Division I Student Athletes and the Experience of Academic Clustering

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ABSTRACT

Have you ever watched a televised college football or basketball game where they show the starting lineup’s academic majors? If so, you may have noticed that many of the student athletes have the same academic majors, be it communications, criminal justice, sociology, etc. In fact, many have taken notice and labeled this phenomenon as “academic clustering.” In particular, numerous scholarly papers and popular press articles have examined clustering in terms of occurrence and frequency. However, very few have attempted to examine academic clustering through the lens of the student athlete to understand their experience. The purpose of this study was to explore how former Division I student athletes experienced academic clustering. This study brings to light the lived experiences of academic clustering through the first-hand voice of former Division I student athletes who were academically clustered.

To examine this phenomenon the researcher asked: What is the lived experience of former Division I student athletes who have been academically clustered? To answer the research question, the researcher conducted a qualitative methodology, specifically, phenomenology, as a means to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of being academically clustered. In addition, Institutional Theory was selected as theoretical lens to interpret the findings of the study. The study sample contained 7 former Division I student athletes who participated on the football team (5 African American and two Caucasian) at a large 4-year public university on the East Coast. A Purposeful sample technique was employed.

Five conclusions emerged from the data regarding the student athletes’ lived experience of being academically clustered: 1) Academic clustering is one consequence of the required athletic schedule; 2) Academic clustering is one method used to maintain athletes’ eligibility; 3)
Academic clustering facilitated indifference toward academic achievement; 4) Academic clustering further isolated student athletes from the general student population and a traditional college experience and; 5) Student athletes lacked in-depth academic support to help realize their academic potential.

Recommendations are provided for academic advisors, coaches and student athletes with the goal of encouraging these different constituencies to understand areas where their behaviors could change to provide a meaningful education for student athletes.
DEDICATION

To the student athletes who march onward and upward toward the light, this thesis is respectfully dedicated.
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Chapter I. Introduction

The purpose of this proposed research study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experience of academic clustering through the perspective of former student athletes. Academic clustering is objectively defined by Case, Greer, and Brown (1987) as when a significant percentage, typically 25% or greater, of student athletes on one team have the same major. Though a cluster is not wholly unethical, it does raise concerns as to why student athletes are clustered. Utilizing a phenomenological approach this study goes beyond what academic clustering is and explores the experience of clustered student athletes and how various elements create the environment for clustering to take place.

According to popular thought, it is believed that student athletes involved in Division I revenue-generating sports (men’s basketball and football) have been stymied in several areas such as academic achievement/expectation and career aspiration outside of professional sports. For the average American sports fan or citizen, the term student athlete is either accepted uncritically or is perceived to perform a number of positive functions. Nonetheless, the literal representation of a priority system in which primacy is accorded to the academic process with athletics subservient to it, the term student athlete evokes descriptions of individuals who are “students first, athletes second” (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). In spite of the rhetoric, athletic programs have come to be protected and promoted activities on college campuses across the country (Flowers, 2009).

Whether or not one supports the idea of high-profile intercollegiate athletics, it is difficult to deny that college sports matter greatly in the public life of the university. Football and basketball are a significant component of the overall identity of schools that invest heavily in
these activities (Toma, 1999). In addition, athletic competition may help structure a student's life, and coaching may improve both physical and intellectual performance. Conversely, the amplified emphasis on sports may hinder the student athletes to the point of negatively impacting their grades (Maloney & McCormick, 1993). Because of this paradox between academics and athletics, college sports has been criticized for allowing commercial interests and over-emphasis on winning to undermine academic values (Meggyesy, 2000). As a consequence the victims of such ambition are the student athletes.

Accordingly, this research study examines academic clustering from the student athlete’s perspective. The literature reviewed by the researcher shows that clustering does happen and often. However, the research is based heavily on objective data describing the frequency of clustering. The gaps in the literature are the student athletes’ perspectives; they are often talked about but not talked to. Specifically, the researcher investigated the practice of academic clustering through the conceptual lens of institutional theory that will aid in illuminating the rules, norms, and routines that have created and perpetuated academic clustering. Furthermore, the researcher utilized phenomenology as the methodology focusing on Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

**Statement of Problem**

Participation in intercollegiate athletics has been promoted by athletic administrators and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) as having educative value, as sports were often defended by claims that such activities developed in its participants a sense of competition, leadership skills, work ethic, and character (Flowers, 2010). However, the escalating costs of intercollegiate athletics, generated by the athletics arms race (desire to hire a popular coach, stadium expansion, new stadiums, product sales, ticket sales, TV contracts), creates a paradox
between academics and athletics (Estler & Nelson, 2005). Many commentators (Adler & Adler, 1987; Benford, 2007; Capriccioso, 2010; Lederman, 2010; Wolverton, 2008; Thelin 2008) have noted how the increasing commercialization of college sports has made it even more difficult for universities to reconcile the gap between college sports and the fundamental mission of higher education (Sharpe & Sheilley, 2008).

Not surprisingly, coaches and athletic administrators appear to always find ways to skew the policies to produce a more favorable outcome for their benefit. For example, a stipulation within the Academic Progress Report (APR), the progress-toward-degree policy, also known as the 40-60-80 rule says that once student athletes declare their majors, they must have completed 40 percent of their degree-program requirements going into their third year, 60 percent going into their fourth year, and 80 percent going into their fifth year. The 40-60-80 rule, according to the NCAA would mean moving student athletes to graduation in five years (Meyer, 2005), whereas before with the progress toward degree policy a student athlete could take any combination of classes as long as he had the required number of credits to maintain eligibility. The unintended consequence of the APR is an enhanced propensity to cluster athletes into “athletic friendly majors.”

Fountain and Finley (2009) say coaches are now more apt to recruit athletes of marginal academic ability and seek easier majors, courses, and professors to ensure a reasonable graduation rate. Accordingly, the phenomenon of clustering has not gone unnoticed. In particular, scholarly research papers (Fountain & Finely, 2009; Case, Greer & Brown 1987; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010) as well as numerous popular press articles (Welch, 2003; Lederman, 2010; Wolverton, 2008) have examined academic clustering as well as its impact. In particular, the Knight Commission has been an independent voice advocating for the alignment
of athletics programs with their universities' educational missions (Hesel & Perko, 2010). The Commission’s initial goal was to recommend a reform agenda that emphasized academic values in an arena where commercialization of college sports often overshadowed the underlying goals of higher education. Since 1989, the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics has worked to ensure that intercollegiate athletics programs operate within the educational mission of their colleges and universities (Knight Commission, 2011).

Thus the problem that the researcher investigated was the lived experience of academic clustering, when 25% or more student athletes on one team have the same major (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987). According to Hollencamp (2009) the NCAA’s recently instituted academic rule, the APR, a semester-by-semester measurement of an athletic program’s academic success based on its graduation rate may have unintentionally increased this problem. The rule, in effect, punishes institutions competitively and financially if their athletes don’t continue to move toward a degree, and may increase the pressure to get athletes into majors in which they are more likely to succeed (Capriccioso, 2010).

**Statement of Potential Significance**

This study contributes to the scholarly community by expanding the focus of academic clustering to include the voice of the student athlete. Using a phenomenological approach fills the gap in the literature that speaks only to the frequency of clustering and/or speaks to the student athlete experience without explicitly focusing on clustering. This study will expand the body of knowledge regarding policy, practice and research implications in order to aid university administrators, athletic administrators, coaches, faculty and the student athletes who face the competing interest of balancing academics and athletics. The following will outline the potential significance in regards to research, practice, and policy.
Research

The perspective of student athletes should be considered when developing reform to ensure the student athletes’ best interests are being met along with the stated goals of the institution of higher learning. Comparatively, while this study will be the first to specifically examine the experiences of student athletes who have been academically clustered, it could open the door to similar studies being conducted. As such, this study could spur interest in gaining a broader perspective of all those involved in the phenomenon of clustering. Specifically, conducting a study from a coach’s perspective could provide a wealth of information. For example, research could show that coaches use clustering as a competitive advantage to make the student athletes’ academic tenure as easy as possible. It could demonstrate that coaches recruit student athletes out of high school knowing that they are not ready for the rigors of college coursework but have an athletic friendly curriculum, which said student athletes can manage. It could also demonstrate the immense pressure to win and financial incentive to promote athletics above academics.

Practice

Considering the potential significance of this study it can aid in reconsidering how academic practices are approached from an institutional point of view. For example, seven years ago Vanderbilt’s Chancellor Gordon Gee announced that he was eliminating the position of athletic director and folding the athletic department into his office's division of student life and university affairs. Gee says that real success is an athletics program that is no longer viewed as an appendage or a side business for entertaining students and donors. Gee's vision is that if the whole university is responsible for the athletic program, everyone invests more to make sure it succeeds (Pope, 2008). Gee also had another motive in addition to improving the quality of his
program: to set an example that it's not unreasonable that other schools might benefit from taking steps to bridge the chasm between athletics and academia (Bechtel, 2003).

Though the researcher is not suggesting the abolishment of the position of athletics director or athletics departments, this study may act as a catalyst to motivate a change in practice of how academics is balanced with advising. For example, athletic administrators may consider relinquishing control of academic advising to the university academic advisors. As it stands at many institutions student athlete academic advisors are the primary academic advisors to student athletes. They act as liaisons between the academic and athletics communities and are primarily responsible for ensuring that student athletes have as much academic success as their ability can afford. Many people view academic/athletic advisors as eligibility brokers, those who keep student athletes eligible to play (Myers, 2005). If academic advising were to be housed under the auspices of university advisors then the frequency of clustering may diminish and the engagement of student athletes in sincere discourse about academic exploration, career alignment, and graduate studies may result.

Policy

Lastly, when considering potential policy impact, this study may prompt policy makers to revisit student athletes’ initial academic eligibility standards. In other words, recruiters would make sure that only those student athletes being recruited and ultimately admitted into an institution are capable of performing academically based on high school GPA and standardized test scores (SAT or ACT). The concern is that the academic preparedness for admission, seriousness toward learning, and graduation rates of many student athletes threaten academic integrity (Lumpkin, 2008). In response to these concerns the NCAA over the past thirty years has instituted various academic reform measures such as Proposition 48, Proposition 42, Proposition
16, increased SAT/ACT scores, increased GPA standards and most recently the Academic Progress Report.

Today the NCAA utilizes a sliding-scale combination of grades in high school core courses and standardized test scores. For example, if a student athlete earns a 3.0 grade-point average in core courses, that individual must score at least 620 on the SAT or 52 on the ACT. As the GPA increases, the required test score decreases, and vice versa (NCAA, 2010a). This sliding scale presents itself as a conduit for the possibility of admitting students who are not fully prepared for the rigors of college academics. However, if student athletes were subject to the regular admissions process without bias to athletics, there perhaps would be greater likelihood that only qualified student athletes are admitted. This assumes that admissions does not also give preference or special admission standards for student athletes.

**Purpose and Research Question**

The research question is: *What is the lived experience of former Division I student athletes who have been academically clustered?* This study is concentrated on each individual subject’s experience, from freshman year through senior year. The selected subjects were interviewed three separate times, following the interview method described by Seidman (1998). The first interview focused on life history and involvement with sports and academics. The second focused on describing the details of the intercollegiate athletic culture and the relationship with academics. The third allowed for subjects to reflect on the meaning of their experience.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research study investigated the lived experienced of former Division I student athletes who were academically clustered. As a means to better understand the phenomenon of
academic clustering within the broader context of universities and athletic departments, the theoretical lens through which this phenomenon was studied was institutional theory. Institutional Theory allowed the researcher to situate academic clustering not as an isolated incident but connected to practices and norms implicitly and perhaps explicitly set by the institution of college athletics and the intercollegiate athletic governing body, the NCAA. Institutional Theory suggests that organizations by accident and choice mirror the norms, values and ideologies of the general environment in which they are embedded (Bess and Dee, 2008).

**Institutional Theory**

Organizations are the preeminent institutional form in modern society. They organize and structure the daily activities of most people (Zucker, 1983). As such, colleges and universities are complex organizations operating in a diverse ever-changing environment with shifting values, varying states of economic prosperity, and obscure permutations of political power. Yet they have endured, constituting a remarkably resilient organizational form and one of the oldest in human history (Bess and Dee, 2008). For these reasons, Institutional Theory attends to the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structure. It considers the processes by which structures, including schemas, rules, norms, and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior. It investigates how these elements are created, diffused, adopted, and adapted over space and time, and how they fall into decline and disuse (Scott, 2004). Thus, it should be noted that a major function of theory is then to provide a model or map of why the world is the way it is. It is a simplification of the world, but a simplification aimed at clarifying and explaining some aspect of how it works (Maxwell, 2005).

More precisely, a theory such as Institutional Theory is a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework
that can be used to predict phenomena (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, it is not simply a “framework,” although it can provide that, but a story about what the researcher thinks is happening and why, and one that gives the researcher new insights and broadens the researcher’s understanding of that phenomenon (Maxwell, 2005). As such, the researcher agrees with Toma & Cross’ (1998) account that today’s intercollegiate athletics are commonly portrayed as the front door to the university: what many people on the outside see and what eventually gets them inside. Campus spectator sports, particularly the entertainment spectacles that are football and men’s basketball at many large institutions, are the aspect of the university most often visible to those outside of the academic community, both sports fans and non-sports fans (Toma & Cross, 1998).

The concepts of institution and institutionalization have been defined in diverse ways, with substantial variation among approaches. Thus, the beginning of wisdom in approaching Institutional Theory is to recognize at the outset that there is not one but several variants. Some versions are much more carefully defined and explicit about their definitions and referents, while others are less clear in conceptualization. Although there seems to be an underlying similarity in the various approaches, there is little agreement on specifics (Scott, 1987). Nonetheless, the roots of Institutional Theory run richly through the formative years of the social sciences, enlisting and incorporating the creative insights of scholars ranging from Marx and Weber, Cooley and Mead, to Veblen and Commons. Much of this work carried out at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was submerged under the onslaught of neoclassical theory in economics, behavioralism in political science, and positivism in sociology (Scott, 2004).

Institutional Theory holds that organizations, like an onion, exist in a layered form encompassing the environmental field, the organization, formal and informal groups within the
organization, and the individual employees. The degree of conformity or fit between the layers in
the onion determines the degree of organizational stability (Hanson, 2001). Organizations are
thus influenced by normative pressures, sometimes arising from external sources such as the
state, other times arising from within the organization itself. Under some conditions, these
pressures lead the organization to be guided by legitimated elements, from standard operating
procedures to professional certification and state requirements, leading to isomorphism with the
institutional environment and increasing the probability of survival (Zucker, 1987).

More specifically, isomorphism is a process that causes one unit in a population to
resemble other units in the population that face the same set of environmental conditions.
Because of isomorphic pressures, organizations will become increasingly homogeneous within
given domains and conform to expectations of the wider institutional environment (Carpenter,
2004). Subsequently, colleges and universities are embedded in institutional environments where
state governments, professional associations, accreditation organizations, and other external
agents generate rules, regulations, and requirements for organizational performance, leading
colleges and universities to adopt practices that conform to institutionalized expectations (Bess
and Dee, 2008). Thus, institutional theory posits a deterministic environment where
organizations may have limited discretion in the types of strategic choices they make. The range
of choice is limited by external pressures for conformity (Bess and Dee, 2008).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that institutions engage in three forms of
isomorphism, coercive, mimetic, and normative:

Coercive isomorphism results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on
organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural
expectations in the society within which organizations function. Such pressures may be felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitation to join in collusion.

*Mimetic isomorphism* occurs when one educational organization consciously models itself after another that it believes to represent a higher level of success and achievement in the public eye. The intention to mimic is constantly encouraged and reinforced by (a) educational consultants who vigorously (and profitably) spread the latest news about exciting things taking place on the other side of the fence, (b) academic conferences that function as supermarkets for new idea, and (c) the rapid movement by administrators between schools or districts near and far (Hanson, 2001).

*Normative isomorphism* is rooted in the processes of professionalization in which the values, codes, and standards are imposed by universities as well as professional certification and accreditation agencies. These agencies also act as gatekeepers, determining who gets into the profession and therefore further reinforcing normative expectations and order on the behavior of teachers and administrators (Hanson, 2001).

Institutional theory also emphasizes the normative elements in the environment that shape organizational practices. The institutional environment is defined as the set of expectations that emerges from influential external agents (Scott, 1995). Likewise, using the lens of institutional theory can provide a rich examination of universities and the athletic culture, which may manifest an environment where academic clustering exists. It is in this respect institutional theory can examine the norms that govern coaches, athletic directors, academic advisors, presidents, faculty, student athletes and policies that shape the student athlete experience. Accordingly, this study used three pillars of institution as defined by Richard Scott (1995):
Regulative, Normative, and Cognitive, as a conceptual lens to view the student athlete experience as illustrated in Figure 1.
Theoretical Framework Graph

Figure 1. Cyclical Nature of Richard Scott’s Three Pillars

Note. Cyclical nature of the three pillars; Regulative, Normative, and Cognitive, which create the student athlete experience.
Regulative Pillar

The regulative pillar is distinguished by the prominence given to explicit regulative process – rule setting, monitoring, and sanctioning. In this conception, the regulative process involves the capacity to establish rules, inspect or review others’ conformity to them and as necessary, manipulates sanctions – rewards or punishments – in an attempt to influence behavior (Scott, 1995). Similar to the aforementioned, the NCAA can levy sanctions against athletic programs found in violation of its rules, sanctions which range from a temporary reduction in scholarships, to suspension of a team from postseason play, all the way up to the requirement that a school eliminate a certain team and, even, measures that indirectly threaten the school’s academic accreditation (Kahn, 2007). A prime example of the NCAA’s regulative power is its ability to create and enforce academic legislation over autonomous universities. For instance, the APR was the NCAA’s response to calls for academic integrity. It is intended to ensure eligibility for student athletes and to serve as a check and balance on athletic departments. The APR also serves to monitor whether the institutions are properly providing for student athlete academic needs. The scores are meant to provide institutions with a clear set of goals for each team and to set a higher priority on academics in collegiate athletics departments (Bouchet & Scott, 2009). However, schools that earn an APR of less than 900 (equivalent to a GSR of 50%) are punished by the NCAA.

One of the primary goals of continued evaluation is to provide a structure that honors the mission of the divisions and sets standards of interaction among university presidents, administrators, athletics departments, and athletes (Hill, Burch-Ragan, & Yates, 2001). While clustering is not necessarily negative, it becomes so if athletes are simply taking an easy major to comply with the strict rules enforcing the completion of a major within five years. Rather than
studying a subject that interests them, or one that will be most beneficial to them in the future, they are choosing—or being directed to—a major to simply maintain eligibility. In this scenario, academics are taking a backseat to athletics, violating generally held university missions and priorities (Denhart, Villwock, & Vedder, 2010).

**Normative Pillar**

The normative pillar is distinguished by the normative system focusing on values and norms (Scott, 1995). Values are conceptions of the preferred or the desirable together with the construction of standards to which existing structures or behavior can be compared. Norms specify how things should be done; actors conform not because it serves their individual interest, but because it is expected of them, and they are obliged to do so (Scott, 1995). Accordingly, the normative pillar can help the researcher better understand the system of college athletics that implicitly and explicitly places pressure on student athletes to choose between academics and athletics.

Most notably the ideals of the NCAA are rooted in the premise of amateurism. The NCAA’s current Amateurism bylaw 2.9 of the Division I manual states:

“Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises (NCAA, 2010a).”

However, many believe these ideals are limited to all but Division I athletics. Evidence has demonstrated that highly selective colleges and NCAA Division III members have different
athletic orientations than their Division I counterparts (Schroeder, 2010). For example, the NCAA Division III presents its concept of non-scholarship sport as follows:

Colleges and universities in NCAA Division III place highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students’ academic programs. They seek to establish and maintain an environment in which a student athlete’s athletics activities are conducted as an integral part of the student-athlete’s educational experience. They also seek to establish and maintain an environment that values cultural diversity and gender equity among their student-athletes and athletics staff (NCAA, 2010b).

Conversely, former Division I football player Dr. Greg Primus, a top receiver for Colorado State University in the late ’80s and early ’90s, said in his playing days clustering was a common practice. “The main goal is keeping these athletes eligible,” Primus stated. “If athletes do have a particular interest and they find that the course load is too challenging, they fail classes and they’re struggling to be eligible, it’s going to be a natural reaction for them to pull out of that and say, ‘You know, what’s most important right now is that I at least get a 2.0. Let me shift my curriculum to Basket-weaving 101.’ And everybody’s happy. At least during those four years” (Hollencamp, 2009, p.3).

There is no doubt that the NCAA is a commercial enterprise, and numerous scholars have taken the position that the NCAA uses this outdated principle of amateurism to maximize its own gain while keeping student athletes as serfs in the feudal system of intercollegiate athletics (Sharp, 2004). The NCAA has retained complete control over major college football and major college basketball in regard to the regulation of student athletes. Courts provide the organization with "ample latitude" in maintaining its regulations out of deference to the goal of preserving
amateur sports as a product distinct from professional sports (Baker, Maxcy, & Thomas, 2011, p.14).

**Cognitive Pillar**

The cognitive pillar stresses the rules that constitute the nature of reality and the frames through which meaning is made (Scott, 1995). Some find the essence of culture to be the implicit assumptions and beliefs that influence the way a group of people think and behave. These guiding assumptions and beliefs, which are below the surface of conscious thought, are manifested into observable forms or artifacts (Kuh & Whitt, 2008). One particular observable fact is when institutions admit young men and women based on their athletic rather than their academic potential, and then expect them to perform as both athletes and students. In high profile sports such as football and men’s basketball, this is a particular problem. Players in these sports often have a difficult time performing well in the classroom for any number of reasons, including attending poor high schools, daydreaming about the millions they think they will make in the pros, and dealing with the oppressive demands of practice and competition (Martin & Christy, 2010). As such institutional theory will be able to help the researcher produce a critical description of their lived experience and add to the literature.

Infusing a cognitive lens into intercollegiate athletics provides the opportunity to debate the realities and perceptions of this system by not accepting things as they are or as what they appear to be. The literature has demonstrated an absence of the student athletes’ voice as it relates to their understanding of the system of intercollegiate athletics as well as their place within the system. The narratives that often describe the student athletes are often general or depicted in numbers and statistics that are constructed without the participation of the student athletes themselves (Case, Greer & Brown, 1987; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Mitten, Musselman,
In contrast to this narrative, a counter narrative through a cognitive lens will enable the researcher to engage student athletes in a critical discourse about their relationship with academic clustering and intercollegiate athletics. This manner of inquiry is directly in opposition to the dominant philosophy of prescription.

For example, Benson’s (2000) article *Constructing Academic Inadequacy* utilized a critical theorist perspective with the premise that though there is a plethora of objective data and statistics regarding the poor performance of student athletes, specifically black male student athletes, their voices are never heard. In this article Benson asks how our educational policies and practices might change if we better understood these students’ narratives of their schooling experiences. Through open dialogue Benson was able to report that the marginal academic performance of these student athletes was a phenomenon created by a series of interrelated practices engaged in by significant members of the university community including peers, coaches, academic advisors, professors, and the student athletes themselves. Conversely the researcher aims to use Institutional Theory to uncover hidden truths about the experience of being clustered.

