed to the lack of conflict. In fact, Iris stated that is why she chose a Division III school – to fully experience being a student and an athlete, and not feel like one was ruining the other.

Twelve of the former student-athletes shared they felt a definite conflict between their roles as student and athlete. For some the conflict was overwhelming, while for others it varied in magnitude. Trying to balance the two distinct roles was cited as being very difficult and the athlete role, more often than not, was prioritized.

Sophie shared she always felt in conflict and her focus on swimming was greater than her focus on academics because she was always pushing herself to the next level in the pool. Her perspective was not conducive to her academics because she did not put in the same level of effort.

Jake and Macy felt a similar pull and tried to bring balance to their lives. Macy pointed out the obligations and duties required to fulfill both roles and the resulting demand on time and energy. Jake echoed the balancing act could be tough, particularly with coaches focused on athletics, faculty focused on academics, and the student-athlete stuck in the middle.

Two of the participants, Scott and Travis, said balancing school and sports was especially challenging during their first year in college as they tried to make their respective teams and find a balance with everything else. Callie echoed these sentiments saying the first two years involved learning about the transition from high school to college

and understanding the athletics were at a completely different level. Jasmine and Scott indicated the student role was on the "back burner" when trying to balance studies and social opportunities.

George and Addy felt there was a conflict, but not as much as others. George indicated he felt his athletics and academics balanced out most of the time, but when classes got really busy, "it was hard to be mentally present on the pool deck for practice and some of the meets." Addy shared while she did not have scheduling conflicts, there were times when it was both physically and mentally exhausting to put energy into both practice and classes.

The student-athletes were open about the fact the conflict was real to them, not just perceived. Chloe highlighted this conflict by saying,

> "You're supposed to say that, you know, your academics come before athletics…Your academics do ride on your athletics so, or vice versa, in the sense of you can't really play without having at least bare minimum academics; however, in actual practice, they conflict each other a lot. And ten times out of ten, athletics will always win."

Summing up the conflict that extended throughout her career, Zoe said,

> "So, you have these responsibilities and obligations, and at the very least, even if it's not, you know, written in black…it's this concept and idea, and this sort of internal pressure, or external too, but that there's supposed to be a certain amount of time that you're dedicating to your craft, which as athletes, we all understand. That's part of our job…to be honing our craft at all times…There's only so much time to dedicate to all of those things, and for me, my internal compass was pointed towards being a student, and externally it was supposed to be being pointed towards being an athlete. So, there was conflict all of the time."

While many of the student-athletes tried to mitigate the conflict by staying ahead on their homework, taking tests on the team bus, and taking the same classes as a team, they also discussed a variety of practical implications of the conflict. These implications included failing courses due to prioritizing athletics, not going to class regularly or putting

in the necessary study time, not being able to take specific courses or declare the first-choice major due to scheduling, and professors not demonstrating an understanding of their schedule. The prioritization of athletics extended beyond the classroom and into their social lives as well. Zoe and Travis shared they did not have a social life and there was no time to develop one.

One interesting observation was shared by Zoe regarding the political aspect of making choices between academics and athletics. She indicated not meeting the coaches' expectations regarding participating in additional lifting and practice resulted in reduced playing time and a lack of trust. This mistrust, in turn, changes the overall dynamics with the coaches and teammates and you are considered "cancerous," even if it is not true.

As a follow up to the question regarding conflict, I asked the participants if the conflict increased or decreased throughout their time in college. Interestingly, no one said it solely increased over time. Addy recalled it remained relatively stable during her first three years, but the conflict increased during her senior year because she was named captain of her team. The unexpected result of this leadership role was the time dedicated to being a line of communication between teammates and coaches and taking on the emotional stress of teammates.

Callie talked about the transition from high school to college and then the difference between her first two and last two years of college. She recalled the conflict of academics and athletics decreased throughout high school and increased in college as she tried to sort out priorities before it started to decrease again.

Blake, Zoe, Sophie, and Iris expressed the conflict stayed about the same for them. Specifically, the conflict did not decrease, but their ability to handle it increased. They

stated they were able to better manage the internal conflict and stop feeling as much external pressure.

The other respondents found the conflict decreased over time. Jake highlighted clear communication as one key to this conflict – making sure he, his coaches, and instructors were all on the same page made a different in his experience. When he did have to decide between academics and athletics, his decision-making matrix was to consider the long-term impact of the choice and minimize regrets.

Other student-athletes shared being able to work out their priorities and understand the importance of their studies made a difference in the level of conflict. The experience was particularly salient for Sophie who shifted her thinking during her third and fourth year to focus more on academics and career decisions while keeping athletics in proper perspective.

Enhanced time management and study skills were cited as the most common reason for reducing conflict. Blake said he had to develop these skills quickly to stay on top of his classes and not let the work snowball. For many of the participants, not letting the work build up meant doing homework on the bus or late at night, learning how to study outside of class, and taking advantage of the mandatory study hours. Beyond time management, Macy recalled her increased knowledge of campus resources, such as study groups and office hours, as central to her ability to manage the stress and emotions of the conflict more effectively.

Having established the meaning of being a student athlete and the potential conflict existing for the participants, the following sections will focus on their definition of success and how it changed along their collegiate journey.

Defining Success

This section focuses on answering the first research question at the heart of the study: How do student-athletes define success? Additionally, I address how the student-athletes' definitions changed as they progressed through college and how they changed further following graduation.

Definitions

Four themes were identified in the participants' definitions of success: winning, improvement, finding balance, and receiving approval.

Winning

Eight of the student-athletes identified winning, or some aspect of winning, as central to their success definition at some point during college. When asked the question, Zoe said, "Of course, winning." Riley responded similarly saying, "To me, as a student-athlete, I had thought success would only mean winning." Others added personal, measurable aspects to their perspective on winning, including increased performance in practice and games, dropped time in practice and races, higher statistics, breaking school records, participation in regional and national championships, and increased playing time.

While defining success as winning was the first thing these participants cited, they were quick to add how the centrality of winning shifted as they grew and matured as individuals. These changes are discussed in more detail below.

Improvement

Closely related to winning, several of the student-athletes referenced the idea of improving in a particular area, skill, or character trait as central to their definition of success.

Sophie summed improvement up nicely when she said, "I had to be better than I was the day before." George felt improvement demonstrated individual success. He said, "I guess individual success for me, it all came down to improvement…if I improved on something, whether it was going a lifetime best time, or executing like a certain detail in the race that I was really focused on. Even if I improved on one thing…that is success. Because for me, that was what kept me motivated, was always finding ways to improve." Conversely George stated if he did not improve on anything in a particular practice or race, he felt unsuccessful. Layla said, "...But also as I practice on my own, was I like getting quicker? Was I getting faster? Were my skills becoming more refined and consistent over time?" Improvement for this group of student-athletes was tightly connected to performance.

Several of the participants highlighted improvement in personal character traits. The first of these traits was taking the focus off self and putting it on others. In this vein, Jasmine wanted to be a servant to those around her. In addition to defining success as improvement, as referenced above, Layla said, "but also being a good role model for my teammates and trying to help them out in any way I could." Callie similarly defined success as being a good teammate and being encouraging to those around her.

The second characteristic was developing a strong work ethic. Amelia was concerned with playing hard and giving her all on and off the court. Jenny shared success is having something to show for all of the training and hard work she put in. Iris felt success was attaining a goal as the result of hard work. She expressed this perspective is applicable to both large and small achievements – like winning an NCAA championship or doing well on an exam.

Finding Balance

Finding a balance between success on the court or field and in the classroom was cited by several student-athletes as how they defined success. In addition to winning and playing at a high level, maintaining a high GPA, making the dean's list, learning continuously, and earning a degree were mentioned as equally important. Blake highlighted this balance with his comments,

> "I think it's a balance between having success on the court and off the court. Obviously, success on the court, you know, going to the NCAA tournament…it was unbelievable. But I think another part of success was walking across the stage on graduation, saying I did it…I think it's a blend of all those things while just being a normal kid at the same time. So, I think if you're able to balance those things…that's what I would define as a successful student-athlete."

Similarly, Jake stated balance was the ability for him to engage in swimming, academics, and his personal life in a manner he wanted, without feeling overwhelmed. He said, "I definitely think I was doing too much at the beginning. And then I was able to do almost as much later on, but with a much happier mindset." Jake and Blake defined success as the progression to a more balanced life.

Receiving Approval

Three of the student-athletes cited the external motivation of having the approval of others, particularly parents and coaches, as part of their definition of success. Chloe said, "I defined success by the approval of people I held in high regard. So, what I mean by that is, if my dad and my mom were proud of me, I was successful. If my coaches were proud…I was successful…If they were proud of me, and they thought that I was being successful, then I thought I was successful." Travis tied external approval to his desire to be successful in the classroom. He shared, "I think the ultimate goal is getting a degree…So mine, you know, I just wanted to make my mom proud about going to school for free, getting a degree,

and stuff like that." Early in her athletic career, Macy sought external validation, which meant winning, being a starter, and receiving both academic and athletic accolades. In short, she defined success as "being the best" and being recognized for your abilities.

