

“INSIDE THE BUBBLE”: A LOOK AT THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT-ATHLETES  
IN REVENUE-PRODUCING SPORTS DURING COLLEGE AND BEYOND

by

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B.A., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1992  
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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs  
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Manhattan, Kansas

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## **Abstract**

This phenomenological study sought to address the overarching research questions: What are the costs and benefits of participation in Division I college sports? How does participation in Division I college sports prepare student-athletes for life after college? A qualitative methodology was selected to provide richer data than that which could be collected via surveys. The researcher interviewed 15 former student-athletes, each of whom participated in either football or men's basketball at one Division I institution. According to the study participants, having a strong support system, including a career networking system and gaining positive attributes were the benefits of the experience. The heavy time commitment, the perceptions of others outside of athletics, and health challenges were all cited as costs of the experience. For the most part, participants of the study believed their college experience prepared them for life after college by providing career networking opportunities as well as attributes that are valuable in their work and personal lives.

Four recommendations for practice were revealed from this study. First, athletic department personnel, campus administrators, and student service unit across campus, should help student-athletes understand and market attributes they are gaining in their roles as athletes and students. Second, campus professionals can help these young adults deal with the negative perceptions and treatment they receive from others on campus. In addition, campus administrators should act to minimize negative stereotypes by speaking out against them and emphasizing the positive examples that are sure to exist on campus. Finally, these professional can learn more about the long-term mental and physical health concerns associated with participation in high-stress, physical college sports and educate participants on preventing or minimizing the potential health consequences of their participation.

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I especially want to acknowledge the study participants themselves. I am grateful for their time and their willingness to candidly share their experiences. A special thanks to “Chuck” and “Tim” for their passionate interest in and ongoing support of this project.

## Preface

As an undergraduate, I accepted a job as a tutor for the campus athletic department. During this experience, I became aware of the demands placed on student-athletes that were different from the demands I faced as a working college student. I had the freedom to take another job if hours conflicted with classes or if I had ideological differences with a boss. For student-athletes, the choice was not as simple. To transfer to another school because of a conflict with a coach would mean missing a year of competition –if the coach would release the student from their scholarship. For many student-athletes, their athletic scholarship provided the means for paying for their education; quitting the team to stay in school would mean a loss of tuition money.

This research project was spurred by knowledge of and experience with student-athletes from the vantage point of someone on the cusp of the bubble. From that perspective, not outside but not completely inside the bubble, I observed the range of student-athlete responses to life in the bubble and the range of attitudes from those outside the bubble toward student-athletes. I have heard the negative stereotypes of student-athletes but experience has shown me that those stereotypes are not true. I felt it was important for the athletes themselves to tell their side of the story in an anonymous, scientific study because candid responses can add contextual detail to what already exists in the literature.

# **CHAPTER 1 -INTRODUCTION**

This introductory chapter will lead into the current study by providing background on the research related to intercollegiate athletics, an overview of the issues that are relevant to the current study, the statement of the research problem, the two research questions to be addressed, and the purpose and significance of the study. Additionally, the evolution of the researcher's interest in this topic is explained. The chapter concludes with definitions of terms relevant to the study.

## **Intercollegiate Athletics**

Student-athletes appeared on college campuses as early as the 1850's when Harvard and Yale expanded their co-curricular rowing sport, to intercollegiate competitions. Other sports, such as baseball and football, quickly followed. Literature, both popular and scholarly, focusing on college athletics and student-athletes in particular has followed societal trends from escapism of the Depression Era to reactions of civil rights issues of the 1960's to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's and on into the current awareness of issues surrounding sexual orientation (Thelin, 1994; Twale & Korn, 2009).

Prior to the stock market crash of 1929, college sports were a popular American pastime. College presidents leveraged successful sports teams as a way of promoting their campus. Students eagerly participated in contests with few rules and little regulation. Despite the benefits, there were costs as well, some scholars questioned the true purpose of sport in higher education, and dangerous sports such as football caused serious injuries to those who participated. In 1929 the Carnegie Foundation released a report on American College Athletics. Their report prompted controversies over "slush funds" for student-athletes and recruiting abuses

(Thelin, 1994). Among the findings of the report was that the fundamental purpose of athletics in higher education was “financial and commercial” (Thelin, 1994, p. 25).

When hard economic times hit higher education in the 1930’s, athletic departments frequently sought to save the sports that generated income and eliminate the sports that did not produce revenue. For example, at Southern Methodist University faculty wages were garnished to pay the mortgage on the football stadium built in the early 1920’s. During the Great Depression sporting events were a popular form of entertainment for many Americans. They were likely a healthy escape from the harsh realities of the depression. Popular literature was another form of escape for those living during hard times; college student-athletes began to appear in literature centered on college life. These athletes were portrayed typically as “dumb jocks” unable to answer the simplest questions posed by university professors, but excused of this minor fault if their athletic prowess meant winning games (Thelin, 1994).

In the 1940’s athletic departments quickly recognized the benefit of allowing radio broadcasts of their sporting events. This generated more revenue for the departments and expanded the public interest in the games. This popularity and the win-at-all costs mentality that followed, inadvertently contributed to a negative aspect of sports. In 1951 the New York Times began reporting stories of point shaving among college basketball players. These reports suggested a link between college sports and organized crime. While most of the campuses involved were centered in the New York area, schools as far away as Toledo and Kentucky were also named. Judge Streit, of the Court of General Sessions in New York City wrote about the out-of-control nature of commercialism and professionalism of college sports (Byers, 1995). Also during this time, academic violations surfaced involving the United State Military Academy and the College of William and Mary. In reaction to this turbulence, the American Council on

Education (ACE) responded by creating a Special Committee on Athletic Policy (Byers, 1995). Just as the Carnegie Report years earlier, the committee met, conducted research and wrote a report making recommendations for reforms in college athletics (Thelin, 1994). Not much changed after the report.

In the 1960's scandal involved the ethics of college coaches at Georgia, Alabama, and Illinois but unlike previous public disgraces within athletics, no committees were convened. In the cases of academic fraud and instances of gambling and other "fixes," the courts intervened (Thelin, 1994). During the 1950's, the popularity of college sports grew with increased television coverage of both football and basketball. As revenues increased athletic departments invested their money, often in dormitories specifically for student-athletes. Faculty "stirred uneasily" (Byers, 1995, p. 94) at what was becoming an overemphasis on sports.

While controversy surrounding college athletics may have been relatively quiet in the 1960's, college campuses were not. College students took notice of civil rights movements that changed laws in the South. The University of California at Berkley was one hotspot of student activity; students protested against an administration they felt restricted their freedom of speech. The success of this movement spurred similar movements across the country and eventually led to a movement for equality for women (Gitlin, 1987). This last movement had a direct impact on the world of college sports.

In 1972 federal legislation known as Title IX called for the prohibition of discrimination against women in educational programs (Thelin, 2004). Debate ensued throughout the 1970's and beyond as to whether that edict applied to athletics. In 1981, women's championship sporting events came under the same jurisdiction as men's setting the precedent of applying the law to intercollegiate athletics (Thelin, 1994). Title IX changed the face of college sports and

may have had an impact on research interest in student-athletes. The 1970's saw an increase in the term '*student-athlete*' in many scholarly journals. Scholars in disciplines such as sociology and law commented on the possibility that student-athletes were being exploited by college athletic departments (Edwards, 1973; Renick, 1974).

The 1980's once again brought reform to college athletics. After two decades of silence, college presidents formed a commission to examine intercollegiate athletics. This new investigation was in response to reports of illegal benefits to student-athletes and other unethical conduct (Byers, 1995). The Knight Commission recommended changes in the academic eligibility requirements of student-athletes. Their first recommendation prompted debate from civil rights leaders and African-American coaches who believed the recommendations would unfairly penalize minority and low-income student-athletes who attended high schools that were ill-equipped to produce students that met the criteria for eligibility (Heck & Takahashi, 2006).

Increasingly over the decades, scholars began researching the student-athlete experience. A few articles appeared in medical and psychological journals but in the beginning, the topic of student-athletes was primarily an education and social science concern. Issues of academic achievement and discrimination of athletes appeared in higher education and social science journals during the 1970's. In the 1980's scholars began examining psychological and identity concerns among the student-athlete population. The 1990's saw an increase in research on substance use abuse and addictions, as well as body image, particularly among female athletes, health issues, and social skills (Twale & Korn, 2009).

Media coverage of college sports continued to increase in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cable television stations dedicated solely to sports coverage emerged. Meanwhile, scholars were researching the impact of contagious diseases in sport, no doubt a response to the HIV/AIDS

epidemic (Dorman, 2000). Scholars also showed a continued interest in health concerns and articles discussing gender and sexual orientation issues in sport began to appear (Twale & Korn, 2009).

The curious relationship between athletic departments and the academy has been an issue in higher education circles for nearly a century. While one scholar questioned how long college athletics would last, it seems clear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that intercollegiate athletics are here to stay for better or worse (Fisher, 1975). One has to wonder just what impact, if any, this sometimes strained relationship has on the young adults who participate in college sports.

### **Overview of the Issues**

There are differing viewpoints of the student-athlete experience. One belief is that athletics are a wholesome activity which instills values. Another view is that athletics, college athletics in particular, holds little educational value. According to Jess Hill, former University of Southern California Athletic Director, students learn positive values and life skills through sport participation. He said: “Athletics develop dedication and a desire to excel in competition, a realization that success requires hard work and that life must be lived according to rules. An athlete learns a sense of loyalty and a respect of discipline” (Hill, in Edwards, 1973, p. 71). Another view of the student-athlete experience is presented by, former assistant professor of physical education Jobyann Renick (1974) who describes the student-athlete experience as follows:

The athlete’s behavior is restricted at every level, but he has few compensating rights. In general, he must comply to the system or be ejected from it. He is treated as a commodity to be exploited for the benefit of others and is left with no viable alternatives to conformity if he wished to participate in intercollegiate sports (p. 551).

Contradictory opinions about the student-athlete experience persist in the scholarly literature as well as in the popular press. High school students who participate in sports have been shown to develop leadership and interpersonal skills at rates higher than youth who do not participate in sports (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999; Etile & Etile, 2002). Yet, at the college level, research indicates that participation in athletics may hinder development and academic achievement (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982; Simons, Van Rhee, & Covington, 1999). Public perception of sport participation at the college level is often negative. Literary and media images of the dumb jock are commonplace. Non-athlete students, faculty and staff often view athletes as having a sense of entitlement, or as being pampered or spoiled (Simons, Bosworth, & Fujita, 2007). The notion of the spoiled athlete is common even outside academia and perpetuated by stories like a recent Entertainment Sports Network (ESPN) story showing a college quarterback treating his offensive lineman to an expensive steak dinner.

Attaining an athletic scholarship would seem to be a positive opportunity for any high school graduate – a chance to attend college free, a chance to compete in sport at a high level, and a possible opportunity at a professional sport career in some sports. Evidence from previous research suggests there are developmental and interpersonal benefits of the student-athlete experience as well. Athletes have been found to develop leadership skills (Ryan, 1989), an openness to diversity (Wolniak, Pierson, & Pascarella, 2001) and acceptance among their peer group (Adler & Adler, 1991). Therefore, Hill's assessment of the student-athlete experience may have some merit. As for the charges that college athletes are "spoiled" or "pampered," (p.5) this perception is a product of what sociologist Harry Edwards (1984) calls the "arms race" of college sport.



At the Division I level – the highest level of competition in college athletics - athletic departments build academic centers, state of the art training facilities and special dining areas, commonly known as “training tables” specifically for student-athletes (Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 2002; Knapp, Rasmussen, & Barnhart, 2001). While the facilities do indeed help train and support elite athletes, their real value is to recruit the top athletes to the school in the first place. An unintended consequence of the separate eating, studying, and sometimes living facilities is that it creates separation from the rest of the student body (Lubker, 2006). College student-athletes live in what one former student-athlete described as “that little bubble.” This study seeks a greater understanding of life in that bubble and how it impacts these students’ preparedness for life after college.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Student-athletes experience college in a bubble isolated from non-athletes. Within this bubble, they must attempt to maintain a balance between athletics and academics (Parham, 1991). It is likely there are both costs and rewards for college student-athletes in this bubble. It is also likely the college experience of student-athletes impacts them beyond their years of college athletic eligibility. This study seeks to explore the costs and benefits of participating in intercollegiate athletics as well as how the student-athlete experience impacts the preparedness for life after college of athletes in revenue-producing sports.

The costs associated with participation in college sports can easily be found in the scholarly literature. Noted costs include lower academic achievement, lower levels of career development, and heavy time demands of their sport (Pascarella et al., 1995). At the Division I level, research indicates that student-athletes experience a conflict between the demands of being a full-time student and being a competitive athlete (Etzel et al., 2002). Evidence suggests that

the time demands of athletics may have negative consequences for participants (Danish & Petitpas, 1993; Jolly, 2008). Studies have revealed lower grades for student-athletes, particularly those in revenue-producing sports (Hollis, 2001; Purdy et al., 1982; Simons, Bosworth, & Fujita, 2007), and lower graduation rates (Donner, 2005; Heck & Takahashi, 2006; Maloney & McCormick, 1993). Several authors focused on the career development of student-athletes bringing to light concerns that they lag behind their non-athletic peers and that athletes in revenue-producing sports lag behind those in non-revenue sports (Martens & Cox, 2000; Melendez, 2007; Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997).

While the list of costs associated with participation in intercollegiate athletics seems long, there are also many benefits for student-athletes. Researchers have found that specific psychosocial and other developmental influences associated with sports participation may be beneficial to the cognitive development and adjustment of college students (Melendez, 2007). For instance, athletic participation in college often provides opportunities for social interaction and support (Sellars & Damas, 1996), for generating feelings of belonging and acceptance among one's peer group (Adler & Adler, 1991), for developing feelings of pride and attachment to one's school (Melendez, 2007), for developing interpersonal skills and leadership abilities (Ryan, 1989), and for openness to diversity and challenge (Wolniak et al., 2001).

There is little empirical research on the long-term impact of the intercollegiate athletic experience. One study utilized longitudinal Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data which includes student-athletes and uncovered evidence to suggest a trend in the type of career paths student-athletes follow after graduation (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). More clues to the post college life of student-athletes are found in popular media. Stories often surface of student-athletes who attended a university for four or five years and completed their athletic

eligibility but are unprepared for life outside of sports. For instance, Kevin Ross tried to sue Creighton University for academic malpractice when, after four years of college, he was reading and writing at an elementary school level (Donner, 2005). Dexter Manley maintains in his autobiography that he was functionally illiterate while playing football for Oklahoma State University (Manley & Friend, 1992). It is unlikely that the majority of student-athletes face the same post college issues as Ross and Manley and their stories are really a reflection of their academic experience beginning before college. Yet little empirical research on the post college experiences of student-athletes exists.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the costs and benefits of participation in Division I revenue-producing sports from the perspective of former players and to gain insight into how that experience prepared this group of college students for life after college. While much has been written about the student-athlete experience, research on the outcomes of that experience is sparse in current scholarly literature. Scholars have focused much of their attention on the academic experience, identity development, health concerns and issues regarding women in sports. The current study seeks the voice of former student-athletes regarding their college experience and how their college experience prepared them for life after college with the vantage point of maturity.

Researchers have surveyed freshmen student-athletes to assess their level of cognitive development and academic achievement (Melendez, 2007; Pascarella et al., 1995) and seniors to gauge their perception of their experience (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Some researchers have conducted case studies on the academic experience (Benson, 2000) and social experience (Adler & Adler, 1985) of student-athletes in revenue-producing sports, but no one has published

research about how participation in intercollegiate athletics prepared student-athletes for their lives after college. The current study seeks to fill that gap in the literature.

Few studies on the student-athlete experience have sought the voices of the athletes themselves, and even fewer studies have asked former athletes to reflect back on their experience and explain how being a college student-athlete impacted their life after college. It is the aim of this study to shed light on the experiences of student-athletes in revenue producing sports, to provide insight into the perceived costs and benefits of participation in athletics as well as the impact of such participation upon their preparedness for life after college. Using the Rational Choice theoretical framework described in more detail in chapter two, this study will examine the benefits and the costs of life in the bubble and how the student-athlete experience impacted the preparedness of life after college for those who participated in college football and men's basketball. This information can guide athletic counselors, sports psychologists, athletic departments and student affairs professionals in efforts to assure that college athletes are deriving positive outcomes from their college experience.

Speaking to former athletes may clarify the impact of the collegiate athletic experience in revenue-producing sport and provide insights into the long-term outcomes of that experience. A few researchers have used survey data to assess what happens to student-athletes after college, but much of this research focuses solely on some aspect of career or income (Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Henderson, 2006). Previous qualitative studies have focused on the academic experience of African-American student-athletes (Benson, 2000; Singer, 2008), or the social and academic experiences of one team, in one sport while in college (Adler & Adler, 1985). The current study asks former student-athletes from revenue-producing sports about the positives and the negatives of their overall college experience – athletic, academic, and social and any other topic they wish

to speak on. The current study will also add the perspective of time and maturity as former athletes look back on this experience and reflect on the ways in which being a college student-athlete impacts their life now. This perspective is a much needed addition to the current literature.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this qualitative investigation:

1. What are the costs and benefits of participation in Division I intercollegiate revenue-producing sports?
2. To what extent does participation in Division I intercollegiate athletics prepare student-athletes for life after college?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will bring to light some of the costs and benefits of “life in the bubble,” as former athletes reflect on their college experience and how it prepared them for their current lives. The information gathered from this study can help athletic academic counselors, academic advisors, sports psychologist and athletic department administrators create programs and policies that benefit student-athletes and prepare them for life after college.

