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## FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMPLETION OF ELIGIBILITY IN DIVISION III WOMEN'S INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORTS

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FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMPLETION OF ELIGIBILITY IN  
DIVISION III WOMEN'S INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORTS

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership

at

Western Connecticut State University

2011

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMPLETION OF ELIGIBILITY IN  
DIVISION III WOMEN'S INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORTS

Sara Festa Morgatto, MS

Western Connecticut State University

Abstract

The major topic considered for this qualitative research study was the identification of the factors that encourage women, according to the female athletes themselves, to make the four-season commitment as players on an intercollegiate sports team at the Division III level (D-III). More specifically, this study focused on the reasons that caused female athletes to choose their universities, the factors that positively influenced them to remain members of a team, and the obstacles they overcame while completing four seasons of eligibility. The student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic ability, their relationships with their team and coach, and the support provided by the university and family also were integrated into the study.

The importance of this topic stemmed from the observed number of women who chose to continue their high school athletic careers at D-III colleges and universities yet did not complete four seasons of collegiate eligibility. Of the 1,223 women listed on the 2008-2009 varsity intercollegiate sports rosters of the eight universities that comprise the Conference, only 162 (13%) of them were seniors (Little East Conference Web Site, n.d.). Despite coaches engaging in countless hours recruiting, practicing, and playing, coupled with the financial commitment of colleges and universities for women's intercollegiate sports, women at the D-III level do not complete their athletic eligibility. Coaches may not be aware of the specific factors that retain female student-athletes on teams for four seasons because little or no research has been conducted in this area.

The researcher-designed survey, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group were utilized to gather information from senior athletes who had completed four seasons of eligibility in one sport. The information gathered from these data-collection methods was analyzed to determine what factors positively influenced the women to complete four seasons of eligibility, the criteria they used to choose their universities, and how the student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic experience impacted their decision to play for four seasons. The obstacles that they faced which made it difficult for them to complete four seasons of eligibility also were identified and appropriate support services were determined that encouraged completion of the college athletic career. The intent of this study was to discover the reasons women remain on D-III teams despite encountering obstacles, by surveying, interviewing, and discussing the issue with female athletes from University A and University B who reached this goal, and by conferring with athletic personnel from both universities regarding the plausibility of the theories generated from the study.

The results of the study suggest several factors that positively influenced female student-athletes at the D-III level to persevere and complete four seasons of athletic eligibility. The factors that encouraged the women to complete their college athletic careers included the support of teammates, coaches, and family; the acknowledgement of their athletic ability, the presence of team cohesiveness, and a sense of collective efficacy. Each of the female student-athletes expressed a feeling of passion about the sport that, despite obstacles, drove her to play for four seasons.

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APPROVAL PAGE



*School of Professional Studies  
Department of Education and Educational Psychology  
Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership*

Doctor of Education Dissertation

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMPLETION OF ELIGIBILITY IN  
DIVISION III WOMEN'S INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORTS

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband Gary, my biggest fan, whose presence in my life fills me with gratitude. His pride in my endeavor encouraged me to persist for over five years on this project. Without his enthusiasm, I am not sure that I would have completed this monumental task.

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FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMPLETION OF ELIGIBILITY IN  
DIVISION III WOMEN'S INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORTS

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

When reading the player roster at any women's Division III (D-III) intercollegiate sports event, it is very apparent that the number of seniors playing on the teams is much lower than that of the freshmen, sophomore, or junior team members. Coaches of women's teams at D-III institutions are concerned about the lack of senior players on their rosters. In women's intercollegiate sports, specifically at the D-III level, there appears to be a number of women who are members of a team as freshmen, but do not play out their four seasons of athletic eligibility and complete their collegiate careers.

Colleges and universities that are members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) D-III level emphasize the importance of the overall success of the college experience for the student-athlete. Although engaging in athletic activities is considered to be important, the academic component is the priority for the student-athlete at the D-III level. While D-III institutions encourage athletic participation, coaches are expected to act in the role of educators both on and off the playing field. D-III colleges and universities do not offer any financial aid to the student-athlete based on athletic ability and the athletic department is included in the university's overall budget. D-III schools must sponsor at least five sports for women, two of which must be team sports. At least one sport must be offered for women each season (NCAA, 2007a; NCAA, 2008).

The major topic considered for this research study was the identification of the factors that encourage women, according to the female athletes themselves, to make the four-season commitment as players on an intercollegiate sports team at the D-III level. More specifically,

this study focused on the reasons that caused female athletes to choose their universities, the factors that positively influenced them to remain members of a team, and the obstacles that they overcame while completing four seasons of eligibility. The student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic abilities, their relationships with their teams and coaches, and the support provided by the universities and families also were integrated into the study.

The goal of this study was to identify and categorize the factors that encourage completion of the intercollegiate athletic career for female athletes at two D-III institutions. After these factors were delineated, viable supports that will increase completion of eligibility were identified to assist institutions to retain female student-athletes on teams.

### **Rationale for Selecting the Topic**

The importance of this topic stemmed from the observed number of women who chose to continue their high school athletic careers at D-III colleges and universities yet did not complete four seasons of collegiate eligibility. The number of women's intercollegiate sports teams offered by each of the universities in the Conference ranged from 9 to 12, with an average of 10 teams per school. While all of the universities in the Conference maintain basketball, soccer, and softball teams, four universities offer one sport not found at any other school in the Conference (see Table 1). There are 1,223 women listed on the rosters of the 80 women's varsity intercollegiate teams representing 16 sports offered by the eight universities that comprise the Conference. Of these 1,223 women, only 162 (13%) of them were seniors (Team Rosters c, n.d.). Of the 292 women listed on the combined rosters of the varsity intercollegiate sports teams offered at University A and University B, only 44 (15%) of them were seniors (Team Rosters a, n.d., Team Rosters b, n.d.). University A and University B were selected for the study because they were representative of the eight universities that comprise the Conference.



Considering the financial commitment of the institution and the professional commitment of the coaches, it seemed relevant to study what factors increase the likelihood that women will complete their four seasons of eligibility. The 2007 budget for women's intercollegiate sports at University A and University B was \$813,247.00 and \$488,795.00, respectively. Recruiting costs for the two universities combined totaled \$24,039 while coaches' salaries equaled \$726,315 ("NCAA Membership Financial Report System," 2007a; "NCAA Membership Financial Report System," 2007bve). Coaches spend countless hours recruiting players, holding practices, and competing, only to have many of their players leave the team before their four seasons of eligibility have been fulfilled. While there may be various contributing factors that encourage women at the D-III level to complete their college athletic eligibility despite facing obstacles, little or no research has been conducted in this area. Once the factors that contribute to career completion have been recognized, the necessary support services can be identified that will encourage female student-athletes to complete their eligibility.

Table 1

*Women's Intercollegiate Sports Offered by the Universities in the Conference*

<b>University</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>
<b>Basketball</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Soccer</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Softball</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Lacrosse</b>	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
<b>Volleyball</b>	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
<b>Tennis</b>	X	X		X	X	X	X	
<b>Field Hockey</b>	X	X	X		X		X	X
<b>Cross Country</b>		X	X	X	X	X		X
<b>Indoor Track</b>		X	X	X	X	X		X
<b>Outdoor Track</b>		X	X	X	X	X		X
<b>Swimming and Diving</b>	X	X			X		X	X
<b>Ice Hockey</b>			X			X	X	
<b>Gymnastics</b>				X				
<b>Golf</b>			X					
<b>Equestrian</b>					X			
<b>Skiing</b>							X	

## **Related Literature**

This preliminary review of the literature supports the rationale for this study through an overview of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, research related to college student retention, and research related to college student-athlete retention. Retention rates for student-athletes and student non-athletes and interventions that are suggested to increase retention rates are discussed.

### **Social Learning Theory**

The theoretical foundation of this research study is based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory that emphasized the importance of observing and modeling the behavior, attitudes, and emotional reactions of other people in relationship to the consequences of the observed behaviors. The four steps necessary for successful modeling of behavior are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977). A person's behavior is influenced by the level of self-efficacy that is achieved. Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 1). Self-efficacy is the belief that one can execute behavior to produce a desired outcome. Bandura (2000) expanded the idea of self-efficacy to the concept of collective efficacy that involves the mutual dependency of the behavior of a group on each of the group members to produce a desired effect. Collective efficacy is the ability of a group to believe in their capabilities, work together, and be effective. Teamwork is defined as "the cooperative effort on the part of a group or persons acting together as a team or in the interests of a common goal" (Webster, 2001, p. 806) and is the epitome of collective efficacy.

### **College-Student Retention**

Although there has been much research in the area of college-student retention (Tinto, 2006-2007), there was a decline in the percentage of college students who earned degrees over

the five-year period from 1989-90 to 1995-96 from 49.9 % to 46.6% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). While the former philosophy placed the responsibility of persistence on the student, current thinking places the onus on the institution. Tinto (2006-2007) outlines some challenges facing colleges and universities regarding getting students to persist and earn degrees. He suggests that while administrators understand why students leave, for instance, lack of academic engagement, they are unsure about what can be done to encourage students to stay. Even when effective programs are identified, the implementation of these programs is faulty and often short-lived.

Learning communities are one example of how institutions of higher education can encourage student retention. Tinto (1997a) defined learning communities as a type of block scheduling with the same group of students enrolled together in two or more courses. In addition to the block scheduling, other components of learning communities are freshman seminars, cooperative learning between students, and teaming of the learning content between the various disciplines represented in the block scheduling.

ESSENCE (Entering Students at South Engaging in New College Experiences) at the University of South Alabama (South) is a first-year student program designed, in part, to increase the number of students who return to South for a second year. Students, who participated in ESSENCE, a learning community intervention, were 50% to 60% more likely to earn degrees than non-ESSENCE students, suggesting the benefits of the program (Noble, Flynn, Lee, & Hilton, 2007-2008).

Andrade (2007-2008) reviewed studies about the effects of learning communities on student involvement with peers, faculty and academics, satisfaction with the institution and the learning community, achievement as measured by grade point average or course grades, and

persistence. Andrade concluded that while learning communities do indicate positive results, it was difficult to decide which of the components of the learning communities was responsible for the success.

### **Student-Athlete Retention**

The 2007 NCAA Report on the Federal Graduation Rates Data (NCAA, 2007b) indicated a 64% graduation rate for all full-time students of the freshman cohort who entered D-III schools for the first time in the fall of 2000 and a 67% graduation rate for women from the same group. The reported graduation rate for total student-athletes was 68%, while the graduation rate for female student-athletes was 73%. Wohlgemuth's, et al. (2006-2007) study of the 3,610 freshmen who entered a mid-western research extensive university in the fall, 1996, indicated that the retention rates for student-athletes in the first year were significantly greater ( $p = 0.019$ ) than those of non-athletes possibly due to the support athletes receive from coaches and other athletic personnel during the freshman year.

Melendez's (2006) administration of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire to 101 student-athletes and 106 student non-athletes at four universities yielded results which suggested that student-athletes reported higher levels of academic adjustment than non-athletes. He proposed that the implementation of academic support, counseling, and mentoring by senior student-athletes are factors that have increased positive adjustment in college for freshmen athletes. Several researchers suggested that academic, career, and personal counseling are all crucial to ensure the success of the college student-athlete (Broughton 2001; Hinkle 1994; Jordan & Denson, 1990). Although research exists that outlines the support needed to encourage student-athletes to return as sophomores, the studies do not specify the required interventions

that will encourage them to remain on their athletic teams until their eligibility has been completed.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the commitment of the colleges and universities at the D-III level to provide and support intercollegiate sports for women, the female student-athletes attending these institutions do not consistently complete their athletic eligibility. The lack of senior leadership on many teams results in the reliance during competitions on younger, less experienced, and less skillful players. Senior players exhibit expert power defined by Napier and Gershenfeld (2004) as “experience, knowledge, special skills or information that sets an individual apart from other resources” (p. 200) that affects the behavior of inexperienced players individually and the success of the team as a group. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behavior, attitudes, and emotional reactions of other people. The void of the expert power of seniors on a team denies underclass players the chance to observe and model the knowledge, special skills and the rewarding behavior of persistence that four-season players possess. Without experienced seniors, a team’s chance of success and of developing a winning program is diminished. A lack of team success decreases persistence by younger players since it is the success of groups that encourages continued membership (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004.) As one coach of a national championship team stated, “In most cases, having seniors are important to the success of a team. Seniors can provide a certain stability and leadership that coaches can't. They can help to guide the younger players and can reinforce what the coaching staff preaches” (J. Frager, personal communication, February 13, 2011).

Although coaches recruit players with superior athletic ability, many of those recruits will ultimately not complete their eligibility because delineation of the many factors that encourage

female student-athletes to finish their college careers has not been identified. While participation in sports increases the probability of continuing at the same university (Leppel, 2005-2006) and some interventions are purposefully implemented that improve student-athletes' adjustment to college (Melendez, 2006), other necessary, yet currently unknown, supports that encourage career completion have not been identified. Although the study conducted by Wolgemuth et al. (2006-2007) suggested that added support of freshmen student-athletes by coaches increases persistence from freshman to sophomore year, an exhaustive review of the literature revealed that coaches are not aware of the specific factors that retain female student-athletes on teams for four seasons because little or no research has been conducted in this area.

### **Potential Benefits of Research**

The potential benefits of this study will ultimately be to increase the number of female student-athletes who complete their college athletic careers at D-III institutions. Retaining women on teams for four seasons will increase individual athletic skills, expand student leadership roles, and improve the overall success of the team as a group. Maintaining a winning program will validate the time coaches engage in leading a team and the money athletic departments spend financing women's intercollegiate athletic programs at the D-III level.

Coaches will be more informed about the factors that attract and retain female student-athletes so that recruiting players who are compatible to their programs and will play four seasons will be achieved. Coaches will become aware of the factors that female student-athletes overcame while completing four seasons of eligibility so that appropriate supports can be implemented that will ensure career completion. Increased individual skills and veteran leadership will produce successful programs and attract talented prospective student-athletes who

seek membership on a winning team. Attaining the commitment of talented recruits on a yearly basis strengthens programs and encourages returning players to persist for four seasons.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study:

1. *National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)* is an organization whose “basic purpose is to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body and, by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 283).
2. *Division III (D-III) colleges and universities*, according to their philosophy statement, are those institutions that “place highest priority on the overall quality of the educational experience and on the successful completion of all students’ academic programs” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 212).
3. *Student-athlete* is defined as an individual who “participates in an intercollegiate squad practice or contest that is under the jurisdiction of the athletics department” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 286) of the college or university.
4. *Participation in Intercollegiate Athletics* “occurs when a student-athlete either practices in a sport, or competes in a sport” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 85).
5. *Eligibility is* “the term used to determine a student-athlete’s status for practice and competition related to NCAA, conference and institutional regulations” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 280). Students must be enrolled full time in a baccalaureate or other degree program to be eligible to participate in organized practices and/or competitions (NCAA, 2007a). A student-athlete is eligible to participate in no more than four



- seasons of intercollegiate competition in one sport either as an undergraduate, a graduate, or as an undergraduate and graduate combined (NCAA, 2007a).
6. *Prospective Student-athlete* is “a student who has started classes for the ninth grade. An individual remains a prospective student-athlete until one of the following occurs (whichever occurs earlier): (a) the individual officially registers and enrolls in a minimum full-time program of studies and attends classes in any term of a four-year collegiate institution’s regular academic year (excluding summer); or (b) the individual participates in a regular squad practice or competition at a four-year collegiate institution” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 287).
  7. *Recruiting* refers to “any solicitation of a prospect or a prospect’s relatives [or legal guardian(s)] by an institutional staff member or by a representative of the institution’s athletics interests for the purpose of securing the prospect’s enrollment and ultimate participation in the institution’s intercollegiate athletics programs” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 285).
  8. *Satisfactory progress* refers to grade point average in a baccalaureate or other degree program and “is to be interpreted at each member institution by the academic authorities who determine the meaning of such phrases for all students, subject to controlling legislation of the conference(s) or similar association of which the institution is a member” (NCAA, 2007a, p. 94).
  9. *Varsity intercollegiate sport* “is a sport that has been accorded that status by the institution’s president or chancellor or committee responsible for intercollegiate athletics policy, administered by the department of intercollegiate athletics, for which

the eligibility of the student-athletes is reviewed, in which qualified participants receive the institution's official varsity awards" (NCAA, 2007a, p.123)

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What factors positively influence women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team to complete four seasons of eligibility?
2. What are the obstacles faced by women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team that interfere with the completion of four seasons of eligibility?
3. What are the criteria that female student-athletes use to choose their universities?
4. What support services are necessary to ensure that female student-athletes will complete four seasons of athletic eligibility?
5. How do student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic experiences influence the completion of their college eligibility?