Changing Definitions During College

The previous section focused on the initial definition of success as described by the participants. This section accounts for the changes, if any, occurring in their definitions as they progressed through their college careers. While two student-athletes indicated there was very little change, the others described alterations in their definitions resulting from the amount of time and work involved in being a student and athlete, change in circumstances, change in goals, and change in perspective.

No Change

Two participants, Amelia and Chloe, stated over the course of their college career they did not experience any significant changes in their definition of success. Amelia expressed she experienced a more significant change while she was in high school, particularly related to her faith and how her relationship with God impacted her priorities and goals. Her definition of success in college, however, remained relatively consistent overall. Other than specific times when her "walk with Christ wasn't always as close as I would like it to be," she stated her definition of success "did fluctuate a little bit based on wins and individual performance, but ultimately it stayed the same." Chloe shared throughout her time in college she kept the same mindset of making the people around her proud.

Change in Circumstances

Three participants experienced changes in life circumstances impacting how they defined success. When initially talking about success, Travis said,

> "When you first get the call and get the scholarship, the goal is, you know, trying to make it to the NBA. Try and make the big bucks and stuff like that. But I think once you start looking at the bigger picture, you realize everybody can't go. Everybody can't make it. And, you know, the ultimate goal is to get the degree and get through college…So yeah, my perspective definitely changed…probably going into my junior year because you experience so much in college."

When I followed up and asked Travis if anything in particular happened his junior year to change his perspective, he shared he lost his grandfather. Related to what this tragedy meant regarding success, he said, "At that point, losing him, I pretty much had to step up and become the man of the household." He went on to say, "That's when everything flipped for me. I wanted to keep pursuing [basketball], but I was pretty much, I was torn down. I couldn't play basketball. I had a good season, but I wasn't in it how I was before." Personal loss caused Travis to see the importance of changing his definition of success to include non-sports related goals.

Injuries were mentioned as catalysts for change by two of the student-athletes. Zoe talked about her experience coming back from injury and how her definition of success shifted. Describing the experience as a change in mindset, she said, "At some point I dealt with injury, so rather than success being about winning a game, it was more so like, how do I get back onto the court? Am I, you know, training properly? Am I eating?" The focus was on how to be successful returning to her previous playing status.

Layla's injuries, on the other hand, were such that she had to medically retire mid-way through her junior year. There was a two-month period while she was waiting on the

results of her medical tests she used to reflect on her priorities and definition of success. Much of the reflection was focused on her faith and spirituality. She said,

> "Coming from a Christian aspect, I saw [the injuries] as time from God, that he gave me, to really change my focus in life and realize that basketball had become an idol and taken over my whole mindset. And I needed to shift my focus more towards building relationships with people…and building more of that faith and connection with God that'll ultimately change my mindset and outlook on life in a more positive way."

Following her retirement, she transitioned from student-athlete to student-coach/manager for her basketball team. Layla described her outlook after changing roles, "So, I think I am much better balanced now, and ultimately just have a more positive outlook on life, to not worry so much about the outcome and just looking for that continuous joy every day throughout life, and finding the joy in the littlest things, and being thankful for all that I've had, and I've experienced, and there's still a lot to come." As a result of significant changes in her life, Layla had more time to consider her shifting priorities and felt it was all for the best.

As mentioned previously, many of the student-athletes' definitions of success involved winning on some level. Zoe, however, shared how her definition started to change when basketball was not going well and winning was not happening. "So, it's always winning. But when it can't be winning or it's not winning, then it's kind of like, okay now, what is it?" She described how her focus began to encompass more than just winning.

> "I wanted to graduate with a 4.0…that is what I did! I wanted to have…other things going on, so I joined a sorority. It was about me trying to then expand what my college life was, rather than it just being centered on basketball, because basketball was not going well. And that was just affecting other things…So it was like, what are my relationships like with my teammates? Like, can I trust the people in this locker room? How are those relationships being dealt with?"

The circumstances these student-athletes experienced caused them to have to adapt their definitions of success, which turned out to be a positive experience for them.

Amount of Work and Time

Three of the participants recognized the impact of the amount of time and work required for simultaneously being a student and an athlete and the subsequent changes this impact required on how they defined success.

Blake highlighted the initial shock of juggling classes and practices his first year and how difficult the transition was from high school to college. He commented on how much harder the practices were and how much more demanding the classes were. "You're just trying to ride the ship honestly. These practices are way harder. You're just trying to fit in. You're trying to get as much playing time as you can all while juggling a full class schedule." The change for Blake occurred slowly over time as he recognized success was more about the little things. "And then, as the years go on, you get smarter, everything slows down a little bit more, and you're able to focus on little things and really trying to succeed. And I think you know, by the senior year, you're just trying to enjoy every minute." While the transition from high school to college was initially difficult, Blake found that he was able to enjoy more success as time passed.

Riley recognized how competitive the college athletic atmosphere was, and in addition to the in-season and on-campus training, he identified the importance of training on his own during the summers as a crucial aspect of success. "A lot of the training is in the summer when you're not even around your teammates and training on your own and certain things like that. So, there was a lot that I just didn't realize would have to

contribute toward success but did." Riley recognized the additional commitment of time and effort it was going to take to be successful.

Similarly, Scott recognized areas in his life needing to change in order to be successful and maintain athletic and academic competitiveness. He reported setting his standards high from the beginning because he wanted to play football and pursue a pre-med academic path. However, it did not take long for his focus to skew heavily toward football, meaning his grades started to decrease. The realization this change was happening, coupled with the strong desire to be successful in both, caused Scott to take corrective action. "So that ended up making me get rid of basically my social life, going out and stuff…to maintain being competitive." He also worked more closely with his academic advisor to help with managing priorities on and off the field.

Change in Perspective

Finally, many of the student-athletes articulated an overarching change in personal perspective causing them to rethink and redefine success.

Zoe discussed the frustration of being part of a system that did not work.

> "We're being put in a system, right? So, you have these coaches and other people who are in charge of it…You have coaches who have essentially created this system, and you're coming into it. And the hope is that you're coming into the system believing that it can work…Your hope is that your coaches are experienced enough and flexible enough themselves, that if the system is not working, that they will be willing to adjust it…The problem is that when it's not working, there is supposed to be some level of adjustment. And there are a lot of coaches who are unwilling to adjust because their idea is, it's you all, not my system…That becomes a disappointing place."

Zoe went on to describe further disappointments related to her experience with coaches who did not exhibit the qualities they were expecting from their players, such as showing up every day at your best and being willing to be adaptable and flexible. All of this

disappointment resulted in a level of friction between the coaches and players, and ultimately, in Zoe's opinion, losing games. However, this experience caused her to adjust and pivot related to her definition of success. She focused, instead, on relationships with teammates, joined a sorority, and focused on achieving her goal of a 4.0 GPA.

Unlike Zoe, many of the student-athletes did not have a series of specific events that caused their definition to change. Instead, the definition morphed slowly over their time as their perspective changed due to a variety of experiences.

Riley was focused on winning when he began his college career. As he progressed, he realized there were a lot of different ways to win and be successful. As an example, he shared his best individual race turned out not to be a good team race. This result caused him to rethink his place in the team, how he fit into the bigger picture, and how his performance may or may not impact his teammates. He subsequently challenged them to understand their limits and felt he was successful when he knew he had pushed his teammates farther than they realized they could go. He said, "That's really what it took was to push all the way beyond and find your breaking point, and then just use that knowledge to know how hard you can push yourself, because sometimes you push yourself to a certain point, and tell yourself this is all I have, but usually that's not always true." After experiencing a shift in perspective, Riley turned his focus not only to realizing his own full potential, but also helping his teammates realize their own.

For Jenny, the change occurred when her focus on comparing herself with others, specifically related to performance in the pool, shifted to an equal amount of focus on her grades. The shift in thinking, and subsequent release of pressure, made her feel happier about the way she was swimming.

Addy focused on her effort in college rather than the results of her athletic competitions. For a variety of reasons, she did not improve as an athlete in college, compared to her performance in high school. She had to accept the fact success was not defined by her times in the pool, because if it was, she would have been a failure during her four years in college. Sophie, on the other hand, did not experience the drop in results like Addy. However, she altered her definition of success in her fourth year, after three years of winning, to include enjoyment of the sport no matter the results. She also recognized graduating itself was a success, having participated in athletics for four years.