**Summary of Methodology**

The strategy of inquiry utilized in this study is phenomenology. The word phenomenology is derived from the Greek meaning “to bring into the light” and the current definition encourages an approach that looks beyond initial appearances (Pringle, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). Its primary position is that the most basic human truths are accessible only through inner subjectivity, and that the person is integral to the environment. Phenomenological research is thus inductive and descriptive. Simply put, a researcher utilizing phenomenology
aims to understand the cognitive subjective perspective of the person who has the experience and the effect that perspective has on the lived experience (Flood, 2010). Therefore, the researcher has “brought to light” the lived experience of the former student athletes’ encounter with academic clustering.

In terms of participant selection the researcher sought out former student athletes whose lives involved a direct relationship with academic clustering. The basis of this decision is that they would likely be most fully and authentically able to make accessible what the researcher is interested in: their experience. However, the researcher must admit a natural bias in that he was a former student athlete who was clustered. Conversely, because of his experience as a former student athlete he has fostered and maintained relationships with other former student athletes who made up the initial sample pool. Thus, the researcher utilized the method _purposeful sampling_; a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be attained as well from other sources (Maxwell, 2005). As a result the participants in this study are all former Division I student athletes who participated in football.

In order to obtain the information needed to answer the research question the method of _interviewing_ was utilized, specifically Sideman’s (1998) three step interview process. Interviews provide opportunities for participants to describe the situation in their own terms. It is a reflective process that enables the interviewee to explore his experience in detail and reveal the many features of that experience that have an effect on the issue investigated (Stringer, 2007). The researcher utilized various forms of questions such as Grand Tour questions that include: Typical questions (Describe a typical day of a Division I student athlete?) and Specific questions (Describe your interaction with professors); Guided questions (Can you tell me more about the
coaches’ philosophy regarding school work?); Task questions (Can you tell me how you selected your major?); Extension questions (Is there anything else you can tell me about your emphasis on academics?); Encouragement comments (Go on.); Example questions (Can you give me an example of how your academic advisor encouraged you not to pursue a major?) (Stringer, 2007).

Logistically, however, all the interviews were conducted by phone. All of the researcher’s contacts live outside of his immediate area, though face to face interviews would have been his first choice. Simultaneously with the interviews the researcher triangulated the data via journal articles, books, and informal conversations with athletic administrators/coaches. These multiple sources and methods may give the researcher more credibility than if his answers were from only one particular source (Maxwell, 2005).

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Academic Clustering**

Academic clustering is a phenomenon in which a large numbers of student athletes at an institution major in a particular program or department, out of proportion to other students at the college. Case, Greer and Brown (1987) defined clustering as when 25% of a given team is found in a single major.

**Academic Progress Report (APR)**

Instituted in 2004 by the Academic Performance Rate (APR) is based on a team’s ability to measure and retain eligible athletes’ semester by semester (Christy, Seifried, & Pastore, 2008). For each student athlete in the cohort group, one point is earned each semester if the student athlete remains enrolled and on the team (retention point) and one point is earned if he/she is academically eligible to compete (eligibility point). Thus, each student athlete can potentially
earn two APR points each semester for the institution by remaining in school and fulfilling the academic requirements necessary to be eligible to participate in intercollegiate athletics. To earn the eligibility point, the student athlete must meet both the NCAA progress-toward-degree requirements and any institutional policies related to athletics participation (LaForge & Hodge, 2011). According to the progress-toward-degree requirement, also known as the “40-60-80 Rule,” once student athletes declare their majors, they must have completed 40 percent of their degree-program requirements going into their third year, 60 percent going into their fourth year, and 80 percent going into their fifth year, thus, according to the NCAA, moving student athletes to graduation in five years (Meyer, 2005).

**Academic Reform**

Policies and procedures that have been implemented to decrease the frequency of academic misconduct. For example, Proposition 48 (Prop 48) which stated the 1983 NCAA Convention that, beginning in 1986, entering freshmen would be eligible for athletics grants and game competition only if their high school grade point average was at least 2.0 in a core curriculum and they had achieved a minimum 700 of the combined 1,600 points on the SAT or 15 of 36 composite points on the ACT exam (Byers & Hammer, 1995). Proposition 48 also developed the concept of "partial qualifiers," which allowed high school student athletes to receive athletic scholarships if they partially met the academic requirements. This system forbade the student athlete from competing as a freshman, but allowed him to compete during his second year if he maintained "good academic standing" and "an overall grade point average of 2.0 in twenty-four units of college work (Rosen, 2000).
**Athletic Administrator**
Anyone in a role such as athletic director, assistant athletic director that has oversight over the implementation and enforcement of policies and procedures set forth by the NCAA, affiliated conference, and institution.

**Division I**
Widely considered the highest level of NCAA affiliated amateur sports. Division I members must offer at least 14 sports (at least seven for men and seven for women, or six for men and eight for women). The institution must sponsor at least two team sports (for example, football, basketball, or volleyball) for each gender. The school also must have participating male and female teams or participants in the fall, winter, and spring seasons.

**National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)**
The NCAA is made up of three membership classifications that are known as Divisions I, II, and III. Each division creates its own rules governing personnel, amateurism, recruiting, eligibility, benefits, financial aid, and playing and practice seasons – consistent with the overall governing principles of the Association (NCAA, 2011b). NCAA rules are established by representatives of member institutions (that is, colleges and universities), and these rules are generally formed at the NCAA’s annual convention. All NCAA legislation must be voted on and adopted by all the active members. As a condition of membership, each institution is obligated to apply and enforce all the NCAA legislation as related to its own athletic programs. Among other functions, the NCAA maintains, applies, and enforces the rules of eligibility and the standards of amateurism in connection with student participation in intercollegiate athletic events.
**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is understood as an approach that involves returning to the experience in order to obtain a comprehensive description that provides the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

**Student Athlete**

Refers to a student who participates in college athletics. Initial eligibility and maintenance of eligibility varies, but amateur status must be maintained at all times.

**Chapter II. Literature Review**

**Introductory Statement**

In Division I intercollegiate athletics academic clustering is a phenomenon in which a large number of student athletes at an institution major in a particular program or department, out of proportion to other students at the college. Clustering raises a range of potential problems, including academic fraud; certain majors and classes having dubious academic requirements; and coaches and athletics academic advisors’ inappropriately influencing students' decisions on majors and classes (Steeg, Upton, Bohn, & Berkowitz, 2008).

This section utilized Machi & McEvoy’s (2009) literature review writing method as a guideline whereby creating the argument for this study. As such this literature review consists of two main sections, the body and the summation. In particular, the body focuses on the concepts of the *Argument of Discovery* and the *Argument of Advocacy*. The Argument of Discovery discusses and explains what is known about the subject in question. In other words, this researcher has developed findings that present the current state of knowledge about academic clustering. The Argument of Advocacy analyzes and critiques the knowledge gained from the
synthesis of the data produced by the discovery argument to answer the research question (Machi & McEvoy, 2009, p.61). Following the body, this paper concludes with the Summation, which consists of (a) the thesis statement, (b) the thesis analysis, and (c) the study’s implications.

**Topic Statement**

Literature regarding the experience of student athletes who have been academically clustered is minimal, but several studies regarding parts of the issue provide significant insight. Noteworthy research exists objectively on the frequency of academic clustering (Case, Greer & Brown, 1987; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Mitten, Musselman, & Burton, 2009; Sanders and Hildenbrand, 2010; Schneider, Ross, & Fisher, 2010) and noteworthy research studies exist subjectively on the student athlete experience (Adler & Adler, 1985; Beamon, 2009; Benson, 2004). As such, the existing literature has led to a progressive refinement of the scholarly community’s understanding of the phenomenon of academic clustering. However, a study that examines student athletes who have been academically clustered describing their point of view via in-depth interviews does not yet exist.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, phenomenology via interviews goes beyond what academic clustering is, but more so provides a first-hand account of the student athlete’s perspective of their particular experience. Qualitative research derives primarily from its inductive approach; it focuses on specific situations or people and it emphasizes words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 2005). Further, qualitative approaches increase awareness of particular issues within a bounded system, which provides more understanding and broadens the researchers’ and readers’ view of the world. Unlike the quantitative approach, which examines the cause and effect of a particular treatment, a qualitative approach is a lens viewing the experiences of both the researcher and the participants (Snow, Wolff, Hudspeth, & Etheridge,
Thus, qualitative research is an ideal strategy of inquiry for student athletes to have their voices represented from which to understand their experience.

The following research tools were searched utilizing various terms: JStor, ProQuest, Ebscohost, Google Scholar and Sage. The literature search included the following terms: academic clustering, student athlete academic fraud, student athlete graduation rate, academic progress report, college athletic economics, university mission, black student athlete, and student athlete exploitation. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journals with articles from the past thirty years. A further citation analysis led to other relevant sources that were included. After reviewing the abstracts of each article, more than seventy articles were chosen for review and read in their entirety. These studies were reviewed for quality and for relevance, and research that was found irrelevant was discarded. Irrelevant research included those articles that did not analyze policy or perform an empirical study. Such pieces contained mainly opinion or editorial writing, and were deemed inappropriate.

**Context Statement**

When studying the experiences of student athletes, it is important to provide the context of intercollegiate athletics and Division I. To understand the participant’s experience, it is necessary to comprehend the precise environment an athlete inhabits and competes within. Accordingly, this section briefly recounts the circumstances that surround, and perhaps have produced, academic clustering. Today we see abundant images of commercialism, professionalism, and corruption that have permeated college athletics, attracting public attention and distrust (Hill, Burch-Ragan, & Tates, 2001). Whether or not one supports the idea of high-profile intercollegiate athletics, it is difficult to deny that college sports matter greatly in the public life of the university. Football and basketball are a significant component of the overall
identity of schools that invest heavily in these activities (Toma, 1999). In addition, athletic competition may help structure a student's life and coaching may improve both physical and intellectual performance. On the other hand, the amplified emphasis on sports may hinder the student athletes to the point of negatively impacting their grades (Maloney & McCormick, 1993).

Because of this paradox between academics and athletics, college sports have been criticized for allowing commercial interests and over-emphasis on winning to undermine academic values (Meggyesy, 2000). As a consequence the victims of such ambition are the student athletes. For many the concern is that the academic preparedness for admission, seriousness toward learning, and graduation rates of many student athletes threaten academic integrity (Lumpkin, 2008). In response to these concerns the NCAA over the past thirty years has instituted various academic reform measures such as Proposition 48, Proposition 42, Proposition 16, increased SAT/ACT scores, increased GPA standards and most recently Academic Progress Report.

Not surprisingly, coaches and athletic administrators seem to have always found ways to skew the policies to produce outcomes in their favor. For example, a stipulation within the APR, the progress toward degree policy, also known as the 40-60-80 rule says that once student athletes declare their majors, they must have completed 40 percent of their degree-program requirements going into their third year, 60 percent going into their fourth year, and 80 percent going into their fifth year, thus, according to the NCAA, moving student athletes to graduation in five years (Meyer, 2005). Whereas before the progress toward degree policy a student athlete could take any combination of classes as long as he had the required number of credits to maintain eligibility.
The unintended consequence of the APR is an enhanced propensity to cluster athletes into “easy majors.” Fountain and Finley (2009) say coaches are now more apt to recruit athletes of marginal academic ability and seek easier majors, courses, and professors to ensure a reasonable graduation rate. Though clustering is not necessarily a new phenomenon it may become more prevalent in the face of the APR. The future policy makers must keep in mind that the implementation of a policy can often produce unintended consequences that conflict or undermine another goal. In this case student athletes are graduating but not necessarily receiving a meaningful education. Accordingly, the phenomenon of clustering has not gone unnoticed. The increasing commercialization of college sports has made it even more difficult for universities to reconcile the gap between college sports and the fundamental mission of higher education (Sharpe & Sheilley, 2008).

Simply put, college athletes represent a unique “nontraditional” group on a college campus. Unlike non-student athletes they are part of a complex social and political system within the university. They attend college in part to excel at the highest amateur level of their sport (Harrison & Harrison 2009). Broadly speaking, Division I student athletes face all of the challenges experienced by other students in the general population with regard to social and academic adjustment to college. College coaches expect a great deal of their players’ time to be spent on sports, with practices, travel, team meetings, and midweek game schedules. Student athletes often spend more than 40 hours a week on sport-related activities, as well as coping with the mental fatigue, physical exhaustion, and nagging injuries that afflict those who participate in college sports (Comeuax, 2011).
Argument of Discovery

The Argument of Discovery can either be built on simple arguments or complex arguments. A simple argument is a single claim, its evidence, and its warrant. However, most arguments are complex, made up of multiple simple claims becoming the evidence to warrant the claim of the major argument (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). Accordingly, this researcher has utilized multiple single claims of evidence to warrant one major claim: *the current literature on the student athlete’s experience with academic clustering has not been examined from the student athlete’s point of view via in-depth phenomenological interviews.* The following will focus on multiple research studies and commentary to date, subjectively and objectively, that directly and indirectly focus on academic clustering whereby demonstrating a gap in the literature warranting this study. The following section will examine six claims; Claim 1: Construct defined in 1987, Claim 2: Clustering more prevalent with minorities, Claim 3: Conflict between athletic culture and academic culture, Claim 4: Student athletes scrutinized by faculty, Claim 5: Coaches implicitly support academic clustering, and Claim 6: Priority to maintain eligibility of student athletes.

Claim 1: Construct Defined in 1987

The first claim is acknowledging academic clustering as a phenomenon. Academic clustering was first examined via a survey study by Case, Greer, and Brown (1987) in which they coined the term *Academic Clustering* to describe the phenomenon. Interestingly, they never intended nor had interest in studying academic clustering. The impetus for their study was that the primary researcher was told that he would be teaching in a program that caters to student athletes. As a result, they decided to conduct a research study on this seemingly unanticipated encounter. This resulted in them surveying 130 institutions to see if this phenomenon was
widespread. Operationally, they defined clustering when 25% or more student athletes were in a particular major. The researchers conducted a survey study of men’s and women’s Division I basketball teams for the year 1985-1986. Of a total of 77 men’s team that responded, 55 (71%) reflected clusters; and 27 (51%) of the 53 women’s team reflected clustering as well. Also noteworthy, they found that men tend to be clustered more than women, blacks tend to be clustered more than whites, “big-time” schools tend to cluster more than smaller size schools, and student athletes tend to be clustered into more non-science majors than science majors.

**Claim 2: Clustering More Prevalent with Minorities**

Fountain and Finely (2009) conducted a modern era survey study building off of and inspired by Case, Greer and Brown (1987). They examined race and academic clustering in a study titled *Academic Majors of Upperclassmen Football Players in the Atlantic Coast Conference: An Analysis of Academic Clustering Comparing White and Minority Players*. The Atlantic Coast Conference served as the sample pool that consists of the following schools: Boston College, Clemson, Duke, Florida State, Georgia Tech, University of Miami, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, North Carolina State, University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, and Wake Forest. They found that nearly every school in the study had minority football players clustered into a single major at a higher percentage than their white counterparts. The pattern of minorities clustering more densely into a single program held true at nine of the 11 schools. Four teams had 62% or more of their minority upperclassmen clustered into a single major. Only in one case was the percentage of white players in one major as high (69%).

Sellers (1992) conducted a survey questionnaire of former black student athletes to assess their life experience as student athletes. Participants were asked for written permission to obtain ACT/SAT scores, high school, and college transcripts. The variables used in the analyses were
college GPA, high school GPA, SAT composite score, socioeconomic status, importance of obtaining degree, hours spent studying, mother’s occupation, and years in college. Interestingly, black student athletes come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and enter college less academically prepared than their white counterparts. Differences in race also seem to influence college academic performance. Yet, black student athletes do not differ in their stated importance for getting a degree or time spent studying.

**Claim 3: Conflict Between Athletic Culture and Academic Culture**

Student athletes’ experiences can differ based on NCAA Division level. Division I student athletes might have fewer opportunities to be a part of the traditional college experience because of the demands of athletic participation at that level, including the benefits and high costs (both immediate and long term) of win-loss records, and of media attention and scrutiny. On the other hand, the focus at many Division II and III schools is different. Many Division II and III institutions pride themselves on their ability to integrate the student athlete, and athletics in general, into the college environment. The general understanding is that athletes who compete at Division II and III colleges and universities do so for the love of the sport rather than for external rewards (Watt & Moore, 2001).

Thus the term “student athlete” at Division I by itself reflects the implicit semantic intention of the NCAA and college administrators to obscure exploitative practices that profited the institutions involved while violating the fundamental tenets of higher education and human rights. The mere crafting of the term, however, has not proven sufficient to persuade the American public to either believe that scholarship athletes in big-time college sports were receiving mythical free rides and getting college educations or to overlook the hypocrisies that have been evident in big-time college sport from its beginning (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005).
Recognizing that the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics creates economic incentives for conduct that may conflict with a university’s academic mission and may potentially exploit student-athletes is the first step in understanding this competing dynamic (Mitten et al., 2009). The academic performance of college athletes, most notably in revenue-generating sports, continues to receive considerable attention from both the academic community and the media. The research focus of the academic community has included comparisons between athletes and the general student body in regard to graduation rates, academic performance, academic support services, academic entrance requirements, and academic motivation (Fountain & Finley, 2009).

Accordingly, one principal concern with the athletic culture in college sports today is that the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics creates economic incentives for conduct that may conflict with a university’s academic mission and may potentially exploit student-athletes (Mitten et al., 2009). Sharpe and Sheilly (2008) cite Eitzen (2000) as having captured the essence of the concerns: “Not only do typical athletes in big-time sports enter at an academic disadvantage; they often encounter a diluted educational experience while attending their schools. Coaches, under the intense pressure to win, tend to diminish the student side of their athletes by counseling them to take easy courses, choose easy majors, and enroll in courses given by faculty members friendly to the athletic department.” Thus the third claim is the conflict between athletic culture and academic culture of higher education. This claim is reinforced in Adler and Adler’s (1985) in-depth qualitative participant-observation study of a major college basketball program to understand the student athlete experience.

The results of the study found that the student athletes start off with high standards for themselves academically but become overwhelmed by the demands and intensity of the athletic
realm, which absorbs their concentration and commitment; athletes find themselves socially isolated from other students because of their geographic and temporal separation and their physical and cultural differences; and for many athletes, the gap between their academic abilities and the university's expectations brings failure, frustration, and alienation. The peer subculture exacerbates the situation by devaluing academic involvement and neutralizing academic failure. As a consequence the student athletes responded by gradually withdrawing from their commitment to academics.

Thelin (2008) says that intercollegiate athletics at colleges and universities is a “peculiar institution.” He further comments that intercollegiate athletics is pervasive, yet their proper balance with academics remains puzzling. This balance between academics and athletics is central to the peculiarity that Thelin speaks of. The academic responsibilities may be nothing like athletes expected, yet their academic accomplishments or lack thereof will become a matter of public record via graduation reports (Meyer, 2005).

Furthermore, Thelin’s sentiment is reinforced in Beamon’s (2008) in-depth qualitative participant-observation study of former student athletes. Many of the participants stated that any reference to education was directly related to eligibility. Most (14 of 20) of the respondents actually employed phrases with the word "used" such as "used up," "used goods," and "used and abused" to describe the manner in which they felt they were treated by universities. Several respondents (9 of 20) mentioned these types of constraints limited their choices for majors. Additionally, most (15 of 20) mentioned choosing majors with courses classified as "easy to pass" or departments that were "athlete-friendly." For these reasons and to remain eligible to play their sport, student athletes often selected more pragmatic educational goals.
An ethnographic study of former college football players by Krystal Benson (2000) found that the marginal academic performance of these football players was a phenomenon created by a series of interrelated practices engaged in by all significant members of the institution including peers, coaches, advisors, professors, and the student athletes themselves. From the very beginning of their academic careers in recruitment, orientation, and their first year and continuing throughout their college years, these football players received implicit and/or explicit messages that school was not important, that they were not considered intellectually capable students, were not expected to do well in school, and were not cared about as individual student learners.

Of course, a principal criticism of “big-time” college sports is precisely that schools select athletes mainly for their athletic, not academic, interests and abilities, and that once on campus they are de facto regarded primarily as “athlete students” rather than “student athletes” (Eckard, 2010). These problems make us focus on the paradox of college athletics that it is supposed to be an academic or educational enterprise on the one hand and that it is clearly a multibillion-dollar entertainment business on the other (Lawry, 2005).

**Claim 4: Student Athletes Scrutinized by Faculty**

Culture sets the normative context for groups and individuals, and indicates which rewards the organization deems important and which kinds of work will be rewarded (Dee & Bess, 2008). Therefore, culture can also be potentially divisive. If routine patterns of behavior within one group are considered normal, different activities performed by another subgroup may be judged as abnormal (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). For example, faculty and administrators who have had the courage to blow the whistle on academic fraud within athletics departments have frequently paid a heavy price for their attempts to protect and preserve their institutions’
integrity. Former University of Tennessee English Professor Linda Bensel-Myers incurred substantial personal and professional costs when she blew the whistle on a massive cheating scam there. Subsequently, she endured constant harassment by administrators, faculty, students, boosters, and coaches. She fought this harassment for years but eventually fled to the University of Denver. The experience led her to become heavily involved in the national college sports reform movement (Benford, 2007).

Interestingly, one pressure facing college athletes on a college campus relates to the negative stereotypes that faculty, traditional students, and administrative personnel have about them. Compared to traditional students, college athletes were rated more negatively by faculty and other students when they were presented as driving an expensive car, receiving a scholarship and special advising/tutoring, being admitted to the university despite low test scores, and missing class (Harrison & Harriosn 2009). Not surprisingly these student athletes are in fact aware of such culture clashes bringing about the fourth claim, the role of faculty. In a study conducted by Benson (2000) she asked a group of student athletes to describe their perception of their professors’ attitudes toward them as student athletes. She noted them saying that many teachers just didn't care enough about their learning to actually teach them the course material. They described experiences with teachers whom they did not understand, who did not appear to have the time to teach material so that they understood it, and who did not appear to be available to help them when they were struggling to learn. Conversely, Martin, Harrison, Stone and Lawrence (2010) conducted a phenomenological study to explore the academic experiences of African American student athletes who were academically high achievers in which they note their experience with professors. In contrast to Benson’s (2000) study, participants spoke highly of their relationships with professors and appreciated the ambitions of their non-athlete peers;
however, participants consistently noted that they had a point to prove and the need to show their
professors and fellow classmates (non-athletes) that they were worthy of being students at
prestigious universities.

Claim 5: Coaches Implicitly Support Academic Clustering

College athletics have occasionally failed to fulfill their obligation of providing genuine
educational opportunities to student athletes. Critics and reform minded analysts argue that these
foibles go beyond occasional oversights and are, rather, evidence of a corrupted system that
threatens the academic integrity of higher education (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004). Like
the student athlete, college coaches face tremendous pressure to win, especially because of the
big business mentality that consumes revenue-generating college sports. This win-at-all-costs
attitude places coaches and athletes in a difficult situation. Coaches must win, but doing so may
compromise their institution’s academic standards. The athlete, on the other hand, may possess
unparalleled athletic talent and may receive an athletic scholarship regardless of educational
ability or the desire to excel (Rosen, 2000).

In a study conducted by Purdy, Eitzen, and Hufnagel (1982) they examined college
athletes over a ten-year period in one major university and two major themes emerged: (1)
Student athletes "owe" their coaches their undivided attention because these coaches are paying
the bills. This creates a role conflict for student athletes, with the student role often being
neglected or de-emphasized. Second, full-scholarship athletes are likely to be the best athletes.
Thus, they may overemphasize their sport at the expense of academic pursuits. (2) Because of
the revenue-producing potential of football and basketball, the pressures are intense to win. This
means that coaches in these sports are likely to be excessive in their demands on the time of their
athletes during and between sessions. The serious and far-ranging financial consequences of
"big-time" sports also increase the likelihood that coaches will recruit exceptional athletes who are unqualified for the academic demands of college. To the degree that this occurs, coaches are then faced with keeping these marginal students eligible.