### **Methodology**

This section will describe an overview of the sample of convenience and the setting of the qualitative research design used in this study. Included in this section are a description of the research design, the instrumentation used, and a discussion of the justification of the analyses used. Data collection procedures and a timeline are provided.

#### **Description of the Setting and the Participants**

The participants in this study were a sample of convenience chosen to suit the purpose of the study. The target population was 19 female student-athletes at University A and 25 female student-athletes at University B, currently attending their respective universities, who had completed or were completing four seasons of athletic eligibility in at least one of the varsity

intercollegiate sports offered by the universities. The participants were full-time students, 18 years or older, who were maintaining satisfactory progress in a baccalaureate or other degree program at the institution. They were chosen from teams of several different sports as permitted by the eligibility requirements of the study and participated in surveys, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. The athletic personnel (coaches, directors of athletics at both universities, and one department chair) also were included in the study and confirmed the major theories and factors that arose from the inquiry. Players and coaches from the women's basketball teams at both universities were excluded from the study due to past involvement by the researcher with these programs.

### **Instrumentation**

**Student-athlete survey.** A researcher-developed student-athlete survey (see Appendix A) was designed to gather information regarding the reasons female student-athletes chose their university, to uncover the factors that encouraged them to complete four seasons of athletic eligibility in their sport, and to define factors that made it difficult to play from their freshman season through their senior season. Information was collected in this survey about the student-athletes' perceptions regarding their athletic abilities, relationships with team and coach, and the support provided by the universities and families that may increase the likelihood that the female student-athletes at the D-III level will complete their college careers. The use of surveys allowed the researcher to efficiently collect data from a large number of respondents who met the criteria of the study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Content validity was established for this instrument.

**Semi-structured interview questions.** Semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix B) were utilized as an additional means of collecting information from the female student-athletes. The semi-structured interview questions delved more deeply into the factors

denoted by the survey. The semi-structured interview “involves asking a series of structured questions and then probing more deeply with open-form questions to obtain additional information” (Gall, et al., 2007, p. 246). Interviews were conducted prior to participation in the focus group to discourage the possibility that the group discussion would influence responses obtained during the individual interviews.

**Focus-group scenarios.** The scenarios (see Appendix C) discussed in the focus group were designed to encourage discussion among the female student-athletes who agreed to participate in this part of the research study. The interaction between the group members elicits thoughts and feelings not always expressed in a one-to-one interview (Gall, et al., 2007). “Vignettes are hypothetical cases or scenarios, with particular features, that make them suggestive of real life situations to respondents” (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2002, p. 44). The focus group members were given two different scenarios depicting situations that contained obstacles to completion of eligibility and asked to discuss the probable reasons that the athlete in the story persisted and completed her college athletic career.

### **Description of the Research Design**

The research design of this study was a qualitative naturalistic inquiry that involved the researcher interacting and relating to respondents in their own environments. Qualitative research is useful for identifying variables that might later be tested quantitatively or if a situation cannot be adequately described and interpreted using quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this study, the data collected were analyzed to define the factors that encourage female student-athletes at the D-III level to complete their college athletic careers and to determine what support services must be established to achieve this goal.

As with quantitative research, qualitative research is subject to evaluation to assess worthiness or merit. To ensure the quality of the findings when conducting qualitative research, trustworthiness must be established. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define a model of trustworthiness that can be applied specifically to qualitative research that includes the criteria of truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. To promote trustworthiness in this study, triangulation of data methods in reference to the student-athletes was achieved through the use of surveys, semi-structured interviews, and a mini-focus group that was facilitated using scenarios. The athletic personnel at both universities completed a questionnaire that outlined the theories that arose from the inquiry. The athletic personnel were instructed to mark whether or not they agreed or disagreed with the factors identified that positively influenced career completion, obstacles to career completion, and the supports necessary to encourage career completion.

Several theories about factors that contributed to career completion were developed based on the data collected regarding the reasons female student-athletes persisted for four seasons despite the obstacles they faced. While multiple researchers were not used, plausible theories were tested through contact with coaches, a department chair, and directors of athletics at two universities who completed questionnaires that highlighted the interpretation and conclusions of the data collected. Member checking with the student-athletes was utilized so that the researcher could be confident that the interview and focus group recordings and transcriptions accurately described the experiences of the student-athletes so that resultant interpretations and theories developed were accurately depicted. The member check occurs when “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with the members of those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

## **Description and Justification of the Analyses**

Information gathered from the student-athlete surveys was analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine what factors have positively influenced the women to complete four seasons of eligibility, the criteria they used to choose their universities, and how the student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic experiences impacted their decision to play for four seasons. Obstacles that were overcome during the completion of four seasons of eligibility also were identified along with the appropriate supports that encourage completion of the college athletic career. The interviews and focus group transcriptions were coded, and recoded using the software program HyperRESEARCH. Open coding was utilized to identify and describe plausible factors that encourage women to complete four seasons of athletic eligibility by analyzing interview responses and the focus group discussion. Open coding refers to taking each piece of information garnered to name and categorize what is being implied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Selective coding using the categories of perceived athletic ability, connection to team, connection to coach, support of university, support of family, collective efficacy and team cohesiveness reflected in the survey was employed. Selective coding involves identifying a core category and relating to it all other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## **Data Collection Procedures and Timeline**

Once approval for the research study was obtained by the Institutional Review Board, the coaches of the women's intercollegiate field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming and diving, tennis, and volleyball teams at University A and the coaches of the women's intercollegiate field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming and diving, volleyball, cross country and track teams at University B were contacted by email and asked to provide the names, addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers of the senior players on their teams who

had completed or were completing four seasons of eligibility. All senior student-athletes identified by the coaches were mailed a packet that included a cover letter, consent form, survey, and return envelope. Completed surveys were returned to the researcher's primary advisor. Individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group were conducted and audiotaped. Data collection occurred during the winter and spring semesters of 2009. A stipend was awarded to each participant with the amount of the stipend based on the level of participation in the study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While threats to internal and external validity are not considered when conducting a qualitative research study, the criteria of truth value, that is, the confidence in the truth about the findings is important to assess (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The truth value of this study may have been compromised to some degree by a lack of prolonged and varied field experience. Given the demanding schedules of the student-athletes and the subsequent time constraints, it was difficult to engage them face to face for extended periods of time. Additionally, the truth value of this study may have been affected due to the coding of the data by only one researcher that may have resulted in researcher bias with regard to the theories developed.

### **Ethics Statement**

Permission to participate in this research was obtained from each student-athlete and coach. To assure confidentiality, each student-athlete participant was assigned a coded identification number for the purposes of analyzing and reporting data. Documented responses where the respondent included the name of her sport or an identifying position on the team were changed to "sport" and "position", respectively to ensure anonymity. All data were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home or office and were maintained there until the findings were published. These data were accessible only to other researchers for whom the data

might be useful in further comparative analyses and who were professors and/or students enrolled in Western Connecticut State University's Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership Program.

### **Conclusion**

Qualitative research characterizes and explains a phenomenon, defined as “a process, event, person or other item of interest to the researcher” (Gall, et al, 2007, p. 447). In this study, the phenomenon being studied was the absence of senior players on women's D-III intercollegiate sports teams. The factors that positively and negatively influenced the female student-athletes at the D-III level during the completion of four seasons of eligibility, along with the support services needed to facilitate career completion were investigated. The intent of this study was to discover the reasons that women remained on D-III teams despite encountering obstacles, by surveying, interviewing, and discussing the issue with the women from University A and University B who reached this goal.



## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

This review of the literature includes an overview of Bandura's Social Learning Theory as a theoretical foundation, research related to college student retention, and research related to college student-athlete retention.

### **Social Learning Theory**

The theoretical foundation of this research study is Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) that emphasized the importance of observing and modeling the behavior, attitudes, and emotional reactions of other people in relationship to the consequences of the observed behaviors. People learn by interacting with other people in their environment and determining which behaviors produce positive effects and which behaviors yield negative consequences. Through the process of "differential reinforcement, successful forms of behavior are eventually selected and ineffectual ones are discarded" (Bandura, 1977, p. 17). Although basic behavior can be shaped unconsciously by experiencing a consequence, Bandura (1977) asserted that it is the human being's ability to think that makes these experiences meaningful and allows for an understanding of the "response consequence" (Bandura, 1977, p. 17). Response consequences are defined as what occurs after a behavior is produced and provides the person with information about whether or not to maintain a particular behavior for use in the future. Through cognitive mediation, people decide if a behavior will produce a positive outcome or avoid a negative result, and learning to repeat or avoid the action will be achieved. Response consequences provide motivation for people to behave in a certain way that is contingent upon what they anticipate the outcome of their actions to be. If a future consequence is determined to be beneficial, people will be motivated to produce behavior that will elicit a later positive response. Response consequences serve to reinforce behavior but Bandura believed that reinforcement is

not automatic nor does it occur without enactment of a conscious thought process or without having observed the actions of other people. “Reinforcement provides an effective means of regulating behaviors that have already been learned, but it is a relatively inefficient way of creating them” (Bandura, 1977, p. 22).

People learn by observing and modeling the behavior of others. The four elements necessary for successful modeling of behavior are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977). To learn from the observation and modeling of others’ behavior, people must be focused on what is being modeled, remember what is observed, imitate the behavior, and have a desire to engage in the behavior. Attention to what is being modeled is influenced by the factors inherent in the observer, the types of activities being observed and the attraction of the observer to the people being observed. The retention of what is being modeled is achieved either through imagery or verbal channels that serve to store the observed behavior in memory for future use. Reproduction of a behavior involves retrieving the observed behavior from memory and transforming it to an action that will replicate what had been previously observed. Motivation to demonstrate a behavior that had been learned through observation is dependent upon whether or not the consequence of the action has been deemed effective for both the modeler and the observer. As the study by Melendez (2006) suggested, the positive adjustment to college is influenced by the mentoring of freshman players by senior athletes. When paired with seniors, freshmen have the opportunity to observe and model the rewarding behavior of persistence exhibited by the senior athletes who completed four seasons of eligibility.

Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their

lives” (p. 1). Self-efficacy is the belief that one can execute behavior to produce a desired outcome. Bandura (1994) indicated that the four major sources that influence people’s development of their beliefs about self-efficacy are: (a) successful experiences of their own, (b) observation of the successful experiences of others, (c) acknowledgement of their capabilities by others, and (d) an understanding of how to interpret their reaction to stress. To ensure a strong sense of self-efficacy, the experiences deemed as successful must be ones that are not easily attained. Persevering through challenging activities until mastery is achieved promotes the flexibility needed to overcome difficulties in order to experience a desired outcome. The impact on self-efficacy of observing the successful experiences of others is dependent on the perceived likeness between the observer and the social model. People will imitate the behaviors of those models who they believe possess similar characteristics and goals as themselves. When people are apprised of their capabilities by others, they are more willing to attempt challenging tasks that lead to the improvement of skills and increased self-efficacy. If people are placed in situations that are consistent with their skill levels and they experience success, they will be more willing to attempt the next level of an activity. Appropriately interpreting the benefit of emotional and physical stress on the ability to perform is essential to creating a sense of self - efficacy.

The completion of four years of athletic eligibility is fraught with obstacles that must be overcome. The development of self-efficacy in female players through acknowledgment of their capabilities and placement in competitive situations that will improve their skills is the arduous task of the coach. Student-athletes must learn to manage stress related to the physical demands of competition and develop positive feelings so that self-efficacy will be heightened. Perhaps as

senior players who have experienced the success of competing for four seasons model the behavior of persistence it will become the goal for their underclass teammates.

Bandura (2000) expanded the idea of self-efficacy to the concept of collective efficacy or agency. "People's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results are a key ingredient of collective agency" (Bandura, 2000, p. 75). Collective efficacy is the ability of a group to believe in their capabilities, work together, and be effective. Individuals rely on other people to complete activities that are unattainable by the individual acting alone. These group activities create a mutual dependency between each of the members that is based on shared beliefs. Individual skills are incorporated into the group effort, but it is through the cooperation of the members working together that a desired outcome is produced. The shared belief that the group is capable of reaching its goal influences the continued association of the individual with the group. Bandura (2000) stated that collective efficacy can be measured in two ways. The first is to ask each member to assess their individual capabilities as they relate to the function of the group. The second way is to ask members to articulate the capabilities of the group as whole. Bandura (2000) asserted "the two indices of collective efficacy are at least moderately correlated and predictive of group performance" (p. 76). Defining the collective belief system of the group is essential in determining the potential success of its members as a team. Team work is defined as "the cooperative effort on the part of a group or persons acting together as a team or in the interests of a common goal" (Webster, 2001, p. 806) and is the epitome of collective efficacy. If female student-athletes feel a sense of collective efficacy that leads to success, they perhaps will be more inclined to persist for four seasons and complete their athletic eligibility.

Related to the concept of collective efficacy is the construct of cohesion that Carron (1982) defined as "a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick

together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives” (p. 124). Brawley, Carron and Widmeyer (1993) conducted research using the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) to measure cohesion and its impact on team satisfaction with team goals for competition and practice. The volunteer subjects ( $n= 145$ ) from seven teams comprised of male athletes and six teams that consisted of female athletes who participated in the study were members of either adult community or college teams. In addition to completing the GEQ, subjects were administered a researcher-developed Likert-type scale that measured the goal related variables of goal clarity, goal influence, team commitment, team satisfaction, participative group goal setting and goals, and goals certainty. Both measures were administered at midseason and the end of the season although two teams and 41 subjects declined to participate in the second assessment. Using a multiple regression analysis, it was determined that for competition, the most common predictor of satisfaction with team goals was cohesion. At midseason, 38% of team satisfaction with team goals for competition was predicted by cohesion and team goal certainty combined ( $p <.0001$ ) and at the end of the season, 27% of team satisfaction was predicted by team goal influence, cohesion and team goal clarity ( $p <.0001$ ). Regarding practice, at midseason 21% of team satisfaction with team goals was predicted by team goal influence and cohesion ( $p <.0001$ ), and 15% of satisfaction with team goals was predicted by cohesion and team commitment ( $p < .0004$ ).

Given that cohesion could predict satisfaction with team goals, Carron, Bray and Eys (2002) conducted further research that investigated the connection between task cohesion and team success. Participants were members of intercollegiate basketball teams ( $n= 18$ ) and club soccer teams ( $n=9$ ) that included 154 females and 140 males. For this study, the measure of cohesion was derived from the administration of two of the four parts of the GEQ, namely

Individual Attractions to Group-Task (ATG-T) and Group-Integration-Task (GI-T). Team scores for each of the GEQ parts were derived and correlated with each team's total winning percentage. Significant relationships between both ATG-T ( $r = 0.67$ ) and GI-T ( $r = 0.57$ ) and team success for all teams combined were found. The authors concluded that the connection between team cohesion and collective efficacy influenced the success of the team. It would be prudent then for coaches to be aware of the importance of developing team cohesiveness so that team goals could be achieved thereby increasing the success of team. Female athletes might be more inclined to complete their athletic eligibility if they are members of a winning team.

In 2005, Short, Sullivan and Feltz conducted a study to develop and validate the Collective Efficacy Questionnaire for Sports (CEQS). Using Bandura's construct of collective efficacy, the scale was composed of five factors: ability; effort; preparation; persistence; and unity. Since all of the subscales correlated with each other and each subtest correlated with the total score, the authors concluded that the questionnaire could be used to measure collective efficacy in sports research. Coaches interested in assessing the degree of collective efficacy demonstrated by their teams might consider using the CEQS for the purpose of identifying the discrepancies in the five factors assessed so that appropriate interventions might be implemented to alter positively the belief system of the team.

