

St. Edward's University

Graduate and Professional Studies

TRANSITIONING OUT OF COLLEGIATE SPORTS: AN EXAMINATION OF ATHLETIC  
ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES AND CAREER PREPARATION PRACTICES

Dissertation Proposal submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the

degree of

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### **Abstract**

In higher education National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I student-athletes are a unique student population tasked with satisfying their athletic and academic identities. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of student-athlete academic support services associated with career readiness and career preparation. The study used Lev Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory (SCT) as the theoretical framework to determine if participants engaged in intentional social interaction and activities. The research questions focused on the perceptions and lived experiences of student-athletes. A researcher-developed interview guide was used to collect data from six graduated student-athlete participants. The study used purposeful and snowball sampling. Data was transcribed, coded, and categorized to develop themes. Data analysis included the fundamentals of first and second-cycle coding. Key findings of the study identified a need for more practical support to student-athletes as they serve the dual role of student and athlete. With 98% of NCAA student-athletes turning professional in a career outside of sport, institutions need to assist this unique population of students with their educational and career goals.

Keywords student-athlete, academic support services, career readiness, career preparation, social-cultural theory

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### Introduction

The narrative surrounding college athletics and student-athletes lacks relevant research regarding how important the quality and success of their education are to institutions of higher education outside of their sport. Historically, there has been a narrative that student-athletes receive a “free education,” yet earning their education/college degree is tied into a larger system that does not always support academic prosperity, upward social mobility, or a direct path towards a meaningful career (Gayles et al., 2018; Ofoegbu et al., 2022). In higher education, it is understood that many student-athletes are awarded scholarships from various colleges and universities. However, Miller (2022) suggests these scholarships should be considered an academic privilege not just a reward for stellar athletic abilities. Student-athletes represent a unique population of students in whom the institution has a vested interest but they also need community, cultural, and academic support (Rubin et al., 2022). Improving the student-athlete experience should go beyond what occurs on the field of play. In the 21st century, higher education must be equally invested in student athletes’ development off the court and field, changing the narrative to address the contemporary higher education model that is meant to benefit all students.

In American higher education, participation in competitive sports have been linked to student-centered missions that are to be upheld by the athletic department, institutions and various stakeholders within the community (Springer & Dixon, 2021). This study is focused on improving the student-athlete experience and the overall model to help organizations transition to a contemporary model. Since college athletics has grown within the last two decades, it is apparent that its imprint on higher education is here to stay (Gayles, Rockenbach, & Davis,



2012). Therefore, it is essential to identify individuals who have the most significant impact from a research standpoint from an epistemology and ontology perspective.

Several institutions are beginning to invest in academics for student-athletes by hiring personnel dedicated to athletic, academic support services designed to help athletes manage their academic and athletic obligations (Judge et al., 2018). Like other colleges or departments on campus, the athletics department must find ways to mitigate attrition. According to Huml, Bergman, and Hums (2014), thousands of student-athletes leave school early without ever receiving a degree, which raises the question of the effectiveness of athletic academic support services in the overall success of the student-athlete long term.

### **Background, Context, and History**

Long before athletes reach college, they are faced with making important decisions regarding their education and academic pathway. By the time they reach high school, the next four years are focused on preparing for the collegiate level, both athletically and academically. However, as is often the case in collegiate athletics, there are instances where some athletes are conditioned to maintain their eligibility instead of taking full advantage of the academic resources made available (Hazzaa et al., 2018). In high school, many athletes start focusing on earning a spot on a college team (Gerlach, 2018) and often gain the support of their peers, teachers, and administrators in the form of grade inflation and excused absences. These perks encourage young athletes to pay more attention to their athletic identity versus their academic one (Gerlach, 2018; Lyons et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, this way of thinking, which starts as early as high school, matriculates into post-secondary higher education. During the recruitment process, institutions prioritize athletic success, which can leave a false sense of reality regarding academic and athletic obligations for

the athlete (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Depending on the sport, recruitment, and communication, students' interaction with college coaches can begin as early as the sophomore year. However, having no previous knowledge of the inner workings of college athletics and the process of balancing both athletic and academic obligations, many athletes and families are tasked with trusting the organizational culture of the institution and its athletic department (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Lyons et al., 2018) as it relates to career readiness and career preparation.

Many student-athletes identify more with their athletic identity, taking ownership of this role which often begins as early as childhood (Newton, Gil, & Reifsteck, 2020). As young athletes navigate sports participation at an early age, they tend to find value in the potential offerings a given sport can provide them in the future (MacIntosh et al., 2019). The idea of being an athlete begins to formulate, which can minimize the cultivation of identities associated with the role of being a student. Even though high school athletic programs attempt to push academics, the influence of coaches and parents can steer young athletes towards their athletic identity creating expectations for a future job, occupation, or destiny-driven athletic career (Hwang et al., 2016; Khattab et al., 2022). Rarely is there mention of the career transition for youth athletes. However, the transition consists of anticipation, encounter, and adaptation phases (Røynesdal, Toering, & Gustafsson, 2018), the equivalency of transitioning from high school to intercollegiate athletics. From an epistemological and ontological perspective, many students in the United States view sports as a pathway for social and economic upward mobility (Adeyemo, 2022), which would explain why some athletes struggle with their academic identity once they enter post-secondary education.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association was established to help monitor college sports based on the revenue generated by many sports programs (Flowers, 2009). A fundamental core value of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a commitment to academic excellence. Yet, academic clustering, the process of grouping 50% or more athletes together in a major, can occur within many athletic departments for eligibility purposes. To measure student-athlete academic performance, the NCAA implemented the Academic Progress Rate, giving institutions the ability to hold themselves and their athletes accountable for team sports graduation rates over a rolling four-year period. (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). However, this does not appear to reflect career preparation. According to a study conducted by Paule-Koba (2019), academic clustering is the grouping of 50% or more athletes in one major. Typically, the clustering of athletes is associated with institutions with whose admissions standards are higher (Watkins et al., 2022) which could explain why many athletes are assigned a major unaligned with their career interest at the Division 1 level (Beasley et al., 2021; Miller, 2021; Smith & Hardin, 2020). College athletics provide an equitable opportunity to access post-secondary education (Miller, 2022). Therefore, it is in the best interest of student-athletes to have a model that supports their athletic, academic, and career aspirations.

Collegiate athletics' imprint in higher education has grown within the last two decades, and the student-athlete model must be adapted as we continue to navigate the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At many institutions, the commercialization of sports places a unique combination of physical demands, time commitments, and high expectations on student-athletes without considering that they must also perform in the classroom (Barger & Seward, 2018; Benford, 2007; Brown et al., 2020). The student versus athlete education versus eligibility narrative has become heightened. Many athletic departments offer athletic, academic support services (AASS), services focusing

on academic success, personal and professional development, and career readiness. The effectiveness of these services is a consideration, and an issue that will need to be assessed as the AASS will look to serve the needs of future student-athletes.

It seems that more universities and colleges are embracing the idea of preparing student-athletes for success after college. According to Turick, Bopp, and Swim (2019), college athletic departments must ensure student-athletes earn their college degrees while also acquiring the skills necessary to pursue a successful career once their playing days have ended. Many mission and vision statements are in place to ensure this goal is met annually. However, there are instances where some organizations do not position their student-athletes in the best position to succeed. Having support systems in place to help student-athletes would mitigate challenges associated with transitioning out of collegiate sports. Ensuring that student-athletes have the opportunity to explore, find, and explore their professional interests before graduating is a more sustainable model for college athletics (Turick, et al., 2019). Thus a deeper understanding of the programming needs of student-athletes may assist universities with the development of more career-based pathways that support transitioning out of collegiate sports.

Lev Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory (SCT) as a theoretical framework is best suited as the research questions being asked requires participants to shared their interactions with others who impact their decision-making process. Vygotsky's SCT proposed human mental development happens outside of the mind (Shabani, 2016) and introduced the idea of scaffolding. Browne et al. (2009) define scaffolding as an interaction between the instructor and learner where the instructor assists learners in completing complex tasks that otherwise would be beyond their capabilities. According to Lyons et al. (2018), the participants' unique understanding of their lived experiences brings a distinct perspective to the studied or investigated phenomenon.