Insights from the student-athlete perspective may prove valuable to athletic academic counselors and academic advisors as they guide athletes through the academic process and help them balance sports and school. The insights of former student-athletes may reveal the types of support that are most effective to student-athletes. Further, these insights may inform college counselors and administrators what areas are not being addressed in their academic experience with the university.

Sports psychologists may learn what is and is not beneficial in their efforts to assist athletes in enhancing their athletic performance and in dealing with the mental stress of being both student and athlete. This study may reveal effective mechanisms for coping with injuries, a constant threat for athletes, and may uncover additional health concerns. The transition out of sport can be difficult for any athlete; the perspective of those who have gone through the process may offer suggestions to sports psychologists or other professionals who train and educate college athletes.

The study may also help athletic administrators continue to enhance policies that effectively address the unique needs of the student-athlete such as stricter enforcement of practice time restrictions, as one example. Edwards (1973) notes that the NCAA, and various conferences routinely enact rules and regulations without seeking the input of those who must live within those rules. While it is not the aim of the current study to alter that trend, implications from this study may provide guidance to administrators.

Scholars have long written about and researched the costs of college sports, both on institutions and on the individual participants. However, not much has been written about the benefits of participation in college sports. By asking open-ended questions of former participants, the current study may uncover benefits of the college athlete experience presently overlooked by those who work with student-athletes.

College athletics are often presented in a negative light, scandals, rules violations, and questions about the role of athletics in higher education have remained public. Yet, intercollegiate athletics maintain their popularity inside and outside the academy. At present ESPN and CBS Broadcasting Inc, (CBS) broadcast television stations dedicated solely to college sports. Conferences such as the Big Ten have created their own television network. With this

much publicity, non-athlete college students often have opinions about student-athletes on their campuses, the researcher was no exception.

### **Researcher's Interest in the Topic**

As an undergraduate, the researcher accepted a job as a tutor for the campus athletic department. During this experience, she became aware of the demands placed on student-athletes that were different from the demands she faced as a working college student. She had the freedom to take another job if hours conflicted with classes or if she had ideological differences with a boss. For student-athletes, the choice was not as simple. To transfer to another school because of a conflict with a coach would mean missing a year of competition –if the coach would release the student from their scholarship. For many student-athletes, their athletic scholarship provided the means for paying for their education; quitting the team to stay in school would mean a loss of tuition money.

During her tenure as a tutor, the researcher heard student-athletes complain about the physical exhaustion they felt in the evening after a day that often began at 6 AM – when she and other students on campus were soundly sleeping. At her institution, a football player could easily spend eight hours in the stadium, between study hall, their “training table,” team meetings, and football practice. One student arrived for an evening tutoring session, dejectedly plopped down in a chair and said he “just needed to get out of this building.” Another student complained that his coach did not want him to wear a particular item of clothing. Yet another student mentioned quitting. He even discussed it with a coach who told him “there are no barbed wires around the stadium,” meaning the student was free to go if he chose. The student did not. He stayed for the duration of his scholarship – four years of competing with his team and one

year on the practice squad, commonly referred to as a “red shirt” year. He then went on to play professional football for a couple of years, and returned to college to complete his degree.

This research project was spurred by knowledge of and experience with student-athletes from the vantage point of someone on the cusp of the bubble. From that perspective, not outside but not completely inside the bubble, the researcher observed the range of student-athlete responses to life in the bubble and the range of attitudes from those outside the bubble toward student-athletes. The researcher has heard the negative stereotypes of student-athletes but experience has shown that those stereotypes are not true. The researcher felt it was important for the athletes themselves to tell their side of the story in an anonymous, scientific study because candid responses can add contextual detail to what already exists in the literature.

### **Definitions of Terms**

There are many terms common to the world of intercollegiate athletics that are used throughout this project. Because this study uses the rational choice theoretical framework (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997), the researcher operationally defined the terms “benefits” and “costs” as they are used in that framework. Other terms specific to the world of intercollegiate athletics are defined as used by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) that regulates the activities of their member institutions.

Benefits – Experiences and/or consequences (academically, socially, and in terms of career development) that are perceived by former students as a positive result of participating in Division I college athletics.

Costs – Experiences and/or consequences (academically, socially, and in terms of career development) that are perceived by former students as a negative result of participating in Division I college athletics.



Division I –NCAA member institutions offering at least seven sports for men and seven sports for women (NCAA Membership Section, para 1).

Eligibility –Students must be enrolled full-time and maintain a set percentage of progress towards a degree to be eligible for competition (NCAA Eligibility Section, para 4).

Graduation rates – the percentage of students graduating from an institution four to six years after entering.

Red shirt – a year where a student-athlete may practice with the team but is not allowed to participate in competition.

Revenue-producing sport – sports which bring money to the athletic department via ticket sales, television revenue, and post regular season participation (i.e., men’s, and women’s basketball and football).

Student-athlete – a college student who participated in varsity level intercollegiate athletic competition. Student-athletes may be on athletic scholarships, or they may be non-scholarship athletes.

## **Summary**

College athletes are at the center of an industry that attracts attention from a variety of sources, including college administrators, educators, fans, and venture capitalists. All of this attention may make keeping an appropriate balance between academics and athletics difficult for student-athletes. In the eyes of an observer, there is much to gain from being a college athlete such as an education, the opportunity to continue involvement in sport for enjoyment or a possible professional sports career, the opportunity for travel, and interaction with their peers. However, there may be potential costs that can take away from academic pursuits, such as time demands, the risk of injury, and potentially the cost of focusing solely on sport and not education

or other career possibilities. The contradictions in the literature call for a closer examination of the student-athlete experience and how that experience prepares this group of college students for life after college.

## **Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature**

This chapter reviews the scholarly literature on student-athletes, beginning with a brief history of intercollegiate sports on college campuses and the NCAA athletic eligibility requirements. Much has been written about the student-athlete experience in the last three decades. Most of that literature is focused on academics, with some charges of the exploitation of student-athletes. Other areas of research include the drug and alcohol use or other health concerns of college athletes. The focus of this literature review is on research relevant to the costs and benefits of participation in intercollegiate athletics and any research related to the outcomes of that experience with regard to preparedness for life after college.

### **The History of Intercollegiate Athletics**

Since the final gun sounded at the first intercollegiate football game in 1869, a student-run pursuit has become an American cultural phenomenon and an industry all its own. In the beginning of college athletics, students served as coaches and players, sometimes in the form of player and coach. Alumni occasionally served their alma mater's to help train younger players and manage practices (Thelin, 2004). Students arranged competition schedules and team travel to and from competitions (Lapchick, 1989).

The student-run athletic system is in stark contrast to today's athletic departments, which employ hundreds of staffers assigned to specific units, such as facilities, sports information, and academics, not to mention personnel assigned to each individual sport. Alonzo Stagg at the University of Chicago is given credit for creating the prototype of today's athletic department. Like many athletic directors of today's athletic departments, Stagg reported directly to the board of trustees and his president. He hired the coaches for each sport. The athletic department began collecting its own revenue through ticket sales. Stagg also promoted athletic events by posting

the team schedules throughout the city and buying billboard space. In essence, university athletic departments became a business connected to their respective universities by name while remaining largely autonomous (Thelin, 2004).

While university presidents had an interest in the success of an athletic program that could bring free publicity and attract potential students to their institutions, they were not the only ones with a vested interest. College and university alumni not only took great pride in their college athletics program but also wanted a more personal stake in the games. Local businesses gave monetary gifts to student-athletes, and alumni formed “booster” clubs whose sole purpose was to raise money for the athletic department (Thelin, 2004). College sports became big business, “grossing over \$1 billion in revenues per year” (Fleisher, Goff, & Tollison, 1992, p. 4).

The business of college sports grew so quickly and with such enthusiasm that no one assumed the responsibility for establishing clear-cut rules to the games. Coaches were free to recruit in any manner they saw fit, players had only to enroll in an institution to be eligible to play on the school’s team, and there were few rules regarding how the games should be played. Due to the lack of regulation, football injuries were commonplace, serious, and in some cases resulted in deaths of players. Public outcry followed the 1904 season. President Theodore Roosevelt stepped in, summoning presidents from some of the elite colleges participating in intercollegiate athletics to discuss ways to make the game safer and competition fair for all schools involved (Farrell, 1989). This meeting led to the creation of an organization charged with regulating college sports.

In 1905, the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States was formed and charged with the regulation of intercollegiate athletics. In 1910, the name was changed to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Today, the NCAA has a home office in

Indianapolis, Indiana and oversees three divisions of college sports (NCAA Membership, para 2). The organization hosts an annual 62-team basketball tournament for Division I basketball; this tournament is nationally televised and has become known to the majority of Americans as “March Madness.” And, while revenues from this televised contest are distributed among the schools that participate, the NCAA also reaps a share of the financial benefits (Byers, 1995). Some critics have likened the NCAA’s financial gain from the sports they staunchly regulate as amateur, to cartel behavior (Fleisher et al., 1992). No matter how it appears, the NCAA remains the long arm of the law in intercollegiate athletics. Beginning in the 1940’s the NCAA began regulating academic eligibility requirements of student-athletes.

### **NCAA Eligibility Requirements**

Initially, the only charge of the NCAA was to reduce violence and to standardize play (Fleisher et al., 1992). Eventually, the organization began to regulate recruiting and the eligibility of the players for competition. In 1948, the first of these rules, the Sanity Code, was put into place. The NCAA’s Sanity Code required that student-athletes demonstrate financial need and meet ordinary entrance requirements of the college in order to receive free tuition, books, and waivers of fees. In order to receive the grant for room and board, a student-athlete was to be in the upper 25% of her or his high school graduating class (Byers, 1995). At the 1951 convention, with lobbying from large schools and schools from the South, the Sanity Code was voted down 130 to 60 (Fleisher et al., 1992).

In the 1950’s, the NCAA revisited the academic standards for student athletes. The decision was made that in order to remain eligible for competition, each student athlete must make “normal progress toward a degree” (Covell & Barr, 2001, p. 424). This simply stated policy was the only eligibility rule in place until 1965 when a second attempt at academic

regulation came in the form of the 1.600 grade point average standard, known as the one six hundred rule. This policy “required that schools limit first year athletes’ grants-in-aid and eligibility to those likely to achieve a freshman GPA of at least a 1.600” (Byers, 1995, p. 164). At the 1973 NCAA Convention in Chicago, the 1.600 rule met its demise. Colleges, particularly small colleges, believed the rule was “a violation of institutional autonomy” and that the rule was discriminatory “against certain types of students” (Byers, 1995, p.165). The end of the 1.600 rule meant that student-athletes needed only a 2.0 high school grade point average to participate in intercollegiate athletics and to receive the grant-in-aid scholarship.

At the 1983 NCAA convention, the American Council on Education (ACE) proposed drastic changes to the academic eligibility of student-athletes. Known as Rule 48, or Proposition 48, the legislation required a student-athlete to “earn a minimum grade point average of 2.00 (4.00 = A) over a specific secondary core curriculum. Student-athletes must also score a 700 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or a 15 on the American College Test (ACT)” (Clark, Horton, & Alford, 1986, p. 162). Controversy surrounded Proposition 48 and its possible negative impact on minority student-athletes. Debate amongst college administrators, coaches, and leaders of minority communities ensued. In 1995, Proposition 16 was proposed to address the concerns. Amendments to the original proposition included increasing the number of core courses required of entering freshmen and created a sliding scale index of high school GPA and standardized test scores (Heck & Takahashi, 2006).

The impetus for much of the reforms of the 1990’s was the Knight Commission Report of 1991. The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics was established in 1989 to propose a reform agenda for college sports. Their subsequent report called for stricter academic standards including that colleges require all incoming freshmen athletes to complete 15 high-

school core subjects, instead of the 11 required under the previous rule. They also required that the academic performance of athletes be reviewed each semester and that athletes be declared ineligible if they did not make continuous progress toward a specific degree (Asher, 1991).

The efforts to refine academic eligibility requirements for student-athletes continued throughout the '90's. The 25/50/75 rule prescribed the degree progress student-athletes must maintain in order to stay eligible for competition (NCAA Eligibility Section, para 5). Twenty-five represented the percentage of the student's degree that had to be completed by his or her third year of eligibility. The 50% represented the progress by their fourth year, and the 75% represented the progress by the end of their fifth year of eligibility. In 2003, the percentages were altered from 25/50/75 to 40/60/80, and schools were held accountable through the earning of Annual Percentage Rate (APR) points. Schools were assigned points at the end of each year, determined by the number of athletes in each sport that were making the required progress. Schools not making 925 points or higher, the number designated by the NCAA, could be penalized with the loss of scholarships (NCAA APR Penalties Section, para 2).

While this latest round of eligibility requirements did put the onus on athletic departments to prepare athletes for graduation, they did not allow a student-athlete the option of exploring the educational opportunities available on college campuses. Many athletes come to college underprepared with little knowledge of academic majors (Gordon, 1995; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). Estimates are that at least 75% of college students will change their major at least once during college (Gordon, 1995). The latest round of NCAA eligibility rules limits student-athletes' opportunities to explore majors and careers. While the 40/60/80 rule might begin to address the fear that student-athletes to go through college for four or five years and have no degree, it still raises concerns of the student-athlete experience. Concerns about the

costs of the student-athletes experience have plagued the scholarly literature for decades (e.g. Edwards, 1973; Maloney & McCormick, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1988; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006).

### ***The Student Athlete as Portrayed in Scholarly Journals***

The literature on the student-athlete at the college level spans four decades. While student-athletes were on college campuses well before the 1970's, scholars did not take much interest in this topic until the late 1960's and into the 1970's. Research topics have followed trends often reflected in issues of American society beginning with the academic performance of student-athletes, stereotyping of athletes, the drug and alcohol use of athletes, women in athletics, and now gender and sexual orientation bias and issues in athletics.

With the growth of and interest in intercollegiate athletics during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, scholars eventually, took an interest in research on student-athletes. Prior to the 1960's the literature was confined to national reviews on the state of intercollegiate athletics within higher education. In the 1960's topics focusing on college student-athletes began to surface. These articles discussed health issues, performance technique, and questions regarding women in sports.

In the 1970's the literature on student-athletes increased both in the quantity of articles appearing in scholarly journals and in the breadth of topics. Many scholars remained committed to writing commentary on the state of college sport, an enterprise which continued to grow in popularity and visibility with television exposure. Faculty remained troubled by an over-emphasis on winning, financial problems, and little evidence to suggest any educational value of intercollegiate athletics (Fisher, 1975; Husman, 1973; Nyquist, 1979). In the wake of many social reforms of the 1960's, authors became interested in the possible exploitation of student-



athletes (Edwards, 1973; Renick, 1973). Much of the concern centered on the possible exploitation of African American athletes in particular (Bailey, 1975; Edwards, 1973; McClendon & Etizen, 1975).

As women's athletic programs became a regular feature on college campuses, scholars took notice. Research and discussion on topics, such as gender stereotyping of athletics as unfeminine, the idea that females should not engage in strenuous activity, and discrimination in the allocation of resources for sport, filled higher education and social science journals (Commission on Civil Rights, 1980; Kemper, 1980; Ritter, 1980). As the notion of women as athletes became more socially acceptable, the research topics became more sophisticated (e.g. Blinde & Taub, 1992; Howard-Hamilton, Lawler, & Talleyrand, 1995; Petrie & Stoeber, 1997).

Other 1980's literature included examinations of the drug use and abuse of male and female student-athletes, including the use of amphetamines as a performance enhancer (Cooter, 1980). When the NCAA implemented a drug testing policy, the policy and its effectiveness became topics addressed in the literature (Leeson, 1989; Tricker & Cook, 1988).

According to a content analysis of scholarly literature on student-athletes in the 1990's, and into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century researchers took an interest in the health of student-athletes, authors reexamined possible bias and discrimination issues and substance abuse (Twale & Korn, 2009). The health issues included the body image of female athletes particularly in sports that reward thinness or where excess body weight is believed to hinder performance (Johnson, Powers, & Dick, 1999). Authors investigated risk factors for the development of eating disorders in college athletes (Williamson et al., 1995). One new topic in 1990's literature was an examination of athletes and crime. With news headlines informing the public of professional or college athletes implicated in incidents of violent crime, scholars responded (Lapchick, 2000; Lederman, 1990).

Lapchick (2000), reminded the scholarly community that some athletes come to campus from high-risk environments, he encouraged professionals on college campuses to help these young adults deal with the stress caused by their environments and use sport as a release.

Throughout the changing trends of student-athlete research, one constant has remained. Scholars are still writing and researching about the academic experience of the student-athlete. Concerns still exist that college athletes must choose between putting their energies into sport or school and that they often choose sport to the detriment of the academic experience.

### **Possible Costs of Participation in Division I Athletics**

A deficient academic experience, lack of career interests outside of sport, risk of injury, and identity foreclosure as an athlete are some of the noted costs of participation in intercollegiate athletics. Some researchers claim that participation in college athletics hinders cognitive development and has negative cognitive consequences for students (Cornelius, 1995; Pascarella et al., 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Raney & Knapp, 1987). For example, in their meta-analysis on the impact of college on students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found “small but consistent...evidence to suggest that intercollegiate athletes...may not be deriving the same cognitive benefits from college as their non-athlete peers” (p. 126). Their research showed slower gains after the first year as a college student-athlete and suggested that athletes in the revenue-producing sports of football and men’s basketball show more negative consequences in terms of their cognitive development than athletes in non-revenue producing sports. They reported that this trend persisted throughout college and was the same for all football and men’s basketball players regardless of pre-college characteristics.

### *Potential Academic Costs*

A number of studies have been conducted on the academic experience of student-athletes. Researchers have conducted case studies to gain an understanding of the student-athlete experience. Others have examined the cognitive development and academic achievement of athletes. And researchers have explored the possibility that athletes are clustered into courses or academic programs.

