COMPLETE OR COMPETE: UNDERSTANDING AND UTILIZING STUDENT-ATHLETES’ MOTIVATION TO GRADUATE FROM COLLEGE

A thesis presented

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Abstract

Student-athletes are a unique and understudied population at institutions of higher education. They are expected to not only perform in their academics, but also excel on the sports field. The rationale for this research was to investigate student-athletes’ motivation at institutions of higher education. This study brought to light where student-athletes succeed or fail academically and athletically, where their motivation came from that made them successful, and what elements made it difficult for student-athletes to find success at their university? This interpretive phenomenological analysis gathered data from six student-athletes during one-on-one interviews at a Massachusetts institution of higher education that discovered the human experience, extracted information, linked the participant’s experience and found common themes, and had the participants reflect on their experiences as a student-athlete, their academic expectations, their athletic expectations, and their own motivation. Evidence revealed across all six participant’s experiences; Commitment, Support systems, Routine, and Future success. These themes were how the participants in this research study continued to stay motivated and found success while they were student-athletes. The implications of this research study are as follows; student-athletes needed good character traits engrained in them continuously through their experience at their university, the university needed to set up support systems, like team rigor and athletic advisors to further guide student-athletes outside their families, and universities should have a mandatory freshmen class that helps them set up a routine and schedule and helps them with their organizational skills and practice better time management.
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Dedication

To my Mom and Dad, who constantly love and support me. Both of you have taught me to aim high, and to work hard for what I want. Mom, thank you for bringing me to the library and showing me the importance of learning for the sake of learning. And Dad, thank you for teaching me to push through the hard times, because when you put the extra effort in the bank you can withdraw it later, when you really need it. If my research has taught me anything it’s commitment, grit, perseverance, and hard work are not only important for student-athletes but for all students. Lucky for me you both passed those traits down to me from a young age. You cannot imagine how much I love you.

In memory of my Papa. You encouraged me when I was discouraged, you cheered me on when I faced adversity, and you were so proud. You are deeply missed and loved.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Motivation, it is an incredibly difficult attribute for anyone to have. It either keeps us moving forward or is the cause of some people’s failure. Student-athletes at the university level, have an incredible amount of pressure put on them, and they are asked to keep motivating themselves through their academic and athletic commitments. The purpose of this study is to better understand the motivation of student-athletes at institutions of higher education.

Behind the scenes of the college games viewers see on television there is an incredible amount of work occurs for each athlete they see on the field. Viewers do not see the physical demands of training for the sport as well as the expectations of faculty on the academic side of the university.

In this study, motivation is defined as the ability to perform both in the classroom and on the playing field and graduate within four years. Knowledge generated from this study is expected to inform institutions of higher education about how to better help student-athletes graduate. It will also gather information about the habits of successful student-athletes, and uncover characteristics successful student-athletes have in common. This study will examine the student-athletes’ motivation to fulfill their obligation in both their academic and athletic commitments to the school.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of research related to student-athletes at institutions of higher education. Following the overview is a discussion of the rationale and the significance of the study. The third part of the chapter includes the problem statement, the purpose statement, and the research question that focuses and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that provides a lens for the study is introduced and explained.
Context and Background

In recent years’ university sports have come under great scrutiny by the media, especially revenue-generating sports like football and men’s basketball. In the 21st century, Division I college football has turned into a multi-million-dollar industry that takes in more money than the academic side of schools (Branch, 2011; Palaima, 2010; Salzberg, 2012; Tublitz, 2007). There is rising concern in intercollegiate athletics that revenue generating sports teams’ performances takes precedence over the academic integrity of the student-athlete. This is an issue because most institutions of higher education revolve around: enlightening the students, communicating knowledge, advancing research, striving for intelligence, comprehending and obtaining an ethical point of view, intellectual inquiry, learning a skill set, and becoming a global citizen.

School athletic departments seek out the best athletes, those who have the potential to give their sports teams a winning advantage, while giving some regard to academic accomplishment. Gaining great athletes ensures the university will gain more revenue from fans and franchising because of a better likelihood of winning. A consequence of a winning season is more pressure the next year to maintain that revenue spike. This means that even better players need to be recruited to ensure another winning season. Student-athletes have evolved into an amateur athlete, leaving the student part of their college career behind. As a result, the university compromises its original mission of promoting academics. It pushes the student-athlete population to play for the institution in hopes of making more money by winning a championship game. Championship games give the university more notoriety and attract incoming freshmen to the university. In the world of Division I football, the athlete is put before the student (Emma, 2008) in order to gain more popularity among incoming freshmen. This increases the university’s cost of admission as well as the number of students that are allowed to
attend the university. There have been cited complaints that student-athletes are no longer students: rather these athletes attend the university purely to train (Pierson, 2014).

Division I institutions of higher education with outstanding sports teams have built sports complexes that rival professional venues. These teams’ coaches make millions of dollars (Branch, 2011). Along with these coliseums, institutions of higher education have built training facilities (e.g., weight lifting gyms, athletic training rooms, locker rooms, and film rooms) to not only improve their current athletes, but to entice future student-athletes to train at the university. All of this is done to help some students make it into the professional leagues. However, this promise is unrealistic according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Only: 1.3% of NCAA seniors make it to the National Basketball League (NBA), 2% of NCAA seniors make it to the National Football League (NFL), 4.1% of NCAA seniors make it to the National Hockey League (NHL), and 10.5% of NCAA seniors make it to Major League Baseball (MLB) (NCAA, 2015).

Student-athletes will no doubt face a crossroads while at their universities. This crossroads is what direction their motivation will go: towards training for their sport or towards time spent on academics. Unfortunately for student-athletes, universities ask too much of them: it is not, as people imagine, a perfect life for the student-athlete. In fact, it is a hard experience, one that takes up most their year and time, one that forces them to choose between their sport and their academic assignments. It is not what most Americans think: the successful athlete doing it all, holding his own both on the field and in the classroom. Branch (2011), Forde (2008), Palaima (2010), Salzberg (2012), C. Smith (2012), and Weiseman and Friar (2014) have demonstrated the stress sports creates for student-athletes. Not only must student-athletes have to attend classes and be prepared for them (which means doing the outside classwork) but they are
only eligible to play if they take the minimum amount of academic credits to be considered a full-time student by the university. They must also receive passing grades that meet both the institution’s expectation and the minimum grade requirement for the academic major. The athletic side of student-athletes’ obligation is just as rigorous. They must not only go to games and practices, but they have mandatory gym time and film sessions, as well as travel time to away games. This aspect is not considered. Anyone would find it difficult to maintain motivation with such a rigorous schedule to follow daily for four years.

Unfortunately, at colleges like the University of Maryland (Salzberg, 2012), University of Alabama (Smith, 2012), The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) (Forde, 2008), Florida State University (Tublitz, 2007), and the University of Texas (Palaima, 2010) the focus has shifted away from academic advancement and obligations and towards athletic dominance. The decision has been made for the student-athlete to follow those demands of the athletic department, leaving little time or motivation to complete their academic requirements.

There is a rift between academic and athletic governance at universities. Neither seems to understand the mission and goals of the other, and therefore they do not effectively govern the institution with synchronization (Duryea, 1973, p. 133). This confuses student-athletes: which governance holds more value to them, which will they put their motivation towards?

Is important to note when talking about motivation that student-athletes have too much thrust upon them to be successful in both those roles. Universities put them in an unwinnable situation. Student-athletes can neither rely on going professional in their sport, nor can they devote the time needed to fulfill their academic requirements that would ensure they can attain and maintain a career after graduation and well into adulthood.
Rationale and Significance

Rationale

The rationale for this study is to investigate student-athletes’ motivation at institutions of higher education. This study will bring to light where student-athletes succeed or fail, where their motivation comes from if they are successful, and what elements bar student-athletes from having four successful college years?

Motivation is a trait learned through time, rigorous activity, grit, perseverance, hard work, and commitment. What characteristics of motivation allow some students to accomplish what is asked of them both academically and athletically? How are they driven to do it all? On the other hand, what handicaps some other student-athletes from being able to do it all, or even come close to being successful in either academics or sports? Why can they not do it all?

Significance

It is clear from background research there is a negative feeling towards student-athletes and how universities have promoted their athletic teams. This would lead one to believe that universities have begun to expect too much of their student-athlete population. This would force student-athletes to choose where to put their motivation: academics or athletics.

Therefore, this study is significant because it could identify characteristics of student-athletes who are successful in both the academic and athletic sides of university life. It could also bring to light helpful frameworks universities use to help their student-athletes. If these characteristics can be determined, then maybe universities can churn out a new generation of student-athletes who have better motivation. If what drives the student-athlete can be determined from this study, then a new framework can be built for student-athletes. Institutions of higher
education can establish programs that can better help student-athletes by promoting healthy habits.

**Research Problem and Research Questions**

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to find a way to use athletic competitiveness to keep students academically successful so they leave college with both academic and athletic options. This study will investigate what motivates student-athletes to be successful. This motivation could be a framework already in place at the university (e.g.: mandatory library hours, team study halls, or mandatory grade point averages), or characteristics and habits of student-athletes who participate in men’s Division I or II football, baseball, basketball, or hockey. By knowing these frameworks, characteristics, and habits, institutions of higher education, can establish better and more efficient programs for their student-athletes. This study can also be used to better understand a recently marginalized population at institutions of higher education. The media has only been telling a slice of the story without understanding the whole experience of the student-athlete. This will help not only the student-athletes of the future, but also the reputation of collegiate sports in general.

**Research Problem**

Student-athletes struggle with academic performance which leads to a disruptive educational experience. In recent decades, it has come to people’s attention that college athletes are not performing at the level they should be: either they are failing as athletes because they are ineligible, or they are failing as students, from too much time spent on athletics. Either way, the student-athlete is put in an impossible spot. This discord within the student-athlete is only prodded on without support. With the academic governance and athletic governance of
institutions of higher education not aligned, student-athletes are confused about where to place their motivation.

Academic and athletic governances and athletic governance have different goals within the university. It appears in recent articles (Branch, 2011, Emma, 2008, Mayo & Rosenthal, 2010, Salzberg, 2012, and Smith, 2012) that Division I colleges are sacrificing the academic integrity of their student-athlete population, in exchange for the revenue a winning team brings into the institution. This divides the student-athlete into two people, forcing the student or the athlete to put motivation into athletics or academics. However, there are unheard and unpublished success stories that this study will bring to light. This new money-making focus at institutions of higher education harms the well-being of the student-athlete, so this study to bring to light healthier tactics for student-athletes to abide by, which athletic departments can recognize and utilize

**Research Question**

The research question for this study is: How do students who are on half or full athletic scholarships and who are on track to graduate from 4-year Division I or II institutions of higher education explain and make sense of their academic success?

**Theoretical Framework**

This research will be framed by self-determination theory (SDT). SDT was developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000). The theory derived from a perceived motivational climate (Nicholls, 1984), which is differentiated into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is engagement in an activity for one’s own enjoyment and satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation is the motivation to compete. According to Nicholls (1984) behavior that motivation is the ability to demonstrates one’s ability. Therefore, achievement
motivation (extrinsic motivation) is a choice based on the motivation to compete with others. This most likely explains why student-athletes have an enormous desire to compete. They prioritize the task over their ego, hold intrinsic goals, and approach the issue of competing rather than avoiding it (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Deci and Ryan (2000) also derived from Nicholls’ (1984), which determined that determined parents contribute to building their children’s motivation, but coaches have an influential position in motivating their players. Players most likely want to avoid negative consequences from their coaches, thus motivation is weighted more towards their athletic effort. This is also supported by Harter’s (1978) theory of effectance motivation, which theorizes that success and failure of mastery lead to what people do. People generally want to do what they are good at, so they put their motivation into what they will be guaranteed to succeed at.

**Conclusion**

This study will survey six college athletes from Division I or II men’s football, baseball, basketball, and hockey teams in order to establish what the individual student-athlete does to be successful student-athletes. It will take away the healthy and successful habits and characteristics shared by successful student-athletes that influence their motivation. Finally, this study will look at which frameworks or programs offered by institutions of higher education are used by successful student-athletes. Chapter 2 will examine literature concerning student-athletes at institutions of higher education.
Chapter 2: The Literature Review

Student-athletes struggle with academic performance, which leads to a disrupted educational experience. “The question whether athletic success comes at the expense of academic quality is particularly intriguing because of the supposed competition…” (McCormick & Tinsley, 1987, p. 1108). Rising concern with academic integrity among student-athletes has sparked a debate over whether to reform athletic departments, or to do justice to a filing system by expelling intercollegiate play altogether. This concern has led to a closer examination of the population of student-athletes as well as furthering research on how to best help and motivate them.

The NCAA is responsible for the oversight of every college sport at every university in the United States. The NCAA is ultimately in charge of the way in which universities govern their athletic departments (NCAA, 2015). Some examples of how the NCAA regulates student-athletes include: their status as amateur athlete, the 20-hour rule, and minimum standards to compete. Interference from the NCAA causes more internal strife, pitting athletic and academic departments against one another in an argument over not only grades, classes, majors, and time management, but also revenue, and standards for outside governance.

Many universities struggle to find balance between academics and athletics, promoting integrity in the classroom and also success in the sports arena. This struggle has been occurring since the 1980s (Ridpath, 2008). This issue has begun to be discussed and debated in the last two decades. Academics are complicated for student-athletes, whose issues include performance in academics, academic integrity, and the educational experience. Their experience might include; proper time management, receiving mixed signals, and pressure for students who were admitted to academically rigorous universities.
This literature review provides a detailed examination of what other researchers have found concerning the growing problem of intercollegiate athletics and the question of student-athlete success within the constraints of the dual role of both student and athlete. This literature review includes scholarly work, as well as observations and critiques done by sports experts. This review looks at who student-athletes are, their performance in academics, and their educational experience.

**Student-Athletes**

The ideal image of a student-athlete is a well-rounded person who excels in both academics and athletics, putting time and effort into each activity. They promote both and embody the dedication and hard work in the classroom and on the field. What the student-athlete accomplishes can truly be seen as the picture of amateurism. “The term [student-athlete] is meant to conjure the nobility of amateurism and the precedence of scholarship over athletic endeavor. But the origins of the ‘student-athlete’ lie not in a disinterested ideal but in a sophisticated formulation designed…” (Branch, 2011, p. 9). The NCAA defines a student-athlete as, “A participant in an organized competitive sport sponsored by the educational institution in which he or she is enrolled. Student-athletes must typically balance the roles of being a full-time student and a full-time athlete” (NCAA By-Laws, 2013).

**Challenges of Student-Athletes**

Often people do not realize that student-athletes struggle. Emma (2008) chronicles the difficulties of being a student-athlete, a life no one else lives. He outlined many of the daily struggles student-athletes go through, including the time focuses on the sport the athlete plays, the physical toll it takes, the amount of travel, and the emotional strain that is put on a collegiate athlete (Emma, 2008). Palaima (2010) agreed with this description, saying “players were
virtually full-time athletes” (Palaima, 2010, p. 1). Many people outside athletic governance may misconstrue what goes on. Student-athletes feel the weight of both the academic and athletic governance on their shoulders. Functioning within the academic governance is a challenge to any incoming freshman. This is even more difficult for first-year students who have the added responsibility to a team, as in this rigorous routine would take a toll on anyone, even the most seasoned athlete or academically gifted student. The alarming aspect of Emma’s (2008) article is the emotional strain that is put on a collegiate athlete as “players are regularly scrutinized by their coaches, their athletic directors, the student body, the alumni, the general fan population, and the local, regional, and national media” (p. 34). This puts student-athletes at considerable risk for not only burn-out and drop-out, but also mental illnesses like depression and anxiety. Smith (1986) created a model that was used to measure the burn-out rate of college athletes. Frey (2007) added, “If stress is experienced frequently over a period of time, burn-out might result” (p. 40). Ultimately, this creates a “no-win” (Emma, 2008, p. 34) scenario for student-athletes. Balancing the expectations of sports and academics is incredibly difficult, especially during their season when the focus is split between academics and athletics. In addition to the commitment and schedule, the toll on the body and brain distract from academia. Emma (2008) said usually players usually are so dilapidated and exhausted that even if they wanted to study, their mind could not focus on the information.

NCAA President, Mark Emmert (2015) would disagree with Emma (2008), that student-athletes can function as normal students. McCormick and Tinsley (1987) would agree. They determined that “major college athletics has a better undergraduate student body than one that does not” (McCormick & Tinsley, 1987, p. 1106). They also found that academic success correlates with athletic success, meaning that when students perform well in school, they will
also win more games. This conclusion is appealing to universities that want their teams to win. An increase in winning can lead to an increase in revenue for the school and also in community support for the institution (Duderstadt, 2003).

While there are many different theoretical models about how non-athletes succeed at universities, only a few are specific to student-athletes. While the NCAA has implemented a measure for academics, the Academic Progress Rate (APR), there is still a fundamental lack of understanding about the experience of student-athletes in both academics and athletics. According to Comeaux and Harrison (2011), there is a subculture at universities for the student-athletes, and within that subculture it is hard to pigeon hole all student-athletes into one way of fully understanding their needs. Just as there are multiple subcultures among non-athletic students, there are multiple subcultures among student-athletes. For example, Comeaux and Harrison (2011) cited the Scholar Baller (SB) program, which was designed to reward and recognize athletes for their academic achievements while at their university. Programs like SB were developed by “practitioners, researchers, professional athletes”, and social scientists (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, p. 236) to separate and help student-athletes. Comeaux and Harrison (2011, p. 238) developed a theoretical framework that extends the SB program. They developed a system from pre-college through graduation that include:

(1) Precollege: family background, educational experience and preparation, and individual attributes

(2) Initial Commitments: goal commitment, sport commitment, and institutional commitment

(3) Social System: faculty interaction, peer interactions, Scholar Baller paradigm, coach’s demands, sports participation, grade performance, and intellectual development
(4) Commitments to Social and Academic Integration: goal commitment, sports commitment, and institutional commitment will equal academic success. (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, p. 238)

This model gives researchers a way to examine student-athletes from an analytical perspective. This breakdown can help with problems that Emma (2008) described regarding the struggle to balance academics and athletics as a Division I athlete.

**Student-Athletes as Employees**

The idea of the student-athlete was called into question in March 2014. An event occurred that changed the conversation about college football and perhaps college sports altogether. The National Labor Relations Board found that football players at Northwestern University were employees of the university (Pierson, 2014). The decision was based on the hours they spent on football, the time taken away from academics, the coach’s treatment and supervision of them, and the money they made for the university (Pierson, 2014). Stinson, Marquardt, and Chandley (2012) cited Ralph Nader’s belief that athletic scholarships should be taken away, as when you pay someone for a service then they become professionals.

This decision is controversial because making student-athletes employees of their university had never been considered. It calls into question their scholarship and dedication to the mission of the institution because “athletes are student amateurs who cannot be paid for their participation on college and university teams” (Pierson, 2014, pp. 1-2). This means that college football players cannot take, or make money from playing football for their universities. The NCAA has strict regulations on players collecting outside funds in relation to their sport. The ruling has called the traditional regulations of the NCAA into question, as well as where the
NCAA will stand if other football teams follow Northwestern in unionizing. How will this affect the governing structure the NCAA has over intercollegiate sports? Ridpath (2008) examined this issue when he wrote about the Drake Group. The Drake Group’s planned is to retire the term student-athlete, as it was only used by the NCAA, to ensure Workers Compensation Boards would not see players as paid employees of the university. Rather, they would be seen as students at the university who received a scholarship for being outstanding in athletics, which is no different than a student receiving a scholarship for being outstanding academically (Ridpath, 2008, p. 19).

While some people and organizations disagree with the movement for Northwestern football players to unionize, all universities are forced to look at the “formidable adversary in the bargaining process” (Pierson, 2014, p. 2). The National Labor Relations Board and Northwestern football players are beginning to discuss their pay, benefits, and working conditions. This may ultimately move in the direction of an employment contract for players.

The football teams that unionize will probably be considered semiprofessional rather than collegiate. A semiprofessional league would allow athletes to get paid to play. The athletic scholarships that student-athletes usually receive would be replaced with benefits and a pay check. This correlates with the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA), whose survey showed that they believed scholarships should be revoked if a student athlete is not preforming in academics (Nichols, Corrigan, & Hardin, 2011, p. 116). This raises many questions for student-athletes moving forward. Will athletes continue to be students, or will they transition into students with full academic responsibilities after semi-professional play? Pierson (2014) predicted that this decision could throw college academics and college athletics into chaos. It could affect hundreds of other football teams, as well as other sports. This would affect the
position athletic departments have within institutions of higher education as well as the position of the NCAA as the regulator of intercollegiate sports.