However, knowledge construction is deeply dependent on social interaction among knowledgeable individuals (Gouthro, 2022; Shabani, 2016). A major tenet of scaffolding is that it is a process that involves both the construction and systematic deconstruction of a cognitive support structure that accommodates a student's individual needs (Browne, Hough, & Schwab, 2009, p.3).

Many athletes began rigorous training during adolescence, undertaking various stressors by prioritizing their sporting careers instead of their educational conquest and post-playing career endeavors (Harris et al., 2015; Lyons et al., 2018; Cosh & Tully, 2014), which again prepares them only for their sport and not for academics or their future after their school years. From an institutional perspective, college athletics are now viewed as the university's front porch attracting prospective students to assist with admission efforts (Benford, 2007; Fried, 2007). However, many student-athletes who represent the institution end their athletic careers feeling like used goods, lacking the aptitude to devise a sufficient educational or career plan (Beamon, 2008).

### **Statement of the Problem**

A student-athlete who does not believe their athletic commitments take away from career preparation has a heightened sense of awareness regarding their abilities to complete tasks associated with developing career-ready skills (Ferrea, Watson II, & Zizzi, 2017). Even though academic clustering helps athletic departments monitor compliance and eligibility for their athletes, little is known about how academic clustering successfully provides student-athletes with career readiness skills. This lack of knowledge could potentially impact how student-athletes view academic and athletic support services, and how they use these resources throughout their college career. The NCAA and athletic departments leave many collegiate

student-athletes unprepared to transition out of the sport, resulting in many former student-athletes leaving school with unaligned career goals, limited aspirations, and uncertainty regarding their futures (Paule-Koba, 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2020).

### **Purpose of the Proposed Study**

This study aims to describe the lived experiences of student-athletes competing or who have competed in athletics at a four-year institution as a way to understand and gauge the readiness and career preparation they received during their undergraduate career. Many college student-athletes see their role as students and athletes as overlapping (Barger & Seward, 2018); therefore, sharing lived experiences allows the participants to detail their academic and athletic interactions and experiences in an undergraduate setting. By studying the descriptions and lived experiences of student-athletes, the research has the potential to pinpoint pertinent details directly related to development of the collegiate student-athlete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study will be guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: How have athletic-academic support services impacted career readiness for student-athletes who seek postbaccalaureate opportunities after completing their intercollegiate athletic careers?

RQ 2: What percentage of current or former student-athletes utilize career readiness/preparation services during the season versus the off-season?

RQ 3: Do athletic-academic support services help team sport athletes or student-athletes explore and assess career preparation?

### **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Proposed Study**

Generating data detailing the experience student-athletes have with AASS would be an appropriate qualitative methodology for this study. The information and context provided by current and former student-athletes of the organization would provide insight into the effectiveness of the services rendered in the past while also determining if the practices in place are sustainable to meet the needs of future student-athletes. Many athletic departments graduate student-athletes by the hundreds annually. To help the department identify gaps in research and practices that may strengthen the institution's mission, goals, and vision, one must analyze the student-athlete experience. Comeaux & Crandall (2019) define the student-athlete experience as planned educational activities and practices implemented by institutions and athletic departments that foster learning and personal development for athletes outside of their respective sports.

This study adds to the literature and research surrounding collegiate athletics and the student-athlete model. According to Brown et al. (2020), nearly half a million students compete annually in NCAA varsity sports at various institutions. However, the NCAA acknowledges that many of its athletes will not become professional athletes, leaving it up to each institution to prepare its athletes for a global society. This study also advocates for athletics and highlights the social and career readiness aspects of earning a post-secondary education. The backgrounds of some of the students whose access to higher education comes by way of athletics suggest there is more to college athletics than wins and championships. Former college student-athletes who do not become professional athletes make up a substantial number of America's population and workforce. This study provides context for what is on the horizon for higher education institutions and their athletic departments, as many states are changing legislation that affects the current student-athlete model presented by the NCAA and the idea of amateurism.

### **Definition of Terms**

Academic clustering: The process of grouping 50% or more athletes in a major not aligned with students' career interests or goals (Paule-Koba 2019).

Academic Progress Rate: An initiative implemented in 2005 by the NCAA to improve college athletes' eligibility, retention, and graduation in team sports at four-year institutions. (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019).

Athletic academic support services (AASS): Personnel dedicated to academics for student-athletes who generally help student-athletes manage their academic and athletic obligations by offering services (Judge et al., 2018). According to Judge et al. (2018), “The services provided typically include supervised study hall and study tables, tutoring, academic advising, academic monitoring, and traveling services (e.g., tutoring while athletes travel to competition)” (p. 221).

Role conflict: The inherent structural constraints and entrenched challenges associated with fulfilling roles as a student and athlete. (Cooper & Cooper, 2015).

Role engulfment: Increased prioritization of athletic roles by student-athletes who must also identify as students. (Cooper & Cooper, 2015).

Non-normative athletic retirement: Unexpected traumatic ending of an athlete's career due to uncontrollable circumstances (Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018).

Scaffolding: The social interaction between the learner and instructor where the instructor assists learners in completing complex tasks that otherwise would be beyond their capabilities (Browne et al., 2009).

Social-Cultural Theory (SCT): A theoretical framework that suggests learning occurs through social interaction (Shabani, 2016).



Student-athlete: Enrolled student at an institution of higher education whose role is to be successful academically and athletically (Grandy, Lough, & Miller, 2016).

Student-athletes experiences: A series of intentional educational activities and practices put forth by the institution and athletic department that fosters learning and personal development for athletes outside of their respective sports (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019).

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

When conducting scholarly research, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations must be defined to add clarity to the overall study being conducted and the research design. Assumptions are factors that the researcher has established as true and have been removed as a variable in the study. Limitations are potential weaknesses in the research design, while delimitations are the boundaries that define the scope of the study (Stating the obvious: Writing assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, 2021).

### **Summary**

This chapter presents an overview of the overall study, which examines the career preparation process and readiness of intercollegiate student-athletes in an undergraduate setting. Because student-athletes identify as both students and athletes, they have a dual investment, which often requires them to prioritize one role over the other (Barger & Seward, 2018), impacting the decision-making process once one is ready to transition out of their respective sport. While many athletic departments provide academic support and programming tailored to the needs of their athletes, it is important to understand the social investment made athletic staff members who assist this sub-population of students with identifying the next stage of life after sports (Brecht & Burnett, 2019; Buzzetta et al., 2017). The perspective of participants who identify themselves as current or former student-athletes at Division 1 university will help form a

narrative that establishes the purpose of this phenomenological study. The study intends to understand the experiences of student-athletes who have access to AASS and career preparation resources at a Division 1 level institution which would significantly add to scholarly research on the student-athlete experience and intercollegiate athletics.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

A detailed review of the research was conducted to identify themes that speak to the student-athlete identity in a contemporary society. This chapter offers an overview of the current literature. The first section details the search strategy used to conduct the overall literature review. The second section discusses the selected theories and connects to the topic while constructing a theoretical framework. This section develops a synthesis of the related literature, which uncovers several themes regarding student-athletes. The first theme is the dual role of student-athletes at their respective institution as their attention, time, and obligations are split between their academic and athletic identities.

After student-athletes' academic and athletic identities are discovered, there is a process of coordinating the implementation of academic advising and athletic, academic support services in collegiate athletic departments designed to assist student-athletes. The literature reveals that professionals who work with student-athletes academically influence the academic and career planning of the athletes. Career retirement and the transition from college sports to career pathways are themes that uncover the process student-athletes experience as they get closer to exhausting their athletic eligibility. The importance of a college education heightens. The final section reviews literature about the connections made at the institutional level among the athletic department, student-athletes, utilization of academic and career advising, and the unintended impact of academic clustering.