Benson's (2000) qualitative study on the academic experience of student-athletes reveals that students were not taking an active part to assure they gained all that they could out of the academic experience. The students she interviewed admitted to "going with the flow" (p. 234) which, in their team culture, meant placing a greater emphasis on athletics than on academics. Benson reported that any blame for a greater emphasis on athletics does not rest with the students. She explained that poor academic performance by the students in her study was not the sole result of inability but "was produced by a series of actions by the students themselves *and* by significant others in the academic environment" (p. 238). The athletes indicated that from their recruiting trips, to new student orientation, and into their first few weeks on campus the message was clear that athletics was more important than academics. Many students also expressed that the expectations for them to perform academically were low and that they lowered themselves to those expectations. These lower academic expectations may explain, in part, the consistently lower gains in cognitive development noted by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) in their meta-analysis of studies on student-athletes.

Evidence that student-athletes internalize expectations from others is noted in other studies (Adler & Adler, 1988; Singer, 2008). In Adler and Adler's (1985) case study of a Division I men's basketball team, they found a culture that emphasized athletics and, in some

cases, devalued academics. The students in their study discussed two groups within their team – the “straights” and the “partiers” (p. 409). The straights did whatever the coaches expected with no questions asked. The partiers felt the coaches were overbearing and intrusive, and they sensed that once their playing days were over, their relationship with the coaches would end as well. The studies by Adler and Adler (1985), Benson (2000) and Singer (2008) lend credence to the perception that athletes are in college for their sport and not for academics, or that once immersed in the culture of athletics, academics becomes secondary.

This athletic culture may explain, in part, the academic experience of student-athletes. Findings suggest that on some campuses student-athletes are steered into certain courses or majors and that faculty and other students believe student-athletes are more focused on their sport than on academics (Adler & Adler, 1985; Knapp, Rasmussen, & Barnhardt, 2001; Raney & Knapp, 1987; Simons et al., 2007). This belief that athletes care more about their sport than academics reinforces a negative stereotype of student-athletes (Simons et al., 2007). According to one student-athlete in Adler and Adler’s (1985) study, professors were “out to get you ‘cause they feel like you living like a king and it shouldn’t be that way [*sic*]” (p. 246).

Negative stereotypes of student-athletes are likely to have negative consequences for all student-athletes. However, the impact may be greater for minority student-athletes (Simons et al., 2007). Black student-athletes face academic, financial, and social challenges that White student-athletes do not face (Singer, 2008). These challenges may be one factor related to the lower academic achievement often observed for minority student-athletes (Benson, 2000; Purdy et al., 1982; Singer, 2008). Other researchers link the poor academic performance of minority student-athletes to societal problems (Benson, 2000; Edwards, 1984). Regardless of the source,

studies indicate a deficient academic experience for black and white student-athletes and some indications are that the athletes themselves are not entirely at fault.

Another potential academic cost faced by student athletes is that too many of them may be steered toward one specific major set of courses. In 1987, Raney and Knapp conducted a study, revealing that student-athletes were, in fact, clustered in physical education majors and courses. The authors compared the results of this study with a previous study conducted on a different campus and found similar results. They suggested that faculty play a role in creating an academic experience different for athletes and non-athletes. On both of the campuses they studied, the authors found that the grades of the student-athletes were higher, on average, than the grades of non-athletes in the same courses. They believe that “the history of intercollegiate athletics is a history of faculty withdrawal from responsibilities in the face of tremendous public acceptance of such programs” (p. 89). Raney and Knapp’s (1987) investigation along with Benson’s (2000) case study, it would seem that any abnormal academic experience of student-athletes is not the sole responsibility of the students themselves. The students in Adler and Adler’s (1985) case study discussed being placed into classes for which they had little interest and that they felt were “a bunch of b.s.”(p. 247). The practice of placing many student-athletes in the same major or courses may help create the athletic sub-culture that values sport over school at the same time perpetuating the myth of the “dumb jock.”

### ***Potential Career Costs***

If athletes are “steered” into majors or particular courses by academic advisors or significant others in their academic lives, this may leave little opportunity to explore areas of potential career interest. Or perhaps the athletes themselves are more interested in sport than exploring other interests. Studies indicate that student-athletes lag behind non-athletes on

measures of career maturity (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Martens & Lee, 1998; Sowa & Gressard, 1983). One possible explanation is that student-athletes believe if they make it to the college level of competition, they can then move on to a professional sports career. However, it would seem the numbers are against them. Chu (1989) noted that “of 700,000 high school basketball players and 15,000 college players, only 200 are drafted” (p. 96) by the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Chu, 1989). He further stated that even if a player manages to make an NBA team their career is short-lived lasting typically “3-4 seasons” (p. 97). Petitpas and Champagne (1988) cited a 1978 report that “3.3% of collegiate athletes who continue on in professional sports have a life expectancy of less than five years” (p. 454). A 2007 report by the NCAA yielded similar numbers, Sanders, Gardner and Jones (2009), cited an NCAA study that stated 1.2% of senior men’s basketball players from NCAA institutions are drafted by the NBA, and only 1.8% of senior football players are drafted by the National Football League (NFL).

The NFL and the NBA use college athletes as their employment pool. In the 1990’s, a talented high school basketball player could go from high school directly to the NBA. However, in 2006, the NBA established a rule requiring those eligible for the draft to be age 19 during the year of the draft (NBA.com). For a talented player with NBA aspirations, sitting out a year of his sport in hopes of catching the eye of NBA scouts does not help his career. So these athletes now go to college to continue their participation in basketball often - as in the case of Kansas State University’s Michael Beasley - for one year only until they are eligible for the NBA draft. For football players, the situation is different. For a talented high school football player in the United States, his only route to a professional football career is college. This may mean that some football and men’s basketball players are in college to focus only or primarily on their sport.

Empirical studies yield mixed results on levels of career maturity and vocational information for student-athletes. Using the My Vocational Situation (MVS) and Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), Martens and Lee (1998) found that athletes were not significantly different than non-athletes on measures of vocational identity and career maturity. However, as the authors noted, a college football player who states professional football as his career goal might score high on vocational identity as he has a “clearly stated career goal in mind” (p. 178), despite the unrealistic nature of the goal. Part of the concern is that many college athletes view themselves as an “athlete” and little more – being an athlete becomes a salient part of their identity. The end of college, in most cases, means the end of that part of their identity. This leaves many athletes unsure of themselves once their playing days are over.

Losing their identity as an athlete may affect their overall self-esteem. Many athletes struggle with “sport retirement” and succumb to overindulgence in alcohol or drugs, become depressed, or are prone to anger (Crook & Robertson, 1991). Yet, not all former athletes meet this fate; some move seamlessly into other careers. But with limited research on the post college experience of student-athletes, it is difficult to understand if the salience of an identity as an athlete and immersion in an athletic sub-culture, as opposed to other factors, are responsible for the struggle to overcome sport retirement. One factor that may contribute to a difficult transition out of sport is a career ending injury.

### ***Potential Health Costs***

Early or unexpected sport retirement, in the form of injury can be detrimental to an athlete. Yet, risk of injury is only one potential health concern for student-athletes. Student-athletes have mental health concerns due to the constant risk of injury, an injury itself, and the

stress associated with being a student-athlete (Kissinger & Watson, 2009; Selby, Weinstein, & Stewart, 1990).

Injury is a constant threat to an athlete, but a physical injury can lead to additional health concerns. Common injuries for college athletes include sprained ankles, tendonitis and pulled muscles (Kissinger & Watson, 2009), but they are also at risk for more serious injuries such as torn anterior cruciate ligaments (ACL), concussions, or spinal cord injuries. When an injury occurs to a student-athlete, it not only impacts his or her physical health, but their status with the team, inability to attend class, and ability to meet the normal demands of a college student which can lead to psychological distress as well (Selby et al., 1990). Furthermore, the repercussions of the injury to one member of a team can extend beyond the individual to other team members. Thus, the mental health concerns of all student-athletes must be addressed along with the general physical health of athletes (Kissinger & Watson, 2009).

Athletic injuries are not the only health concerns for student-athletes. Nattiv, Puffer and Green (1987) found that student-athletes are at greater jeopardy for health-risk behaviors, including things like not wearing seat belts or motorcycle helmets, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or engaging in risky sexual behavior. Athletes who face the threat of injury in sport may be more willing to take risks in other areas. This risk-taking behavior may lead to a higher use of alcohol or other drugs among athletes (Nattiv et al., 1997; Selby et al., 1990). Researchers have also indicated that the stress of the student-athlete experience could cause illness or other health concerns (Etizel et al., 2002; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988).

The threat of injury, the stress of the dual roles of the student-athlete, and the stress of competition at an elite level have the potential for any number of health concerns for student-athletes. Altogether these concerns add up to a potential cost of the student-athlete experience.



This potential cost is one that perhaps only other student-athletes living inside the bubble can understand. For many of these student-athletes, the way to deal with these concerns may be to stay close to others in the same situation; closing that inner circle that keeps athletes in and non-athletes outside the bubble.

### ***Potential Costs Related to Psychosocial Development***

Life inside the bubble may have consequences in terms of psychosocial development. According to Lubker (2006), student-athletes on college campuses are often isolated from the rest of the student population, contributing to misperceptions of the college athlete by those outside the bubble. This separation may lead to the sub-culture discussed by Adler and Adler (1988). Isolation from peers on campus may affect social development and may hinder opportunities for students to explore other areas of interest (Adler & Adler, 1988; Benson, 2000; Bowen & Levin, 2003; Lubker, 2006; Nishimoto, 1997; Shulman & Bowen, 2001).

For college athletes, one by-product of this separation from non-athletes may be the continuation of the “dumb jock” stereotype which involves the perception that all athletes have low intelligence and little academic motivation and that they receive undeserved benefits and privileges. A study of 538 student-athletes found that 33% believed that professors perceived them negatively, while 59.1% said their fellow students held negative perceptions of athletes (Simons et al., 2007). According to the perceptions of these student-athletes, the “closer athletes are to the archetypal African American male football or basketball player the more ... likely they are to receive negative treatment” (Simons et al., 2007, p. 297). African Americans report more negative perceptions than whites and others. Conversely, white female athletes in non-revenue sports are less stigmatized and less subject to negative treatment. The impact of the dumb jock stereotype may be even more salient for African-American student-athletes who may not blend

in easily to the non-athlete student population, especially at predominately white institutions (Simons et al., 2007).

While Simons' and colleagues (2007) studied behavior from the perception of student-athletes, Engstrom, Sedlacek and McEwen (1995) measured faculty attitudes toward student-athletes. They found evidence that professors do harbor “prejudicial and biased attitudes” (p. 222) toward student-athletes. In 1991, Engstrom and Sedlacek found similar results among college freshmen who held negative stereotypes of athletes especially in terms of academic ability. These studies demonstrate the negative perceptions student-athletes must deal with on campus.

If athletes feel negative perceptions from others, they may tend to stay with others like them. Or, as some researchers claim (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1988; Benson, 2000; Nishimoto, 1997), if their rigid athletic schedules keep them apart from other students, both sides – athletes and non-athletes – may develop misperceptions of the other group. This separation may have other consequences.

Many developmental theories, including that by Chickering and Reisser (1993), include socialization with others as an important part of college student development. Development in the management of interpersonal relationships can only occur if one is allowed to explore such relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Cornelius (1995) found that a strong athletic identity did not correlate with high interpersonal scores. This finding suggests that isolation from peers may impact psychosocial development.

As the research indicates, college athletes may suffer many costs to the college experience. These costs might include a poor academic experience, a strong attachment to an athletic identity, which may impact their career development, and the risk for a number of

physical and mental health issues. However, life in the bubble is not all hopeless for student-athletes. The following is a review of the literature citing benefits of the student-athlete experience to the individuals who participate.

### **Potential Benefits of Participation in Division I Athletics**

While the list of costs associated with participation in intercollegiate athletics seems long, there are also many benefits for student-athletes. Researchers have found that specific psychosocial and other developmental influences associated with sports participation may be beneficial to the development and adjustment of college students. Athletic participation in college often provides opportunities for social interaction and support (Sellars & Damas, 1996), for generating feelings of belonging and acceptance among one's peer group (Adler & Adler, 1991), for developing feelings of pride and attachment to one's school (Melendez, 2007), for developing interpersonal skills and leadership abilities (Ryan, 1989), and for openness to diversity (Wolniak et al., 2001). One notable recent benefit is that student-athletes are persisting and graduating at a rate higher than the general student population (Sander, 2009).

#### ***Persisting to Graduation***

In his theory of student involvement, Astin (1984) claimed that students are more likely to persist to graduation and have a more satisfactory college experience if they are involved on their campuses. Also, he asserted that participation in athletics had "an especially profound, positive effect on persistence" (p. 302). Historically, the term *student-athlete* created the image of the "big man on campus" who was typically an athlete and leader of many social activities. As the demands on their time increased, participation in campus activities outside of athletics has decreased; yet, student-athletes have been found to be more engaged in positive educational practices on their campuses in some areas than non-athletes (Umbach et al., 2006). If this

involvement leads to persistence toward graduation, which is a desired outcome for college students, then it would seem participation in intercollegiate athletics does have a positive impact on students. At present, student-athletes are graduating at rates slightly higher than the general student population (Melendez, 2007). In the 2008 graduation rate data released by the NCAA (2008), college football players graduated at a rate of 67%, which is 12 percentage points higher than the graduation rates reported by the federal government for all college students (NCAA, 2008). It would seem, then, that many student-athletes do choose to put forth effort towards earning their degrees.

### ***Other Benefits***

Student-athletes in the current and in previous studies have cited many benefits to their college experience. These benefits include satisfaction with their college academic and social experience. Athletes also benefit from skills and attributes gained through participation in sports, such as leadership and an acceptance of diversity.

Ryan (1989) found that participation in sports is associated with a higher degree of satisfaction with an institution's academic reputation, intellectual environment, administration, and friendships. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) found similar results in a recent national study of student-athletes. Participation in athletics contributed to desirable outcomes, including the belief that athletics provided a well-rounded educational experience. When surveyed during their senior year or last year of sport eligibility, student-athletes believed "they have had very valuable experiences which non-athletes have not had" (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007, p. 965).

Shulman and Bowen's (2001) longitudinal study used data collected by Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and included post college career information that found athletes in higher paying careers, on average, than non-athletes. In a review of the types of

careers of athletes versus non-athletes, they found that former student-athletes tended to have more “social” careers in sales or marketing. The authors suggested that the experience of being a student-athlete, whether in terms of name recognition or other special qualities, may lead to these careers. While the authors did not define “special qualities” some researchers have found leadership, acceptance of diversity, or the ability to work within a team as attributes gained through sport that may be valued by employers (Hirko, 2007; Ryan, 1989; Pierce, 2007; Wolniak et al., 2001).

Research suggests that skills learned from the athletic experience transfer to other areas. Football players are required to learn a “playbook” that to an outsider sounds like a foreign language. Pierce (2007) found that student-athletes successful in college engineering programs took some of the habits, skills, and management strategies learned as student-athletes and applied them to their academics. The 19 collegiate athletes he studied exhibited good time management and organizational skills and reported using the concentration and drive to succeed on the playing field to help them be successful students in the classroom. Further, Wolniak et al. (2001) found that “participation in revenue producing sports... had little consistent negative impact on athletes learning orientations” (p. 634). While studies indicate that athletes earn lower GPA’s, additional evidence suggests that they are learning from their classroom and athletic experiences nonetheless (Pascarella et al., 1995; Pierce, 2007; Wolniak et al., 2001).

One such outcome of the student-athlete experience found in the literature is openness to diversity. Athletes showed greater gains in acceptance of those different from themselves (Hirko, 2007; Wolniak et al., 2001). The student-athlete population may be the most diverse on many college campuses they are more frequently exposed to students of different racial/ethnic, cultural, national, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In a study of the quality of interactions

among different races within athletics, Hirko (2007) found that interactions in the athletic environment, which calls for teamwork and collaboration, made a positive impact on student-athletes' college education. These students believed "this learning benefited their education" (p. 26). These exchanges made them open to interacting with people of diverse races outside of athletics as well.

Inside the bubble of the student-athlete experience, there are positives. Despite the time demands and sole focus of intercollegiate athletics, Melendez' (2007) study demonstrates the positive influences of athletics. The student-athletes in this study indicated an overall satisfaction with college, motivation to earn a degree, development of interpersonal and leadership skills, eased social adjustment, and opportunities to exhibit leadership skills.

The way student athletes self-identify may affect what they get out of the college experience. Some students identify themselves by the athletic role more than others. Cornelius (1995) found that individuals who identified as athletes on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) assessment had positive leadership attributes and good time management skills. Brewer and colleagues (1993) found similar results in their study of students in physical education courses who identified strongly with the athletic culture. Their study also found indications that athletic identity may be a social construct and not strictly a trait. The authors suggested that athletes might strongly identify with the athletic role in the athletic environment but not as strongly in other settings (p. 250). These results indicate that student-athletes learn to adapt to their surroundings.

The information presented thus far has shed light on both positive and negative consequences and aspects of the student-athlete experience. While some studies sought the voice

of the student-athletes through case studies, most of the scholarly literature on the student-athlete experience relies on survey data. Even scarcer is research that includes the voices of former student-athletes speaking about their college experience.

### **Life Outside the Bubble**

Peer reviewed literature on the student-athlete experience after college is limited. Shulman and Bowen (2001) examined career outcomes. Henderson, Olbrecht and Polacheck (2006) looked at earnings of former athletes versus non-athletes. A few scholars have examined the transition out of sport (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). It should be noted this transition or sports retirement literature is not limited to former college athletes, but athletes at all levels. The literature reviewed below merely begins to describe life outside the bubble of college athletics.