### **College-Student Retention**

Although there has been much research in the area of college student retention (Tinto, 2006-2007), there was a decline in the percentage of college students who earned degrees over the five-year period from 1989-90 to 1995-96 from 49.9 % to 46.6% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). While the former philosophy placed the responsibility of persistence on the student, current thinking places the onus on the institution. Research

conducted at Boise State University (BSU) revealed that university personnel placed more responsibility on themselves than students placed on the university for 36 factors associated with retention (Landrum, 2001-2002). An 81-item survey that asked respondents to rate the percent of university responsibility and the percent of student responsibility for each statement was completed by 88 university personnel and 142 students. The resultant unit of measure for the surveys was “the percentage of responsibility attributed to the university” (Landrum, 2001, p. 200) and the scores obtained for each item by university personnel and students were compared using an independent means *t* test. Of the 36 items, significant differences were found for 16 items ( $p < .05$ ) and 20 items ( $p < .001$ ) where university personnel assigned more responsibility to themselves than did students for each of the factors. Upon examination of the top 10 items rated as being more the responsibility of the university, there was agreement between university personnel and students for eight of these factors. The eight statements and the percent of university responsibility designated by university personnel and students respectively were

- helpful staff members (92.1, 92.2);
- good teaching (89.8, 91.1);
- providing faculty who are genuinely interested in students (92.8, 89.5);
- providing faculty who are genuinely interested in research (91.6, 89.5);
- the availability of residence halls and apartments (89.4, 87.4);
- poor teaching (89.2, 86.3);
- maintaining a student health service facility (87.7, 83.7); and
- the quality of instruction (87.7, 81.9) (Landrum, 2001-2002, p. 201).

The responsibility for retention that the university personnel in Landrum's study attributed to themselves supports Tinto (2006-2007) when he suggested that current thinking places the responsibility of retention on the university rather than on the student.

Tinto (1993) divided the process of acclimation into college life into three stages. During Stage 1, the student must separate from family, high school, and hometown. Along with the physical departure comes the abandonment of the culture of the pre-college environment. While attempting to adopt the belief system of the college, the rejection of old values may lead to psychological pain that jeopardizes the chance for persistence. During Stage 2, the student begins the transition from home and may feel in limbo between home and college, neither having fully left home nor completely assimilated into the culture of the college. If a significant disparity exists between the values of home and college or if the student feels isolated because of differences of race, age, or socio-economic factors, successful transition may be impeded. Stage 3 is characterized by the student's full integration into college life and it is at this stage that institutions will need to provide support for the student to encourage persistence.

Tinto's (1993) Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure pertained to the process of voluntary leaving within the setting of the institution. Whether or not a student stays or leaves college is influenced by the interaction of several factors. Family background, personal attributes, educational, intellectual, and social skills, and economic status influence the student's goals and the commitment the student makes to achieve these goals. A student's individual characteristics and goals interact within the academic setting and if the experiences with other students and faculty are positive, successful integration and student retention will occur.

Tinto (2006-2007) outlined three challenges facing colleges and universities regarding getting students to persist and earn degrees. He suggested that while administrators understand



why students leave, for instance, lack of academic engagement, they are unsure about what can be done to encourage students to stay. Even when effective programs are identified, the implementation of these programs is faulty and often short-lived. Despite a better understanding about knowing why students are not retained in higher education, using the research to develop successful programs that encourage students to persist is lacking. Finally, while access to higher education for low income students has increased, high income students continue to complete degrees at a greater rate than their low income peers. Tinto (1993) suggested that commitment on the part of the college and university should be focused on the needs of all students rather than on the goals of the institution. By providing educational and social supports, students can be successfully integrated into college life and retention rates will increase.

Researchers at Arizona State University (ASU) interested in understanding the relationships between loneliness, social support, and persistence conducted a study of 401 students enrolled in 23 freshman seminar classes (Nicpon, et al, 2006-2007). Participants provided demographic information and completed three different surveys that measured perceived loneliness, social support, and persistence. Using a one-tailed Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient, a negative correlation between support from friends and loneliness ( $r = -.58, p < .001$ ) and a positive correlation between support from family and friends and persistence ( $r = .35, p < .001$ ) was found. A multiple regression indicated that for the total sample, persistence was predicted by the variables of loneliness and social support ( $R_2 = .275, F(3, 28) = 42.93, p < .001$ ). For women, the variables accounted for 32% of the variance in academic persistence. Nicpon, et al, 2006-2007 concluded that support from peers decreased feelings of loneliness and improved feelings of connectedness to the university that resulted in an increase in persistence for freshman students. The researchers suggested that to improve

retention, universities should provide avenues for freshmen to become involved in campus activities and make social connections with other students so that assimilation into college life will be achieved.

In an effort to better understand the relationship of self-beliefs, social support, and university comfort with persistence decisions, Rayle, Kurpius, and Arredondo (2006-2007) studied 527 first semester women from 56 freshmen classes at Arizona State University. In addition to the collection of demographic information, instrumentation included three self-beliefs scales, two social support scales, and three university comfort scales. Retention data were obtained through the university's student enrollment records. A hierarchical regression analysis of the self-report scales indicated that 54% of academic persistence was predicted by the cluster of self-beliefs, social support, and university comfort ( $p < .001$ ). The clusters of self-beliefs and social support, self-beliefs and university comfort, and social support and university comfort were significant predictors of academic persistence ( $p < .001$ ). Social support was found to be the strongest predictor of the three variables ( $p < .001$ ). Rayle et al, 2006-2007, believed that the results of their study confirmed Tinto's model (1993) that placed importance on the need for students to feel supported so that persistence was realized. Further, the researchers related the effect of self-beliefs on persistence to Bandura's social learning theory (1977) and suggested that through counseling, students can gain awareness about the connection between positive self-beliefs and academic success.

Through an evaluation of existing research, Braxton, Brier, and Steele (2007-2008) developed seven guidelines for increasing student retention: (a) all faculty members not just academic advisors should be concerned with the career development of their students, (b) respect for the individual needs and concerns of the various subgroups of students needs to be shown, (c)

all students should be treated as if they are at-risk for departure, (d) implement appropriate programs designed to improve retention rates and ensure that faculty members are an integral part of the process through the development of positive relationships with their students, (e) institutional integrity must be maintained through the alignment of mission statements and action policy, (f) encourage students to form friendship groups based on shared cultures, and (g) implement instructional techniques and support services as documented in the literature to increase retention rates.

Learning communities are thought to be one example of how institutions of higher education can encourage student retention. Tinto (1997a) defined learning communities as a type of block scheduling with the same group of students enrolled together in two or more courses. In this way, cooperative learning, peer tutoring and interdisciplinary projects can be implemented. Andrade (2007-2008) reviewed studies about the effects of learning communities on student involvement with peers, faculty and academics, satisfaction with the institution and the learning community, achievement as measured by grade point average or course grades, and persistence. In addition to the block scheduling, other components of learning communities are freshman seminars, cooperative learning between students, and teaming of the learning content between the various disciplines represented in the block scheduling. Students also may reside in the same dormitory designated as learning community housing. Through her review of the literature, Andrade concluded that while learning communities do indicate positive results, it is difficult to decide which of the components of the learning communities is responsible for the success. Although all of the learning communities reviewed utilized the block scheduling, the implementation of other facets of the program varied so that determining the effects of each is difficult. Coaches utilize some of the aspects of the learning community model such as

cooperative learning, housing arrangements and freshmen study halls. Sports teams are a natural form of block scheduling as the members cooperatively learn and practice their skills, provide peer support to one another and form social groups outside of the team setting. The implementation of various components of learning communities by coaches may positively impact the completion of four seasons of athletic ability.

ESSENCE (Entering Students at South Engaging in New College Experiences) at the University of South Alabama (South) is a first-year student program designed, in part, to increase the number of students who returned to South for a second year and ultimately earned a degree. ESSENCE is essentially a learning community intervention comprised of seven components: students choose to participate in the program, students reside in separate dormitories, access to an in-house peer advisor, completion of freshman seminar, involvement in selected group activities, participation in team building activities, and tutoring. Using the freshmen cohorts who entered from 1998 to 2001 ( $n = 2,195$ ), data were collected from university computer system to compare the four-year and five-year graduation rates of ESSENCE and non-ESSENCE students. While participation in ESSENCE positively impacts four-year graduation rates, such an effect did not extend to five-year graduation rates. The data indicated that ESSENCE students were 50 to 60% more likely to earn degrees suggesting the benefits of the program (Noble, Flynn, Lee, & Hilton, 2007-2008).

To assess the impact of learning communities on student satisfaction and retention, Baker and Pomerantz, 2000-2001, conducted a study of freshmen at Northern Kentucky University (KTU) enrolled in 15 three-class clusters. Each of the clusters identified as a learning community (LC) was comprised of two 100-level classes typically taken by freshmen, and a freshman orientation class. An administration of a student satisfaction survey was completed by

304 LC students and 304 non-LC students registered in freshman composition classes. The results of the surveys indicated that the LC students reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction on 69 of the 95 items than the non-LC students. Some examples of the significant differences ( $p < .01$ ) between the two groups were found on the items “my academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual” and “faculty are usually available after class and during office hours” (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000, p. 123). Other significant differences ( $p < .04$ ) between the LC and non-LC students occurred on the items “my academic advisor s concerned about my success as an individual” and “there is a sufficient number of week-end activities for students” (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000-2001, p. 123). Regarding persistence, the retention rates were higher but not significantly different for LC students (87%) as compared to non-LC students (84%). The authors concluded that the similarities between the retention rates of both groups may be related to the fact that although not in a cluster, a high number of non-LC students enrolled in the freshman orientation class which may have had a positive effect on their return rate.

Research conducted by Johnson (2000-2001) at the University of Southern Maine (USM) focused on the effects of four various programs on retention. Two learning community programs and two non-learning community programs were studied over a two-year period. All four programs contained the typical learning community component of a freshman seminar. One of the learning community programs, the First Year Alternative Experience (FYAE) included the additional elements of weekly group tutorial sessions, courses taken as a cohort, an assigned advisor, and the monitoring of student progress by faculty and the director of the program. The other learning community program, the Russell Scholars Program (RSP) included those components used by the FYAE, and added the dimensions of the development of a mentoring

relationship through contact with faculty outside of class, the development of an individual learning plan, and housing the cohort together in one dormitory. RSP participants were similar to one another in that they possessed academic skills and motivation that surpassed the average USM student. The results of the study showed that the two-year retention rate for the 32 RSP participants (78.1%) was significantly greater than that of the retention rate of the 54 FYAE participants (57.4%) and the two non-learning community programs ( $n=235$ ) and ( $n= 202$ ) with rates of 49.4% and 49.5% respectively. The two-year retention rate of RSP participants is significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) than the 50.8 % overall retention rate at USM. Johnson (2000-2001) concluded that learning communities like FYAE and RSP not only increased retention rates but served to improve the quality of the college experience.

FYE (First Year Experience) is a program that was piloted for three years at Northern Michigan University (NMU) to improve student acclimation and increase retention of freshmen students. FYE is comprised not only of the typical freshman seminar, but added the components of designated blocks of courses for which students register as a cohort, selected faculty who not only taught the courses but provided academic, career, and social support to cohort members, and the use of upperclass students as peer mentors. Soldner, Lee, and Duby (1999) reviewed the second semester retention rates for the cohort of FYE students ( $n= 697$ ) who entered in the fall semesters of 1995 through 1997 and compared them to the retention rates of non-FYE students ( $n= 2,863$ ) who entered during the same three fall semesters. The retention rates for the FYE students (91.8%) were greater than those of the non-FYE students (87.5%) but the difference was not significant. The authors concluded that although the number of FYE students ( $n= 639$ ) as compared to the number of non-FYE students ( $n= 2,513$ ) who returned to NMU for a second semester was not statistically significant several benefits of the program were realized. Through

an examination of information collected in focus groups and surveys, it appeared that students developed relationships with cohort members and faculty that caused them to feel more connected to the university, and provided support for them academically and socially.

In an effort to improve the retention rates of freshman students considered to be at-risk for departure, Kutztown University (KU) implemented and evaluated the effects of the Student Support Services Freshmen Year Program (SSSFYP) during the 1994-1995 school year. To be eligible for this federally funded program a student must possess “one or more of the following characteristics: first-generation; educationally unprepared; economically disadvantaged; or learning or physically disabled” (Colton, Connor, Schultz, & Easter 1999, p. 149). The five components that comprise SSSFYP are

- academic advising/counseling;
- freshman colloquium;
- student mentor program;
- academic skills training; and
- social support activities (Colton et al, 1999, p. 151).

Students who participated in the program were required to meet with their advisor/counselor eight times per year, enroll in the freshman seminar that focused on integrating the student into the university, meet weekly with their student mentor; access academic support services such as tutoring, and participate in social activities with peers and faculty at least four times per year. To evaluate satisfaction with the program, surveys were completed by 108 (62%) of the students that participated in the year-long program. Overall satisfaction with the program was endorsed as “very satisfied” and “satisfied” for 55% and 42% of the respondents, respectively. The percentage of students who indicated an overall counselor satisfaction level of “extremely” and

“very” was 68%, and 28% respectively. Retention rates for second semester and the first, second, and third year were derived and compared to the retention rates of the general population at KU. In all cases, SSSFYP cohorts yielded higher retention rates than did the general population. A 97% second semester retention rate was realized for SSSYP students. First, second, and third year retention rates for SSSFYP students were 80%, 74%, and 70% respectively, as compared with students eligible for SSSFYP not participating, whose retention rates were 54%, 33%, and 25% for years one, two, and three. Colton, et al, 1999, espoused the benefits of the SSSFYP in terms of its impact on student satisfaction and retention rates for those participating at-risk students. Although the researchers caution against using such an intrusive program for students who are not considered to be at risk, Braxton et al (2007-2008) suggested treating all students as if they are at-risk for departure. Tinto (1993) indicated that universities need to be committed to providing intervention for all students.

Using Tinto’s (1993) Model of Departure as a framework, Wilson (2005-2006) conducted case study research at a New Zealand polytechnic school to examine the impact of institutional interventions on student retention. A member of the school’s Academic Quality Unit led the study and met regularly with the faculty from six programs to discuss the implementation of the selected interventions aimed at increasing retention and graduation rates. Students participated in the study ( $n= 83$ ) through the completion of surveys and participation in focus groups; teachers completed a questionnaire. A mentoring program, use of a learning styles preference questionnaire, revision of course materials and curriculum, changes in the delivery of curriculum, alternate assessment procedures and monitoring of attendance were strategies that were incorporated into the year-long project. Prior to the study, 52% of the students enrolled in the six programs were retained and at the end of the study, 66% of the students enrolled were



retained. Before the research, 41% of the students retained were graduated and after the study, 61% of the students retained were graduated ( $p < .05$ ). Although retention and graduation rates improved for students enrolled in the selected programs, the author indicated that the success of the interventions varied from program to program within the polytechnic school making specific strategies unable to be generalized to other institutions.

Based on the premise that the classroom itself is the core of the college experience where social and academic support can be received, Tinto (1997a) utilized a mixed methodology design to study the effects of the Coordinated Studies Program (CSP) at Seattle Central Community college on student engagement and retention. The students involved in CSP enrolled in several classes for which the instructors collaborated on and delivered interdisciplinary activities during weekly blocks of time that met for the first fall quarter. To assess the level of involvement in academic and social activities between CSP ( $n = 121$ ) and non-CSP ( $n = 166$ ) students, a questionnaire that measured student engagement was administered at the end of the program. CSP students reported a significantly ( $p < .05$ ) higher level of involvement than their non-CSP counterparts for six of the seven activities assessed and for their overall perceived gain. Second semester and one-year retention rates obtained from university student records for the CSP students and the comparison group indicated a significantly ( $p < .05$ ) higher reenrollment rate (83.8%) for the CSP students for the second semester than for the non-CSP students (80.9%), and for the following fall with a return rate of 66.7% and 52.0% for CSP and non-CSP students respectively. Qualitative data were collected through observations of the program, interviews with students and faculty, and review of course materials, syllabi, and college publications. An analysis of the qualitative data suggested that learning communities increase persistence by

- building supportive peer groups;
- shared learning: bridging the academic-social divide; and
- gaining a voice in the construction of knowledge (Tinto, 1997a, p. 609).