### **Literature Review Search Strategy**

The strategy used to conduct the search was to identify studies that generate an understanding of student-athletes, their positionality within college athletics, athletic identity,

and the role and emergence of AAAS. Instead of using a methodology that utilizes a traditional library search, keywords such as student-athletes, academic services, athletic identity, career readiness, career preparation, and academic clustering were used to identify specific academic journals pertinent to the overall study based on the research topics and researchers. These studies will serve as a guided outline for what practices are currently being used in intercollegiate athletics related to student-athlete support services and will also help establish gaps in the current literature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research process for this study is supported by a theoretical framework that allows the researcher to build upon previous research conducted by Comeaux (2007; 2013), which highlights the business-like approach to college athletics and the need for academic reform for student-athletes. This study attempts to identify how one learns and becomes educated—specifically, student-athletes who serve in dual roles. Although learning is a psychological event influenced by education and learning experiences, Lev Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory (SCT) allows the researcher to connect the participants' perspectives to the literature. Knowledge construction is deeply dependent on social interaction between knowledgeable individuals (Gouthro, 2022; Shabani, 2016). Therefore, this framework will give the researcher better insight into the information disclosed by participants. In a college setting, athletes interact with various knowledgeable individuals. However, the impact of these interactions may vary based on the athletes' ability to differentiate between learning and being educated. Usually, scaffolding occurs when students learn complex thinking skills associated with completing complex tasks beyond their capabilities (Browne et al., 2009). The use of SCT and scaffolding as a theoretical

framework will help participants recall instances when academic and educational scaffolding occurred during their college careers as student-athletes.

Many institutions have fallen into cultural norms that impact education, sport, and athletes (Rothwell, Davids, & Stone, 2017). Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) conducted a study that speaks to athletic departments promising academic success to student-athletes and their families but regularly not taking responsibility for academic failure. Historically, college athletics has always been linked to supplementing the mission of higher education and its institutions; however, there has been resistance to innovative change within organizations creating an unintended myth regarding the educational process (Comeaux, 2013; Flowers, 2009).

Since its inception, Vygotsky's SCT supports the notion of social interaction and the inclusion of intentional activities for development to take place within the mind (Gouthro, 2022). Nevertheless, scholars like Donoghue and Horvath (2016) insist that learning is a phenomenon of neurological complexity, whereas education is the derivative of a more sociocultural phenomenon. Furthermore, researchers Donoghue and Horvath (2016) strengthen Vygotsky's theory, exploring a more ontological and epistemological pedagogy of educating athletes in higher education.

What is unique about Vygotsky's SCT is that coaches actively use principles of the theory in their pedagogy. Athletically coaches regularly use scaffolding in a practice setting, helping athletes prepare mentally for the competition (Thomas et al., 2021). However, in education, scaffolding has long been used to help learners build competencies so that one day they will be able to function independently (Farias et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the research suggests that coaches have used scaffolding to primarily support the athlete's learning in the realm of competition (Thomas et al., 2021). The social interaction between learner and instructor is an

integral aspect of scaffolding (Browne et al., 2009). In earlier years, as Jones and Thomas (2015) explain, scaffolding was a term used to describe how young children develop speech through parental tutoring. In the higher education landscape, scaffolding is used to develop critical thinking skills to teach students how to think instead of what to think (Browne et al., 2009). With scaffolding being a significant tenant of Vygotsky's SCT, the student-athlete population can surely benefit from academic and career scaffolding. Researchers Comeaux and Crandall (2019) believe more educationally sound activities such as reading and writing, collaboration with peers on problem-solving tasks, and meaningful interactions with faculty help build the school to career transition for college athletes. The average undergraduate student lacks these skills and may struggle to conceptualize them in a real-world context (Browne et al., 2009). Therefore, it is becoming increasingly important to examine the system in place designed to enhance student-athletes' experiences outside the realm of competition.

### **Review of Research and Methodological Literature**

In college, opportunities are vast however the environment can present challenges that impact agency and various aspects of one's identity (Booker, Wesley, & Pierre, 2021) since the formation of one's identity is directly correlated to memberships in various social groups (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2021). In many aspects, identity can be defined as how an individual view themselves while assessing how they fit socially in the world around them (Duran & Garcia, 2021; Pascale et al., 2021). The population of students who identify as athletes have a deep passion for playing sports (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2021), but they are also asked to navigate higher education as both a student and an athlete. According to Steele, Van Rens, and Ashely (2020), academic or student identity refers to one's role and expectations within the classroom, whereas one's athletic identity is central to how one performs and excels in a sports

setting. This dual role presents conflicts over four years, with student-athletes dedicating a minimum of 20 hours a week to athletics during the season while balancing the demands of preparing for a career after undergraduate, which impacts their overall transition process (Harry & Weight, 2021; Hazzaa, Sonkeng, & Yoh, 2018; Pascale et al., 2021). As Cooper and Cooper (2015) state, role conflict, the entrenched challenges associated with fulfilling roles as a student and as an athlete, eventually leads to role engulfment, an increased prioritization of athletic roles by student-athletes, which is the gradual process of an individual's self-identification with one primary identity such as college athletes primarily identifying themselves as athletes and not as students. A reality that many intercollegiate administrators are attempting to negate and mitigate (Comeaux, 2007). However, there is a positive relationship between academic identity and academic outcomes (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2021).

A review of the literature suggests that academic advising and athletic, academic support services have grown since the NCAA required its members to offer these services to all student-athletes (Hazzaa et al., 2018). The need for these services grew once the demands of coaches grew. In the past, coaches were responsible for academic programming and ensuring their teams conducted mandatory study halls (Judge et al., 2018). However, the growth of college athletics resulted in more and more coaching staff spending less time with their student-athletes, which may have inadvertently shifted the athlete-coach relationship. The influx of academic support is designed to assist student-athletes with managing their academic and athletic commitments (English et al., 2022). Various professionals hold various academic positions within the athletic department since many secondary student-athletes spend most of their time doing sports-related activities in the athletics facilities (Huml et al., 2019; Judge et al., 2018).

Recent studies have shown that many collegiate athletes experience burnout, prompting the need for additional advising in many athletic departments. Garinger, Chow, and Luzzeri (2018) conducted a study that examines what stressors impact student-athletes the most. Daily hassles such as class conflicts, relationship issues, training deficiencies, and travel for competition impact athletes (Garinger, Chow, & Luzzeri, 2018), which can have a negative effect on athletic performance but heavily impact academic performance as well. One-third of NCAA student-athletes struggle to complete tasks outside of their sport due to schedules that revolve around practice, traveling, and competition (Tabet, Lambie, & Golubovic, 2021). As mentioned earlier, many students enter college seeking various opportunities. However, the opportunities afforded to student-athletes revolve around their respective sports, which explains why AASS are more prevalent in college athletic departments now that we have entered the 21st century.

According to the literature, student-athletes who participate in AASS benefit academically, however, Breacht and Burnett's (2019) research suggests the impact of AASS lies in identifying those student-athletes in need of support the most. According to Buzzetta, Lenz, and Kennelly (2017) being a collegiate student-athlete presents many challenges for exploring academic and career opportunities with athletic commitments taking precedence over academic and career planning. Some researchers suggest academic clustering results from the time constraints associated with being an athlete. According to Paule-Koba (2019), academic clustering groups 50% or more athletes in a major that is not aligned with career interests or goals. More often than not, student-athletes who play football are more likely to be clustered into a major associated with the background of the athletic advisors since eligibility standards are tied to each athlete (Houston & Baber, 2017; Johnson, 2013). Earlier during an athlete's career, this clustering would likely benefit the individual, however, from an epistemological and ontological



perspective, the clustering process may not connect in a meaningful way to the potential future of the individual. Barcza-Renner et al (2020) research supports this notion based on the fact that these athletes will have to ease into both retiring and transitioning from their respective sports and beloved institution, two separate but life-altering processes.