Jake and Macy described an internal process led to their change in definition. Jake shared as he progressed through high school and college, he made an intentional effort to intrinsically define success. He still cared about what those around him thought, but he said, "At the end of the day I'm either happy with what I've done or not happy with what I've done because of what I think. So, I think that's been a good thing for keeping me grounded." After focusing on winning for much of her career, Macy made a shift to focus more on internal validation and a growth mindset. She recognized she can still have lofty goals, like winning a championship, but she can also focus on smaller goals too. In summary, she described her new definition of success as, "being the best version of yourself you can, in that moment, because each moment has different conditions, different circumstances, and some of those things are outside of the locus of your control." For Jake and Macy, a change in perspective meant an increased focus on internal processes and validation.

George credited his change in definition of success to his maturation process and increase in emotional intelligence. Initially, he felt unsuccessful if he did not get the time in

a race for which he planned. He said, "That kind of becomes toxic…puts a lot of pressure on the end result." Instead, he found it helpful to focus on smaller details and celebrate little successes along the way. Iris also adopted a change in her definition as a result of experience in life. Specifically, she recognized what is most important is not money and winning. Instead, having the ability to push through difficult times and achieve your goals is more important.

Callie transitioned from being focused on athletic and academic performance to placing a greater emphasis on being a good teammate and preparing herself specifically to be at her best for her teammates. Layla's change in definition also included her impact on her teammates and added the ability to learn from mistakes. She said,

> "Looking back now, I would definitely say, like self-improvement is definitely like a big part of that. Like still refining the skills and being more consistent and disciplined, and them becoming like second nature. But also leaving a positive impact on the teammates around you. I think that's a big part of success as well. And then…learning from your mistakes, taking what you've learned from your mistakes, and if you can take what you learn from the sports world and apply it to your real life. I think that's super important."

Additionally, Layla highlighted having a positive outlook and a positive impact on others as necessary for success. And as mentioned above, her faith played a significant role in these realizations after recognizing basketball had taken over her mindset and her focus needed to shift to faith and relationships.

Jasmine's change in definition was also related to her faith. She identified the time after her second year as the phase that started to shift how she defined success. During this time, she realized she did not have to be the best player on the floor to be "worthy" and fulfilling her purpose. She stated, "God didn't put me in this position just for me. Like, it's also to be a servant to those around me. So, then my purpose became more than just me."

Jasmine identified her purpose as being "much bigger" and more closely aligned to her relationship with God.

Changing Definitions after College

Having identified how the student-athletes defined success in college and how these definitions changed as they moved through the collegiate experience, this section focuses on the changes that took place after graduation. As former student-athletes, I asked them to reflect on their time since college and discuss how their post-graduation experiences further shaped their definition of success. The responses are divided into the following categories: change in focus, change in goals, and change in perspective.

Change in Focus

Six of the student-athletes identified a change in focus as influencing their definition of success following graduation.

Blake's general focus moved away from sports and became more directed at life in general. He said, "I think it's definitely changed…I do have goals for myself in life, but I feel like I just want to take it day by day, because, you know, life can hit you at any moment, and I feel like staying present is so key, and if I'm able to do that, then I feel like I will have success in the future." Blake's focus changed to being more about staying present and in the moment.

Riley, Chloe, and Jasmine identified a change in focus related to their greater purpose as part of the shift in their definition of success. Consistent with what brought meaning to him as a student-athlete, Riley spoke about an elevated sense of personal fulfillment and responsibility. He stated, "You could be in what some people could really define as a very successful job within a great environment, that sometimes it's just not

what you're happy doing. And I think not just happiness, but a sense of fulfillment now is much more important to me in success, because I think about it…I need to find a place where I can be fulfilled in my work." Chloe shared thoughts in a similar vein, highlighting the COVID-19 pandemic as a specific time that caused her to think differently about success. She shared, "My definition has changed…I've finally taken that time, and COVID definitely helped. Not being able to go anywhere always helps must make you sit down and think about stuff, figuring out what actually brings me joy and what actually defines my happiness. And as long as I am trying my hardest and still progressing to get to those goals that I've made for myself, that is success to me." She continued to describe her change in focus and the importance of her own interpretation of success, not relying on someone else's.

Jasmine's shift in focus centered on her faith and how consistently she follows God's definition of success. "You know now is so much more different and just thinking about what's God's perspective, and where he's asking me to be? What steps is he asking me to take right now? What steps is he asking me to take next year?" In relation to her current job as a coach, she also mentioned the difference between being "you-focused, with blinders on" as a student-athlete and seeing the big picture as a coach and mentor. She said, "When I think about even just success for my players as student-athletes, I want it to be different for them and I want to help facilitate that as much as I can just for them to understand. The stat line doesn't make or break who you are…your identity, in seeing success as who you are, as a person, cannot come from this [stat] line." Jasmine's definition of success meant something much different when working with her players from what it did as an individual student-athlete.

Macy shared she plans to increase her focus on intangibles are not based in achievements or accolades. As a recent graduate, she also recognizes something that seems incredibly stressful in the moment, may not be memorable after time has passed. She referred to this focus as staying mentally regulated in the moment.

Having graduated, Addy's new definition of success is figuring out her own goals and following through on things she wants to do for herself, not things required of her as part of an academic or athletic program.

Change in Goals

Three of the student-athletes experienced a change in goals following their time in college. Closely tied to Chloe's change in focus described above, she identified making a difference in people's lives as a new goal. Travis's response to this question related to his big-picture goals of accomplishing more than just getting a job. He said, "The way that I view success now is…it's always changing. I think it's always changing…I'm gonna get a job, and I get a job. But if you want to elevate, you have to do more." Scott's overall goals following graduation were to make it to the NFL and then go to medical school. As such, his short-term goals became much more practical in nature – preparing physically and mentally for the NFL draft and completing shadowing hours for medical school applications. Finishing college and facing the prospect of the next phase of life caused shifts in the overarching goals of these student-athletes.

Change in Perspective

Finally, eight of the student-athletes highlighted changes in a particular perspective as the result of their change in success definition.

Riley identified two unique aspects of his perspective changed. First, he does not feel like people have to put themselves in a box, particularly related to attending college. He said, "It seems like after high school, you can really do whatever you want, and there's a lot of different ways to be successful. Some people go to college…and that really doesn't work out for them. Some people just don't go to college at all and find something that really works, and they could be happy with it." And second, he feels that life is not just about finding happiness, but also having a sense of fulfillment and coming to terms with everything that you have done in your life up to the present. Specifically in relation to pursuing a coaching career, he shared,

> "But a big part of fulfillment for me…is being okay with everything that I've done at this stage and moving on from it. I think it's pretty easy actually to think about the past, and when we think about the good times, to think, what was missing there? And what more could I have done?...What can I do now? And it's nothing, because it's in the past. So, I think what's healthy now is not just…what I did or didn't do in my career, what I could have done better. But to just instead of focus on that, I can take what I did best, and take what I think I could have done better, and just set that as an example for the athletes I'll be around."

The others shared varying changes to their perspective. Amelia realized her approach had to change following college. She said, "For example, today I'm trying to [work hard] and working hard is me not getting frustrated or giving up…my mind was, okay, I gotta keep going, let me not quit on it, even though it's not easy." Amelia recognized working hard in the real world is a lot different from working hard in college.

Callie's perspective was formed as a student-athlete and continued to develop beyond graduation. She prioritized preparing herself for work and life and is trying her best to learn from what happens, regardless of the outcome, good or bad.

While she admits to being the same person she was in college, Zoe decided not to put as much pressure on herself or her decisions as she did when trying to balance her

roles as student and athlete. She stated, "I'm not putting as much pressure on myself, and creating stress for myself has just gotten better. And so, the muscle is just getting stronger." She went on to share,

> "I'm in grad school now, and it's not what I thought I was gonna be doing, but…I feel good about my decisions, my choices. So, there's just kind of strength in that. Where now you have these bigger life things that are happening, where it's not even, though it's a big thing to us. Then it's not as small as being an athlete and winning a game. It's these bigger life things that are happening, and it just kind of helps with that, having had to practice doing it then."

Reducing the amount of personal pressure and recognizing the relative insignificance of things she experienced as a student-athlete have helped Zoe shift her perspective.

Jasmine conveyed it is no longer about the accumulation of statistics making or breaking who she is. She tries to instill this perspective in her players as a coach.

> "And just being able to understand that, and then applying that, continuing to apply that to my own life and, like, my success isn't wrapped up in how successful I am as a coach…But to understand that now success is, how obedient was I?...You know, now, just, it's so much more different and just thinking about what's God's perspective, and where he's asking me to be? What steps is he asking me to take right now? What steps is he asking me to take next year?"

What matters in Jasmine's new perspective is a focus on the big picture, coupled with her faith.

Travis offered two points of view related to how his perspective has changed – one practical and one philosophical. First, he said there are a lot of people with college degrees, and he is learning about the necessity of networking. And second, he emphasized the importance of not being afraid to fail and how failing is the only way to learn.