Tinto (1997a) asserted that the current research supported the need for institutions to understand that the social and academic aspects of the classroom are interconnected and serve to support the student in both areas. Recognizing that classrooms are the basic unit at which students become integrated into college life is crucial so that programs like CSP that support involvement and encourage retention are incorporated into the freshman year.

Hendel (2006-2007) conducted research at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities (UMTC) to ascertain the effectiveness of placement in a freshman seminar with regard to its impact on student satisfaction and retention. This study compared the results of the Student Experience Survey completed by freshman students who participated in one of the three types of seminars offered with that of the survey results for the randomly selected students from the freshman class who did not participate in the seminars. While 723 students from the freshmen class of 5,086 participated in either the content seminar ( $n= 387$ ), developmental seminar ( $n= 184$ ) or the residential life seminar ( $n=152$ ) the number of respondents to the survey was 354 (48%). A sample of 176 students randomly chosen from a group of 1,600 non-seminar undergraduate students completed the surveys. Retention data were collected on 1,723 of the students who began in the fall of 1998 at UMTC. The results of Hendel's study (2006-2007) indicated similar overall student satisfaction rates for both seminar and non-seminar students. However there was a significant difference on 15 of the 92 items contained on the survey whereby the seminar students reported higher levels of satisfaction than their non-seminar peers most notably in the areas of academic advisement ( $p <.01$ ) and sense of community ( $p <.01$ ).

The results of the logistic regression analysis indicated that the retention rates for both groups were not significantly different.

The long-term effect of participation in an academic freshman seminar was examined at North Dakota State University, Fargo (NDSUF) in a study by Schnell and Doetkott (2002-2003). Cohorts from each of four successive years totaling 927 seminar participants were manually matched with non-seminar participants based on the same pre-enrollment characteristics of ACT scores, high school rank, size of high school graduating class, and academic major. A chi-square analysis revealed that for each of the four years, the retention rates for seminar students were significantly greater than expected than the retention rates for non-seminar students ( $p < .001$ ). While the number for both seminar and non-seminar students decreased over the four years, the percentages of seminar students who were retained consistently exceeded the percentages of non-seminar students who remained. For those students participating in the seminar, the one-year retention rate was 96.22% as compared to a 91.15 % rate for non-participating students. The two-year rate for seminar students was 75.16% while the two-year rate for non-seminar students was 63.21%. Retention rates for three years and four years for seminar students were 59.29% and 51.40% respectively and rates for non-seminar students for the same years were 50.59% and 44.01%. The researchers determined that because the study utilized a matched-group comparison, the results of the study were more valid than those studies that compared the retention of seminar participants with that of the general population. Responding to Tinto's challenge (1993) of investigating long-term retention, Schnell and Doetkott (2002-2003) contended that the current study more strongly points to the importance of the freshmen seminar and its impact on retention than short-term research.

Williford, Chapman, and Kahrig (2000-2001) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the effects on retention and graduation rates of an extended orientation taken as a two-credit course by freshmen attending Ohio University, Athens (OUA) from 1986 to 1995. The purpose of the course was to assist students to become acclimated to campus life and to improve their academic skills. For the ten-year period studied, the number of students who enrolled in the fall quarter course ranged from 369 to 472 while the number of non-participants ranged from 2,513 to 2,861. First year retention rates were determined for students who completed the course and compared with the percentage of returning freshmen who had not taken the course. For each of the ten years, the participants return rate was slightly higher (1%) than that of non-participants. The ten-year average for participants was 85% while the average rate of return for non-participants was 84%. Four, five, and six year graduation rates, defined as earning a bachelor's degree, were computed for the two groups from 1986 to 1991. Except for 1986, graduation rates for students who took the course during their freshman year were on average 3% higher for the six-year period than those students who did not enroll in the course. The authors concluded that if the first-year retention rates and the six-year graduation rates of those students taking the extended orientation class were applied to the total number of students in the first-year class, an increase of 30 students would be retained from freshman to sophomore year and 90 more students would be graduated over the six years. Furthermore, extending the orientation period for half of the fall semester allowed students to receive university support as they navigated the academic and social demands of adjusting to college life.

A study of 297 freshman students who were enrolled in semester one freshmen seminar classes was conducted at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) to determine which course topics impacted their persistence as evidenced by their return for the second semester (Davig & Spain,

2004). Through the use of email and telephone interviews, survey data were collected from 183 returning students and 26 non-returning students. A focus group comprised of six returning students encouraged participants to express their feelings regarding the helpfulness of the activities covered in the orientation class. The professors who taught the 12 sample group sections of the class assisted in the selection of the activities contained on the survey considered to be related to positive college adjustment. While the Board of Regents Report (as cited in Davig & Spain, 2001) indicated that the overall retention rate at ECU is 63.9%, the return rate for the students in this study was 82%. The results of the surveys were analyzed using Chi square values to compare the returning and non-returning student responses regarding if a particular activity was included in their seminar and its impact on re-enrollment. The five areas identified that if not included caused the student to be less likely to return ( $p < .05$ ) were

- study skills;
- advising information;
- curriculum planning (CARES Report review);
- group activities (out of class) with other students and faculty; and
- taking campus tour (Davig & Spain, 2004, p. 310).

The highest five areas determined to be very helpful as indicated by the percentage of returning students who endorsed the activity were

1. CARES report - 78.8%;
2. Advising information – 69.1%;
3. Taking campus tour – 54.2%;
4. Get acquainted in class – 50%; and
5. Study skills – 49% (Davig & Spain, 2004, p. 312).

The CARES report “shows the requirements for the student’s program and what has/has not been completed” (Davig & Spain, 2004, p. 310). Students and university personnel receive the CARES report once during both the spring and fall semesters. Information gleaned from the focus groups suggests that attendance at group activities outside of class and meeting other people were the most beneficial aspects of the orientation course. The students noted that if professors reminded them about extra-curricular activities it encouraged their participation in these events and strengthened their involvement in campus life. The researchers concluded that freshman orientation classes such as the one at ECU that include activities that encourage the student’s connection with faculty and peers increases the integration of the student in the life of the university. If students become assimilated into their universities, retention rates will increase.

Alexander and Gardner (2009) contended, that to improve retention rates, universities would be prudent to engage in a comprehensive self-study that assesses the performance of first-year students so that a definitive plan can be implemented that will increase persistence. Within this self-study, institutions can address “critical issues in improving the first year of college” (Alexander & Gardner, 2009, p. 19) by scrutinizing college life during the period of time when students are the most vulnerable to attrition, engaging faculty in the need to address increasing freshmen retention, developing partnerships between all educators on campus, and focusing on the delegation of program responsibilities to appropriate faculty and administrators. Alexander and Gardner (2009) believed that to guide the process of a self-study, the nine standards contained in the Foundational Dimensions<sup>®</sup>, a framework that was developed at the University of South Carolina, should be utilized to assist universities with the evaluation of the strengths of their first-year experiences and to identify the areas in need of improvement. The nine

statements focus on the philosophy of the institution, the organization of programs, the delivery of curriculum and experiential learning, the responsibilities of faculty, the transition of students from secondary school to college, the importance of being aware of the specific needs of all students, the need to promote student understanding and respect of diverse cultures, the need to encourage student understanding of the purpose of engaging in higher education, and the importance of the university engaging in self-assessment while networking with other institutions to promote continuous improvement.

The research indicated that freshman level learning communities, freshman seminars, and other institutional interventions have been shown to increase the number of students who as a whole return as sophomores and ultimately graduate. Other studies suggest that different interventions increase retention rates from the freshman to sophomore year for student-athletes. The specific strategies that encourage persistence from the freshman to the sophomore year for student-athletes will be discussed in the following section.

### **Student-Athlete Retention**

Colleges and universities at the Division III (D-III) level must sponsor at least two team sports and at least five total sports for women. D-III student-athletes do not receive any financial support in the form of athletic scholarships, and it is a level that according to its philosophy is student-athlete focused (NCAA, 2008). The 2007 NCAA Report on the Federal Graduation Rates Data (NCAA, 2007b) indicated a 64% graduation rate for all full-time students of the freshman cohort who entered D-III schools for the first time in the fall of 2000 and a 67% graduation rate for women from the same group. The reported graduation rate for total student-athletes was 68%, while the graduation rate for female student-athletes was 73%.

Wohlgemuth et al. (2006-2007) conducted a study to determine factors that influenced retention and graduation rates for a freshman cohort at a mid-western research extensive university. In this study of the 3,610 freshmen who entered in the fall of 1996, 44% were females. The retention rate in the first year for student-athletes was significantly greater ( $p < 0.019$ ) than those of non-athletes, however, no significant difference in retention rates was found for subsequent years between student-athletes and non-athletes. The author suggested that this difference in first-year retention may be attributed to the fact that as freshmen, student-athletes received more support from coaches and other athletic personnel than do non-athletes from typical institutional support providers. Despite maintaining comparable retention rates, student-athletes were less likely to graduate in four years possibly due to the time constraints placed upon them due to their membership on a team.

Melendez (2006) administered the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) to a sample of 207 students comprised of 49% student-athletes ( $n = 101$ ) and 51% student non-athletes ( $n = 106$ ) at four universities to determine how athletic participation influenced college adjustment. Women comprised 53% of the respondents ( $n = 110$ ) and a total of 175 freshmen and 30 sophomores completed the survey. The SACQ is a self-report measure which contains 67 items that yields scores for the categories of academic, social, personal/emotional, and goal commitment/institutional attachment and a general college adjustment composite. The student-athletes reported higher levels of adjustment than non-athletes in two categories as evidenced by the results of the ANOVA for academic adjustment,  $F(1,199) = 4.03, p < .05$  and institutional attachment,  $F(1,199) = 8.95, p < .01$ . He proposed that the implementation of educational support, use of counselors who have specific training working with college student-athletes, and mentoring by senior student-athletes are factors that have served to increase positive adjustment



for freshmen student-athletes. Tinto (1993) emphasized the importance of providing support to college students so that they will become fully acclimated to college life and be more inclined to persist. Considering that student-athletes reported a stronger connection to their universities than did student non-athletes suggests that athletic participation with its additional support factors may increase retention rates for these students.

Using survey data collected on 2,594 men and 2,585 women by the National Center for Education Statistics, Leppel (2005-2006) examined the participation in intramural and varsity college sports on the probability of persistence from freshman to sophomore year. For this study, persistence included remaining at the same institution or continuing education at another university as compared with departure from college. Second-year enrollment status indicated that approximately 78% of the total sample had remained at the same university, and 13% continued their education at another university, while the percentage of men and women who dropped out was 8.2 and 7.6, respectively. While 60% of the men reported sports involvement several times or often during a semester, only 35% of the women indicated that they participated in a sport regularly. Probability estimates for both men and women showed significant relationships ( $p < .01$ ) between participation in sports and the likelihood of persistence at the same institution rather than dropping out for both men and women. For women, participation in sports significantly lowered the probability ( $p < .01$ ) that they would change schools rather than drop out of college completely. Leppel (2005-2006) suggested that to increase retention rates for females, colleges and universities would be wise to encourage women to become involved in sports.

Student-athletes face many challenges not encountered by non-athletes. The student-athlete must balance the demands of academics, social activities and athletic involvement,

maintain optimal physical health, and for most athletes, deal with the end of the athletic career upon completion of college eligibility (Broughton, 2001; Jordan & Denson, 1990). The need for counseling services to assist college students to adjust to their unique roles as student-athletes has been recognized as being an important factor in the adjustment and subsequent retention of student-athletes. Academic, career, and personal counseling are all crucial to ensure the success of the college student-athlete (Broughton, 2001; Hinkle, 1994; Jordan & Denson, 1990).

Effective support systems for student-athletes should be comprehensive and include the four components of “academic advising, life skills, clinical counseling, and performance enhancement” (Broughton, 2001, p. 4). While providing academic support in the form of orientation and study halls as many universities do, the implementation of a life skills training course is equally as important. The problems facing college students and student-athletes in particular, as well as information necessary to survive college life should be discussed so that participants can develop a repertoire of practical solutions when faced with an issue. Clinical counseling allows the student-athlete to discuss personal problems related to college, family, and peers that affect their emotional well-being. Performance enhancement counseling can be delivered individually or as a group and deals with topics directly related to the student as an athlete such as mental and physical pre-game strategies and assessing game performance. Broughton (2001) stressed that institutions must develop interventions that cater to the unique needs of the student-athlete so as to improve their college experience.

In collaboration with one another, the Center for Counseling and Student Development and the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics at University of Delaware, Newark designed and implemented the Student Services for Athletes (SSA) program. The goal of the program was to institute support services for student-athletes that were accessible to them when they were not

practicing, conditioning, or competing. The SSA program consisted of four facets: “(1) academic monitoring, (2) consultation services with the university community, (3) outreach through workshops and special programs, and (4) personal counseling” (Jordan & Denson, 1990, p. 95). Academic monitoring was achieved by assuring that the student-athlete was registered for the correct number of courses, was maintaining passing grades, and was enrolled and passing those courses necessary for degree completion. Faculty and SSA counselors consulted with one another to discuss the needs of the student-athlete and assist the student-athlete to schedule tutoring if necessary. Consultation services within the university were not limited to communication between faculty and SSA staff, but extended to coaches and parents and were not limited to academic performance but included the behaviors exhibited by student-athletes that affected their functioning in the classroom and on the playing field. Coaches even consulted with SSA staff to explore ways to better relate to and motivate their teams. Workshops offered to student-athletes by SSA explored the following four topics: “(1) transitions, (2) career development, (3) training for academic success, and (4) coping and relaxation” (Jordan & Denson, 1990, p. 96). The focus of the transition workshop was to make student-athletes aware of what services were offered by the university that would help them to acclimate to college life and taught them how to deal with the end of their college athletic careers. The career development program encouraged student-athletes to complete career interest surveys and develop strategies for searching for a job. Time management and effective study skills were discussed during the training for academic success, and finally the coping and relaxation workshop provided training in relaxation techniques. All student-athletes were required to attend an orientation at the beginning of the fall semester to acquaint them with the many facets of life as a college student-athlete including course requirements and the rules of intercollegiate athletic

eligibility. Either through self-referral or referral from coaches or other athletic personnel, students received counseling to deal with personal issues that affected their functioning as a student-athlete. Jordan and Denson (1990) believed that the success of the SSA was a direct result of the cooperation of faculty, coaches, and counselors in providing a comprehensive support program for student-athletes.

Researchers Smith and Herman (1996) developed a Student-Athletic Academic Support Program (SSASP) and studied its impact at the State University of New York, Potsdam. The authors indicated that the goal of the program was to ensure “that all of the institution’s student-athletes graduate prepared” (Smith & Herman, 1996, p. 3) with the skills and academic performance necessary to be admitted into graduate school, an understanding of careers available to them, and the perception that being a student is the most important part of the student-athlete’s persona. The objectives of the program were to improve the “academic performance, retention, and graduation rates of all student-athletes” (Smith & Herman, 1996, p. 3). The SSASP consisted of five components that included the assignment of an academic coordinator who worked specifically with the team on academic issues, meetings with the director of the career planning office and each student-athlete at least once per semester, mandated study halls for first-semester freshman and any student-athletes with inadequate academic progress, optional study skills workshops for any student-athlete, and tutoring. Cooperation between the athletic director and the coaches and the coordinators of the SSASP was deemed paramount given the degree of influence over their players that athletic personnel possess. Initial evaluations of the program in 1995 and 1996 were conducted using a 30-item questionnaire that was completed by 104 student-athletes that assessed the attitudes about the program’s five components. When comparing the responses from 1995 and 1996, a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) between the

perceived value and helpfulness of the academic coordinator was found. Attendance at study halls was found to be beneficial by an average of 48% of the student-athletes who completed the questionnaire both years. The authors noted that overall, the student-athletes reported either being unaware about the opportunities to meet with the career office director and participate in the study skills workshops or non-use of these two components. The authors concluded that the experiences offered by SSASP must be more effectively disseminated to the student-athletes early in their college careers.

### **Conclusion**

The theoretical foundation of this research study is Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) that emphasized the importance of observing and modeling the behavior, attitudes, and emotional reactions of other people in relationship to the consequences of the observed behaviors. Bandura expanded on his idea of self-efficacy, which is the belief that one can execute behavior to produce a desired outcome, to the concept of collective efficacy, that is, the ability of a group to believe in its capabilities, work together, and be effective. Related to the concept of collective efficacy is that of cohesion. Cohesion referred to the willingness of a group to remain together to reach a common goal. Brawley et al. (1993) found that the most common predictor of satisfaction with team goals was cohesion while Carron et al. (2002) concluded that the connection between team cohesion and collective efficacy influences the success of the team.