Recent studies reveal more attention is being devoted to the minimum of 20 hours a week student-athletes dedicate to athletics while balancing graduation demands, placing them in dual roles (Harry & Weight, 2021; Hazzaa, Sonkeng, & Yoh, 2018; & Pascale, Gregg, Buenano, 2021). A study conducted by Kiefer et al. (2021) revealed that only 2% of athletes participating at NCAA member institutions pursue a professional career in their sport yearly. The remaining 98% of student-athletes choose retirement, which can be defined as the process of disassociating one's role and identity as an athlete in the context of college athletics. (Kiefer et al., 2021). For many of these individuals, the decision to retire from college athletics is made at the conclusion of their last year of eligibility, ending their role as an athlete, yet being a student remains. Athletic identity is an essential retirement factor since many student-athletes develop this identity early on during their childhood (Barcza-Renner et al., 2020).

Many researchers have conducted retrospective studies regarding athletic retirement; however, recent literature suggests that longitudinal studies will be equally important. Lally (2007) conducted a study that examined athletes one month after their decision to retire was made. The researcher found that not all athletes experienced a difficult transition because various interventions were already in place when the decision to retire was made (Lally, 2007). Much of the literature tends to focus more on the difficulties student-athletes face after retirement than what usually takes place once the decision is made. Shander and Petrie (2021) note that athletic retirement is a process as opposed to a single life event that occurs all at once.

The notion of athletic retirement is supported by the research of Holding et al. (2020) who investigates the decision-making process associated with transitioning out of college sports. Some athletes experience early retirement due to career-ending injuries or illness, which can be categorized as non-normative athletic retirement (Rohrs-Cordes & Paule-Koba, 2018). There is also a population of student-athletes who are willing to accept retirement after realizing their goals have changed, opting to pursue other life experiences. Holding et al. (2020) makes a connection between athletes who feel pressured to retire and athletes who transition out of elite competitive sporting careers looking to further their education or settling down to start a family and/or career. Based on the results of interviews with subjects in their study, Brown et al (2019) propose individual athletes rarely make the decision or go through the retirement process alone as parents often influence them, partners, other family members, and coaches. However, the findings in a more recent study conducted by Barcza-Renner et al (2020) suggest student-athletes should work with a practitioner prior to retirement to help mitigate the challenges associated with losing sports participation-built support systems (e.g. coaches, academic advisors, tutors). The retirement process begins, and there is a timeframe where athletes transition to other life events, but little is known about the context of retirement programming in university athletic departments (Turick, et al., 2019; Kiefer et al., 2021).

The research suggests a formal retirement program that focuses on topics like psychological health, career planning, educational planning, athletic identity, and financial planning is needed because it is highly unlikely that student-athletes will advance to the professional level in their sport (Kiefer et al., 2021; Stellefson et al., 2020). On the surface, many college athletic departments do an outstanding job of tending to their student-athletes and making sure all their needs are met. According to Kiefer et al. (2021), the NCAA created the

Challenging Athletes' Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS/Life Skills) program in 2008 to assist student-athletes as they transitioned out of their sport. The CHAMPS program required each institution member to have a coordinator who oversaw personal and career development opportunities outside of sports but the program lacked specificity and a uniform curriculum across all member institutions (Kiefer et al., 2021). As of 2017, the NCAA reported that across all sports, a student-athlete has less than a 10% chance to become a professional athlete (Stellefson et al., 2020). With this being the most recent data, it appears that the process of implementing and assisting athletes is the responsibility of the institutions as opposed to the governing body, which is the NCAA.

Often, there are unintended consequences with retirement/transition looming, yet past research failed to mention such when researching the student-athlete model in a contemporary society. Kiefer et al. (2021), mention psychological health, career planning, and educational planning being important topics when assisting student-athletes with their future endeavors. For some athletes welcoming the end of their "controlled life" experience of intercollegiate athletics is filled with various levels of emotion (Archer, Kearney, & Blackburn, 2007), and losing their sports identities reiterates Beamon's (2008) sentiments about student-athletes feeling like "used goods" upon completing their athletic career at their respective college or university.

Recent research shows that student-athletes are starting to utilize academic and career advising; however, not all athletes are in majors that will benefit them after graduation (Paule-Koba, 2019; Stellefson et al., 2020). Academic clustering has been identified as the main reasoning behind the undefined career plans of student-athletes, as this method of grouping assists with maintaining eligibility which serves in the best interest of the institution rather than the athlete (Houston & Baber, 2017; Miller, 2021). Some literature suggests that there is some

relationship between athlete and student (Comeaux, 2013). Researchers studying student-athletes acknowledge athletes are at the institution to receive a quality education (Dowling, Mills, & Stodter, 2020; Huml et al., 2019) however, research up to this point has yet to address the gaps associated with career aspirations and preparation (Paule-Koba, 2019). Researchers Comeaux and Crandall (2019), as well as Rich et al. (2020), called attention to athletic departments and their stakeholders, stating mission and vision statements require institutions to get away from eligibility maintenance and provide more educationally sound activities mirroring that of non-athlete students on campus shaping the educational experience of their student-athletes.

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 begins with an introduction to the research study, which assesses the dual role of student-athletes who work to maintain their academic and athletic identities in a college environment. The search strategy used keywords such as student-athletes, academic services, athletic identity, career readiness, career preparation, and academic clustering to identify studies that would generate a better understanding of student-athletes, their positionality within college athletics, athletic identity, and the role and emergence of AASS. Comeaux's (2007;2013) research regarding student-athletes highlights how a newfound business-like approach to college athletics has brought a need for educational reform at institutions across the nation.

The literature uncovers various themes that support why this research study can add to current literature regarding student-athletes in a contemporary model. Entering college as a new student is challenging enough. However, the added role of being an athlete impacts preparing for a career after an undergraduate career based on the demanding schedule student-athletes face (Harry & Weight, 2021; Pascale et al., 2021). Athletic and academic identity impacts student-athletes in college because of the dual responsibility each role serves (Comeaux, 2007; Lally,

2007, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2021). Fortunately, research suggests that many athletic departments begin to break cultural norms by implementing academic programs to help students maintain their academics. The NCAA understands that a student-athlete has less than a 10% chance of becoming a professional athlete across all sports (Stellefson et al., 2020). Therefore, many institutions that offer academic advising and athletic academic support services offer these services to student-athletes (Hazzaa et al., 2018) which is supposed to aid them with identifying an appropriate career path (Buzzetta et al., 2017).

According to the literature, the presence of AASS assists student-athletes with academics, but an unintended organizational change occurs in the process. The growth of academic services allowed athletic departments to group athletes into a single major, commonly described as academic clustering (Paule-Koba, 2019). The study conducted by Paule-Koba (2019) reveals progress was made toward earning a degree. However, not all athletes receive an education in a major that would benefit them after graduating. As a theme, academic clustering is a critical element of the current study because it provides insights into how student-athletes truly view AASS.

Athletic retirement and transition are themes throughout Chapter 2 that connects much of the literature together. For student-athletes transitioning out of sports is a decision-making process that needs to be supported through social interaction with experienced practitioners early during their career (Barcza-Renner et al., 2020; Holding et al., 2020;). As the theoretical framework, Lev Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory (SCT) helps the researcher connect the current study to the research identified throughout the literature review. Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory suggests that human development occurs through social interaction where knowledgeable individuals assist their learners with completing tasks beyond their capabilities

(Browne et al., 2009; Shabani, 2016). Vygotsky's SCT also proposes that human mental development happens outside of the mind (Shabani, 2016), and that social interaction learners experience is called scaffolding.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This study intended to gain an understanding of how Division 1 student-athletes experience academic and career preparation practices at a four-year institution. This chapter explains the research methods that were used for the study. This chapter expounds on how the research project was designed and conducted, and the procedures that were used to collect the data. The chapter also list the procedures that were used to identify themes and patterns from the qualitative interviews. Additionally, this chapter demonstrates why qualitative methodologies were used to answer the research questions that served as the foundation of the study.

### **Research Questions**

The qualitative study was guided by the following research questions

RQ 1: How have athletic-academic support services impacted career readiness for student-athletes who seek postbaccalaureate opportunities after completing their intercollegiate athletic careers?

RQ 2: What percentage of current or former student-athletes utilize career readiness/preparation services during the season versus the off-season?

RQ 3: Do athletic-academic support services help team sport athletes or student-athletes explore and assess career preparation?