Fountain and Finely (2009) state that coaches can adopt one of three paradigms: First, recruit athletes who are truly and completely prepared for the academic rigors of the university. Second, they can increase expectations of players and provide academic services for the players of marginal academic pedigree. Or, third, they can recruit athletes of marginal academic ability and seek easier majors, courses, and professors to ensure a reasonable graduation rate. They state that exercising the third option could lead to an increase in academic clustering of athletes. Comeux (2009) cites Adler & Adler, (1985) stating that coaches who view students as athletes first also feel enormous pressure to win, and as such they tend to devalue the academic role, counseling their students to take less demanding courses, to choose majors held in low repute, and to take courses with selected faculty who are “student athlete friendly” or who are willing to give the Division I student athlete “special” considerations in the classroom.

Unmistakably, Christy, Seifried, and Pastore (2008) substantiate claims that coaches might be inclined to academically cluster their student athletes. They administered an online survey of 127 individuals consisting of coaches, athletic directors, and athletic administrators from institutions from the major football conferences Big East, Big Ten, PAC Ten, SEC, ACC, and Big Twelve Conferences. Three major themes emerged. First, the APR will cause head coaches and athletics departments to take a closer look at the type of student athlete being admitted. Second head coaches will be held more accountable for the academic success of student athletes and this, in turn, will have a positive impact on graduation rates. And third, the APR will lead to an increase in “academic fraud,” creating an environment of “watered down”
curriculum so the student athlete will be able to “succeed” in the classroom and encouraging “easier” academic courses to ensure APR success.

**Claim 6: Priority to Maintain Eligibility of Student Athletes**

Academic support services for student athletes dates back to the 1970s when programs consisted of one or two individuals whose job was to keep student athletes eligible for competition (Gatson-Gayles, 2003). Athletic academic advising of college student athletes at many institutions continues to focus only on maintaining academic eligibility and graduation rates rather than on enhancing the academic, personal, and athletic development of the student athlete. It is clear however, that this concentration on academic advising does not sufficiently meet the needs of student athletes (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Offices of academic services for athletes have come to take enormous control of the athlete’s curricular life and study habits. Savvy advisors from the athletics departments know which academic program is easiest to major in, which courses to avoid and take, and which professors are sympathetic and unsympathetic to athletes. (A corollary phenomenon that has arisen on campuses is the faculty member who prejudges athletes as “dumb jocks” and/or unmotivated and often makes course completion and grade achievement unfairly difficult for athletes) (Lawry, 2005).

Conversely, Gatson-Gayles (2003) conducted a phenomenological study of directors of student athlete support services seeking the factors that contribute to a successful academic service office. Directors of student support services at private institutions, as well as some from the smaller state institutions, expressed that institutional size played an important role in the success of their academic support program. Staffs at academic support programs at smaller institutions are able to work more closely with students than can those from large state institutions. Small class sizes allow for increased interaction between faculty members and
students, a point illustrated in the following comments from the director at a private institution. However, as one participant noted, admissions plays a crucial role in academic advisors’ their overall success to educate and graduate the student athletes;

“The problem in college athletics today is there’s a mentality out there that if you put enough money into academic support and enough staff people, tutors, and learning specialists you can bring any kind of student into an institution of higher learning and make them successful. We don’t believe that’s the case. We just feel like if you don’t bring quality students into a quality institution then you’re going to have problems. Certain students would graduate, but the majority probably would not (Gatson-Gayles, 2003, p. 54).”

**Argument of Advocacy**

Machi and McEvoy (2009) state that projects such as doctoral dissertations demand extending topic knowledge beyond what is known by uncovering a question for original study, a research problem. Researchers must ask more questions: What are the gaps, contradictions, omissions, and debates about the research subject surfaced by the discovery argument?” Accordingly, this researcher has outlined and critiqued the previous claims made in the Argument of Discovery section warranting the main claim therefore justifying this study.

The first claim noting the existence of academic clustering by Case, Greer and Brown (1987) though groundbreaking, does not offer a voice of the student athlete regarding their experience of being clustered. Their study essentially leaves the reader to their own conclusions in regards to if the student athlete received a meaningful education, if student athletes were steered into a major, and even why clustering occurred. But what their study did, without fear of denial, is begin the conversation. As stated previously they found that men tend to be clustered
more than women, blacks tend to be clustered more than whites, “big-time” schools tend to cluster more than smaller size schools, and student athletes tend to be clustered into more non-science majors than science majors. Conversely, this study is student athlete centered. In other words, seeking out an athlete’s total experience pre-college, during college, and a post-college reflection of what they would have done differently knowing what they know now.

The second claim where Case and colleagues (1987) stumbled upon race, Fountain and Finley’s (2009) follow-up study sought it out. By all accounts Fountain and Finley’s study points to the fact that even twenty-two years later academic clustering and the intersection of race is still a noteworthy phenomenon. Thus it would be imprudent for higher education administrators and the scholarly community concerned with clustering to dismiss the reoccurrence of race and clustering. Nevertheless, the gap still remains as to how the student athletes themselves interpret, feel, and are impacted by clustering. This study from the outset acknowledges that clustering is a concern, but a concern that needs to be reinforced with the student athlete’s voice involved in the discussion.

The third claim regarding the conflict of interest between academics and athletics is highlighted in Adler and Adler’s (1985) qualitative ethnographic study of the student athlete experience which is the first of its kind. In other words there has not been any scholarly attempt to capture the essence of the student athlete’s perspective qualitatively prior to this study. Their study demonstrates that by engaging the student athlete, meaningful dialogue can be extracted to better understand their experience. Though this study did not mention the phrase academic clustering, certain themes emerged from quotes that demonstrate where the application of clustering could manifest. For example, one participant said:
“In college the coaches be a lot more concerned on winning and the money comin' in. If they don't win, they may get the boot, and so they pass that pressure onto us athletes. I go to bed every night and I be thinkin' 'bout basketball. That's what college athletics do to you. It takes over you mind.”

For the same reasons, to extract the student athlete’s point of view, this study follows suit with Adler and Adler, but hones in on the experience of being clustered. Adler and Adler’s (1985) study did not delve into the issue of clustering. This researcher has used a similar in-depth interviewing structure but adapted it to focus on the phenomenon of academic clustering.

The fourth claim regarding the role of faculty proves quite interesting. The caveat that is often overlooked is that professors and academic departments should be the ultimate guardians of academic integrity. Conversely, it appears that a number of professors and/or academic departments may have compromised their bestowed upon commitment of academic integrity for the sake of athletics. The question that arises is, why? Were these professors approached by athletic department staff and given special benefits (sideline game passes, travel with team, etc.) for leniency in grades/curriculum demands? Are these professors star struck fans that desire a relationship with these “rock star” student athletes? Or are these professors influenced to assist athletics by senior university administrative staff or alumni.? Whatever the reason or reasons, academic clustering likely could not exist to the extent that it does without the aid of professors.

Thus, the advantages of Benson (2000) and Martin, Harrison, Stone, and Lawrence (2010) studies are encapsulated within a perspective built upon the student athlete’s voice. In this instance, the message being transmitted is that professors, despite their stance toward athletics and in particular student athletes, are important in shaping the cognitive perceptions student athletes have about themselves and their academics. What this study attempted do is expand
upon these themes in three particular ways. First, it illustrated the perceived attitudes of “athletic friendly” professors. Second, it offered insight as to whether clustered student athletes feel that they are being pushed through by professors, thus resulting in a disillusioned attitude toward academics. And finally it illustrated that the student athletes were indeed appreciative of professors who are “athletic friendly.”

In regards to the fifth claim, the role of coaches and revenue, it should be noted that from a historical point of view since the 1950s televised football has become an important aspect of American culture, attracting significant audiences. More recently, the annual men’s NCAA Final Four basketball tournament every March has also become a highlight of the sports calendar, approaching baseball’s World Series in popularity (Schroeder, 2010). Last year, nearly fourteen million prime-time TV viewers watched the University of North Carolina Tar Heels win the men’s championship and nearly three million watched the University of Connecticut Huskies take home the women’s title. The audience is even larger when factoring in Internet viewership; it’s up 147 percent from 2007 to 2008 (Hesel & Perko, 2010). It also goes without saying that this enormous popularity of men’s basketball has led to huge potential revenue opportunity. For instance, CBS agreed to pay the NCAA $6 billion from 2002 through 2013 to broadcast its men’s basketball tournament (Mitten et al., 2009). A May 2009 Congressional Budget Office (CBO) paper titled “Tax Preferences for Collegiate Sports” states that the 2008 NCAA men’s basketball tournament generated approximately $143 million in revenue for college athletics departments (CBO 2009). The CBO paper includes data showing that the 2004–05 fiscal year average athletic program revenues for universities with Division I football and men’s basketball teams was $35.2 million.
As a result of such revenue coaches are able to demand enormous salaries. Coaches’ compensation packages not only include substantial base salaries, typically the highest in the university, but also revenues from summer camps, media shows, and shoe and apparel contracts (Benford, 2007). For example, in 2006 the median salary for basketball head coaches was $611,900 a 15% increase from the 2004 median; for football head coaches it was $855,500 a 47% increase from the 2004 median (Mitten et al., 2009). Because substantial compensation is provided to a coach in return for a winning record this presents an inherent conflict of interest for coaches, choosing between academics and athletics.

While the goal of academic reform such APR is to restore the balance of academics and athletics, the means utilized by schools to avoid loss of scholarship could prove to be dubious. Given that coaches certainly do not want to face scholarship reductions due to a low APR, they will be faced with several options for maintaining or increasing graduation rates (Sharp & Sheilley, 2008). These sentiments regarding coaches provided sufficient contextual information for this study, as the experience of being academically clustered by the participants likely will have been influenced by coaches and/or administration. However, without conducting such a study, the scholarly community will be left only to theoretical speculation regarding the experience student athletes have with their coaches.

For example, according to Sanders and Hildenbrand (2010) there are two predominant theoretical explanations of why clustering occurs: a selection hypothesis and structure hypothesis. The selection hypothesis holds that participation in college athletics is selective of a unique population of students. According to this view, student athletes begin college more disposed than non-athletes toward a unique set of academic majors—namely, those majors that are perceived to best facilitate successful participation in college athletics. Lesser college
preparation on the part of athletes may make them less inclined than non-athletes to consider academia's more challenging majors. Whereas the structure hypothesis argues that clustering stems from the experience of college athletics itself. According to this view, participation in college athletics places athletes into environments that pressure them to choose academic majors that are most compatible with fulfillment of the student athlete role. Thus, according to this second view, external influences are most accountable for athlete clustering.

Sanders and Hildenbrand’s view is of particular importance because it essentially says that regardless of hypothesis, selection, or structure, the student athlete chooses to be clustered. This current study helps substantiate these claims by examining the process in which a clustered student athlete becomes clustered.

The sixth claim regarding the role of academic support services and advisors is looked upon more now than ever, and they receive enormous amount of pressure if APR cut-off scores are not maintained or increased. There will be an objective accountability for academics personnel with dismissals or demotions from athletics department personnel to help get the program back in compliance. Coaches also will desire to be actively involved in selecting academic personnel that work with their specific program (Satterfield, Croft, Godfrey & Flint, 2010). This balancing act of ensuring the eligibility of each student athlete and the morality of not forcing them to choose a major against their will presents a peculiar dilemma. Again, this peculiar dilemma has not been studied as of yet and could close a gap in the literature. Though Gatson-Gayles (2009) conducted a phenomenological study of directors of student athlete support services seeking the factors that contribute to a successful academic service office, the question still remains, what is the student athlete’s perspective? This researcher used the same in depth phenomenological method but applied it to student athletes.
Given the evidence presented thus far a reasonable conclusion based on the research question asked, “What is the lived experience of former Division I student athletes who have been academically clustered?” and further substantiated by the literature review demonstrates that there is a gap of knowledge. This gap of knowledge in accordance with Machi and McEvoy (2009) is presented here as the thesis statement, which warrants this study as original research.

**Analysis and Interpretation and Explanation of the Thesis**

The purpose of this literature review was to create the argument for conducting this research study. The literature review included knowledge that helped frame this research study ranging from: previous qualitative and quantitative studies conducted and various commentaries about clustering. In addition the literature review shed light as to how this study attempted to fill the gap in the literature given what is known and more so what is not known.

The claims that emerged about academic clustering were organized into two sections: Argument of Discovery and Argument of Advocacy. The first section, Argument of Discovery was organized into six single claims– Claim 1: Construct defined in 1987, Claim 2: Clustering more prevalent with minorities, Claim 3: Conflict between athletic culture and academic culture, Claim 4: Student athletes scrutinized by faculty, Claim 5: Coaches implicitly support academic clustering, and Claim 6: Priority to maintain eligibility of student athletes. These single claims provided the building block for the primary goal, to justify this study, which was the focus of the Argument of Advocacy section. Emergent from each of the six claims were themes that further explained key ideas of the thesis, provided further definition of those ideas, and explored the thesis from various perspectives.

Foremost among all identified claims whether implicitly or explicitly stated is that academic clustering is one of the many symptoms of revenue-generating Division I
intercollegiate athletics. Each claim identified various reasons for the dichotomy of athletics and academics, and the impact it has on the institution of higher education and on the student athletes. For example, Adler and Adler’s (1985) study focused on the structure of “big-time” athletics, which they attributed to the compromise of academics. They note that due to the athletic demands placed on student athletes by coaches, administrators, and boosters, they wholly deny student athletes a legitimate opportunity to succeed in the classroom. Moreover, these claims are important because they highlight a structural deficiency that often goes unnoticed in college athletics. Many times we hear of academic fraud or academic scandal and perceive it to be an isolated incident, but rarely do we frame it or acknowledge it as a continuous structural practice.

These claims also extend the knowledge of academic clustering more broadly. For example, Sharp and Sheilley (2008) proposed a holistic approach to remedying this clustering by ensuring that it must start with having the right people in administration, faculty, and coaching in place who value education. They also recommend placing academic services back in the jurisdiction of the university, rather than remaining housed in athletics.

The overarching connection within all six claims is that the education of the student athlete is being compromised implicitly or explicitly by one or more actors (coaches, athletic directors, faculty, academic advisors, and the student athlete). As a result the overwhelming conclusion each claim hints towards is that the commercialization of Division I intercollegiate athletics brings forth the inherent conflict of interest when revenue becomes the premium. For example, Fountain, and Finely (2009) cite former Texas A&M football coach, R.C. Slocum, who after being fired, complained that he was at a competitive disadvantage because his players did not have a general studies program like players at the rest of the schools in the Big Twelve
conference. The underlying assumption is that if his players had a general studies program, which is presumably less academically challenging than “mainstream” courses, more of his players could have enrolled in it, leading to more wins and therefore allowing him to keep his job. This underlying assumption can be viewed as indicative of many Division I revenue-producing sports programs and the hypocritical tone the institutions of higher education have adopted.

This dichotomous notion can also be seen as two clashing subcultures between academics and athletics. A subculture is the culture of a subsystem within a larger system. Subcultures often overlap with surrounding substructures in an organization (Bess & Dee, 2008). Kuh and Whitt (1988) state that culture exhibits one or more of the following properties: 1. Observed behavioral regularities; 2. Norms or specific guides to conduct, some of which are more salient than others; 3. Dominant values espoused by the organization; 4. The philosophy that guides an organization’s attitudes and actions toward employees or clients; 5. Rules for getting along in the organization; and 6. The feeling or organizational climate and the manner in which members of the culture interact with those outside the culture. Some find the essence of culture to be the implicit assumptions and beliefs that influence the way a group of people think and behave. These guiding assumptions and beliefs, which are below the surface of conscious thought, are manifested into observable forms or artifacts (Kuh & Whitt, 2008). One particular observable fact is when institutions admit young men and women based on their athletic rather than their academic potential, and then expect them to perform as both athletes and students. In high profile sports such as football and men’s basketball, this is a particular problem.

Finally, all this leads to one important perspective: the student athlete’s. In all of the articles and journals, it is rare to have a student athlete openly acknowledge that the system is
awry. This perspective would provide a glimpse into the unspoken truth of Division I athletics. Though it is well known that academic clustering is a phenomenon, to have student athletes substantiate the reasons why it happens, how it happens, and who orchestrates the system would prove quite groundbreaking. For instance, student athletes could shed light on why they chose a specific major, how academics are discussed behind the locker room doors, or if they feel coaches are not concerned with academics outside of eligibility.

**Practical Impact of the Study**

This phenomenological study of the student athlete’s experience of being academically clustered has led to greater insight and appreciation for some of the challenges Division I student athletes’ face. This qualitative study provided the student athletes a voice regarding their experience and highlights the need for continued research in this particular subject. The prospective to extend this area of research subsists in numerous meaningful ways: understanding the expectations placed on student athletes, the academic choices student athletes have to make, and the student athlete experience as a whole.

The implications of the findings in this research project are applicable to multiple constituencies throughout athletic departments and universities as well. According to the NCAA (2010b), its core purpose is to govern competition in a fair, safe, equitable, and sportsmanlike manner, and to integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student athlete is paramount. Ultimately, the integrity of college sports must start at its stated purpose: education of the participants. The dearth of integrity in college sports has unfortunately also started at the premise of education (Ridpath, 2008). If education is thus paramount and the central mission of college, then leadership—presidents, athletic directors,
coaches, and faculty—must place the best interest of the student athlete first, not institutional prestige, championship games, bowl games, and ultimately revenue.

Myles Brand, former president of the NCAA noted, “When you have extreme clustering you really do have to ask some hard questions: Is there an advisor who's pushing students into this? Are there some faculty members who are too friendly with student-athletes? I'm not saying that's the case. But I think you have to ask those questions.” Those questions, Brand and others say, should be asked by professors and administrators on individual campuses, since questions about curriculums and course quality at a given college or university are the purview not of the NCAA, but of the faculty there (Lederman, 2010).

This study may prompt college administrators, athletic advisors, faculty, and coaches to ask themselves: Are student athletes becoming independent, self-directed, and leaving college with a meaningful education? If they cannot answer in the affirmative, there perhaps rests the disconnect to the fulfillment of the educational mission of college, as well as the conscious awareness of exploiting the student athlete in the best interest of the university, which is not necessarily the best interest of the student athlete.
Chapter III. Research Design

This doctoral thesis pursued a phenomenological study into the lived experience of former Division I student athletes. The chosen former student athletes were asked to describe their academic experience, specifically academic clustering at their respective institution. However, to focus solely on the method of this research without a discussion of its background and development would be a great injustice. In fact, the researcher has outlined the difference between qualitative and quantitative research, the history and development of phenomenology, his decision on the specific method of phenomenology, and his history with academic clustering.

Qualitative Paradigm

The researcher’s methodology utilized a qualitative approach. Qualitative research derives primarily from its inductive approach; it focuses on specific situations or people and its emphasis on words rather than on numbers (Maxwell, 2005). Further, qualitative approaches increase awareness of particular issues within a bounded system, which provides more understanding and broadens the researcher’s and readers’ view of the world. Unlike the quantitative approach, which examines the cause and effect of a particular treatment, a qualitative approach is a lens through which the experiences of both the researcher and the participants are viewed (Snow, Wolff, Hudspeth, & Etheridge, 2009).

Utilizing a qualitative approach via interviews goes beyond what clustering is, but more so why it occurs, who it affects, how it affects the student athletes and how various elements create a particular situation. The researcher is not merely concerned with physical events and behaviors taking place, but understanding the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their perceptions. Thus, qualitative research was an
ideal strategy of inquiry for student athletes to have their voices represented and for the student athletes to lead the researcher on an intellectual journey of discovery.

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants’ setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher interpreting the meaning of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009). Maxwell (2005) indicates five particular goals for which qualitative studies are especially suited:

1. Understanding the Meaning for participants—the event, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved with or engage in. Meaning is used in a broad sense, including cognition, affect, intentions, and perspective.

2. Understanding the Context within which the participants act and the influence that this context has on their actions.

3. Identifying the Unanticipated phenomena and influences and generating new grounded theories about the latter.

4. Understanding the Process by which events and actions take place. Getting to the processes that lead to the particular outcome.

5. Developing Causal explanations of the traditional view that only quantitative methods can be used to credibly draw causal conclusions has been disputed.

Accordingly, the question arises, when is it suitable to use qualitative research? According to Creswell (2007) qualitative research is conducted because a problem or issue needs to be explored. Creswell (2007) further states that qualitative research is conducted because a detailed understanding is needed and this can only be accomplished by talking directly to people and
allowing them to tell their stories. It is conducted as a means to empower individuals to share their stories, and hear their voices. It is conducted when the researcher wants to write in a literary, flexible style that conveys stories. It is conducted because the researcher wants to understand the context and settings in which participants in a study are situated. It is conducted to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist. And it is conducted when quantitative measures and statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem.

In contrast, Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that many quantitative researchers are apt to dismiss qualitative studies completely as giving no valid findings, but rather representing a little better than journalistic accounts. Quantitative researchers tend to be interested in whether and to what extent variance in x causes variance in y (Maxwell, 2005). Creswell (2009) describes quantitative research as a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically by instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures.

**Phenomenology**

What is called phenomenology is not a rigid school or uniform philosophic discipline with an undisputed set of dogmas. Rather there is a great diversity in various points of view of thinkers and approaches who and which could be classified under the general rubric of phenomenology. Consequently, as a philosophical movement, phenomenology is marked by a variety of different forms, themes, ideas, problems, and issues and further developments and variations (Küpers, 2009). Yet, phenomenology is understood as an approach that involves returning to the experience in order to obtain a comprehensive description that provides the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The word phenomenology is derived from the Greek meaning “to bring into the light” and the
current definition encourages an approach that looks beyond initial appearances (Pringle, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). Its primary position is that the most basic human truths are accessible only through inner subjectivity, and that the person is integral to the environment. Phenomenological research is thus inductive and descriptive. Phenomenology is a disciplined, rigorous effort to understand experience profoundly and authentically. In this effort, phenomenology becomes quite complex. Further, it is hardly monolithic; there is a wide range of phenomenological methodologies and themes. For example, several scholars emphasize the hermeneutical or interpretative aspect of phenomenological inquiry; others strive to honor a philosophical tradition of phenomenology; still others work in the space between phenomenology and post structuralism (Pinar & Reynolds, 1992). Simply put, a researcher utilizing phenomenology aims to understand the cognitive subjective perspective of the person who has the experience and the effect that perspective has on the lived experience (Flood, 2010).

According to Kockleman (1967) the term phenomenology was used as early as 1765 in philosophical writings. Spielberg (1982) notes that phenomenology was first documented in the 1764 book *Neues Organon oder Gedanken über die Erforschung und Bezeichnung des Wahren und der Unterscheidung von Irrtum und Schein* by Johann Heinrich Lambert. Further, Spielburg (1982) notes that for Lambert phenomenology was a theory of illusion and of its varieties, forming in this role the concluding fourth part of a study of the means for finding the truth.

Since the mid-1700s phenomenology has typically fallen into two major paradigms, that of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Husserl’s philosophical ideas (Transcendental) gave rise to the descriptive phenomenological approach to enquiry (Flood, 2010). In contrast, Heidegger suggested that rather than focus on people or phenomena, the exploration of the lived
experience or “dasein,” the situated meaning of a human in the world should be the focus (Hermeneutic) (Flood, 2010).