According to Tinto (2006-2007) there has been much research conducted in the area of college student retention and he suggested that the current thinking places the responsibility of retention on the university rather than on the student. In a study by Landrum (2001-2002), university personnel assigned more responsibility to themselves than did students for 16 factors associated with persistence. Research shows that connectedness to the university (Nicpon et al.,

2006-2007) and, for women, social support (Rayle et al., 2006-2007) are two factors that positively influenced persistence. Tinto (1997a) posited that the learning communities are one example of how institutions of higher learning can encourage student retention. Learning communities are defined as a type of block scheduling that allows for cooperative learning, peer tutoring and interdisciplinary projects, although the components of a learning community vary from program to program. In addition to the block scheduling noted by Tinto, Andrade (2007-2008) listed residing in the same dormitory and freshman seminars as additional facets of learning communities. Noble et al. (2007-2008) reported the use of inclusion in selected group activities, an in-house peer advisor, and participation in team building activities while Johnson (2000-2001) noted the dimensions of the development of a mentoring relationship through contact with faculty outside of class and the development of an individual learning plan as components of learning communities. The use of upperclass students as mentors (Noble et al., 2007-2008), and weekly meetings with student mentors and participation in social activities with peers and faculty (Colton et al., 1999) are other components of learning communities. Research by Noble et al. (2007-2008), Baker and Pomerantz (2001-2002), Johnson (2001-2001), Soldner et al. ((1999), Colton et al. (1999), Wilson (2005-2006), and Tinto (1997a) demonstrated support that learning communities increase retention rates. Several researchers have studied the use of freshman seminars in isolation of other learning community components and its effect on persistence and found that participation in freshman seminar increased persistence significantly (Schnell & Doetkott, 2002-2003), increased persistence but not significantly (Hendel, 2006-2007), and produced a slightly higher return rate (Williford et al., 2000-2001). In a study by Davig and Spain (2004) students who enrolled in freshman seminar indicated that they would be less likely to return for a second semester if such activities as study skills and group activities

outside of class with other students and faculty were not included in the course. Andrade (2007-2008) in a review of studies related to learning communities reported that while such programs do indicate positive results relative to persistence, it was difficult to discern which of the components of learning communities was responsible for the success.

The 2007 NCAA Report on the Federal Graduation Rates Data (NCAA, 2007b) indicated a 68% graduation rate for total student-athletes and a 73% graduation rate female student-athletes for the freshman cohort who entered D-III schools for the first time in the fall of 2000. While there have been many studies conducted related to college student retention in general, few studies have endeavored to uncover the reasons why student-athletes, and female student-athletes in particular, persist for four seasons to complete their athletic careers.

Various factors have been identified as possible positive influences on student-athlete persistence. Wohlgemuth et al, (2007) found that the return rate for student-athletes from the freshman to sophomore year was significantly greater than that of student non-athletes but noted no significant differences in return rate for athletes and non-athletes in subsequent years. Wohlgemuth suggested that the increased retention rate from freshman to sophomore year might be due to the added support given to freshman student-athletes by coaches as compared to the typical support received by freshman students in general. Melendez ((2006) determined that the higher levels of academic adjustment and institutional attachment reported by athletes as compared to non-athletes may be influenced by the educational support received by athletes, along with access to counselors trained to work specifically with student-athletes and mentoring by senior student-athletes. Leppel's study (2005-2006) revealed a significant relationship between participation in college sports and the likelihood of persistence at the same institution.

Student-athletes face many challenges not encountered by non-athletes and must balance the demands of academics, social activities and athletic involvement, maintain optimal physical health, and in most cases deal with the end of the athletic career upon completion of college eligibility (Broughton, 2001; Jordan & Denson, 1990). Effective support services must be comprehensive, specific to the unique concerns of the student-athlete, and include academic support, and special programs and workshops that are designed to increase adjustment and the subsequent retention of the student-athlete (Broughton, 2001; Jordan & Denson, 1990; Smith & Herman, 1996). In addition, personal counseling is espoused by Broughton (2001) and Jordan and Denson (1990) as a way to assist student-athletes with the many challenges that they face. Consultation by the university with coaches and parents regarding behaviors exhibited by student-athletes in the classroom and on the playing field (Jordan & Denson, 1990) and between the athletic director, coaches, and university (Smith & Herman, 1996) are other ways to promote a positive adjustment to college life for the student-athlete thereby increasing retention rates so that the completion of the athletic career will be realized.



## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter is a review of the methodology that includes the research questions, and a description of the setting, participants, and instruments. A description of the research design and justification of the analyses are discussed. Data collection procedures and a timeline are included.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What factors positively influence women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team to complete four seasons of eligibility?
2. What are the obstacles faced by women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team that interfere with the completion of four seasons of eligibility?
3. What are the criteria that female student-athletes use to choose their universities?
4. What support services are necessary to ensure that female student-athletes will complete four seasons of athletic eligibility?
5. How do student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic experiences influence the completion of their college eligibility?

### **Description of the Setting and the Participants**

The study was conducted at two D-III universities in Connecticut with approximately the same number of undergraduate students and undergraduate programs. Each of the universities belonged to the Conference and offered a variety of women's intercollegiate sports teams. One of these universities was located in an urban area, while the other was located in a more rural area.

University A was founded in 1903 and is located in southwest Connecticut, 65 miles north of Manhattan and 50 miles southwest of Hartford. University A has two campuses; the original 34-acre mid-town campus and a 364-acre Westside campus. University A is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and offers 37 undergraduate programs. Of the approximately 6,200 students who attend University A, 4,400 are full-time undergraduates. Of those full-time students who entered in the fall 2007, 53% were women, and 19% were traditionally underrepresented groups. The student-to-faculty ratio is 15.5 to 1 and the mean SAT composite score (Mathematics plus Verbal) for all first time students who entered in the fall 2007 was 996 (WestConn Facts and Figures, n.d.). University A maintains the following women's intercollegiate teams: basketball, volleyball, swimming and diving, lacrosse, tennis, softball, soccer, and field hockey (Team Rosters a, n.d.).

University B was founded in 1889 and is located in northern Connecticut, midway between Boston and New York. The 182 acre wooded campus is 30 minutes from Hartford and 45 minutes from Providence. University B is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and offers 33 undergraduate majors. Approximately 5,137 students attend University B and the total number of new full-time students enrolled in 2007 is 1,261. Students of color comprise 16% of all undergraduates. The student-to-faculty ratio 15.5 to 1 and the mean SAT was 1022 (Fast Facts, n.d). University B maintains the following women's intercollegiate teams: basketball, volleyball, swimming and diving, lacrosse, softball, soccer, field hockey, cross country, indoor track, and outdoor track (Team Rosters b, n.d.).

The participants in this study were a sample of convenience chosen to suit the purpose and parameters of the study. The targeted number of participants was 19 female student-athletes at University A and 25 female student-athletes at University B who were listed as seniors on

their team rosters. To participate in the study, the female student-athletes were required to be attending their respective universities currently, and to have completed or be completing four seasons of athletic eligibility in at least one of the varsity intercollegiate sports teams offered by the universities. The participants were required to be full-time students, 18 years or older, who were maintaining satisfactory progress in a baccalaureate or other degree program at the institution. The athletes were chosen from teams of several different sports as permitted by the eligibility requirements of the study, and participated in surveys, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. Not all participants participated in each aspect of the data collection. The athletic personnel at both universities also were included in the study and completed a content validation questionnaire and a questionnaire to test the theories that arose from the inquiry. Players and coaches from the women's basketball teams at both universities were excluded from the study due to past involvement by the researcher with these programs.

Although the target population totaled 44 female student-athletes, the number of prospective participants was immediately reduced to 33, since the 7 senior basketball players from University A, and the 4 senior basketball players from University B were eliminated from the study. There were three other reasons that the final number of student participants in the study did not meet the targeted number of participants. Some of the female student-athletes, although listed as seniors, had not completed four seasons of eligibility, and some of the coaches did not provide enough player information to contact all of the targeted participants. Also, some of the contacted prospective participants did not agree to participate. Therefore, the final number of participants consisted of eight athletes who attended University A and four that were enrolled at University B who agreed to participate in the study. All 12 participants consented to and completed the student-athlete survey, four of the survey respondents consented to and

participated in the semi-structured interviews, and while four of the interviewees agreed to participate in a focus group, only three of the interviewees formed the focus group. The athlete who had consented to the focus group but did not participate cited mandatory attendance at a class during the scheduled time of the focus group to be the reason for non-participation.

The demographic section of the student-athlete survey revealed the following characteristics of the participants as a group. The average age of the respondents was 21.1 years, and all participants were Caucasian. The 12 participants were completing Bachelor's degrees in a variety of majors that included history, education, health, psychology, chemistry, marketing, and justice and law administration. Of the total number of participants, nine commuted to school and the average commute time was 70 minutes with a range of 25 minutes to 2 hours. Two of the participants lived on campus in dormitories and one lived in an off-campus apartment. Student-athletes represented five sports including field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, and swimming and diving. Of those students who participated in the semi-structured interviews, three were soccer players and one was a field hockey player. The focus group consisted of two of the soccer players and the field hockey player; all had been interviewed individually prior to meeting as a group.

The athletic personnel who completed the content validation questionnaire consisted of six coaches, two directors of athletics, and one department chair. Specifically, the content validation questionnaire was completed by the female field hockey coaches from each of the universities, one female lacrosse coach from University A and one female lacrosse coach from University B who also coached field hockey, the female softball coach from University A and the female swimming and diving coach from University B. Also completing the content

validation questionnaire were the male director of athletics at University A and the female director of athletics at University B and one female department chair from University A.

The questionnaire utilized to test the theories that arose from the inquiry was completed by 10 coaches from women's intercollegiate sports teams, 2 athletic directors, and 1 department chair. Specifically, the Athletic Personnel Research Results Questionnaire was completed by the female softball coaches from each of the universities, the male volleyball coach at University A and the female volleyball coach at University B, the male soccer coaches at each of the universities, the female lacrosse coach at University A, the female swimming coach at University B, and the female coach who heads both the lacrosse and field hockey teams at University B. One of the coaches who returned the questionnaire did not provide any of the requested demographic information. Also completing the research results questionnaire were the male director of athletics at University A and the female director of athletics at University B, and one female department chair from University A. The coaches who participated represented an average of 13.5 years of coaching experience with a range of seven to twenty years. Three of the coaches did not provide the number of years as a coach.

### **Instrumentation**

This section describes the student-athlete survey and the establishment of content validity for this instrument. A discussion of the purpose and use of the questions used in the semi-structured interviews and for the scenarios used in the focus groups is provided. A description of the research results questionnaire is provided.

#### **Student-Athlete Survey**

A researcher-developed student-athlete survey (see Appendix A) was designed to gather information regarding the reasons female student-athletes chose their universities, the factors that

encouraged them to complete four seasons of athletic eligibility in their sport, and to define factors that made it difficult to play from their freshmen seasons through their senior seasons. Information also was collected in this survey about the student-athletes' perceptions regarding their athletic abilities, relationships with teams and coaches, and the supports provided by the university and their families that may increase the likelihood that the female student-athletes at the D-III level will complete their college careers.

The survey included a total of 42 questions. The first section consisted of nine demographic data questions that required the respondents to either provide a short answer or indicate whether or not a specific response applied to them. Examples of these questions are age, academic major, and race. Respondents were then asked to answer three questions by checking all provided responses that applied to them. An example of one of these questions was: "What are the main factors that contributed to your ability to be a member of an intercollegiate sports team?" Other responses not included on the list were added by the respondent. The Student Perceptions of Intercollegiate Sports Experience (SPISE) comprised the final section, and contained a 30-statement 4-point Likert-type scale where the responses ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Likert-type scale statements assessed the student's perception of the intercollegiate sports experience that pertained to athletic ability, relationship with team, relationship with coaching staff, university support, and family support. An example of statements on the athletic and team sections were: "I feel confident in my athletic ability" and "I am a productive member of the team", respectively. Responses to these items were reported using descriptive statistics only.

**Content validity.** Content validity was established for this instrument through the assessment of the particular constructs by a panel of experts in the field (Jury of Experts). For

the purpose of this study, content validity refers to “the extent to which the items in a test represent the domain of content that that the test is designed to measure” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p. 636). The purpose of the content validation aspect of this study was to assess whether or not the items contained on the SPISE adequately represented the categories of athletic ability, relationship with team, relationship with coaching staff, support of university and support of family as perceived by the student-athlete, and whether or not each of the five categories were factors that might affect the completion of eligibility. The athletic personnel at University A and University B considered to be a jury of experts was asked to assess the survey for validity (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Content Validation Jury Members*

Position	Institution
Director of Athletics	University A
Health, Promotion and Exercise Science Chair	University A
Field Hockey, Head Coach	University A
Softball, Head Coach	University A
Women’s Lacrosse, Head Coach	University A
Director of Athletics	University B
Field Hockey and Women’s Lacrosse, Head Coach	University B
Women’s Swimming, Head Coach	University B

*Note.*  $n=8$

The results of the assessment of content validity indicated that the survey statements did represent the five categories contained in the survey, namely athletic ability, relationship with

team, relationship with coaching staff, support of university and support of family as perceived by the student-athlete and that each of the five categories are factors that might affect the completion of eligibility (see Table 3). Additional comments made by the athletic personnel about their responses to the survey items are listed in Table 4. Based on the results of this validation questionnaire, content validity was established. No changes to the survey were made based on these results.

Table 3

*Content Validation Questionnaire Responses*

Question	Yes	No
1. When examining the statements contained in the “Athletic Ability” section, do the statements represent this category?	6	2
2. Do the statements about athletic ability relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?	7	1
3. When examining the statements contained in the “Team” section, do the statements represent this category?	8	0
4. Do the statements about team relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?	8	0
5. When examining the statements contained in the “Coaching Staff” section, do the statements represent this category?	8	0
6. Do the statements about coaching staff relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?	8	0
7. When examining the statements contained in the “University” section, do the	6	2



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statements represent this category?		
8. Do the statements about university relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?	6	2
9. When examining the statements contained in the “Family” section, do the Statements represent this category?	8	0
10. Do the statements about family relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?	8	0

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Table 4

*Additional Comments by Content Validation Jury Members*

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Comments	Survey Section
1. Playing time has more to it than just athletic ability; may not be accurate of ability.	Athletic Ability
2. Could have had more specific questions.	Athletic Ability
3. Number 18 is ambiguous. I think it might be coaching staff?	Athletic Ability
4. Sometimes athletic ability does not have anything to do with playing time. Others could be more talented; attitude; desire.	Athletic Ability
5. I don't believe that student-athletes really understand the limitations here.	University
6. Since we are Division III institutions that do not offer or take in consideration	University

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athletic ability in the awarding of financial aid. Not a good question; not sure about this section.

- |   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| 7. Division III universities should not have different team money for athletes, team budgets, or individuals.                               | University        |
| 8. Inclusion of a section relating specifically to the athletes' views on the athletic department community may be helpful insight as well. | University        |
| 9. I don't know if this area is relative to continued play at the college level.  | Family            |
| 10. Does family include possible husband, partner, boyfriend? Personal significant others may also matter.                                  | Family            |
| 11. More of the athlete's personal preference. Might not have a huge affect on eligibility.   | Family            |
| 12. I have known several that would have answered "No" to that question (Number 38), but it would have had no affect on their eligibility.  | Family            |
| 13. None  | Team              |
| 14. None  | Coaching<br>Staff |
- 

A pilot study of the instrument was conducted in April, 2007. The instrument was given to four former student-athletes who had completed four seasons of eligibility in one sport. Respondents were asked to complete the survey and assess it for clarity for the purposes of revising parts that were confusing in terms of format and content. The four respondents easily completed the survey in the suggested time of 15 minutes without any concerns regarding content. Regarding format, one of the four respondents suggested that a fifth response choice be added as a "moderate between agree and disagree." The researcher chose to adhere to the four

choice response format to force respondents to make a definitive choice in their responses, rather than to include a neutral response that would yield inconclusive data.