### **Purpose and Design of Proposed Study**

The study aimed to describe the lived experiences of student-athletes competing or who have competed in athletics at a four-year institution as a way to understand and gauge the career

readiness and career preparation they received during their undergraduate career. Many college student-athletes see their role as students and athletes as overlapping (Barger & Seward, 2018); therefore, sharing lived experiences allows the participants to detail their academic and athletic interactions and experiences in an undergraduate setting.

A qualitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate method because the study explored the real-life use of specific approaches and practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To investigate the research questions, a phenomenological approach to the methodology was used to better understand the knowledge of participants' lived experiences regarding athletic academic support services and career preparation programming (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methodologies can be used to discover meaning in the participants' responses. Therefore, the qualitative methodology used the responses to enhance the participants' voices (Castellan, 2010) from a phenomenological perspective.

### **Research Population and Sampling Methods**

The general population for the study were American collegiate student-athletes. The target population was current and former NCAA Division I student-athletes with at least two years of varsity sports experience. Current and former NCAA Division I student-athletes are the target population for the study due to an increasing number of academic and athletic challenges facing college student-athletes today (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012). Social media (Twitter), personal contacts, and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study.

Snowball sampling involves the recruitment of an initial population sample that then uses their personal network to recruit additional participants to the study (Ellard-Gray et al, 2015). The researcher intended to recruit 5 to 10 participants for interviews. The connectivity of Twitter



allowed the researcher to gain participants within the social networks of others. For researchers who wish to recruit participants for in-depth interviews, it is important to use digital technologies for sampling (Dalessandro, 2018). A study conducted by Dalessandro (2018) revealed that younger adults experience their social world through various digital technologies which lend well to qualitative research studies. With the target population being current and former NCAA Division I student-athletes, snowball sampling allowed participants to share the recruitment flyer (Appendix A) on social media to garner more interest and participants. Participants were asked to share the recruitment flyer with former Division 1 student-athletes within their professional and personal networks.

### **Data Collection**

In order to begin data collection, approval was obtained from the IRB at St. Edward's University. (Appendix B) After this step was completed, participants received a calendar invitation that allowed them to schedule their interviews. Participants were informed about the ethics and confidential nature of the study that protected them and their interests. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and they each signed a consent form. Further, they were also reassured that they could withdraw from the research study at any time.

### **Interviews**

The method of data collection was semi-structured Zoom interviews. The interviews were performed individually and included various open-ended questions. (Appendix C) Interviews are a principal methodology of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was the primary method of gaining insights into the participants' lived experiences which will require them to narrate their experiences without any barriers. The use of open-ended questions allowed

the researcher to retrieve more options and opinions, giving the data more variation than would be possible with an instrument that used close-ended questions or surveys.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The data analysis process allowed the researcher to identify potential patterns that provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants as student-athletes transitioning out of their collegiate sport. The data became most valuable when it was fully analyzed. The construction of themes becomes clearer through the analysis and coding of the data. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since the researcher collected language-based data, a thematic analysis was used to further examine the data sets. In qualitative research thematic analysis allows researchers to find commonality between phrases or words that can be tied back to theory (Lester et al., 2020). Since qualitative data analysis is a considered a nonlinear iterative process (Lester et al., 2020), this helped the researcher make sense of participants individual experiences given there is no way of knowing beforehand the point in time in which participants were in an undergraduate setting. According to Yin (2011) the non-linear cycle of compiling a database, disassembling data, reassembling data, interpreting data, and concluding the data are all phases of qualitative data analysis. Furthermore, a thematic analysis tends to provide flexibility as this technique fits with most research questions and any textual data (Cassell & Bishop, 2019).

According to Vanover, Mihas, and Saldana (2021) generating themes or concepts from qualitative data, such as interviews, requires researchers to code, filter through, and highlight the various similarities that exist within the phenomenon. Zoom provides a transcript. Therefore, the researcher re-watched the videos to verify that the zoom transcript was accurate. The researcher then employed Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) miner, a software designed to help organize,

analyze, and code qualitative data. After inputting the interviews into the software, the researcher reanalyzed and reviewed the transcripts to determine commonalities and themes between the participants. All themes were coded according to the commonalities of the participants' lived experiences. Using the QDA miner software allowed the researcher to code data into clusters that will help develop sub themes based on the parallels of the responses given by each participant.

### **Limitations of Research Designs**

There were a few limitations to this study. One of the most significant limitations was the willingness of the participants in the study during the data collection. Another limitation was that the results only included current or former college Division 1 student-athletes who responded and volunteered to participate in the study. The sample size may limit some findings that could be potentially important in addressing the phenomena. The study's design, potential researcher bias, and the data collection process were also be additional limitations.

### **Validity**

Due to the subjectivity of qualitative research, the researcher must take steps to ensure the validity of the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state validity in qualitative research is the process of checking for accuracy within the research findings. To arrive at themes the researcher highlighted themes and phrases using the QDA miner software for each interview. These phrases and words were then be categorized accordingly. Before validating a theme, the researcher utilized member checking with each participant to ensure the findings were accurate. Member checking allowed the researcher to take semi-polished findings back to the participants providing them with the opportunity to comment on the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For a theme to be valid it must be vetted by 80% of the participants. Readers should know that the researcher

may know some of the participants better than others. To this fact, the researcher removed any bias and previous knowledge of any situation in an attempt to convey the participants' own stories.

### **Credibility**

The potential threats to the credibility of the study were if participants were not truthful and factual in their responses. Creswell and Creswell (2018) define credibility as the measure of truthfulness and accuracy of the participants' responses to the study. Member checks are a common strategy used for ensuring credibility in qualitative research (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Member checks were utilized by giving participants a copy of their transcribed interview to ensure the information provided is accurate and reflects their perspective.

### **Expected Findings**

While the researcher's positionality and previous experience can create bias, it was fully understood that the data and current literature assisted in addressing each research question directly. The researcher expected that the shared narratives of the participants reflected their truth and their experiences navigating career preparation as a student-athlete at a Division 1 institution. Depending on the sport, the researcher believe some student-athletes may have experienced different challenges than others.

### **Conflict of Interest Assessment**

There is no inherent conflict of interest between the researchers and participants in this study.

### **Researcher's Position**

From 2005-to 2010 the researcher spent five years as a student manager for the men's basketball team at a Division 1 institution as a college undergraduate student. During this time,

the researcher built very strong relationships with various student-athletes, coaches, staff members, and administrators. Many of the basketball players from that time still keep in contact to this day with the researcher and often share with each other lived experiences during those five years. Since graduating the researcher and others have taken very unique paths towards our current career paths. However, it is often asked, “Was career readiness and preparation a part of what the institution and athletic department provided for student-athletes?” For the last eight years, the researcher has been a basketball coach and mentor. Regularly the researcher has conversations with high school athletes regarding their futures as college student-athletes. These interactions have revealed that future generations of athletes have very different needs. Working with student-athletes is both a passion and a vocation for the researcher. Therefore, it is very important that the narratives of former and current student-athletes be used to improve a model that must evolve to ensure the future success of student-athletes is met with the same verve they receive when they are representing the institution during competition.

### **Ethical Issues**

Considering the study involved participants who shared their lived experiences at various colleges and universities as current and former student-athletes, safeguards were put in place to protect the privacy of participants and their rights. The researcher planned to protect the participants’ rights by getting approval for the research design from the IRB, getting signed and written consent from the participants prior to them taking part in the study. No psychological distress or discomfort is expected. However, should participants experience any distress or discomfort they are free to remove themselves from the study immediately.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used for the study. The research questions of the study were reintroduced and the purpose of the designed study is explained in depth. The chapter also discusses the research design of the study, the population, recruitment process, and the instrumentation used in the study. The data collection and data analysis methods and procedure are the next focus of Chapter 3 while also acknowledging variables such as validity and credibility which impacts the reliability of the overall study. The chapter concludes with the ethical considerations.