Pinar and Reynolds (1992) note Van Manen’s (1984) four "procedural activities" to guide a phenomenological exploration. First, the phenomenological investigator chooses a phenomenon that interests him or her in a serious way and simultaneously pulls him or her into the world. Authentic phenomenological research is not narcissistic nor is it idealistic in the classical philosophical sense. Serious phenomenological research attunes and pulls the investigator and the student more deeply into the world. Second, the phenomenological researcher investigates the identified phenomenon as it is lived, not merely as it is theorized. Third, the phenomenological researcher reflects upon the essential themes or structures that characterize the phenomenon. Finally, the researcher describes the phenomenon via the art of writing.

**Edmund Husserl – Transcendental Phenomenology**

The philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered the founding father of phenomenology, but others who have also used and substantially contributed to phenomenological ideas include Heidegger, Sartre, Schütz, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Berger and Luckmann, Ricoeur, Garfinkel, Bourdieu, Derrida, Giddens, and Habermas. The different phenomenological routes they have taken suggest that it is practically futile to attempt to identify one single doctrine in phenomenology; rather, it is better to see it as a movement united by a common core (Aspers, 2009).

Nonetheless, Husserl, in response to his disillusionment with natural science as a means of studying human experiences, developed transcendental phenomenology. He saw phenomenology as a foundational science underlying all of the sciences and sought to clarify,
through the use of critical reflection (i.e., rationality) and description, the foundation and constitution of knowledge in consciousness (Hein & Austin, 2001). He contended that knowledge stems from conscious awareness and that the mind is directed toward objects (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009a). For Husserl, the aim of phenomenology is the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear in order to arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience (Dowling, 2007).

Indeed, when Husserl insists that phenomenology, the science of the personalistic attitude, is a “rigorous science,” he is intent on carrying over this rigor from the natural sciences, but with a fundamentally different sense of rigor. What makes the natural sciences rigorous is that they are exact and produce repeatable results under reproducible conditions and what they ascertain is laws of nature. However, their results pertain to factual entities in nature (plants, animals), and the laws they formulate are laws with respect to factually existing entities. The laws can only be formulated on the basis of things existing in nature (Luft, 2005). Phenomenological rigor on the other hand was one of Husserl’s central goals, which was to provide a method for doing phenomenology and the centerpiece of his method involved “bracketing,” “epoche,” or “phenomenological reduction.” The goals of the aforementioned methods were to provide a way to turn our attention from naïve absorption in the perceived world to enable us to study intentionality, our ways of representing the world in our conscious mental states (Thomasson, 2007).

Husserl asserted that to generate valid data it was first necessary for the researcher to put aside any presuppositions that he/she might have in relation to the question. He termed this epoche, but the concept is also referred to as “bracketing” or “reduction.” What resulted was information that was fundamentally epistemological in nature. It provided a description of the
experience, but made no attempt to derive meaning from the incident. Famous for saying “back to the things themselves,” Husserl endeavored to present findings that were pre-reflective, prior to it being categorized (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009a). Conversely, phenomenological epoche does not eliminate everything, does not deny the reality of everything, and does not doubt everything, it doubts only the natural attitude, the biases of everyday knowledge, as a basis for truth and reality. What is doubted are the scientific “facts,” the knowing of things in advance, from an external base rather than from internal reflection and meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Yet, Moustakas (1994) does acknowledge that perfect epoche is rarely achieved. He states that some entities are simply not “bracketable.” There are life experiences that are so severe, intense, and so ingrained in us that they cannot be reached. However, he is hopeful that epoche will offer a resource and process for the actual nature and essence of things to be disclosed more fully, allowing things to reveal themselves to us in knowledge and truth (Moustakas, 1994).

**Martin Heidegger – Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) developed another phenomenological approach known as hermeneutics meaning interpretation. It differs from Husserlian phenomenology, in that the researchers bring their own understanding and experiences to the research process, whereas the former advocates “bracketing” (Mapp, 2008). Heidegger embarked on a phenomenology of human being, or, as he called it, dasein, a term denoting the essential nature of the human being, which includes the ability to inquire into the nature and possibilities of Being. In Heidegger’s thinking a person exists as a being both in and of the world. Heidegger asserted that nothing can be encountered without reference to a person’s background and pre-understanding, and that we cannot have a life in the world except through acts of interpretation (Tan, Wilson, & Oliver,
In other words, he differs from Husserl in his views of how the lived experience is explored, and he advocates the utilization of hermeneutics as a research method founded on the ontological view that the lived experience is an interpretive process (Dowling, 2007).

Heidegger, a student of Husserl, challenged bracketing, by suggesting that the researcher is as much a part of the research as the participant, and that his or her ability to interpret the data was reliant on previous knowledge. Heidegger called this prior understanding *fore-structure*. He postulated that there is no such thing as interpretive research, free of the judgment or influence of the researcher (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009b). This challenge can be traced back to a dispute between Husserl and Heidegger over Husserl’s *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on phenomenology. Heidegger's message was simple: “Understanding is never without presuppositions. We do not, and cannot, understand anything from a purely objective position; we always understand from within the context of our disposition and involvement in the world” (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009b).

**Transcendental or Hermeneutic**

As demonstrated in the literature review, there is plenty of information regarding academic improprieties, scandals, and academic clustering; yet absent in the literature are the voices of the student athletes’ perceptions of the phenomenon of clustering. Scholarly investigation is needed and through investigations the divide between athletics and academics can perhaps be bridged. As such, Heidegger’s method of hermeneutic phenomenology offers a framework that supports promoting the student athlete’s voice because it is descriptive in nature. Moreover, the application of Heidegger’s phenomenology is a means to investigate the lived experience of others while also incorporating the researcher’s pre-understanding to add richness to overall investigation. Pre-understanding is not something a person can step outside of or put
aside, as it is understood as already being with us in the world. Heidegger went as far as to claim that nothing can be encountered without reference to understanding a person’s background (Laverty, 2003).

In contrast, Husserl’s method of transcendental phenomenology, though descriptive, does not place context around the experience. The aim of this study was to examine the lived experience, which allowed the researcher to bring forth his personal experience with academic clustering. It also allowed him to build instant rapport and credibility with participants, enabling him to pose and ask questions that might otherwise not have been asked. And it allowed him to interpret and comprehend the responses of participants not just at face value but connect it to deeper meanings within the culture of intercollegiate Division I athletics. This personal insight of the researcher undoubtedly added richness to the overall study without compromising the integrity of the participant’s descriptions.

Accordingly, Creswell (2009) states that in qualitative research the researcher’s role is typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with the participants. As such, this introduces a range of strategic, ethical, and personal issues into the qualitative research process. Further, the inquirer should explicitly identify their biases, values, and personal background that may shape the interpretation of the study. As necessary in hermeneutic phenomenology the researcher has disclosed his relationship with academic clustering in the previous chapter.

**Participants**

The term “sampling” in qualitative research is problematic for some because it implies the purpose of representing the population sampled. Research methods texts typically recognize only two main types of sampling, probability sampling and convenience sampling. In probability sampling each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected, which some
consider “the highest form of quality research,” whereas any other form is a non-probability sampling, or in other words a convenience sample (Maxwell, 2005).

The researcher drew from his network of former student athletes to determine if they met the criteria of being a clustered student athlete (See Table 1). In doing so, before the researcher conducted his formal interviews, he conducted pre-interviews to determine their relationship with academic clustering. The sampling for this study is then purposeful sampling, meaning that all participants met a specific criteria. Creswell (1998) recommends that an adequate sample size should be at least three individuals but no more than ten individuals, which the researcher adhered to. The specific number of participants was based on when saturation of information is reached as described by Seidman (1998). The researcher found participants who fit the following criteria as reflected in Table 1:

Table 1.
Criteria for Selecting Participants

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<tr>
<td>Former Division I student athlete</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participated on a football or men’s basketball team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received a full athletic scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirms that he was a part of a cluster</td>
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Further, each participant had first-hand experience with clustering; were interested in understanding the implicit and explicit impact of clustering; willing to participate in one-on-one interviews with the researcher; allowed the researcher to tape-record all interviews; and agreed that the data can be published as long as their identity is not revealed.
Data Collection Procedures

In order to obtain the information needed to answer the research question, interviewing was utilized. Interviews provided opportunities for participants to describe the situation in their own terms. It was a reflective process that enabled the interviewees to explore their experience in detail and reveal the many features of that experience that have an effect on the issue investigated (Stringer, 2007). Typically, qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses. The participant’s perspectives on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Specifically, the researcher utilized Seidman’s (1998) “three interview series” that is designed for phenomenological studies. This method calls for having three separate interviews. The first interview established the context of the participants’ experience. The second allowed the participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurred. And the third encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. The scheduling goal was to adhere to Seideman’s (1998) suggestion of spacing the interviews between three and five days apart. This spacing allows time for the participants to ponder the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two (Seidman, 1998). Further, the researcher adhered to the suggested length of 90 minutes.
Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis is not about mere counting or providing numeric summaries. Instead, the objective is to discover variation, portray shades of meaning, and examine complexity. The goals of the analysis are to reflect the complexity of human interaction by portraying it in the words of the interviewees and through actual events and to make that complexity understandable to others (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Thus, the impulse to impose some form of organization and order to data can be overwhelming at times with the mass of seemingly unconnected notes and scribblings, interview tapes, and transcribed conversation (Mason, 1996).

Accordingly, the researcher implemented Marshall and Rossman’s (1999) analytical procedures that fall into six phases:

**Phase 1 – Organizing the Data:** Reading and re-reading data to become familiar with it in intimate ways. In some instances, direct transfer onto pre-developed data recording charts is appropriate.

**Phase 2 – Generating Categories, Themes, and Patterns:** This is the most difficult and complex phase that demands a heightened awareness of the data. As categories of meaning emerge, the researcher searches for those that have internal convergence and external divergence.

**Phase 3 – Coding the Data:** This is the formal representation of analytical thinking. The researcher applies some coding scheme to categories and diligently marks passages in the data using codes. Codes may take several forms: abbreviation of key words, colored dots, numbers. Computer software typically relies on abbreviations of key words.
Phase 4 – Testing Emergent Understandings: As themes and categories emerge, the researcher begins the process of evaluating the plausibility of his developing understanding and exploring them through the data. Part of this phase is to evaluate the data for their usefulness and centrality; in other words exploring how useful the data is in illuminating the question being explored.

Phase 5 – Searching for Alternative Explanations: The researcher should search for other plausible explanations.

Phase 6 – Writing the Report: The research genre this doctoral thesis will fall under is the Realist tales, which are the most recognized. This report displays a realist account of the culture under study, and represents published articles or scholarly monographs in third-person voice with clear separation between the researcher and the researched. For example, the report states that “the data revealed” over “I interpreted this event.”

According to Creswell (2009) qualitative researchers often use general procedures in a research proposal to guide the researcher and then incorporate a specific analysis method. In adhering to Creswell’s (2009) recommendation, the researcher incorporated Moustakas’ (1994) modification of methods of analysis suggested by Stevick, Colaizzi and Keen. The following is a description of each particular step:

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon.

2. From the verbatim transcript of your experience complete the following steps:
   a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
   b. Record all relevant statements.
   c. List each non-repetitive, non-overlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
   d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.

f. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of your experience.

g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of your experience.

3. From the verbatim transcript of the experiences of each of the other co-researchers (participants), complete the above steps, a through g.

4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers’ experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

Furthermore, the researcher utilized the qualitative software package MAXqda (http://www.maxqda.com/) for the systematic analysis and interpretation of interview texts that have been generated. According to Creswell (2007) MAXqda is a powerful analysis tool for developing theories and testing theoretical conclusions.

In short, the researcher’s six primary steps in providing this analysis included: (1) Data Managing – create and organize files for data; (2) Reading, Memoing – read through texts, make margin notes, form initial codes; (3) Describing – describe personal experience (4) Classifying – develop significant statements and group said statements into meaning units; (5) Interpreting – develop a textural description; develop a structural description of ‘what happened,’ and develop the ‘essence’ of how the phenomenon was experienced; and finally (6) Representing, Visualizing – present a narration of the essence of the experience in tables, figures, or discussions (Creswell, 2007). Table 2 shows the work plan used for data collection and analysis activities.
Table 2.

Data Collection and Analysis Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRB</td>
<td>January 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct and analyze interviews</td>
<td>February – March 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize and read data</td>
<td>March 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create themes and codes</td>
<td>March – April 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code data</td>
<td>March – April 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing the report</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trustworthiness

Maxwell (2005) states there are two types of threats to trustworthiness that are often raised in relation to qualitative studies: Researcher Bias and Reactivity.

*Researcher bias* is not concerned with eliminating variance between researchers in the values and expectation they bring to the study, but with understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusion of the study (which may be either positive or negative) while avoiding negative consequences.

*Reactivity* is the effect of the researcher on the individuals studied—essentially trying to understand how the researcher is influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inference the researcher can draw from the interview (for example, leading questions).
Creswell (2007) offers eight validation strategies to help increase trustworthiness. Prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich and thick description, and external audits. Creswell (2007) further states that qualitative researchers should engage in at least two of these strategies. Accordingly, the research study applied three methods: clarifying researcher bias, member checking, and peer review.

**Clarifying Researcher Bias:** The researcher must comment on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study.

**Member Checking:** The researcher solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. This involves taking data analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account. The researcher should not present them raw data, but present them themes and descriptions and inquire about their views of the analyses and what might be missing.

**Peer Review:** This provides an external check on the research process. The peer reviewer keeps the researcher honest, asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher’s feelings.
Protection of Human Subjects

All participants were invited to participate in this research on a voluntary basis. Accordingly, the researcher was guided by Seidman (2006) eight points of informed consent:

1. An invitation to participate in what, to what end, how, how long, and for whom?
2. Risks: outline the potential risks of vulnerability or discomfort for the participants that might result from taking part in the research.
3. Rights: outline the rights of the participants. These rights are designed to mitigate the vulnerability or discomfort and should include an explicit statement about the research being voluntary.
4. Possible benefits: modestly outline the benefits of the study in general.
5. Confidentiality of records: steps the researcher will take to make sure the participant’s identity is kept confidential.
6. Dissemination: How the research will be disseminated and seek explicit release for the extensive use of the participant’s words.
7. Special condition for children: participants under 18 years of age must be provided a parental consent form.
8. Contact information and copies of all forms: clarifies how to contact the researcher and the local IRB if the participants have any questions about their rights.

Moreover, the researcher completed the National Institute of Health (NIH) web-based training course, Protecting Human Research Participants (Certification Number 651669 dated 03/10/2011). Anonymity of all participants and universities was paramount and pseudonyms were used and applied during the entire report.

Conclusion

As presented in the current literature, academic clustering appears to be a symptom of the dichotomy between academics and athletics. Clustering, if exercised as a means to “game” the system from genuine academic pursuits, threatens the very foundation of higher education. This
study demonstrates an opportunity to engage former student athletes who have experienced clustering and can articulate the nuances of such a phenomenon. The scholarly research studies that have been dedicated to academic clustering, Case, Green and Brown (1987), Fountain and Finely (2007), Sanders and Hilderbrand (2003), are all quantitative. Furthermore, many more studies regarding intercollegiate athletics focus on statistically quantifiable items: graduation rate, APR score, GPA, and SAT/ACT score.

The gap in the scholarly literature is the student athletes’ voices. The literature typically speaks about them, their behavior, their grades, their test scores, thereby concluding who they are without ever talking to them. This doctoral thesis attempted to complement the current research on clustering qualitatively by adding the student athlete’s voice. The method of phenomenology is most appropriate in supporting the goal of describing the lived experience of the clustered student athlete. This method of analysis allowed for an in-depth examination that may affirm some preconceived notions, bring to light unanticipated concepts, as well as negate some commonly held beliefs. In addition, this research study attempted to serve as an impetus to further examine academic clustering among the scholarly community. Moreover, this thesis can be of benefit to athletic administrators and athletic reformers interested in exploring the phenomenon of clustering—why it happens, how it impacts the student athlete, and how the dichotomy between academics and athletics can be better understood.
Chapter IV. Findings

The purpose of this research was to bring to light the lived experiences of former Division I student athletes who have been academically clustered. The gap in the literature is the perspective of the student athletes who are often talked about but not talked to. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to analyze the interview data. First, data analysis using Moustakas’ (1994) modified version of the Stevick, Colaizzi, and Keen protocol are presented, specifically the thematic analysis that resulted in seven themes and 43 invariant constituents. Next, based upon the thematic analysis the researcher presents a textural and structural description of each participant followed by a composite textural and composite structural description for the entire sample of research participants. Lastly, a synthesis of the composite textural and composite structural description is presented capturing the essence of being academically clustered.

Thematic Analysis

Moustakas’ (1994) modified version of the Stevick, Colaizzi, and Keen protocol requires the researcher to list all non-repetitive statements from the verbatim transcripts. These statements are also known as the invariant constituents. Next, this protocol requires that all similarly themed invariant constituents be placed together into a broader category or theme. Accordingly, the researcher analyzed the verbatim transcripts of all seven participants’ experiences of being in an academic cluster in order to determine the significant, relevant, and invariant meanings that provide living descriptions and highlights of the experience. The researcher derived 43 invariant constituents and clustered them into seven themes as reflected in Table 3:
Table 3.

Thematic Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significance of family and their influence</td>
<td>Expected to go to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valued education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear of disappointing parent(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education growing up (pre-college)</td>
<td>Engaged academically in grade school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aware that I was supposed to do well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School wasn’t easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lacked confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aspired to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Didn’t aspire to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletics while growing up</td>
<td>Played all sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Athletics overshadowed academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Athletics was my identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Athletics boosted my confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being recruited by college scouts</td>
<td>Receiving letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coaches calling house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Official campus visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very little academic message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heavily sport focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tired of process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why I signed with school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation of college</td>
<td>Potential career goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potential majors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Didn’t want to fail out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College academic experience</td>
<td>Relationship with academic advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of academic guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Placed in class and/or major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt stuck in major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Built-in network of teammates in classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special treatment received (Tests)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coaches’ message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No need to study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study hall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflections of clustering

Culture of clustering
Recognized cluster
Personal responsibility
How clustering happens
Keep’em eligible
Athlete first
Lost academic opportunity
Meaningful education

Thematic Analysis Description

From the invariant constituents the researcher constructed thematic portrayals of the experience. The following represents the clustering of meanings into core themes. Likewise, the following excerpts and data represent the distinctive nature of clustering for the participants.

Theme One: Significance of Family and Their Influence

The data revealed that family influenced each of the seven participant’s views of education. All of the participants identified the importance their mother and/or father had while growing up. For all of the participants their parents valued education and believed it was important in order to have a good life. Consequently, most of the parents expected college attendance by their sons. Interestingly, four of the seven participants explicitly said they were fearful of failing out of college and disappointing their parent(s). The family influenced in no particular order aspects such as (1) choice of high school (2) expectation to get good grades in K-12 and graduate high school (3) the college chosen (4) fear of disappointing parents and (5) to get a college degree. These factors accounted for how each individual pursued higher education.
Theme Two: Education growing up (pre-college)

The general consensus among all participants was that they were fairly engaged in education at one time, typically in elementary school. Then at specific points along the K-12 spectrum they lost interest in school and became more interested in sports, socializing, and girls. As they all progressed into high school sports became the dominant theme in their lives. At the same time every individual’s confidence in his academic abilities decreased. Nonetheless, they all aspired to reach college, though some did not have that aspiration until they were being recruited to play college athletics.

Theme Three: Athletics While Growing Up

All of the participants began playing sports at an early age. The earliest noted age was seven years old, playing for an organized basketball league. As each participant grew up sports became more prevalent in their everyday lives. Many noted how they lived to play sports and how it became their identity. Likewise, playing sports boosted the confidence of each participant more so than academics.

Theme Four: Being Recruited by College Scouts

All of the participants during high school or junior college experienced the college recruiting process. For all of the participants the initial contact by college scouts came in the form of recruiting letters. Recruiting letters were noted as non-personalized mass mailings sent to all the area’s top recruits to mid-level recruits. These letters typically are an advertisement about the institution and the football program. As the recruitment process advanced it became personalized via receiving phone calls from college scouts (coaches). During this process coaches attempt to connect with each participant on a more intimate level. The next phase of the
recruiting process was being offered a visit to each respective college. The NCAA allows every prospective student athlete five official campus visits. The intent of these visits was for each participant to have an opportunity to meet the coaches, tour the facilities, meet current players, and tour the campus. Each participant, however, noted that an academic message either by phone or official visit was hardly discussed. They all noted that everything was sports focused. After going through months of the recruiting process many of the participants said they were tired of the visits and phone calls and just wanted to sign with the school. Most chose to sign with their college based on proximity to family.

Theme Five: Expectation of College

Many of the participants entered college without an academic plan. Only one participant could clearly articulate his career ambition and how college would help him achieve his career goal. Most noted that when they arrived on campus their main goal was not to fail out. Three of the seven participants indicated that college was never their goal growing up. Two of those three said their parents never actively spoke about going to college until the athletic recruitment process began.

Theme Six: College Academic Experience

The academic experience for all of the participants varied somewhat, but by and large they all echoed similar sentiments. In particular, nearly every participant spoke of the lack of academic guidance from their academic advisor. They noted that not having a meaningful relationship with their advisor partly hindered their academic growth. Many felt they could not switch majors and “start over” because their scholarship would run out; therefore they felt stuck in their major. Every participant felt that being clustered provided a built-in network of
teammates and as a result, they did not have to make friends with “regular students.” They all noted that being part of a cluster elicited certain benefits foremost having access to tests before they were administered. This type of special benefit created a sense of laziness and indifference toward academics because participants did not have to give full academic effort. Compounding their indifference toward academics was their daily schedule, which was experienced as having a “full time job.” Their daily schedule was skewed heavily toward athletic-related commitments. Likewise, the times allocated for studying such as study hall for all the participants, was a “joke” in that no real studying took place. Many noted how they could not focus because it became a “goof off” session. And lastly, they all noted that the academic message they received from their coach did not support academic first.

**Theme Seven: Reflections of Clustering**

The data reveal that all seven participants view clustering as a residual phenomenon of “big-time” college athletics. All participants noted that clustering had its positive aspects though not many. In particular a few participants noted that clustering provided a sense of comfort in having familiar faces in a majority of their classes. They also noted that it was positive for student athletes who may not have otherwise been able to handle the rigors of college academics. Conversely, many didn’t realize at the time the extent the culture of clustering had on their lives and how it would impact them in the future. Many see clustering as a means to keep student athletes eligible. And in doing so this creates lost academic opportunity and a meaningful education. However, they all realized and acknowledged the personal responsibility they should have had with their education.
Textural and Structural Descriptions

According to Moustakas (1994) a textural description is simply the “what happened” during the experience. This description is taken directly from the verbatim transcripts of each interview. Conversely, the structural description is a narrative of how each participant interpreted their experience and what conditions they believe led to their experience. The textural and structural descriptions sometimes overlap and are not necessarily exclusive to one or the other, but a guideline to reach the essence of the experience.

Participant Profiles

A brief description of the participants is presented in Table 4 below in order to introduce them prior to introducing their brief biography, textural descriptions, and structural descriptions.