In *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Outcomes*, the authors (Shulman & Bowen, 2001) used longitudinal data in an attempt to understand what athletes gain from their college experience academically and examine the outcomes of that experience, particularly in terms of careers. While their data of Ivy League and Division III athletes at elite academic schools revealed that the athletes underperformed academically, they also found that former student-athletes were likely to earn more money than non-athletes. Another study revealed contradictory results. At first Henderson and colleagues found that athletes earn more money than non-athletes. However, on closer examination, the authors found that the types of careers impacts earnings. Athletes may earn more than non-athletes in the fields of business, military, or in manual labor, but athletes often select careers in education that pay lower wages (Henderson

et al., 2006). Athletes' strong attachment to their sport and their identity as an athlete may lend itself to an interest in coaching, which may be part of the motivation behind this career choice.

A strong identity as an athlete can make the inevitable transition from athlete to former athlete a difficult one. A career ending injury could be particularly detrimental to athletes who believe they have few skills other than sport. If athletes decide for themselves that their athletic career is over, the transition out of sport may be smoother than if they are forced out of competitive sport due to injury, illness, or replacement by a younger or more talented athlete (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

There are more descriptions of life after college and sport found in the popular media. Unfortunately, they often paint a bleak picture for former Division I athletes. As mentioned above, Dexter Manley and Kevin Ross felt their college experience did not prepare them for life after college. A recent story of the murder of Steve McNair, former Alcorn State and NFL quarterback, revealed a troubled post-sports life. A former teammate of McNair's believed he struggled to fill the void left after his athletic career ended (Mattingly, Smith, & Drash, 2009). But not all former athletes struggle when moving from sports to a second career. Many former athletes, like former Princeton University and professional basketball player, Bill Bradley or former University of Kansas and Chicago Bears football player, Gale Sayers have experienced success moving out of athletics and into politics or business.

Not much is written in the scholarly literature on the post-college experience of student-athletes. With charges of exploitation (Edwards, 1973; Haden, 2001; Renick, 1974) and concerns about graduation rates (Donner, 2005; Heck, 2001) a closer look at the outcomes of the student-athlete experience is warranted. As this review of the literature suggests, there are costs



and benefits to the student-athlete experience. The experience varies depending on the level of competition (Pascarella et al., 1995; Shulman & Bowen, 2001) and whether or not participants are involved in revenue or non-revenue producing sports (Engstrom et al., 1995; Hollis, 2001; Maloney & McCormick, 1993). This study seeks to learn what participants believe to be the costs and benefits of participation in Division I revenue-producing sport as well as how their college experience prepared them for life after college.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to rational choice theory, people make decisions such that they will “achieve pleasure and avoid pain” (Coleman & Fararo, 1992 p. 23). In other words, individuals seek greater benefits than costs. But decisions by individuals are not made in a vacuum. Rational choice theory as used in sociology considers decisions that are made within systems.

For college athletes, the world of intercollegiate athletics is the system in which they make their choices. Researchers have demonstrated that college athletes live in a sub-culture that may devalue academics and place a greater emphasis on the athletic role (Adler & Adler, 1988; Benson, 2000). This narrow identity may have negative consequences that may not surface until long after the college experience is over.

When college athletes weigh the costs and benefits of any particular decision, they do so in the context of their athletic socialization. This socialization includes contact with individuals and systems inside and outside of the university. The individuals and systems within the University, include faculty and staff, academic policies and procedures, reporting lines, and a governing board. The individuals and systems outside academe include fans and athletic department boosters who donate money to keep athletic operations running at a level to compete with rival universities, and the NCAA which governs athletic activities. Within this macro-

system, student-athletes make the many decisions that must be made during a college career including the choice to stay with the team or to discontinue their participation in sport. Rational choice theory (Coleman & Fararo, 1992) posits that individuals make choices based on perceived costs and benefits. Student-athletes not only make their decisions based on their own beliefs and desires but within the context of significant others around them – their families and their team.

Only student-athletes can fully explain the experience of participation in Division I college athletics. This study seeks the perspective of former college athletes to learn what they view as the costs and benefits associated with their participation in athletics as students. And, when they reflect back on that experience, to what extent do they believe they were prepared for life after college?

### **Summary**

While data show negative consequences of participation in intercollegiate athletics upon GPAs, cognitive development, and clusters in various majors, there are also benefits to such participation. Student-athletes have a positive perception of their experience. In addition, student athletes demonstrate greater acceptance of diversity, and they develop leadership and other desirable attributes. The limited research on the post college life of student-athletes focuses on incomes while studies on athletes transition out of sport includes college and non-college athletes.

## **CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY**

A phenomenological design was chosen for the current study. This chapter provides a description of this design and explanation for its appropriateness to the current study. The participant selection process is described including details of the actual sample. This is followed by information on the data collection and analysis process. The researcher also discusses establishing trustworthiness and researcher bias, as those are important aspects of a qualitative study.

### **Study Design**

According to Patton (1980), qualitative studies deal with “nuance, with detail, with the subtle and unique things that make a difference beyond the points on a standardized scale” (p. 74). Researchers choose qualitative designs depending on the nature of the research question, the need to provide detail of the topic, and to allow participants to tell their own story (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Those three factors fit nicely with the purpose of the current study.

Qualitative studies address how or what questions, such as the first research question of the current study: What are the costs and benefits of participation in Division I revenue-producing athletics? Qualitative studies can be used for topics that need to be explored, like the second research question: To what extent does participation in Division I intercollegiate athletics prepare student-athletes for life after college? Because of the limited research on the outcomes of the student-athlete experience, the voices of the former student-athletes themselves is critical. The participants will provide the details needed to make meaning of the experience (Creswell, 1998).

Qualitative studies provide descriptions and explanations of a human or social experience and allow for evaluation of the experience. They also aid future strategies and actions for changes or improvements in a setting (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Through the use of semi-structured, open-ended interviews, this study allows participants to provide detail of the student-athlete experience and what impact, if any, that experience had on the participants' life after college. The voices of participants will provide those outside the student-athlete bubble with a more thorough understanding of that experience and can guide campus administrators in making policy that impacts student-athletes.

There are a number of different traditions of inquiry within the qualitative research domain. The researcher chose a phenomenological approach because it best fit the purpose of the current study. Creswell (1998) explains that phenomenological studies seek to describe “the meaning of the lived experiences” (p. 51) of individuals about a particular phenomenon. Phenomenological studies provide rich contextual description of the lived experience and make meaning of that experience. In addition, phenomenological studies explore a subject resulting in implications for policy and practice and they can bring to light ideas for future studies (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The detail and meanings that come from this phenomenological study can enhance the understanding of the student-athlete experience. By using this approach, the participants themselves describe in detail their experiences as student-athletes then and now after their athletic and college careers are over. Their stories can impact future research on student-athletes and can have implications for professionals working with student-athletes.

Phenomenological studies require that the researcher establish rapport with the study participants. This relationship is a crucial component of qualitative studies (Patton, 1980). Qualitative researchers rely on participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences in

order to make meaning of the experience. Establishing positive rapport with participants is one way to ensure respondents are providing honest and accurate information (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) allowing the themes that emerge from their stories to be an accurate reflection of the experience.

The themes from this phenomenological study may provide focus for future studies on the student-athlete experience particularly in the high profile arena of revenue-producing sports. The description of the essence of the student-athlete experience in relation to the costs and benefits thereof will give scholars and campus administrators a broader understanding of the student-athlete experience and the potential impact that experience has on those who participate.

A crucial component of qualitative studies, and one the researcher felt was needed in the literature, is the voice of participants. Because a phenomenology seeks the “lived experience,” those who lived the life of a student-athlete must tell their story in their own words (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). Fifteen former student-athletes were interviewed about their experience.

## **Participants**

Criterion sampling was used to identify possible participants for the study (Creswell, 1998). Each participant met criteria established prior to the study: completion of their eligibility in Division I football or men’s basketball, entrance into college during the years 1985-2003, and attendance at the same university. The college entrance timeframe allowed for perspective on their life after college at the time the interviews took place.

For the study to yield effective results, the participants must have lived the experience of being a student-athlete in a revenue-producing sport at a Division I institution. The researcher felt it was important for participants to have lived the experience for an entire four years in order for more rich, contextual data to emerge from the study.

The researcher chose to focus on revenue-producing sports at Division I institutions because research indicates that student-athletes in this environment differ most from non-athlete students (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005; Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 2002). By gaining insight into their experience and evaluating the benefits and the costs to the students, the study may yield results that have direct implications for policy and practice for student-athletes in Division I athletics.

The institution selected for the study is a medium-sized Midwestern land-grant institution known in this study as The U. The U had a national reputation as a football powerhouse during the 1990's; however, it received very little national recognition for its men's basketball program. The U also has a national reputation for the education of its student-athletes ranking in the top three of all NCAA Division I schools in the number of College Sports and Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) Academic All-Americans in all sports (CoSIDA's Academic All-American Program By the Numbers, para 3).

To begin participant selection, the researcher contacted four former athletes who are acquaintances of hers. These four former athletes met the criteria set forth in the proposal for the study: they each entered a Division I institution during the years of 1985 to 2003 and participated in football or men's basketball. Each participant persisted through his entire four years of eligibility at The U. Using the snowballing, or chain technique (Creswell, 1998), the researcher asked each participant to suggest names of others who met the criteria and who might be willing to participate in the study. The snowball or chain process allows for the identification of "cases of interest" (p. 119) by someone who knows others who might have further information to add to the study.

Using the above mentioned personal contacts and contacting other acquaintances via the social and professional networking sites Facebook and LinkedIn, the researcher made contact with 31 former Division I football and men's basketball players, each of whom participated for at least four years in their sport. Those who participated in the study entered college between the years of 1985-1998. Of the 31 individuals contacted, 15 individuals were able to complete the interview process. These 15 interviews were sufficient to reach saturation of the data. As defined by Rubin and Rubin (1995), the saturation point is reached "(w)hen each individual interviewee adds little to what you have already learned" (p. 72). The nature of qualitative research designs can allow for some data analysis during the data collection process. This on-going data analysis led to the conclusion that data saturation had been reached. A complete description of the data collection process is outlined below.

### **Data Collection**

One-on-one interviews were used to collect data for the study. Each participant was asked the same set of questions (see Appendix A) regarding his college experience and the impact that experience had on his preparedness for life after college. The interview questions were designed to answer the research questions and were developed by a thoughtful examination of what the researcher wanted to know. In this case, the researcher was interested in how student-athletes perceived their college experience, academically and socially, and how they feel that experience prepared them for their life after college. The questions were open-ended by design to allow the participants to reflect on their own experience and to describe the most salient features or incidents of their experience. In order for reflection and follow-up to the open-ended questions, it was important that the interviews be completed face-to-face, or when that was not possible, by telephone.

Each of the 15 respondents participated in a one-on-one interview. Some of the face-to-face interviews took place in restaurants, while the others occurred in the office of the participant. The telephone interviews were conducted with the researcher at home and the participant either at their home or office. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Interview lengths varied from 30-75 minutes.

Each study participant was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix C) that described how his confidentiality would be maintained. The consent form also included contact information for the researcher; participants were encouraged to contact the researcher for any follow-up questions or concerns. Confidentiality was assured through the use of pseudonyms and the agreement that any documents would be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. As the participants reviewed the consent form, they were given the opportunity to create their own pseudonym to be used in the study. A demographic breakdown of the participants, using their pseudonyms, is shown in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1 Participants**

	Race	Year Entered	Year Graduated	Career/ Industry
Adam	Black	1998	2002	Education
Bill	Black	1988	1993	Insurance
Chuck	White	1989	1993	Mortgage Broker
Cody	Black	1989	1992	Insurance
Jesse	Black	1987	1993	Human Resources
Joe	Black	1985	Unknown	Business Manager
Mark	White	1994	1998	Sales



Mike	Black	1987	1993	Electrician
Nate	White	1989	1993	Business Owner
Robert	Black	1986	1993	Football Coach
Rock	Black	1986	1999	Insurance
Terry	Black	1991	1996	Activity Director
Tim	Black	1985	1995	Principal
Trey	Black	1989	1993	Insurance
Vince	Black	1988	1991	Marketing

Following data collection, the full process of data analysis began. While data were informally analyzed as interviews were transcribed, qualitative data analysis involves repeated reviews of the raw data and much reflection on the emerging themes and their possible meanings.

### **Data Analysis**

Analyzing phenomenological data is a systematic process during which the researcher spends a significant amount of time coding and interpreting the data. For this study, the researcher analyzed the data by generating patterns, categories, and themes. This step was followed by testing the emergent meanings of the data. After this stage, the data were reviewed again to seek possible alternative meanings. The final stage was to write up the report of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Critical to qualitative data analysis is the researcher's examination of her own experience with the phenomenon. The researcher examines and "brackets" (Creswell, 1995, p. 52) any bias she has regarding the topic. A more detailed description of this

process is given in the Researcher Bias section below. The researcher then begins the process of combing through the data to identify significant statements, meaning units, and themes.

After each recorded interview, the researcher transcribed the recording, verbatim. The transcript was then sent to the participant to review for any errors, omissions, or clarifications. None of the respondents made any changes to their transcript. The transcripts were then printed and inserted into a three-ring binder.

To begin the process of organizing the data, each transcript was read individually. Notes were made in the margins of the transcript when words or phrases from the interview stood out as potentially important. The next step involved a cross-case analysis for each question (Patton, 1990); this allowed for the comparison of responses to each question and allowed the researcher to search for themes or categories that emerged from the participants. At this stage, statements that reflected a cost or a benefit of the college experience were identified and underlined. Statements about how being a student-athlete prepared the participants to deal with life after college, whether the statement pertained to their professional, or personal lives, were also underlined. Creswell refers to this process as “horizontalization of the data” (p. 147).

At this point, open-coding began. Open-coding involves naming and categorizing similar statements (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). To this end, each interview transcript was read again, and using a color coding system with hi-lighters, repeated statements were hi-lighted. This generated a list of initial statements which were categorized and then grouped into “meaning units” (Creswell, 1998, p. 150).

To test the emerging understandings of the data, the researcher reflected on the data to seek all possible meanings and to get at an overall description of “the essence of the experience” (Creswell, 1988, p. 150). One hundred and fifty-six significant statements were documented.

Due to overlap within those statements, similar statements were clustered based on the context of those statements. Fifty-eight meaning units emerged. Out of those meaning units, six overall themes were developed.

Using axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1999), the themes were reorganized and categorized based on their contextual meaning. Two categories were identified for the benefits of the student-athlete experience in Division I revenue-producing sport, and three categories emerged as costs of that experience. Finally, two categories emerged to describe preparedness for life after college.

The process of analyzing qualitative data is rigorous and time-consuming but is necessary to assure that what is found is the true essence of the experience. A common misunderstanding of qualitative research centers on the idea of generalization. While quantitative studies seek to generalize findings from the sample to a broader population, qualitative researchers believe the human experience cannot be generalized (Ritchie & Lewis, 2001). Instead of generalization, the standard for qualitative studies is the concept of trustworthiness (Guba, & Lincoln, in Creswell, 1998).

### ***Trustworthiness***

A number of factors go into establishing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, including how well the data collection and analysis relate to the research questions, the soundness of the data collection and analysis techniques used, and when “the study has overall warrant and value both in informing and improving practice, protecting confidentiality, privacy and truth telling of participants” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 270). In short, trustworthiness is established when the reader understands how the researcher arrived at her or his conclusions.

The relationship of the researcher to the participants is one crucial component of trustworthiness (Patton, 1980). The researcher had established good rapport with nine of the respondents prior to the study. The remaining six were referred to the researcher for possible inclusion in the study by a trusted, mutual friend. In addition to an established positive relationship to the participants, two other methods of providing trustworthiness were used by the researcher: member checking and peer debriefing.

The process of member checking is used to provide a higher level of trustworthiness by asking participants to review their interview transcripts and preliminary research results to judge the “accuracy and credibility” of the data (Creswell, 1998, p. 203). As mentioned previously, each participant was provided with the opportunity to review his transcript for accuracy. No alterations were made to these transcripts. The second step in member checking was to provide participants with a written description of the findings. Participants were sent, via email, an exhaustive description of the findings and had the opportunity to read the data and to clarify or add to the descriptions if they felt alterations were warranted. This process adds a level of “confirmability” to the findings (Creswell, 1998, p.197). None of the respondents made any alterations to the description.

A second method of increasing the trustworthiness of a study is peer debriefing. This process “provides an external check of the research process” (Creswell, 1998, p.202). Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the researcher consulted with an objective peer who had no personal involvement with the subject or participants of the study. This peer has extensive knowledge and experience with qualitative studies. The peer debriefing process was used to create the interview questions that were relevant to the research questions, to determine when enough data was collected, and to discuss the emerging meanings and themes.

The two strategies of member checking and peer debriefing along with good rapport between the researcher and the participants increased the trustworthiness of this phenomenological study. Because the participants viewed the researcher as a person whom they could trust, their responses to the interview questions were more candid than if interviewed by someone outside of the bubble.

Another area that must be addressed in qualitative studies is that of researcher bias. Because of the familiarity with the subject matter and the participants of the study, the researcher no doubt had preconceived ideas about the study and the participants of the study. These preconceived ideas must be examined and dealt with as much as possible for a sound study. This process, known as “epoche” (Creswell, 1995, p. 52) cannot eliminate any preconceived ideas or biases, but the awareness of them can minimize their influence on the study. A more detailed analysis of researcher bias is included in the next section.