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

Semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix B) were utilized as an additional means of collecting information from the female student-athletes. These interview questions delved more deeply into the factors denoted by the survey. The semi-structured interview “involves asking a series of structured questions and then probing more deeply with open-form questions to obtain additional information” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p. 246). For example, a structured question was, “What did you like best about playing on an intercollegiate sports team for four seasons?” This question then was followed by the open-ended question, “What was it about (informant’s response) that encouraged you to play for four seasons?” All informants were given the same sets of structured and open-form questions, with additional open-ended questions based on individual responses. Gall, et al. (2007) contended that asking the same set of structured questions along with follow-up questions that are dependent upon the unique response of each participant helps to standardize the data and yields a greater depth of information than what would have been obtained through the sole use of structured questions. While people do form opinions independently, Krueger (1988) indicated that people’s opinions are influenced by the viewpoints of other people. Thus, interviews were conducted prior to participation in the focus group to discourage the possibility that the group discussion would influence responses obtained during the individual interviews. Morgan (1988) suggested that conducting focus groups after the interviews allows the researcher to clarify and discuss issues that arose during the interviews. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. A copy of the transcription was given to each participant to review for clarity and accuracy.

## **Focus-Group Scenarios**

The scenarios (see Appendix C) discussed in the focus group were designed to encourage discussion among the female student-athletes who agreed to participate in this part of the research study. The interaction between the focus group members elicits thoughts and feelings not always expressed in a one-to-one interview (Gall et al., 2007). While some interviewers rely solely on questions to elicit discussion within the group, other facilitators utilize vignettes or scenarios for this purpose. “Vignettes are hypothetical cases or scenarios, with particular features, that make them suggestive of real life situations to respondents” (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2002, p. 44). The focus group members were given two different researcher designed scenarios depicting situations that contained obstacles to completion of eligibility and asked to discuss the probable reasons that the athlete in the story persisted and completed her college athletic career. The scenarios described fictitious characters that were a composite of characteristics of actual female student-athletes and factual incidents that had occurred to female athletes as observed by the researcher during her association with athletics at University A and University B. The scenarios were reviewed for accuracy by one of the respondents who had participated in the pilot study of the survey. The 25-minute focus group discussion was audiotaped and transcribed. Copies of the transcription were given to each participant to review for clarity and accuracy.

## **Athletic Personnel Questionnaire**

Once the data from the contact with the female student-athletes were analyzed and synthesized, a questionnaire (see Appendix H) was developed that highlighted the results of three of the research questions. The purpose of this questionnaire was to test the plausibility of the theories generated from the analysis and synthesis of data collected from the female student-

athletes through the survey, interviews and a mini-focus group discussion. Athletic personnel at both universities completed the questionnaire that outlined these theories that arose from the inquiry. The athletic personnel were instructed to mark whether or not they agreed or disagreed with the factors identified that positively influenced career completion, obstacles to career completion, and the supports necessary to encourage career completion.

### **Description of the Research Design**

The research design of this study was a qualitative naturalistic inquiry that involved the researcher interacting and relating to respondents in their own environments. Qualitative research is useful for identifying variables that might later be tested quantitatively or if a situation cannot be adequately described and interpreted using quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this study, the data collected were analyzed to develop theories regarding the factors that encourage female student-athletes at the D-III level to complete their college athletic careers, and to determine what supports should be established to assist them to achieve this goal.

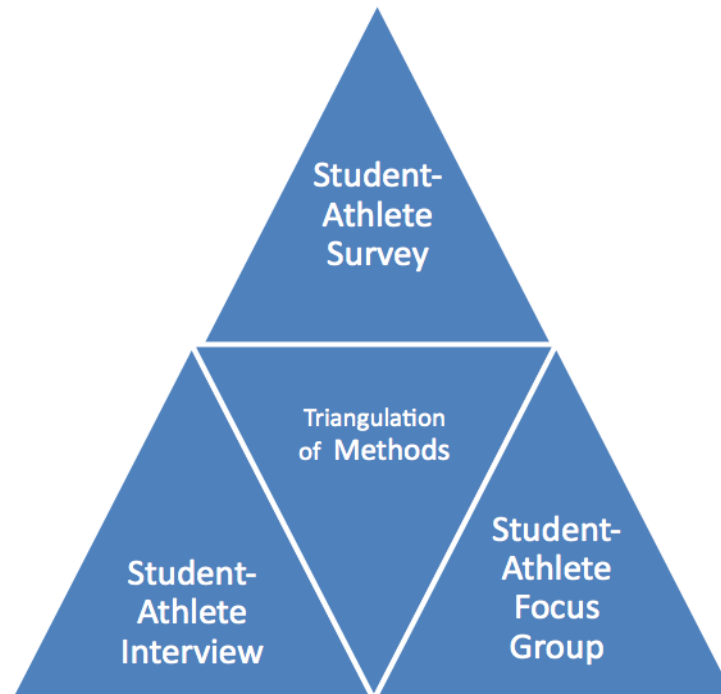
As with quantitative research, qualitative research is subject to evaluation to assess worthiness or merit. To ensure the quality of the findings when conducting qualitative research, trustworthiness must be established. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined a model of trustworthiness that can be applied specifically to qualitative research that includes the criteria of truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Truth value, the confidence in the truth about the findings, is evaluated using credibility strategies such as member checking and prolonged engagement with participants. Applicability, the extent to which the findings can be applied to other settings or contexts is assessed using the transferability strategy of providing a dense description of the participants in the study. The consistency of the findings is evaluated using the dependability strategy of a code-recode procedure and neutrality, the freedom from bias is

ensured using a confirmability strategy such as triangulation. Various, although sometimes overlapping, strategies for each of the criteria were proposed, that when employed would increase the trustworthiness of a qualitative study.

While the use of all the strategies for each criterion is not necessary for every qualitative study, it is imperative that the strategy of triangulation be employed. Triangulation refers to the analysis and synthesis of data from multiple sources for decision making and is a strategy that is employed to increase trustworthiness for the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Knafl and Breitmeyer (1989) suggested four types of triangulation: data methods (the use of various means of data collection); data sources (the use of different settings and different stakeholders as respondents); theoretical (the testing of diverse theories); and investigators (the use of more than one researcher to analyze data). To promote trustworthiness in this study, triangulation of data methods (see Figure 1) in reference to the student-athletes was achieved through the use of surveys, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group that was facilitated using scenarios.

In this study several other strategies were utilized to insure trustworthiness. A dense description of the respondents and the setting of the study were provided to insure the criterion of transferability. Dense description refers to providing extensive background information about the informants and the research setting so that others reading the results of the study can determine if the conclusions reached can be generalized to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to provide a dense description so that athletic personnel can decide if the results of this study can be applied specifically to the athletic programs at their universities. Member checking with the student-athletes was utilized so that the researcher could be confident that the interview and focus group recordings and transcriptions accurately described the

experiences of the student-athletes so that resultant interpretations and factors identified were accurately depicted. The member check occurs when “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with the members of those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Several theories about factors that contributed to career completion were developed based on the data collected regarding the reasons female student-athletes persisted for four seasons despite the obstacles they faced. While multiple researchers were not used, factors that arose from the inquiry were tested for credibility by surveying the athletic personnel at University A and University B.



*Figure 1.* Triangulation of Data Methods

### **Student-Athlete Semi-Structured Interviews**

The semi-structured interview “involves asking a series of structured questions and then probing more deeply with open-form questions to obtain additional information” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 246). Semi-structured interviews are utilized in qualitative research as means to gather

more in-depth information in a one to one situation. While a set of semi-structured interview questions was used (see Appendix B), follow-up questions were asked based on the responses of the participants. At the end of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to talk about other pertinent issues not covered in the researcher created questions.

In this study, the interviews were conducted at each student-athlete's respective university, face to face in a private room. At University A, a small office that was located in an academic building was used for the interviews. The office contained a window, a desk with a chair, a small table, and three comfortable chairs. The office was pleasantly accented with a bookcase that held books, photographs and art work. The researcher greeted the participants at the door and offered them snacks, candy, and bottled water before they were seated in one of the comfortable chairs. The researcher thanked each of the participants for coming, and asked them if they had had any trouble finding the office thus establishing rapport before beginning the interviews. The digital voice recorder used was placed in the center of the small table that was positioned between the interviewee and researcher who sat in the desk chair. The hall area remained quiet throughout each of the interviews and the sessions proceeded without interruption. At University B, a tiny, narrow room at the library was used for the interview. The researcher met the participant in front of the building and the student-athlete showed the researcher to the room that she had reserved for the interview. Rapport was established during the walk to the room as the researcher and participant discussed the campus parking situation and the recent renovations made to the library building. No food or water was offered since the student-athletes at University A did not consume the refreshments so the gesture was eliminated for the interview at University B. The interviewer and interviewee sat face to face in close proximity with the recorder in front of them on a shelf. The interview proceeded without



interruption or any distractions. Participants at both universities were presented with gift cards at the conclusion of the interviews, and possible dates and times were proposed for the purpose of scheduling the focus group session. The researcher informed each of the participants that she would be contacted to confirm the date and time of the focus group.

### **Student-Athlete Focus Group**

Focus groups, also referred to as focus group interviews are utilized in qualitative research as a means of data collection that combine the features of an interview with observation (Morgan, 1988). Focus groups consist of similar people who are thought to possess a wealth of knowledge about the research topic. The interviewer facilitates the group discussion by asking questions of the group, and then allows the participants to discuss the topic amongst themselves. As the discussion progresses, the interviewer observes the interaction between the group members (Gall, et al., 2007). The size of the typical focus group ranges from 6 to 12 (Morgan, 1988), 6 to 8 (Bloor, et al., 2002) or 7 to 10 participants (Gall, et al., 2007), although mini-focus groups of 4 to 6 participants can be beneficial. Pugsley, (as cited in Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2002) indicated that groups as small as 3 and as large as 14 participants have been utilized. While the larger focus groups may result in a greater wealth of total ideas, mini-focus groups can allow individuals to more thoroughly express their ideas and share their experiences (Krueger, 1988). In this study, three female student-athletes from two different sports comprised the mini-focus group. Discussion was facilitated through the use of two researcher-created scenarios (see Appendix C).

### **Data Collection Procedures and Timeline**

Once approval for the research study was obtained by the Institutional Review Board, the coaches of the women's intercollegiate field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming and

diving, tennis and volleyball teams at University A and the coaches of the women's intercollegiate field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming and diving, volleyball, cross country and track teams at University B were contacted by email and asked to provide the names, addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers of the senior players on their teams who had completed or were completing four seasons of eligibility. All 10 of the senior student-athletes identified by the University A coaches and 8 of the 13 senior athletes identified by the University B coaches were pre-contacted by email to explain the research, the parameters of confidentiality, and to encourage participation in the study. Pre-contacting potential participants alerts them to the forthcoming arrival of the survey and reduces the likelihood that it will be inadvertently discarded (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

Those eligible student-athletes who agreed to participate in the study and those who did not acknowledge the email but for whom addresses were obtained from the coaches were mailed a packet that included a cover letter, consent form, survey, and return envelope. The cover letter included the purpose of the study, the process for maintaining confidentiality, the components of the study, and the promise of a stipend for each participant. Gall et al. (2007) cite the importance of crafting an effective cover letter so as to increase return rate of the survey. All eight surveys that were mailed to University A female student-athletes were completed and returned. Of the 13 survey packets mailed to the University B female student-athletes, 6 surveys were completed and returned but only 4 met the criteria for participation in the study. Participants mailed the completed surveys to the researcher's primary research advisor. A follow up to the mailing to encourage participation was done by email. Respondents of the survey received gift cards in the mail to thank them for their participation in the study.

Upon receipt of the completed surveys, individual face to face semi-structured interviews of approximately 40 minutes each were conducted with the four student-athletes who agreed to participate in that part of the study. One focus group was formed based on the willingness of participants and met at the athletes' university for a discussion of two scenarios that depicted vignettes of female student-athletes. Interviews and the focus group were conducted at each of the student-athletes' universities in a private office.

All interviews and focus group dialogue were audiotaped using a SONY IC digital voice recorder and were copied onto a secure computer at the home of the researcher. The digital files were directly uploaded to Capital Typing.com, an online transcription company noted for its quality transcriptions of university transcripts including one to one interviews and focus group interviews. Intelligent verbatim transcriptions, free from extraneous utterances were completed and returned to the researcher as word documents via email. Each of the participants received a copy of her transcribed interview and the focus group interview and was given the opportunity to check the dialogue for accuracy. Corrections to the transcriptions were made by three of the four student-athletes. The revised transcriptions were matched with the audio tapes to ensure accuracy of the content before the documents were converted to text files. Original and computer files of the audio tapes were erased at the conclusion of the study. Data collection occurred during the winter and spring semesters of 2009. Additional gift cards were awarded to each student-athlete who participated in the interview and focus group upon completion of those components of the study.

### **Description and Justification of the Analyses**

Information gathered from the student-athlete surveys was analyzed to determine what factors have positively influenced the women to complete four seasons of eligibility, the criteria

they used to choose their universities, and how the student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic experience impacted their decision to play for four seasons. Obstacles faced that interfered with the completion of four seasons of eligibility also were identified, along with appropriate supports that encourage completion of the college athletic career.

The data collected from the surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Responses from the demographic section and the three question section regarding the reasons the female student-athletes chose their universities, the factors that positively influenced the female student-athlete to complete four seasons of eligibility, and the obstacles faced were counted and expressed as percentages. The three question section of the survey included a response of "Other" to allow student-athletes the ability to write in reasons specific to them that did not appear on the questionnaire. Other responses were noted and listed but not analyzed using descriptive statistics. The percentages for each statement contained on the SPISE, a Likert-type scale were reported along with a list of all additional comments made by the respondents. Descriptive statistics were utilized to categorize the responses from the survey and relevant trends and theories were developed regarding the athletic experience of the senior female athlete at the Division III level.

Interviews and focus group transcriptions were coded, and recoded using HyperRESEARCH, a software program designed to analyze qualitative data. HyperRESEARCH is a code and retrieve data analysis program that allows the researcher to identify common and unique themes contained within the interviews. The coding of qualitative information can be accomplished through open coding and selective coding. Open coding refers to taking each piece of information garnered to name and categorize what is being implied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding was utilized to identify and describe plausible factors that encourage

women to complete four seasons of athletic eligibility by analyzing interview responses and focus group discussions. Selective coding involves identifying a core category and relating to it all other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Selective coding using the categories reflected in the survey of perceived athletic ability, relationship with team, relationship with coach, support of university, and support of family was employed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA AND AN EXPLANATION OF THE FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that positively influenced the female student-athletes (FSAs) at the Division III (D-III) level to complete four seasons of eligibility, identify the obstacles that they faced, and to determine the supports needed to facilitate career completion. This chapter includes the results from the gathered responses on the survey that included the Student Perceptions of Intercollegiate Sports Experience (SPISE), semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. The five research questions that guided this study were:

1. What factors positively influence women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team to complete four seasons of eligibility?
2. What are the obstacles faced by women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team that interfere with the completion of four seasons of eligibility?
3. What are the criteria that female student-athletes use to choose their universities?
4. What support services are necessary to ensure that female student-athletes will complete four seasons of athletic eligibility?
5. How do student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic experiences influence the completion of their college eligibility?

### **Positive Influences Encouraging the Completion of Eligibility**

*Research Question One: What factors positively influence women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team to complete four seasons of eligibility?*

Several factors that positively influenced the FSAs in the study to complete four seasons of eligibility emerged from the survey. Survey results will be reported separately from the

combined reporting of semi-structured interviews and focus group results. Reporting separately the results from each instrument allows the data to be more readily organized and understood.

### **Survey Results**

All respondents ( $n=12$ ) indicated that their athletic ability was a factor in the completion of their athletic careers. While 92% of the respondents endorsed the support of the coaching staff as having a positive influence on them, 83% of the athletes indicated that the support of teammates was a factor. Factors that positively influenced 75% of the respondents were a desire to be a part of the team, their role on the team, a sense of collective efficacy, and the quality of the sports program (see Table 5). For the 12 athletes who completed the survey, 50% of the respondents endorsed the support of family as positively influencing their decision to complete their athletic careers.