Iris shifted her perspective on success to remind herself success is subjective, and she can make the definition what she wants it to be. She no longer has to rely on comparing herself to peers or teammates and their accomplishments.

Finally, Jake shared he might not care as much as he thought about the things he wanted and worked hard for throughout his college experience. He said, "As I go forward, I think that my definition of success might become like, making the best decision on the margins and then…trying to be grateful and trying to be happy." He still wants to maximize his potential, but his definition of success has the added components of gratitude and happiness.

This section provided themes from the responses of student-athletes to the questions related broadly to research question 1. The following section focuses on research question 2 and addresses how the student-athlete identity and definition of success are related.

Student-Athlete Identity and Success: Research Question 2

The purpose of research question 2 was to have the participants consider their student-athlete identity and its influence on their definition of success. All of the student-athletes acknowledged their definition of success was, in fact, influenced by their identity as a student-athlete. The degree of this connection varied from person to person, with some expressing an extremely tight coupling and others focusing more on other aspects of their identity.

Scott provided a holistic response tying his student-athlete identity to all of the qualities he learned while being a student-athlete and how they connect to success in life and career. In summary, he said, "My identity as a student-athlete has contributed to my definition of success by emphasizing the importance of being able to balance my life while managing my time, working hard, trusting in teamwork, being resilient through losses, and being able to handle pressure. I feel these qualities are important for success in any

career." He identified a variety of qualities that were part of his student-athlete identity and shaped his definition of success. In summary, he said, "My identity as a student-athlete has contributed to my definition of success by emphasizing the importance of being able to balance my life while managing my time, working hard, trusting in teamwork, being resilient through losses, and being able to handle pressure. I feel these qualities are important for success." Qualities such as time management, a strong work ethic, discipline, teamwork, and resilience were highlighted by Scott as stemming from his student-athlete identity.

Macy also identified a set of characteristics defined both success and her student-athlete identity, including a strong work ethic and pushing herself to the limit. For her, success took on new meaning when her identity included leadership roles. These roles allowed her to look outward and assist other people with being successful and reaching their goals.

The definition of success in college shared by Zoe, Jasmine, and Chloe highlights the very tight interconnectedness between the role of student and the role of athlete. Zoe's definition was cultivated through her student-athlete identity and focused most on winning and positive outcomes. She said, "The basic concepts of winning and positive outcomes are integrated in the student-athlete identity, which is the way I have identified most of my life. I do not know if I could think of a clear distinction between my definition of success as a student-athlete and my general definition of success. They are inextricably intertwined." Chloe further shared the significance of the relationship between her student-athlete identity and definition of success and the focus on winning. She stated, "My identity as a student-athlete significantly impacted my definition of success. In sports, winning equals

success and that translated into my idea of success – top of the class, being the best statistician at work, etcetera. If I am not the best and win at whatever I try, I consider that a failure." Jasmine shared her identity as a student-athlete actually created her definition of success. In fact, she went so far as to say she believed herself to be a failure if she did not live up to her own definition of success. Jasmine said, "My belief was that my purpose was to be a student-athlete at that point in time. So, everything I ate, drank, and breathed surrounded that. If my stats weren't where they should be, or if I wasn't fulfilling the role my team needed me to, I would see myself as failing." She went on to talk about her single-minded focus and how it detracted from other areas of her life including family, relationships, spirituality, and academics. "I would neglect the positive in my life holistically and fail to contribute that to a holistic success. Because of my athlete identity, success became one-dimensional – tunnel visioned." Each of these three student-athletes identified such a significant connection between their role as student and role as athlete that success or failure in one was equivalent to success or failure in the other.

Layla confirmed her identity as a student-athlete determined her definition of success and shared the transition in her identity that took place after experiencing injury and being forced to retire from her sport of basketball. Layla shared,

> "Before my injuries, I would have determined success as stats because I thought my work in the gym should have translated to numbers in games. After my injuries, I would say my definition of success is giving full effort 100 percent of the time. Sometimes that'll translate to good stats and sometimes it won't. However, all we can control are our effort and attitude, so success should not be based on pure stats and outcome numbers. Some people are more naturally skilled than others, so they don't need to work as hard. Those who have to work harder typically can overcome the tough obstacles with more resilience, and therefore, reach success."

The different perspective forced on her by retirement caused Layla to identify effort and attitude as, ultimately, more important than winning.

In high school and early college, George saw himself only as "[George] the swimmer." His identity was completely tied up in results in the pool. George's experiences in college, along with realizing there is much more to sports and life than the times he was swimming, helped shift his identity to be more well-rounded. Part of this journey included his role as team captain, which forced his focus to shift outward onto his teammates.

Similarly, Addy assumed more of an identity as emotional support for her teammates. As a result, she focused on being a good teammate, setting a good example, and having a good mindset.

Iris's identity as a student-athlete resulted in the perspective that her definition and standards of success are higher than her non-athlete peers. She shared all the training and work required to be a student-athlete results in student-athletes being able to push themselves further and have a higher breaking point.

Amelia's student-athlete identity influenced her definition of success, but this definition was also tied closely to her spiritual identity – consistent with her responses to the other questions.

> "My identity as a student-athlete influenced my definition of success by putting an emphasis on the effort given. Being a student-athlete with my identity rooted in Christ, success to me was always more dependent on making my Heavenly Father proud and that came simply by working with all my heart with the goal of giving him the glory. Being a student-athlete emphasized the effort part of this definition of success."

The outcome of the dual nature of these identities for Amelia was a specific emphasis on giving maximum effort.

In relation to the connection between his student-athlete identity and definition of success, Blake said, "I think it just went to show myself I am able to do anything I can put my mind into. I never want to compare myself to others. The quote, 'comparison is a thief

of joy,' is something I live by. So, my definition of success is only determined by me, and if I felt proud of myself, then I felt like I succeeded." Blake moved toward an inward focus on accomplishing his own personal goals, rather than comparing himself to the success of teammates and others around him.

Cassidy noticed a change in her student-athlete identity mid-way through her college career. She said,

> "I feel like my first two years of college, again there's a bigger emphasis on the performance aspect. So, I feel like I put more of my identity in how I was performing in both soccer and academics. And then…as the years went on, more so on how I was being as a person for my teammates and my peers, and more so on if I prepared myself, rather than the outcome of what actually happened."

Cassidy's focus, and consequently her identity, shifted from a performance-based definition of success to a definition elevating the idea of being a better person.

Jenny shared in her student-athlete identity, she valued the student identity more than the athlete identity, because she recognized early in her swimming career competitive swimming would not be a part of her life forever. She expressed gratitude for being successful in both athletics and academics and highlighted the advantage of having two things to focus on – particularly when one was not going as well as expected.

While others may have felt this way, Sophie verbalized her definition of success would have been completely different had she not been a student-athlete. She shared, in her experience, those who identify as student-athletes have so much internal pressure they make it harder on themselves to be successful.

Travis focused more on the practical benefits of being a student-athlete and how they contributed to his success in particular situations. He shared, "My [student-athlete] identity changed everything. Being a student-athlete made school easier for me…meeting

new people and learning how to network with different cultures." He also connected his student-athlete identity to some of the personal challenges he faced while in college, particularly the loss of several close friends and former teammates. He said, "It also gave me a sense of peace knowing that everyone knew who I was on campus, so when I was dealing with a tough time, I knew seeing people would change my perspective those days." Travis's identity as a student-athlete assisted him in overcoming very challenging, and potentially devastating, experiences.

Success and Career Transition: Research Question 3

The following sections discuss the participants' career aspirations, how they prepared for the transition from college athletics to the next phase of life, and how their definition of success may have influenced the transition.

Career Goals

The participants in this study varied in their career aspirations, and in many cases, their career plans evolved as they progressed through college and beyond graduation. Table 2 lists both the initial and current career plans of the student-athletes interviewed.

Three of the student-athletes planned to play their sport professionally. Travis studied criminal justice in college but wanted to make it to the NBA. Late in his college experience he realized playing in the NBA was unlikely and, instead, pursued a master's degree in criminal justice. He now plans to work in cyber security. From a young age, Jasmine was obsessed with medicine and hospitals. She started on a pre-med track but changed her major to psychology after transferring schools. Jasmine played professional basketball in Italy for a short period of time before deciding to return to the United States to attend graduate school and further study psychology. Scott was inspired by his father to

be a student-athlete and pursue medicine, specifically to be a cardiothoracic surgeon. These plans are on hold as he pursues his dream to play in the NFL. Depending on the length of his NFL career, he plans to eventually attend medical school (with a short NFL career) or go into business (with a long NFL career).