**Athletes Performance in Academics**

Institutions of higher education have taken many different roads in order to fix the plight of student-athletes. Some of these paths include the football family, the 20-hour rule, and the NCAA’s Annual Progress Rate (APR) rule.

Piereson (2014) believed that there is a desire and need for intercollegiate competition. As Ridpath (2008) emphasized, sports are “entrenched in our society” and therefore it is a part “of American higher education” (p. 12). There is a demand for change to promote the success of student-athletes. Ridpath (2008) argued reforms are needed rather than the unlikely overthrow of what has always been. He even acknowledged: “Intercollegiate athletics to have academic fraud, pay for play scandals, overzealous booster involvement, and athletes enrolled in school with little desire or motivation to focus on academic and social development” (Ridpath, 2008). Historically, the challenges are largely the same and unchanged: “How exactly to manage and/or reform the system, and who would lead the effort, has undergone several different iterations…” (Ridpath, 2008, p.12).

Tublitz (2007) wrote about misconduct at Florida State University (FSU). FSU’s athletic director, Dave Hard, contended that budget cuts would be made to the academic departments. From this, Tublitz (2007) concluded that the student part of student-athlete often comes second to the athlete part because of the priorities that the student athlete is given. The “winning at all costs” motto promotes the athlete part of the title, while leaving little time for the student part. These guidelines and regulations have not been enforced, only looked at as recommendations (Tublitz, 2007, p. 15). Intercollegiate competition can be a good thing for the university, if it is
handled in a more successful manner. McCormick and Tinsley (1987) said that sports are good for students: when they succeed in two arenas, that will spur the student-athletes to greatness. While the university has grown and expanded with time and the changing population of students, it is facing a change from the NCAA. The NCAA published new academic laws in 2013 in response to the question of academics being put at risk because of athletics. This section discusses three paths: the APR, the football family theory, and the NCAA’s 20-hour rule.

**Academic Progress Rate**

The Academic Progress Rate (APR) was implemented in 2003 to ensure that students were spending equal time in their area of sports and study. The president of the NCAA, Mark Emmert, believed, “We must continue to embrace our role in providing the necessary skills to continue this high achievement” (NCAA, 2015, p.1). He spoke about changing the rules to enforcing more oversight in the area of academics. The APR was put in place to ensure that a student athlete’s grade point average (GPA) did not drop below a 2.0 and that the student-athlete graduated in a timely manner. However, the Drake Report, which was created to promote personal and intellectual growth for all students and demand excellence and professional integrity from the university, contended a 2.0 is more than a non-athletic student needs to stay on most college campuses. Furthermore, it exposed the declining rate of graduation among many student-athletes, especially those in high revenue sports (i.e., football, men’s basketball, women’s basketball, and baseball) (Ridpath, 2008). The NCAA has determined that the average APR for a Division I football team is between 949 and 965 (NCAA, 2015). The NCAA has required all teams to earn higher than a score of 900 collectively as a team. If the team does not get higher than a 900, there will be sanctions placed to require more time be given to academics by taking time away from athletics. These sanctions involve cutting practice time and regular
season play, and eliminating the team from the possibility of postseason play. Penalties are set up in three tiers, each with more sanctions that grow off the last. The APR has shown that athletes are devoting more time to academics and more athletes are going back to finish degrees.

Franklin (2006) wrote about the academic integrity of student-athletes at universities. He outlined three different phases the NCAA has created in their effort to reform student athletes and the university. In the first phase, it reviews eligibility standards, and while the NCAA does not control who the university admits, it does set standards incoming freshmen have to attain in order to compete as well as how upperclassman have to perform in the classroom to be able to play once enrolled. The second phase considers “progress towards degree” (Franklin, 2006, p. 17) as academic behavior is observed and assessed to make it more possible and less stressful for the athlete to complete a degree (for example a fifth year or lowering the GPA average to a 1.8). The third phase covers the accountability for both the academic and athletic staff at the university (Franklin, 2006). These newer reforms by the NCAA have assisted college athletes. In contrast, in 1997 Congress threatened to intervene if the NCAA did not clean up its act (Nathan, 2000).

**Football Family**

Gravelle, Karlis, Rothschild-Checreouné’s (2014) theory of the football family focused on the positive aspects of finding success under both academics and athletics governance. They pointed out that success is achieved through adult support and influence and also determined that peer support was a factor in successful navigation through college academics and athletics. Gravelle et al. (2014) compared the role of faculty to the success of coaches,
Similarly, to the way that coaches create a supportive environment for their athletes to play their best and stay motivated towards achieving athletic goals, a teacher must provide a similarly supportive environment for student to believe in themselves, place effort into their work, and remain engaged in their studies. (p. 2)

This implies that both academic and athletic governances must work together in order to successfully support student-athletes.

The ultimate goal of Gravelle et al. (2014) was to determine how first-year Canadian football players engaged successfully in the environment of higher education environment. They found:

(1) participants share the most experiences with those who are in similar positions, such as other football rookies at university, (2) rookies go to class and work on academic projects (engaging academically) together, and (3) rookies learn from each other’s’ mistakes.

(Gravelle, Karlis, & Rothschild-Checroune, 2014, p. 5)

Ultimately, their interviews showed that it was easier for a football player to engage with like-minded and scheduled attendees. It was less stressful and the motivation of teammates helped. According to one student-athlete, “Being able to speak the same vernacular, understanding similar terminology, and having an immediate connection with peers may aid academic engagement” (Gravelle, Karlis, & Rothschild-Checroune, 2014, p. 6).

These findings are similar to Ayers, Pazmino-Cevallos, and Dobose (2012), whose survey revealed that 22% of student-athletes were advised on what major they should be in by both academic and athletic employees. (Ayers et al., 2012, p. 24). Nichols et al. (2011) attested that majors should not be set up and established primarily for the use of student-athletes so they
can concentrate more on athletics than academics (p. 112). This would align with the goals of the football family introduced by Gravelle et al. (2014), because players would also have to be in the same majors to be in the same classes.

Nichols et al. (2011) suggested that student-athletes should be mainstreamed into the academic world of the university, and not be part of the athletic lifestyle that many student-athletes adopt. This goes against the idea of the football family. Nichols et al. (2011) found:

An academic support system should be set up for the well-being of the student-athlete because they are aware of the lifestyles of the student athlete, this would ensure student athletes get a valuable and meaningful…educational experience as possible and not just to maintain their athletic eligibility (Nichols et al., 2011, pp. 117-118)

Essentially, there is a demand for a model to help student-athletes successfully compete in the academic arena. Assistance within the university could help student-athletes with the many struggles they face.

### 20-Hour Rule

A third path that has been created to help student-athletes concentrate on academics is the NCAA’s 20-hour rule. The 20-hour rule limits the amount of time spent on athletics in an effort to make student-athletes spend more time on academia. The core of this long-standing rule is to ensure that student athletes are spending adequate time on both academics and athletics. Pope (2009) confirmed this by comparing student athletes’ dedication to sports to having a full time job. He also attested to the 20-hour rule being mistreated and abused (Pope, 2009). Ayers et al. (2012) reported that the NCAA’s rule on no more than 20 hours spent on athletics was impossible to attain. Many universities and athletes are not truthful about how much time they
spend practicing and training (Ayers et al., 2012, p. 22). The 20-hour rule was established to “prioritize” (Ayers et al., 2012) academic studies over athletic training. The result of Ayers et al. (2012) found that student-athletes spent the same amount of time on academics in- and off-season and also exceeded the 20-hour maximum. They also found that they missed fewer than one practice or game, while the number of missed classes exceeded seven days (Ayers et al., 2012, p. 24). This aligned with their final finding, that student-athletes admitted to spending more time on athletics than on academics.

**Student-Athletes’ Educational Experience**

Student-athletes have a special experience at the university. They face a full load of course work, and in addition to the academic demands they have also agreed to perform athletically. This entails practice, weight training, traveling, game time, and other mandatory team events. With so many commitments, it is difficult to make time to do all of them well. They face the problem of trying to please everyone: to please their professors by trying to attain the rigor of academics and trying to please the university and make money for the institution by trying to perform and win at an athletic level. This section discusses issues facing student-athletes: mixed signals from their university, time management, and minimum requirements.

**Mixed Signals**

King and Sen (2013) said “doing nothing different, and imagining that nothing will change, is delusional” (p. 83). Student-athletes are pulled in too many different directions. Faculty want them to be scholars, coaches want them to be athletes, athletic directors want them to win, and the university board wants to make money. Mixed signals to the student-athlete have promoted academic malpractice and have confused student-athletes about where their primary
concerns should lie at the university. A reform movement has begun to alleviate this issue in intercollegiate athletics.

The reform movement has begun to become more prevalent when discussing the issue of intercollegiate athletics. At a 1997 meeting organized by Harvard, representatives from eight universities came up with a list of resolutions to maintaining the student-athlete’s status of amateur athlete, and to contain commercialism (Benford, 2007). These resolutions were rejected by 21 of 23 institutions. This was not the first-time universities came together in an effort to reform intercollegiate athletics. At each meeting,

The end product always took the form of a report. And while specific recommendations varied across the reports, they shared a common concern for commercialization and professionalization of college sports and the challenges those trends represented to the integrity of higher education (Benford, 2007, p. 6).

Benford’s (2007) concluded that, the enrooted culture of sports has tarnished the reputation of elite universities. He used McCarthy and Zald (1977) to discuss the complexity of the issue of academic integrity is. Benford (2007) said this reform movement is a social movement, one of many different social movements within the college sports reform movement, such as, “academic integrity, athlete’s rights, anti-athlete violence, gender equality, racial and ethnic diversity/rights, steroid use/abuse prevention, youth sports reform, antigambling, ethics in sports, and Olympic reform movements” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, as cited in Benford, 2007, p. 8). These concerns paint a picture of the complexity of reforming sports to bring the student-athlete and the university back to a rational state. The creation of an “athletic arms race” (Benford, 2007, p. 10) has become more important to the university than the academic values of the university, which
distracts from the three goals a university should be promoting, “(1) creation, (2) preservation, and (3) distribution of knowledge” (King & Sen, 2013, p. 83).

In addition to this issue of the primary concern of the student-athlete, there is also a debate within the institution. The board wants to make money, and athletic departments make the money. Television and revenue-making deals require a winning team. Colleges like having successful sports teams, especially in football and men’s basketball. The revenue earned by the school from merchandise sales, ticket sales, and other expenses usually surpasses what the academic governance brings to the university (Duderstadt, 2003, Mayo & Rosenthal, 2010).

Buchet, Ballouli, and Bennett (2011) found:

(1) many employees involved in sales operations felt that the department was more concerned with ticket sales then they were with other sources of revenue…including student fees” (2) administrators pushed for the increase of ticket sales, and (3) this increase in ticket sales was pushed due to the competitive salaries of coaches (p. 91).

This is not the only reason that revenue is important when discussing intercollegiate athletics. Building and renovating stadiums that rival those of professional sports teams becomes prevalent in attracting more fans (Stinson et al., 2012). Return on investment (ROI) is important in Division I athletics. While this is not widely researched, the NCAA did study ROI, and found that “for every one dollar invested in athletic programs, approximately one dollar of revenue was produced” (Stinson et al., 2012, p. 105). However, this does not lead the reader to any conclusion about how the revenue a university makes is shared between its athletic department and the rest of the university.
Brooks, Cox, White, and Burson (2013) disagreed with Stinson et al. (2012), who found that revenue was not the core objective of a university. Rather the core objective was to ensure there was funding to sustain the mission of the institution (Stinson et al., 2012, p. 108). Brooks et al. (2013) claimed universities have strict contracts with TV networks, especially with Division I football. These TV revenues increase during post season bowl games. Brooks et al. (2013) stated:

Television networks paid the ACC to televise sporting events (primarily football and basketball). Of the ACC’s fourteen member’s schools (which stretched along the east coast from Miami to Boston) Florida State University (FSU) was arguably the most valuable “brand” because of its high national profile that drew strong television rating. (p. 112).

This idea of universities making outside contracts with the television industry is a highlight to the weight the athletic department has at the university.

**Time Management**

For some time, there has been an ongoing issue with academic and athletic governances within institutions of higher education (Branch, 2011). These problems have caused great harm to the student-athlete population. These student-athletes face an overbearing work load, stress to perform, sanctions from two governances, and unrealistic expectations. To put it simply their plates are too full. In order to support these student-athlete programs some support systems have been put into place to accommodate student-athletes at the university.
Minimum Requirements

Finally, there is an issue with student-athletes meeting the minimum requirements of the university. Nichols et al. (2011) found that faculty were particularly frustrated with the quality of students being admitted to the university. They said,

The academic profiles of entering student-athletes should be similar to those of non-athletes, and any special admissions of student-athletes should be in accordance with the same standards applied to non-athletes. To achieve these goals, faculty and academic administrators should be integrally involved in the admissions of student athletes. (Nichols et al., 2011, p. 110).

The survey found that it was unfair to admit students to a university if they cannot perform to the expected standard. It also showed that if academics and athletics worked together this might “improve the transparency and accountability of intercollegiate athletics and protect the primacy of academics on…campus” (Nichols et al., 2011, p. 110). Student-athletes face an array of difficulties and fall under the guidelines of two different governances within their university, so they do not enjoy the same freedoms that the rest of the student body has. They are confined to fitting into their student-athlete title. Often student-athletes are not understood and their lifestyle is difficult. It is often too much for them to handle, therefore their academics or their athletics suffer.

Allowing academically unprepared student-athletes to be admitted to rigorous universities sets student-athletes up for failure. The court case Ross v. Creighton (1993) is an example of the failure student-athletes can face after being recruited to a Division I school. Kevin Ross filed suit against Creighton University in 1993 on the grounds that the university had denied him an
education. Brought to Creighton based on his basketball skills, Ross was put into soft classes because his academic skills were below those of other accepted students. After playing he had a D average. Ross claimed the university allowed him in without the academic supports he needed in order to be a successful student and guided him to only complete some academic credit, but not the full amount needed to graduate. The 7th Circuit Court said:

Lawsuits have involved allegations of educational malpractice or breach of contract.
Claims sounding in tort are generally grouped under educational malpractice and have been summarily dismissed by courts. Courts traditionally allow contract claims predicated on very specific promises made to students, but reject claims concerning the general quality of the education. (Ross v. Creighton, 1993)

Navarro (2015) wrote about education malpractice, “It is imperative to provide student and academic affairs professionals with…research related to career development and issues that may result from misalignments of students’ undergraduate majors and career aspirations” (Navarro, 2015, p. 366).

Usually this will lead to the mind set of all I have to do is be eligible, as pointed out in Ross v. Creighton (1993). Of concern is what happens after graduation. While it is true that more sports are often prioritized over academics, the concern is that depression and anxiety accompany elite sports retirement (Cosh & Tully, 2014). Cosh and Tully (2014) attested that without a major that will secure a career, “in concerning themselves with just doing what is necessary to pass, athletes may preclude themselves from later graduation entry…” (Cosh & Tully, 2013, p. 188). They found that student-athletes justify prioritizing of athletics over academics because of the lack of time management skills, however the true sacrifice of the student-athlete is broken down into two parts: (a) the team being the priority of the student-
athlete, where student-athletes saw themselves as being pushed in this direction, and (b) there being a lack of time to complete everything. This type of pressure to perform in academically rigorous classes, but not having the tools to do so put additional pressure on the student-athlete, and also may set the student-athlete up for academic failure.

**Conclusion**

The plight of the student-athlete must be further researched. The lack of success stories in the media is a cause for concern. The old image of the student-athlete is now in competition with the new Northwestern model of amateurism and employee. Student-athlete performance in academics has been discussed, and conclusions can be drawn about what the universities have done wrong. Finally, the student-athlete’s educational experience has been discussed, including issues of time management, the university’s mixed signals to the population, and pressure to perform in rigorous classes without a platform.

There is a need to find ways in which universities can channel the competitiveness of this population it to motivation them to achieve academic success. By the end of college, student-athletes should feel that they could be drafted or join the work force. Student-athletes can achieve this goal by having a framework within the university that supports them.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The aims of research in this doctoral program are to examine a complex problem of practice, generate knowledge from data gathered at the research site, and provide context and strategies for introducing systemic change to help resolve the problem of practice. The purpose of this study is to find a way to use athletic competitiveness to keep students academically successful, so students end college with academic and athletic options. The question this study seeks to answer is: How do students who are on half or full athletic scholarships and are on track to graduate from 4-year Division I or Institutions of higher education explain and make sense of their academic success? Only students (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) attending a 4-year institution of higher education, participating in a men’s Division I or II intercollegiate sport (football, basketball, hockey, or baseball), and taking a full academic course load as defined by their university will be interviewed. Academic success is operationalized as being on track to graduate from a 4-year Division I or II institution. This chapter elaborates on the qualitative research approach, discusses the participants, and explains in depth how the study will be conducted.

Approach

Qualitative research is an appropriate approach for this study because the goal of a qualitative research study is to better understand a behavior. Qualitative research studies strive to explore the human experience and the relationship between stories in a controlled setting. J. A. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) wrote about how qualitative research is focused on sense making. Quantitative research focuses on links among events, and on what happens. Qualitative research seeks to extract information from the participant and lets the participants reflect on the meaning behind that information.
Qualitative research is meaningful for this problem of practice because its aim is to find the first-hand experience while truthfully reporting the experiences of student-athletes. It seeks an in-depth description and discussion of events the participant experienced while being a student-athlete at their institution of higher education. Through building an understanding of the participant’s behavior in the constraints of the institution of higher education, the researcher can better understand the meaning of the participant’s experience.

**Background and Information on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) seeks to make sense of people’s experience in a specific area of their lives (J.A. Smith et al., 2012). IPA stemmed from phenomenological philosophy, which seeks to make sense of one’s own experience, or go back into the problem itself to figure out a solution through another lived experience. The following is a seminal audit of the phenomenological philosophers and their evolving philosophies.

**Phenomenology.** Husserl (1927, cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2012) examined human experience, then followed it up by trying to identify qualities about those experiences. A researcher must find a way for their participants to come to terms with their own experience with a particular phenomenon. Others can learn from the original participant’s experience. In essence, participants must examine how their experience was and reflect on how it affects their life, or how their perception of an experience could differ from how others view it. To achieve this one must have a phenomenological attitude.

Husserl’s (1927. cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2012) development of the phenomenological method is a corner stone of IPA experiments. In order for a researcher to effectively develop a IPA studies, Husserl directed that researchers must understand and interpret a participant’s experience in relation to the world. Through this lens, an IPA researcher must grasp the concept
that people’s lived experience has a direct correlation with how they perceive their own experience.

Heidegger (1927/1962. cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2012) acknowledged Husserl’s (1927) perspective on phenomenology, however he had his own approach to the practice of phenomenology. Heidegger (1927/1962) believed in identifying qualities of experiences and intersubjectivity, which is shared and overlapping experience in relation to the world in which we live in. In shorter terms: How our being in the world is in our own perspective. Our activities are central to who we are and shape our meaning in this world, as well as our dasein (existence or state of being) and worldliness. This relates to inter-subjectivity because according to Heidegger (1927/1962):

Such entities are not thereby objects for knowing the world theoretically, they are simply what gets used, what gets produces, and so forth…Dasein is always already thrown into the pre-existing world of people and objects, language, and culture, and cannot be meaningfully detached from it” (as cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2012, p. 17).

IPA researchers can conclude from Heidegger (1927/1962) that subjects are thrown into situations and those subjects’ perception of that situation is worthy of study.

Merleau-Pontry (1962 as cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2012) extended from Husserl (1927) and Heidegger (1927/1962) in his own theory of phenomenology of perception. This explains how our experience can be understood by ourselves, but we will never be able to understand another person’s experience, or position in the world. Therefore, an experience can never be fully captured. Merleau-Ponty (1962) distinguished himself from other researchers because he focused on subjectivity and embodiment. These two components, allow people to get a glimpse
into someone else’s experience and apply it to their own. The participant’s experiences are experienced through different positions by others. IPA researchers can take away from Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory that people’s experiences will never be fully captured, but these experiences cannot be ignored.

Finally, Sartre (1943/1956. as cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2012) formed the theory of existential phenomenology. He believed only you yourself can be self-conscious of an experience. People are in a constant state of wanting to understand themselves more, and therefore people will always be becoming themselves. Sartre’s (1943/1956) concept of nothingness stems from his belief that people will always try to make themselves better, thus looking to the future, or what can they be, and will never examining what they are. Just as present experiences define who we are, he believed those absent things are equally important to who we are. Essentially, human nature is who we will become and never who we are. An IPA researcher can take from Sartre (1943/1956) that while lived experience is very important, what is not experienced could be equally consequential.

These phenomenological theorists have seen how experiences shape ourselves and how we can reflect and better ourselves through closely examined experiences. Each philosopher brings additional insight into how an IPA researcher can more effectively examine data.