### **Researcher Bias**

As someone who has worked in both paraprofessional as well as professional positions in higher education, the researcher has heard student-athletes struggle with the demands placed upon them. She has observed judgments from colleagues on how student-athletes go through college being “pampered” or “have everything done for them.” This background is certain to influence the researcher’s views of the college athlete experience. These thoughts and feelings must be examined and set aside as much as possible so as not to interfere with the study.

To do just that, the researcher used a journal to write and examine those thoughts and feelings. Topics in the journal include: empathy towards student-athletes who expressed frustration and irritation with the intercollegiate athletics system in which they existed; envy of the opportunities for travel – including “perks” such as gifts from Bowl game sponsors and other

athletic vendors – that were part of the student-athlete experience; and apprehension about the adulation and admiration that young student-athletes receive from fans.

Given prior knowledge of the subject, much thought was put into what can be learned about the experience from those involved. After exploring her experience with student-athletes, the researcher prepared to approach each interview with an open mind knowing that what she values may not be the values shared by the participants. Awareness of any bias or prejudice must happen before they can be neutralized.

The researcher's goal became one of a student wanting to learn. The participants of the study are the ones with the knowledge. Their interviews were attempts to shed light on the student-athlete experience in an effort to help educators working with college student-athletes provide a developmental and academic rich experience for student-athletes, an experience that will have a lasting and positive impact on their life after college.

### **Changes to the Original Design**

Patton once wrote, “Always be suspicious of data collection that goes according to plan” (Halcolm in Patton, 1980, p. 119), and this study was no exception. Two changes to the original study design were made, both of which centered on the selection of participants. The original proposal, called for 30 participant interviews. A number of strategies were utilized to solicit 30 participants for the current study, including the snowballing technique described above, contacting people known to have met the criteria, and asking friends and colleagues for names of people who met the criteria for the study. College friends and acquaintances that attended The U from 1985-1995 were contacted through the social network sites Facebook and LinkedIn. This resulted in 13 contacts. Colleagues from work and other friends from two different Division I institutions were asked to identify additional possible participants, resulting in four contacts and

two new study participants all from one institution. Asking each participant for additional contacts garnered 10 new names and three interviews. The second change involved the number of schools involved in the study. While two schools were originally targeted for the study, participants from only one school responded. Attempts to solicit study participants from the second institution included personal contacts as well as a notice for study participants sent from a representative of the school. Those efforts resulted in only one individual interested in participation in the study. In total, these processes resulted in 31 contacts. While no person refused an invitation to participate in the study, messages were not returned or in two cases, a suitable time was not agreed upon and, therefore, no interview was conducted. After consultation with members of the dissertation committee, it was agreed that 15-20 interviews would suffice and led to saturation.

Conducting interviews with study participants that are no longer in a centralized setting is challenging. The original goal was to conduct face-to-face interviews with all participants. However, the decision to expand the data collection process to include telephone interviews widened the pool of participants. The 15 completed interviews provided enough rich, detailed data to gather the essence of the student-athlete experience in a revenue-producing sport at a Division I institution. The interviews also provided detailed insight into how that experience prepared student-athletes for life after college.

### **Limitations**

Interviewing every former Division I football and men's basketball player is clearly an impossible task. Therefore, a sample must be chosen from that large population. That sample limits the study to the experience of those individuals. Another limitation of the current design is the reliance on self-report data. Both of these limitations can be minimized with a solid design.

The current study is limited to one institution and the experiences of the individuals who agreed to participate in the study. From these individuals the researcher gathered the essence of their experience. Individuals at another institution or at another time may describe a different experience. No two individuals will experience the same phenomena in the same way; the 15 interviews in the current study were analyzed for common themes to be added to the literature.

Interviews rely on the participants to provide accurate, credible data. It can be difficult to know if participants are recalling and describing information accurately. Subjects may be influenced by a variety of factors, they may refrain from saying anything negative, or they may react to the interviewer by responding in a way they feel would please the interviewer. However, establishing good rapport with participants, assuring their confidentiality, and helping them understand the true nature of the study can enhance the credibility of the responses.

These two limitations are common to qualitative studies and are minimized as much as possible for the current study. Collectively, the experiences and themes that emerge from the current study enhance the literature on the student-athlete experience. The researcher's experience within the bubble establishes her credibility among study participants and may enhance the honesty of responses.

## **Summary**

Using a phenomenological study approach, the researcher interviewed former football and men's basketball players about their experiences as student-athletes and how those experiences prepared them for life after college. Criterion sampling was used to identify 31 individuals for the study; this resulted in 15 completed interviews. Each participant was asked the same set of interview questions designed to explore the research questions. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via telephone, and each interview was transcribed verbatim. To



account for researcher bias, the researcher used the bracketing approach to become aware of preconceived notions about the phenomenon so they would not interfere with the analysis of the data. Once the data were collected, the process of data analysis began. The results of the data analysis are presented in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4- FINDINGS**

The findings of this phenomenological study are presented in this chapter. As a result of the data analysis, themes emerged regarding the costs and benefits of the student-athlete experience in revenue-producing sports at a Division I institution as well as how the student-athlete experience prepared these individuals for life after college. The participants' own words are used to describe the experience of being a college student-athlete.

### **Benefits of Participating in Intercollegiate Athletics**

While much of the existing literature charges universities with the exploitation of college athletes (e.g., Edwards, 1973; Haden, 2001; Renick, 1974; Ryan, 1989) and presents evidence that student-athletes, particularly those in the revenue-producing sports of football and men's basketball, are not reaping the same cognitive benefits as non-athletes (Cornelius, 1995; Pascarella et al., 1995; Raney & Knapp, 1987), some scholars do cite benefits of participation in college sports (Melendez, 2007; Ryan, 1989; Wolniak et al., 2001). As the respondents of this study reflected back on their college experience, they cited many benefits to the experience of being a student-athlete. Two benefits emerged as themes; support and education and exposure to new experiences.

#### ***Support***

The most commonly cited benefit among the study participants was that of support. Support can take on many forms, and the respondents of this study used that one word to refer to academic support and social support from university staff and teammates. Furthermore, they described other forms of support they received from outside the university.

Division I university athletic departments provide academic support to student-athletes by staffing academic support units with athletic academic counselors and tutors to provide advising and academic assistance. Unfortunately, these support units are often targeted as a part of a negative stereotype that depicts student-athletes as pampered or spoiled and having everything done for them. In addition to academic support a common perception - enhanced by press reports of rule violations - is that student-athletes receive money, cars or other “gifts” from sports boosters or agents (Fowler, 2010). Indications of that type of behavior were minimal in this study; only one respondent alluded to support above and beyond that needed to succeed as a college student. Robert (football) explained:

You had a lot of help. No matter what went on you had help – you needed a paper done, you had help. If you needed help financially, you had help. If you needed to get out of jail, you had help.

In fact, Robert did find himself in jail a day after returning to his hometown from a football bowl game trip. An officer involved with the case recognized him as a football player for The U and as having been at the bowl game and therefore not in the area when the crime in question was committed. So, his recognizable name and visibility at a nationally televised football game got him out of a potentially bad situation.

Other participants admitted to preferential treatment due to their status as student-athletes. Jesse (football) stated:

(S)ome instructors showed favoritism, plain and simple. I mean everybody knew what we were there for. To be honest with you, we were there to play football. Education was secondary. You know, people like to think education is first, but we were there to play football. That was how we made The U, The U.

Trey (football) further explained: “People do know you. People do cut you some breaks. You do get some perks. But they’re more social if you will.” Trey referred to social perks such as getting into a nightclub without paying a cover charge or showing proper identification. He then added, “the tutoring piece, I think that balances out with the absolute lack of time that you have.” Another example of this give-and-take philosophy of their support system was offered by Joe (football) who said:

the workouts [are] so demanding they make sure from a training table stand point you got fed properly. Immediately after that there was study table, [and they] make sure there were ample tutors for whatever subject that you needed.

While outsiders perceive specialized academic counselors and tutors as an example of student-athletes being pampered or spoiled, the student-athletes see this as payment for the demands placed on them in their dual roles. They expressed gratitude for this academic support and acknowledged they had a part to play in their own academic success. For instance, Chuck (basketball) stated:

You’ve got academic support. Whereas, you know, granted a lot more of your time is taken than an average student. But I think that [as a] whole, especially at The U, the academic support is there. Because so much of your time is demanded, that if you can get on top of things and use the resources that you’ve got to help you dedicate the time you need to get things taken care of, you’re gonna be successful. Of course you’ve got to work too. You can’t just show up ... and expect that you’re gonna pass a class. You’ve got to put a little bit of yourself into it.

Similarly, Vince (football) appreciated the counselors and tutors provided to him during college. He said:

I know I definitely wouldn't have been able to graduate without that - without paying for them. [The academic counselors] made a point to [tell us to] go to class because it is a tough thing when you're a young kid and you have all that freedom. So they was [*sic*] kind of like parents away from home making sure, you know, you are going to go to class, get your books and stay on track to graduate.

These support systems – particularly the academic support – are in direct response to the reality of coaches recruiting talented high school athletes that may not be prepared for the academic rigor of college. Some of the students recognized and took full advantage of these opportunities. Adam (football), who described his background as poor and his neighborhood as a place where gang activity and violence were prevalent, is an example of the aforementioned. He explained:

(W)hen I first got here, believe it or not, I almost flunked out because I really didn't take school seriously that first semester. So once I was on the verge of losing my scholarship and going back home, my academic advisor at the time ... he really increased my awareness of the importance of being here and the importance of a degree. And then after [that]- sports. So I really saw that. So that's when I took advantage of my education.

As Adam describes, he asked for assistance in specific areas, received that assistance and became a successful student. He is now working at a state university and has begun a PhD program. He, like the others who agreed to participate in the study, did not struggle much once their college days were over, possibly due to the support system in place at The U.

Academic support was not the only type of support available to student-athletes, Mike, Joe and Vince, all football players, believed the training table was a benefit to their experience. As Mike (football) explained, "(B)ecause if you don't eat breakfast in the morning, ... you can't

really function.” Joe (football) said, “they make sure from a training table stand point as far as making sure you got fed properly.” Vince (football) acknowledged the training table as unique to The U, “every university doesn’t have a training table – we were able to eat there.” Though Terry, a basketball player, mentioned that sometimes his schedule caused him to miss a meal at the training table and he would have to pay for a meal elsewhere.

Another form of support experienced by respondents of the study came from the informal support of their teammates. Nate (football) described this form:

You’re part of a team, and you’re around people that are going through the same thing you are. And so I think there’s [sic] a lot of benefits to that because we’re all going through the same struggle. That’s why I never had a desire to join a fraternity or anything.

Another participant spoke about the relationships that he had with his teammates. Rock (football) stated:

I think [as a] normal student you get to know people, but you don’t spend as much time around your classmates as you do around football players especially with off season stuff and meetings and stuff. You just develop bonds that go beyond.

Nine of the 15 respondents cited support when asked about the benefits of the student-athlete experience. They had support within the university and from interested others, such as fans and boosters, outside of the university. Plus they had the informal built-in support of teammates who were living the same experience and struggling with the same issues. But support was not the only benefit to their experience. Participants expressed gratitude for the education they received, and acknowledged the opportunity they had to travel, which many college students do not get to experience.

### *Education and Exposure*

Other benefits of the student-athlete experience are listed under the broad category of Education and Exposure. The themes under this category include formal education, but also informal educational opportunities that broadened the horizons of the former student-athletes, or exposed them to new experiences.

For some, college itself was a new experience, as they had no college role models to help them navigate the higher education landscape. Three of the study participants indicated that they were first generation college students. College athletes who are also first generation college students are reliant on the athletic academic counselors to provide information regarding their academic choices, including majors and possible career interests. These three respondents described their lack of experience with higher education and their heavier focus on sport because that is what they knew. For them, exposure to higher education was a positive outcome of their athletic experience. Tim (football) explains:

I know some guys may not admit to that but I'm certainly telling you I wasn't here for education because I didn't have any success stories about education in my neighborhood. I didn't see any people going to college in my neighborhood so it was not something that was a high priority for folks in my neighborhood and it certainly wasn't for me.

Cody (football) relied on his academic counselor to guide his selection of courses. He said, "when you have someone like me that wasn't really being pushed one way or the other by parents or significant others they put you in these social degrees." Terry (basketball) expressed gratitude for the opportunity to attend college for free. He said:

The opportunity to go to school for free, that was number one; and seeing other classmates that had to pay for their books, had to pay for their tuition, their board and

room. And just realizing that I'm lucky, you know I don't have to do that. And some kids that had to work two jobs to go to school. So that was number one.

Others, regardless of their status as first generation college students expressed gratitude for the opportunity to go to college and in particular, for their scholarship which paid their tuition, room, board and books. Mike (football) and his wife banter about how hard she worked, holding down two jobs to put herself through college. While Mike gleefully admits he had access to free tutors, and was fed well at the "training table". But, Mike concedes, "I worked hard too, but I worked hard at something else."

Jesse (football), who said both his parents had attended college on athletic scholarships, also stated "free education" as a benefit to being a student-athlete, "I mean there's still [*sic*] people 20 years later still paying for college. So I mean yeah ... that was definitely a benefit." While Cody (football) responded to the question of benefits this way, "you earn your education."

Education can take place in the classroom and outside of it. A few respondents of this study listed the travel opportunities they had as student-athletes, as a benefit to their experience. Nate (football) explained, "the opportunity to travel and go different places.... I'd never been farther east than Omaha you know. So playing football you got to travel and see all these different places so that was a benefit." Trey (football) also acknowledged travel as a benefit in that he "saw different places. You know, you go to bowl games you get to deal and have experiences that you would never have dealt with at least at that level." In listing the benefits of the student-athlete experience, Cody (football) said, "you get to travel."

The participants were able to cite a number of benefits to their college experience. They appreciate the support systems they had in place, including those formed with teammates, and they expressed gratitude for their scholarships which paid for their education and for the



opportunity to travel and experience unique situations – such as a trip to Japan – that they would not have experienced without athletics. Yet, most respondents were able to cite costs to their experience as student-athletes.

### **Costs of Participating in Intercollegiate Athletics**

As these 15 respondents looked back on their college experience, only one former athlete could not name one cost to his experience. Among the remaining 14 participants, three themes quickly emerged, first, the amount of their time that was demanded to, in the words of Joe (football), “honor the scholarship,” the second centered on health and the third cost was the beliefs people outside the bubble had about student-athletes.

### ***Time Commitment***

Years after college ended, these men could recount their daily routine – classes in the morning, over to the stadium for lunch at the “training table,” followed by lifting, team meetings, practice, dinner, and study hall. “(I)f you got over to the stadium at 1:00 with study hall and all that, you didn’t leave till 9:00,” Robert (football) explained. Joe (football) described the schedule in very similar terms,

From practice to working out to training table to study hall to home and doing whatever else you needed to do academically you’re day was done. There’s [*sic*] only so many hours in a day... your days always just seemed to be very short.

Chuck (basketball) saw both an advantage and disadvantage to the time commitments made of student-athletes. “We had more limitations on our time but I felt like we had plenty of opportunities to go meet other students.” He also felt the tight schedule he had as a student-athlete “kept me focused” and helped him prioritize his limited time.

Conversely, Adam (football) felt his busy college schedule made him miss out on a personal life while in college. “That first part of the day was all school; the second part of the day was all practice and football.... I really didn’t get that personal experience in terms of having connections with other students.” Along those lines, two respondents mentioned not having a holiday break or spring break as other students. “We never got to come home for holidays and things of that nature. You didn’t get to experience some of the things a normal student experienced” Cody (football) said. Mark (basketball) also expressed this as a cost to being a student-athlete. He said:

you look at the social side of college and things that other students were able to enjoy where I didn’t really get a spring break or a Christmas break or to do some of the things socially that other college kids were able to do was certainly a sacrifice you know you look back on it and you’re completely happy to be able to make that sacrifice because every kid wanted to be in your shoes to have the opportunity to play.

Time was not the only sacrifice of the student-athlete experience. Some respondents indicated the sacrifice on their bodies as a cost to their participation in college athletics. In one case, this sacrifice altered career plans.

### ***Health***

When asked “What was the cost of being a student athlete?” Jesse (football) immediately responded: “Health.” He was not alone; three other respondents cited physical health as a cost of being a college student-athlete. Jesse went on to explain how his years of playing football have affected him now at age 40. He stated:

I hurt every morning I wake up. It’s hard to get out of bed. It’s hard to walk up steps or go down steps like right when I get up in the morning. I mean yeah, health. I played

football ever since the third grade till I was 23 24 so you're talking about 15 years of everyday pounding. Yeah, it's health.

Bill (football) believes the injuries he suffered during his senior year prevented him from playing professional football. He explained, "the injuries for me coming at the end of my senior year and [not] being able to play pro football." He also described how injuries can impact the already limited time student-athletes have, "by the time someone has some injuries you know that takes away from study time and...[you have to] get up early and staying late."

Bill was the only study participant to state that injuries from sport participation directly impacted his plans for life after college. But certainly not the only one impacted by sports injuries. Mark (basketball) and Tim (football) both discussed the "toll" that the body takes to perform at the elite college level and on into the professional ranks. Mark stated:

I had twelve operations things that you know, it was important for me to play in every game but playing nine days after surgery to playing with a broken hand to you know at 34 I'm at the stage where I need shoulder replacement surgery. So I just look at the toll that your body takes and I think that every level that you play, the higher you go the more pressure there is to perform and your body pays the price for that.

Tim (football) expanded the health toll beyond the physical describing the experience as:

stressful and taxing on your body, your mind. It's just kind of a beat down mentality and then being a student-athlete being expected to keep grades and stay in classes I think it was too much for guys to handle sometimes and I know a lot of female athletes as well that didn't make it—they just couldn't cut it. It's very taxing on your whole demeanor.