Table 2: Participant Career Plans

Name	Initial Career Plans	Current Career Plan
Blake	Business/Sport Mgmt.	Business
Scott	NFL/Cardiothoracic Surgeon	NFL/Business/Medical School
Chloe	Forensic Science/Law	Criminal Justice
Zoe	Law	Library Information Science
Travis	NBA/Criminal Justice	Cyber Security
Amelia	Teaching	Criminal Justice
Layla	Physician Assistant	Physician Assistant (gap year)
Riley	Business	Sport Coach
Jasmine	Anesthesiologist/Pro Basketball	Psychology
Callie	Medicine	Occupational Therapy
Jenny	Environmental	Environmental/Law
George	Accounting	Financial Services
Addy	Unsure	Applying for jobs
Iris	Physician	MA in Public Health/ Medical School
Sophie	Accounting	Accounting/ Swimming Coach

Table 2 (cont'd)

Name	Initial Career Plans	Current Career Plan
Jake	Economics/Comp. Sci.	Consulting
Macy	Physician	Physician/Surgeon

The other participants displayed interest in a variety of fields including law, teaching, business, and various areas of healthcare. Most of them are pursuing something different from what they studied in college or originally wanted to do.

One of the challenges that surfaced in multiple interviews is the inability to pursue a particular major or field due to the time commitment or scheduling conflicts associate with being a student-athlete. Chloe experienced this frustration and shared the following,

> "My first option, I believe, was forensic science. And then my second option was a type of pre-law track. But…the actual practicality of like just aligning your schedule…But you also have to think about the aspect of, okay, if I do this forensic science, and chemistry is kicking my butt, I don't really actually have the time to go and sit down and find a tutor, actually spend additional time to learn this because I got practice, or I gotta go to this game, or I'm tired because we just did a four hour workout. So, things like that, seeing like the actual expectations and the course schedule is like, yeah, let me just do something a little bit simpler."

The following section highlights the process each of the student-athletes went through to transition from college to the next phase of life and how their definition of success influenced the transition.

Preparation for Transition and the Influence of Definition of Success

Responses to the questions associated with this topic required the participants to layer their career preparation process on top of their evolving definition of success. As such, all of the participants prepared for their transition out of college and applied their

definition of success in a unique way. The uniqueness of each participant's experience and their resulting responses highlighted two themes. First, the influence of the definition of success on career transition is highly individual and personal. And second, the nature of the process associated with defining success is iterative – each stage of development, including career transition, requires the individual to evolve in their thinking and decision-making. Following are examples illustrative of the uniqueness of the participants' responses.

Blake

Blake indicated he was not afraid of the transition from college to the next stage of life but felt the need to prepare for the cut-throat nature of the real world. In this regard, he indicated sports had provided him with a competitive edge. He said,

> "But I felt like, you know, the real world is different. It's a really cutthroat world. And people, you know, they'll just take whatever. And I feel like that's also something I can take is keeping that competitive edge. I feel like in business everything is competitive and if you want to be successful, you've got to take what's yours and not be afraid to fail."

He also felt like the time in between school and work was a time of adjustment, especially since it felt different not to be playing a sport. Blake's definition of success factored into the transition in the form of accountability, particularly with this gap in his life. He acknowledged it was difficult to stay focused without mandatory exercise sessions and study halls and identified intentional accountability with those around him, including former coaches, as necessary for success.

Scott

Scott wanted to be pre-med, prepare for the MCAT, and play in the NFL. He realized, however, toward the end of college he had to be more realistic with his plans and available

time. He ended up taking business courses to supplement his education, instead of the registering for the pre-med requirements. Scott also realized his career plans not only depended on whether or not he made the NFL, but the length of his NFL career. He shared he would likely pursue medicine if his NFL career was short, but he would follow the business path if his NFL career lasted longer.

Scott's definition of success revolved around competitiveness and the balancing of continuous learning in sports and education. He faced a lot of adversity toward the end of college and realized, as part of his definition of success, his competitiveness and learning needed to translate into the next phase of life. Specifically, he needed to be tough-minded and believe in himself.

Layla

Layla was forced to retire from college athletics due to a series of injuries. During her final year in college, she used the opportunity afforded by a more open schedule to move forward with plans to become a physician assistant. She is currently taking a gap year prior to entering a physician assistant program.

With a success definition focused heavily on performance and refinement of skills, Layla's retirement forced her to consider alternate definitions. As she began the transition out of college, her expanded perspective played a significant role in how she defined success. Layla said, "But I think my life changed around for the better in terms of a lot of the lessons I've learned and how I can go forward into the real world now with great friends that I never had before…But I'm very much trying to work on my mental and emotional state of mind, as well as my social relationships." In this context, Layla was able to build the social and emotional health that were lacking and find a healthy balance in life.

Jenny

Jenny described her career plans in college as "up and down." Due to her uncertainty, she chose not to give them full consideration until her final year. Even then, she wanted to put everything into her final swim season and placed her career pursuit on the back burner. She ultimately decided on an environmentally focused career and is planning to go to law school in the next few years.

Jenny felt unsuccessful compared to her peers, because she did not have a job lined up during her last year of college. She shifted her definition of success away from relying on comparing herself to others and, instead, decided to focus on waiting patiently for what is right for her.

Addy

Similar to Jenny, Addy felt nervous others were "farther down the path" toward their careers. Her feelings caused her to want to pull back from the career exploration process and even took away some of her urge to compete athletically. However, once she started sending out job applications, Addy discovered she could actually leverage her experience as a student-athlete and the skills she learned, including time management, leadership, and dedication, to market herself more effectively.

Her fully evolved definition of success in college included being an optimist, a good teammate, and someone who can be relied upon when assuming a leadership role. She is now applying these traits to her job search.

Jake

Jake began thinking about his transition out of athletics from a very early age. He knew he would eventually stop swimming and decided to be prepared for the "moment

after." In college, this foresight translated into joining multiple student organizations to help determine the best career path. He ultimately landed in consulting.

Jake's definition of success in college was intrinsically centered and focused on traits such as discipline, time management, and the ability to lift others up. He has more recently augmented this definition to make it broader and include maximizing his potential – specifically in his career moving forward.

Macy

Macy planned to be a physician since she was five years old. She shared her belief there is no better way to prepare for a career in medicine than being a student-athlete. As such, she identified several intangible traits possessed by student-athletes, including mental and physical fortitude, leadership, and compassion.

Macy's initial definition of success was externally focused and did not take the intangible, invisible traits into consideration. As she progressed through college, Macy realized being the best version of herself was, in fact, success. She said, "I learned that you can do your best and still not technically be the best. But doing your best is just as important, if not more important than what others think." As a result, she has felt more successful and satisfied.

Each of these experiences provides evidence of the unique path the student-athletes journeyed to arrive at their present definition of success. The stories also highlight the iterative process required to adapt the student-athletes' definitions of success to the various stages of their development.

Summary

This chapter presented the research findings from interviews conducted with seventeen former student-athletes. The opening section highlighted the participants' responses to questions regarding what it means to be a student-athlete and whether or not a conflict exists when navigating the role of student and athlete simultaneously. The remainder of the chapter was dedicated to information related to the study's three main research questions.

First, I outlined the themes related to their definition of success and then discussed how the individual definitions change during and after college. Second, I documented how their identity as a student-athlete impacted their definition of success. And third, I discussed the participants' career aspirations, how they prepared for the transition from college athletics to the next phase of life, and how their definition of success may have influenced this transition. The following chapter includes a discussion of the findings, as well as recommendations for enhanced student-athlete services and further research.

CHAPTER 5:

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to define success from the student-athletes' perspective and gain a better understanding of how their student-athlete identity and perspective on career transition informed this definition. The goal of this research was to present qualitative, descriptive data that will help universities and student services and athletic personnel to have a more nuanced understanding of success from the student athlete's perspective and result in improvements for the student-athlete experience.

This chapter contains discussion of the findings outlined in chapter 4 and future research possibilities to address the research questions:

1. How do student-athletes define success?
2. How has the student-athlete's identity influenced their definition of success?
3. How has the student-athlete's definition of success informed their career transition?

The participants ascribed significant meaning to their identity and experiences as student-athletes and most felt at least some conflict between their role as student and athlete. Their definitions of success spanned four general categories including: experiencing winning, making improvement, finding balance, and receiving approval. In all but two cases, the student-athletes experienced varying levels of change in their definition of success as they progressed through college and most experienced additional or continued change beyond graduation.

All the student-athletes acknowledged their identity as a student-athlete influenced their definition of success. The degree of connection between identity and definition varied

across the participants and the reasons given and experiences shared were highly individualized.

Each of the student-athletes shared how they applied their definition of success to their career transition process. The responses varied widely due to the highly individualized and layered nature of the process of connecting their success definition to their career transition.