Hermeneutics. The second branch of phenomenology is the study of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretative methods and purpose, which is the core purpose of an IPA study. Hermeneutics is completely separate from phenomenology, as it focuses more on the interpretation of the Bible, historical documents, and literary works. Its overall focus is on uncovering a writer’s intended meaning. The following is a seminal audit of hermeneutic theorists.
Schleiermacher (1998. as cited in J. A. Smith et al. 2012) was the first to use hermeneutics, and in its generic form, offering a well-rounded point of view about how researchers can adequately interpret a participant’s experience. Schleiermacher (1998) believed that writers have a specific meaning for the text they publish. The author must then leave interpretation to the reader; however, these interpretations cannot run wild, they must run within the parameters of the wider text. Schleiermacher (1998) believed that the researchers must tap into their emotional senses in order to read a participant. Interviewing and interpreting an interview transcript asks researchers to tap into their intuition to understand the participant’s experience. This is important to an IPA researcher because the reader of a text must have a relationship with the author of the text in order to get meaning from it as part of the data collection.

Heidegger (1927/1962) was also a student of hermeneutics. He believed in appearances, and questioned how something was presenting itself as opposed to how it was in its previous state. Dual quality was an important part of appearance for Heidegger (1927/1962):

Things have certain visible meaning for us (which may or may not be deceptive), but they can also have concealed or hidden meaning…Phenomenology is concerned in part with examining something which may be latent, or disguised, as it emerges into the light (as cited in J. A. Smith et al., 2012, p. 24).

This hidden meaning is what a researcher must figure out. However, it is believed that the reader, listener, and analyst will never be able to provide perfect interpretation, because they will always bring their own preconceived notions, assumptions, and experiences into the analysis.
Gadamer (1960/1990) was heavily influenced by both Schleiermacher (1998) and Heidegger (1927/1962). Gadamer analyzed of historical documents and literary works in the traditional hermeneutic philosophy. However, he was also influenced by the relationship between a preconceived notion and something new. When interpreting, a reader puts aside a preconceived notions and something new. When interpreting, a reader puts aside preconceived notions until the end in order to not influence the author’s original meaning. Gadamer (19601990) is important to the IPA researcher because there is a difference between making sense of a text and understanding the person who wrote or said it. He also enlightens researchers about connecting experiences in the past to current experiences.

The hermeneutic circle is the final fundamental part of understanding this perspective. The hermeneutic circle is that in order to understand the whole you must understand the part and to understand the part you must understand the whole. This is important to the IPA researcher because to understand different levels of a participant’s experience a researcher’s perspective has to constantly shift between the part and whole.

Hermeneutics is an essential branch of understanding experience because it examines perspective. It is important for an IPA researcher to understand of how their own perspective can influence their data collection.

**Ideography.** The third branch of IPA is ideography. Ideography is used to single out a member of a group. It uses particulars to explain the individual story or experience. Ideography is intricate because it acknowledges the complexity of an experience while also trying to understand a person’s particular experience. The goal of ideography is to give a detailed description of a person’s experience and a detailed interpretation of a certain experience. It seeks to understands the world of objects and relationships with these objects (J. A. Smith et al., 2012).
IPA as an Appropriate Strategy

IPA is the appropriate approach for this study because it is committed to examining the situation experienced by the participant. This study calls for participants to reflect back on their college experiences as both students and athletes. It also seeks to examine how their university experience was different because they were in a separate student-athlete population at the institution of higher education. As student-athletes, these participants have had the unique experience of being amateur athletes while carrying the burden of a full academic course load. This requires a unique persona, one that calls for high motivation. In recent years, student-athletes have been portrayed in the media as not academically committed to the institution of higher education, but fully committed to their athletic practices. However, the media has ignored the larger population of student-athletes that does complete an academic degree, while successfully preforming in athletics. IPA calls for participants of the experiment to make sense of their experience and reflect on the phenomenon they experienced. This IPA study will call for its participants to make sense of their experiences with being motivated through their university experience as student-athletes. It seeks to determine whether competitiveness plays a role in their motivation. It takes a highly motivated person to complete an undergraduate degree as well as compete in the athletic arena at such a high level. IPA will allow the researcher to not only uncover common themes among the experiences of one population of students, but also examine how these experiences defined the participant and how they can be better served by the university.

Data Collection

The interview protocol examines the participant’s experiences as student-athletes at an institution of higher education. These questions will surround participants’ perceptions about being a student-athlete as well as their views about participating in both the academics and
athletics. The researcher will ask open-ended questions about aspects of their lives as student-athletes, what the expectations are for student-athletes, and how motivation has allowed them to be successful in either athletics, academics, or both. Questions will focus on what these experiences have meant for their university life as well as their future adult life or what will come next. Secondary questions will also be used in the interview protocol. These questions will focus more on the meaning of the experience to the participant. These questions will be different for each participant’s account because each account will be different.

Semistructured interviewing will be used for data collection. Interviews will be broken down into three stages (appendix 1). The first stage will be an introductory meeting, where the interviewer and participant can meet, get to know one another, discuss the objective of the interview, and get comfortable with one another. The introductory meeting will last between 15-20 minutes. The interview will be at least 60 minutes and could go up to 90 minutes. This will allow time for the researcher to get complete information. Forrester (2010) discussed how the interviewer should ask participants to describe their experience or event being discussed, including emotions they feel during the retelling. Lengthy interviews will allow the participants to tell their stories in their own words. During this time participants will also fill out The Sport Motivation Scale (SMS-28) (Pelletier et al., 1995) in an effort to better understand why these participants practice their sport. The third stage is member checking (appendix 2). The interviewer will send the participant a copy of the transcript. This is not a face-to-face meeting. It gives the participant the opportunity to reread answers, make changes, fix mistakes, and add more detail.

Semistructured interviews will be used because of their open and expansive conversation component. Rubin and Rubin (2012) said a semistructured interview is used when a researcher
wants to limit the number of questions to ask in an interview, but also add to the length of the interview by asking follow-up questions to participant’s answers, bringing more detail to the interview. However, a semistructured interview must limit and narrow the focus of the interview and not get off topic. Semistructured interviewing tactics allow for some freedom to ask follow-up questions. These follow-up questions allow participants to elaborate with more details about a particular experience. A researcher can also have the participants elaborate on feelings at the time which is important for how they react to an experience.

The first step in analysis is transcribing the interviews. A transcription, is a word-for-word rendition of what happened and what was said during the interview. Reading the transcript can have a lot of merit when going through the interview again. A researcher can discover details missed during the interview. Forrester (2010) believed watching, listening, or reading the interview on an individual basis helps gather a more detailed summary of the participant’s account. He also believed it is worth keeping a reflective diary, where the researcher can take notes as they emerge. Also important, according to Forrester (2010), is keeping copies of all notes, key extracts, and themes at each stage of analysis. Smith et al. (2012) recommended keeping a notebook when reading and rereading the transcripts. Researchers should write down their recollections, observations, experiences, and other important notes about the interview to reflect back on. Also worthy to include in this notebook is:

Identifying the participant’s own reflections is a key part of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. It is important to make a note of the participant’s own sense making in your reflective diary so it can be used in the next stage of analysis (Forrester, 2010, p. 190).
Rev.com will be used so that no mistakes will be made by the researcher on the transcript, to make the study more ethical and to ensure the researcher does not omit information from the transcripts.

After the transcripts are complete, they will be coded by hand. Coding by hand gives the researcher more focus to pick up on details while they are going over the transcripts. Through coding the researcher will be able to quickly recognize and locate passages, phrases, and themes. Because qualitative research requires attention to detail, meaning, and differentiating experiences leading to a common overall experience, coding is important in order to organize among the interviews.

In order to keep the data organized during the coding process, events, and topical markers are used. Labels help a researcher organize and group information into like chunks of data. Researchers may also want to use a hierarchy of code to narrow too broad a label. Usually common labels or colors are used to highlight like themes throughout an interview. To reduce the number of themes presented in the interviews, researchers should narrow down what they select by only examining those concepts and themes that apply to the questions the study seeks to answer. A researcher can differentiate based on the questions asked during the interview. Questions can be used as an organizational tactic and coded as themes in the interview. Also to be coded are concepts and themes raised by a majority of the interviewees.

Once coding is complete, a researcher sorts, summarize, and compares. This requires a researcher to extract material from the same labels and put them into one file. This has to be repeated for the rest of the labels in the coding system. A researcher then reads the files one at a time and summarizes what is read and seen. Once a researcher has summarized all the files, the material can be sorted into meaningful conclusions. After this process is completed a researcher
moves on to weighing and combining, putting all the information into a big picture for the conclusion and answering of research questions.

Participants

Each participant in this study will be a student (freshmen, sophomore, junior, or senior) attending a 4-year institution of higher education while participating in a men’s Division I or II intercollegiate sport (either football, basketball, hockey, or baseball) and taking a full academic course load that is approved by their college or university (appendix 3). Academic success will be measured by being on the appropriate timeline to matriculate from the degree program the student-athlete is in.

This project will include only one gender. No women will participate because female intercollegiate athletes face a variety of issues in addition to the one being studied. This study seeks to make general suggestions for more efficient and effective matriculation, so women may use this study to improve their experience at institutions of higher education as this study seeks to make general suggestions for more efficient and effective matriculation; however, issues like Title IX, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination will not be discussed.

Homogeneous sampling and random sampling will be used to get participants. Smith et al. (2012) and other recent studies have shown sample sizes are getting smaller. Because IPA studies are better with smaller sample sizes, this study plans to use six participants. Because this study seeks to get a broad perspective of Division I or II male student-athletes, the researcher will try to get at least two to three participants from different universities. This may not happen, and the participants may come from the same institution of higher education. The participants will be selected from institutions of higher education in and near Massachusetts that are classified by the NCAA as Division I or II. Six participants will cover
the experiences needed, and keep the study at a manageable size so interviews can be completed in the amount available.

Each interview will be conducted at the university the participant attends so he does not have to travel. University libraries usually have small group work spaces that are good for interviewing because they have privacy and convenience. Interviewing is a good way to conduct an IPA study because it collects individual experiences and how participants feel about and make sense of those experiences. However, a drawback of interviewing is that the study can only make suggestions to the rest of the student-athlete population. These experiences cannot be pinned onto those other student-athletes.

Data Analysis

IPA’s goal is to make sense of a life experience. This study seeks to determine how student-athletes make sense of their experience at a 4-year university in the role of being a student-athlete.

Data analysis begins with reading and rereading each interview transcript. To make sure the participant’s experience is the only focus of analysis, immerging in the data will allow the researcher to chronicle the account the participant gave her. Forrester (2010) believed watching, listening, or reading the interviews on an individual basis will help gather a more detailed summary of the participant’s account. He also believed it is worth keeping a reflective diary, where the researcher can make notes as they emerge. Also important, according to Forrester (2010), is keeping copies of all notes, key extracts, and themes at each stage of analysis. Smith et al. (2012) recommended keeping a notebook when reading and rereading the transcripts. In the notebook a researcher should write down their recollections, observations, experiences, and other important notes about the interview to reflect back on. This diary will also be used for:
Identifying the participant’s own reflections is a key part of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. It is important to make a note of the participant’s own sense making in your reflective diary so it can be used in the next stage of analysis (Forrester, 2010, p. 190).

For a researcher who has just gathered an abundant amount of data, having a system to reduce the data from overwhelming to manageable will help keep data analysis tamer. There will be a shift from general information to specific events and details. This indicates the participant has developed a trust in the researcher. As participants become more detailed and specific they are growing to trust the researcher. While the rereading process is taking place researchers will be able to pick up on some details that they might have missed during the interview, or when just listening to the audio of the interview. These details could contribute to something very large or important in the overall experience. Forrester (2010) echoed this, urging a researcher to not only reread and re-listen to the transcript, but to write up a summary of each participant’s interview. This in turn helps to familiarize a researcher with the interview.

The second step is initial noting, which asks a researcher to look at the content of the interview, what information was given and the language used to give the information. This step stems from reading and rereading because a researcher gets even more familiar with the transcript and data set. The goal of a researcher is to engage the text and make descriptive comments on the transcript to help break down the information. Here researchers are writing what is meaningful to them, and also writing down what was meaningful to the participant. Because IPA is a data-driven type of study, it is important for a researcher to be able to describe the data without bias. Forrester (2010) attested that a researcher should not jump to conclusions. Highlighting the participant’s sense making and reflection is important to the data set. Looking at
the language the participant uses can help a researcher contextualize how the participant feels and help pull apart how the participant understands the experience.

Notes are organized for each interview using titled headings for different parts of their notes. The following titles for notes are recommended by Smith et al. (2012): descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments. Color-coding each title so a researcher can write in the margin of the transcripts makes the different titles stand out. It is also recommended to write the comments and notes in the left margin, and themes right margin. Engaging with the transcript in this way can allow a researcher to ask questions about particular wording, sentence framing, and meaning for every line of the transcript. Researchers may also underline, box, and circle anything outstanding so their eye will be drawn back to it. At the end of a section of the interview a researcher should stop and summarize it to help with the initial interpretations of the data. This will help a researcher identify emerging themes.

Forrester (2010) agreed with keeping a reflective diary. However, Forrester (2010) differed by detailing a long-term notebook that identifies themes at each step of analysis. This will be better for the trustworthiness of the study; as Forrester called this an audit trail. Here a researcher can note what is worth taking into consideration and also what makes the study believable. This audit trail is a way to track procedural steps throughout the analysis and synthesis of the data.

The third step in data analysis is developing emergent themes. Because a researcher has now added notations to the transcript the data set has grown. The researcher can begin to develop emergent themes through this bigger data set. Forrester (2010) believed that breaking the transcript into smaller chunks of information and describing what was said in detail, helps to identify themes. He described two strategies; writing a descriptive summary of what was said,
and identifying initial interpretations about what was said during the interview. Through these descriptive summaries a researcher can begin to understand the meaning of an experience to a participant. Finding themes that relate to the study in each interview is important because it reduces the amount of information a researcher must to work with. It makes it easier for a researcher to organize comments and notes into the themes. The themes should maintain the interpretative and phenomenological focus of the study so the analysis focuses on the participant. Researchers must remember that theme titles must correlate with the content of what the participant. These themes will be important for the next three steps of data analysis, especially when bringing all the interviews together.

The fourth step when analyzing data is to search for connections across emergent themes. First, a researcher should order the emergent themes chronologically (the order in which the theme emerged). Researchers must dive further into their data in order to make intertranscript connections among the different themes they established. Researchers have a variety of different methods for extracting the patterns they are looking for: abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function.

The following is a brief description of each method. *Abstraction* identifies patterns among the themes and then clusters those themes together. Through this a researcher can superordinate to create new names for themes and subsections for themes. *Subsumption* helps a researcher divide up the superordinate themes and bring them together under related themes. *Polarization* is when a researcher looks at how the themes are different instead of comparing how they are similar. It is as important to recognize differences between data set as it is similarities. *Contextualization* is for looking at the similarities rather than the differences. *Numeration* is how many times each theme is supported in each account. A researcher can use
this to determine which themes are the most important and should be talked about most in the analysis. Another way the themes could be organized is by positive and negative presentations. Function can help determine whether the outcome and conclusion will have a positive or negative spin. This allows a researcher to determine which themes are the most prevalent in the dataset and which themes were spoken about most. This helps a researcher bring it all together and tell a story about the participant’s story.

Forrester (2010) called for clustering themes, or condensing the number of themes that could emerge. Relatable themes mean that more connections can be made within a data set. Cutting down themes into more meaningful chunks can help a researcher understand the participant better. It can also help link similar experiences across the different interviews. This leads to final themes, which are the central concepts of the data set. If a researcher finds these central concepts across multiple interviews explaining a common experience among different people becomes easier. This helps with presenting findings in the results section of the report.

The fifth step of data analysis is moving to the next case, and repeating the first four steps for all the interviews conducted during the study. The researcher must be careful to not ignore new themes that have come up because they do not align with the first interview they analyzed. Looking at each interview or case study as a fresh new opportunity is beneficial in order to find new themes across all interviews and case studies.

The final step is looking for patterns across cases. A researcher should take the emergent themes from each case and make connection across the cases. This will most likely lead a researcher to reorder and rename themes to fit across multiple cases. Pointing out what is shared among all the cases makes an IPA a unique type of study. The most effective way to make connections across cases is to make a table of the themes a researcher came up with and then
provide an explanation and examples of how each theme was presented in each participant’s interview. It is important to remember that while themes may overlap, according to Forrester (2010) it is okay if they do not. If a researcher finds that some interviews have different themes, then that experience is unique to that participant. IPA prides itself on idiosyncrasies and researchers should appreciate and embrace individuality across their data sets.

Providing an audit trail is important when conducting an IPA study. A researcher, must prove that the interpretations were based on a sound data set. It is important to note development in the transcript from mere answers to finding meaning in those answers.

**Ethical Considerations**

An informed consent form (appendix 4) will be written by the researcher and given to participants before their scheduled interview. The participants will be required to sign the informed consent form before the interview begins. In compliance with Smith et al. (2012), the researcher will allow the participant to withdraw from the study during the interview process. Withdrawal information will be specified on the consent form and member checking e-mail. Participants can withdraw at any time during and after the interview. Participants will be provided a copy of their transcript from their interview. They may review it to better determine whether they wish to continue to be used in the study.

There is no physical or emotional danger in this particular study. Safety is not an issue and there will be no need for supportive staff. In consideration to the participants, their full legal names will not be used throughout the study.

**Trustworthiness**

The purpose of this study is to find what motivates students to be academically successful so they end college with academic and athletic options. IPA will be used to attain at least six
student-athlete’s experience to make recommendations about what student-athletes could do and what they should be discouraged from doing. The following sections will outline the trustworthiness of this study.

Credibility

Credibility will be demonstrated in the following ways; the adoption of a clear and well-established research method, the use of random sampling, the use of tactics to ensure honesty, and member checking. According to Shenton (2004), the adoption of well-established research methods helps a study be as valid as possible. The protocol for this study will be adapted from studies that have come before as well as from Smith’s et al.’s (2012) steps for data analysis that minimize researcher bias. The interview protocol should be similar to previous ones.

Random sampling is another tactic to help ensure credibility in a research project. Shenton (2004) supported this by using Preece (1994) to explain that random sampling helps minimize bias by the researcher, institution, or participant. It also confirms the anonymity of the participants. Random samples will help with credibility because they ensure a researcher does not know the participant beforehand or have any sort of relationship with the participant. Participants should be “selected [as] a representative sample of the larger group” (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995, cited in Shenton, 2004, p. 65).

Selected participants want to take part in the study, or they would not have been willing to commit their time to being interviewed. Before the interview, participants will be given the informed consent form and the interview protocol. An introduction e-mail will be sent so the participant can read about the study, ask any questions, or voice concerns before the interview. During the interview, participants should be frank, blunt, and honest about their experience as a
student-athlete. However, participants may be tempted to lie during their interview, which means the study would lose credibility. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), interviewers can recognize inconsistency and build it into the interview’s consistency checks (p. 67). But with the knowledge that participants can pull out of the study at any time and that they will remain anonymous in the study, it should be clear that they do not have to lie for the study, or to not get into trouble with their university.

Lying can also relate to member checking. Guba and Lincoln (1981) attested that member checking is the most important part of credibility. Member checks, as well as access to the transcript to ensure accuracy are important to the credibility of the study. Researchers should constantly be asking themselves; do their words match their story? Because the interviews are semistructured, participants will be asked to offer reasons or examples for information they give during the interview.

**Transferability**

IPA can offer general suggestions. Student-athletes could read the study and relate to a participant. Readers can use what the participants experienced to change their own experiences. Universities can use details of the accounts of student-athletes’ accounts to better the experiences of student-athletes. They can find what universities do that work and maybe change their own procedures.

**Dependability**

Dependability relies on whether this study could be conducted again with similar results and conclusions. There are “close ties between credibility and dependability, arguing that, in practice, a demonstration of the former goes some distance in ensuring the latter” (Lincoln &
Guba, 1985, p. 71). Because the detail of this research will be in the final report, other researchers could use the same methodology at different universities. The study’s research design and methodology are clearly laid out, its implementation is discussed in detail, the details of data collection are addressed, and an overall reflection on the study is given.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures the study’s findings are based on experiences, not the characteristics of a student-athlete. Unfortunately, a researcher bias will always be present. However, this can be combated when “belief underpinning decisions made and methods adopted should be acknowledged within the research report, the reasons for favoring one approach when other could have been taken explained and weaknesses in the techniques actually employed admitted” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). A clearly written methodology will allow readers to “determine how far the data and constructs emerging from it may be accepted” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). The researcher will keep a reflective and informative research journal that shows clear thoughts, revisions, reflections, and to ensure this study is as credible as it can be.