As Tim explains, the stressful nature of competition at such an elite level can have an impact on the mental state of college student-athletes. Even if a college athlete plays injury free during his

or her eligibility, the stories presented here indicate that their participation in sport at this high level will impact them later on.

Coping with injuries can be stressful enough for a college athlete. But it is not the only stressor they experience on campus. Student-athletes must face the long standing cultural stigma of the “dumb jock” as well as other perceptions of those outside the bubble.

### *Others Beliefs About Athletes*

While time was the most commonly cited cost to being a student-athlete, perceptions from and the expectations of others outside of the athletic bubble were salient themes from this study. Nearly half of the study participants acknowledged that their experience differed from non-athletes; and that other students viewed them differently. They felt a need to be on their best behavior because they were representatives of The U. As Chuck (basketball) explained:

People are going to put you on a little more of a pedestal not so much at The U basketball or the other sports, as football, but you're still to an extent put on a pedestal, 'oh, that's such and such' or 'he plays basketball' or 'he plays baseball' or 'she plays volleyball' whatever. You're kinda looked upon more favorably. But that's only good for the introduction. After that, you better have some substance to your character or people will figure you out pretty quickly.

Terry (basketball) felt the need to project a positive image. He explains, “you have to walk straight and do things the right way. Any minute that you think that people are not watching, they are watching.” Bill (football) also sensed the importance of his image, “you always have to be on your best behavior. Even if you're in a bad mood you gotta be polite, sign autographs and you know. You have to be on at all times.” Vince (football) recognized that student-athletes are often representatives of their school. He said:

(Y)ou have to be careful of what you did where you went and who you hung out with because you still were a representative of the university. So you had to be really careful about things like, how you carried yourself in public whereas other students didn't have to worry about that.

The participants of the study were well aware of the public interest in college athletics, particularly, football and men's basketball. Bill explained, "People bombard you with questions about football." He went on to describe how the student-athlete experience changed him in an unexpected way. He admitted to getting an "inflated ego" and saw others go through a similar experience. In his view, the experience of being a high profile college student-athlete can sometimes change people "for the negative."

While the respondents of this study felt the admiration and expectations of fans, they also felt intimidation in the classroom by others who assumed they did not belong there. This perception often took the form of the "dumb jock" stigma. Rock (football) said, "I think there's a perception that you don't do your school work, you don't go to school. You think more of yourself than you probably should; you think you're entitled to stuff that other students aren't entitled to." Mike (football) responded to the question by saying "you have to put with that dumb jock stigma" and he gave the following example:

I had a situation freshman year I was dating a girl, she was in the same class I was in – I forget which class. But I studied you know what I mean....and she cheated off me on a test. And the answers were exactly the same. And he thought I cheated. So I was like 'I didn't cheat. I'll take the test over again.'.... So we ... took the test again, and I got the same grade and she flunked it. That stigma follows you.

Trey (football) recalled, “I had a math professor who literally every day in class would start the class with a dumb football player joke.” He learned to cope by developing a “pretty thick skin” and going out of his “way to prove I belonged there.” As part of his effort to prove he belonged, he made a point of visiting with every professor during their office hours. In one visit, he took a sample essay he had written in preparation for an upcoming exam. The instructor assured him that if he submitted that level of work, he would get an A. During the course of their conversation, the professor learned that Trey was a member of the football team. After the exam, Trey did not receive an A, in his words:

I got like a C+. [I thought] This is odd because I produced that essay almost verbatim. So I take it to her and I said ‘here’s the essay I showed you that you said if I submitted this it would be an A answer’ So here’s my blue book, here’s the - and it was almost verbatim I’m just trying to understand what happened. She’s like ‘well, obviously I-‘ yadda yadda yadda, so she has to - I mean the proof is right there - she has to give me an A. Well on the next exam I get a B B- whatever, and I got a note that says ‘If you do not improve your handwriting, I’m not going to grade your exam, and I’m going to fail you.’ The only thing that had changed, in my mind, I could be wrong, but the only thing that had changed was she found out I played football. So just things like that there’s a price to be paid [*sic*].

The negative perceptions these men felt were not reserved for the classroom. As Rock (football) explained his experience with those outside the athletic bubble, “If you’re Donna and you had a bad experience with a football player on one level or another than that’s how you view all football players.”

None of the respondents used the word celebrity to describe their college experience, but mentions of “everyone watching” or “people do know you”, suggests a life lived in the limelight. Sometimes that limelight seemed unfair to them. Chuck (basketball) said:

I got in trouble once in school, stupid thing just being a kid. If I’m a regular college student not only does that not make the papers, I probably go home end of story. But because they knew who I was, the [city] police, have something to prove, I guess. So they kinda tried to make an example out of me. And I was in the wrong, but we went from a mole hill to a mountain and it really wasn’t necessary.

Chuck felt that the actions – good or bad - of college athletes in the high profile sports of football and men’s basketball are magnified by people outside the athletic bubble and that unfortunately, the negative behavior gets magnified more times than the positive behavior.

The complex perceptions of others were commonly cited costs of the student-athlete experience. From the vivid examples described by participants, the impact of these perceptions lingered years later. It is likely there were other aspects of the student-athlete experience that had a lasting impact on the participants of the study.

### **Preparation for Life After College**

For the most part these participants felt that their college experience in the bubble prepared them for life after college. Only one student said he was not prepared for life after college and he spoke strictly from a career perspective. The remaining 14 respondents focused on positive attributes they were able to transfer from their athletic experience into their day-to-day lives.

## *Career Information and Opportunities*

One unanticipated finding from this research was the number of advanced degrees earned by members of the sample. Five of the 15 respondents have advanced degrees; one in law, the rest in education. Mike (football) completed his degree, continued on into professional sports for a number of years, and then returned to his hometown and is now a certified electrician. Joe (football) was the only participant who has not yet completed his degree though he would like to earn his bachelor's degree before his kids reach college age. Cody (football) completed his degree, but candidly discussed his disappointment with his college major. When asked how being a student-athlete prepared him for life after college, Cody responded:

My honest opinion? It didn't. And I'm just being perfectly frank with ya'. I don't think it did because when you have someone like me that wasn't really being pushed one way or the other by parents or significant others they put you in these social degrees. I mean I have a home ec degree, what am I gonna do with a home ec degree? You know, they pretty much steered you toward those classes. They didn't really push you to stay in the business college or journalism because they thought you might struggle. I guess they didn't want to pay the price.

The remaining participants discussed a positive experience that did prepare them for life after college. Robert (football) believed his experience as a college football player was good because, "It got you educated. But it really opened some doors like say if I wanted to come back to [the area] and work I just pick the phone up and call somebody and say 'hey, I want a job.'" Joe (football) agreed that being a college athlete opened doors for him, "I think because I attended the university there's been many opportunities I've come in contact with mainly because of my affiliation with the university." Vince (football) believed having his degree and



the networking opportunities were enough to springboard him into his career, “having that degree and having it from the university....plus being able to know how to dress, know how to articulate yourself, basically how to act in the business world” led to career opportunities for him. Mark (basketball) also believed the positive image he created as a college basketball player led to career opportunities. He explained:

the jobs I’ve been able to get are from people that I’ve met through athletics, or knew my name through athletics so it has opened doors for me that might not have been opened or I would have had to work harder to get an interview or position myself to be involved in the job that I currently do.

The evidence from this study indicates little career information or guidance was provided to these men, but public interest in athletics did lead to networking opportunities which led to careers. When asked about the benefits to “out of class” experiences, such as internships, most study participants said that they did not try to take advantage of those opportunities, though they seemed aware that they existed. Chuck (basketball) admitted:

I guess I probably should have tried to do a little bit more than what I did. I’ve always been a guy – and maybe that’s my own fault – but I’ve kind of always wanted to earn my way doing whatever I did. I didn’t want special treatment because of what I do. If you like me because of me that’s good; if you like me because I averaged 12 points last year that’s not the right reason. You don’t know anything about me if that’s all you’re looking at. I think looking back maybe I probably should have tried to reach out a little bit more, meet some more people in the community because coming through that was always ‘oh with your connections’, well now 15 years later there aren’t any connections.

However, one participant did take advantage of internship opportunities. Jesse (football) did two internships while earning his degree. He acknowledged that his status as a student-athlete helped him obtain these opportunities. “I got one of them through the (athletic) academic counselor, and then the second one I got through the football staff.”

As Martens and Lee (1998) suggest, many college athletes expect to become professional athletes and have few other career alternatives. There were hints of professional sports aspirations among the respondents of the current study, but only a few stated a professional sports career as a goal. Eight of the study participants did play professional sports.

Adam (football) discussed intentionally working hard at both football and school to keep both options open. He explained:

I had deficiencies in a few areas like English and Math and so I let [his academic counselor] know that, he provided tutors for me; he had people going to classes to help me with homework. And then once I got over that hump and I developed those skills, I really, I felt more confident about school. And then I took on the mind set of preparing for football, being the best on the field, but also making sure I had everything taken care of once football was over, or if football didn't work out.

Bill (football) dreamed of a professional sports career and seemed on his way until his senior year when he was struck by injuries. He earned his degree, and moved on to the next phase of his life, though the transition was a difficult one for him. Others admitted that sport was higher on their priority list than any college major. Tim (football) said:

When you're playing at a high level and you're playing very well in high school, you just know it's something you're going to do and going to continue. And then in college I

never really even viewed it – I’ll be honest with you – as an educational experience, it was just an opportunity to go play football and get an education along with it.

When asked about the decision to play sport in college Mark (basketball) alluded to professional sports career plans or the possibility of becoming a coach. He stated:

I had other opportunities to play college football but basketball allowed me to choose a school at the level of The U and other I guess high major schools, Creighton, Villanova other schools that gave you a chance to compete at the highest level of college sports. So that was one reason and I guess I thought you know even from a professional standpoint, pro aspirations and if not that, coaching was something that I wanted to do as well.

Rock (football) was also a two-sport athlete in high school. His final college decision came down to the type of schools recruiting him for either sport. “I guess that because bigger name schools was [sic] recruiting me for football, size wise I knew football was probably the better choice.” When asked if he considered a professional sport career, Rock said, “No.” He does believe young athletes today are more in tune with the professional opportunities than he was at the time. Ironically, Rock’s father played professional football and while he believed football was “in his bloodlines,” he did not aspire to a professional sports career as a teenager.

The respondents of the current study are collectively highly educated; all but one completed his degree. At the time of the interviews all were employed. They have chosen a variety of career paths including school administration, sales, management, a trade and coaching.

### ***Attributes Gained Through Sports***

As they discussed how their experience prepared them for life after college, each participant was able to list positive attributes they gained through participation in sport that they believe helps them in their current day-to-day lives. Whether or not the participants of the study

thought much about their careers after college, their experience as student-athletes gave them the opportunity to gain and hone qualities that are valuable to employers and significant others in their lives. Among the attributes they listed as helping them prepare or cope with life after sport were; acceptance of diversity, dealing with adversity, teamwork, and work ethic.

The literature cites an acceptance of diversity as a benefit to the student-athlete experience (e.g., Hirko, 2007; Wolniak et al., 2001). Mark (basketball) believed acceptance of diversity was one of many attributes he gained from his experience as a college basketball player. He explained, “all those things that athletics teaches you... the different cultures that your teammates come from that you deal with in the outside world.” Bill (football) stated that his exposure to people of different backgrounds was a benefit of his student-athlete experience. He explained:

I was kind of shy comin’ into college . . . I grew up in a mid-sized town in Texas; pretty much black and white (laughs) literally and figuratively, and at the University met a lot of people of different backgrounds. My best friend ended up being the son of a farmer from South Dakota.

Terry (basketball) shared similar thoughts about his exposure to diversity. He said:

I have so many friends from so many different parts of the state that I didn’t know exist, you know like [a small rural town] so many places I didn’t realize, but I got to visit because of friends. And they’re still friends today. So that social life opened doors to lifelong friendships.

Vince (football) was quite candid about the cultural experience he had when going away from home to college. He explained:

Being an African-American student, a male, coming from New Orleans and now all of sudden you are in predominately white [city and state] you go in there with ideas of, coming from the South and going to the Midwest you learn a lot about other cultures. You learn one, that everybody isn't racist, everybody [is] not always looking out to hurt you or to harm you. There are some Caucasians that are willing to help you. That was one of the benefits that I had going to college.

For Joe (football), his college experience provided the opportunity to relate to those outside his cultural circle. He stated:

Being able to socially interact with wide spectrum of people, and it's amazing because ... even at the university still a minority whether it was in the classroom numbers or just in [the town] you learn how to cope, how to talk, how to interact with people maybe not necessarily at the same level as you or the same race but you're able to adapt.

Chuck (basketball) shared his experience from the perspective of a white male. He explained:

[I] grew up in a predominately white town and then I moved to a town to attend high school that had no diversity whatsoever (laughs) and so I think that I wouldn't necessarily have had a negative outlook on other races, people of different backgrounds, but I wouldn't be able to see socially that they really and it's cliché but to me there really is no difference. It's just you are what you are be it good be it bad – the color of the skin is just the surface but to me and that's cliché, but what's underneath is what's important.

And I don't think I would believe that to such a degree if it weren't for athletics.

Rock (football) expanded this acceptance of diversity to an awareness of where he fits in the broader world. He said:

The whole experience of learning to get along with people of different backgrounds being a part of such a big thing I think you learn to be part of something bigger than you and I think all that carries over into life after sports.

Overall, these former student-athletes felt they learned a great deal from their college experience. The time demands, perceptions from others, and the stress of competing at an elite level created adverse conditions for those who participated. For many, that adversity in itself was a learning experience. As Tim (football) explains, “it gave you resolve, it made you a lot tougher. You dealt with so much stuff when we got out it gave you that mental attitude that there’s nothing you couldn’t take on.” Mark (basketball) credits sport with teaching him a number of life skills,

athletics taught me everything. You look at what it’s like to work hard, to work as a team, to handle adversity – not only yourself but to deal with your teammates having adversity whether it be [*sic*] personal or on the court.

In addition to dealing with adversity and a solid work ethic, Chuck (basketball) described an understanding of healthy competition that he acquired through sport. In basketball one on one “battles” can be heated, in Chuck’s words,

That’s one of the beautiful things about sports, period. It teaches you to have the mindset that that’s your enemy on the court, but off the court, that’s over. You have to have respect for the guy that came at you with all he had and you went at him with all you had.

For him, this carries over into the work world where he shows respect for co-workers and competitors for their efforts alone. Adam (football) credits sport with instilling in him many attributes that help him be successful. He explained:

I am the professional that I am today because of football that environment even though they created an environment that kept me away from doing a lot of personal things, a lot of outside things just in terms of my work ethic, leadership just came from being a student-athlete and also gave me more responsibility because I didn't think I had some of the skills I had coming from Arkansas but they really prepared me really developed me I can really identify with or cope with people who aren't that confident or who have low self-esteem, if they come from the background like where I came from if they don't or feel like they can't you know I can cope with them and say 'I was in the same place but if you do x,y and z you can be successful too.'

This experience in dealing with adversity would seem to be one of the attributes developed inside the athletic bubble that translates favorably to life outside of athletics. As Adam (football) said, "team work, accountability, responsibility, leadership" were attributes that he gained from his experience as an athlete that help him be successful in his career outside of athletics. He also discussed a strong work ethic and a desire to be the best he can be at whatever assignment. Others talked about a certain focus or drive they have now that they attribute to their athletic experience. Jesse (football) said:

the focus and intensity you bring from the football field. I mean when you go to prepare for a presentation a report or whatever you still have to have that same concentration the same focus to do the job and do the job well.

The solid work ethic gained from the student-athlete experience can be valuable to employers.

Trey (football) explained:

what I've been told by HR people is that the reason why people want to hire athletes is that there's a lot more 'want to'. There's an understanding that there just aren't any

excuses. So, I think the reason why, is these people have spent a life of deadlines, of performance being judged or whatever. It's either you win or you lose, either you did it or you didn't, and you know that is rare to find.

The work ethic gained from the intensity of elite athletic competition plays out in other positive attributes such as the ability to compete, a higher self-esteem and an intense desire to be the best at whatever task is at hand. Nate (football), who manages his own business said, "with business you gotta strive to get better and be better than your competition. I think that's one of the things I learned a lot." He also learned a little about managing people. He explained:

I think the biggest thing is just the understanding that everybody has a role within a team and so you know like an offensive lineman he's not going to be a good quarterback and vice versa. And likewise in business you know you might have one person in one role because that's their strength but they wouldn't do good [*sic*] over here so I think maybe understanding what peoples' strengths are and having them in those roles.

The employees at Nate's business seemed very happy and were eager to help as the researcher arranged the interview with him; behavior that could be a sign Nate has put into practice a management style that does, in fact, utilize the strengths of his employees and allows them to be successful in their jobs.

Dealing with the stress of high profile college athletics helped prepare these men for more than just careers, Tim (football) stated "multi-tasking" as an ability he utilizes most from his days as an athlete, not only in his career but for "work and life purposes...you dealt with such an intense level of stress that it kind of prepared you to deal with some of that stuff after college." Jesse (football) described how battling injuries as a college athlete gave him a competitive fire that he uses today when faced with adversity. He said:



(A)nything I go through now, I can fall back and use that experience and think ‘OK this is what I had to go through to get back on the playing field’ or to get you know to be competitive in life again. So I mean it helps, it helps now especially with me going through the divorce. I mean I lay in bed and I get that fiery attitude and ‘You know what she’s not gonna get the best of me.’