This study contributes two significant findings to the current body of literature. First, defining success is an iterative process that occurs over time and is the result of series of events or occurrences that happen around or to the student-athlete. And second, the overwhelming lack of intentionality surrounding the process of defining success and the largely reactive nature of the student-athletes' decision making processes are indicated by the overall uniqueness of the participants' experiences and responses. Following the Interpretation of Findings and the Implications for Theory, the section on Implications for Practice provides suggestions for a more proactive approach to addressing the topic of success with student-athletes.

Interpretation of the Findings

While the experiences, definitions, and responses shared by the student-athletes varied significantly, there were common themes and threads running through the interviews. These themes, as described in chapter 4, are connected to the higher education literature and theoretical framework of the study in the following sections.

Meaning of Being a Student-Athlete and Conflicting Identities

The student-athletes shared what being a student-athlete meant to them as context for the interviews and subsequent responses to questions. This study indicates student-

athletes ascribe a significant level of meaning to being a student-athlete. Several participants highlighted the overarching, positive significance of the meaning of being a student-athlete. Some focused on the qualities acquired through the student-athlete experience, including versatility, work ethic, leadership, discipline, and responsibility. Other themes constructed from the student-athletes' responses were consistent with the current body of literature. First, the internal and external expectations experienced by many of the participants in this study led to high motivation in both academic and athletic settings (Gaston Gayles, 2004; Hart et al., 2024; Tudor & Ridpath, 2018). A smaller group were less motivated academically, reflecting the findings of other studies (Lucas & Lovaglia, 2008; Simons et al., 1999). Second, this study found the commitment required for being a student-athlete was significant, both in time and effort. For some, the commitment had a positive influence, preparing them for life after college. For others, the commitment had a negative influence, representing sacrifice of academic, career, and social opportunities. (Gaston-Gayles, 2004; O'Neil, Amorose, & Pierce, 2021). And third, the uniqueness of the culture and relationships built in the student-athlete community (Eiche, Sedlacek, & Adams-Gaston, 1997; Sedlacek, 2004; Sowa & Gressard, 1983) remained a consistent theme throughout this study.

The concept of conflicting identities between student and athlete aligns with previously conducted research (Adler & Adler, 1987; O'Neil, Amorose, & Pierce, 2021) and the attempt to balance the significant demands from both sides (Aquilina, 2013) is central to the student-athlete discussion and provides additional context for defining success.

The research suggests (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Lu et al., 2018; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005), and 12 of the 17 student-athletes in this study confirmed, while it is experienced at

varying levels of intensity, there is a conflict between the role of student and the role of athlete. The level to which the student-athletes experienced a conflict between their identities as students and athletes varied from overwhelming to minimal. Conflict was felt most often when the student-athlete's sport was in-season but included both practice and competitive events as strong contributors to decisions having to be made regarding time and effort put into academics and athletics.

None of the participants indicated the conflict between their athletic and student identities increased in intensity during their time in college. Many of the participants identified their first and second years in college as the timeframe during which the conflict was most prominent and challenging. However, following the first two years, they shared the conflict either decreased over time or stayed consistent throughout the remainder of their college career. The reason provided by the student-athletes for the consistency or decrease of the conflict during their third and fourth years was they developed skills and decision-making strategies that helped them reconcile the conflict and achieve balance. While there is a significant body of literature addressing the overall conflict experienced by student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013; Comeaux, 2010; Healy et al., 2016; O'Neil, Amorose, & Pierce, 2021), resolving the conflict and strategies to achieve balance are areas needing further study.

The student-athletes who did not experience conflict between the two roles in the same way as the other participants highlighted specific factors that mitigated the conflict. Included in these factors were the type of university selected, specifically Division III schools that did not offer scholarships or have the same focus on athletics; finding solutions

to the conflict they experienced in high school, so it was not a factor in college; and having higher priorities on which to focus, such as spirituality.

Definitions of Success

At the heart of this study, with the intention of filling a significant gap in the research, is the question of how student-athletes, as individuals, define success. Not surprisingly, each of the student-athletes interviewed provided a unique and nuanced definition of success. Within these distinctive responses, several broad themes were constructed from the responses as important factors in defining success. These themes and their ties to the literature base and theoretical foundations are discussed briefly below.

The first two themes, winning in athletics and achieving improvement in skills, abilities, and results, were closely associated in the participants' responses. While the theme of winning is not surprising based on the literature related to the conflicting worlds experienced by student-athletes (Carodine et al., 2001; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013), only about half of the student-athletes in this study cited winning as central to their definition of success. Those who did highlight the importance of winning went on to explain how their perspective changed over time as they matured as individuals and balanced their priorities as student-athletes. In a similar vein, the student-athletes' experiences taught them consistent improvement in skills and abilities meant success on the court or in the pool. Similar to winning, the student-athletes identified their desire to improve as changing over time into a more holistic view of improvement and becoming a factor that ultimately spilled over into their academics.

These changes in perspective are consistent with the theoretical framework around which this study is constructed. The process of developing identity and purpose

(Chickering & Reisser, 1993) naturally results in focusing on priorities that display a more holistic perspective. While winning can remain important, the need to win as part of the identity is reduced as the student-athlete develops their identity around a "solid sense of self" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 181). Additionally, the student-athletes' purpose can begin to shift away from success on the field or court and toward vocational and personal interests, and interpersonal relationships. The focus on personal improvement is an evolutionary process also consistent with the theoretical framework. The establishment of a more mature identity and purpose leads to a different perspective on how improvement in skills and abilities can be applied to developing holistic perspective.

The third theme is finding balance between the academic and athletic priorities. For the student-athletes who expressed this perspective as part of their initial, core definition of success, the intended outcome was not decreasing expectations in their athletic performance, but instead, increasing performance in both areas because of their ability to balance priorities. It should be noted, many of those who did not initially include balance as central to their definition of success, did discuss the importance of balance as part of their changing definition. Similar to the first two themes, a more balanced perspective is the intended outcome. Related to the theoretical framework, one of the components of identity development Chickering and Reisser (1993) indicate contributes to the "solid sense of self" is the ability to clarify self-concept through the trialing of various roles and lifestyles. The roles and lifestyles established by the culture of athletics lend themselves to a particular set of priorities and circumstances (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013) through which student-athletes must navigate. As the student-athletes in this study navigated the

athletic culture at their institutions, they ultimately sought balance in their academic and athletic priorities.

The theme of balancing academic and athletic priorities also points to the multidimensional structure (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013) of a student-athlete's identity and highlight identity salience (Lu et al., 2018; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005) as an important factor in the maturation process. This study suggests as each dimension of the student-athlete identity was activated and reinforced over time, the definition of success changed accordingly.

The fourth theme is receiving approval from important figures in the student-athletes' lives. Parents and coaches (Adler & Adler, 1991; Raunig & Coggins, 2018) were specifically identified as the key figures whose acknowledgment and approval equated to success for the student-athletes. A common sentiment was wanting to make these important people proud. This theme is also supported by Chickering and Reisser's (1993) concept of the "solid sense of self," of which one factor is receiving feedback from valued individuals. Positive feedback (Baker et al., 2000; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980; Shrivastava & Sharma, 2015) in particular allows the student-athletes to see how they are perceived by others and adjust their priorities and performance accordingly. For the student-athletes in this study, the perception of important individuals was relevant for both their athletic performance and academic achievements.

Finally, while faith and spirituality were part of the central definition of success for only two of the participants, these concepts were referenced throughout the interviews in response to various questions, highlighting their relevance (Clements & Koenig, 2014; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Dillon & Tait, 2000; Noh & Shahdan, 2020; Vernacchia et al., 2000).

Faith and spirituality also provide an example of how each student-athlete's experience is unique and how their definitions of success incorporate a variety of different components.

Additional themes were identified related to the changes occurring in the student-athletes' definitions of success as they progressed through college and beyond. Changes in definition that happened during college resulted from changes in circumstances; the amount of work and time required for academics and athletics; and changes in perspective. These themes are briefly discussed below.

Three participants identified specific circumstances or events causing them to change their definition of success, including the loss of a loved one, sustaining multiple injuries that forced early athletic retirement, and lack of winning from a team perspective. The literature focuses on early athletic retirement (Cash et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2016; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Webb et al., 1998) and its overall influence on student-athletes but does not address how it potentially changes their perspective on success. This gap in the literature leaves space for further study on how circumstances, both inside (e.g., injury and lack of winning) and outside (e.g., loss of a loved one) of athletics influence a student-athletes definition of success.

The circumstances described above provided each of the student-athletes with the chance to recalibrate their ideas of success and each took advantage of the opportunity. The process of recalibration is consistent with the theoretical framework of this study because the development of purpose manifested itself in the decisions of the student-athletes to adjust their definitions of success related to personal (lack of winning), vocational (early retirement), and interpersonal (loss of a loved one) factors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Based on their responses during the interviews, these "negative" events

gave the student-athletes a reason to evaluate their definition of success and make "positive" changes.