**Limitations**

IPAs come with general limitations. The largest limitation for an IPA study is that it is based on people’s experiences, which cannot transfer to another student-athletes’ experience. The findings can be generally applied; however, they cannot be directly pinned on another. IPA emphasizes the importance of an idiographic focus and this study is intended to reflect some of the experiences of six student-athletes in the state of Massachusetts who are freshmen, sophomores, juniors or seniors at Division I or II institutions of higher education. These student-athletes must play either football, basketball, hockey, or baseball. These student-athletes have experienced the phenomenon under study.
A limitation of this study are that it is based on student-athletes at Massachusetts institutions of higher education. It does not consideration other regions of the United States. Another limitation is that this study does not include women, however another researcher could take this methodology and do a study on women. This study ended up getting only football players. This study does not include student-athletes from other types of sports teams like swimming, soccer, gymnastics, tennis track and field, or volleyball. This study seeks to study highly competitive Division I or II sports that are affected by network television and valued more by the NCAA as money making sports.

The theoretical framework of motivation can also be a limitation. Motivation is fickle it comes and goes. Because motivation can be high one day and low another, this type of behavior will be taken into consideration when analyzing the data and will be addressed in the interview protocol. Behavior is a limitation because behavior can change very easily and very suddenly.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to identify how to use athletic competitiveness to keep students academically successful, so that students end college with an academic and athletic option. The data collected during the research study was analyzed using hand-coding and note taking. After analysis the transcripts yielded four themes: Commitment, Support systems, Routine, and Future success. Within these themes a total of ten subordinate themes emerged: Under Commitment, identified subthemes were Grit, Perseverance, and Hard work. Under Support systems, subthemes were Family, Team, and Institutional support. Subthemes for Routine were Organization, Time management, and Scheduling, and for Future success, Jobs and careers. All of the themes and subordinate themes answered the following research question: How do students who are on half or full athletic scholarships and who are on track to graduate from 4-year Division I or II institutions of higher education explain and make sense of their academic success?

In the discussion of the themes, the reader will meet the six participants who volunteered to be a part of this study. Each attended the same unnamed institution of higher education in the Massachusetts, each was on at least a part time scholarship, and each played football. While they had different majors- engineering, finance, business, criminal justice, health science, and undeclared but leaning toward business administration- and were different grade levels (a freshman, two sophomores, and three seniors), all spoke positively about graduating from their chosen major in a timely manner, as they wanted to begin their future outside of the university. During this chapter readers will meet Kyle, Chris, Peter, Jae, Willy and John, and hear about their experiences as student-athletes.
In this chapter, readers will explore the identified themes and subordinate themes that the data presented. First discussed is Commitment, and its subordinate themes of: Grit, Perseverance, and Hard work. The second theme discussed is Support systems, and its subordinate themes of: Family, Team, and Institutional supports. The third theme discussed is Routine, and its subordinate themes: Organization, Time management, and Scheduling. Finally, the fourth theme presented is Future success, followed by its only subordinate theme; Jobs and careers. Each theme has its own section which will discussing the analysis and findings of the theme, followed by individual subsections for the subordinate themes, each with their own analysis and discussion. Finally, each theme will be wrapped up with a conclusion section.

Superordinate Theme 1: Commitment

The first theme identified from the data set was Commitment. Commitment was defined as the student-athlete’s dedication to both their athletic team and their personal academics. Many of the participants of this study used language that indicated they are highly motivated in their studies as well as motivated to participate on their team because of the feeling of commitment. Whether it was internal pushing or external conditions that promoted the commitment, it appeared all participants had a deep dedication to both performing well on the football team and to finishing their academic major within the four-year time frame college majors take to complete. While the reasoning and explanations were different among participants, the conclusion remained the same. Each participant was highly committed to football and their chosen academic major.

Commitment was especially used by the participants due to the nature of football. As a game, football relies on every member of the team, whether they are offense, defense, special teams, or kicking. Each team member relies on the other members to do their job in order to
successfully do their job. Therefore, if one part of the team, or one member of the team is not committed fully, the team does not function as perfectly as it could. This idea seemed to carry into other areas of the participant’s life, like school.

Jae discussed commitment in the context of football being a team sport as described above. Jae said:

It’s the ultimate team sport. My coach will also say it, but obviously it is. Dedication like you just have to dedicate everything that you’re doing on the field to one another because it relies on everybody doing their job correctly, so if somebody chooses to be lazy on one play, it could result in a touchdown. It could result in an interception. It could result in one of your brothers getting hurt, strictly because you said, “Oh, I want to take this play off.” That’s always in the back of your mind, like you have to make sure you’re always giving your all in everything and anything you’re doing.

While Jae was discussing what happens in a game, this dedication carried over to other aspects of being a student-athlete on the football team at this particular institution. These commitments during season included team lifts, team workouts, special teams’ meetings and video, and practice. This list does not note independent work different participants discussed during their interviews, like using the Athletic Training Room (ATR) for rehab, completing extra exercises to strengthen one area of their bodies, or extra services, like tapping before practice, physical therapy sessions, individual lifting sessions, individual stretching sessions, or working on skills independently. To these participants, commitment was not solely stepping on the field on Saturday and being committed to playing hard the four quarters- it was much more. Commitment included dedication to the craft of playing football, it’s the steps in between finishing a game, one week to get reading for the next week, or the steps taken after one season in preparing for the next season. The mentality
of no days off or you’re only as strong as your weakest member, kept these players moving forward. They all noted in their interviews that there were times they did not want to go to practice because they were tired, or sore, but their commitment to their team motivated them through the thoughts of I don’t want to do this right now, or I’m too tired to do this right now, or I quit, this is too hard. Peter would agree with Jae. Peter said:

You’re controlling yourself, you’re controlling what you do. So it’s really all about how you look at yourself and how you want to pursue yourself. So if you want to work hard and do all that stuff, I mean, go for it. But if not, that’s your own choice.

Commitment is mind over matter, its doing the work even when the person does not want to complete the tasks. Because football is the “ultimate team sport,” as Jae said, motivation is how you pursue the tasks at hand. Willy appeared to agree with Jae and Peter when he said:

I can’t speak for everyone, but depending on what you put into the game… You know, all off season when no one’s looking and all the sacrifices are made when no one’s watching. The more work you put into something, the more you become attached to something. So the more you’re attached the stronger you’re feeling something, whether it’s bad or good. It’s always going to affect you so that’s why I have such fulfillment when winning a game.

Because of the commitment the players put into their craft, winning a game kept them motivated to being successful on the field. They used their competitiveness to get better, to get good results. This demonstrated their dependence on their teammates, and how each player’s commitment was contingent on the other player’s commitment to the game. This was important because when one student-athlete was not committed, then they were not their best - they were not performing to their fullest potential. In addition to this, if students were not academically
committed, and they failed to be eligible to play, then the team had to forfeit a player that could have helped them win. John agreed with the other participants and stated:

Off-season. When we wake up at 5:00 a.m., and you’re here working and everyone else is sleeping. What are you going to do with it? That is grit, that is putting in the work when no one else is. He [coach] uses that as fuel for us because you’re already up, you might as well get better. I mean, because when you show up and you’re just going through the motions, you’re just waking up at 5:00 a.m. to be miserable. But if you wake up and you’re like, “I’m going to get better this morning,” that in two hours I’m done for the day then, with all my physical activity. I don’t have to do anything besides go to class the rest of the day, it’s like, “If I can get better these two hours instead of just trying to get through it, you’re going to get so much more out of it.” He [coach] uses that grit in the off-season to make sure we get better.

Both Willy and John discussed off-season, or the season they did not play the sport. Although not common knowledge to those outside the athletic community, football season does not end at Thanksgiving. This team in particular played into December. Following the regular season, the players began off-season workouts and lifts. As John stated these are at five o’clock in the morning. Also stated by John if you don’t really do anything during those five o’clock in the morning workouts then that time was wasted. As Willy would indicate later, “you’re cheating yourself.” In order to get better individually, one had to be committed to the team, and if one is committed to the team, the team functioned as it should: a perfectly working machine, where each part did its job.

While commitment on the field was discussed often during the interviews with participants, they also had to maintain eligibility to play. Part of the machine that is the football team is the
different players. Each player must train for, practice, and know his job. Part of being able to play intercollegiate athletics, is the student-athlete has to remain academically eligible to play. This was also a motivator to commitment because if one person could not play because they were ineligible, it did not bode well for the team who was dependent on every player on the field. Five of the six participants discussed time management strategies (which will be discussed in a separate section) concerning how they balanced their school commitments and their athletic commitments, because academics was more important than athletics, which was noted by all the participants in this study.

While commitment was the outstanding factor that drove participants to being successful in academics and in athletics, there were three other actively words or phrases in the interview protocol actively used by the interviewer to get the participants to describe their experience. These words were Grit, Perseverance, and Hard work. While they were a part of the interview protocol, participants began to use these words in their answers to earlier questions. In this study Grit means someone’s resolve in the face of difficulty, thus showing their character. Perseverance means doing an action, or activity despite it being difficult or challenging. And Hard work means how much effort the participant puts into an action or activities. These subthemes fall under Commitment because they are closely related to commitment. One cannot commit to an undertaking like being a student-athlete without possessing traits like; grit, perseverance, and hard work to motivate them through their prescribed schedule.

**Subtheme 1: Grit**

Grit is important when discussing commitment as commitment cannot stand alone; it needs the support of characteristics like grit. In the face of adversity or hardship, four of the six participants used grit in determining what they needed to do, in order to be successful. Where commitment sometimes failed, more commonly in the face of adversity, grit took over in
motivating the participants to move forward. Some participants discussed they enjoyed using grit as it showed what they were truly made of. In addition to this, many discussed a time of adversity, and the factor that propelled them forward was grit.

To Willy, grit had been the element necessary for getting through the tough times. Throughout his interview Willy hinted at many times of adversity: he commented on times when his living situation became difficult in college, he was injured several times, he transferred institutions of higher education after his freshman year, and he was behind in credits in his chosen major upon arriving at his current institution of higher education. When discussing grit Willy said:

I look forward to whenever it gets hard. I look forward to whenever it gets difficult. “You’re getting that 1% so let’s get to it. This is the grit you wanted to sign up for, you know.” And for me it’s always been easier to be motivated. I’ve never been in a prominent position where I’ve been highly favored or I was that guy, even when I was that guy. It wasn’t up to my own expectations yet so it’s always easier for me to dig deep than go back.

Willy cited that he had never just been handed opportunities, he had to make his own windows for success, and grit had always been instilled in him in order to achieve what he has set out to do. It appears that grit, even in the face of adversity, or lack of motivation, pushed him to give more when the going got tough. As Willy was a senior in college at the time of his interview, he had been doing this for the past three years, and had used his grit to get through the tough workouts or practices. Also because of his seniority of the team, he did not just follow the coaching staff’s expectations; he also sets his own expectations for his athletic performance, which one could assume he did academically since habits usually transcend different parts of people’s lives. This was important because his grit allowed him to not only successfully complete his major early, but
also to work though injury. Not allowing excuses to hold him back, his motivation by using grit has allowed him to succeed and become a force of leadership on the team.

Jae would agree with Willy that grit was especially important when committed to a demanding sport and also a demanding major (engineering). It was a constant topic in his interview, that balancing the commitments for both his major and his team was difficult as both required a lot of time and effort. He said:

I got like a D on my first test in my electronics class. I had just got hurt…I think it was week two of coming off a shoulder injury, so academically…I just kept, I was being a pain in the butt to the athletic staff. I was there probably like three times a day trying to rehab my shoulder, doing whatever I could. I was just there…in class I was asking questions. I was looking up extra, anything to help me understand what we were learning. The next test I got a C+. Then the next week on kickoff, I had three or four successful blocks, and I was pretty happy…Don’t let a bad week just ruin the rest of the year. Just keep moving forward.

When Jae struggled like Willy, he had to dig down and use that grit when things got difficult for him in being a student-athlete. This is important because some who do not possess grit might have stopped working, they might have used their injury as an excuse, or they might have just accepted the D without trying to better themselves academically to improve their grade on a later assessment. Instead grit was used the week following his injury and when he got a poor grade on a test. He used grit to keep going and took the steps to ensure he was doing everything necessary to get better, both athletically and academically. It turned out well for Jae because giving the extra 1%, as Willy referenced, saw him get a better grade on the next test in class, the extra rehab strengthened his shoulder, and in doing that he had several successful plays in the next game. Grit proved for both of these participants to be a factor in their motivation to be successful.
In addition to Jae and Willy’s discussion about grit, Peter would also cite grit as an attribute. Peter very simply said “It’s just something that you look at. Motivation is if you see something you want to do and you love it so much, there’s nothing real else that should stop you from doing it. But if you love it, you’re going to pursue it.” Peter’s discussion of motivation and grit was agreed upon by all six participants, and while several of them never came out and said “I used grit to succeed” they all said they loved football and they were all highly motivated to complete their academic major of their choice. Therefore, all six participants contained some sort of grit, whether they recognized they had it or not. There was not anything stopping these six participants from competing athletically, or succeeding academically, and while they’ve all had their setbacks, they have all gritted through it and gave that extra 1%.

**Conclusion.** Grit was experienced by the participants in athletics. Grit came out a lot more when discussing hard practices, or their 5:00 a.m. workouts in the off-season. However, independently they spoke about an individual time when grit was used in other aspects of their lives, whether it was Chris entering his first Master’s degree class, John changing majors, Willy dealing with housing issues, or Jae having to deal with an intricately designed tight schedule. When the participants discussed grit it seemed like grit was used to better themselves, as Willie stated he has needed grit to get to a position in his life, and Jae has used grit to overcome adversity in his academic major. Peter said grit was about working hard, even through the hurt or chaos of life, in order to be able to do what he loves to do. With this in mind the interpretation is grit is used when the going gets tough, whether on the field or in the classroom. It is expected that grit applies to all areas of life. When someone is highly motivated, traits such as grit applies to all aspects of life. Grit helped them overcome mental and physical toughness to get from where they are to where they want to be in order to maintain their commitment and motivation.
The conclusion drawn from discussing grit was they had to have it in order to fulfill their commitments. Grit encouraged their overall commitment to the team and to their major. As all six participants said they were motivated by their future, they had to have grit in order to be successful both academically for their future careers, and also grit when it came to their commitment to the team and the athletic goals. Grit was a huge reason why these six participants were successful in their academics and athletics. As with anyone, no one is perfect, and these participants demonstrated that they had missteps. However, they relied on their grit to get them through the difficult times in order to be successful. While they’ve all faced challenges, zero of the six participants were crippled under the pressure that was on them. As young adults they gritted through the difficulty to get to a better place, where they were happy and successful.

While grit was important in order to get through a difficult time, perseverance was also needed to get through the rough times and in order to be fully committed. Next the subtheme Perseverance will be presented.

**Subtheme 2: Perseverance**

Perseverance was important when facing the rigorous demands of a college major, and an intercollegiate football team. Perseverance was completing a task despite it being difficult or physically uncomfortable. Perseverance was a factor to motivation to the participants as four of the six participants attributed perseverance to their success. Jae discussed perseverance when he said:

Some years we lose a lot of games, but you got to just keep going. You got to persevere. You’ve got to get through it because if you’re going to let the losses weight you down, you’re not going to be able to get over it. We’re always being taught perseverance because
it’s like, “Remember, all right guys. We’re on a three-game losing streak, but it’s fine. We can turn it around at any point. At the flip of a switch, the whole year could change. We could get everything that we ever wanted in the next seven games. We’ve got to keep pushing forward…” So now during team workouts and in the summer whenever we see him, just throwing it out there, bits and pieces in the speech, just something that’s always going to stick there with you but also just seeing who’s paying attention, who’s present because a lot of kids listen but they’re not listening. They’re there, but they’re not really there. It’s always testing like, “If you can’t pay attention to me talking to you for five minutes, how are you going to be able to pay attention to your teachers for 65 and try to learn something for your test?” Everything means something when we’re doing something with it.

Jae discussed perseverance as those times when the team had lost or was not doing well in a game. To persevere through the difficulties of a game the participants love to play speaks to their motivation to be successful. Jae discussed perseverance as a way of getting through something difficult, whether it was practice or a class. This was true to all the participants, especially when they were talking about off-season 5:00 a.m. work outs, or when they were struggling to balance their school work and athletic work. Jae also discussed other players on the team who appeared to not have perseverance. They were maybe not as motivated to be present at practice so they were not actively listening to the coach. He questioned how they acted when they were in their classes and when things were tough, or not going their way, how had they managed to keep going. He especially noted that coach’s speeches were relatively quick, while classes were up to an hour lecture. Jae questioned how the other student-athletes could actually listen in class for a long amount of time when things were tough or not going their way. This opened up to more questions about how could they learn both football plays, tactics, maneuvers, strengthening points, or how
could they learn the skills for their desired field after graduation. Because as Peter said, practice was not easy, it was fast-paced, it was physical, and they were in a constant state of movement. This was important because it highlighted how perseverance separated those who went through the difficulty, or the adversity: They were faced with and worked their way out of the situation. Motivation in this case was assisted by the tenacity of the players to get through still giving it their all in order to be committed and successful to the team. Willy agreed with Jae by saying:

The hardest grit and perseverance I’ve had to show has been outside of football, but I had the ability to do so because of football. So when you’re younger, you have those hard games of coaches running you to the ground, you don’t want to do it, you want to go home, you’ve waited a long time for this and then when you do it, the feeling after is always better than the feeling doing it, so…I still can’t do it is, if I’m in the middle of a workout or a game, and I sell myself short, or I cheat…I can’t…no one might notice it, but I’m going to notice it forever, and it’s going to take a toll on me.

Willy’s extension of Jae’s explanation was well-put to answer the question, where did their motivation to succeed come from? While football, academics, or other outside factors of life might have put weight on Willy, it was all about not selling oneself short. Most people who are motivated do not sell themselves short because they are driven by accomplishment. This provides a context for what these participants stood for. Their tenacity proved there were student-athletes who did not make excuses, or use their place on the team and in the major as jokes, or stepping stones. They were serious about making it through college with two options: to continue to compete, or to go a career they have trained for during their academic major studies. It can be assumed that there are student-athletes that make excuses, or even give up when faced with too much to commit to. There are some that cannot withstand the toll being a student-athlete takes on a young adult.
Four of the six participants determined perseverance was a part of their success. Chris discussed the fulfillment of winning a football game as “To finally see us win by a touchdown or two, that was really really good, especially because it was a competitive game, so there was a lot of ebbs and flows in it. It was just really, really good to win that.” As discussed earlier, the football team was demanding of its players’ time. The team required commitment to the other activities that went along with playing football, like the work outs, the lifts, and others. *Perseverance* was a theme most participants discussed when talking about the fulfillment of success.

**Conclusion.** Perseverance was incredibly important to these student-athletes, especially after an unsuccessful football week resulting in a loss in a game, or an unsuccessful week academically resulting in a poor grade. Perseverance was discussed a lot by the participants, and told the story of a group of student-athletes who were determined to succeed. Whether it was persevering through a major academic change, living situation difficulty, or a difficult class or practice, the success came in overcoming this by being persistent, and having the ability to move forward in the difficulty. Perseverance was encouraged by commitment, as none of the participants wanted to be the weak link on the team. They did not want to be the one who quit, so they persevered on even if it was uncomfortable. One of the participants cited that seeing other teammates not persevering through and instead relying on other forms of distraction like joking around, and not working hard, led to them not being successful up to the point they were sometimes ineligible. As Willy stated, he had to have grit and perseverance as much on the field as in class because he had to be eligible academically to be on that field competing every Saturday. Thus the conclusion drawn is although it might have been difficult to balance their academic and athletic commitments, they were highly motivated to getting good grades to
maintain their status as eligible athletes. Without perseverance through their difficulties they discussed in their interviews, the demands of their academic and athletic commitments could have been crippling, like can be to others in their position. However, because they persevered through to maintain their commitment, perseverance made them successful in the face of adversity.

*Hard work* is the final subtheme that will be discussed. Hard work was echoed in grit, perseverance, and the participant’s commitment to their success. To be discussed next is the subtheme *Hard work*.