The stories above explain how sport brought out positive attributes that transferred to other areas of life. However, two men in the study suggested that innate traits are what made them successful in both sport and life. Rock (football) explained:

What makes you good in football makes you good in life. I mean, if you’re a good teammate, if you’re a guy that’s trustworthy as in you do what you’re supposed to do, and you’re where you’re supposed to be when you’re asked to be there, you work hard. I mean a lot of stuff that makes you good in football will make you do good [*sic*] in whatever walk of life after college.

Chuck expressed a similar belief when he said: “(Y)ou’re gonna get out what you put in to it. If you work hard and apply yourself, people are always gonna have more ability than you, but you’re always going to get a return on your investment.”

Most likely, athletes take away from their experience some combination of an enhanced innate talent, and qualities they acquired during their experience. A solid work ethic and a sense of responsibility to teammates can make one a good team member, however not everyone can work hard enough to compete at the Division I level without some natural athletic ability.

The intensity of the student-athlete experience bolstered self confidence for some participants. Mike (football) said:

It definitely helped me with my confidence level and just being able to walk into a room and being able to speak to people and being able to know that there's nothing I can't do without a little hard work.

Bill (football) listed many attributes he felt were enhanced by his experience as a student-athlete.

He explained:

You're very comfortable socially you're also very competitive because you're in a competitive culture so you're able to be competitive. Time management comes in to play, organization, you're able to communicate...be a better public speaker and it provides a certain amount of confidence too.

Jesse (football) described his work experience with non-athletes and their concept of what it means to work as a team. He explained:

Individuals who competed in the college arena stuff like that they have more a sense of what it's like to be a team. Whereas a lot of non-athletic individuals it's all about them. That's what I was talking about earlier, stab you in the back, cut your throat.

Adam (football) was able to list a number of attributes he feels he gained from sport and also made a comparison to non-athletes. He stated:

Just the team work, accountability, responsibility, leadership; the number one thing I think I have over a lot of people who are not student-athletes, which, nothing against non student-athletes but really the work ethic. Just even in my job it's a 40 hour a week job, but coming from football and just that mind set this is not a 40 hour a week job for me it's a by any means necessary getting the job done, it's 50 hours, 60 hours, coming in at 7 instead of 8. So it really set me up to, I don't know, I guess really perfect everything that I do. You know not just doing what's required but going beyond expectations, being the

best I can be, making others around me be better because of that team work mentality.

And I am who I am today because of football.

Mark (basketball) believes the experiences he had as a student-athlete helped him gain attributes that carry over into other areas of his life, “The adversity and teamwork and all the things that put you in a team environment that it takes to be successful in the workforce, in a family or in a marriage.”

The findings suggest many positive attributes gleaned from the student-athlete experience. The time these men put into sport at a young age, showed them that hard work does reap rewards. They carry that work ethic and belief that they can succeed with some effort, into their current lives. Their reliance on teammates to achieve the end goal of winning a game, taught them not to judge someone until you have seen what they can do. Dealing with the intensity of elite competition helped them to cope with other life stressors. These attributes are valuable to employers, friends and family and seem to have been good life preparation for those in this study.

## **Summary**

There was a consensus that the amount of support available to student-athletes was a benefit of participating in a revenue producing sport at a Division I institution. Respondents also expressed gratitude for their education and the athletic scholarship that made it possible for them to attend college. Additionally, they were able to name positive character attributes that they believed they acquired through their experience as a student-athlete. Not only did student-athletes have official support systems in the form of academic counselors, tutors, athletic training staff and nutritionist; they had their teammates as support. They believed the opportunity for travel and exposure to diverse people and situations that came along with the athletic

environment were beneficial. They were also able to take advantage of many networking opportunities that came with being a high profile athlete.

There were three main costs of participation: the time spent on sport - limited time to spend with family, not experiencing what "normal" college students' experience, and being mentally and physically drained at the end of the day. The second major cost was to their health either then in the form of injuries, or now as arthritis and other symptoms of strain on the body are being felt. The third cost was the perceptions of others; this includes being put on a pedestal, the 'dumb jock' stigma and the assumption that "all athletes are alike".

Fourteen of the fifteen participants felt that their college experience prepared them for life after college. They gained attributes such as team work, a solid work ethic, the ability to deal with adversity and an acceptance of diversity. There is also some evidence from the respondents that career information was lacking for student-athletes but career networking opportunities were beneficial. The next chapter contains a discussion of these findings compared to other studies and the implications for future research and practice.

## **Chapter 5- Discussion and Implications**

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings of the current study in relation to the current literature on student-athletes followed by a discussion of implications for future research and recommendations for practice on the college athlete experience. The stories told by respondents of this study are similar to previous studies on student-athletes. However, the current study suggests many benefits to the student-athlete experience and attributes gained through sport that have not been discussed in scholarly literature. Adding the perspective of life after college, provides a more detailed picture of how the experience, both the costs and benefits of being a student-athlete plays out in later life.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The scholarly literature on student-athletes reveals a world where athletes are separated from the rest of the student population in the classroom and outside of it (Lubker, 2006; Raney & Knapp, 1987); where athletics is given greater emphasis than academics (Adler & Adler, 1988; Benson, 2000); and where the focus is on a career in sports (Martens & Cox, 2000; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). At the same time it describes a college experience where student-athletes gain valuable skills and virtues (Melendez, 2007; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Ryan, 1989; Wolniak et al., 2001); where they participate in the academic experience (Umbach et al., 2006); and where they feel a real sense of pride in their institution and persist to graduation (DeBrock, Wallace, & Koenker, 1996; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). There are many benefits to the student-athlete experience, but there are also many costs. Using rational choice theory, athletes were asked to describe those costs and benefits. They were also asked to reflect on how the student-athlete experience prepared them for life after college. Rational choice theory as used in sociology acknowledges that individuals are rational and will make logical choices, however individuals do

not make decisions alone. Their decisions are always made in a social context. For student-athletes dealing with the costs and benefits of their experience decisions they make to continue in their sport, to favor academics or athletics or decisions regarding who they will spend their time with are made within the world of college athletics.

It was the aim of this study to ask the participants themselves to expand on their experience in an effort to determine the benefits and costs of participation in college sport and ultimately how the experience prepared participants for life after college. Comments from the participants of this study indicate that while much is demanded of them, the student-athletes gain a lot of from their experience in revenue-producing sports at a Division I institution. Despite claims by Edwards (1973) and others (Renick, 1974) that student-athletes are abandoned once their playing days are over, participants in the current study leveraged contacts made from their college sport participation to secure jobs after college. They also gained attributes from their experience that they utilize in their day to day lives.

### *Support*

The high level of degree attainment of the respondents in the study may be a direct result of the support they were given as undergraduates. However, according to Hollis (2001) a high level of academic support provided to student-athletes does not always equate to higher graduation rates. The author hypothesized that institutions with support services available to students would have higher graduation rates. The author found that at the Division I schools she reviewed support alone in terms of services, administrative support, staff, budget and space were not enough to raise graduation rates. Her findings indicate that other factors are involved. In the current study, students like Adam (football) and Terry (basketball) acknowledged their

deficiencies and asked for the assistance they needed to be successful. A students' own desire to complete their degree may be one such factor.

Benson's (2000) study indicated that the influence of others in the academic lives of the students heavily impact the academic experience of the athletes. Her interviews with student-athletes, suggested these students picked up on cues from "others' expectations and practices" (p. 237) and acted accordingly. This aligns with comments in the current study; Tim mentioned cues he picked up on from people at the university. He believed significant others expected him to graduate, but he recognized that these same people did not have the same expectations for some of his teammates.

The graduation rate of the current study participants mirrors a national trend of the time. In the 1990's the graduation rate for college football players saw increases, in 1992 48% of football players graduated, that number increased to 53% in 1995 (Heck & Takahaski, 2006). A closer examination reveals a unique trend among the current sample. While the graduation rate for football players in 1995 was 57%, if broken down by race a different picture emerges. The rate for white football players in 1995 was 59% and 41% for black football players (Benson, 2000). In the current sample, out of eleven football players only one did not complete his degree. Of the black football players in the study, ten completed their degrees and three have advanced degrees. Completing a degree was not a criterion for participation in the study, and the researcher fully expected to encounter multiple athletes who did not complete their degree. One reason for the high completion of the sample may be a result of the most commonly cited benefit to being a student-athlete – the support system they had at The U.

Support can take many forms. While respondents named tutoring as one type of support, they indicated that other support systems were in place as well. The team – the football team in

particular - may have become its own support system within the bubble. One respondent believed the relationships among his teammates were the biggest benefit to his experience. Another respondent likened the football team to a fraternity and said he didn't feel that he missed out on anything in college with the time spent between football and school. These attitudes align with the case study Adler and Adler (1988) conducted with a Division I basketball team in which team members supported each other through good and bad times.

It is possible that only another student-athlete could understand life within the bubble. In that intense environment, student-athletes dealt with the stress of competition at a high level, a busy schedule which left them exhausted at the end of the day, and conflicting perceptions from others outside the bubble. Some outsiders, wanted to talk about sports, and seemed to enjoy just being around athletes, yet others, viewed them as dumb jocks and made the assumption that all athletes are the same. This perception from non-athletes was shown in Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) and Engstrom et al. (1995) two studies of faculty and non-athlete students as well as in Simons et al.'s (2007) study of the athlete stigma on campus. Student-athletes may have coped with this stigma by getting support from other athletes who shared a similar experience.

This adversity from people outside the bubble may have led to the intense relationships that developed within the bubble. These relationships extended beyond college. Many post graduation jobs were secured using contact from athletics. Even for those who did not use the contacts, they are aware the network exists and feel blessed to have that support. What the participants felt they did not have enough of, was time.

### ***Time Commitment***

Scholars have discussed the heavy time commitment required of Division I athletes particularly in the sports of football and men's basketball (Edwards, 1984; Etzel et al., 2002).



This time commitment has been a concern because it impacts academic performance and keeps athletes in revenue-producing sports separated from other students on campus which may have implications for developing interpersonal skills (Danish & Petitpas, 1993). Most participants of this study agreed that the time devoted to sport was one cost to their experience.

The different timeframes kept by student-athletes and non-athletes at The U may have kept athletes separate from “normal” students. Mike (football) mentioned the differing time schedules of athletes and students which may have led to the misperceptions non-athletes held of student-athletes. It may also have led to the creation of an athlete sub-culture as described by Adler and Adler (1985) and Benson (2000).

In previous studies researchers have indicated that the time demanded of college sports and the subsequent exhaustion of student-athletes may have a negative impact on the students’ academic performance (Melendez, 2007; Pascarella et al., 1995). However, some respondents in this study credited their regimented schedule with keeping them focused. This structure left little time for outside distractions and focused their attention on the task at hand, forcing them to prioritize their limited time. This finding is similar to what Pierce (2007) discovered of successful student-athletes in an engineering program. This structure of student-athletes at The U may have created effective study habits for some students and ultimately led to their degree completion. However, it did not provide them with time management skills to build on later in life.

While structuring study time for athletes may have led to degree completion, the heavy time commitment of elite competition and a full-time academic load left little time for anything else. This includes little time for any type of stress release. Tim, Bill, and Jesse (all football) each indicated that the experience of being a college student-athlete at an elite level was a

stressful experience. Chuck realized basketball was his stress release once his playing days were over and he suffered consequences of no longer having that release. High performing athletes are susceptible to stress and its' consequent health issues.

### *Health*

Athletes are often viewed in our culture as the picture of health. When a high performing athlete such as cyclist Lance Armstrong or professional football player Teddy Bruschi reveal they have cancer or have suffered a stroke, the news can come as a shock. However, participation in sport frequently causes health concerns both physical and mental. In fact, athletes are at risk for a wide range of injuries and illness (Kissinger & Watson, 2009).

The athletes in the current study were no exception. Bill, Jesse (football) and Mark (basketball) mentioned injuries incurred during their college playing days. For Bill it meant the end of his sports career. As noted by previous authors, depression or psychosomatic illnesses can occur at the realization that an athletic career has ended (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Respondents in the current study experienced such issues once their sports careers ended. A former basketball player knows he will soon experience arthritis in his knees and already has acquired stress-related health concerns because he no longer has the daily "release" of basketball. Some of the stress might have been due to his retirement from sports. He chose to step away from the court when his wife decided not to live overseas during the basketball season. He retired and soon after developed panic attacks. This participant was not alone; others in the current study described depression or stress related disorders that developed upon retirement from sports (Kissinger & Watson, 2009).

Despite these health concerns these men did not regret their athletic participation. Mark (basketball) stated that he encourages his children to get involved in sport. Chuck (basketball)

was glad for the opportunity to talk about the panic attacks he suffered when his sport career ended. He wanted other athletes to know about these consequences to sport participation so they could make more informed decisions regarding their own participation.

Yet for others the transition out of sport was less traumatic. One participant was glad his days of playing football were over because he had grown weary of the attention from fans and the media spotlight. He enjoyed going back to being “an average Joe”. Another went from being a student-athlete to a law school student and was focused more on his present and future than his past. Yet another believed his experience as a graduate assistant basketball coach helped bridge his transition from being a competitive athlete to a life without sports. These examples indicate that having a career goal outside of sports might help to ease the transition into sports retirement, lending credence to the concerns of previous scholars that student-athletes lag behind non-athletes in their career development during college (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Martens & Cox, 2007). Without career goals beyond sports, college athletes may be setting themselves up for a hard fall outside the bubble of college athletics.

### ***Others’ Beliefs About Athletes***

Like the students in Benson’s (2000) study, the former student-athletes in this study indicated being influenced by the expectations others have of them. These expectations were not only from advisors, coaches and faculty, the men in this study felt other students had preconceived ideas or expectations of them because they were athletes. Non-athletes on campus were interested in them because of their status as athletes and often looked up to them or wanted to hang out with them because of their affiliation with athletics. This was often cited as a cost to the experience and may have added to the pressure they felt in the bubble.

At the same time, the respondents of the current study also felt that other students held negative perceptions of them because they were athletes. Like the students in previous studies (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom et al., 1995; Simons et.al., 2007), non-athletes at The U were surprised to encounter a student-athlete committed to academics. One participant remembered the surprise non-athlete students expressed when they learned he was a football player committed to earning his degree. Another participant observed that many non-athletes painted all football players with the same brush and that a bad experience with one means a person believes that all football players are like that.

More salient than the perceptions of fellow students were the perceptions they felt from faculty. Faculty members appeared to have preconceived ideas about their intellectual abilities or effort because of their status as athletes. Students in this study substantiated the comments of Benson's (2000) students' years earlier that they are "living up – or down – to the expectations others have" (Trey, football). The stories they shared indicate that faculty at their institution shared some of the prejudices and biases as the faculty in Engstrom et al.'s (1995) study. One former athlete was accused of cheating when in fact, a classmate cheated off him. Another was forced to listen to a "dumb football player joke every day" in a math class.

The participants of the study acknowledged a separation from normal students. While Chuck (basketball) described the admiration he felt for older team mates who made friends with non-athletes from their dormitory, no other respondents expressed such an outlook. Possibly due to the perceptions of those outside the bubble the student-athletes in this study may have chosen to cluster together, or due to the tight schedule that various team's keep. Whatever the cause, this separation from the non-athlete population reinforces the student-athlete sub-culture seen in qualitative studies on the student-athlete experience (Adler & Adler, 1988; Benson, 2000).

Much has been written about the possible discrimination and bias of college athletes. However, the outcomes of the college experience of student-athletes have failed to capture the interest of researchers.

### *Career Opportunities*

Previous research on careers and athletes focused on the career development of college athletes, showing some indication that athletes have a preference for a professional sports career over other career areas (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Martens & Cox, 2000). Other studies have examined the salaries of former athletes after college, comparing them to non-athletes (Henderson et al., 2006; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). The themes that emerged from the current study indicate a need for more career activities for student-athletes.

In discussing their post college life, four respondents mentioned how their participation in athletics and affiliation with the university in such a high profile way provided networking opportunities for them. These networks were valuable in their efforts to secure jobs inside and outside of athletics. The interviews did not reveal evidence of career development activities provided to them during their college experience.

Participants in this study were not specifically asked about the course selection process and their role in that process, and none provided any insight into how they selected their courses and majors. Course selection is often an opportunity for an advisor and college student to discuss future career goals. One respondent discussed his disappointment with his major and stated that the only time he was asked what he wanted to major in was on his recruiting trip. After that recruiting visit and his subsequent commitment to The U, this former athlete felt “steered” into certain classes, much like the student in Adler and Adler’s (1988) case study who felt he was put into classes which he viewed as not worth his time.

However, none of the other students in this study indicated they were put into classes with other athletes exhibiting an administrative culture similar to the one in Raney and Knapp's study (1995). In fact, one former athlete mentioned feeling very out of place in a large lecture class where he knew no one else and felt his physical features made him stand out. This makes it difficult to ascertain whether athletes at this institution were clustered into courses, or what factors led to one former athlete pursuing a major for which he had little interest.

Kennedy and Dimick (1987) and Martens and Cox (2000) found college football and basketball players to be lower in career attitude maturity than non-athletes. By contrast, the respondents of the current study appeared to have a realistic outlook in that they would like to continue playing at that level if given the opportunity. A few study participants expressed a desire for a professional sports career. While others simply wanted to continue their participation in sport at "the next level". One former football player described a process of playing at a high level and seeing how far he could continue to play football, but did not state a professional sports career as a goal going into college. Another mentioned working hard at both school and football to keep both opportunities open. The participants of the current study showed a mix of career maturity levels.

Of course, a professional sports career is not the only career opportunity for student-athletes. They have the same career opportunities as their non-athlete classmates. Many college students are encouraged to find internships to gain practical work experience that prepares them for a career. In this study, only one participant discussed having an internship while in college.