Three student-athletes pointed to the amount of work and time required to be a student-athlete as a catalyst to changing their definition of success. While the significance of the time commitment of student-athletes highlighted by the participants in this study aligns with previous research (Adler & Adler, 1985; Brewer et al., 1993; Harrison et al., 2011; Raunig & Coggins, 2018; Simons et al., 1999), the gap in the literature is again related to the connection to the definition of success.

Similar to the circumstances described above, the student-athletes who experienced "negative" challenges due to the demanding time commitment reconsidered how they defined success and shifted their focus to balancing and managing priorities. The reoccurring theme of conflict between the student identity and athlete identity (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Healy et al., 2016) confirms the connection of this study to the theoretical framework; specifically, the process of identity development as proposed by Chickering and Reisser (1993).

And finally, a shift in perspective caused many of the student-athletes to rethink their definition of success both during and after college. While the original perspective and the subsequent perspective were different for each participant, many of them mentioned moving from an inward-facing focus on personal success and accolades to an outward-facing focus on team success and "small wins" as the crux of their change. Regardless of the type of change that occurred, the common thread throughout the interviews was a specific catalyst that drove the change. Examples of catalysts mentioned by the student-athletes include disappointment in the student-athlete experience, individual results in athletic

competitions, perceived failure on the field and in the class, the personal maturation process, and the realization that sports will not be around for the long-term.

The progression through the student development process, as outlined in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors requires catalysts to propel students to the next stage of development. Consistent with this theoretical framework, the student-athletes in this study identified specific factors that allowed them to develop a fuller and more intentional outward-facing perspective that was still tied to their personal identity as a student-athlete.

Identity and Definition of Success

The make-up of the student-athlete identity is complex, particularly with the addition of the athletic identity to the student's personal identity. Chapter 2 established student-athletes deal with competing, and sometimes conflicting, identities (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). The definition of athletic identity is the extent to which an individual identifies with the role of athlete, with a particular emphasis on membership in a group and social relatedness (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Good and colleagues (1993) add the athletic identity is the strength and exclusivity with which the athlete role is associated with identity development. The extent to which the athletic identity, in particular, contributed to, or encroached upon, the student-athlete's larger identity was beyond the scope of this study. I, however, felt it was important to consider the participants' identities as a whole and how they influenced their definitions of success since the literature does not specifically address this connection.

The purpose of research question two was to identify any connection between the participants' student-athlete identity and their definition of success. While the degree to

which this connection occurred varied from individual to individual, all the participants affirmed their definition of success was in some way influenced by their identity as a student-athlete.

Consistent with responses to earlier questions, the student-athletes highlighted a variety of traits and characteristics associated with their identity as student-athletes as part of their definition of success. These traits include time management, a strong work ethic, teamwork, setting a good example, and resilience. In addition to these traits, some of the participants described student-athletes as having a distinct advantage over their non-athlete peers related to certain characteristics. These include having higher standards of success, higher mental and physical fortitude, greater capacity for leadership, and being able to push self to the limit with higher thresholds.

A common thread in many of the interviews was the idea the student-athlete identity was inextricably woven into the definition of success –they could not be separated. For some this perspective translated into a coupling of the concept of success in athletics (i.e., winning) with success in the classroom (i.e., best grades). For others, the athletic identity came to the fore and resulted in a hyper focus on success in sports, to the detriment of other aspects of life including athletics and community building. Those who shared the experience of focusing solely on sports at some point in their college career also highlighted that this perspective did not persist but changed as they matured and gained experience in life.

Definition of Success and Career Transition

The purpose of research question 3 was to inquire about how the student-athletes' definitions of success informed their career transition.

There are different perspectives in the research on how the student-athlete identity, and particularly athletic identity, influence career development. As discussed in the literature review, some studies suggest the risk of underdeveloped career maturity is greater depending on the degree to which a student-athlete develops in their athletic identity (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Other researchers, however, found the direct correlation between high athletic identity and low career maturity may not be as prevalent (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000; Kornspan & Etzel, 2001). While this study did not measure the level of career maturity related to athletic identity, all but one participant expressed a strong student-athlete identity. Additionally, each of the student-athletes displayed a level of career maturity that allowed them to: (1) simultaneously pursue their goal of playing professionally, or at the next level, while still making progress toward their ideal alternate career path; (2) pivot to a major that allowed them to pursue their chosen career; or (3) find an alternate route to their chosen career following graduation.

Regardless of these differing paths, each of the study participants shared their definition of success did, in fact, influence their career transition. More so than any other topic explored in this study, the student-athletes shared highly unique descriptions related to their experiences.

There was agreement among many of the participants that being a student-athlete prepared them for moving into the phase of life following college. Multiple student-athletes referred to their athletic experience as similar to holding a full-time job, without pay, while also being a full-time student. While this experience presented significant

challenges for balancing academics and athletics, it provided them with a unique perspective many of their peers did not receive.

Some of the student-athletes discussed the changes they implemented in their final year of college to prepare for the next phase. These changes trended in one of two directions. First, some of the student-athletes shifted their definition of success away from winning and accomplishments to a definition capturing a more holistic perspective. This shift was generally in recognition that the sports career was coming to an end and a broader perspective was needed to be successful in their post-sports world. On the other hand, several of the student-athletes decided put everything they had into their final year of sports for, ironically, the same reason –their sports career was coming to an end. In one case, however, the focus on sports was with the goal of continuing into a professional league.

An additional theme I identified is the winding nature of the path from college to career. With a few exceptions who knew exactly what they wanted to do for a career and followed through, the majority of the participants changed their major and career track, questioned their abilities and preparedness for a particular career, and generally found their way to their career toward the end of college or even after graduation. It was during these times the student-athletes were reliant on their definition of success to guide the decision-making process and affirm their choices.

Implications for Theory

This study relied on Chickering and Reisser's (1993) research on the seven vectors of student development. The vectors of establishing identity and developing purpose were the primary theoretical foundation for this study. These two vectors were determined to

be the most salient for the process of defining success due to their connection to the establishment of the student-athlete's sense of self and the movement of the student-athlete through the process of establishing of an intentional plan of action regarding vocational, personal, and interpersonal priorities. While these two vectors are appropriate for this study, future studies could include other vectors that focus on different aspects of a student-athlete's development. The following sections briefly highlight the connection of these vectors to the experiences of the student-athletes who participated the study.

Establishing Identity

Chickering and Reisser (1993) provide specific components contributing to a student's sense of self and identity covered in detail in the literature review. Germain to this study are the final two components focusing on: (1) the development of self-acceptance and self-worth based on personal standards, and (2) the sense of integration and stability regarding their identities and values, coupled with an awareness of the systems and communities of which they are part.

Regarding the first component, student-athletes who participated in this study demonstrated varying levels of self-acceptance and self-worth fluctuating throughout their time in college, as seen in the iterative process of developing their definitions of success. Some expressed confidence in their decisions related to success, while others were more tentative and unsure. The most unstable aspects of determining a definition of success are the "personal standards" on which the self-acceptance and self-worth rested. The student-athletes' responses to the interview questions demonstrate as their personal standards changed, so did their definition of success. These standards include their perspective on

winning, the level of meaning they ascribed to being a student-athlete, and their focus on individual accolades versus team accomplishments.

In most cases the second component was more evident when the student-athletes discussed experiences occurring in their later college years and following graduation. The personal maturation process coupled with experiences that changed the participants' perspectives lent themselves to more stability and integration of core values in the development of a success definition. There was also a much stronger sense of "place" in regard to their systems and communities.

In summary, this theoretical component of the study helped answer one of the questions asked by Chickering and Reisser, "How stable and clear am I about who I am and what is important?" (1993, p. 182)

Developing Purpose

Central to the college experience is the development of an increasing sense and clarity of purpose. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), students must develop action plans and priorities related to their personal interests, aspirations, and vocational plans in order to clarify their purpose. As discussed in the literature review, vocational plans involve more than just an individual deciding on a career. They also include the process of the person discovering their passions and "what actualizes [their] potential for excellence" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 212).

The student-athletes who participated in this study discussed the process of developing their priorities and plans of action for their personal interests and vocational plans. At the time of the interview, most of the participants had identified not only their career track, but their corresponding passions. Central to this process was their definition

of success. The definitions of success highlighted the perspective from which the participants were approaching their personal interests and vocational plans. The student-athletes shared personal perspectives ranging from a focus on inward-facing ideals to the strong need for external acknowledgement. They spoke about competitiveness and performance-based definitions of success as well as definitions focusing on incremental change and contentment with choices made. Regardless of how they arrived at their current definition of success, they all recognized this definition played a part in their priorities related to personal interests and career development. Similar to the development of identity discussed above, the student-athletes underwent a progression in their development of purpose.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study suggest defining success is an iterative process that occurs over time and is the result of a series of occurrences that happen around or to the student during particular development stages. This entire process occurs within the environment created by the different, and sometimes conflicting, roles student-athletes must navigate. Additionally, there is an overwhelming lack of intentionality associated with the development of their personal success definition. The evolution of success happened by chance and was largely a reactive process. As such, student-athletes need assistance in making intentional and well-informed decisions related to how they approach success. I now address how institutions can better support student-athletes through the decision-making process.