**Subtheme 3: Hard Work**

*Hard work* is the final subtheme to be discussed under *Commitment*. Although hard work might seem like a simple trait, maintaining a work ethic that attains success is difficult. While there are people who say they work hard, it is the maintaining of that work ethic that leads to success, it is attributable to the no days off mentality many of the participants spoke about. Hard work was a trait that drove the participants to success. While commitment, grit, and perseverance all led to success, they would not have been possible without hard work. While discussing success Kyle said,

It shows all the time in the off-season and preseason and even during season, like all the work you put in is finally paying off. You have an end result to what you’ve been preparing for, for months… It’s a sense of accomplishment that you get from, after all the 5AM runs and all the different lifts. It makes you think like all right it was worth the time that I put in.
Whether it was winning a game, doing well in a class, or balancing their commitments, all six participants discussed their work ethic, and how they accomplished what was expected from them with hard work. Both Chris and John had similar narratives about hard work. Chris said:

Just all the hard work you put in all week. I mean, no one likes to lose, so just everything you put in all week and seeing it actually being put on the field on Saturdays, it’s just really, really fulfilling to say the least… It’s basically just like scoring a touchdown. It’s…know that all those hours of studying are paying off in the end and then seeing your grade transcripts being just as good as you wanted it to be.

While John said:

Off-season. When we wake up at 5:00 a.m., and you’re here working and everyone else is sleeping. What are you going to do with it? That is grit, that is putting in the work when no one else is. He [coach] uses that as fuel for us because you’re already up, you might as well get better. I mean, because when you show up and you’re just going through the motions, you’re just waking up at 5:00 a.m. to be miserable. But if you wake up and you’re like, “I’m going to get better this morning,” that in two hours I’m done for the day then, with all my physical activity. I don’t have to do anything besides go to class the rest of the day, it like, “If I can get better these two hours instead of just trying to get through it, you’re going to get so much more out of it.” He [coach] uses that grit in the off-season to make sure we get better.

Both participants discussed the hard work it took in between seasons to get ready for the next season. While discussing winning a game, Chris cited all the steps that he took between the last game and the present game. This was hard work, and winning proved you worked hard that
week. While John discussed the steps they took between seasons as an example of hard work, citing the early morning workouts and lifts, it was the hard work they put into their craft that made them successful not only on the football field but also in outside life and academics. Hard work was important to note as without doing the hard work, winning and getting good grades could not have been achieved. All the participants cited either winning a game, or getting a good grade as bringing them a feeling of fulfillment; however this feeling was impossible without putting in the hard work. Being willing and capable of withstanding difficulty translated in other aspect of the participants’ lives. For example, Willy discussed having to pull all-nighters in the library to maintain his personal goal of getting a 4.0 GPA in school. It went beyond feeling miserable or tired while completing these steps; it was knowing they were doing it for a higher purpose, their commitment to the team.

Conclusion. Hard work was echoed throughout the theme Commitment. It takes hard work to do anything well, and to work through the difficulties and obstacles of life. Each participant at one time or another brought up the fact that it was hard work to be a student-athlete. It was interpreted that hard work was when no one was checking in on them, and showing up and really being ready for what tasks were in front of them. Two of the six discussed their off-season early morning lifts, or team runs, when talking about hard work. It proved their commitment to the team, as some might go through the motions of doing the work without really doing the work, or selling themselves short on working hard by doing only the bare minimum or skipping the morning sessions all together. One of the participants discussed how it was everything you have done all week in their routine, it was that hard work that was shown on Saturday in the game. It can but assumed that this was true for academics, that the hard work put into a tough class was shown in the class’s final grade. It was the office hours they’ve attended,
or the hours spent in the library, that led to the grades they wanted to see. To these participants, hard work is putting in the effort to be successful. It was doing the hard work even when they either do not feel like doing the work, or they felt totally abashed by the obstacle in front of them, and yet their hard work has led them through their difficulties. It was the mentality of always getting better, because they were committed to the team and to their chosen major.

**Superordinate Theme 2: Support Systems**

Support systems are incredibly important to young adults. They generally provide structure, expectations, and reassurance. All of these are needed by the youth as they make their way through the difficult rigor of college life. Because student-athletes are committed to more than the average college student, they need more support in order to keep themselves successful academically and athletically. At the institution of higher education used in this study, the college provided formal institutional supports, but family and team were also discussed when participants spoke about who supported them on their endeavors through university life.

Peter spoke positively about multiple supports the institution of higher education provided for its student-athlete population. This combination of supports was important for student-athletes as it helped to provide structure and expectations for them. Peter said,

So all the teachers, not just the teachers, but like I said, the advisors… they’re on your back all the time. If they notice something, they’re not hesitant to say it. And that’s a good thing about the institution. They notice something that’s going wrong…they will tell you and tell you how to help yourself.

Support systems had to have an important place in the student-athletes’ life. As Peter noted, when something was not going rights or well, teachers and advisors told them. This was the
reassurance some of the student-athletes needed to ensure they were making the right choices and devoting enough time to their commitments. The support systems were direct in telling the student-athletes how they needed to adjust what they were doing in order to be better. While discussing that teachers and advisors helped to make him better and ensured he achieved the expected grade point average, he noted that one of the advisors saw him out of class and questioned it. When asked who tracked his progress, Peter also said that the athletic advisors looked at their grades. This kind of support could have helped him stay on track and remain committed to the tasks of being a student-athlete, motivating him in the right direction.

In addition to athletic advisors being important, Jae noted the support he got from the coaching staff as he balanced a tricky schedule between football and the engineering department. Jae said:

During season, it’s difficult and the engineering department, there’s only so many teachers of that specific department…Some days I have to work with my football schedule because of my class schedule. Last semester, it’d be class ended at like 3:00, 3:30 and practice would be at 4:00 or its start at 3:00, whatever time it started, so I’d have to come from the engineering building to practice, get dressed, run out there, and then depending on the day, I would have lab starting at like 6:00 or 5:30. In the middle of practice, I’m asking coach, “Coach, what time is it?” He’s like “Oh, its 5:15.” I go, “All right. I got to leave in five minutes. I have lab.”

While frustrated by the tight schedule, Jae did not note that his coaches gave him issues about having to leave to fulfill his academic obligations. He noted his communication with these coaches was to ensure they knew his academic schedule and to give the coaches a reminder about when he had to leave practice, or come late to practice. This was important because the
coaches allowance of this showed the coaches’ opinion of academics was high, and they instilled that it would not be okay for practice to come before school. That they allowed Jae to leave in order for Jae to be as academically sound as possible provided evidence that the coaching staff supported positive behaviors and that the expectation was that class come first.

Finally, teammates were noted as a support system on the team. Kyle discussed how some of the players were in the same class. Maybe they did not have the same teacher, but it was the same material so they could help each other out. He also noted, when asked about getting advice from his teammates about academic classes they had already taken that he was taking now:

I learned it more from my teammates that in my same major that are older than me because they’ve had to do these same exact classes and they put me under their wing, “All right, so this is how I did it you should try it.” I ended up trying it and it works. It’s kind of like a big brother thing, I embraced from some of the guys.

When asked if this was a motivator he strongly agreed, because he wanted to take the advice given to him, so he would not look bad by not following the advice and then failing. The older teammates had an important impact on the younger teammates as they had already figured out what worked for them and what did not work for them. They could promote healthy habits among the freshmen and advocate habits that work, over behaviors that could get them into trouble.

Support systems were clearly a part of the participant’s success and motivation. All six participants included in their interviews one time were either family, team, or institution. Supports provided to them a positive and motivating experience to being successful student-
athletes.

**Subtheme 1: Family**

Family was shown to be the most important support system. All participants referenced their family as a means of support when they faced adversity and difficulty, whether it be academic or athletic.

John spoke about his parents as his support system, the most out of all six participants. When asked what strategies he used when he is feeling burnt out either performing academically or athletically, he answered:

I always turn to my parents and just talk to them, give my mom a call…I always give her a call and she always knows the right words to say…That’s what calling my mom does. She takes my mind completely off of it. She’ll talk about something that happened three years ago that has nothing to do with anything and will make a 45-minute phone call out of it that’ll just distract me for that time being. So I can get my mind right again.

John’s parents instilled in him that getting good grades was mandatory. While it was a privilege and fun to play football, good grades have always been a theme in John’s life when it comes to being a student-athlete. John’s parents have always harped on getting good grades, and the fact he was primarily in college to get good grades has echoed in John’s actions. This support system was important when John faced adversity as it was important for him to have an outlet to let his frustrations out about the difficulties he was facing in academics or athletics. He knew they provided the structure to be sympathetic, but gave him sometimes the tough advice they needed to give him. This kind of support was a piece to what helped John, in addition to the grit,
perseverance, and hard work. It was imperative that John had a support system to help re-motivate him during difficult times.

Like John, family as a support system was also been helpful to Peter. When asked how he overcame his biggest challenge at the university, he responded”

I’ll always call my parent [when overcoming a challenge] and say, “Hey, you guys want to get dinner or something? You guys want to meet somewhere?” And then to see them and talk to them is a huge stress reliever. And they want to talk to me too.

Having an outlet to get away from the institution of higher education was helpful to Peter during stressful times. When he commented that football was his biggest challenge, physically getting away from anything and everything football seemed to destress and re-motivate Peter. Having a positive force that was supportive helped Peter refocus and get back on track when motivation was lacking because of the stress of his commitments. While Peter’s parents differ from John’s parents, both parents provided positive emotional support to their sons during times of difficulty.

In addition to John and Peter’s comments about their family as a support system for them, Kyle also commented on his parents. However, Kyle used his parents as motivation to do better. He mentioned his parents a support system who set the structure and expectation for Kyle to do well. Kyle discussed his family when answering questions about academic success. He said:

I know what success is, getting the certain GPA that basically my parents has wanted me to get my entire life, I guess. They’ve always wanted me to shoot for higher than they got. My parents have always wanted me to have been really good at school…whenever I was getting a 3.5 or higher, like what they wanted me to get was I saw as my success.
Kyle’s family was the framework that unexpectedly set the standard for how Kyle measured success for himself. However, like John’s parents Kyle’s parents instilled in him the importance of good grades throughout his life. Several of the participants echoed this sentiment; Chris, Peter, Kyle, and John all discussed the expectation of good grades that came down from their parents. Willy, on the other hand, used his family as motivation for where he did not want to be in life and his mom’s excitement when he succeeded as motivation, and Jae discussed how his father told him being a student-athlete was not a typical experience.

Family offered all participants some sort of support. They offered their children an outlet for frustration concerning failure or adversity, or they provided expectations and a framework for how to succeed. Each participant’s parents celebrated their child’s successes, while also being a crutch when difficulty struck, an outlet away from the stressors of school and football.

**Conclusion.** Family was an important support system for the student-athletes who have participated in the study. Family was important because like the data shows the participants have either had values of academic success instilled in them, and have maintained that expectation through their time in college. Family provided the context for what success was to the participants in this study.

However, another support system was the team itself. Most of the participants said either the team was really close, or the team was equated to a brotherhood. It was important they have a family that supported them, but also to have a support system on campus, with people who knew and understood what each other were going through. Next to be discussed is the support system the team provided the participants.
Subtheme 2: Team

While football was a stressor to the participants as it required a lot of hard work and time, the team was a second support system that was discovered in the dataset. Half of the participants spoke about the importance of team support. While team members were an important factor to the support system, the participants also included the coaching staff and team slogans that were embedded in the framework of the football team that set the expectation for success.

Kyle discussed how the coaching staff were always reinforcing the team slogan – “tough” – to set the expectation of working hard, and persevering through the tough times, whether it was a complicated workout or a game they were losing. Kyle said,

The team slogan that we have is “Tough”… You’ve gotta be able to handle random things that happen, be able to handle random things that happen, be able to overcome situations. That’s something that our coach really preaches to us is, basically adversity and being able to get over, no matter what’s going on, to be able to get over the hill, the hump.

This reinforcement and acknowledgement from the coaches, particularly the head coach, was important to the participants. It told them without literally telling them that the coaches understood the rigor of university life as well as competing as a student-athlete. The coaching staff encouraged the players to persevere through the difficulty and were a support system when individual players on the team were in need of support, or were in need of an expectation to hold themselves to. In addition to this, the participants discussed how coaches would discuss grades with the players, did classroom checks, or made an appearance at study hall hours to ensure the expectation was lived up to by the players.
Peter supported this analysis when he commented on the coaching staff and the characteristics that the coaching staff spoke about. When asked who besides his family have offered him help Peter said:

Coaches are definitely people you want to go talk to. They’re like family. This whole team is like a family too, so if you have something to say, just say it. They’re not going to take it any bad way whatsoever. They know what you’re going through. So it’s not like they’re getting surprised. They just know. They know how to handle it.

Having a close relationship with the coaching staff created a community of trust where players could speak with their coaches honestly about all types of issues. He also commented, “I mean if you’re not doing good in school and they know it, if you’re not going to class and you’re late to class. They do have class checks, so if you’re not at class and they check, you’re in…trouble.”

The coaches, like parents, seemed to know the needs of their players, and they provided a structure for what was right and what was is wrong. The coaches kept the players on the team academically motivated. This type of relationship was important to foster, as three of the six participants discussed how they could speak with their coaches, and the coaches had positive responses and advice for them to take away. Willy agreed with Peter. When Willy was asked about coaching techniques he commented:

That’s the key characteristics of it. Coach…would always address like being “tough” is having grit, being rugged, having perseverance. We pride ourselves in having…doing things the right way. Doing things, the right way comes challenged with those who do it the wrong way, and you’ve still got to outplay them, out-beat them…Every snap is a mini-battle, and every mini-battle comes with everything you decide, and the grand
perseverance, being resilient and if you ever forget tend lose sight of those, you are going to get put down. You never want to be that guy.

Coaches who instilled positive values in their student-athletes, like the participants’ coaches, were hardwiring the expectations of the team and being a student-athlete has. It appears that because the head coach instilled key characteristics into his players, he set the structure and expectations for his team to reach. It can be assumed that if the participants used the characteristics that were expected on the field, then those characteristics would transfer to other aspects of life. For example, when Willy said during a game each snap of the ball is like a mini-battle, each assignment in a class is like a mini-battle. If one wins enough mini-battles they can win the game or conquer the class. As with the participant’s parents, who instilled positive characteristics into their children that turned into good academic habits, the coaches did the same for good university life and team habits.

Having the team as a support system was important to the student-athletes. In addition to the coaching staff being a part of the participant’s support system, others spoke about their teammates. Peter discussed how his roommate was not only a roommate, but also his teammate and childhood best friend. This support system was important to Peter so that someone could empathize and understand what was happening. John agreed and disagreed with this when he discussed how his roommate played a different sport at their institution of higher education. He voiced how he liked to have someone who could empathize with him as a student-athlete, but also not be on the same team. In the event that the team was overwhelming him, he liked to step back and away from them.

The support system the team provided was incredibly important to the participants, as half of them spoke about specific instances when the staff and team helped them in a positive
way. All the participants spoke about the positive effect the football team had on them. To summarize this support system Peter said it best: “Having the coaches, they’re definitely like a gateway to success…”

**Conclusion.** The team appeared important to participants in the data set. Five of the participants spoke highly of the promotion of academics on the team. The coaching staff was a support system for the student-athletes that participated in this study. A majority of the participants commented on how the coaches’ office doors were always opened and the characteristics of a good student-athlete were always promoted within the team through the coaches. In addition to this, the head coach required his players to participate in more than the required study halls for his freshmen and ineligible athletes. This is evidence that he wanted his players to have a time and space for academics and to seek help through other institutional supports. Next to be discussed is the institutional support the institution of higher education provided and has established for their student-athlete population.

**Subtheme 3: Institutional Support**

Institutional support systems were noted by all participants. Institutional support was important as it provided the student-athlete population with certain requirements to ensure that academic work and obligations got done. Institutional supports included academic advisors, athletic advisors, professors’ support and attendance policies, and mandatory study halls (for those students who were freshmen or getting below a certain grade point average defined by the university and NCAA).
Institutional supports like study hall were discussed at one point like a parental check in or like when a parent makes their child have homework time. Several participants commented on how it was good structure to have. For example, Kyle said:

I think I was more motivated in the classes because we have study hall required for freshmen year, for football players two times a week. You have to be in study hall from whatever year you are in, if you don’t have a certain GPA, so trying to get my GPA over a 2.5 and keep it there is what’s making me feel successful so I don’t have to go to these mandatory study hall.

When discussing fulfillment in winning a game or getting a good grade, Kyle brought up the fact that institutional support allowed him to be successful academically. As a freshman, per the rules of study hall, he had to attend. When asked if the study halls have helped him, he said they had helped, even when he did not want to go. He likened it to a built-in study and homework time into his schedule. It allowed him to focus on other tasks throughout his day because he had this separate time to complete his homework.

In the study halls, student-athletes were also provided with athletic advisors, who monitored the study hall and also provided assistance and support to the student-athletes. Two of the participants spoke about their positive relationships with the athletic advisors. John spoke about his positive relationship with one of the athletic advisor when he was switching his major from business to health sciences. He said:

I went to the athletic first, because her and I are very close. We met at study hall…So, last year because I was a freshman I had to go all year and I always talked to her, and we became really close…and just checks in on me and stuff…I asked her what to do. Then
she guided me to talk to my academic counselor. It was her first and she laid everything out to me, then I went to my academic.

Because of John’s positive relationship with his athletic advisor they were able to formulate a plan of action during the time he switched majors. When commenting to switching majors, John said it was a chaotic time, because he was exposed to all new classes, and he noted that those classes were more challenging. He was prompted by the athletic advisor to get in touch with his academic advisor, and begin the process of switching.

Peter also discussed how institutional supports helped him. He commented on how the athletic advisors checked in with the student-athletes at study hall, and held them accountable for what they were supposed to do. Peter said:

So with the academic ones they’re usually there to help you with attending events, meetings you should be at, making your schedule. And then with your athletic one, they just want to make sure that you’re going to class, you’re getting good grades, making sure you’re doing everything right that you should be doing and not doing anything wrong…so they’ll actually tell you…there’s some times last year where I would not go to class, but I had a reason. The athletic advisors at study hall…for a freshman it’s mandatory to go to study hall all year. So seeing them there, like, oh, you weren’t at class? And I’d be like, oh, I had this...So they [athletic advisors] can definitely track everything that you’re doing.

He noted the academic advisors set the expectation and framework for what was supposed to happen academically, and led them in scheduling and what order classes and events to complete. He also discussed how the athletic advisors assisted in helping student-athletes by checking their grades, checking in on classroom assignments, making sure they were attending class, and if they
were not attending, find out why, or what they needed to do to catch up from missing class, while the student-athletes completed the expectations set by the academic advisors. They tracked all academic progress of the student-athletes at the institution of higher education. While this appears to be a lot of work, it provided structure for when the student-athletes struggled with keeping up with their commitments.

**Conclusion.** The academic advisors seemed to be another layer of positive support. Not only were they accessible to the student-athletes due to their location in the sports complex on campus, but they were also available during study hall. While academic advisors were spoken about in a positive manner, athletic advisors where spoken about more frequently.

**Superordinate Theme 3: Routine**

The data presented the third theme of *Routine*. *Routine* was an important theme that emerged from the dataset as it seemed to allow the participants to structure their life and helped with motivation. All six participants described using some sort of routine in their day-to-day activities as a strategy to keep up with their busy schedules. Along with routine a majority of the participants discussed organization, time management, and scheduling.

Routine helped with the difficult schedules all participants had. All six participants spoke about routine helping them move through their day-to-day commitments. Willy spoke about how routine made it easier to get up for the team’s five o’clock in the morning workouts, because it was a part of his routine, and had been since arriving at the institution of higher education. He said:

I’m at a point now at which I’m a senior. Waking up for workouts, going to practice you don’t want to go to, playing hard, valuing the little things is easy to me now. Not that it’s
repetitive, because it’s not, but it’s a commitment, because if it’s repetitive, you forget why you’re doing it, you’re just going through the motions, but it’s a commitment. It’s something that I take pride in because I know how important it is to make sure every practice is great, because you can make those same play you made in practice.

Routine indicates a repetitious activity, meaning that once Willy had been doing the act over and over, it was easier to accomplish and fulfill. Therefore, the researcher can conclude that routine provided a structure for the participant to fulfill his commitment. According to Willy’s example, when routine was stable, practice went well, and then those plays transferred to success on the field. This example transferred to his academic success when academic obligations were consistent, as the routine allowed for the participants to be successful. This idea of repetition and routine brought fulfillment to most of the participants in this study. John agreed with Willy, stating that his day-to-day behavior was a rhythm that he got into. Once he completed his obligations in the morning, he had the rest of the day to complete other tasks. John said:

> It’s more when we get things done earlier in the day. So, I’m up at 5:00 a.m. every day, for either lifting or conditioning. Then we have the rest of the day to ourselves then. Which is nice, but I mean, it’s a struggle to get up that early every day. But you get used to it. You get a rhythm and it’s not a big deal at all.