Table 4. Participant Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Current Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Black/Chinese</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>State Accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Family Assistant Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Community Outreach Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>US Federal Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggie</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Beverage Merchandiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>Pharmaceutical Brand Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Nursing Home Administrator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Biography: Eric

Eric identifies as being of mixed ethnic heritage; his father is African American and his mother is Chinese. Eric was born and raised in a suburban community in Northern California. He became involved in organized sports at the age of seven. He also valued academics as both of his parents are college graduates. For Eric, it was not a matter of if he would go to college, but what college he would go to. Eric noted that as he got older he excelled primarily in two sports: football and basketball. As he progressed in high school, sports took precedence in his life while academics subtly became secondary as he received athletic accolades. He recalls his college recruiting process as standard in that he was not a highly sought after recruit. Eric was being recruited by a few Pac 10 schools as a senior but never offered an athletic scholarship by them. He was offered a full football scholarship to a smaller conference school. Reluctantly, he declined the scholarship offer at the advice of his father and enrolled at a well-known football program at a private Midwestern university. After one year of not adjusting well academically and athletically he decided to move back home where he attended and played football at a junior college. After one full year of junior college he accepted a full scholarship offer to a northeast public institution where he played football and graduated with a degree in criminal justice. Upon graduating from college Eric was offered a tryout with one NFL team but declined because he was physically and mentally “burned-out” with football. At the same time Eric lacked career direction and took several entry level jobs. He eventually realized his passion for numbers and is now a state accountant, married, and has two young children.
Eric: Textural Description

From the moment Eric enrolled in college he had an ambition to play professional football in the NFL. “My main focus was what can I do to get to the league (NFL). So I really didn’t have a plan (academically) of what I wanted to do.” This kind of ambition is bold, yet can be detrimental to academic success. “I was doing this football thing and you know that overshadowed everything else.” This ambiguity toward his academics allowed Eric’s academic advisor to steer him to a particular major. Eric recalls his advisor saying, “why don’t you do criminal justice and you could change it later on if you think of something else?” Eric states, “That’s how it basically went, no lie. It wasn’t like what are you interested in or anything like that, it was why don’t you do criminal justice and if want to change it, you can change it later and I went along with it.” Lack of direction was central to Eric being steered into a cluster. “I’m out here, there’s so much stuff going through my mind, I was second guessing my decision of going out there and you know. I was home sick and all this stuff was going on.”

Furthermore, Eric was frustrated by the fact that his “prescribed” major was not discussed in reference to post-college employment prospects by his academic advisor. “I didn’t hear shit about jobs, I can tell you that much. Even when I graduated near the end of my senior year it was like what am I going to do with this, you know. And I know, I know for a fact it wasn’t something discussed when the talk about what do you want to major in, as far as what it would lead into, I had no idea. It was, why don’t you try this major and that was it. It was, no you could do this or that with this degree.”

Likewise his coaches did not provide much guidance either. “The coaches, I wouldn’t, I can’t fault them for not be as involved in my academics. I mean they’re there to coach football. They probably don’t know much of the ins and outs of the academic programs anyway.”
Similarly, Eric recognized that his coach’s involvement in his academics would be fleeting at best. “Other than if I had to go to study hall that was about the only thing (laughter) that they ever talked about, my academics…I may have spoken with Coach Smith about my academics, how things were going. Even if they were going bad, I told him they were okay. It wasn’t like someone was hounding me about my academics.”

While in the cluster Eric became cognizant that something was awry given that many of his teammates were in the same major. “Usually you hear communications or physical education, I didn’t think criminal justice was the jock major, but as I started taking classes I noticed all the football players were all in the same classes as me and that’s when I figured out that was the football major.” Being in the cluster led to feelings of self-consciousness and shame for Eric, “sometimes I would sit in my room and think, damn man, I didn’t want to be that dude, I didn’t want to be that dude with the communication major and here I am a criminal justice major and I’m that dude in that major.”

During the cluster experience Eric said that “whether it was intentional or not, I believe football was the focus, not to say that nobody, I wouldn’t say this about the coaches that they didn’t care we weren’t studying. But it was obvious, we were football players, we’re expected to, our football-related activities would come first before academics.” Memories of academics during the football season were recalled as, “I knew during football season my grades were going to be crap and after football season they would be okay. And that’s just something I understood.” In particular, this belief in inevitable poor grades can be attributed to realizing the time and energy football would take. “Football was time consuming, I mean not only was it time consuming, you’re running around and everything else, you got to sit up in these football meetings and pay attention. So it’s not only the time, it’s the energy, I caught myself falling
asleep in a couple classes, I was just tired. It’s not like football you’re just walking around in the morning, going on daily stroll with your dog, you’re out there hitting, running fast, you’re exerting a lot of energy and after that I was expected to go to class and study and all that stuff, the body can only handle so much.”

Eric realized the benefits of being in a cluster, specifically receiving tests prior to tests being administered. “For the majority of the classes, yeah, I had the tests, they were all multiple choice tests and it wasn’t hard to come by, the old tests just in different order. Most of the classes we had the answers.” Having the tests lead to feelings of disenchantment and laziness with academics. “If I had the test, I had all the answers for the test in that class so I knew that I didn’t need to study for that class.” Conversely, Eric was able to draw a comparison between courses in his major to non-major courses. “I minored in political science and those classes were way different than the criminal justice classes where I didn’t have all that inside knowledge so I had to really study for those classes, so if I could get the answers for the test in criminal justice I could focus more on the political science classes.”

Also a noteworthy benefit of being in the cluster for Eric was the built-in network of teammates that took many of the same classes as him. “If you’re in a certain major you’re going to be in classes with teammates and if they’re working together to study for a final or project you have that, you’re with somebody that you’re comfortable with and that makes it easier to work on a project of something like that.”

Eric’s entry into the cluster appears typical in that he was steered into his major by his academic advisor. As a result, Eric’s experience in the cluster was highlighted with many commonly associated occurrences that a clustered student athlete experiences. In particular five core themes emerged: 1) He had no personal academic plan. 2) He received minimal if any
guidance from his academic advisor. 3) He felt there was an imbalance of time devoted to football. 4) He received special benefits such as tests. 5) He felt comfort in having teammates in the same classes.

**Eric: Structural Description**

Many feelings emerged as being associated with his experience in the cluster. In particular, his own lack of academic direction, not having a meaningful relationship with his academic advisor, a belief that maintaining academic eligibility for student athletes was his academic advisor’s primary role, a perception that the divergent athletic/academic culture was correlated with revenue, and a belief that academics was implicitly made secondary to athletics.

For Eric, attempting to articulate his academic ambition was frustrating and something he never attempted before. He was conscious that he needed to declare a major immediately because he was a junior college transfer, and he found this task daunting. His personal feelings of ambiguity toward academics compounded by the need to declare a major pressured Eric into accepting the suggestion of his academic advisor to major in criminal justice. Reflecting on that moment Eric confessed that “I’m stuck in my counselor’s office trying to figure out my major and just anything sounded good to get out of there and I said okay.” Eric strongly believes that his undeveloped academic goals needed to be vetted and nurtured more by his academic advisor. He wanted his academic advisor to have a discussion(s) about different majors and what these different majors could potentially lead to in terms of jobs. However, what he received from his academic advisor was quite the opposite, “a prescription of what to take.”

Being academically clustered is tied to his belief that maintaining academic eligibility for himself and his teammates was the priority of the academic advisors and not developing a sound academic plan and/or possible career goals. “I just thought it was, they’re just trying to keep
everybody as being eligible as they could. You got academic advisors, I’m sure they’re getting direction from coaches, athletic director – hey you gotta keep these guys eligible, put’em in easy classes.” As a consequence of being clustered Eric recognized how clustering doesn’t help the student athlete develop academically. “So you’re not really helping the student athletes find themselves if you’re just, you know, setting them up for a major that’s easy that they can stay eligible with.” Eric refers to this as “conscious clustering.” Similarly, Eric also believes clustering is tied to the monetary aspects of college sports. “Coaches, you know they have to answer to the athletic directors, boosters, and everybody, you know, people who are funding the program and stuff. You know, the coaches have an interest cuz they’re getting paid a lot of money to coach and they want to keep their job.”

Moreover, being kept eligible and in easy classes is implicitly tied to the rigorous schedule that Eric and his teammates had to manage. When he returned home after a “12-13 hour day” consisting of practice, film study, weight lifting and classes he desired only to “get off my feet and enjoy myself so I can wake up the next morning at 6 am and do it all over again.” Day and night there is no time for concentrated focus on education. Without the cluster Eric may not have been able to manage such a rigorous schedule.

Eric wraps up his experience as, “I was involved in this system and I sort of let it happen to me. Some of the responsibility falls on me obviously because nobody is forcing me to do these things. There were adults there that could have sort of pulled me over to the side and been like hey why don’t you think of this, or there’s life after football. Or during that initial academic meeting say, why don’t you come back and think about what you want to major in instead of making me choose my major during a thirty minute meeting. So I mean there’s things that could
have been differently on both sides, it’s part of the game, you just hope that people become aware of it.

**Biography: Chris**

Chris is a 29-year-old African American male. He was born and raised in an urban community in northern New Jersey. He describes his community as blue collar and hardworking though it has become riddled with crime as of late. His mother completed high school but did not attend college. His father did not complete high school but completed a trade school. As a child Chris was very active in sports, music, computers, and math. In high school Chris was selected for the academic honors program, which he notes was very prestigious. However, he became infatuated with athletics in high school and academics became secondary. He was a member of a highly ranked football program and began getting recruited by several well-known college football programs. He notes how football became his identity and how he dreamed of playing professional football. He selected his college based on the location so his parents could attend his games. Upon graduating with a degree in criminal justice, Chris attempted to play professional football though his attempts were unsuccessful. As a result, he was unsure about a career and accepted various sales jobs. Currently he is single and works as a family assistant coordinator.

**Chris: Textural Description**

Entering college Chris’ initial academic goal was to study physical education to become a gym teacher but unbeknownst to him that was not offered as a major. “I always thought I’d become a gym teacher. I felt that they made good money, their job is fairly easy and it gave them an opportunity to also coach other sports.” However, physical education was not offered as a major. “That was on me not doing my homework to see if they had physical education.” Consequently, Chris explored the criminal justice major as advised by his older brother who
graduated with that particular degree. “I didn’t feel I was pressured into a particular major (by academic advisors). I actually had criminal justice set in my mind as an option before I went to school. I kind of had it in my back pocket. That to say if I can’t figure out a major that truly, that I am truly passionate about I’m going to give criminal justice a try.” Interestingly, Chris’ final decision to choose criminal justice appeared based more on logistics than actually based in solid interest. “And I said (to my academic advisor) where am I at right now with credits. And criminal justice seemed like the one I was further along and based on the other classes that I had taken. Well that’s the one that I’m interested and I don’t want to be here longer than four years, so let’s get this going right now.”

At first Chris did not notice the high number of teammates in his major. “As I was taking classes you start seeing more and more teammates in it.” Initially Chris found having teammates in a majority of his classes a benefit. “It was nice at times to have that network of people that have the same major and you can say hey I missed class today what was the assignment. And you know people had your back. You didn’t have to really socialize with the general students all the time to get the information. You weren’t forced to make friends with people for information. Whereas you can text your teammate and get the information right away.” Chris also found that clustering aided his ability to focus more attention on playing football. “It did allow me to devote more time to football. Because like I said, it’s basically a network of people where resources are being offered for the group whereas other courses and majors not as many resources are being offered to the athletic department. And because we are getting this resource it’s helping us prepare for exams and big assignments. Its saves time and that time is reinvested into film study, putting in extra work in the weight room, or extra time into resting, which is very important too.”
Though clustering is advantageous in some regards, it did present problems for Chris. He felt it took away from his ability to be vocal and studious in class because he would be deemed the “go to person” for all his teammates’ academic needs. “It kind of gets to a point where if you become visibly focused and vocal in class others (teammates) will kind of want to feed off of you. But not in the sense where they become as focused and vocal in class but more so you got all the answers where are they? It kind of gets to a point where you play dumb. You say no I don’t know the answers just because you don’t want to be that guy where 20 people for example are looking for the answer from you.” Further, Chris speaks to feeling drained and questions his own pursuit of education because of overbearing teammates. “You’re playing dumb to the point where it becomes habitual and you know what, what’s the point of me knowing all of this stuff if people are just gonna kind of drain it out of me without any benefit on my end.”

Similarly, Chris begins to question what employment prospects would be like because so many of his teammates are in the same major. “Wow there’s a lot of us studying this. And you realize, you do think two steps ahead, you’re trained as a student athlete to think a couple steps ahead. You say, when I get out of school you’re gonna tell me we’re all going for the same job, is there that many jobs in this field.”

Likewise, because a cluster groups an individual with teammates who are also friends it distracted Chris from his ability to focus. “Because it was so many familiar faces it was kind of distracting because, you know, we all have sense of humors and we’re all clowning around, and joking around.” This sentiment was also echoed when Chris spoke about study hall (official organized study session), which is mandated for most student athletes to take if they are a freshman and/or below a certain GPA. “When you get a bunch of teammates together to do something that they really don’t want to do and in a place that they don’t want to be, you been
there for the majority of your day and now you’re being forced to sit there and do your work, you
know, like you feel you’re not capable of managing your own time and do it around your own
schedule. You know people had to be silly to keep their sanity. So it was a joke in the sense of
you’re getting a whole bunch of people in one big room and you expect them to get their work
done, that doesn’t happen.”

While in the cluster Chris became suspicious of his academic advisor and the athletic
department itself. Specifically, Chris felt particularly guarded with sharing his academic life. “I
didn’t really trust my advisor until my last year really. I felt as though if I went to them things
would get back to coach. I mean if something was going wrong you would end up in the sand pit.
I mean it was a very….you try to avoid discipline, being disciplined when possible, so that’s
what I felt.” Moreover, Chris was conscious of the punitive nature that speaking to his academic
advisor would result in. “I felt as though if they were aware of academic challenges going on
there would be more oversight and more work given to you versus help. And you know, I felt I’d
be better trying to work this out on my own.” As a consequence Chris took this as an
opportunity to reach out to individuals outside of athletics. “I actually sought help outside the
academic program, because there was academic services for students. And as a student athlete
you are a student so you have access to that in addition to what you have. And I actually felt
more comfortable seeking assistance with professors directly through advisors through the
university rather than the team. I felt like that was something I wanted to address confidentially
and privately. I didn’t feel like I had that privacy going to the athletic student advisors.”

Chris’ entry into the cluster is atypical in that he was not steered into the cluster by an
academic advisor or coach. Nonetheless, Chris’ experiences in the cluster resemble those who
were steered into it. For example, Chris’ textural description highlights six core themes: 1) He
was able to focus more on football because the cluster provided academic relief. 2) He benefited from having a network of teammates in his class to assist with homework and note taking. 3) He suppressed his own academic ambition to not be relied upon academically by his teammates. 4) He felt distracted in class because of the high number of teammates in his class. 5) He did not trust the athletic academic advisors and felt they put the best interest of the football program ahead of his own. 6) He questioned his employment prospects post college.

**Chris: Structural Description**

Chris was conscious of divulging any academic challenges he was experiencing to his academic advisors. He was acutely conscious that if he went to his academic advisor with any academic challenges it may have led to added time commitments in the form of increased study hall hours, tutoring sessions, or punishment by coaches thereby giving up more control of his life. “I just felt like that more work would be given to me, more oversight, more stress given to you than alleviating all those things and improving.” During these instances Chris felt threatened by the possibility of losing the little control that he believed he had. Chris refers to participating in college athletics as a “full-time job,” with days lasting “10-15 hours.” As a consequence, he valued the little time he did have and was wary of doing anything to compromise that time.

Chris felt that academic clustering placed him in an uncomfortable position where he became relied upon by his teammates to help them academically. For Chris, he speaks of feeling drained by his overbearing teammates and a sense of obligation to help them regardless of their effort. “I felt like people weren’t giving their best and they’re still asking you for help. And at some point when people aren’t giving their best you just stop helping them.” Chris became frustrated and filled with anguish over his teammates’ inability to help themselves as well as questioning his own academic effort. “What’s the point of me knowing all of this stuff if people
are just gonna kind of drain it out of me without any benefit on my end.” Chris became conflicted with helping his teammates who he genuinely cared about; however, they took more from him than he was able to give. As a result, Chris sacrificed his own academic ambition as a way to suppress his inner conflict so that his teammates would no longer rely upon him.

Chris’ disillusionment with academics and his mistrust of the athletic department stems from his belief that athletics departments have financial incentives to cluster student athletes, which is not necessarily in the best interest of the student athlete. “If every single person on the team had a different major and if they requested academic assistance, it would look really bad on the team if they couldn’t provide that. So if a third of the team does criminal justice, it’s like wow we saved a boat load of money by having all these kids being able to fit into two study groups versus having thirty different tutors for each or having to pay a different tutor for different subjects.” The superseding implication of Chris’ sentiment is a loss of faith in a system that is supposedly there to genuinely help the student athlete.

For Chris, he used the analogy of being in a barrel to describe his experience with academic clustering. “Clustering itself, basically, you’re put into a barrel with a whole bunch of humans in the barrel, you gotta find a way to stand out, take leadership, if you’re in the cluster and you’re not doing anything to rise above your teammates and you kind of settle with everyone else. You may get lost in the shuffle and your worth gets watered down. In order to stand out you gotta do the best you possibly can academically, network, meet other people retain as much info as possible. Start early with developing your resume and making connections career wise and being a leader and regardless if you’re in a group with other people, it doesn’t mean you can’t individually stand out and be more noticeable.”
Biography: Harold

Harold is a 31-year-old African American male. He was born and raised in an urban Massachusetts community. He describes his community as low income. In particular, he said his neighborhood was rampant with crime, gangs, and drugs. He grew up in a single parent home with his mother; he did not know his father. At the time, his mother’s highest level of education was a high school diploma but she will graduate this spring with her bachelor’s degree. As a child, Harold describes himself as mischievous. At the age of 14 he joined a gang and sold drugs. By the age of 16 he was arrested for his criminal activity. Nonetheless, Harold described himself as a decent student. He was also a member of the football team. By his senior year in high school he became a highly touted football recruit. He was offered scholarships to numerous universities. He chose his school based on location to stay close to his mother. Harold graduated with a degree in criminal justice. At the conclusion of his senior year he was offered multiple try-outs with the New York Giants, Minnesota Vikings, Denver Broncos, and Houston Texans but declined because he was physically and mentally “burned out” from football. He then took various jobs including security officer and juvenile counselor. He also unsuccessfully attempted to become a police officer. He has now returned to school to pursue his teaching certification. He is married with one daughter.

Harold: Textural Description

Harold entered college with little to no expectation of achieving academically or playing professional football. “I really didn’t have expectations because you gotta remember where I was coming from, I’m selling drugs, making money. I loved playing football, but I really, I was just, that wasn’t the main focus. It was more just being on the streets, chasing the women, chasing the money…you know that type of money. I thought I was going to be a drug dealer.”
In terms of academic achievement Harold said, “when I got to college, it’s like alright, I’m here, I’m gonna lift weights, do the academics, do what I need to do. I didn’t have any expectations I was just like I’m here, I’m present, I’m here, there wasn’t any expectations, no real goals.” This lack of ambition is somewhat precarious and left Harold susceptible to being clustered. However, Harold did have one goal in mind, to major in criminal justice, though for an eccentric reason. “My thought process behind that (choosing a major) was that because I was already arrested and been in jail, just like well, I’m not trying to be fucked over by the law, so I need to know and understand the law and that’s it and that’s how I chose criminal justice.” In addition, Harold speaks to his desire to be a gym teacher, but was discouraged by a friend.

Prior to choosing his major he experienced being steered into particular courses by his academic advisor. “They just gave me classes and told me what I need to take. These are the days you’re going to be in class that fits yours schedule and that was it. This is your study hall hours and that was it.” Harold didn’t have much confidence in his academic advisor citing her incompetence as a reason for his frustration with academics. “I hated that bitch. She was horrible, she was horrible. She was the reason why I didn’t get the classes or take the classes I was supposed to take my freshman year. She gave me classes. I don’t know if that was her first year or what….I mean I don’t know, I’m a freshman. I don’t know jack. As a freshman you don’t know jack. And just kind of set me off on a bad path.

Eventually that bad path led to extreme academic hardship for Harold. “I wasn’t taking academics seriously. I failed out my very first year. I was partying every weekend. I knew I was redshirting (not participating in games, but allowed to practice) and I really didn’t care.” The catalyst of failing out was led by what Harold perceived as indifference about his grades from his coaches. “Let me just say this, coaches were only sincere because they want you to play. If you
weren’t a guy who was playing…If a guy was third on the depth chart, I don’t think they took you as seriously. My redshirt freshman year, there was no coach that was like come on you need to get your grades right. I failed out and there was no coach saying that to me, it was all academic advisor saying you got get your grades right to stay in school and to keep your scholarship. Coaches really didn’t say anything to me until I was a backup and they knew if the starter went down I was playing, you see what I’m saying. That’s when they kind of…you got to pick up your grades, you got to do this you gotta do that.”

Interestingly, when Harold re-enrolled in school he declared criminal justice as his major not knowing it was a clustered major. “It didn’t occur to me at the time. It didn’t occur to me until after I graduated. It was just like wow, all these guys were in criminal justice and about ten of them stayed in that field and did something with it out of like twenty or thirty.” Regardless of being in a cluster or not, Harold felt sure of one thing. “I was an athlete first. I felt that my athletic ability helped me get to where I was. I felt that if I kept my academic at a novice level, an intermediate level, I was okay. The focus on academics wasn’t that strong. I wasn’t really trying to grab A’s and B’s like that just trying to pass.”

While in the cluster Harold had positive relationships with professors in his major. “I remember a professor named Karen Pine, she was particular toward the athletes. Then there was the guy who works for the football team, he was actually part of the criminal justice teaching staff. He wouldn’t do any favors for us. But like if you were late for assignments, he would be like make sure you turn it in soon as possible. He wouldn’t say you don’t have to do the work or grade it differently, but he would give you more time a little bit more lenient in that aspect.”

Nonetheless, Harold had access to tests prior to them being administered. “Well let me say this, one guy on the team had ways of getting tests before we actually took the test. So I
mean all you had to do was study the test and you’d get 100%. Yeah, I mean, guys would make money off the stuff, $20, $10.” But Harold says, “I usually studied for the test unless I was just tired. It wasn’t because of special benefits. If I didn’t study it was because I was just being a dick head, I just didn’t feel like studying.”

Harold entered the cluster for a personal reason: to understand how to combat the law if he found himself in an unfavorable position with the law. Nonetheless, Harold experienced being steered into classes by his academic advisor when he first arrived as a freshman. Because he inadvertently found himself in a cluster, he spoke of five core themes that captured his experience. These five include: 1) He felt he was steered into classes by his advisor. 2) He felt that coaches did not care about his academic achievement unless it impacted his eligibility. 3) He considered himself an athlete first. 4) He had athletic-friendly professors 5) He had access to tests, which led to no real learning.

**Harold: Structural Description**

Harold’s experience in the cluster was dictated by a strong belief that he was an athlete first, student second. In particular, this originated and was reinforced by the expectations of him as a football player to prepare himself athletically. In addition, Harold’s own academic motivation was modest at best because eligibility was the primary focus.