The literature review highlighted academic success programs and their central role in supporting the academic and athletic success of student-athletes. The following section

will address adjustments or additions that can be made to these programs to account for the important developmental process of defining success. Some of the recommendations below represent themes constructed when the participants in this study were asked what additional services could have been provided to help them achieve success. Other recommendations are a direct result of the findings of this study. Recognizing not all institutions have similar financial resources, or full academic success programs, it should be noted that these practices are not intended to be "one size fits all." Practices can vary depending on the budget and resources available to the school. Similarly, supports and interventions should be implemented at scale.

Orientation and Classes

Most schools support specific orientation programming for the student-athlete population. And while the student-athletes need to know about NCAA rules, regulations, and eligibility requirements, additional topics could be addressed during this dedicated time, including an introduction to the concept of success and how it will be defined – as a department, as a team, and, most importantly, as an individual. Once the concept of success is introduced, other programming will ideally provide opportunities to continue the conversation and highlight the iterative nature of the process of actually defining success. The "Athletics in Higher Education" course at Michigan State University is a good example of where this kind of material and discussion can live, since the course covers topics both directly and tangentially related to success, such as the philosophy of athletics, athletic and academic achievement, and ethical issues. Engaging student-athletes in discussions on how to define success in a proactive manner will mitigate the largely reactive nature of the

process identified in this study and contribute to a process marked by purpose and intentionality.

Academic Support and Advising

The level of engagement of academic support services and academic advising was mentioned multiple times by the participants in this study as a service needing to be bolstered. There was specific concern shared by those who were either STEM majors or pursuing a pre-med track about their ability to navigate the challenging schedule associated with being a student-athlete. While most of the large schools have dedicated academic support staff for student-athletes, smaller schools are oftentimes unable to offer similar services. These smaller schools could consider creative options such as workshops or other opportunities to address student-athletes in large groups. A study by Navarro (2015) provided evidence that academic and student affairs staff can have an influence on the major selection process of student-athletes. In this vein, several of the participants mentioned having an advisor who is intimately familiar with their circumstances and specific challenges would have been incredibly helpful. Those who experienced this type of specialized advising were grateful for the support and accountability it offered.

One of the most frequent concerns shared by the student-athletes was the inability to take the individual classes they want or select their first choice of major due to the incompatible schedule. This experience is consistent with information highlighted in the literature review. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) found while student-athletes reported an overall positive college experience, they felt there were trade-offs in particular areas, including not majoring in their first choice and not taking classes in which they are interested. The study conducted by Foster and Huml (2017) found that student-athletes

whose major choice was unrelated to their career goals generally had higher levels of athletic identity as opposed to at academic identity.

There is no easy solution to these problems, particularly due to the time demands on the student-athletes' schedules, but consideration should be given to mitigating measures. Increased attention could be given to highlighting alternative paths, such as post-baccalaureate programs and gap years, to careers in areas such as medicine and other STEM-related fields. While potentially controversial, other measures could include scheduling sections of problematic courses in particular majors during time slots conducive to, or in a format (e.g., hybrid or online) compatible with, student-athlete schedules. Again, these solutions may not be scalable for smaller institutions. However, an additional suggestion is to conduct a formal needs assessment of the student-athlete population to determine exactly where the deficiencies in services lie and what is required to fill these gaps.

Faculty Support

Another frequently mentioned concern voiced by the participants of this study was the lack of faculty support and understanding of the student-athlete experience (Lawrence, 2009). One student-athlete described it as a disconnect between faculty and athletics, where the faculty viewed participation in a competitive sport the same as any other student activity. This disconnect not only results in a negative classroom experience for student-athletes, but in a worst-case scenario, bias (Baucom & Lantz, 2001). Continued education for faculty, supported by administration, and intentional efforts to bridge the gap between athletics and academics could help reduce, or resolve, some of these challenges. Recommendations for programming include: (1) round-table discussions between faculty

and student-athlete representatives regarding the student-athlete experience, and (2) increased communication by the Faculty Athletics Representative (FAR) to academic colleagues, highlighting the nature of the commitment required of student-athletes and how to best support them.

Mental Health Resources

One of the most frequent barriers to personal success mentioned by the student-athletes in this study were the mental-health challenges they, or their teammates, encountered. Mental health is recognized as a significant problem on campuses across the country, with nearly 8 million students, or around 40 percent of the population, reporting a significant mental health challenge (Leshner & Scherer, Eds., 2021). Student-athletes face a particular set of challenges, increasing their likelihood of experiencing mental health problems, including the consistent pressure to perform both academically and athletically (Bauman, 2016). Over 50 percent of student-athletes report a need for mental health support, while less than half utilized mental health resources (Moore, 2017). The overwhelming need for mental health services and the underwhelming utilization of available services requires focused attention by athletic departments. In additional to staffing sport psychologists, athletic departments should continue to look at ways to enhance the services that exist and highlight the need for a safe space for student-athletes to express their concerns and address varying levels of mental illness. Programming should seek to destigmatize the use of available mental health resources. Corresponding messaging, directly from athletic departments and coaching staffs, could be especially impactful.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on a small sampling of former student-athletes who played a variety of sports, both revenue generating and non-revenue generating, and attended schools across all three NCAA divisions. The study also included both male- and female-identifying student-athletes. While the scope of the study and the number of participants did not allow me to include additional institution types or focus on a specific student-athlete sub-population, the purpose of the study was to begin to identify how student-athletes define success. A variety of factors could be changed to enhance and broaden both the scope and the results.

First, a larger sample size from a targeted group of student-athletes could provide more nuanced information related to their definitions of success. Examples of targeted populations include: a specific type of school (e.g., NCAA Division I, II, or III; HBCU, faith-based, or liberal arts institutions), a specific sport or category of sport (e.g., basketball, football, Olympic sports, revenue or non-revenue generating), and a specific gender identity (e.g., men's or women's sports). Expanding the study in this way, with an increased sample size, could identify how definitions of success are similar or different across environments.

Second, this study relied on the recollection of former student-athletes who, in some cases, were years removed from their college years. While there is certainly value in having space and time to reflect on past experiences, interesting data could also be generated by a longitudinal study following student-athletes through their college career. Interviewing the student-athletes at varying intervals would allow them to share their

experiences, decisions, and definitions in real-time and would also allow them to see the trajectory of their identity development as a student-athlete.

And third, none of the student-athletes in this study had the ability to profit from their own brand, largely due to when they attended college or the sport in which they participated. However, future studies addressing how students define success will need to consider the impact of name, image, and likeness opportunities, and the ability of student-athletes to monetize their personal brand.

Conclusion

I opened this paper by recounting my experiences meeting with three different students who presented three different scenarios about their future goals. In my naivete, I made assumptions about how they defined success and was wrong in at least one case.

The purpose of this study was to define success from the student-athletes' perspective and gain a better understanding of how their student-athlete identity and perspective on career transition informed this definition. The interviews highlighted the fact that a student-athlete's definition of success develops over time via an iterative process encompassing both the establishment of their identity and the development of their purpose. The results of the study suggest the definition of success is developed via a largely reactive, unintentional process through which student-athletes have both shared and individual experiences that ultimately produce a highly individualized definition of success. Though themes and similarities were constructed, the 17 student-athletes involved in this study defined success in 17 different ways.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide
Former Student-Athletes

Pre-Interview Routine

1. Introduction
2. Consent Form
3. Demographic Information sheet
4. Reminder that there are no right or wrong answers

Opening Questions

1. Start off by telling me a little about your sports background…
    a. What sports have you played and how long?
    b. What have been some of the highlights of your sports career?

As you know, I am interested in how student-athletes define success. Before we get into the heart of the interview, I have a few questions about your identity as a student-athlete.

Transition Questions:

2. Please describe what being a student-athlete meant to you.
3. Did you find that your role as a student and athlete came into conflict with each other, if at all?
    a. How did the conflict increase or decrease during your time in college?

Key Questions:

4. As a student-athlete, how did you define success?
5. How did this definition change over time as your progressed through college?
6. How did your identity as a student-athlete influence your definition of success?
7. What were your career plans and how did you prepare for your transition from college athletics to the next phase of life?
8. How did your definition of success influence this transition?
9. How has your definition of success changed since graduating?

Concluding Questions:

10. What support mechanisms did you have that helped you achieve success? What additional services could have been provided to help you achieve success?
11. Do you have any concluding comments, thoughts, or questions?