John’s statement about the early morning workouts being difficult, was important because he indicated that it was a struggle to get up and continue that commitment; however, the rhythm of getting up and meeting the obligations the football team has established was eased because of routine.
Routine provided the participants structure that they had to maintain. When the routine was not maintained, then the participants have faced some sort of disaster. For example, Kyle spoke about how his routine of setting alarms failed one day. One of his alarms did not go off, causing disaster. Kyle described being in a state of chaos; he was late to class, and because he was late to class he missed a review for an assessment, and because he missed the review he performed poorly on the assessment. This pattern continued for Kyle, all because his routine was disrupted. It took time for Kyle to get back to his routine and find success again in a small quiz. This speaks to John’s mention of rhythm in his interview. John thrived on rhythm, and it would appear so did Kyle, because when Kyle’s rhythm was thrown off, it caused problems in his day-to-day activities and led to a chain reaction of being unsuccessful academically.

Chris echoed routine’s importance when it came to handling his busy schedule while also tackling his academic and athletic endeavors similar to how Willy, John, and Kyle spoke about routine in their interviews. Chris said:

Just taking it one day at a time. I try not to look at the big picture because then I get stressed out, so I just take it one day at a time, seeing where I have time to study or time to work out and just taking it from there, whether that’s going week by week but day by day…It’s basically my order of events. I go to class. Then after class, if I have time, I’ll take a nap to prepare for lifts. After that, if I have time, I’ll rest, stretch out against, and then I’ll go to practice. After that, just start all over again… It’s basically just a tight-knit routine I do, just to keep myself on track and be motivated for the day.

Chris used routine to keep his workload manageable. He spoke about how routine has kept him completing one task at a time, and allowed him to focus on one task at a time. Ordering events helped keep his mind on what he was doing, completing that part of his day, and then moving on.
Routine was important to all participants that participated in the interviews for this study. Routine has kept them academically successful because they had an understanding of their requirements. Routine was good for the participants and their busy schedules because it established expectations, and their understanding of the expectations provided them structure. Going hand in hand with routine was; Organization, Time management, and Schedule. The first subtheme to be discussed is Organization.

**Subtheme 1: Organization**

During their interviews all six participants spoke about organization as a positive attribute of their daily routine. Organization sets the stage for them in going through their routine, it also allowed them to see their schedule written down, or their requirements for the day ordered so they knew what the expectation for that day was. Organization included calendars, syllabi, cell phone alarms, cell phone reminders, cell phone notes, and keeping materials in a certain order and in a certain place for easy access. Essentially, it was knowing where everything is, and how to access everything in a timely and easy manner. Well-organized participants could better get through their busy day-to-day schedule and successfully complete their requirements.

Kyle spoke about how organization was a cornerstone to his success as a student-athlete. As discussed in the subordinate theme 3, Kyle sets alarms to keep himself on a time table that was contingent on his schedule. Kyle said:

If I’m not organized, I learned that …I just am not…I won’t function as well throughout the day. ‘Cause my mom’s really… She seems OCD about every little thing that’s going on throughout her day, and so I picked that up from her. She’s always had a crazy stuffed
schedule, like we’re gonna leave at this time, we’re gonna do this, this, this, this. If I don’t have a basic structure of what I’m supposed to be doing I feel like I’m just kind of lost.

In Kyle’s statement he expressed how if he were not organized he could not make it through the day. He has learned his organizational strategies from his mother, who instilled in him the values and benefits of organization. Her organization skills when Kyle was young, inherently taught Kyle how to be organized and get from place to place on time. By being organized, Kyle was afforded success by knowing where he needed to be and when, which contributed to not only his athletic success but also his academic success.

John agreed with Kyle and related to the obsessive compulsiveness of organization, and to setting alarms and reminders on his cell phone. John stated:

Well, I have a big calendar on my desk that has everything I have to do. I guess you could say I have OCD…but everything has to be in order for me…If I have a schedule for the day, if something pops up, I don’t let myself get shaken up that, “Oh, I have to go run and do this.” I like to plan out what I have to do, but I’m ready for life’s curveballs. Things are going to happen. But I think success is that positive mindset everyday where you look and see what you have to do and be like, “I’m going to attack this and I’m going to get it done.” It’s all about focusing on what you have to do to be the best you can be every day. It’s as simple as that. I feel like if you have everything laid out for what you have to do for that day, that it’s way easier to attack it…I have what time my class hour there, plus I have my lift practices meetings. It’s just, I think outlining everything that I have to do kind of. I set reminders in my phone all the time the night before, before I go to bed, so that if I have to set an extra alarm for this or having those reminders every night before I go to bed to be
able to check everything and be able to do everything before I go to sleep, having that piece of mind that I have this under control. It is very important for me.

Organization helped John focus on what his task was during the day. John’s desk calendar helped him visually see everything he needed to do that day, and also allowed him to see what the expectation was for the next day. Like Kyle, alarms helped John keep up with timeliness. Alarms and reminders to help him double check his schedule and also to kept him going through the day. As part of his daily routine, John set his alarms the night before as a way to remind himself of the tasks for the next day, and then during the day to keep up with those tasks.

Peter also commented on using a large calendar like John to list out the tasks he was committed to per day. Because he lived with other student-athletes they had a house calendar to keep commitments organized for the whole house. “Yeah. And then we have a big calendar on the wall of our kitchen. So if anybody else has anything important or important for everybody that live there, they’ll write it down.” This relates to what John said about seeing everything laid out; it made the tasks much more attainable. Peter continued and said:

I like to write stuff down. Like random places. Like if I have a random slip of piece of paper I’ll write something on it, I’ll just shove it in my pocket… I do have a planner…But I also use the notes in my phone for all the… like I’ll write it in my planner and I’ll also write it down on my phone, because I’m on my phone more than I am in my planner. So if I can see it on my phone, I’ll know it’s important.

Organization was echoed in Peter’s interview as he spoke about writing things down to see what he had to do. While sometimes writing things down can go awry like writing them on random slips of paper, overall it kept his minds clear of remembering everything and alleviated the anxiety of
having to memorize everything. Having it written down allowed for commitments to be completed successfully.

**Conclusion.** Organization went hand in hand with routine. It allowed for their routine to run smoothly throughout the day, whether it was reviewing what was coming up by using calendars to keep their commitments organized and clear, or using reminders, alarms, and notes in their phone to help them keep going through their day. Organization was an important and positive force that helped all the participants. Organization was important when managing time, and keeping to a specific timetable. Next to be discussed is time management.

**Subtheme 2: Time Management**

*Time management* was another component to routine because it kept the participants on a timetable to meet the demands of their busy schedule. Five of the six participants spoke of time management during their interviews. Again, similar tactics that they used in their organization were brought up again when discussing time management.

Just like alarms kept Kyle from forgetting his different obligations during the day, he also used the same strategy to make sure his schedules were coordinated and to keep him from being late to his different obligations throughout the day. Kyle said:

I have probably 30 alarms set in my phone. Three of them with five or 10-minute intervals, at 5:00 a.m. It’s like 5:00 a.m., wake up, 5:05 there’s another alarm that says get dressed, and one at 5:30 that says leave. There’s that, and then I have two set for almost each class, 30 minutes before and 15 minutes before… I’m getting an alert from my calendar, I get two more from my alarm. It seems like my parents pushing me.
When asked how he kept track of all the things he needed to do for his athletic and academic schedules, he commented on how his alarms kept him punctual by telling him when he needed to get ready, when he needed to start to get to his destination, and the time he needed to be at his destination. He related his alarms to his parents telling him what he needed to do, when he needed to leave, and what time he had to be at a certain place. By setting alarms, Kyle was taking responsibility for his commitments and taking the appropriate steps he needed to take to be successful in fulfilling his obligations.

Like Kyle, Chris used structure to complete his tasks. Like he used his syllabi to keep track of his academic deadlines, he used routine to manage the tasks throughout the day. Chris said he relied on his memory and also just knowing when he needed to get to certain assignments done, or when he needed to do certain assignment for particular classes. For example, Chris said:

I plan everything out in advance. I’m very structured person. Mentally. I don’t like writing things down, even though I should…Yeah, like I probably should, but I know what I need to go to class and have the class. I know get lunch, have some downtime, go to this, go to that, go to this. Structuring everything helps because if I just go by my day, just whatever happens happens, I feel like I lose balance of what I need to get done, but if I need to have a mental point that I need to get things down, that helps.

Planning and having assignments done ahead of time was Chris’s way of managing his time to effectively get things done. He later discussed he knew the routine for certain classes; for example, in his calculus class he had homework that was due two times a week, so he could plan when those two assignments would get done during his week. Another example he cited is for his constitutional law class, there was usually a certain reading, or case, that they had prepare for before attending the class. With this in mind he knew he needed to make time before that class to
read the material for the upcoming class. He commented that this type of muscle-memory time management structure, allowed him to manage his time effectively to get all of his academic work done, which in turn led to academic success. Chris stated in his interview he used his syllabi for his classes to keep himself organized in getting his academic work done and submitted on time.

Willy also commented on his time management and correlated it to routine. The difference between Willy and Chris’s comments on time management was Willy set hard deadlines for himself, and divided up the week. When discussing what he did to be athletically successful when academics becomes an obstacle he responded that he tries to get assignments done within three days. Willy said he likes to get

Assignments done within the three days I have it, when football comes, from Thursday to Saturday, it’s over. My deadline for this is on Wednesday because I know when Thursday comes it’s like I’m locked in now where academics comes after athletics. You create these…windows for yourself to perform in between. Always set deadlines, because if I make a promise to myself out loud, on paper, I abide by it.

To keep himself balanced between academic obligations and athletic obligations he divided his week so football was at the end of the week and academic obligations were at the beginning of the week. He constantly set deadlines as a reminder for what he needed to get done and in the time frame he needed to do them in. This allowed him to manage his time between his busy schedule and commitments to both football and classes, and it kept him successful.

**Conclusion.** Time management was an important component to getting all the requirements done. As John discussed in his interview, when time was not managed properly it
led to failure or imbalance. He discussed a time when he had a big anatomy test, but also needed to watch extra football film to prepare athletically. He admitted to getting off-track with academics when he chose to watch the extra film tape over studying. In hindsight, he concluded if he had divided his time up in a better way things could have gone differently. This time management lesson was important because not only can routine and organization help with time management, but scheduling time for the different obligations and commitments can also help.

Next to be discussed is Scheduling.

**Subtheme 3: Scheduling**

Scheduling was an important part of the participants’ time at their institution of higher education. All six participants spoke about the importance of having a schedule that they could stick to throughout the semester. Not only was scheduling and fitting all their commitments into a semester schedule important, but also, making sure they can fit all the requirements into their daily schedule was important. Participants spoke about both: how they designed their schedule for the semester, and their daily schedule. Each helped them be a successful student-athlete.

John spoke about his day-to-day schedule and how it fits into the components of the entire semester’s schedule. John described his days-to-day schedule as,

> Usually we make our classes earlier because we practice later in the day. So, usually I have 8:00 a.m.s every day. Then I tried to set it up where I have two classes every single day. Usually 8:00, and then probably 10:00 to 12:00, and then we watch film every day for at least an hour…So, we watch ourselves from the day before to make correction before we go out there again. Then I always go to the trainer before because I’ve had a series of injuries in my life. So, anybody who’s always banged up or has prior injuries
goes and sees trainers. Usually I get to the athletic facility at about two-and-half hours before practice to be able to watch film, and then go to the trainers. Then be able to get ready for practice itself. Then practice, I think, is usually at 4:00 till 6:00/6:30. Then usually I go home at 7:00 every day. So, I usually leave my apartment at 8:00 and don’t get back until 7:00 during season.”

Here John described his knowledge of what he needed to get done in the semester, (e.g. taking two classes per day to fulfill the obligation of being a full time student taking four class per semester) as well as balancing within that larger schedule what he needs to get for each fall semester and spring semester (e.g. morning workouts in the post season means later classes, or during season earlier classes to accommodate the afternoon football obligations). Then he discussed his daily schedule; for example, because he had had injuries part of his schedule during the day was to go to the athletic training room to see the athletic trainers. Moreover, John’s schedule alluded to the busy day that he faced. Generally left his apartment during football season at eight o’clock in the morning and did not returning until seven o’clock at night.

However, he scheduled his semester obligations to correspond with his football obligations, he tried to balance his day-to-day schedule to make sure not only he could not only attend class and practices, but also get the work done for his classes in-between.

In addition to John, Willy also discussed his daily schedule to keep up with his commitments as a student-athlete. Willy discussed his typical week and the scheduled obligations between his athletic commitments and academic commitments. Willy said:

I’ve had major surgeries, so my typical week, should not be as long as it is…only because, so for example, I have practice, then rehab, sometimes can be in the afternoon or early in the morning. We never really know till the day of. With that happening it’s like
you’re always rearranging your schedule based on practice… You always have your lift in the morning no matter what. You just have two or three classes in between there and then you have practice in the afternoon. And then after practice you have rehab. I would always have an hour-and-a-half of rehab because I have a torn ACL… Ideally you wanna get home by 8:00 but you have to eat and stuff. You’re always eating on the go, because always going from class, from lift, to class, class to practice, you never want to be late. You always want to be early. And then you always have meetings in between, too.

Willy commented on his surgeries, that made his week slightly longer than others on the team. He, like John, noted that he had to schedule going to the Athletic Training Room and also scheduled rehabilitation workouts into his daily schedule. He also noted re-organizing his schedule to accommodate his obligations as a student-athlete, and also other aspects of life, (e.g. getting home at a reasonable time to make himself dinner and eat). He, like John, had a long day, noting his day could start at six o’clock in the morning, but also said he likes to get home by eight o’clock at night. Willy also alluded to having other commitments be part of his day, like meetings in between the other obligations.

Peter also commented on his schedule throughout the day, stating that sometimes schedules change, which made it difficult to stay on schedule in the time that followed. When asked about a time he found it difficult during football season to keep on top of his academics he stated:

There’s times where we won’t get out of practice…Actually since there’s other Fall teams, we all have set times for the fields on when who can use what. But there have been times where we’ve had practice moved to a least starting at 10:30 at night and not getting off the field until at least midnight… I mean that happened last year. We were out
really late. Had tests the next day, couldn’t really study that much and I ended up not
doing as good on a test. I didn’t do terrible. So it’s just like, it’s all about the timing on
when you have to attend stuff in football.

Because there were multiple sports teams at this institution of higher education, sometimes the
field schedule could interfere with the established schedule when a change was made. Peter’s
story about a change in schedule and routine caused a change in behavior. He alluded to not
being able to study for a test because of a late night practice. The researcher assumed that
homework and studying happened after practices ended, according to other participants this was
at 6:00 or 6:30 in the evening. Because of the schedule change and routine change, this led to not
studying and that resulted in a poor test grade. It can be concluded that a clear and consistent
schedule helped keep commitments and obligations defined and on track to take place during a
particular time during the day.

**Conclusion.** Scheduling was an important component to the participants’ routines.
Scheduling incorporated organization and time management because the participants had to
know the expectations of their classes and have their materials organized, and also had to know
what they needed to get done and the amount of time it would take to complete. A carefully
balanced schedule allowed for academic success, because it supported time in the day that was
dedicated to academic work. A good schedule allowed the participants to find slots of time to
complete either additional athletic tasks, or complete their academic assignments. Scheduling
was important to all six participants as it assisted them in moving from their day-to-day
activities, as well as move semester to semester and season to season concerning football.
Superordinate Theme 4: Future Success

The final theme that emerged from the data set was *Future Success*. When discussing their academic success and fulfillment, participants discussed how they desired to enter the workforce after graduation. Future success in this dissertation was defined as graduating in the general time allotted to complete a degree, being academically successful in their chosen major, and potentially having the credentials and knowledge to enter the career field they desired after graduation.

One participant, John, discussed how he changed his major after his freshman year. Originally John entered the institution of education as an economics and finance major; however, he realized that he did not like what he was doing. He was inspired by the doctors who had helped him at the hospital during his past injuries. He felt “intrigued in the medical field.” The only thing that held him back from choosing the health sciences major originally was he “did not think [he] could juggle that, and football, and college.” However, later in the interview when asked who advised him and what advice was given to him when choosing his major, John responded,

I was told that, “Be prepared because Health Science is very demanding.” It’s a lot. It’s a lot of studying, but Health Science is a lot of memorization, it’s a lot of little pieces that add up to something bigger. If I want to do it, make sure that’s what I want to do. That was the biggest thing that everyone told me is, “If you want to make the change [switch majors], make sure it’s something that you want to do for the rest of your life…” “Just make sure that this is what you want to do if…” When I sat down and talked with my counselor, I was like, “I thought about going in the medical field my whole life, but I thought it would be too much.’ She was like, ‘I’m not telling you what to do but if you thought about it your whole
life, it’s probably what you want to do.” So, I took the leap of faith…I really like what I’m doing. It’s nice to go to class and not feel like you’re in class.”

John felt that even though his first instinct about choosing the health science major was negative, and he worried about his academic success, when he began the process of changing majors he felt not only confident, but also motivated to get through the rigor of the new major as well as keep up with his football obligations. He cited in the interview that he was motivated to complete his major and then go to school to become a physician’s assistant when he completed his undergraduate degree. The desire for future success in a major that made John happy motivated him to work harder in a more difficult major.

Jae agreed with John and had an equally difficult major in the science department: electrical engineering. Throughout his interview Jae constantly spoke about how it was difficult to coordinate his academic and athletic schedules and how the work his major demanded was rigorous. When asked about what he did when he felt burnt out academically or athletically, he responded:

Giving yourself a reason to complete it, to keep going because sometimes for a lot of kids if they don’t have a goal to reach at the end, they don’t really want to keep going for it. They don’t want to keep themselves motivated because, “All right, what am I doing this for? Nothing is coming out of it for me.” It’s always good to have some high-risk/reward that you’re getting from it, at the end of the day.

He stated that he needed to give himself a reason to get through the task at hand and he accomplished this by setting goals. Working towards his future was a huge motivator for Jae; this is evident because the high-risk/reward Jae spoke about was graduating with an opportunity to go
into the electrical engineering field. Jae referred to what his parents wanted for him, despite having a rigorous major, as they “want [him] graduating with the job that you like, that you love, that you’re not going to get bored at after two or three year.” The idea that he was working toward the future was a motivator for Jae that is reinforced by his parents. Future success in his academic field was a clear motivator for Jae; this is important because if he was not thinking about the future he might not be as motivated to work towards bettering himself academically, or he might not have been as committed to his major, or he might have switched to a different major to make his schedule more relaxed. Jae chose none of these options as both obligations were important to him.

Chris also spoke about his future success, and how it was important to him to be independent moving forward and out of college. During his interview Chris spoke about how his family always helped him and as a college student he has relied on his family. What motivated Chris was being independent, and no longer relying on his family. Chris said,

Just I’ve always wanted to be on my own and stuff. I like living with my parents. At the same time, I hate having to fend off them. I’ve always wanted to provide for myself. I’m a younger brother. My brother always tried to take care of me. I hate that. I appreciate it but I hate it. I always wanted to provide for myself, just basically a pride thing at the end of the day. I just want to be able to do everything on my own and then support the people that helped me.

While he appreciated the help that had been offered to him, it was more alluring to Chris to stand on his own. This was motivation for Chris to finish his major successfully and enter the work force. To have a successful future to Chris meant that he could get a job in the criminal justice field, and be able to work to support himself. Future success was important to Chris because he desired independence and to stand on his own, and the only way to be fully independent was to hold a job.
Chris was highly motivated to be independent; therefore, future success was a motivator for Chris to complete his academic major not only successfully but also in a timely manner.

In addition to John, Jae, and Chris, Peter also spoke about his motivation for future success. When asked what he felt happier doing, getting a good grade, or winning a game, he responded:

Getting a good grade, only because academics is where I’m going to have future on the outside of school, whereas I don’t see myself going anywhere near football when I graduate. Not as a bad thing, it’s just I would feel more confident with knowing that I’m doing good for my future.

This final example of how the future was a motivator for the participants to attaining academic success is the ultimate summation of all six participants. Their academics were important to them and acted as a motivator so that they could have a future beyond their institution of higher education. The only way to have a future in their chose career field was by being academically successful in the program.

All six participants expressed they wanted to move onto successful careers and used the motivator of future success to work through the difficulty of being a student-athlete. The subtheme for future success is Jobs and career, which is discussed next.

**Subtheme 1: Jobs and Career**

Jobs and careers were the primary topic of conversation during the interviews when the participants discussed their future success. The general goal after receiving a college degree was to successfully enter the workforce. Five of the participants spoke about wanting to be successful in their chosen career paths, or getting a job in their desired career field to then build up to having a career they would enjoy. While only five of the participants discussed in detail their
desire to get a good job in their chosen career path, the sixth participant discussed how going into the medical field was motivating for him and he wanted to work hard academically to make that a reality. He did not discuss jobs and careers because after he gets his undergraduate degree, he will have to go outside the institution of higher education in this study for an additional two years of school to become a physician’s assistant. Therefore, he was motivated by the future; however, jobs and careers were not presented in the data set for John. However, the other five participants did speak about how they were focused and motivated to working towards their future job and career after they graduated from their institution of higher education.