## Chapter 4 Data Analysis

### Introduction

Chapter 4 of this research project provides the results that were gathered during and after the interviews concluded. The fourth chapter also highlights the three (3) research questions that guided this qualitative study. Chapter four outlines the background of each participant who volunteered to participate in this study. Qualitative analysis was used to examine their responses. This study analyzed a diverse group of participants whose lived experiences as Division 1 student-athletes provides first-hand knowledge regarding career preparation practices at four-year institutions.

### Description of the Sample

This study included a sample size of six research participants. The participants were all former student-athletes who participated in collegiate sports at various universities across the United States. The participants reflected on their experiences as Division 1 student-athletes both academically and socially. All participants were over the age of eighteen. The sample included participants from different genders, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and regions of the United States. There reasoning for the targeted sample was so that the study could include a diverse perspective of the student-athlete experience in a contemporary society.

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Graduation Year</b>	<b>Age</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	<b>Cross Country/Track</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Participant 2</b>	<b>Soccer</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Participant 3</b>	<b>Cross Country/Track</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Participant 4</b>	<b>Basketball</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Participant 5</b>	<b>Basketball</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>38</b>

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Graduation Year</b>	<b>Age</b>
<b>Participant 6</b>	<b>Basketball</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>25</b>

Note. \*For confidentiality purposes, participants are listed in the order they completed their interview. They are also protected by pseudonyms, so they are not identified by their actual name.

### **Demographics**

The demographics of the participants for this study were Division I scholarship student-athletes who were former Division I student-athletes who graduated from 2003-present. All participants were 18 years old or older. Also, student-athletes had to identify sophomore, junior, or senior, or graduate of a Division 1 institution.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview guide (Appendix C) structured the interview and allowed for prompt questions, which were dependent on participants' lived experience. The researcher organized, coded, and analyzed all collected data. The interview recording was completed using Zoom utilizing its video and audio recording features. All transcripts were saved on Zoom's cloud before being transferred to an external hard drive with the video recording. Before organizing data, the researcher completed member checking to ensure no corrections were needed on the transcripts. The researcher coded and analyzed data per participant and question with the first and second cycle coding. The first cycle represented descriptive and concept coding. The second cycle coding was represented by pattern coding. In analyzing data per participant, the researcher made sure to focus on each participant's responses for each question.

When it was time to analyze the coding per question, the researcher analyzed each question's responses. The researcher did not proceed to the next participant or question until the analysis was complete. If the researcher had to stop working at any time, they were able to know



where to continue by color coding data, so they would not miss any significant details per participant and question. Each coding cycle was concluded with a summary of the emerging codes, and specific themes. In completing the first and second cycle coding, the researcher viewed patterns and themes that were repetitive amongst participants. The codes, and themes originated through the data, transcriptions, and through the coding cycle. The codes, and themes that emerged from analyzing data from current student-athletes and former student-athletes' lived experiences are presented in the findings below.

**Practical Application of Findings**

RQ 1: How have athletic-academic support services impacted career readiness for student-athletes who seek postbaccalaureate opportunities after completing their intercollegiate athletic careers?

Theme	Supported Evidence
Services Usage	<p>“I used for tutoring for one of my classes accounting classes”</p> <p>“Childcare would have been a service I would have utilized; it would have helped me academically”</p> <p>“Not as often as I probably possibly could have, but at the same time a lot of the hours that services were available. It just wasn't it didn't fit into my schedule, whether it be because of practice or other classes”</p> <p>“I used the academic services when I would travel away to road games to receive assistance in my education”</p>
Athletic Advising	<p>“I would the use athlete advisors quite a bit, probably, like my first semester, my first two semesters, However, once it got to the more technical classes and had really specific questions, they couldn't answer them. So, I</p>

	<p>would just go to the advisors within the College of Business”</p> <p>“I don't remember anything else ever being offered um in terms of just for the athletes. I had my college advisor, and mandatory study hall.”</p> <p>“...But also their job is to make sure that you can compete by following NCAA rules”</p> <p>“Got me in the classes that I need to get for the degree that I was seeking”</p> <p>“Advisors they advise hundreds of athletes, hundreds of majors. There's no way that they know every single little way that certain major works.”</p>
<p>Major/Degree Selection</p>	<p>“one of my teammates. She was a nursing major, she ended up having to leave soccer, there's no way to do a nursing program”</p> <p>“There is a lot changing majors and unfortunately, usually it was something that was easier to be able to play sports or to stay on the team.”</p> <p>“I probably would have double major or had a minor, but in college athletics you don't have time like that”</p> <p>“My university had a readiness program. The program was used to help advise student athletes on what degree they wanted to pursue.”</p>

RQ 2: What percentage of current or former student-athletes utilize career readiness/preparation services during the season versus the off-season?

Theme	Supported Evidence
Eligibility	<p>“I think that they're just there to make sure you're eligible for the NCAA, and to make sure that you're in compliance. Um, so I didn't utilize any of the services.”</p> <p>“You need to do well in your classes because if not. Then you won't be eligible to compete or play. I heard this a lot”</p> <p>“Graduate school is only in discussion if a player wants to stay eligible during or after undergraduate school”</p>

RQ 3: Do athletic-academic support services help team sport athletes or student-athletes explore and assess career preparation?

Theme	Supported Evidence
Athletes’ perception of Athletics	<p>“They say they're there to lead you personally post-athletics but in the end I don't think they are. I found out through my own research what career opportunities were available to me.”</p> <p>“So it's just like I feel like if you go into athletics. It's like almost like. What if you had grandiose career ambitions? It's almost impossible. You're having to choose. Do I want that? Or do I want this? There's no way. There's absolutely no way with the amount of time that you give between traveling, practices, meetings, classes.”</p> <p>“In a way, I wish I would have gone in, and had the true college experience being a student”</p>
Athletic Scholarship Transparency	<p>“Athletes are brought in on scholarships. With that, you know, a lot of their time is spent with the team..”</p>

	<p>When you're on athletic scholarship you are really at the mercy of the program”</p> <p>“On a basketball scholarship, you got work outs. You got weights. Then you got practice”</p>
<p>Support Needed</p>	<p>“Ask the athlete what their goal is. The biggest thing you want is to know the athlete”</p> <p>“I got a degree, but at the time you know, nobody really sat me down and talked about a resume.”</p> <p>“Nobody talked about how to apply for jobs.”</p> <p>“I think when an athlete declares a major, someone should ask, “hey what are your goal?” long before senior year”</p> <p>“I would have like to have somebody kind of guide me along as me. You know what I’m saying like, whether it’s a class, a professor, a coach”</p> <p>“I wish I was asked, what can I see myself doing in the next twenty or thirty years”</p>

**Limitations of the Study**

A major limitation is the small number of participants. After receiving IRB approval five weeks was the allotted time to recruit participants and conduct interviews for data collection and analysis process. Originally, it was planned to conduct the interviews in a two-week span. However, the researcher did not take into account that many of my participants live in different time zones, which presented scheduling conflicts throughout the process. Recruitment was challenging as some prospective participants who had agreed to participate in the study ultimately declined because they did not feel comfortable sharing their experiences as student-

athletes out of respect for the institution they attended. Therefore, the researcher had to rely on the network of the participants themselves to garner more interest.

### **Summary**

The responses of the participants provide an in-depth view of how former student-athletes view collegiate athletics, AASS, and career readiness and preparation practices at Division 1 institutions. The transition process for collegiate athletes impacts both their athletic and academic identities. Therefore, their perception of the institution and athletic department overall can change after identifying failed or miss opportunities that could have aided in preparing them for life after college sports. Based on the candidness of each interview, the findings will help usher in more innovative practices to be implemented across the evolving landscape of collegiate athletics at the Division 1 level.

## Chapter 5

### Introduction

Chapter 5 of this research project provides the results of the qualitative study. Former Division 1 student-athletes who participated in various collegiate sports at institutions in several regions of the United States were interviewed. The study aimed to describe the lived experiences of student-athletes competing or who have competed in athletics at a four-year institution. The purpose of this project was to understand and gauge the readiness and career preparation they received during their undergraduate career. With participants sharing lived experiences, a deeper understanding of AASS and career preparation practices and programming in collegiate athletics was gained. A discussion of the results, implications of the results for practice, policy, and theory, and recommendations for further research can be found in this chapter.