Harold’s belief that he was an “athlete first, student second” was the essence of his four years in college. This feeling was exacerbated and compounded by what he was expected to do as an athlete. “I mean you would just be studying tape alone, practice tape, game tape….I mean I did that more than I did for classes. I mean not even including practice, it was just game tape and practice tape alone was more than studying for school work.”
Further, Harold was not concerned with being a high academic achiever. Rather, he was only concerned with maintaining eligibility allowing him to continue playing. “The focus was staying eligible. It was practice, it was getting better, getting stronger, getting faster. It was really the focus of education was staying eligible. It’s not much more than that. I mean, you took it for what it’s worth to stay eligible. Some people might look at it differently, I didn’t. I just looked at it as I need to graduate cuz I promised my mother I was going to graduate and that I needed to get some type of education and that was it.” Further, he notes the sentiments of his teammates as well. “A lot of the guys I hung out with thought the same way I did. We’re here to play football and we’re going to school to be eligible to play football. I mean guys would pass the class with C’s. They’re like trying to stay eligible. You’re not really learning anything passing with C’s, you’re just there, you’re present.”

Lastly, Harold believes clustering is done knowingly. “I think, and it’s just an opinion. I think a lot of academic advisor knew. They looked at the kids’ grades and their GPA from high school then decided that this kid is a C, C- student or B, C- student and we’re going to figure out a major for him that won’t be too difficult for him to achieve. Because it looks bad on us if a kid fails out, we’re not doing our job if a kid fails out. And this is me looking back it right now.”

Biography: Michael

Michael is a 31-year-old African American male. He was born and raised in a suburban community in southern New Jersey. He describes his community as working class. His mother completed college as an adult and his father did not attend college. As a child, he says he was very curious academically and excelled in grade school. At the same time he participated in organized sports: football, basketball, baseball, and swimming. However, once he entered junior high school he became academically lazy and “academically overwhelmed.” At this point in his
life he focused more on sports to his detriment. Progressing into high school Michael continued to excel in football while his academics continued to slip. Michael eventually transferred to a different high school in his senior year where they were committed to his academic growth. Michael was then able to make the necessary grades to become eligible for a football scholarship. Michael was a mid-level recruit and was pursued by some big-time football schools. He eventually made his college decision based on the close proximity of his family and girlfriend so they could attend his games regularly. Michael graduated with a degree in criminal justice. Upon graduation, Michael secured a job with the public defender’s office as an investigator and then became a sworn federal police officer. He is married and has two young children.

**Michael: Textural Description**

Entering college Michael’s ambition was to study business administration and become a CEO. “When I first got to campus I knew that’s what I wanted (business administration). I thought that I was already in the process once you start taking classes. I thought I was in the process that I could declare it (business administration) once it came up.” However, Michael was unaware that he needed prerequisite courses in order to declare business as his major. This lack of understanding prohibited Michael from pursing his ambition. Left without a definitive major to pursue, his academic advisor suggested that he major in criminal justice. “My advisor said criminal justice was the easier degree, the easier degree to get and some of classes that I already had can count toward that major so I can graduate on time. She said everybody is taking it and this is a good way to go about your courses, your major. Take this major and graduate with that. That was what had happened so I think I was forced more to take that major.” Distressed by not being able to pursue his major of choice Michael says he felt “stuck in criminal justice. “To be honest with you, I didn’t want to do criminal justice. I didn’t want to do that major, I had no
intention of becoming a law enforcement officer. I really didn’t have any intention on any of that stuff.” Unfortunately, the only consolation he could find in the situation was in the belief that “at least I’m going to get my degree in something.”

For Michael, he recognized early that criminal justice was a major widely chosen by student athletes. “It seemed like criminal justice was the major of the sports program. Football or basketball it didn’t matter, everybody was in criminal justice.” Because Michael was trusting of the athletic program he felt that clustering was normal. “I thought it was one of those football-friendly classes that everybody used to love to take when it came to college. It was one of those push through class. You pass the class and the teachers are football friendly and push you through and everything like that. It kind of had you eligible to play.”

While in the cluster Michael became disenchanted with academics because of special benefits that he was able to receive. Specifically, Michael recalls being given tests for exams at study sessions prior to the test being administered. “A couple times they (football program) would have some type of study sessions where pretty much the actual test was provided. A test from a previous year and it’s just worded up differently and changed up in different numbers and it was pretty much the same thing.” Having this benefit, Michael’s academic experience did not present much of a challenge. “You went in to the test and knew everything was right and then you leave and you know you already got an A. Or you get a couple wrong so you won’t get a perfect score, but you know, it was really up there, you know you’d get an A or B.”

If a test was not provided at a study session he would anticipate a teammate having it to share with him at some point before the test. “There were plenty of times I wouldn’t study for the test. Sometimes I really didn’t care about the test cuz I already knew that 10 minutes before class we would have the answers anyway. We weren’t worried about the test the night before but it
was like we’d get it tomorrow. It was like a big group session right before the test and everybody would sit next to each other and pretty much, you know, look off each other’s test or whoever was the main person who knew all the answers and we pretty much went down the line and everybody looked off each other’s paper. That was pretty much it; there was really no worries about it.”

And even when the attempt to study came up, specifically study hall, Michael felt that it was a waste of time. “We had that study hall. It was crazy you couldn’t really do your work cuz it became a chat session. You can’t put a whole bunch of guys’ together, good friends, football players in a room and think they’re going to study, no way…just didn’t work that way.”

Michael’s entry into the cluster stemmed from not understanding the academic major declaration process. Therefore, unable to declare his desired major, his advisor steered him into a clustered major. Michael’s experience in the cluster was highlighted with three specific core textual themes: 1) He had a lingering disappointment that he could not choose his major. 2) He lacked academic guidance from his academic advisor. 3) He had special benefits that led to academic disenchantment.

Michael: Structural Description

Michael never felt like he was a student athlete in the ideal sense of the term. “I didn’t consider myself a student athlete. School was there but, you know, obviously I paid attention to it and I wanted to do well but I didn’t look at it as a student athlete type thing but more of an athlete that just goes to school. Of course like I said I wanted to do good in school but I was more of an athlete.” Driving this sentiment is that Michael did not have meaningful academic conversations with his academic advisor or coach. Also attached to the sentiment of not being an
idealistic student athlete was Michael’s daily schedule that was overwhelming athletic focused which left him with little time to study and physically exhausted.

Michael lacked guidance academically from coaches as well as his academic advisor. He never recalled his coach emphasizing academics. “My coach’s view on academics, of course he preached about it, but to be honest with you I don’t remember him speaking about it that much. It wasn’t like a big, a big thing that he would talk about. I remember at the time coming in as a freshman, you know, coming into college there was a lot of players that were failing out of school at the time.” This implicit message compounded with the lack of academic communication by his academic advisors created a perception that academics were not important. For instance, Michael doesn’t recall an academic advisor ever talking with him at any point about choosing a major or overseeing that he takes the appropriate courses in order to declare the major of his choice. “No, I don’t remember them sitting down and taking the time out walking me through it as far as choosing the right major for you.” The superseding implication of their inaction is Michael’s personal disillusionment with academics and the waning value of it.

Michael’s waking hours were spent abiding a regimented structure required to participate as a student athlete. “The typical day in football season was so tiring. We had the job of playing football. It was a lot going on, so sleep deprivation and stuff like that I do believe we really were deprived a lot of sleep and rest as we should have gotten. I always felt tired, I always felt, you know, my body was hurting and never felt like I could recover in a certain amount of time. We was always doing something we always had to be somewhere.”

Thus it is not surprising that Michael felt he did not have to give full effort academically. Clustering helped save him time in terms of actually studying and perhaps was needed in order for him to survive the rigors of being a college athlete. Michael believes that the phenomenon of
clustering provided him a safe haven as opposed to if he was not in a cluster. “Without the cluster I would have had to apply and put forth more effort in school. As far as if I didn’t have the cluster and if I was doing business administration I really think that I would have put more effort towards that major and that degree and definitely had to work harder and study a lot more.”

Also not surprising is how he internalized his coaches’ nonchalant views of academics, his advisor’s lack of guidance, and his daily schedule that implicitly or perhaps explicitly signaled to him academics wasn’t important. “School and classes became secondary. It was one of those things that once you figured it out, how to get by, it was like alright then I don’t feel like going to class I’m not going to go. And you just hang out at home and stuff like that until practice starts. I did feel that school did become secondary.”

Interestingly, Michael believes that academic advisors, coaches, and administration knew what was going on in terms of clustering. “And probably a lot of times, I’m thinking, it’s probably the staff, support staff and stuff like that. They’re trying to keep you so busy so you can focus more on football. And maybe your school work afterwards and that’s it. There is no life outside of that world. It’s just that and that’s it. I’m thinking the people that kind of get you clustered it’s the support staff, I would think.”

**Biography: Reggie**

Reggie is a 30-year-old African American male. He was born in an urban northern New Jersey city and resided there until sixth grade. He describes his childhood community as the inner city where he attended a private elementary school. In the sixth grade he moved to a central New Jersey suburban community, which he describes as “a better area and more white.” Neither his mother nor his father attended college. As a child he says he was very competitive in school
to the extent that he and his friends would compete for grades. He did not want his friends to get higher grades than him. As Reggie progressed into middle school his competiveness for academics declined because of girls, sports, and the desire to be socially accepted. Although he notes that he still maintained good grades because his dad ruled with an “iron fist” regarding academic achievement. Sports in high school became a big part of his life, in particular, basketball. He was being recruited to play basketball in college. Due to his large physical stature his peers encouraged him to play football. Thus, in his junior year he went out for the football team. By Reggie’s senior year he became one of the area’s best players. Reggie became a mid-level recruit and was recruited by a few major football programs. He eventually chose his college based on three factors: 1) the proximity to his home; 2) his best friend was offered a football scholarship to the same college; and 3) hearing about the good academic reputation of the college from his high school teachers. Reggie graduated with a degree in criminal justice. After college Reggie played two seasons in the Arena Football league. He was cut after his second season and decided that it was time to move on with his life. He is currently engaged and working as a merchandiser for a major beverage company.

**Reggie: Textural Description**

The experience of academic clustering for Reggie is one of indifference about his academic goals. Unsure of his interests and potential career aspirations he implicitly allowed his academic advisor to choose his classes for him without protest. “I didn’t pick my schedule when I came to school. I don’t remember how it worked out but when I came in school my schedule was handed to me and that was it. I didn’t pick my classes. Those classes I’m assuming were picked by the football program’s personnel.” Though Reggie was unsure about his academics he believed that being given his classes by his advisor was “standard.” “I didn’t feel any type of
way because I didn’t have anything to go by. It was standard issue when you first go through something and don’t have anything to put it up against. I just thought this is how things worked.”

As Reggie progressed into his sophomore year his major was decided not based on his interest per se, but by logistics. “I went into the academic office and my advisor sat me down and said well it’s time to pick a major and I said to her well what do I have the most classes in? She looked at what I already took and said you have a few criminal justices classes that can go toward the major. Boom, sign me up I’m done, I’m out of here. And the reason why I had the criminal justice classes is because those are the classes I was put in when I came to school.” Further, Reggie expressed a genuine lack of guidance by his academic advisor. “It wasn’t a conversation, you sure, it wasn’t any of that.”

Eventually, Reggie recognized explicit benefits of being in a cluster, specifically receiving a test prior to it being administered. For Reggie this presented somewhat of a dilemma. “It was the first time I ever cheated on a test in my life. How they (teammates) got the test, I don’t know, but it sure was the real deal and I used it (laughter). I’m not an idiot.” Moreover, Reggie admits this was the only time he cheated on a test.

Conversely, Reggie felt trapped once in the major. “Some people switch majors, but in my mind was, listen, I played my freshman year so they’re probably only going to pay my scholarship for four year is what I’m thinking. I started with criminal justice, I can’t switch now. I strongly remember that thinking listen; I can’t switch now so I’m going to stick with it. You see, they say you can switch if you want now, no, no…So if they’re already paying for four years, I’m not switching. I’m not paying for anything so I got to get this done.”

Reggie’s entry into the cluster appears to be rooted in his advisor’s initial selection of his classes as a freshman. Accordingly, when it came time to pick a major Reggie deferred to the
major in which he had earned the most credits. Reggie's experience in the cluster was highlighted with many commonly associated occurrences that a clustered student athlete experiences. In particular four core themes emerged: 1) Initially his classes were selected by academic advisors without his consent. 2) He lacked guidance from his academic advisor. 3) He was faced with a moral decision to accept special benefits or not. 4) He felt trapped in his major.

Reggie: Structural Description

Interestingly, Reggie did not consciously realize he was in a cluster or contemplate why many of his teammates were in many of the same classes. “In college you’re living life you don’t really, like now, start putting things together like why are we all clustered in this class. You don’t think about things like that. You just go onto class especially in the end of class you’re just goofing off. You never ask questions when you’re playing sports, working out and all that stuff. You’re not really thinking, like damn, why are we all in the same class, it was never a thought.” For Reggie, his main concern was not about academics. “It was about football, parties, and girls and what we’re going to do later on.”

Reggie’s lens through which he experienced college stems from his upbringing that never stressed going to college. He notes that he cannot recall his mother or father discussing college until he began being recruited to play college football. “I came in (to college) with zero expectations actually. I think maybe because my parents never went to school, to college, so I guess they didn’t know what to expect. In turn because we never talked about it I didn’t know what to think. It was just going there and going to experience it, whatever it is, it is.”

In general, Reggie is aware of his own personal responsibility regarding his academics and life. In particular, he speaks about himself in relation to his academic advisor. “I can’t expect an academic advisor to be worried about my life if I’m not worried about my life, you know
what I mean. I can’t expect him to think I gotta get on Reggie to make sure he does something with his life. They’re not my parents I can’t expect him to do that. If I’m not coming to them, listen, I want to do this or that, what can you do for me. If I’m not reaching out to them, why would they have to reach out to me? That’s why I don’t have any ill feelings for what they do.”

However, Reggie has a negative perception of the athletic department. Reggie describes the student athlete academic support services as “horrible.” Specifically he didn’t have a problem with his advisor but recognized the precarious position an advisor’s job calls for. “Most of the people (academic advisors) were just trying to get by, they don’t care if you’re doing bad, unless, if you’re on the verge of failing or something like that. Or if the coach says listen man, this guy is doing terrible, he needs study hall or whatever the case may be then they’ll do something. But they are very much reactive than proactive. There was never a time where I felt as though for anyone would go out of their way like, you know, checking grades, he’s doing bad, let me go grab him and talk to him…there was never any of that.”

His negative perception is further compounded by the belief that clustering is done purposely. “The program, they do push you into, you know, easier subjects and things of that nature, to make it, I’m assuming, to make it easier on the student athlete. I’m thinking that’s what they’re thinking. And since, you know, as I said, when you’re seventeen, eighteen coming into college, you’re not thinking about academics too much, you just go along with whatever, whatever they’re pushing for you.” Reggie also acknowledged the personal responsibility of each student athlete. “I don’t want to be unfair to the football administration. I think it’s up to you. I can’t say they didn’t do anything. I think it all falls back to being an adult and making your own choices.”
Biography: Gary

Gary is a 33-year-old Caucasian male. He was born in suburban New Jersey. He describes his childhood community as working class. He performed the best academically and was most engaged in elementary school. As he progressed into junior high he became less engaged, and in high school he describes his academic engagement as poor. His parents made the decision that he would attend Catholic high school because he started “running with the wrong crowd.” Likewise, at this particular time sports and girls became his focus. At the conclusion of his senior year in high school he made the decision to repeat his senior year at a post-graduate preparatory academy. This decision was made so that he could mature mentally and physically. As a result, he was recruited to play Division I football and post-graduate school allowed him to genuinely focus academically. Primarily ivy-league schools and mid-major schools recruited him to play football as well as two schools in major conferences. He made the decision to attend his college based on the proximity to his family. Gary graduated college with a degree in criminal justice. After graduation he secured a position as a pharmaceutical sales representative where the company also paid for graduate school. Gary earned a master’s in business administration. He is currently a brand manager for a large pharmaceutical company and is married with a newborn child.

Gary: Textural Description

Entering college Gary felt confident about his academics due to the one year he spent in post-graduate high school. He said post-graduate high school was where he was able to “engage and lock in academically.” Thus, in his first year of college he was disappointed with the classes he was placed in. “Our counselors put us in the very basic foundation courses. I don’t want to say rocks for jocks but they pretty much were.” He did not hold his academic counselor in the
highest esteem. “You know, I would see her (academic advisor) occasionally for my classes and it was a matter of just kind of managing our class load and that was it.”

When it was time for Gary to pick his major he said it was his decision. “For the most part it was my decision. I chose it going into my sophomore year. And a lot of it was just because a lot of the foundational courses we had been taking counted against that major itself. It almost made it a no brainer, right? You got X amount of classes you already completed and they counted toward that major and decided to go forward with it.” Gary was also influenced by his teammates, the classes they took, and their opinions of courses and of professors. “Coming back to buddies on the team I would take things knowing that they’re going to be in it and knowing that they’re supposed to be decent or half decent classes.”

Gary recognized the underlying reason why he chose criminal justice as well as why his teammates did too. “I think a lot of people jumped in because they offer easy classes. We knew the professors well. We weren’t guaranteed a decent grade but it was one of those things if you go and show up you’re going to pass a majority of the courses and they were set up that way.

Similarly, Gary recognized what the impact clustering had on him personally. “It really facilitated me taking a lazy path forward, man. I think you were so fully invested in the athletic part of it. Where academically it was, you know, you kind of got a little bit of a break and that’s why we went that direction.” In particular, Gary speaks of special benefits that facilitated his laziness. “Guys would have note takers for them and share them with you and tests and other crap like that.” Even more, having access to tests further facilitated his laziness. “A majority of the cluster classes that you’re speaking to would have a test circulating. Would they be the exact test, no, but they would very similar as far as steer you in the right direction. They would be a former copy of test that would be administered for classes, but never the exact one and it kind of
just surfaced. There was a couple people who would know somebody if we’re going into class, it was more of a study guide than a true test with answers on it.”

Gary’s entry into the cluster appears to be rooted in his advisor’s initial selection of his classes as a freshman. Accordingly, when it came time to pick a major Gary deferred to the major in which he had earned the most credits, criminal justice. Gary’s experience in the cluster was highlighted by five core themes: 1) He was disappointed with the selection of classes by his academic advisor. 2) He lacked academic guidance from his advisor. 3) He picked classes based on teammates’ referrals. 4) He acknowledged that there were football-friendly professors. 5) He felt clustering facilitated laziness.

**Gary: Structural Description**

Gary felt that he “fell through the cracks” academically. He believes that academic services were primarily designed to help those student athletes who were in danger of being ineligible. “I think I was one of those that never had an issue being eligible so I really never got much out of it. I never had anybody pushing me. I never had anyone saying here’s what you may want to consider.” Conversely, because he was not a high academic achiever either no guidance or encouragement was provided. “I think I was one that fell kind of in the middle, you know, of whatever curve you’re looking at and since I wasn’t a super high achiever or dragging, it was like you just got forgot about. So I never felt like…I never got any special attention or extra effort by anybody that, you know, to help me figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up.”

Gary has his suspicion for why academic clustering occurs, to help keep student athletes academically eligible. “They want to see success and in their minds it tends to be graduation rate and how do they get people through to graduate and to keep them eligible. So I think you fall under these clusters easier.”
The cluster provided him an excuse to be lazy and an excuse to not give full academic effort and an excuse to just get by. He felt that if it had not been for the cluster his academic experience would have been more meaningful. “It’s sad looking back on it, it facilitates laziness. When you think about it you're with a bunch of people and you kind of know what to expect and it sets the bar low. And for me I think that was one of my biggest regrets of college, for sure.”

Gary contrasts his college experience to that of his master’s program experience. “Post-graduate school is obviously very different, you know, I learned a ton and was very engaged. I went to business school following undergrad and I learned more than I learned in my life. I excelled in school and because it was relevant to what I did every day, you know, to my job and to my career.”

Gary weighs the positive and negatives of clustering. “If the desired result is to keep players eligible and keep them playing and to keep the program going, clustering is definitely a big positive. It’s a positive in terms of camaraderie when you’re trying to build a team. But I think some of the negatives are and I use myself as an example, you know, what would I have done if I would have not been part of a cluster and gone a separate way and pushed myself and gone to business school right after undergrad? So to me that’s the big question. And I think the potential downside to clustering.”

**Biography: Brandon**

Brandon is a 33-year-old Caucasian male. He was born and raised in a suburb in Northern California. He describes his childhood as a middle-class community. Both his parents attended college but did not graduate. Growing up Brandon never envisioned himself going to college; he always thought he’d become a fireman. Nonetheless, his father was a disciplinarian and demanded he earn good grades. At the same time sports was a major factor in his life as well as
religion. Athletically he felt he was above average throughout middle school and high school but not good enough to play Division I college football. After Brandon graduated high school he enrolled and completed one year of junior college while also participating on the football team. At the conclusion of his first year in junior college he was asked to partake in a two-year religious mission in South America. Upon returning home to California he grew three inches in height and after training in the weight room for six months he put on nearly 40 pounds of muscle. It was at this time that another local junior college football team took notice of his stature and asked him to play. He decided to play and had a tremendous year athletically garnering national attention by numerous schools. He initially committed to attend a well-known West Coast public institution but due to a new NCAA rule regarding academic standards he was unable to attend. Brandon was still able to attend other universities in which he chose a well-known public East Coast institution. Brandon graduated with a degree in criminal justice. He is now married with three kids and is a licensed nursing home administrator.

Brandon: Textural Description

Entering college Brandon had a career goal and major in mind. “When I got out to school, believe it or not, I wanted to do the FBI. I had it set in my head that I wanted to be in the FBI. So when the majors came up for me I actually picked criminal justice. So they didn’t say here’s the majors we can offer you. I actually said I want to major in criminal justice.” For Brandon his learning wasn’t as important as receiving good grades. “I wasn’t too focused on learning as I was getting good grades and passing the class. In order to get into the FBI I thought the criminal justice major would look best. You know what I mean, and I’m thinking okay in order to get a good job, you know, if I want to work in criminal justice I should study criminal justice.” Interestingly though it did not take Brandon long to realize he had chosen the “jock
major.” “I kind of realized that, shoot, they throw everybody in criminal justice (laughter) all my classes had football players in it (laughter).”

Brandon gave his academic advisor credit for her willingness to help him search for classes and fit classes into his schedule. However, as he recalls, “I can remember at times she would ask what do you want to learn about and I was like look, I don’t really care what I learned about. Just give me the units and the classes with the easiest teachers you know.” This particular thought process stems from family and friends who said to him it didn’t matter what your major is per se but more so that you graduated. “People always told me it’s all about getting your name on that piece of paper that says you graduated. Rarely do people look up and say what’s your GPA. I mean now when I talk to people and tell them I graduated, it’s not what classes did you take, you know, sometimes it’s what’s your major.”

But at the same time being in a jock major gave Brandon a sense of insecurity as to how he believed professors viewed football players. “The academic departments hated the athletic department. It’s like some teachers you didn’t tell you played football. When we went to class the dumb guys on the football team hung out together. I was the kid in the corner by myself. I didn’t want to be seen sitting with those guys. I didn’t want to be lumped in as a football player, you know what I mean, cuz they looked down on football players.”

Conversely, Brandon recognized the personal benefits of being in a cluster. “There was definitely benefits cuz at the same time you always had someone in there you could talk to. You always knew someone in every class and it made things a lot easier whether it be getting rides to football (practice) afterwards or having someone you already knew in the class. I mean for me that was the benefits.” Furthermore, Brandon faced a moral dilemma with receiving tests prior to them being administered. “Even if I felt guilty, it’s like how come I’m busting my ass studying
for this when everyone is getting the answers for nothing. So you know, that was hard for me psychologically trying to….I didn’t want to feel like I was cheating, but at the same time I couldn’t afford to let these jackasses get better grades than me. But what are you supposed to do when they give you the test with all the answers.” Brandon recalls one specific incident where he gave in to cheating. “I remember especially one test was going around and I remember studying for an hour and half and going this is bullshit dude, I’m not going to study for this. The answers are sitting right there in my bag.”