Peter spoke about jobs and careers as his motivation to be successful academically, and described his career after graduation. Despite being a sophomore, Peter spoke about his excitement about potentially working for his family’s business. When asked if he was motivated to complete his major Peter responded:

Just seeing other people do what they love when they get out of school, it’s just something I want to be able to do. And for it to be incorporated with my family would make it even better… Being in the work world…I’ve been in it the past couple of year, and talking to people, communicating, building trust with clients, that helps a lot. Makes you realize, you really want to do this. I’ve realized it hit me at one point this summer, I was like, wow, I really want to do this. This is fun.

Peter was enthusiastic when he discussed continuing into a career at his family’s business. This made him highly motivated to complete his major and to stay on top of his academic requirements in order to be successful. This response was consistent with his definition of motivation which was asked earlier in the interview. His definition of motivation included, “Motivation is if you see something you want to do and you love it so much, there’s nothing really else that should stop you
from doing it.” This consistency was important because it proved what he loves to do; when he worked with clients and he realized he wanted to pursue this as a future career, that motivated him to successfully complete college and earn an undergraduate degree.

Jae was equally excited about his future career in electrical engineering, and explained that a career in the field is constantly changing. The question asked when he offered the following response was, what advice was given to you upon choosing your major, from either people in your personal life or people here [at the institution of education]. In his response he said:

You can go into the office one day and just be bored because you go to review some documents. Then the next day, “Oh, we’re going to need you over here because we’re going to need help designing this next big thing that we’re planning on doing.” It’s interesting that it can always change the day to day and the topic, there’s always new research being done on it. It’s like the world that never ages. It just keeps growing.

The spontaneity of working in the field of electrical engineering appeared to excite and motivate Jae to push through his rigorous schedule and successfully complete his undergraduate degree. While he did cite a negative aspect of a job or career in the field (paper work), he seemed excited about the technical side of working in the field, such as designing products. He liked the fact that every day would not be the same in his chosen career field. He supported this when describing the process of choosing his major. He said, “I picked it off of pure interest but at the same time, the betterment of my future.” Jae was committed to his future outside of football and the institution of education, and he was motivated to graduate and move on to a successful career in the electrical engineering field.
Willy also discussed his desire to work hard in his academics to benefit his future. Willy was an economics major and had completed all of his major course requirements and was now focused on taking classes in the finance minor the college offered to fulfill his credit obligations. He expressed wanting to better himself academically. For example, he spoke about how he set goals for himself and one of them being he wanted to get a 4.0 GPA one semester, and worked tirelessly to attain the goal. He did not state whether or not he reached the goal, but he seemed to be pleased with the fact that he did the hard work by going to the library, staying up late to study, and getting his assignments done. Concerning his job and career he stated when asked to define academic success:

My big importance factor in college is partly the ability to network. So I think everyone’s creative in their own way, everyone goes to class, everyone does the curricular, everyone reads a book… but what separates you is the ability to network, the ability to think. I think I would say the idea of classes is to exercise your brain, make you think in any kind of situation. If you go to college and don’t network you whole way throughout there, you’re just like a random. You’re just a number when you apply to jobs.

To be successful academically was more than completing the requirements a major had laid out for the student. It was also about doing the extra work for the end goal of getting a good job or entering a career soon after graduating. Willy expressed wanting to be “well-rounded” when leaving school. It went beyond college requirements; it was also having the ability to show people your character and meeting people. This was accomplished through taking advantage of the not only being on the football team and using the intelligence from football, but also by going to the other activities the college offered to meeting people who could help you into the future. Willy recognized the fact that he had opportunities to expand himself as a person by playing collegiate
football, but also took the time to express interest in his career by meeting people in the field and networking so he could have as many connections as possible when he entered the work force. To Willy, his motivation to be successful in his job and career showed that he has more character because he has committed himself to more things in college. Having character was a motivator to Willy because he wanted to stand out in the job applicant pool. Leaving college well-rounded enough to get a job was a motivator to Willy.

**Conclusion.** Jobs and careers was an important factor behind the participants’ motivation. The data showed all the participants had the future on their minds, even the participant who spoke about his future educationally. Their future endeavors in their career fields or getting a job were a motivational factor for them to be academically successful. Despite the rigor of the majors, their desire to work through the difficulty in order to attain a job and career after graduation motivated them to work hard in college.

**Conclusion**

*Commitment, Support systems, Routine, and Future success* were the four major themes that emerged from the dataset collected during the participants’ interviews. The question in this dissertation was; How do students who are on half or full athletic scholarships that are on track to graduate from a four-year Division I or II institution of higher education explain and make sense of their academic success?

Commitment was a strong motivator for the participants. While half of the participants spoke about commitment they all commented on the sub-themes of either Grit, Perseverance, or Hard work, which not only helped them in successfully completing their athletic obligations, but also helped them in staying motivating through their academic work. Grit, perseverance, and
hard work were cited more in the dataset than commitment. These attributes transferred into the other aspects of the participants’ lives. For example, if you had grit to get through a difficult practice, you had grit to get through a difficult assignment; if you persevered through waking up for five o’clock in the morning for workouts during the spring semester, then you could persevere through a rigorous class that semester. If you worked hard during football practice, then you could work hard on an academic goal. These characteristics were important to the dataset because despite not explicitly mentioning, they proved evidence of commitment. Even though only three of the participants spoke about commitment directly, the other participants proved they were committed to their obligations of being a student-athlete by providing evidence that they had grit, perseverance, and the ability to work hard.

The second theme to emerge from the data set was Support systems, which was discussed by all six participants. Support systems proved incredibly helpful to the participants when they were struggling academically. Oftentimes these support systems came in the form of family, the team, and institutional supports. Family was mentioned by all six participants as a way to get through tough academic obligations. Family members provided support and encouraged motivation towards success. Beyond this, participants spoke about having good grades ingrained in them from a young age by their parents. In addition to their families, a majority of the participants spoke about how the team helped them be academically successful. The coaching staff in particular were discussed during this subtheme. The participants spoke about how the coaches were people they spoke with when something was going wrong, and their offices were a place where the participants could go to get back on track. Even though it was not discussed in depth, and private conversations were not revealed in the dataset, it could be assumed the coaches provided a stable environment where the participants could go to get advice, even on
academic matters. In addition to this the coaching staff engrained the slogan “Tough” on the team, and this slogan was applied to different aspects of the participants’ lives. When it was ingrained in them to do things the right way in football, this translated to the classroom as well.

Finally, the subtheme Institutional support emerged as all the participants spoke about how study hall and athletic advisors played a part of their academic success. In addition to this, academic advisors, classroom checks, and teachers were also mentioned, although not as frequently as the first two. These provided structure and support for the participants to get what they needed for their academic success. Particularly study hall and athletic advisors encouraged academic success, and the check-ins from their advisors, especially when they were not doing well academically, encouraged the participants to do better towards their academic obligations which eventually made them more successful.

The third theme to emerge from the data set was Routine: Having a structured routine throughout the day to set them up to accomplish all their obligations, including academics. Routine was important to all the participants because it was a regular way to go about what they needed to get done. It kept them on track to complete all their obligation in a timely manner. Their class routine, football routine, and extra tasks routine helped them keep up with everything they needed to get done, and it was more motivating for them and easier to do when it was a part of a daily routine. Part of their daily routine was organization. They spoke about having a calendar with their tasks for the day written on it. Some even spoke about using the reminders, alarms, and notes features on their cell phones to make sure they knew their tasks for the next day, and helped them remember when they had to be certain places to fulfill an obligation, including academic obligations. Time management was also discussed during organization and routine, as five of the participants suggested that good time management skills allowed them to
schedule activities, including academic assignments and study time. Having good time management allowed them to divide their time between their academic and their athletic obligations. Without time management they would not have been successful academically because they would not have made the time needed to do their academic work. In addition to this, scheduling was a part of their routine and time management as scheduling classes and football at different times in the day allowed them to find time slots to accomplish academic tasks. Scheduling study hall also provided them a time when they knew they had to work on academics.

Finally, the theme *Future success* was a key to their academic success. There was a realization across all the participants that their future was important to them, and therefore they recognized they had to be academically successful. They all spoke about how they were working toward the future, and also they had an understanding that they needed to learn their academic trades to successfully enter the workforce. As Jae summarized:

> Academic success means you learned something. It’s there. It’s not going to leave, so if someone asks you that question, it’s basic knowledge. It’s like you’re learning how to ride a bike. It’s just a memorized movement. It’s simple to you. It’s progression…Now that’s something that’s going to help your life move forward and keep building and making it better for yourself and then better in your working career because you’re going to keep using that success and try to build on it and try to make something better of it for yourself.”

Future success went hand in hand with jobs and careers as this is what they were all working towards. The fact that not one participant said they wanted to go to the NFL, provided evidence they were at their institution of higher education to be successful academically.
In conclusion, all participants expressed the importance of their academic obligations over their football obligations. Half of the participants- Jae, Willy, and John- said they felt more motivated to complete their academic obligations than their athletic obligations. Chris discussed how his athletic success helped his academic success but did not put one over the other. And both Peter and Kyle discussed how getting a good grade brought them more fulfillment than winning a game. The reader can clearly see that the data suggests the participants in this study knew what they have to do to be academically successful and valued their academic success at their institution of higher education.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research study was to find a way to use athletic competitiveness to keep students academically successful so they leave college with both academic and athletic options. This study discovered that student-athlete motivation was the key to success at participants’ institutions of higher education. The study’s significance is that it has identified characteristics of student-athletes who were successful in both academics and athletics. The research question was: How do students who are on half or full athletic scholarships and who are on track to graduate from 4-year Division I or II institutions of higher education explain and make sense of their academic success?

The study used a qualitative approach was used in data collection because the researcher wanted to better understand the behavior of student-athletes. Specifically, it used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in order to make sense of each participant’s experience as a student-athlete. In-depth interviews were used so participants could examine their understanding of success as a student-athletes and to better understand their own motivation.

Four themes were found in the data set, each with at least one subtheme. The first theme was Commitment; its subthemes were Grit, Perseverance, and Hard work. The second theme was Support systems; its subthemes were Family, Team, and Institutional supports. The third theme was Routine: its subthemes were Organization, Time management, and Scheduling. The final theme was Future success; its subtheme was Jobs and careers.

This chapter presents and discusses findings from the research, organized by theme and relates them to the theoretical framework; self-determination theory (SDT), which specifies two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. After discussing the findings for each theme, the
chapter will discuss implications of findings for practice setting, provide examples of how these findings can be used in the practice setting, and suggest areas for future investigation.

The first theme presented is *Commitment*, which includes *Grit, Perseverance, and Hard work*. The first finding presents whether the data collected in this study upheld or contradicted already published works, and relates the findings to the theoretical framework used for the research study.

**Findings**

**First Finding: Commitment**

Most participants were committed to what they were doing, whether it was performing academically or athletically. Commitment was important to them because the characteristics of commitment, grit, perseverance, and hard work—generally transferred to other aspects of their lives.

The interviews revealed that many of the participants struggled in their day-to-day lives. Their commitment to both football and their academic endeavors made it difficult to complete their work. This fits with what Emma (2008) said in his article about the daily struggles of a student-athlete. While the participants did not discuss travel, they did speak about how busy their days were, often times comparing their commitments to having a full-time job.

The data disagreed with Palaima (2010), who said “players were virtually full-time athletes” (Palaima, 2010, p. 1); this turned out to not be the case. While all six participants spoke about difficulty juggling their athletic and academic commitments, they did not identify as full time athletes, nor indicate that their institution required them to be full time athletes. They had athletic commitments they had to maintain; however the participants never brought up having to
sacrifice their academic commitments for football. In fact, the opposite was presented, as the coaching staff and other institutional supports encouraged academic success. Coaching staff were understanding if academic commitments were scheduled during scheduled football time or overlapped with athletic commitments. It was clear from the interviews that academics came first. Therefore, leaving practice early or coming to practice late was fine. The travel bus waited for student-athletes who were coming directly from class so there was no pressure to skip class or miss class time to catch a bus leaving for a game.

NCAA President, Mark Emmert, and McCormick and Tinsley (1987) found that academic success was positively correlated with athletic success. This research study complements these findings, as all participants attested that, even though they had their failures and missteps in their academic journeys, their academic careers were successful overall.

Commitment and its subthemes; Grit, Perseverance, and Hard work, proved that some of the literature is correct: student-athletes are successfully in both competing athletically, and completing their academic requirements. As described in Chapter 4, commitment, grit, perseverance, and hard work all stemmed from either the team, the coaching staff, or parents as a motivating and engaging the participants. Comeaux and Harrison (2011) discussed goal commitment, which included commitment to sports as well as commitment to academics. This research study found that these characteristics transferred from one area of the student-athlete’s university life to others.

It can be concluded that while the NCAA and other outside governing bodies have implemented safeguards for student-athletes, some student-athletes are self-motivated enough to succeed on their own. They used intrinsic motivation to succeed for themselves, as they want to be satisfied academically, however they also used extrinsic motivation because they liked to
compete and do well in football. None of the participants said that he was willing to sacrifice his academic success for the success in football. As stated in the discussion of the data in Chapter 4, all participants chose doing well in academics over winning a football game.

Discussed next is the second finding, *Support systems*, which include the subthemes *Family, Team, and Institutional supports*. The second finding presents whether the data collected in this study upheld or contradicted already published works, as well as related the findings to the theoretical framework used in this research study.

**Second Finding: Support System**

The second finding was that each participant had a support system that included family, team, and institutional supports. These support systems held the participants accountable when their own self-motivation waned. Several of the participants commented that their families had instilled in them that playing football was secondary, so their primary focus at their university was academics. Part of the participants’ success was having a support system.

The theme *Support systems* was supported by Comeaux and Harrison (2011), who developed a framework for student-athletes, that included a precollege aspects of the student-athlete experience. This precollege aspect included family as part of the student-athlete’s success, as well as other social systems like faculty interaction, coaches, and grade performance. These were all brought up during interviews. All six participants said their family had helped them succeed at their institution of higher education. Support from the coaching staff was also brought up. The coaching staff not only had freshmen and those who are deemed ineligible to play attend study hall twice a week, but the coaches also showed up to study hall occasionally,
conducted classroom checks during the school week, and asked student-athletes why they got certain grades.

This research study complemented Gravelle, Karlis, and Rothschild-Checroune’s (2014) theory of the football family. Gravelle et al. (2014) study found that success is determined by positive aspects, including relationships with the coaching staff and peer support. They said that it worked when student-athletes played the same sport and took the same classes. While none of the participants expressed that it was helpful to have teammates in class with them to keep them motivated, the participants said it was helpful to have others who knew what they were going through, and could offer advice. This correlated with Gravell et al. (2014), where the Canadian football team said they were less stressed and more motivated by their teammates.

The participants also cited their athletic advisors, saying they were very helpful when they tracked academic progress, monitored study hall, and gave sound advice. Nichols et al. (2011) found that student-athletes needed a support system that knew about their lifestyle. This understanding would lead to a better educational experience. The participants concluded that their academic advisors were always helpful and understanding of their different situations. The advisors understood the participants’ obligations to football and established a fostering place where student-athletes could get guidance regarding their academic endeavors.

The data did not agree with King and Sen (2013), as none of the participants felt they were pressured to win, or to sacrifice academics for athletic wins. The participants did not say they felt their athletic department or coaches made them choose between academic success and athletic success. Academic integrity was maintained across all the majors that participants were enrolled in. Academic integrity was considered important by many participants. Contrary to McCarthy and Zald (1977) and Benford (2007), the participants did not feel as though they were
a part of a complex system of entangled and conflicting governances; rather, they felt fully supported by their university. The data also do not agree with Ayers et al. (2012), who published that 22% of student-athletes who took their survey admitted having been advised on what major to select. This data showed the opposite, with the participants successfully on course to complete a variety of different majors they had chosen including engineering, health science, criminology, and a variety of business involved majors, in a 4-year period that they chose.

There has not been much research into the supports provided for student-athletes at institutions of higher education. However, other research does not seem to correlate with the data obtained from the participants. It can be concluded that more research needs to be done about the support systems for student-athletes at the university level. Most other research has determined that either student-athletes were lured away from the academic side of the university in favor of having a winning team, revenue, and academic integrity being questioned. Very little research has been done on the experience of successful student-athletes, and pro-academic sports teams that uphold the rigor of both academic and athletic obligations.

Support systems and the subthemes that emerged from it are supported by the theoretical framework, SDT. SDT was created by Deci and Ryan (2000), who used Nicholls (1984), which concluded that parents and coaches have a profound influence over their child’s effort.

Discussed next is the third finding, Routine, which includes the subthemes; Organization, Time management, and Hard work. The third finding will presents whether the data collected in this study upheld or contradicted already published works, as well as related the findings to the theoretical framework used in this research study.
Third Finding: Routine

The third finding is Routine; its subthemes are Organization, Time management, and Hard work. Routine was an important part of the participants’ daily lives. Different participants cited different routines, but collectively they included decluttering, planning, having time to prioritize tasks to complete, being effective in the moment, focusing on the task at hand, finishing the job honestly, not procrastinating, and staying organized.

Certain aspects of the 20-hour rule created by the NCAA applied to this finding. While the 20-hour rule was established to help time management among student-athletes by limiting the 20-hour rule was not an issue because they had well-coordinated schedules and a coaching staff that encouraged them. Five participants said the coaching staff was more than willing to work with student-athletes and their demanding academic schedules. The exact number of hours spent on sports during the football season or during the off-season was not discussed or determined in this study, so commenting on the institution of higher education’s commitment to the 20-hour rule would not be appropriate.

Time management was important to keeping up with the participants’ busy schedules. Time management was supported by a well-correlated schedule, so student-athletes felt they had scheduled in their day to complete tasks. Time management was supported by their schedule because it gave them a time during the day to complete tasks without spending too much time on one task. This study does not support Cosh and Tully (2014), who concluded that student-athletes justified prioritizing their athletics over their academics because they lacked time management skills. This study found that the participants had good time management skills, as they were successful in completing their academic work load, while keeping up with their academic commitments. Although the participants were not perfect and had experienced failure,
this research found that Jae was on pace to graduate with an engineering degree and Willy was ahead of his major at the beginning of the spring semester and taking on an unexpected minor to fill his credit load. This study showed that the participants had time management skills, as they recognized and valued the educational opportunities at their institution of higher education. This contrasts with Cosh and Tully’s (2014), which concluded that students felt they had to prioritize the team over anything else and did not have time to complete mandatory tasks. While the participants concluded that it was a lot of work, they did not feel as though it was impossible. Rather the routine they established that got their commitments done in a timely manner. Their commitment to their routine and schedule helped them manage their time effectively.

These results cannot be compared to other literature about student-athletes’ routines, organization, time management skills, and schedules because there is little of it. However, it can be concluded that student-athletes who abided to an established routine every day, were well organized, had good time management skills, and coordinated their schedules for athletic and academic schedules to the best of their ability had academic success academically at their institution of higher education.

Routine is related to the SDT theoretical framework, as routine, organization, time management, and scheduling are learned practices. These four practices are either instilled, or not, in people as they grew up. Deci and Ryan’s (2000) SDT is supported by Harter (1978), who stated that success and failure of mastery lead to what people do. This can be applied to the participants, as they mastered practices growing up that helped them succeed at their institution of higher education. People generally like to excel; when the participants realized they could attain academic and athletic success, they were more motivated to continue doing what they were
good at: playing football also completing their academic major at their institution of higher education.

Discussed next is the final finding, Future success, which includes the subtheme Jobs and careers. The fourth finding presented whether the data collected in this study upheld or contradicted already published works, as well as related the findings to the theoretical framework used in this research study.

**Fourth Finding: Future Success**

The final finding is Future success, and its subtheme is Jobs and career. There was no research found on student-athletes’ careers beyond playing professional sports. The only research produced about jobs and careers was when Northwestern University moved to make their football players employees of the university, rather than student-athletes. When student-athletes compete in intercollegiate sports they are considered amateur athletes, paying them to play their sport would make them professionals. This idea was not brought up in interviews. While some participants compared their days to working a full-time job, the idea of being an employee of their institution of higher education as a football player was never brought up.