### Discussion of the Results

RQ 1: How have athletic-academic support services impacted career readiness for student-athletes who seek postbaccalaureate opportunities after completing their intercollegiate athletic careers?

The findings show that while athletic-academic support services are in place to support student-athletes academically, the consistency of the services or lack thereof caused participants to question if the institution was invested in their education and future career path. Services usage, athletic advising, and major/degree selection were the themes that developed after coding participants' responses. Many participants acknowledged the challenges of accessing the services. The hours when athletic-academic support services were available sometimes matched the scheduling or available time slots associated with being a student-athlete. The results show

that student-athletes are aware of the role of their athletic academic advisors, who are positioned as academic support. However, the authenticity of the relationship is questioned by participants because of the major/degree selection of student-athletes. As a theme, the major and degree selection narrative was directly associated with the participant's sport. If a particular major or degree plan interfered with athletic obligations, the only options available were to change to a major conducive to athletic scheduling or no longer participate in the sport, which can significantly impact the funding of one's education.

RQ 2: What percentage of current or former student-athletes utilize(d) career readiness/preparation services during the season versus the off-season?

The findings suggest that career readiness/preparation services must be clearly defined throughout the student-athlete's career. Many participants encountered professionals who raised eligibility concerns, as the topic of discussion usually revolved maintaining a specific grade point average. According to Participant 6, the only reason the topic of graduate school was a topic of discussion was due to the fact that he had an extra year of eligibility after finishing his undergraduate degree two semesters earlier. Other narratives within the results revolve around compliance and the NCAA. According to the findings, it becomes challenging to utilize a service, be it in-season or off-season, if one does not feel as if they are interacting with a skilled practitioner who understands student-athletes' needs in regard to career readiness/preparation.

RQ 3: Do athletic-academic support services help team sport athletes or student-athletes explore and assess career preparation?

In sharing their lived experiences, participants brought three inherent themes to light: perception of the college athletics, the athletic scholarship, and the support needed as a student-

athlete. The findings acknowledge the fact that collegiate athletics is demanding. Nevertheless, college athletics was the most feasible option to access higher education. *Athletic scholarships* are the recruiting tool used by various institutions to get athletes to their universities or college—however, the transparency surrounding the athletic scholarship impacts how athletes view athletics. Coming in as a student-athlete who has to honor his or her athletic obligations even to have a chance at earning a college education is challenging when support is not consistently available. According to the findings, athletic-academic support does not help student-athletes explore and assess career preparation due to those services not always being student goal centered. Offering services is excellent. However, when the services are more focused on the sport than on the student athlete, they tend to be useless to those seeking an actual career path upon transitioning from their sport.

Exploration requires inquiry, and the results suggest that the professionals working with the student-athletes at the time rarely inquired about life after college sports. As told by participants,

- "Ask the athlete what their goal is. The biggest thing you want is to know the athlete."
- "I think when an athlete declares a major, someone should ask, "hey, what are your goal?" long before senior year"
- "I wish I was asked, what can I see myself doing in the next twenty or thirty years."
- "I got a degree, but at the time, you know, nobody really sat me down and talked about a resume."
- "I would have like to have somebody kind of guide me along as me. You know what I'm saying like, whether it's a class, a professor, a coach"



All of the statements and observations above would have helped with career readiness/preparation.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

In Chapter 2, research conducted by Buzzetta, Lenz, and Kennelly (2017) acknowledges being a collegiate student-athlete presents many challenges for exploring academic and career opportunities, with athletic commitments often taking precedence over academic and career planning. The findings of this study suggest this is accurate, with many participants expressing the time constraints associated with being a Division 1 student-athlete. Participant 2 stated the following, "Athletes are brought in on scholarships. With that, you know, a lot of their time is spent with the team." The sentiment of Participant 2 is reiterated with the following statement, "it's a lot in college athletics. It's a lot of time," which was provided by Participant 4.

The implementation of academic support in schools was designed to assist student-athletes with managing their academic and athletic commitments (English et al., 2022). However, such resources and programming have yet to enhance the overall student-athlete experience. The literature suggests athletic advising is directly related to eligibility. As a result, Paule-Koba (2019) believes academic clustering, the grouping of 50% or more athletes in a major that is not aligned with career interests or goals, is the norm. Participant 1 stated he decided to stop running cross country after two years because the sport impacted his grade point average. During his interview, Participant 1 also revealed that his athletic academic advisor was not the best resource once he started taking courses for his intended major and degree.

With college athletes experiencing burnout, the need for advising is crucial. However, there was a consistent narrative regarding the daily tasks of collegiate student-athletes related to

their sport, not to their courses and career preparation. The literature revealed many student-athletes deal with stressors that impact both their academic and athletic identity. Garinger, Chow, and Luzzi (2018) conducted a study that explains how daily hassles such as class conflicts, relationship issues, training deficiencies, and travel for competition impact the student-athlete. Each participant at some point during the interview either expressed or acknowledged how the time constraints associated with being student-athlete impacts their decision-making process regarding their academics, major, and degree. As stated by Participant 2, “I feel like if you go into athletics. It's almost like. What if you had grandiose career ambitions? It's almost impossible. You're having to choose. Do I want that? Or do I want this? There's no way. There's absolutely no way with the amount of time that you give between traveling, practices, meetings, classes.”, which further supports a study conducted by Tabet, Lambie, and Golubovic (2021) which uncovered that one-third of NCAA student-athletes struggle to complete tasks outside of their sport due to schedules that revolve around practice, traveling, and competition.

As student-athletes navigate their athletic and academic endeavors, athletic retirement/transition looms. According to Barcza-Renner et al. (2020), student-athletes should work with a practitioner in their field of interest or their academic advisor before retirement from their sport to help mitigate the challenges associated with losing sports participation-built support systems (e.g., coaches, academic advisors, tutors). Participant 6 explained that his university had a readiness program, which was used to help advise student-athletes on what degree they wanted to pursue. Participant 6 also shared that graduate school is only in a discussion if a player wants to stay eligible during or after undergraduate school. This data identifies how academic scaffolding, as discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, would benefit athletes, given the time constraints. Participant 4, who graduated twelve years prior to Participant 6, explained that his athletic

department did not have a formal career readiness program. However, his relationship with his advisor is how he found his career path. Participants 4 and 6 were both Division 1 basketball student-athletes. The lived experiences of Participant 6 shows some evolution within collegiate athletics supporting literature highlighted by Dowling, Mills, and Stodter (2020) acknowledging that athletes are at the institution to receive a quality education. An education that leads one to a career and not just a job.

### **Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy and Theory**

#### **Practice**

Many higher education institutions aim to provide transformative experiences where students gain transferable life and leadership skills often scaffolded by professionals inside and outside the classroom (Shirley et al., 2022). Of the six participants, only one felt this occurred during their career as a Division 1 athlete. Therefore, the results suggest that practices implemented by institutions and athletic departments must be reimaged to better support student-athletes of the 21st century. Recent literature suggests that the duality of the athletic and academic roles must be examined to serve student-athletes best. Not surprisingly, a 2022 study by Ballesteros et al. discovered a positive correlation between academic identity and student-athletes well-being.

The United States higher education system provides a unique opportunity for student-athletes to earn an education by participating in athletics and representing the institution (Ortega & Grafnetterova, 2022). However, supporting student-athletes may require practitioners to make actionable change by challenging current academic and athletic department structures (Ballesteros et al., 2022). The results revealed that their academic needs changed as student-

athletes progressed throughout their athletic career. Earlier in their athletic career, students may focus on their athletic identity. However, academic identity changes in relation to year in school, which explains why mentoring and academic/career scaffolding is important to post baccalaureate success of all student-athletes (Ballesteros et al., 2022; Ofoegbu et al., 2022; Ortega & Grafnetterova, 2022). Various participants expressed the need for professional guidance as they navigated thinking and preparing, while in college, for their careers after their years as student-athletes. Never having this need met impacted their transitioning experience. However, more intentional, outcomes-driven practices can change the future of student-athletes and of intercollegiate athletics (Ofoegbu et al., 2022) regarding career preparation practices.