Brandon’s disillusionment with academics was also reinforced by his coaches. Because Brandon was a junior college transfer the expectation of him from his coaches was to play immediately, unlike freshmen. Further, due to another player being injured he was asked to fill in at that position, which he had never played previously. Essentially, he was asked by his coaches to compromise school for the sake of football. “I had to learn the whole playbook in less than four weeks from when I got there from when our first game was! And literally I can remember at times, coaches said okay don’t worry about class we’ll take care of your classes. Yeah don’t worry about school this week we gotta get this playbook in.” In particular, Brandon was told not to go to class for a whole week because of a high profile game coming up. I can remember Coach Rodriguez saying, “This is Miami week. You don’t go to school this week. This is Miami week. We study for Miami, this is what we do, we’re going to beat ’em.”

Brandon’s entry into the cluster was his choice though he was unaware that he chose the institution’s athletic-friendly major. Conversely, many of the feelings and experiences he describes are similar to those who were steered into a clustered major by an advisor. Brandon’s experience in the cluster was highlighted by five themes: 1) He encountered the realization and disappointment that he was in the jock major. 2) He was insecure and self-conscious of being in
the jock major. 3) He acknowledged receiving special benefits because he was an athlete. 4) He was faced with the moral dilemma to cheat on tests or not. 5) He felt the coaches sent him mixed messages regarding athletic and academic priorities.

**Brandon: Structural Description**

Brandon’s feelings and thoughts connected with academic clustering are based on his belief that he was an “athlete student.” Brandon believes that the popular thought that football practice is merely two or three hours a day is unequivocally false. He takes into account pre-practice physical treatment, team meetings, individual position meetings, practice, and post-practice meetings that account for at least an eight-hour day. Brandon believes that the daily schedule of a student athlete was indicative of what was the priority. “We were limited in when we could take class. We could only take class between 8 am and 12 noon because the rest of the day is all football stuff.”

Brandon believes that the clustering didn’t happen by chance, but was consciously done. “I think that coaches know. I think the athletic directors and the counselors all know. I mean a lot of these kids that come in and the coaches and stuff look at them as athletes. They don’t ever look at him and say he’s going to raise our graduation. I don’t think anyone does that. I think they look at it as he’s a good football player and how can we get him to stay eligible. I think everybody knows that, it’s a given.”

As a result, Brandon is aware of the implicit role his academic advisor had. “Her job was to keep everybody eligible. That’s her job. She was paid to keep you eligible. And I guarantee that if we had a bunch of dudes becoming ineligible she would lose her job. I mean that’s just how it was.”
For Brandon, his “athlete student” belief was confirmed by the mixed messages he received from his coaches in his first year on the team. The foremost example occurred at the conclusion of Brandon’s first season. During the season Brandon was explicitly told by coaches to skip class and come to the football office to study game and practice film. However, and as ironic as it sounds, he was scolded about his poor grades at the end of the semester. “Once football ended they flipped the script on me, cuz football would end November, first part of December…and then all of a sudden it was like, dude what are you doing (academically)? I felt like going, are you serious (laugh)?

Further compounding Brandon’s belief that he was an athlete first was after he sustained a season-ending leg injury. “At West Virginia I broke my leg at the game. That was really hard for me cuz you go from being this really important person where everyone talks to you. You’d pass a coach in the hallway and they’re like, hey listen when we do this, or hey you did good in this, hey we need to look for this this week, to the day I broke my leg dude. The next day I felt like I was a nobody bro, a nobody to those coaches! It was like, they would walk right past you dude. So I remember calling home to my dad and that psychologically, that messed me up a little bit too. It’s like you know how it is, Vaughn, you’re only as good as good as your last game. Basically you’re only good to them for what you’re worth. And that’s what kind of woke me up and in my mind too and I’m going, you know. I’d love to say that this guy cares about me and I’m sure they did feel bad that I broke my leg and at the same time they’re like there’s nothing we can do about it. We got to move on. You know, it’s kind of a wake up call.”

**Composite Textural Description**

For all participants their family was of particular importance in terms of providing life lessons, discipline, academic expectations, as well as being involved in the college decision-
making process. For four of the seven participants being first-generation college students, a fear of failure was present. They felt that they lacked a certain awareness about the college process, what to expect, and how to navigate college. The most notable fear was the fear of failing out of college. In fact one participant failed out but was reinstated.

For nearly all of the participants education in their early life (pre-high school) was a time when they excelled academically. Interestingly, sports for many of the participants were viewed as a hobby and purely recreational. The general consensus was that they were academically curious, excited about learning, and felt confident academically. Then, at various points between junior high and high school most of the participants experienced a paradigm shift from academics being the focus to that of socialization being the focus—girls, parties, and athletics. This process of socializing usually occurred as a result of trying to “fit in” and a self-realization that they were athletically gifted. Many of the participants felt a particular pride and self-confidence because of their athletic prowess. For instance, Chris noted how football became his “identity.” Eric said that “I played varsity basketball my sophomore year (high school) and seeing my name in the papers and stuff, you know, and started feeling myself and all that (laughter). You start getting, I started getting cocky and letting school fall off a little bit. I mean I wasn’t ever in jeopardy of being ineligible but I knew I wasn’t trying as hard in school as I probably could have. Yeah, sophomore year things started going bad.”

This particular trend of athletics taking precedence continued as they progressed into college. This new paradigm was reinforced for all participants by college coaches who were recruiting them. Every participant said that college coaches seldom spoke of academics during the recruitment process as opposed to athletics. Brandon recalls that “nobody talked about academics (laughter). Nobody ever says, hey, we have a great academic program. No, nobody
said that (laughter).” Reggie recalls that “I never really had them talk to me personally, you could get a good education here. Or, you know, we have the highest graduation rate, none of that stuff. It was more listen, we need you here, we want you here, we like what you can do athletically and the coaches love you. But never to me personally were any coaches saying to me that you gotta graduate. None of them, not one. I don’t remember any of them saying that.”

Further compounding this sentiment were the official recruiting visits that every participant took. An official recruiting visit is allowed by the NCAA as a chance for the prospective student athlete to visit the campus, meet the coaches, and get a sense if the institution would be a good fit for them. However, many of the participants portrayed their official visits to various colleges as having a “party atmosphere” trying to lure them to said college. One particular participant, Michael, says that sex was implicitly offered to him as a means to obtain his commitment to a particular institution. “It wasn’t really like, put it this way, saying girls would, you know, gonna fuck…It was go holler at her and you know and I’m sure you’ll get what you want type of thing. It wasn’t offered as sex on the table right then and there. It was more like go talk to her and see what you can do or whatever. I’m sure you could. It was pretty much out there, they ain’t want to come out and say it was sex.” Though Michael’s experience may be unique, it nonetheless captures the essence of the experience of being a student athlete.

For most participants their adjustment to college was academically challenging. Feelings such as being overwhelmed, unprepared, nervous, afraid of failing, and a rigorous daily schedule resonated with them the most. In fact, all noted that their ability to concentrate on academics was implicitly prohibited due to their football commitments.

Most participants noted how participating athletically was similar to a “full-time job” in terms of hours per week and daily commitments. These hours consisted not only of scheduled
practices and game times but also weight lifting sessions, pre-practice meetings, post-practice meetings, mandatory film study sessions, non-mandatory (but mandatory) film study sessions, treatment (physical therapy), mandatory team breakfast, mandatory team dinners, speed and agility workouts, and travel to and from games. All participants said they easily spent well over forty hours on football-related activities. Not surprisingly, all participants revealed that their academics inevitably suffered.

All but one participant had negative comments regarding the quality of academic guidance received. These negative comments stem from the lack of guidance by their academic advisors. Issues such as not being made aware of different academic majors and possible career paths, as well as the lack of simple conversations to explore their personal academic interests were the primary themes expressed. In fact, two of the participants stated that they were handed their class schedules as freshmen without any input or opportunity to dispute the class selection. Three of the seven were steered into a particular academic major by their advisor. One participant noted that he chose his classes and major based on what his teammates recommended. And only two participants chose their majors without being prompted or steered by their academic advisors.

Conversely many stated that they felt stuck in the major and could not switch majors because they would not graduate within four years. Many also stated that because they were on scholarship they were fearful of the reality that if they switched majors it would take more time than they had; in essence their scholarship would not cover the expense and they would be left without a degree.

For all participants they acknowledged the implicit and explicit benefit that a cluster provided. Foremost among the benefits was a sense of comfort of being in the same classes with
familiar faces. In the event that a participant missed a class they could get notes, assignments, and/or important missed information. On the other hand some of the participants noted that because they were in a cluster they were not forced to make friends outside of the football team. This type of dynamic created a sense of isolation from “regular students.” Also noteworthy, one participant noted how he became relied upon academically by his teammates to a point where he disengaged with academics to relieve himself of the burden of being everyone’s go to person for help and information.

All of the participants found that professors in their major were more partial to them as a result of being members of the athletic program. Of particular interest, all participants spoke about having access to tests prior to them being administered. Though no one knew exactly where the tests were generated from everyone had their opinions ranging from: absolutely no idea, passed down by teammates year to year, fraternities, or possibly professors. Conversely, receiving this benefit stimulated feelings of guilt and laziness for several participants.

**Composite Structural Description**

Being academically clustered for each participant was a confusing reality. Are they a student athlete or an athlete student? This confusion doesn’t necessarily begin at college though it appears college exacerbated this confusion. Rightly or wrongly athletics appears to have taken precedence over academics in a subtle and somewhat divisive manner. Being clustered lead to feelings of embarrassment, loss of control, laziness, ambiguity toward academics, and the inability to articulate career goals and aspirations.

Being a student athlete required extreme physical and mental toughness. All the participants had to balance and make sense of the mixed messages about academic and athletic priorities. Simply put, due to the significant amount of hours given to athletics, the implicit
message was that athletics was more valued than academics. As a result, feelings of disillusionment about academics arose.

Further the academic advisors were viewed as looking out for the best interest of the football program, not the individual student athlete. Specifically, academic advisors were described as not providing sufficient academic guidance. For instance, the lack of communication about various majors, particular career paths, and graduate school was not a part of their message. Many of the participants felt that maintaining eligibility was the primary role of the academic advisors and not much else. Whether or not explicitly expressed, participants knew that they wanted more from their advisor but were unsure how to articulate it and just went along with what the advisor provided.

For many participants they had no idea that the major they were in was a “clustered major” or as some said, “the jock major.” Many did not realize that they had either been steered into or chosen the “jock major” until after a few classes and seeing many of their teammates in the same classes. During this realization a sense of embarrassment of being in a cluster emerged, as well as feelings of shame and disappointment. Conversely, it did not bother others. They felt that even though they were clustered at least they would graduate with a degree.

As each individual moved along within the cluster he found himself more attuned to being an “athlete student.” Through constant reminders of athletic-friendly professors, coaches who demand more time athletically, little control over class selection, and receiving special benefits, the idea of being a “student athlete” was fleeting. More particularly, as the participants realized what was happening with them they noticed the same thing was happening to teammates, which further compounded their sense that being an “athlete student” was normal.
These subtle yet impactful messages constantly challenged how each individual viewed their own academic attitudes and beliefs. For instance this was apparent when each of the participants received tests prior to them being administered. During these times the student athlete was confronted with the enigmatic and moral character question: to cheat or to not cheat. During this contemplation the student athlete tried to understand his values while attempting to justify why it was okay to cheat in the academic atmosphere of which he was a part. All participants justified it as either everybody else is doing it or it gave them a break from studying.

**Synthesis Textural – Structural Description**

The student athletes’ lives during their tenure in college was consumed with athletic responsibilities as well as academic responsibilities; however, these responsibilities were not equally divided as the term “student athlete” tends to suggest. The amount of time required to fulfill their athletic commitments has been described by many of the participants as a “full-time job;” extending beyond the traditional 40-hour work week. For these participants, the time commitment of football impacted their academic responsibilities. It appeared that there was never enough time to meet the needs of both athletics and academics in a sufficient manner. In fact, their respective sport took precedence during their entire tenure as a student athlete requiring numerous hours spent on playing games, travel, practice, film study, team meetings, weight lifting, physical therapy, mandatory breakfasts, and mandatory dinners.

For these student athletes their academic experience was directly impacted by the culture of the football program’s implicit message that their academic responsibilities were secondary. These perceptions were perpetuated from multiple actors in the college athletic system. Notably, these perceptions began with college scouts during the recruitment process and continued with coaches, academic advisors, faculty members, and teammates alike once on campus.
Idealistically, we assume that coaches should set a positive tone regarding academic priorities. Further, we assume that academic advisors are there to guide, assist, and nurture the academic aspect of the student athlete. However, this was not the case. In particular, many interpreted being in a cluster as connected to a plausible ulterior motive to ensure academic eligibility and an adequate graduation rate for the majority of the student athletes.

The environment that these student athletes experienced had its own set of rules and values separate from all other students. It seemed that no matter how often the term “student athlete” was used to describe them they knew they were different. Conversely, it should be noted that different isn’t necessarily a negative association. The participants in this study chose the path they were on to a certain degree. The experience of being a student athlete created a different and exclusive experience than that of the general student body. This experience of being able to continue playing a game they loved at the highest amateur level, a free education, and the possibility of playing professional football was a tradeoff in that they missed out on some traditional college experiences. They knew that playing a sport, in particular football, would be demanding physically, mentally, emotionally and academically, though they could not conceive to what degree until they were actively in the experience. As a result, this is where the dichotomy of academics and athletics emerged.

For all of the participants the entry point into the cluster was at the conclusion of their sophomore year leading into their junior year. Or if they were a junior college transfer they entered the cluster upon enrolling in the institution. The decision to pursue a certain major was reflected in the following scenarios: 1) It was their sole decision. 2) They were steered by an advisor. 3) Logistically they chose the major based upon the amount of credits they currently had
that counted most toward a degree. But interestingly, none of the participants knew that they were entering a cluster or comprehended what a cluster was.

For them, academic clustering had a positive and a negative impact on their individual growth and college experience. Clusters can positively create a sense of comfort and familiarity with having teammates in the same classes allowing student athletes to create further camaraderie. But on the other hand clustering was viewed negatively. In particular, many of the participants expressed the mental stress caused by being in a cluster. For example, being labeled a “dumb jock,” feeling “stuck in a major,” “losing control of their lives,” to “guilt” because they consciously cheated on test(s).

Nonetheless, as most of the participants noted the key to academic success is ultimately the responsibility of the student athletes themselves. This acknowledgment implies that being in an academic cluster does not preclude an individual from giving full effort academically, seeking out mentors, and exploring career options. However, many noted that because they were so young, immature, and unsure how to approach college their academic advisor should have invested more time into establishing a structured academic plan. And because none of these participants were given the attention that they felt they deserved the cluster became a safe haven. In effect, the cluster provided a quasi-coping tool to help alleviate the mental and physical stress of being a student athlete.

The essence of academic clustering for these student athletes was rooted in balancing expectations of academics and athletics. The expectation was to succeed athletically without question as the majority of their daily lives was consumed with athletic-related activities. Likewise, they were expected to perform on par academically with athletics though not nearly as much time was allocated to class and/or studying. Athletics and academics are both important
but there was not sufficient time to devote equally to both. Therefore, academic clustering was a means to balance out expectations allowing for athletics and academics to coexist.

Chapter V. Conclusions, Implications, and Limitations

The purpose of this study was to capture the experience of former Division I student athletes who were academically clustered. The interviews allowed each participant the opportunity to speak openly and candidly about their experiences as a clustered student athlete. Within this chapter a summary of the study is included. Next, five conclusions are discussed. Also discussed are the implications for practice, the implications for future research, the limitations, and the researcher’s concluding thoughts.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of academic clustering through the lens of former student athletes. Academic clustering is objectively defined by Case, Greer, and Brown (1987) as when a significant percentage, typically 25% or greater, of student athletes on one team have the same major. However, little research has investigated the experiences of student athletes who have been academically clustered. The research on academic clustering is based heavily on objective data describing the frequency of clustering. The literature lacks the student athlete’s perspective.

Research indicates that student athletes involved in Division I revenue-generating sports men’s basketball and football have a tendency to be academically clustered (Case, Greer, & Brown 1987; Fountain and Finley, 2009; Mitten, Musselman, & Burton; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010; Schneider, Ross, & Fisher, 2010). This study contributes to the body of knowledge related
to the experience of student athletes being clustered in Division I revenue-generating sports. The findings are valuable to college and university administrators, athletic administrators, current student athletes, and prospective student athletes to gain a better understanding of the experiences of the student athlete population. Although this research focused on the experiences of Division I student athletes, this information may also prove noteworthy for individuals who are a part of non-revenue-generating sports as well as non-Division I institutions.

The literature review included information that framed the study, information specific to Division I athletics, the student athlete experience, and policies and rules. Further, the literature review consisted of two main sections, the body and the summation. In particular, the body focused on the concepts of the Argument of Discovery and the Argument of Advocacy. The Argument of Discovery section discussed and explained what is known about academic clustering. In other words, the researcher presented the current state of knowledge about academic clustering. The Argument of Advocacy section analyzed and critiqued the knowledge gained from the synthesis of the data produced by the discovery argument to answer the research question: What is the lived experience of student athletes who have been academically clustered?

A qualitative research design was selected to understand the lived experience of student athletes who have been academically clustered. According to Creswell (2007) qualitative research is conducted because a detailed understanding is needed and it can only be accomplished by talking directly to people allowing them to tell their stories. It is conducted when the researcher wants to write in a literary, flexible style that conveys stories. It is conducted because the researcher wants to understand the context and settings in which participants in a study address. And it is conducted when quantitative measures and statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem.
The study utilized phenomenology, which served as the methodological guide throughout the study. Phenomenology is understood as an approach that involves returning to the experience in order to obtain a comprehensive description that provides the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). More specifically, Heidegger’s method of hermeneutic phenomenology was utilized as the framework that supports promoting the student athlete’s voice because it is descriptive in nature. Moreover, the application of Heidegger’s phenomenology was a means to investigate the lived experience of others while also incorporating the researcher’s pre-understanding to add richness to the overall investigation. Pre-understanding is not something a person can step outside of or put aside, as it is understood as already being with us in the world. Heidegger went as far as to claim that nothing can be encountered without reference to a person’s background understanding (Laverty, 2003).

Institutional Theory provided the lens to frame the issue of academic clustering and to answer the research question. Institutional theory allowed the researcher to situate academic clustering not as an isolated incident but connected to rules, practices and norms implicitly and perhaps explicitly set by the institution of college athletics. Institutional theory considers the processes by which structures, including schemas, rules, norms, and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior (Scott, 2004). The major function of theory is to provide a model or map that helps to explain why the world is the way it is (Maxwell, 2005). It is in this respect institutional theory can examine the norms that shape the student athlete experience. Accordingly, this study used the three pillars of institutional theory as defined by Richard Scott (1995). These pillars are: Regulative, Normative, and Cognitive as illustrated in Figure 1.1.
Seven former Division I student athletes who participated in football accounted for the participants in this study. They were “purposefully selected” (Creswell, 2009) to participate based on their experience with clustering. Further, each participant had first-hand experience with being academically clustered. They were willing to participate in one-on-one interviews with the researcher. They allowed the researcher to tape-record all interviews. And they all agreed that the data can be published as long as their identity is not revealed. The participants took part in a series of three interviews that were semi-structured as recommended by Seidman (1998) for phenomenological interviews. All interviews took place via “Skype phone” and were digitally recorded.

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The transcribed data was uploaded to MAXqda, a qualitative data analysis software program. Transcripts were analyzed and coded using Moustakas’ (1994) modification of methods of analysis suggested by Stevick, Colaizzi, and Keen. It was through this data analysis process that the essence of the participants’ lived experiences were understood. After analyzing, coding, and organizing the data, the information was arranged into textural and structural descriptions for each participant, followed by composite textural and composite structural descriptions for the entire pool of participants. A synthesis of the composite textural and composite structural descriptions capturing the essence of the lived experience of being academically clustered completed the analysis.
Conclusions

The following research question guided this study: *What is the lived experience of former Division I student athletes who have been academically clustered?* When seeking to answer this question, institutional theory provided the lens to interpret, analyze, and answer this question. As a result five conclusions have been drawn:

Conclusion 1: Academic clustering is an implicit consequence of the required athletic schedule.

Conclusion 2: Academic clustering is one method used to maintain athletic eligibility of student athletes.

Conclusion 3: Academic clustering facilitated indifference toward academic achievement.

Conclusion 4: Academic clustering further isolated student athletes from the general student population and a traditional college experience.

Conclusion 5: Student athletes lacked in-depth academic support to help realize their academic potential.

**Conclusion 1: Academic clustering is an implicit consequence of the required athletic schedule.**

Upon entering college these participants were submerged into a normative culture where they were expected to conform to the demands of their sport. These norms existed in both an implicit and explicit manner to ensure that the greater good of the team was served. Through the lens of the normative pillar a cultural expectation was created where each participant was expected to conform to the daily schedule necessary to compete at the Division I level. Commonalities that emerged from the participants’ schedule included attending daily team breakfast, pre-practice film study, pre-practice meetings, physical therapy, weight lifting sessions, post-practice meetings, post-practice film study, team dinner, traveling to the team
hotel Friday nights for home games and traveling to the airport Friday afternoons for away games. All the while, they still had to attend classes and find time to study.

Interestingly, there are congruencies between how the participants’ spoke about their daily schedule in this study and what previous research states. Comeuax (2011) acknowledges that college coaches expect a great deal from their student athletes ranging from practices, travel, team meetings, and midweek and weekend game schedules. He further notes how student athletes often spend more than 40 hours a week on sport-related activities, as well as coping with the mental fatigue, physical exhaustion, and nagging injuries. This falls in line with one participant’s sentiment that college athletics is a “full-time job” with days lasting “10-15 hours.” Similarly, another participant, Brandon, believes that the daily schedule of a student athlete was indicative of what was the priority. “We were limited in when we could take class. We could only take class between 8 am and 12 noon because the rest of the day is all football stuff.”

Considering the preceding literature and the sentiments of the participants, it appears that academic clustering is therefore seen as one consequence of the daily athletic schedule. In particular, classes must not conflict with scheduled athletic commitments. Afternoon to late evenings are reserved for athletic commitments leaving only morning to early afternoon for classes. Because of such a short window of time, classes and majors must be able to fit within this schedule; if not, they cannot be pursued. For example, majors that require afternoon labs, typically the sciences, cannot be logistically pursued. As a result, student athletes are limited to the majors they can logistically declare. It is in this sense that student athletes are implicitly steered or only have a few majors to choose from, which results in a cluster.
Conclusion 2: Academic clustering is one method used to maintain the athletic eligibility of student athletes.

In order to participate in college athletics student athletes are required by NCAA policy to maintain a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 as well as other possible university and team standards. Through the lens of the regulative pillar these rules can be seen as a method to keep academics central to the student athlete experience. Conversely, if student athletes fail to maintain these minimum standards they can be placed on academic probation and lose their scholarship. Further, if a team fails to comply and falls below the NCAA’s APR standards it will be subject to financial penalty, loss of scholarships, and even post-season bans. It is within this context that the regulative policy of the NCAA implicitly prompts the emergence of academic clustering. In particular, this becomes an issue when clustering is used as a tool to maintain athletic eligibility at the sacrifice of a meaningful education.