The data collected about future success was surprising. All participants expressed the desired to have a good job or career when they graduated. The three participants who were seniors discussed how they put time and work in to their academics while they attended school. They wanted to get the most of their education so they could continue on to professions that interested them and excited them. Chris discussed how he took master’s classes in the hopes of finishing not only his bachelor’s degree in criminology, but also a master’s degree in criminology in his fifth year. Jae said that it was important that he learned as much as he could
during his classes and labs so he could go on to have a successful career in engineering. He talked about how learning was important now, so when he was on his own in the work world, he could be successful in the work he was assigned. Finally, Willy described how he had already finished his college major credits, and had picked up a minor to fulfill the rest of his graduation requirements. He spoke about how it was important to be successful in school, because at the end of the day, academics was what would see him succeed in the future. Despite the difficulty of being a student-athlete, as discussed in Smith (1986), Frey (2007), Tublitz (2007), Emma (2008), Ridpath (2008), Palaima (2010), and Branch (2011), none of the participants concluded it was not impossible to be successful academically while competing athletically because they were motivated by their future success.

Like the seniors, the underclassmen, two sophomores and a freshman, spoke about their motivation to have a successful career upon graduation. John, one of the sophomores, discussed how he changed his major because it excited him to be a physician’s assistant in the future. Not only had John changed his major, his advisors at the institution of higher education encouraged him when he brought it up. Peter, the other sophomore, was also excited about working for his family’s company in the future. He recognized that working there brought him joy, and this motivated him towards business administration. Finally, Kyle, a freshman, expressed how he was looking forward to a successful career. He explained his choice of major during his interview. He committed to being a communication major, because of the job availability in the communications field.

Future success, jobs, and careers are related to SDT, the theoretical framework used in this research study. Cosh and Tully (2014) published the idea that student-athletes need a major that will make them want to do more than just pass their classes. This correlates with this data
because each participant was seeking a career in his chosen academic major, and the idea of having a successful future motivated him towards academic success. This was applied to the perceived motivational climate in Nicholls (1984). Future success, jobs, and career can be related to intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when a person is engaged in an activity they enjoy and are successful in. This is evident in the participants’ motivation to complete their chosen academic majors in the appropriate timeframe to then have successful jobs in the future. It was clear in their interviews that participants enjoyed their chosen academic major, and they continued to be motivated to succeed in it for their future job or career.

This data cannot be compared to other literature about future success, jobs and careers, because there is no literature about student-athletes and their futures outside of professional sports. Future more research is needed in this area.

Discussed next are some subsequent findings. The subsequent findings conclude the data collected from the participants during their interviews.

**Subsequent Findings**

While some literature correlates with this data, other literature is absent or contradicted by this study. The four major themes that emerged from the data set were *Commitment, Support systems, Routine, and Future success*.

*Commitment* was the first finding. The participants that I interviewed were more motivated because of their commitment. Student-athletes in general have a range of commitments at their institution of higher education, including their obligations to their chosen academic major and their responsibilities to their sports teams. Commitment to success in academics and athletics was apparent in the data. To achieve this success, participants depended
on character traits like grit, perseverance, and hard work. These traits then transferred into other aspects of their lives. The head coach used words like grit, perseverance, and hard work to motivate his players. The participants expressed that these character traits also motivated them in other areas of their university life, like academic success. This agreed with McCormick and Tinsley (1987), who found that academic and athletic success correlated. When student-athletes won, they were more motivated to do well academically and vice-versa. While McCormick and Tinsley (1987) did not ask about components that went into this success, a majority of participants agreed that components like grit, perseverance, and hard work helped them succeed.

*Support systems* is also supported by the literature already published. Support systems proved imperative for the student-athletes. Each component of the support system—family, team, and institutional supports—positively affected participants. Comeaux and Harrison (2011) would agree that things like family background, sports commitment, institutional commitment, faculty interaction, coach expectations, and goal-oriented commitments can lead to success. Their research commented on family background, how faculty interacts with student-athletes, and coach expectations. It was clear that the participants thrived on positive relations with their families and their institution of higher education. All participants expressed having positive support from their family, which helped keep them motivated toward succeed. They also expressed that the coaching staff’s priority was academic success. This was evident in the coaches’ commitment to classroom checks and going to the team’s mandatory study hall to check up on their players. The coaches and athletic advisors’ checkups kept the participants positively motivated. This research correlated more with Nichols et al. (2011), who found that student-athletes could successfully be mainstreamed at universities with an academic support system. This is backed up by these findings that student-athletes could be successful in the
regular academic rigor of the university. Five participants believed the instructional supports offered to them were helpful. Finally, the football family discussed in Gravelle, Rothschild-Checroune, and Karlis’s (2014) correlated with these findings. Some participants said that older players on the team who had taken classes the younger players were currently taking helped them. Moreover, the participants seemed to believe the team was so close because it was creating a supportive environment with common experiences at the university. This gave them a positive group to motivate them and drove them to success.

Institutional supports are not supported by Tublitz (2007) and Ridpath (2008), who suggested that academic misconduct is apparent at institutions of higher education. Their studies were done at other universities and their findings do not apply to all institution of higher education. Ayers et al. (2012) also differ from these findings because they theorized that majors are pushed onto student-athletes. These advisors were understanding and generally supportive of the student-athlete’s vision for his future.

**Routine** and the subthemes **Organization, Time management, and Schedules** were not mentioned in the literature as much. Academic success and athletic success had not come easily to the participants. In coordination with the characteristics of commitment, grit, perseverance, and hard work were already-established structures like routine, organization, time management, and schedules. Routine helped the participants keep pace with their daily and weekly lives. It assisted them in knowing what they had to do or what they were required to do. In addition, they had a system for organizing their commitments. Whether it was related to school, calendar related, or athletics, each participant had a way to easily access important information. **Time management** and schedule go hand-in-hand with being successful and well-motivated. The participants scheduled time slots not only for tasks like class, practice, film, lifts, and work outs,
but also for other everyday tasks like laundry, and homework. Having blocks in their day when they were scheduled to complete tasks like homework and assignments or chores, helped with their time management so they used their time wisely instead of wasting it. This helped them get everything done. When there is a designated time for completing a task, it makes getting it done much easier.

*Future success, and Jobs and careers* were the final findings. Future success was determined by what job they could get after graduation to begin their careers. Each participant spoke about how the future had a profound impact on his motivation. Working towards future success was incredibly important to the participants. There is not much literature on this topic, so these findings about student-athletes’ being motivated by their future success is an important topic for future research.

Discussed next is the conclusion. In the conclusion the research question will be answered. In addition, the findings will be situated within the published literature on student-athletes.

**Conclusion**

The research question this study sought to answer was: How do students who are on half or full athletic scholarships and who are on track to graduate from 4-year Division I or II institutions of higher education explain and make sense of their academic success? This study answered the research question because it presented four main ways the participants made sense of their academic success. Participants made sense of their academic success by believing in their commitment to their obligations, having a support system that held them accountable to completing their responsibilities of being a student-athlete, being routine oriented and having
behaviors that helped them complete their obligations as a student-athlete, and identifying with the desire to be successful in their future jobs and careers.

The research study used an empirical approach, IPA, to gather data. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 both correlated with and contradicted peer-reviewed literature. This research complemented those other authors like; McCormick and Tinsley (1987), Pope (2009), Comeaux and Harrison (2011), Nichols et al. (2011), Ayers et al. (2012), Brooks et al. (2013), Cosh and Tully (2014), and Gravelle et al. (2014) because they spoke to the success of the student-athlete. Each of the above articles provided conclusions about how student-athletes found success. This research did not support or did not relate Smith (1986), Duderstadt (2003), Franklin (2006), Frey (2007), Tublitz (2007), Emma (2008), Ridpath (2008), Mayo and Rosenthal (2010), Palaima (2010), Buchet, Ballouli, and Bennett (2011), Stinson et al. (2012), King and Sen (2013), Piereson (2014), and Navarro (2015). Those studies had no correlation with or contradicted this data. For example, outside governances like the NCAA, the Drake Group, or COIA were not brought up in this research study, nor was revenue, disagreeing governances, APR, the 20-hour rule, or the idea of student-athletes as employees.

It can be concluded that student-athletes need of a framework to be successful at institutions of higher education. While this study only examined the experience of six student-athletes at a Massachusetts institution of higher education who played football, it showed how these student-athletes were successful in their academics.

Discussed next are recommendations for practice and future research. In the recommendations for practice section makes suggestions for other researchers and how to implement these findings in another study. The recommendations for future research section make suggestions about more research to be done concerning student-athletes.
Recommendations for Practice

Based on the conclusions drawn from this study, the following recommendations are made to institutions of higher education. These recommendations are made with using the data presented in this research study.

Institutions should engrain good character traits in recruited and current student-athletes. Characteristics that were constantly repeated—commitment, grit, perseverance, and hard work—can be transferred into other areas of university life. When constantly upheld, these characteristics act as self-motivators. For example, what is the point of persevering and working hard through a difficult practice, if the student-athlete cannot do that in class and therefore is ineligible to play? Coaches chose strong character traits that they wanted to instill in their players and kept on repeating them. Repetitious expectations can be learned even if someone does not possess the traits to begin with. These can be learned, fostered, and practiced daily.

In addition to engraining good character traits in student-athletes, institutions of higher education should set up a series of support systems for their student-athletes. The data showed that support systems were integral to remotivating the participants and were associated with their academic success. While not everyone has a supportive family like these participants, universities can make team and institutional supports available for their student-athlete population. Institutions of higher education should have a framework for a supportive team and coaching staff. For example, coaches at this institution constantly asked questions about grades, did classroom checks, and even showed up to the mandatory study halls for freshmen and ineligible players. Other universities can use these positive actions by the coaching staff to ensure that student-athletes know someone will hold them accountable for successfully completing their commitment to academics.
Other team structures can be put in place to help navigate the more demanding majors at universities. Compromises should be made with student-athletes who want to pursue a more time-consuming major, and individual meetings with those student-athletes should be arranged so players and coaches know the expectations of the major, and how to work in the athletic obligations. In addition to having coaches and the team play a larger role in a student-athlete’s university life, the institution of higher education can put more structure in place. While the participants said that study hall was only for freshmen and the ineligible, universities could expand this by making it more rigorous. For example, anyone getting below a 70% average in their classes had to go to study hall until their grade was above an 80%. The participants also expressed how their athletic advisors were a positive force in their lives. However, there were few athletic advisors, so having an athletic advisor for each sports team to help foster a close relationship with student-athletes and provide point person when a student-athlete struggles with athletic and academic commitments.

Routine, organization, time management, and scheduling recommendations are to conduct a mandatory class for all entering student-athletes that shows them how to create a routine, how to best organize themselves, how to set up and stick to a schedule, and how to best manage time to complete their tasks. Many young adults and college students do not have these skills, as they must be learned skills. The university should provide a class that teaches these skills to all incoming freshmen student-athletes these skills. There should also be a system in place to check on these skills all incoming freshman student-athletes. As mentioned above, to better have relationships with and help the student-athletes, an athletic advisor should be assigned to each sports teams. She or he can be the point person to check on the routine and management of obligations student-athletes need to be successful. When student-athletes are
struggling, the advisor can help them get back on track. With constant reinforcement, routine, organization, time management, and scheduling can be learned and used by student-athletes.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There is a lot to be researched concerning student-athletes. Each student-athlete is different, each major is different, and each sport is different. Future research should include interviewing student-athletes in the same sports or teams, the same majors, and on different scholarships. These interviews should be conducted across the same university and different universities. Also to be studied are differences between male and female student-athletes.

In addition to these recommendations, more research should be done on the impact of things like APR and the 20-hour rule on different sports teams. Because of Northwestern University’s publication on student-athletes as employees, and the Drake Group’s plan to retire the term *student-athlete*, more research should be done on the idea of intercollegiate sports as amateur or professional. More research should be completed regarding how the 20-hour rule has impacted different sports teams at similar and different universities. In addition, research should be done on the APR of different sports teams across different conferences, and institutions of higher education. Finally, more research should be done to elaborate on television contracts with institutions of higher education, the future success of student-athletes, whether playing their sport professionally or going into a field related to their academic major; and the positive and healthy habits of successful student-athletes.
Appendix 1

Interview Protocol

**Title of Project:** Understanding and Utilizing Student-Athlete’s Motivation to Successfully Matriculate From College

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Do I have your permission to begin recording our session? (Recorder Turned On)

**Interview Protocol:**

- Introductions
- Give a time of how long interview will take: 75-80 minutes
- Provide the purpose and significance of the study: The purpose of this study is to find a way to use athletic competitiveness to keep students academically successful so students end college with an academic and athletic option. The significance of this study would lead to conclusions about what characteristics a student-athlete possesses to be successful in both the academic side of university life, as well as the athletic side of university life. If these characteristics can be determined, then maybe universities can churn out a new generation of student-athletes that have better motivation, making the student-athlete more successful than they have been. If what drives the student-athlete can be determine from this study, then there can potentially be a new framework built that student-athletes abide to. In addition to this institutions of higher education can establish programs that can better help student-athletes as well as promote healthy habits for student-athletes to get in to.
- Go over participant criteria:
  - College student; freshmen, sophomore, junior, or senior
  - On a part or full scholarship
  - Attending a 4 year institutions of higher education in Massachusetts
  - Participates in men’s division one or two intercollege sport of football, basketball, hockey, or baseball.
  - Taking a full academic course load (4-5 classes)
  - On track to graduate from their degree program within 4 years of beginning college
- Go over confidentiality:
• Documents will be kept on a password protected laptop and thumb drive, and backed up on Northeastern University sponsored Google Drive
• Pseudonyms will be used to protect the participant’s identity, and will be used in all aspects of writing and recordings
• Only one document with the participant’s real names and contact information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the home of the interviewer
• Hand coding will be used on transcripts and all documents written by hand will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the home of the interviewer
• Go over commitment: If you feel as though you no longer wish to participate you may pull out of the study at any time during the interview, or after the interview. The interviewee just needs to communicate this to the interviewer via e-mail or phone call. A copy of the interview transcript will be e-mailed to the interviewee to review and add information if so desired.

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about a typical week during your sports season. Please include both academic and athletic commitments and schedules.
2. Tell me the story of how you came to play _______________ at your university.
   a. Describe why winning a game brings you enjoyment or fulfillment?
   b. Describe why getting a good grade brings you enjoyment or fulfillment?
   c. Is it the same feeling of enjoyment or fulfillment? Why or why not?
   d. Tell me which you feel happier doing: winning a game, or getting a good grade in class? Why do you feel happier when you ________________?
3. Which do you value more; your athletic career at your university or your academic success at your university? Why do you feel this way?
4. Define what academic success means to you.
5. Define motivation for me?
   a. Does your definition of motivation change when we talk about athletics?
   b. Does your definition change when we talk about academic success?
   c. How do you stay motivated during your sports season in participating in the sport and being academically successful?
   d. What strategies do you use when you feel burnt out in either performing athletically or preforming academically?
   e. What do you do to re-motivate yourself to being academically successful when athletics becomes an obstacle?
   f. What do you do to re-motivate yourself to being athletically successful when academics becomes an obstacle?
6. Describe the process of choosing your major when you committed to this university?
   a. What advise was given upon choosing your major?
   b. Who are the people or person who advised you?
   c. Are you motivated to completing your academic major?
   d. Do you feel like you will be academically successful in your chosen major?
7. Describe your motivation to graduate in 4 years.
   a. Can you tell me about some times when your motivation in sports has conflicted with graduating in 4-years?
8. Describe coaching techniques that have helped you to be academically successful?
   a. Are you motivated to be academically successful to keep playing your sport?
   b. Do you learn things like: grit, perseverance, hard work, and dedication from your sport?
   c. When does your coach use these things?
   d. Do they transfer to your academics?
   e. Can you discuss a time where you felt any of these things?

9. Describe to me how you balance your athletic commitment and your academic success?
   a. Describe to me a time when you struggled to balance both your athletic commitment and academic success?
   b. Describe the strategies you used to help rebalance if you get into a situation where you are not being successful in academics?
   c. In what area at the university do you feel like you struggle with or are missing out on in terms of academic success?
   d. What is your biggest challenge at your university to being academically successful?
   e. How do you overcome this?
   f. Who helps you?

10. Why are you motivated to play your sport?

11. Have you faced an obstacle in your sport?
   a. Tell me about the obstacle.
   b. How did you successfully overcome that obstacle?
   c. Have you faced an obstacle in a class you are taking or have taken at school?
   d. Did you learn how to overcome that obstacle and use the lesson learned in your academic success?

12. How do you organize yourself for success?
   a. Describe to me your system of keeping track of both your academic and athletic requirements.
   b. Are there requirements your team has for academics like team study sessions, mandatory library hours, or GPA requirements from your coach or university to promote academic success?
   c. Describe the struggles and benefits of being a student-athlete at your institution.
Appendix 2

Date__________________
Jillian Dunn
105 Ocean View Street #2
Winthrop, MA 02152

Participant’s Name
Participant’s Address

Dear ___________________________,

Thank you for sitting with me to discuss your experience as a student-athlete at ____________ on ______________. Your insight to being a student-athlete is invaluable and exciting step forward in a very understudied group of people at universities. As we discussed at the beginning of your interview I am writing you a follow up e-mail with the transcription of your interview attached. Please review the transcription for accuracy and edit the transcript for better accuracy.

When you are finished please send me the revisions and if nothing needed to be changed please send me a quick e-mail letting me know you are satisfied with the transcription. Thank you again for your time!

Best Wishes,

Jillian Dunn
Appendix 3

January 30, 2019
Jillian Dunn
105 Ocean View Street #2
Winthrop, MA 02152

Dear Potential Participant,

Jillian Dunn is an Ed. D student and certified National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research from Northeastern University. She is seeking to use your institution, Merrimack College, to gather data for her Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study. This type of study would require her to interview 6-9 male student-athlete on full or part athletic scholarships for 60 minutes.

The goal in this research project is to better understand the experience of student-athletes at division one through three institutions of higher education. Jillian’s research question is; How do students who are on half or full athletic scholarships that are on track to graduate from four-year division one through three institutions of higher education explain and make sense of their academic success? Essentially she wants to better understand the condition of the student-athlete. How are they motivated and how do they make sense of their academic success? Published literature has shown that student-athletes are more often the better students, with higher grade point averages, yet they are overwhelmingly understudied in the world of educational research. This is a specific population that universities are taking in, and the question is how are they so successful, what factor have helped them to become better students in being athlete?

With your support on this project we can celebrate the student-athlete and understand the conditions they face in both motivation and academic success. Through in-depth interviews we can understand their perspective and how they view their own success and make sense of it. We can get glimpse of where their motivation comes from, and begin to debunk tensions between academic commitments and athletic commitments to the university.

Jillian is looking for volunteers to be interviewed one time, though an e-mail follow up is likely. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Please contact Jillian Dunn either via phone: (978)518-
1634 or by e-mail at dunn.ji@husky.neu.edu if you would like to volunteer for her study, or if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Jillian Dunn
Appendix 4

Consent Form

Northeastern University- College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigators: Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Principal Investigator and Jillian Dunn, Student Researcher

Title of Project: Understanding and Utilizing Student-Athlete’s Motivation to Successfully Matriculate From College

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are asking you to take part in a research study. This consent form details the project; however, the researcher will be telling you about the study first. If you have questions, feel free to ask. You may withdraw at any time with no questions asked. I will ask you to sign this form to consent to participating in this study and also that you understand your right to withdraw. You will sign 2 copies, one for me, Jillian Dunn, to keep and one for you to keep.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this study is to find a way to use athletic competitiveness to keep students academically successful so students end college with an academic and athletic option.

What will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in a 75-80-minute interview. You will be provided with the questions a head of time.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?

All together this should take 75-80 minutes and it will take place at a location you choose.

Is there going to be risk or discomfort to the participant?

There is no risk or discomfort to participating in this study.

Who will see this information?

No one except the researcher will know your real identity and have access to the interviews provided. In the study, that will be published on ProQuest, a pseudonym will be used and your real name will not be used.

If you no longer wish to take part in the study?

You may withdraw from the study with no questions asked at any time with no repercussions.

Who can I contact if I have any questions or problems?

Any questions and concerns can be directed at Jillian Dunn by either phone or e-mail. Phone number: (978)518-1634 or e-mail dunn.ji@husky.neu.edu. Or you can contact Dr. Kimberly Nolan at k.nolan@neu.edu.
Will I be paid for my participation?
Participants will receive a $40.00 gift card to Dunkin’ Donuts.

Will it cost you anything to participate?
There is no cost to participating in this study.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in the research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director of Human Subject Research Protection at Northeastern University. Address: 960 Renaissance Park, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: (617)373-4588 or E-mail: n.regina@neu.edu.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of Participant Agreeing to Take Part

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date
References


Cosh, S., & Tully, P. J. (2014). “All I have to do is pass”: A discursive analysis of student athletes' talks about prioritizing sport to the detriment of education to overcome stressors encountered in combining elite sport and tertiary education. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 15, 180-189.