### **Policy**

The array of services offered by athletic departments offer various resources to student-athletes, but their location geographically on campus regularly isolates athletes from their non-athlete peers (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019). This reality has caused many researchers to question if the resources are in place for the purpose of academic clustering and eligibility maintenance only (Comeaux & Crandall, 2019; Miller, 2021; Paule-Koba, 2019; Watkins et al., 2022). During interviews participants shared they felt the services offered did not always align with their schedule. Largely due to the time constraints associated with their athletic identity.

Whether it was traveling, practices, classes, the results showed the athletic department's perception of its policies and the participants' perception of their experience were vastly different. Paule-Koba et al., (2021) recently conducted a study that implies university athletic stakeholders must re-evaluate their policies regarding scheduling, traveling and classes since the current policies quite often negatively impact the student-athlete's academic performance or pursuits. In two separate interviews both participants mention their athletic teams traveling from

the south region of the United States to Hawaii for a competition, only to come back to their respective institution behind on much of their coursework. It is impossible to assume that student-athletes can maintain their academics, let alone pursue future career aspirations under such rigorous schedules.

## **Theory**

In various academic cultures, the epistemological differences are evident, yet student-athletes' attitudes toward their academic goals insist that a social-cultural layer is missing, which reflects Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Donoghue & Horvath, 2016; Englund, Olofsson, & Price, 2018; von Suchodoletz et al., 2020). Aligning the goals of students by intentionally developing their competence through increased guidance and support is how academic scaffolding and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Brower et al., 2021) impact student-athletes in contemporary society. However, the results suggest little to no support was provided in transitioning to a non-athletic related role upon transitioning from the sport. In theory, higher education aims to teach students how to think instead of what to think (Browne et al., 2009). Nevertheless, participants felt isolated from their athletic stakeholders once their athletic identity ended with the institution. To combat this from happening to future student-athletes, Participant 2 suggested that athletic scholarships have an academic financial component to help athletes find a community outside of their sport to help mitigate role conflict and role engulfment. The notion supports Shabani's (2016) idea of Vygotsky's SCT, as the researcher explains that learning occurs through social interaction.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

Given that this study had a small sample size, future studies should collect data from a larger sample to generate more data strengthening the narratives and themes of the overall study. The qualitative study only included former Division 1 student-athletes whose average age was 30 years old. Future research should look to gain the perception of current Division 1 student-athletes actively pursuing their degree. Once a major is declared, future studies should examine if students are tracking on a specific career plan over the entire four years.

### **Conclusion**

Student-athletes are sold by the university on the idea that they are given the resources to excel on and off the field or court, but many leave college with poorly defined career preparation or plans (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2022; Miller, 2022). The NCAA and its member institutions acknowledge high graduation rates for student-athletes. However, the research suggests that academic decisions often impact athletic success, not individual career development (Houston & Baber, 2017; Miller, 2022; Paule-Koba, 2019; Watkins et al., 2022). Career readiness is a growing concern at all levels of the education system, but it has yet to be studied, especially for collegiate student-athletes (August, 2020). The ninety-eight percent of student-athletes who do not become professional athletes require more intentional support from internal and external stakeholders who should be heavily invested in their success. The results of this study indicate that there is a disconnect between the services being offered and the needs of the student-athletes. In a contemporary society, there must be campus-wide collaboration allowing student-athletes to experience positive educational experiences using career-focused counseling support and resources while participating in collegiate athletics (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016; Miller, 2022).

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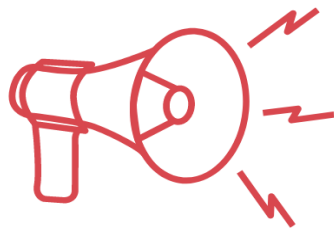
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Appendix A



**ST. EDWARD'S  
UNIVERSITY**

**LOOKING FOR DIVISION 1 COLLEGIATE  
STUDENT-ATHLETES PARTICIPANTS**



**TRANSITIONING OUT OF  
COLLEGIATE SPORTS: AN  
EXAMINATION OF ATHLETIC  
ACADEMIC SUPPORT  
SERVICES AND CAREER  
PREPARATION PRACTICES**

**Purpose of Study**

This study intends to understand how Division 1 student-athletes experience academic and career preparation practices at four-year institutions.

***WHO?***

- Current or Former American collegiate Division 1 student-athletes
- Minimum of two years in a sport.

Eligible participants will participate in a 30-60 minute Zoom interview (100% confidential).

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me through email. [Ayoung11@stedwards.edu](mailto:Ayoung11@stedwards.edu)

IRB Approval #0000129

## Appendix B



## Institutional Review Board

September 9, 2022

Protocol ID #0000129

Dear Mr. Young,

Thank you for your recent proposal submission to the St. Edward's University Institutional Review Board. Your research proposal TRANSITIONING OUT OF COLLEGIATE SPORTS: AN EXAMINATION OF ATHLETIC ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES AND CAREER PREPARATION PRACTICES, version 2, dated 09-07-22, has been reviewed and is **approved** on this date: 09-09-22. Please use protocol number 0000129 on all consent and recruiting materials, and in future communication with the IRB.

Compliance with 45 CFR 46.115(b) requires that all records relating to IRB approved research be retained for **at least 3 years after closure of the project**. Records may be preserved in hard-copy, electronic or other media form, and must be accessible for audit purposes. Records for completed projects should be stored in secure locations on campus with the same care used when the project was active.

If you experience unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others, adverse events and/or other problems with the study during the approved period, please note that you will be required to complete the appropriate report form to the IRB within 5 business days of the event. See the link for these forms on the IRB website, on the Forms and Templates page. [1]

When you have completed your research project, please submit the "Study Closure Form", also found on the Forms and Templates page of the IRB website. [1]

We wish you success with your research. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the chair of the IRB or contact [irb@stedwards.edu](mailto:irb@stedwards.edu).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lisa Bell Holleran".

Lisa Bell Holleran, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice  
Chair, SEU Institutional Review Board  
E-mail: [lhollera@stedwards.edu](mailto:lhollera@stedwards.edu)

[1] <https://stedwards.edu/institutional-review-board/forms-and-templates>

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## Appendix C

## Demographic

1. With what gender do you identify?
2. In what sport did you participate?
3. In what region was your institution located?
4. Was your institution a public or private college or university?
4. How many years did you participate in college sport?
5. What year did you graduate?
6. Did you suffer from any career ending injuries?
7. Did you compete professionally?

## Career Transition Interview

1. How often did you utilize the academic services of the athletic department? Was graduate school ever a topic of discussion?
2. Did your university have an athletic career readiness program or transition workshop?  
(Yes/No) If yes:
  - a. What was the name of the program?
  - b. What topics were addressed in the program?
  - c. Was the program mandatory?

- d. How often did this program occur at your institution?
  - e. In what year were you when you participated in the program?
3. If you participated in a career readiness program, was the information and activities that were provided in the program useful or helpful to you? Please explain why or why not.
4. What was your athletic career transition experience like?
  - a. How did transitioning from sport make you feel?
5. During your transition experience, did you feel that you had sufficient academic and social support? (Yes/No)
  - a. If yes, please explain what academic and/or social support you had available during this time.
  - b. If no, please explain what you would like to have had in the way of support during this time
6. Did you feel that you had informal information given to you about transitioning from sport?
  - a. If so, who gave this information to you?
  - b. In what form was the information given to you?
  - c. Was it useful to you? Why or why not?
7. Do you still identify as an athlete? Why or why not?
8. Are you currently in a career that is fulfilling and satisfying to you?

- a. If so, did you find this path on your own or did the institution prepare you for your current role?
  - b. If no, do you feel your institution could have prepared you better for a career that would be fulfilling and satisfying to you? How?
9. If there is anything you could have done differently to better prepare for the end of your sport career what would you have done?
10. What recommendations would you give to athletic programs about speaking to athletes on preparing for transitioning from sport?