Table 5

*Factors that Positively Influenced Membership on an Intercollegiate Sports Team*

Response	Frequency	Percentage
1. Academic support	4	33
2. Financial support	1	8
3. Family (non-financial) support	6	50
4. Support of teammates	10	83
5. Support of coaching staff	11	92
6. Support of peers not on team	8	67
7. Support faculty/staff	1	8
8. Housing situation	1	8
9. Quality of sports program	9	75
10. Team cohesiveness	8	67
11. Collective efficacy	9	75
12. Athletic ability	12	100
13. Role on team	9	75
14. Feeling of satisfaction regarding playing a sport	8	67
15. Desire to be part of a team	9	75
16. Understanding of team concept	6	50
17. Understanding of coach's expectations	8	67
18. Sense of belonging on team	8	67

*Note.*  $n=12$  (Survey respondents)

### **Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Group Results**

As the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and the focus group were coded it became apparent that the themes that emerged from both instruments were so similar that the



results could be reported collectively. Henceforth, the term “personal contact” will refer to the combined responses of the semi-structured interviews and the focus group unless otherwise stated. The main themes that will be discussed in this section are support of teammates, support of coach, support of family, cohesiveness, collective efficacy, passion for playing, and athletic ability. These themes are listed in order of prevalence.

**Support of Teammates.** As with the survey, the participants cited the support of teammates as an important and positive aspect of remaining on an intercollegiate team. Support of teammates was dual faceted in that these four-season players described being supportive of other players and being supported by other players. Without exception, the concept of teammate support was overwhelmingly the most cited factor that positively influenced persistence on a team for four seasons. The student-athletes discussed supporting each other in and out of the athletic arena, “becoming like family to one another, like sisters, best friends, and being able to go to them and talk to them about anything.” When asked what helped the most to remain on the team even when faced with obstacles, FSA3 replied, “the camaraderie of the team, the girls whom I developed a relationship with on the team” and FSA4 said, “I’m passionate for the people around me as well and I want to be there for them. I knew that I, like them playing, that they needed me there.” In reference to team support, the following statements were made:

FSA1: She’ll tell me when I’m not doing something right and I can tell her when there’s something she can improve on. So we’re always helping each other and working off with each other.

FSA2: I’m always looking out for girls whether it’s picking someone up if they need a ride home at night or thinking to help with their homework or just to talk. I would definitely be labeled as the team mom.

FSA3: Well I think it helped that whenever I made a mistake or even when I have an issue outside of (my sport) and I needed to talk to someone there was always someone there willing to provide comfort for me, support and encouragement whenever I needed someone to talk to.

In addition to identifying the need to support teammates as well to be supported by teammates, the FSAs discussed their leadership roles on their teams.

FSA1: In every team I played on, the coach has always looked at me as a leader. But it wasn't only just like the leader like telling players what to do and yelling at players. I always led by example. So if it was just working to get that ball, I work as hard as I could to get that ball. So they'd always say give example and say I was always someone who led by example.

FSA2: Third year, as of more on the leadership role as a junior, it was a lot more exciting because I did get to fill that role and I did see a lot more time. I'd be the one that they would come to if I needed to speak to the coach like if something needed to be brought to the attention of the coach, I'd be the go-to person.

FSA3: The first three years I was just there to work hard and try to push the (position played) that was in front of me and encourage and support her and the other players on the team as well. And I think my senior year I was more of a leader. I had to be in that position both vocally and by example.

FSA4: I was a captain my senior and junior year. This past year, me and (another senior player) being there for four years had the freshmen come to our apartment and said they disliked everything that we were talking about doing. I said, “We need to listen” and by listening they gained respect for us and I think that made a difference throughout the season. I wanted them to know that we were approachable and that definitely made a difference in that situation.

**Support of Coaching Staff.** Personal contact with all four participants identified the support of the coaching staff as being a factor for persistence and confirms the importance of the athlete’s relationship with the coach that was found on the survey results. The support of the coach consisted of not only developing a positive relationship with the coach ( $n=4$ ), but also gaining an understanding of the coach’s expectations ( $n=4$ ) and the importance of team building by the coach ( $n=3$ ). Regarding their relationships with their coaches, the FSAs stated:

FSA1: He, to me I’d say he’s like a family member to me. I could go to him for, I remember during the season of the few things, I went through a few things like in my life. I was just able, I went straight to him and I would call him up or I’d go straight to the office and I would always tell him everything. It was just like, it was a good relationship.

FSA2: Very dedicated, really you can tell it’s a passion and something that he wants to do and he’s really motivated to help his team succeed. He’s definitely there for his team. You can email him that anytime and he’ll send you one right back and really pushes for things to happen whether it’s fundraising or going to an event and he’s all about the giving back to the community which I think is a huge plus.

FSA3: They were really demanding of you but at the same time would always encourage you whenever you did something positive. They were always available to talk to outside of the sport about anything and they were very willing to help you in any situation, athletic or non-athletic.

FSA4: She always made sure and talk to all the players. We have meetings. She really wants to help her athletes.

Understanding the expectations of the coach were important to all of the participants and are demonstrated by the following comments obtained during the personal contact:

FSA1: He expects a lot out of you and as a player he expects a lot from you. We'd win 14 games in a row and it's still, it wasn't that it wasn't good enough. It was you can accomplish more, I know I can get more out of you and I love that. Because he made you not settle. So we won 14 games, it's great. Okay, let's just stop here. No, it was always let's do more. Let's accomplish more. I love that.

FSA2: Because meeting him as a freshman, he explained the expectations and he explained what he expected from me and I agreed with him and thought it was like what my role would be was very appropriate and to have him give you feedback constantly and to remain the same coach is really helpful and he knows, he gets to know you and that's motivating because he knows what buttons to push and what not to push, how to reach you, things like that.

FSA3: He was very, I guess demanding of you as a player as far as the drills you did and he expected you to be able to do in games. He is a very good teacher because he taught me everything I know about how to be a successful college (position played).

FSA4: She's very driven and she really wants, she has high standards. She has put everything for us as she possibly can to motivate the girls that we played with and to beat the teams and step up to a higher level.

The importance of team building by the coach was illustrated by the following responses by three of the athletes:

FSA1: For some reason, the upperclassmen were not getting along with the underclassmen. I went into my coach's office and I was like "Look, I don't know if I could handle this. I just want to play. I'm not here to deal with all of this side stuff." And then what happened was he, we all showed up to practice one day and he lined us up. Upperclassmen facing the underclassmen, this was like the freshmen. And he says we're not moving until you guys figure this out. I thought this was such a smart idea.

FSA2: [If I was the coach] I would try to build team chemistry first off to help lead the team because without that ability to work with each other cohesively, you definitely struggle.

FSA4: That was really important in our team. Our coach would do like specific team building things at practice to help that because since we weren't, we didn't all know each other for a long period of time and we needed each player like I said.

**Support of Family.** While only 50% of the student-athletes who completed the survey indicated that the support of family was a positive factor that contributed to their continued membership on an intercollegiate sports team, being supported by family was confirmed by all four FSAs during the personal contact part of the study. When asked to describe their family's involvement in their athletic participation and how it affected the completion of their college career, the athletes responded in the following ways:

FSA1: My family actually really, they try to get to as many games as they could but they always would ask, call me as soon as the game is over; how did the game go; how did you do; what was the score; how many goals did you score. Always, they might not have been at all the games but they were definitely always supportive, always wondering what was going on and all the banquets in all of the sports they were always there.

FSA2: Very helpful. They know me best so they know when my breaking point is and when I wanted to quit (my sport) they really wanted me to think about it. Of course, they would support whatever decision I made but I think they knew if I quit, I'd be making a terrible mistake and I trust their judgment so it helps.

FSA3: I think it definitely helped because I guess I knew I always had their support. They were just like a constant force I could always count on being there. They comforted me and encouraged me throughout my four years as an athlete whenever I had a bad night with (my sport).

FSA4: I feel like they're very supportive. My mom always sent me to camps and stuff like that. I think that my parents might be disappointed giving up something that I love so much and spent so much time to doing and it happen with a lot of the freshmen that decide not play, I know that their parents are really upset with that.

For all three of the focus group members the scenarios elicited the affect of family on career completion as evidenced by the following statements:

FSA1: I attended school that was about an hour and a half away, I mean it's not that far away, but my parents, for them, it was a little hard to get there. So, my family wasn't able to see a lot of my games and so, transferring schools I did think of my family and having them being able to come to my games. It's definitely a big factor.

FSA3: I think for me, family is such an important part of my life and I knew that coming here, my parents were able to come see my games and I thought that that was a really important part. No matter how bad I played or how little I played, they were still there to support me.

FSA4: Parents are a crucial part in the athletes' lives, especially the support, because when nothing's going wrong with your team, your family's always there, or when things are going wrong with the team, your family's always there, so that's really important. I'd definitely want my parents to be involved.

**Team Cohesiveness.** The presence of team cohesiveness, defined as the willingness of the group to remain together, was verified by all participants during personal contact as being a positive influence on persistence. Athletes talked about getting along with one another and

looking up to one another, qualities that encompassed not only current team members but former team members who remained close to the team after graduation. Staying in contact with teammates during the off-season and team talks and drills during the season increased the sense of team cohesion. FSA2 described her best season as her senior year when the “team chemistry was phenomenal.” FSA3 spoke about the role of the coach in recruiting players that will enhance feelings of togetherness:

I think that’s a huge part of our coach’s goal when he recruits girls. So I think a lot of that has to do with him and the fact that he recruits girls who he knows are going to do well in a team setting and be willing to work as a team instead of as an individual. Our coaches really did a good job of recruiting girls that are team oriented I guess is a good way of putting it and I just felt like there was a collective effort and support group that really kept the team together.

**Collective Efficacy.** When asked how their teams experienced a sense of collective efficacy, the positive influence of collective efficacy was evident in the responses of all participants. Collective efficacy was defined for the athletes as a belief in the team’s capabilities.

FSA1: I mean it definitely showed itself, the fact that we won LEC three years in a row since I’ve been here. We always believe in each other that we could accomplish that. I would always like set goal of ours in the very beginning. No, definitely there was never any doubt that we could accomplish. What we wanted to accomplish we were going to accomplish.



FSA2: I think everyone was on the same page and knew where we were going as a team and I believe we did accomplish that this past season.

FSA3: I think throughout the season, I mean that was always our goal. We felt that if we, and like I said we always talked about the fact that we have the talent to get to the final four and if we played to our capability then we would get there and I think that was the season that it was most evident that that was there.

FSA4: Some games we would have like this strength that we never even imagined, we could achieve anything and sometimes we thought we could and it really showed in our play.

**Passion for Playing.** While athletes described their days as being long and busy, their hard work, determination, dedication and persistence along with improvement in their athletic skills sustained them and allowed them to complete their athletic careers. All of the FSAs enjoyed playing and competing but it was their passion for the sport that helped them to overcome obstacles, persevere and play out their athletic eligibility. Passion was cited by each of the four participants during the personal contact phase of the study as being a driving force to career completion.

FSA1: The bottom line is that I am just so passionate about the sport that I'm never going to give it up ever.

FSA2: Knowing that this was my passion and knowing that this is something that makes me entirely happy and knowing that I could be on a team and play, that was (my sport)

always been a passion, to fulfill passion like I had this hobby that filled so much of my life growing up and then to be able to take it to the next level, to the next level of competition is very, I'm very lucky, very fortunate to be able to do that.

FSA3: I mean if you love to play, I mean sometimes you'll just play no matter what.

FSA4: I think pretty much my passion for (my sport) and I mean I'm a very passionate person. So, I think that's what really drove me. Just passion, love for the sport, I think that's a big thing. Like, if you really care about the sport, and you feel like it's your only option to play, then you'll stay.

**Athletic Ability.** Although each of the FSAs described various levels of skill, all interviewees identified athletic ability as being a factor for completion of eligibility and confirmed the results found on the survey. FSA1 described herself as being an "All American" while FSA2 indicated that she was "just athletic." FSA4 noted "not being the best player on the team but being dependable, a clutch player" and finally as a senior having waited for three years for her chance to play every game, FSA3 said, "I played very little my first three years. Then in my senior year I played almost every single minute." While three of the four women indicated that their skills had improved throughout their college careers, FSA3 described her athletic ability in this way:

I would say when I started as a freshman I had a lot to learn because I played (my sport) my whole life but I didn't start playing (position) until my junior year in high school. So I was somewhat intimidated and didn't feel like I had all of the tools, all of the knowledge that was necessary to, I guess, be completely successful at the college level

and by my senior year it was a complete opposite feeling. I felt like I was a fairly good (position) and I was confident that I could do what was necessary to help my team to win. During the focus group, the following response from FSA4 in reaction to the FSA in the scenario illustrates the impact of athletic ability on persistence:

And since she's a leading scorer, that might have made her feel important on the team and maybe that was what pushed her, maybe that was her drive was being able to score goals and stuff like that.

### **Obstacles Interfering with the Completion of Eligibility**

*Research Question Two: What are the obstacles faced by women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team that interfere with the completion of four seasons of eligibility?*

#### **Survey Results**

The FSAs who completed the survey reported only a few factors that made it difficult for them to persist during the completion of their four seasons of eligibility. Pre-season practice was indicated to be a circumstance that 33% of the athletes ( $n=4$ ) found to be a challenge to remaining on the team, 25% of the respondents ( $n=3$ ) reported the lack of financial support to be a factor, while a lack of team cohesion affected 17% ( $n=2$ ) of those who completed their eligibility (see Table 6). Neither the factors of pre-season practice or lack of financial support were revealed during the interviews or focus groups. Rather than the absence of team cohesion being revealed during the interviews, the presence of team cohesion emerged as a factor that supported the athletes' decision to remain on their teams for four seasons.

Table 6

*Factors that made it Difficult to Remain on an Intercollegiate Sports Team*

Response	Frequency	Percentage
1. Lack of academic support	1	8
2. Lack of financial support	3	25
3. Lack of family (non-financial) support	0	0
4. Lack of support by teammates	0	0
5. Lack of support by coaching staff	0	0
6. Lack of support of peers not on team	0	0
7. Lack of support of faculty/staff	1	8
8. Housing situation	0	0
9. Quality of sport's program	0	0
10. Job	1	8
11. Team cohesiveness	2	17
12. Collective efficacy	1	8
13. Athletic ability	0	0
14. Role on team	1	8
15. Feeling of satisfaction regarding playing a sport	0	0
16. Little desire to be part of a team	0	0
17. Disagreed with team concept	1	8
18. Did not meet coach's expectations	1	8
19. No sense of belonging	1	8
20. Pre-season practice	4	33

*Note.*  $n=12$  (Survey respondents)

## **Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Group Results**

The personal contact highlighted different obstacles to career completion than did the survey results. The major obstacle mentioned by the student-athletes was learning how to balance the many facets of college life including academics, athletics, jobs, and social life. Conflicts with teammates was second and to a smaller degree conflicts with coach, lack of a fan base and publicity for team, player attrition, injuries, being away from home, and team not winning accounted for the remainder of the obstacles. Although player attrition and team not winning was mentioned by only one of the athletes, it was a theme that occurred throughout her interview and is considered to be an important aspect of the study. When FSAs were asked if there was ever a time in their college careers that they thought about leaving the team, each of the participants identified different obstacles.

FSA1: Yes, there was actually. This was actually my junior year here. It was probably a week after a pre-season. For some reason, the upperclassmen were not getting along with the underclassmen. And I was like just in the middle of it. What is going on? Like this is pettiness and it's just girl talking. It was awful. And so what happened was, I went into my coach's office and I was like "Look, I don't know if I could handle this. I just want to play. I'm not here to deal with all of this side stuff." And he was like, "I agree. I totally agree." But it's getting to the point where I don't even know if I want to continue playing. I may stop.

FSA2: It's going to sound really self-centered but I come from a small high school where I was the best player on the team. I was, I mean, a lot of the girls were just playing for fun and when you play all year round, your skill is at a different level and to come to a team

where you're not the best player had to be the best experience for me and the most eye-opening experience for me so that really changed things.

FSA3: I almost didn't play this year because I needed, the games conflicted with the class I needed to take to graduate so it was either play or not graduate. So it was a really, really tough decision and I went back and forth several times and I was really torn about what I should do. Because on the one hand, I worked so hard and I hadn't played for 3 years, and this was my opportunity to play. This was going to be my year that I was going to be a star and play. But then it would push me back a year academically and I'd be forced to stay here another year and financially that would be expensive. I mean if I decided to live here. So I decided to play.