Regardless of practical work experience whether in the form of summer jobs, or internships, the student-athletes did feel, for the most part, that their college experience prepared

them for the lives they lead now. All but one respondent listed many positive attributes gained through sport participation that prepared them for life outside of sport.

### *Attributes Gained Through Sport*

The findings of the current study concurs with findings from Melendez (2007), and Ryan (1989), that college sport participation does develop positive attributes in athletes and leaves them with a positive outlook on their college experience. Ryan (1989) found that athletic participation was associated with developing leadership skills and satisfaction with the college experience, especially in the areas of student friendships, the intellectual environment, and the institution's academic reputation. Two respondents mentioned the "prestige" of The U, when talking about how prepared they felt for life after college. Melendez (2007) also found that being a student-athlete is associated with satisfaction with the college experience, motivation to earn a degree, opportunities to exhibit leadership skills, and the development of interpersonal skills.

The study participants listed a variety attributes that prepared them for their life after college, including an inner drive to succeed and do well, the ability to work within a team and with others who may have different views or backgrounds from themselves. The participants also believe the ability to tackle many tasks at once and prioritize their tasks were gained from their experience as student-athletes. They spoke of the ability to face challenges, take on leadership roles and accept responsibility. In addition the respondents in this study claim their participation in sports provided a large network which has led to career opportunities for them.

Respondents of this study were able to discuss transferable skills from sport that they use in their current lives. As Pierce (2007) indicated in his study on student-athletes in engineering programs, athletes develop an intensity that can help them focus and be successful outside of

athletics. Two former football players used the word focus when describing the benefits of being a student-athlete. Others mentioned an “increased self-confidence” and “accountability.”

In Danish et al.’s article describing the life skills gained through sport, they listed many qualities athletes might have, including things like the ability to communicate, accepting winning and losing, pushing yourself to the limit, accepting responsibility for behavior, setting and attaining goals, working within a system, and being self-motivated. The respondents of this study described many of these attributes. Tim (football) discussed a feeling that “there’s nothing you can’t take on” after his experience as a student-athlete. Chuck (basketball) shared the story of competing heatedly against players on the basketball court, but respectfully acknowledging their talent once the game was over. Adam (football) discussed his desire to be the best at everything and described how he works until the job is done no matter how much time it takes. All of the qualities described by participants of this study are recognized now in their work and personal lives.

While previous scholars cited time management as a skill gained by participation in intercollegiate athletics (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Cornelius, 1995), the participants of this study disagreed. One former football player mentioned learning to prioritize the limited time that he had, a practice he still uses today to balance many tasks at work and family obligations. Another did not believe he learned time management skills from his experience as a student-athlete. In fact, he claimed to still struggle with managing his time today. As did a former basketball player who mentioned that the structured schedule he had in college forced him to manage his time but did not teach him how to do so. This study indicates that time management was not learned during their experience. The difference between college and now



may be that their daily routine was so regimented their time was spent following a set schedule versus developing strategies to manage their own time.

The respondents of the study also spoke about The U with pride. As Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) and Melendez (2007) found, student-athletes often have strong feelings of attachment to their institutions and feel good about their overall college experience. Evidence from this phenomenological study of former student-athletes suggests that, from the perspective of those who participated, the benefits of the student-athlete experience in Division I revenue-producing sports appeared to outweigh any costs incurred and that, for the most part the experience prepared them for life after college.

As rational choice theory proposes, individuals seek pleasure and to avoid pain. The respondents of this study admitted to costs – and sometimes physical pain – associated with the student-athlete experience. As indicated by rational choice theory, the benefits of the student-athlete experience appear to have outweighed those costs. Even Cody (football), who felt he was not prepared for a career after football, finished his interview by saying:

Overall it was good, it was fun. I think that - being young and dumb at the time - I didn't know what to expect. And that's what I tell kids all the time, especially my children before you go to college the people that are successful, at least in my opinion, are the ones who don't switch majors ... they know what they want to do before they get there and they pursue that.

The study participants believed they developed attributes that help them be productive successful employers, managers, husbands and fathers. Their comments and stories suggest they have developed interpersonal skills and other positive attributes from their athletic experience.

They express a clear meaning of what it means to be a member of a team, and to respect others who contribute to the team, or whom they might be competing against.

The current phenomenological study supports previous research in some areas, but raises questions in others. As previous studies indicate, there are a number of positive attributes to be gained from athletic participation. However, further research is needed to clarify effective career development opportunities for student-athletes and to explore what factors might contribute to a more successful academic experience while in college and whether these unknown factors and/or more career development activities might lead to even more success stories for student-athletes once their playing days are over.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Important implications for further research emerged from the current study. First, a closer examination into the athletic sub-culture is warranted. A second area is the career development of athletes, including an examination of career development within the athlete sub-culture. A related area is the impact of the NCAA 40/60/80 continuing eligibility rule on career development and major selection while in college. Another area to explore is the impact of college athletic success on satisfaction with the college experience as this might reveal interesting insights into the student-athlete college experience. An examination of student-athletes engagement on campus may reveal consequences for the overall collegiate experience of student-athletes. The final area that needs further study is the health of college athletes including the mental health of athletes as they transition out of the bubble of athletics.

Previous studies suggest evidence of a student-athlete sub-culture that influences attitudes and behaviors of student-athletes (Adler & Adler, 1985; Benson, 2000). The current study suggests that due to time demands and other unique circumstances of participating in high profile

college sport, athletes tend to spend a significant amount of time with other athletes. While previous studies describe the athlete sub-culture as promoting an emphasis on athletics over academics, participants in the current study did not describe that type of preference. In fact, the participants of the current study overall came across as quite committed to their student role. Two participants alluded to the idea that the individual student-athlete impacts his or her success in athletics as much, if not more, than they are influenced by athletics. Further researcher might examine behaviors of athletes to determine what qualities might predict success and what qualities do not. The scope of the current study did not provide participants with the opportunity to elaborate on their course selection process or specifics about interactions with non-athletes, or what relationships formed between athletes. A study aimed specifically at examining the athlete sub-culture may provide further insights into course selection, dating and other relationships outside the team culture and career development opportunities provided to student-athletes.

Many critics of college sports posit that these students are solely focused on sport to the detriment of career development. Evidence from this study and previous ones (Benson, 2000; Raney & Knapp, 1987) suggest that athletes are not the only ones to blame for a lack of career goals outside of sports. For example, Cody (football) believes he was not given a chance to build his own class schedule and to explore areas such as business or journalism. He believed the athletic department, did not want to “pay the price” of having an ineligible student-athlete. That price has gone up since the passage of the 40/60/80 eligibility rule. Will the consequences of this ruling have the desired effect of recruiting student-athletes who meet the initial eligibility requirements, are prepared for college, and have a good chance of meeting the continuing eligibility requirements? Researchers should speak with current and former athletes to see if opportunities for career development have increased in recent years. Or if these regulations put

more pressure on athletic departments to continue the practice of “steering” athletes into courses for which they have little interest because the departments don’t want to pay the price.

The impact of college athletic success on satisfaction with college might reveal interesting insights into the student-athlete college experience. The participants of the current study were involved in either a successful football program or a mediocre collegiate basketball program. Respondents from both sports reported high levels of satisfaction with their college experience. But there may be factors related to the success or lack of success of an athletic program that impacts the college experience of the student-athletes involved.

An examination of student-athletes engagement on campus may reveal consequences for the collegiate experience of student-athletes. Kuh’s (2003) use of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data indicates that levels of engagement in academic activities directly impact the educational experience of college students. It would be interesting to learn more about the levels of academic engagement by student-athletes at various institutions and how that impacts their college experience.

Sometimes the price to be paid for participation in sports comes in the form of consequences to either physical or mental health. Respondents of this study indicated that the struggles they faced were not because of lack of preparedness for life after college but in adjusting to life without athletics. For some this occurred immediately following college, for others after a professional sports career. Two participants mentioned dealing with depression, while one experienced panic attacks. The transition out of competitive athletics and its subsequent mental and physical health consequences is an area for further study. Research in this area can lead to recommendations to help ease this transition.

The results of the current study indicate a need for further research on the student-athlete experience and the long term consequences of that experience. There are a number of implications for college administrators who work with student-athletes and create policy on behalf of these students. Professionals working with student-athletes should be proactive in their approach as not all student-athletes will ask for the specific help they need like Adam.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Adam's story demonstrates how a student who enters college with academic deficiencies can ask for and receive the help he needs to be successful. His story is a good example of how academic support systems do help student-athletes succeed in college and persist to graduation. But the onus does not lay solely with the athletic academic counselors. The results of this study demonstrate four main implications for athletic department personnel – including coaches - campus administrators and student support services across campus. First, campus professionals can help student-athletes realize the positive attributes they are gaining in their dual roles. Next, they can help these young adults deal with the often negative perceptions and treatment they receive from others on campus. In addition, they can act to minimize those negative perceptions and stereotypes by speaking out against them and pointing out the positive examples that are sure to exist on campus. Finally, they can learn more about the long-term mental and physical health concerns associated with participation in high-stress, physical college sports and educate participants on preventing or minimizing the potential health consequences of their participation.

Reaching out to experts from career services, counseling and academic support units in an effort to build a support team for student-athletes who are underprepared for college and career decision making can raise not only graduation rates, but success and satisfaction for life after college. Implications from the current study are that student-athletes acquire many

attributes that are valuable to employers. Career counselors aware of the transferable qualities gained from sport can help student-athletes learn how to market those skills to potential employers. Coaches can also make student-athletes aware of these transferrable attributes and encourage their athletes to use what they learn in sport in other areas of their lives. Danish et al. (1993) found that athletes did not realize the skills they gained through sport and therefore were not able to promote those attributes as they transitioned out of sport and into other careers. Once athletes were educated about the positive attributes they possessed they could see the transferability of those attributes and apply them.

While the addition of academic support units within athletic departments has provided support to athletes, it may also create the student-athlete 'sub-culture' that keeps athletes separate from the general student population. Athletic academic counselors and advisors can encourage student-athletes to form study groups with classmates who are not athletes, thus encouraging interaction among athletes and non-athletes breaking down barriers and stereotypes and exposing student-athletes to students who have a very different college experience than their own.

In addition, athletic counselors, administrators, faculty and student affairs staff should openly discourage perpetuation of the dumb jock stereotype among campus colleagues by promoting the positive examples of scholar athletes. They can also speak out against negative and or stereotypical comments about student-athletes creating a campus climate that is welcoming to athletes and establishes a norm that athletes are expected to be students. Eliminating this stereotype can ease some of the pressure student-athletes feel and open the door for more effective interactions between student-athletes and non-athletes.

Many respondents cited the health costs of their participation in college athletics. While they are aware that injuries can occur during their participation in sport, it was unclear if they

were aware of the long-term effects sport might have on their health. Coaching staffs and other athletic department personnel such as trainers, and sport psychologists should make athletes aware of the long-term risks so that individuals can make rational choices about their participation in sport. This could be done by having former athletes come back to discuss their experiences after their sports careers ended, including the psychological difficulties of leaving behind something that has been an important part of their identity for so long. Athletic departments should also encourage efforts to minimize long term health damage that elite competition can cause.

Coaches themselves are in a unique position to have a positive impact on the college experience of student-athletes. The NCAA is developing resources to help coaches in their efforts to develop the whole student-athlete. The NCAA website hosts numerous educational materials on various issues effecting student-athletes (NCAA Academics and Athletes, para 1). Athletic department administrators can encourage coaches to use these resources to enhance their work with college athletes.

There are a number of intervention strategies coaches, college administrators and counselors can use when working with student-athletes. These interventions include the academic support that is part of most Division I athletic departments, but also career development activities, coping strategies to deal with the negative perceptions student-athletes face on campus and information on maintaining a healthy lifestyle. It is crucial that student affairs staff, counselors, advisors and coaches attend to the academic, career development, and mental and physical health needs of student-athletes.

## **Limitations of the Current Study**

The findings of this study may be limited to the institution and time period in which the individuals experienced being a student-athlete. A variety of factors may influence the experience of student-athletes in Division I revenue-producing sports on any campus. These factors include the coach the athletes play under and the NCAA policies in place while they are in college.

An expanded study of the student-athlete experience in revenue-producing sports at other institutions might reveal a very different experience. The life of a student-athlete can be heavily influenced by the coaches they play under. As one study participant said, “we were blessed because (coach) didn’t practice on Sundays” (Robert, football). This was part of that coach’s philosophy. Other coaches may schedule at least one team event each day of the week, further impacting the feeling of not “having a personal life” (Adam, football).

One other limitation of this study is the lack of diversity within the sample. Only white and black former student-athletes participated in the study. However, this is representative of the institution which the participants attended. Very few football or men’s basketball players at the university at that time were of any other racial or ethnic background. While it was the choice for this study to focus on two revenue-producing sports, football and men’s basketball, additional studies might seek the female perspective. Studies indicate that female athletes may have additional perceptions and stereotypes with which to cope (Blinde & Taub, 1992). Repeating the current study with a female sample and with other racial/ethnic groups may provide further insights into the student-athlete experience.

It would be inaccurate to leave readers with the impression that all student-athletes at The U complete degrees and lead successful lives. Three participants mentioned the same former



teammate whose fate more closely matched that of Dexter Manley. The researcher was unable to make contact this former student-athlete for participation in the study. The fact that so many of the participants complete their degree may indicate a relationship between degree attainment and a willingness to speak about their college experience. Future researchers should interview former student-athletes who did not complete their degrees; this would provide a much richer description of the student-athlete experience and add to the current literature.

### **Summary**

This study brings to light many positive attributes that were developed through participation in intercollegiate athletics at a highly competitive level. Attributes such as leadership, accountability, responsibility; the drive to do a job to the best of one's ability; the ability to work within a team; the ability to accept individual differences team members bring are attributes valuable to employers, to communities and to families. Each of the men interviewed in this study mentioned at least one of these attributes that they believe were developed, or enhanced through their participation in athletics. The status of each of these men as successful businessmen, educators and devoted fathers is a tribute to how they carry those attributes with them in their current lives.

Their stories provide evidence of what is good in college athletics but also highlight areas that need improvement. In particular, student-athletes need opportunities for career development and exploration. This may help ease their transition from life within the bubble to life outside of the bubble. Student-athletes should also hear the stories of those who have made the transition before them so they can prepare for and attend to the possibility of mental and stress related health issues that might arise during that transition.

Findings of the current study align with many previous studies on the student-athlete experience in terms of the time commitment required of athletes, and the lack of career development activities provided to athletes. However, the current study reveals many benefits to the student-athlete experience and many positive attributes gained through sport that can prepare athletes for life after college. According to the former athletes in this study, the support systems put in place in response to poor academic achievement of student-athletes in revenue-producing sports was a beneficial investment. The current study also explains how participation in team sports can prepare individuals for life and work. Using rational choice theory as a framework, it would seem the positive aspects of college sport participation outweigh the negative. In fact, one study participant stated it exactly that way. Mark (basketball) summed up his college experience by saying, “The positives far outweighed the negatives. I wouldn’t change anything I think everything happens for a reason; it certainly afforded me a lot of great opportunities that I’m trying to reap now.”

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## Appendix A - Interview Guide

### Demographic Information

Race \_\_\_\_\_ College Entrance Year \_\_\_\_\_ Degree Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

### Contextual Information

Tell me a little about your background before college.

- Family information (number of siblings, parents' work, childhood memories)
- Why and when did you first begin participating in your sport
- Why did you choose to play intercollegiate athletics

### Costs

Tell me what were the costs of your participation in college athletics?

- Academic work, performance etc.
- Social life
- Campus life
- Family life
- Off-campus opportunities
- View of self
- Time management
- Other

### Benefits

What were the benefits of or your participation in college athletics?

- Academic work, performance etc.
- Social life
- Campus life
- Family life
- Off-campus opportunities
- View of self
- Time management
- Other

### Preparedness for life after college

How do you think your participation in athletics prepared you for life after college?

- Family life
- Work life
- Community involvement
- Time management
- Money management
- Social life
- Other

## **Appendix B - Debriefing Statement**

Thank you for participating in my research. I hope that this opportunity to reflect back on your college years was, overall, a positive experience. If you have any questions or concerns that you'd like to address now I'm happy to discuss them, or if you think of something at a later time, feel free to contact me.

## Appendix C - Consent Form

### KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT

**PROJECT TITLE:** Exploring the Costs, Benefits and Preparation for Life After College of Participation in Division I Intercollegiate Athletics

**APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT:** 11/0/2009

**EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:** 11/0/2010

**INVESTIGATOR:**

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**SPONSOR OF PROJECT:**

N/A

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived costs and benefits of participation in college athletics by former student-athletes, and how their college experience prepared them for their life after college.

**PROCEDURES/METHODS TO BE USED:**

Participants in this study include former student-athletes from Kansas State University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You, as well as the other participants, will each engage in an interview, approximately 45 minutes to one hour in length with the investigator. Your interview will be held at an agreed upon location and will be tape-recorded.

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO THE PARTICIPANT:** N/A

**LENGTH OF STUDY:** Each interview will take place sometime between November 2009 and March 2010. Though your role in the study will end upon completion of the interview you will be invited to review the research findings if you desired.

**RISKS ANTICIPATED:** There are no foreseeable risks of participation in this project.

**BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:** You will benefit by engaging in reflection about your college experience and its impact on your life.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDNETIALITY:** Only the investigator will know your identity as well as that of each of the other participants. At the time of the interview, you will be asked if you would like to create your own pseudonym or have one assigned by the researcher. That pseudonym will be used during the analysis phase of the study as well as in the written report of the findings. Your name will not be associated with your responses.

**COMPENSTATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS:** N/A

**PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:** N/A

**TERMS OF PARTICIPATION:**

*I understand that this project is research and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.*

*I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent from, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.*

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness to Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_