The participants each spoke of their assumption that clustering is not by chance but by implicit design and perhaps explicitly employed by athletic administration to maintain the eligibility of student athletes. For example, in Michael’s narrative he noted how his advisor explicitly steered him into his major by saying that it was an easier degree to earn. Likewise, Eric was told by his advisor to pursue a particular major.

Similarly, the literature concurs with many of the participants’ experiences that revenue ultimately propels clustering. In a study conducted by Purdy, Eitzen, and Hufnagel (1982) they concluded that the serious and far-ranging financial consequences of "big-time" sports also increase the likelihood that coaches will recruit exceptional athletes who are unqualified for the academic demands of college. As a consequence coaches are then faced with keeping these marginal student athletes eligible. In Beamon’s (2008) in-depth qualitative participant-observation study of former student athletes many of the participants stated that any reference to
education was directly related to eligibility. Most of the participants (15 of 20) mentioned choosing majors with courses classified as "easy to pass" or departments that were "athlete-friendly." Considering the preceding literature and the sentiments of the participants, it appears that academic clustering is therefore seen as a method of maintaining athletic eligibility.

**Conclusion 3: Academic clustering facilitated indifference toward academic achievement.**

Through the lens of the cognitive pillar student athletes developed the perception that academics was secondary. Initially, most of the student athletes’ academic outlook ranged from being somewhat interested to enthusiastic. However, as the student athletes progressed year to year they grew to perceive academics with indifference and their interest and enthusiasm waned. This indifference and perception was an implicit result of being in a cluster.

For those student athletes who were steered into their major their indifference was immediate. These student athletes lacked any interest in the major and could not connect their academics to particular career paths. They felt stuck and not able to grow academically. To compound this indifference they experienced what student athletes who chose their major also felt. In particular, they realized they were in the “football major,” which generated feelings of shame and self-consciousness. Eric said that “sometimes I would sit in my room and think, damn man, I didn’t want to be that dude, I didn’t want to be that dude with the communication major and here I am a criminal justice major and I’m that dude in that major.”

They realized that because so much of their time was dedicated to football, it implicitly sent a message that academics was secondary to athletics. For example, Brandon states, “I can remember at times coaches said okay don’t worry about class we’ll take care of your classes. Yeah don’t worry about school this week we gotta get this playbook in.” Further, because these participants were benefactors of special benefits such as having access to tests before they were
administered this exacerbated their indifference. Many felt that they no longer needed to study. For example, Reggie states that “it was the first time I ever cheated on a test in my life. How they (teammates) got the test, I don’t know, but it sure was the real deal and I used it (laughter). I’m not an idiot.”

Interestingly, there are congruencies between how the participants’ spoke about their indifference and what previous research states. As concluded in Adler and Adler’s (1985) in-depth qualitative participant-observation study of a major college basketball program they found that the student athletes start off with high standards for themselves academically but become overwhelmed by the demands and intensity of their sport. Likewise, they note that the peer subculture exacerbates the situation by devaluing academic involvement and neutralizing academic failure. As a consequence the student athletes responded by gradually withdrawing from their commitment to academics. Considering the preceding literature and the sentiments of the participants, it appears that academic clustering can lead to indifference toward academic achievement.

**Conclusion 4: Academic clustering can lead to isolation from the general student body.**

The dual commitments of athletics and academics created a lifestyle of implicit and perhaps explicit isolation for these participants. It can be inferred by the description of each participant that due to their rigorous schedule it was difficult for them to foster any substantial relationships with faculty, student groups, and non-athlete peers or partake in career exploration opportunities.

Through the lens of the cognitive pillar, student athletes had the perception that developing friendships and being a part of the academic community was not necessary. The cluster in effect created and perpetuated a homogenous group through implicit self-isolation. In
particular, the cluster provided each student athlete a built-in network of friends to do assignments, study, and share notes with. For example, Chris states that “it was nice at times to have that network of people that have the same major and you can say hey I missed class today what was the assignment. And you know people had your back. You didn’t have to really socialize with the general students all the time to get the information. You weren’t forced to make friends with people for information. Whereas you can text your teammate and get the information right away.”

Through the lens of the normative pillar being isolated was seen as normal. For example, Reggie stated that “especially in college you’re living life you don’t really, like now, putting things together, why are we all clustered in this class. You don’t think about things like that, you just go onto class. You never ask question when you’re playing sports, working out and all that stuff. You’re not really thinking, like damn, why are we all in the same class, it was never a thought, we never had conversations why everybody is in the same it was just, it was what it was.”

Interestingly the emergence of the term “academic clustering” developed from student athletes being isolated. Specifically, in Case, Greer and Brown (1987) they note how Case, a prospective professor at the time was told he would be responsible for teaching a class that caters to student athletes. As found in Adler and Adler (1985) their study’s results found that the student athletes find themselves socially isolated from other students because of their geographic and temporal separation and their physical and cultural differences. Considering the preceding literature and the sentiments of the participants, it appears that academic clustering can lead to isolation.
Conclusion 5: Student athletes lacked in-depth academic support to help them make informed decisions regarding academic path and career path.

The participants were bound by enormous expectations to exceed athletically. Thus, it could be argued that the resources and time given to student athletes athletically far outweigh the resources and time given to them academically. In particular, student athlete academic support services in theory should be the central resource hub for their academic needs ranging from individual counseling and tutors to career preparation. However, as noted by all participants, this was not the case. In fact, it appeared that their athletic academic advisors were there in name only and not in action. Harold stated that “they just gave me classes and told me what I need to take and these are the days you’re going to be in class that fits yours schedule and that was it.” When the researcher asked Gary if he had a relationship with his academic advisor he said, “not really much at all (laughing). You know, I would see her occasionally for my classes and it was a matter of just kind of managing our class load and that was it.”

Through the lens of the cognitive pillar many of the participants recognized that it was partly up to them as individuals to seek out academic guidance and be proactive as they were in fact still students who needed guidance. Reggie stated that “I can’t expect an academic advisor to be worried about my life if I’m not worried about my life.” However, many perceived it should have been the responsibility of the academic advisors, who are the adults, to engage them no matter how difficult and tedious this process may have seemed.

This lack of support appears more of an institutionalized norm as demonstrated in Benson’s (2000) study of student athletes. Benson’s participants noted how they felt from their freshman year to graduation. In particular, they said they received implicit and/or explicit messages that school was not important, that they were not considered intellectually capable
students, were not expected to do well in school, and were not cared about as individual student learners.

Based on the responses from the participants, only one could articulate what major he desired and connect it to a post-college ambition. However, it should be noted that he came into college with that ambition and that it was not cultivated while in college. For the remainder of the participants, after four years of college, they were all left with the figurative blank stares of not knowing what they were going to do post-college. Considering the preceding literature and the sentiments of the participants, it appears that academic clustering does not foster academic exploration, academic growth, or career preparedness.

Implications for Practice

The study’s conclusions have implications for multiple constituencies within higher education, including student athletes, academic advisors, coaches, and prospective student athletes. Exploring the experiences of former student athletes who were academically clustered provides valuable information for those who advise student athletes and student athletes themselves in terms of understanding how to navigate college academics. The individuals who participated in this study were not limited to a single race, socio-economic background, academic ambition, or professional ambition. Likewise, academic clustering is not limited to a single act, a single person, or a single feeling. It can and perhaps should be viewed as a series of interrelated practices as noted in Benson’s (2000) study, Constructing academic inadequacy. Through open dialogue Benson was able to report that the marginal academic performance of these student athletes was a phenomenon created by a series of interrelated practices engaged in
by significant members of the university community including peers, coaches, academic advisors, professors, and the student athletes themselves.

Current student athletes and prospective student athletes can utilize the study’s conclusions when contemplating how to pursue their academics: from understanding the value of thinking critically about their academic endeavors, searching for majors, as well as connecting majors to various career paths. The study revealed that most student athletes were unable to articulate their academic interest or career interests. Consequently, student athletes must be proactive in facilitating their own academic and career development. In particular they should curtail the notion that they “owe” their coaches for giving them a scholarship and neglecting their academics as found in the study conducted by Purdy, Eitzen, and Hufnagel (1982). As noted by many of this study’s participants, athletes stated they should have taken academic initiative, pursued their interests, and actively pursue mentors who can help them reach their goals.

This study is important for athletic academic advisors who may be unaware of the impact of clustering, short term and long term. The study revealed that academic advisors were not as helpful as they could have been in nurturing academic development and career development leading to academic detachment. This form of academic detachment was highlighted in Adler and Adler’s (1985) study concluding that student athletes make pragmatic adjustments based on athletic, social, and classroom experiences leading them to abandon their earlier academic aspirations and gradually resigning themselves to inferior academic performance. If academic advisors are able to be more conscious of the consequences of clustering they can perhaps reduce chances of academic detachment by re-evaluating their personal practices and philosophies about how to approach the student athlete’s academic pursuits.
College coaches may find this information insightful as a means to better understand the direct and indirect impact they have on their student athletes. In particular, all the participants discussed the lack of involvement and message about academics that came from their coaches. For example, a USA Today article, *College Athletes Studies Guided Toward 'Major in Eligibility'* (Steeg, Upton, Bohn, & Berkowitz, 2008) highlights many areas in which academic clustering can impact a student athlete. An excerpt from an interview of a former football student athlete, Steven Cline, articulates his experience and perception of the college athletic system that steered him away from his initial major, pre-veterinary, into an easier and friendlier major, sociology. He states:

“The whole time I was at Kansas State, I felt stuck — stuck in football, stuck in my major. … I'd tell current student athletes to choose a career — a real career for their life after football and work toward it. Don't let anybody or anything take you off that path. Don't fool yourselves into thinking (you're) going to play (sports) professionally. Now I look back and say, well, what did I really go to college for? Crap classes you won't use the rest of your life? Social science is really nothing specific. … I was majoring in football.”

For most of these student athletes playing professional football will not be an option, thus having a sound academic foundation will be a key factor in their post-college life. Coaches should then be mindful that they have the strongest voice to reach these student athletes. If coaches are sincerely interested in the overall well-being of their student athletes, they should consider feasible options that will establish and reinforce genuine academic exploration and career development.
The results of this study add to the current research on student athletes in relation to the phenomenon of academic clustering. The study provides information that allows college athletic administrators, coaches, and student athletes to reevaluate current practices and how student athletes pursue academic achievement. The paramount benefit of this study is that it allowed the student athlete to share his voice unlike previous research. Previous research is based heavily on objective data and the frequency of academic clustering. For example, Sanders and Hildenbrand (2010) conducted a quantitative multinomial logistic regression of football players' academic major selections to determine if academic clustering actually existed as noted by popular press articles. The seasons 1996, 2001, and 2006 were selected for analysis in which Chi-square was used to identify statistical significance. Their results suggested that academic clustering existed within intercollegiate athletics when compared to the general students at the respective institution.

In contrast, this study sought the voices of the student athletes to glean their experience of being academically clustered. Infusing phenomenology into academic clustering provided the opportunity to debate the realities and perceptions of this phenomenon by not accepting things as they are or what they are thought to be. The narratives that often describe the student athletes are often general or depicted in numbers and statistics that are constructed without the participation of the student athletes themselves. In contrast to this narrative, a counter narrative through phenomenology enabled the student athletes to engage in a critical discourse about their relationship with and about academic clustering and intercollegiate athletics, which led to a raised consciousness and deeper understanding for them and the researcher.
Implications for Future Research

In two peer reviewed articles, Johnson (1985) along with Sharp and Sheilly (2008) both ask what are the obligations of the university to educate student athletes? Is it the duty of the university to help the student athlete earn any degree regardless if they “legitimately earned it” or not and does that constitute an education? Or does an education constitute being an active participant in deciding your own major, choosing your own electives, and setting up your classes as you see fit? This study on the lived experience of student athletes who have been academically clustered has implicitly answered some of these questions. However, there is much more that needs to be understood. The student athlete’s voice was brought to the forefront demonstrating the value of their thoughts, opinions, and sentiment. In particular, this illustrates the need to continue research studies where they are the subject and not the object of discussion. The potential to extend the research of clustering exists not only in terms of the student athlete perspective, but also in capturing the perspectives of coaches, academic advisors, faculty, and other athletic administrators who are actors within the dynamic of academic clustering. Pursuing their voices will allow for a richer understanding and comprehensive view of clustering.

Conversely, because intercollegiate football presents unique characteristics unlike any other sports in terms of team size, coaching staff size, and revenue-generating expectations these student athletes’ experiences may differ greatly. Hence, there is opportunity to conduct research on the multitude of other intercollegiate sports by applying the same phenomenological method. Moreover, conducting phenomenological research studies on Division II and III student athletes can also prove insightful in distinguishing between levels of intercollegiate athletic sports in terms of the experiences of student athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators. Doing these
comparative studies will enable the intercollegiate athletic community to have a greater sense of the breadth and depth that academic clustering presents across all divisions.

Academic clustering can also be explored through other conceptual lenses such as critical theory that can provide another voice to the student athlete. Critical theory is a conceptual framework that focuses on understanding the total existence of groups of people and on explaining cultural, economic, and political contexts (Hyter, 2008). First coined by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, critical theory challenged the biased nature of all knowledge, specifically knowledge that was transmitted via dominant institutions such as schools and the media (Morrell, 2009). For example, from a critical theorist perspective, questions such as the following might be asked: Is academic clustering necessarily in the best interest of the student athlete or the administrators and advertisers? Does clustering contradict the academic mission of college, or does it take away from true academic enrichment?

As presented in the current literature and this study, academic clustering appears to be a symptom of the dichotomy between academics and athletics. Clustering if exercised as a means to “game” the system in terms of genuine academic pursuits threatens the very foundation of higher education. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will complement the current research on clustering qualitatively by adding the student athlete’s voice.

Limitations

This study has several plausible limitations that potentially influenced these findings. The first limitation is relative to its generalizability because the participants represent a select group of academically clustered student athletes whose views could potentially be different from other student athletes who were academically clustered. Atieno (2009) noted that one of the main disadvantages of qualitative approaches to mass analysis is that such findings cannot be extended
to wider populations with the same degree of certainty as quantitative analyses. This is because the findings of the research are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to chance. Accordingly, this study encompassed only seven participants, which under a quantitative lens would be considered a limitation. The findings do not represent all Division I student athletes or football players who have been academically clustered. Likewise, the participants of this study represent a homogenous group because all attended the same public northeast university. The characteristics of this institution, its athletic culture, coaches philosophies, academic departments, and student athletes’ experience cannot necessarily be generalized for other universities.

Maxwell (2005) states there are two types of threats to trustworthiness that are often raised in relation to qualitative studies: researcher bias and reactivity. Researcher bias is trying to understand how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusion of the study. Reactivity is the effect of the researcher on the individuals studied. Essentially, reactivity is trying to understand how the researcher is influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inference the researcher can draw from the interview.

Thus, another limitation to consider is the researcher’s personal experience with being academically clustered. The researcher was able to bring his own understanding and experiences to the research process as deemed appropriate by Heidegger’s phenomenology method. This allowed the researcher to bring his pre-understanding to the study. In contrast, Husserlian Phenomenology purists would argue that Heidegger’s method is flawed because it dismisses “epoche” or “bracketing,” which is a salient limitation.
Concluding Thoughts

The process of conducting this original research has been simultaneously demanding, enlightening, and humbling. This process lasted over a year and has challenged the researcher to think critically about intercollegiate athletics, re-examine his own personal beliefs, and reflect upon his experience as a former Division I student athlete. Conducting this study not only allowed the researcher to explore a topic of great personal interest but a phenomenon that he personally experienced.

As a former Division I student athlete, the researcher has the utmost admiration for all student athletes who sacrifice so much for the sport that they love, regardless of sport or division. But in particular, he has a certain affinity for the Division I football student athlete. They are consumed with responsibilities and expectations unlike any other student or student athlete on campus. Even though they volunteered themselves to participate in college football, nothing could have prepared them for the demands placed on their mind, body, or spirit.

Contrary to popular belief, student athletes, in particular the seven men who participated in this study, did value education as did the researcher. However, the culture of college athletics made it difficult for these men to nurture their academic being. Although this does not exempt them from their academic responsibilities, it illustrates the pressures and norms that have been created over the years that make academics secondary to athletics.

The participating former student athletes had important experiences to share. The researcher is indebted to these men who allowed him to explore their inner thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences. They provided so much to the researcher and even more to the greater academic community. In fact, some of these men even said they also benefitted from participating in this study. Many said they never critically examined their experience as a college
athlete prior to participating in this study. Further, many never looked at college athletics and their experience through the lens of something possible divisive.

Lastly, the researcher is thankful for the journey and pleased with the results this academic exercise has provided him. It is the researcher’s passion for college athletics and student athletes that fueled his ambition to undertake in this research study. It is the researcher’s intent to publish sections of this study in various journals and magazines. The researcher is excited and looks forward to seeing how this study can be of value to athletic administrators, coaches, and student athletes.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview One – Focused life history
1. Tell me about your parents’ educational background.
2. Tell me about your childhood as it relates to athletics.
3. Tell me about your academic experience in grade school and middle school.
4. Tell me about your high school athletic experience.
5. Tell me about your high school academic experience.
6. Tell me about any travel team or AAU experience.
7. Tell me about any mentors or family members that were influential in your life growing up.
8. Tell me about any perceived special treatment or benefits you received as a result of your athletic ability from teachers, staff, family, friends, and fans.
9. How did that special treatment influence your outlook on life?
10. Was college something that you always aspired to? If so, why?
11. What factors were most important to you in selecting a college and why?
12. What factors were least important to you in selecting a college and why?
13. Tell me about your academic expectation of college before enrolling. What were your goals?
14. Tell me about your athletic expectation of college. What were your goals?
15. Tell me about the college recruitment process.
16. Tell me about the sales pitch that coaches pitched to you.
17. Tell me about your “official campus visit” experiences.
18. Tell me about the academic emphasis coaches spoke of during the recruitment process.
19. Tell me about why you chose the school you signed with.
20. What influence did the coaches have in your final decision?
21. What influence did your family have in selecting your college?

Interview Two – Details of experiences
1. Tell me about your adjustment to entering college.
2. Tell me about your daily schedule in season.
3. Tell me about your daily schedule in the off season.
4. Tell me about the importance of academics as you began your college tenure.
5. Tell me about time spent on athletic-related activities as opposed to academic-related activities.
6. Tell me about your coach’s views on academic achievement.
7. Tell me about your relationship with your academic advisor.
8. Tell me what upperclassmen were saying about choosing a major or their major.
9. What do you believe the general consensus was amongst your teammates regarding academics? Did you share the same view? Please explain.
10. Tell me about your career goals at the time.
11. Tell me about the majors you were contemplating pursuing.
12. Tell me how and why you selected your academic major.
13. Tell me about any conversations you had with a coach or academic advisor to pursue a particular major or set of classes for the sake of eligibility.
14. Tell me about the relationship you had with professors in your major.
15. Tell me about any special benefits, privileges, or treatment you received as a result of being in your particular major.
16. As a clustered student athlete did you ever feel guilty that you cheated yourself by receiving the special benefit? How did you justify it in your mind? Please explain.
17. If it wasn’t for being in your particular major, how do you think you would have done academically?
18. As a clustered student athlete did you ever consciously not study or prepare for class or exams because you knew you would still pass? Please explain.
19. As a result of being clustered willingly or not, did your views of academics change? Please explain.
20. Did any underclassmen ever ask you about picking a major? What advice did you give them?
21. Can you share any particular stories you have about being clustered?

Interview Three – Reflection on the meaning
1. Did you consider yourself a “student athlete” in the idealistic sense of the term? If so, why?
2. Is clustering an unspoken phenomenon? Please explain.
3. Tell me about your views of the system of college athletics – in particular how does clustering happen, who enables this to happen, and are student athletes also responsible for its existence? Please explain.
4. In your view, are there external forces that influence academic clustering? If so who and/or what?
5. What are the positives of clustering?
6. What are the negatives of clustering?
7. In some cases, is academic clustering an inevitable phenomenon? Please explain.
8. In some cases is academic clustering a necessary evil for some student athletes? Please explain.
9. Did you ever publicly or privately contemplate why so many of your teammates or other athletes were in the same classes? Please explain.
10. Do you believe you received a quality education? Why?
11. As a result of being a part of a cluster were you ever disenchanted by academics as being secondary to athletics? Please explain.
12. Describe how you explored academic interests?
13. Please describe your coach’s philosophy about academics. What did he say or do to reinforce his beliefs?
14. Do you believe you had a realistic or unrealistic expectation of playing professional sports? How did this expectation impact your attitude toward academics? Please explain.
15. How has your college educational background prepared you for your career?
16. What advice would you give to freshmen Division I student athletes regarding their academics?
17. If you could go back to your freshman year, what would you do differently?
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Date: _________________  
Dear _________________,

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experience of academic clustering through the lens of former student athletes. Academic clustering is objectively defined by Case and Greer (1987) as when a significant percentage, typically 25% or greater, of student athletes on one team have the same major. Though a cluster is not wholly unethical, it does raise concerns as to why student athletes are clustered. Utilizing a phenomenological approach this proposed study goes beyond what academic clustering is, but more so explores the experience of clustered student athletes.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place over the telephone and will consist of three sessions that will take approximately 90 minutes each. All sessions will be tape recorded and transcribed at a later date. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to answer a series of questions about your experience of being clustered into your academic major.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. At the conclusion of the research project all tape recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and/or pseudonyms and will not identify you, your college, or any individual as being of this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time. You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Vaughn Calhoun (857) 212-2893, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. David Szabla (617) 866-9100, the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: (617) 373-7570, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Vaughn A. Calhoun
Appendix C: Telephone Recruitment Script

Recruitment Phone Script

Hello,

As a current doctoral student at Northeastern University a part of my requirements to graduate is to conduct an original research study. Thus, my research interest is to examine the lived experience of former Division I student athletes who have been academically clustered. Academic clustering is a phenomenon in which a number of student athletes, typically 25% or more, are implicitly or explicitly placed in an academic major because it is considered “athletic friendly” so that the student athlete is on a path of least academic resistance in order to focus on his athletic commitments. The title of my research study is *A Phenomenological Study of Division I Student Athletes and the Experience of Academic Clustering.* I am proposing to interview former Division I male student athletes who participated in either football or men’s basketball to obtain their experience of being academically clustered.

Specifically, you are being reached out to because, 1. You are a former collegiate student athlete 2. You participated in football or men’s basketball and 3. You may have been academically clustered. Because I was a clustered student athlete, I have a genuine interest in gaining a deeper understanding of the experience of being clustered therefore filling a gap in the current literature that is void of the student athlete’s perspective of being clustered. The current literature only speaks of the frequency of clustering.

Your agreement to participate in this research study will require you to take part in a series of three interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes each. These interviews will be arranged at a mutually convenient time and you will be tape recorded so that I will have an accurate account of your description, which will be transcribed at a later date. I will also take notes during our time together. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be used in this study, and you will have the opportunity to review any and all of the audiotape transcriptions for accuracy. You may withdraw at any time if you feel uncomfortable or no longer wish to participate. If you can confirm that you were a clustered student athlete according to the above description and wish to participate I will forward via email a consent form that you must sign, date, and return to me. Also note that no compensation will be provided to you for participating.

I am happy to answer any questions that you have regarding the previous statements made and/or about your potential participation in this process.

Thank you