FSA4: Maybe just like the constant wading through of our players, lack of like motivation since I think some people don't take seriously at first because players were all new every year, we weren't winning necessarily so people don't take it seriously. So, that was kind of an obstacle. Like I said, we had a lot of people with family issues, money issues, emotional issues.

FSAs described overcoming these identified obstacles by working with their teammates, displaying personal fortitude and a desire to play, and feeling the need to support teammates.

FSA1: And I ended up saying, I was like, "Look, I came to play (sport) and I know that all of you girls want to play. We need to let this go and we just need to come here and play, forget about everything else like we're supposed to love each other like sisters, what's going on?" And everyone looked at each other like, you're right. I mean everyone

got out what they had to get out and that was the end of it. We didn't hear about it. We didn't talk about it ever again, and it works. But that was the one time I thought I'd really wanted to quit.

FSA2: I kind of just realized that, "Hey, people are going to be better than you at certain things" and I just realized how far I'd already come. I'd already made it to the college level which was a goal of mine and I was where I wanted to be and I was going to succeed to the best of my potential. I wasn't going to keep comparing myself to others. I was going to do the best that I could and that's what really drove me to keep going and overcome any selfishness and ideas that I had.

FSA3: Well, I just thought, the reason I would play would be so that I could actually play in the games because I had not received the opportunity to play much in the previous years. So, that was the biggest argument for playing and the fact that I didn't want to see myself as a quitter because I like to finish things and I don't want to leave something when I was that close to finishing, that's another big thing. But I think one of the biggest things that prompted my decision was my coach because I went and I talked to him about this. And at first he was completely shocked because he wasn't expecting it because I hadn't talked to him about it before and he never really knew what to tell me and he asked me, first thing he asked me is what did your parents tell you. I was like, they're not telling me either way, they're telling to make the decision for myself. So then I got a phone call later and he told me that he wanted me to play and that he wanted me to find a

way to make it possible so that I can play, because he didn't want to see me work so hard to get to where I was and then leave.

FSA4: Well, I felt like I was like a rock on my team like a foundation. So, I felt like it was my responsibility to help everybody get through it and to approach it in a responsible way.

### **Criteria Used to Choose a University**

*Research Question Three: What are the criteria that female student-athletes use to choose their universities?*

#### **Survey Results**

In response to the survey, at least 50% of the female student-athletes reported that course and degree offerings, meeting current team members, the reputation of the athletic program and the reputation of the coach were criteria they used to ultimately choose their university. The location of the college was cited as a factor for enrollment at their universities for 75% of the respondents (see Table 7).

#### **Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Group Results**

The responses from the semi-structured interviews revealed little information that pertained to the impact of the criteria used to choose a university on completion of athletic career. Interestingly, as evidenced by the interview responses, the closeness of the college to their homes was viewed negatively for one of the FSAs and positively for two of the FSAs. One of the FSAs was bothered by the fact that the university was a commuter school.

FSA1: Close to home. I live in (nearby town), so I live at home. That was one of the things I wasn't sure about.



FSA2: My family, we are so close-knit and it's more of like we liked being in each other's presence and we enjoy doing things together and the distance was definitely not something I wanted to try because I knew I wanted to be near home and as it was, when I was living on campus, I was home every weekend and things like that.

FSA3: I mean maybe that it was a commuter school but I mean other than that I'd say I was pretty sure about coming here.

FSA4: Well, I'm from (nearby town) which is 20 minutes away. I originally was going to play at (school out of state). It was the only school I'd applied to and last minute I applied here to come here. So, it's just close; there's a new team. I was really last minute but it was close to home.

Positive recognition of their universities for various reasons was mentioned by the athletes during the interviews.

FSA1: I went to (another) college first, my freshman year and came here the middle of my sophomore year and I was introduced to the library and the midtown section first and I was actually very impressed and I really liked the midtown. I loved the library and then I came to the west side and was shown that really sold me. I'm a (sport) player so, but no, I do like the campus. I like the school a lot.

FSA2: It's very small but a very close-knit community which is a really great aspect of it. You can go see any professor, any resources that you need, they're here for you. So all in all, it's very helpful.

FSA3: All right, I'd say it's a small commuter university that has a strong business, chemistry, education programs, nursing.

FSA4: I've really realized the impact you could make on the people around you and what is offered at the university and in general, if you start getting out and like going to new opportunities and stuff many things arise here and there's like so many programs that we're not aware of and so many outlooks, and people willing to help you if you're willing to find them basically.

While the reputation of the coach and having met prospective teammates prior to choosing their universities influenced their decision to attend their universities, these factors did not affect their persistence. However, it seems that during the course of four years, the reputation of coach and having met future teammates evolved into support from each of these sources that did influence career completion. Focus group scenarios did not elicit any responses that were associated with the connection between the criteria used to choose a school and completion of eligibility.

Table 7

*Criteria that Female Student-Athletes Used to Choose their Universities*

Response	Frequency	Percentage
1. Academic reputation	3	25
2. Course/degree offerings	6	50
3. Financial support	2	17
4. Location of college	9	75
5. Contact by coach	5	42
6. Campus tour	2	17
7. Overnight visit	5	42
8. Meeting current team members	7	58
9. Athletic program reputation	6	50
10. Coach's reputation	6	50
11. Team's reputation	5	42
12. Friends also attending	2	17
13. Coach's description of team concept	5	42
14. Perceived ability to play	5	42
15. Attendance at games	0	0

*Note.*  $n=12$  (Survey respondents)

## **Services that Support the Completion of Eligibility**

*Research Question Four: What support services are necessary to ensure that female student-athletes will complete four seasons of athletic eligibility?*

The support of teammates, coaching staff and family were the three most important factors that positively influenced women to complete four seasons of athletic eligibility on an intercollegiate sport. While these sources of support to FSAs are not necessarily support services in the true sense, it is prudent to recognize that each of these components serve to increase the possibility of career completion. In addition, involvement with women's intercollegiate sports teams by the university and faculty, and team building by the coach are other types of supports that influence athletic persistence.

Given the fact that the single most important positive influence on career completion was the connection and support between teammates, it is prudent that the coach utilize team building strategies that encourage the development of strong bonds between team members. When interviewed, three of the four athletes mentioned team building by the coach as a means to encourage the team to become a cohesive group. FSA4 said, "At practice we do like team building exercises and if they notice things weren't going so well, we have like team talks and we did like these drills. It was like handball kind of things like that just to bring out like intensity among us and more competition among us which was really helpful."

When discussing the involvement of the university with women's sports, three out of four FSAs mentioned the presence of the university president at competitions as being a positive factor when competing on a team.

FSA1: When you go to a game you always see the president.

FSA2: I do recognize them [administration] at our game which is awesome and I know that there are other sports as well, not just ours. I remember receiving a letter from the president after we won one of our conference playoff games. (The president) wrote everyone a little note which that's a really, to have it addressed to you and to know that they were paying attention and knew what was going on, it's really cool.

FSA3: Well I know the president is a big fan of sports in general. (The president) does go to a game to be supportive in that way.

When asked, "If you were the president of the university, what would you change in regard to women's athletics?" two of the four athletes indicated that they would do more to publicize and promote women's athletics to increase the support of female sports teams by the university as whole.

FSA2: I would try to publicize them more. Although I think they have done a better job with putting them online. For example, I noticed that they have something about the basketball team going to the NCAA tournament right now. So I think it has gotten better but I think that I try to publicize more especially in the dorms and in places, I guess buildings, academic buildings for the commuters who don't live in the dorms.

FSA3: Fan base. I think that's the biggest thing. I know that one of my fellow people in the (university leadership project) is doing a super fan project, trying to get like the team's support, one specific game each season and everybody will know about it. So, that should probably help. But I think that goes for all the teams, there are not a lot of people coming.

Responses from the interviews revealed that favorite faculty were those who were “approachable and available” and showed interest in the women as students and as athletes.

When asked to describe their favorite professors, the following responses were elicited:

FSA1: I do have a favorite professor actually. She is a little older but she is very sweet. I like her because I can approach her with everything, I could talk to her. I’d go to her and talk to her about my academics. I talk to her at the class because at that time I did struggle in this class so she’s always willing to help. Not only that, she always will ask me about (my sport), what are you going to do when you graduate, are you still going to play or are you coaching and all that. It was a nice relationship.

FSA2: All my professors. No, I have this professor last fall and she was wonderful. You could knock on her door any time that she was there. She’d come in if you needed to. She’s very dedicated and really there for her students which is what you hope a professor would do and she’s very understanding to an extreme because sometimes students try to pull a fast one on the professor but she seemed to know what was going on.

FSA3: She is very enthusiastic about what she does. You can tell that she loves what she does. And she is very informative, very clear and precise in the way that she teaches. She’s always there to help; she’s in her office a lot. So you can always go and ask her questions.

FSA4: I like my health professors. There's not a specific person that I can think of right now. There's been, like I value like intellect and stuff like that so I have some teachers that push me academically, I like that but I can't think of a specific teacher.

### **Influences on Completion of Eligibility**

*Research Question Five: How do student-athletes' perception of their athletic experiences influence the completion of their college eligibility?*

The results of the SPISE are divided into sections that pertain to the student-athlete's perception of their athletic abilities, relationships with teams, relationships with coaches, university involvement and family involvement over their four-season careers. Each section will be discussed individually and response patterns will be compared to responses obtained during the personal contact.

#### **Athletic Ability**

The results of the SPISE regarding athletic ability (see Table 8) indicate that 75 % of the respondents strongly agreed that they felt confident in their skills, were able to execute in a competitive situation and were satisfied with their playing time. While only 67% of the athletes surveyed strongly agreed that they play to their athletic potential, 92% of the women strongly agreed that their skills have improved throughout their college careers.

Table 8

*SPISE Responses Regarding Athletic Ability by Number and Percentage*

Statement	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
13. I feel confident in my athletic ability.	9 (75)	3 (25)	0	0
14. I am able to execute in a competitive situation.	9 (75)	3 (25)	0	0
15. I play to my athletic potential.	8 (67)	3 (25)	1 (8)	0
16. I am satisfied with the amount of playing time I received.	9 (75)	1 (8)	1 (8)	1 (8)
17. I think my skills have improved throughout my college career.	11 (92)	1 (8)	0	0
18. I think my athletic ability has been overlooked.	0	4 (33)	5 (42)	3 (25)

*Note.* *n*=12 (Survey respondents)

Regarding athletic ability, the personal contact yielded similar findings as that of the SPISE results. All participants identified athletic ability as being a factor for completion of eligibility. While each of the athletes interviewed described various levels of skill, all indicated that their athletic ability improved throughout their four seasons of eligibility.

FSA1: My freshman year I guess there was like our school record with back-to-back hat tricks and I ended up with getting two back-to-back hat tricks. I made all American of the week. I think I broke the school record with goals at sophomore year. I made third team all American. My junior year I made first team all American and all New England. And then in my senior year, I made third team all American again and all conference.



FSA2: On a scale of 1 to 10, I'd probably rate myself as a 7 because there's always room for improvement but I know that competing at this level, you know you have some type of skill.

### **Relationship with Teammates**

According to the responses obtained on the SPISE regarding their membership on a team (see Table 9), 75% of the FSAs who completed the survey indicated that they strongly agreed that they felt part of the team, were a productive member of the team, and enjoyed playing on the team because of their teammates. While 42% of the women surveyed strongly agreed that they socialized with their teammates outside of the athletic environment, 58% of the women agreed with that statement. Beliefs that the team was cohesive and exhibited collective efficacy was endorsed as strongly agreed upon by 67% of those women surveyed.

Table 9

#### *SPISE Responses Regarding Relationship with Team by Number and Percentage*

Statement	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
19. I feel part of the team.	9(75)	3 (25)	0	0
20. I am a productive member of the team.	9 (75)	3 (25)	0	0
21. I enjoy playing on this team because of my teammates.	9 (75)	3 (25)	0	0
22. I socialize with my teammates outside of the athletic environment.	5 (42)	7 (58)	0	0
23. I think my team shows that we are cohesive (willingness for the group to remain together).	8 (67)	2 (17)	2 (17)	0
24. I think my team exemplifies collective efficacy (belief in the team's capabilities).	8 (67)	4 (33)	0	0

*Note.* *n*=12 (Survey respondents)

As with the results of the SPISE, the personal contact revealed the importance of the relationship with teammates to career completion. In fact, the development of positive connections to teammates and its impact on athletic persistence was the strongest theme to emerge from the personal contact. When faced with obstacles that interfered with the decision to remain on the team, it was the support of teammates that was the deciding factor to stay for four seasons. The following responses to the focus group scenarios illustrate the influence of teammates on career completion even when faced with obstacles.

FSA1: I agree; teammates. I say also that some girls all notice that they don't love the sport; but a lot of times they'll even stay just because of their teammates.

FSA3: I also think that teammates help, as well, because you can make some of the best friends as teammates, and they can support you, be there for you all the time and, even if you're losing, you can, I think, still enjoy yourself.

FSA4: Probably her teammates played a large role in that. She might have had one or two really good friends on the team that helped her push through.

When asked what the most important connection an athlete needs to make, the relationship with teammates was cited as being paramount.

FSA1: I would say teammates because, even if your family's not there, they turn into your family, they become like your second family. And even if you're not close with your coach, you still have that connection with your teammates.

FSA4: Not all good coaches are that approachable in that way, sometimes there are certain, not approachable for a reason, so you don't have to be best friends with your coach. But if you're not good friends with your teammates then you might not play together and might just be just bad on the field.

### **Relationship with Coach**

Regarding their relationship with their coaches (see Table 10), 92% of the athletes strongly agreed that they understood what the coach expected of them as players. While 83% of the respondents strongly agreed that the coaching staff helped them to improve their athletic ability, 75% of the women surveyed strongly agreed that they felt supported by the coaching staff both as a team member and a student. The coach's ability to match the FSA's athletic ability with her role on the team and identifying the coach as a contributor to team success was marked as strongly agree by 67% of the female athletes who completed the SPISE. Most of the respondents strongly agreed (42%) or agreed (50%) with the philosophy of the coaching staff.

Table 10

*SPISE Responses Regarding Relationship with Coach by Number and Percentage*

Statement	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
25. I understand what the coach expects of me as a player.	11 (92)	1 (8)	0	0
26. I agree with the philosophy of the coaching staff.	5 (42)	6 (50)	1 (8)	0
27. I feel supported by the coaching staff both as a team member and a student.	9 (75)	3 (25)	0	0
28. I think the coach is able to match my athletic ability with my role on the team.	8 (67)	3 (25)	1 (8)	0
29. I think the coaching staff contributes to the success of my team	8 (67)	4 (33)	0	0
30. I think the coaching staff has helped me to improve my athletic ability.	10 (83)	2 (17)	0	0

*Note.* *n*=12 (Survey respondents)

As with the results of the SPISE, understanding the expectations of the coach was strongly supported during the personal contact. In fact, developing a positive relationship with the coach and being supported by the coach was the second strongest theme next to relationships with teammates that positively affected persistence for four seasons. As indicated on the SPISE, the participants cited that the improvement of their athletic ability was dependent on the coach. Coaching characteristics such as being demanding and knowing how to reach players along with the strategy of setting high standards led to individual improvement and increased performance by the team as whole. The following statements exemplify the influence of the relationship with the coach on an athlete's decision to play.

FSA1: I think what really sold me on (university) was the coach. I got along with him really well here.

FSA2: I had spoken with the coach at the time and he was really positive and it seemed like a very healthy program that I wanted to be a part of.

FSA3: I think we had a fairly good relationship. I mean I could always talk to him about you know, especially since I was learning, like questions I had as far as the game is concerned and I never really talked to him about anything outside of (my sport) but I felt like I could, like he was there if I needed to talk to him.

### **University Support**

The results of the SPISE regarding the university's involvement with their sports team (see Table 11) was less definitive as compared to the responses on the sections about athletic ability, relationship with team, relationship with coach, and family involvement. While 67% of the athletes responding agreed that the university supports the needs of the coaching staff, only 50% of the women agreed that the university was supportive of the special needs of athletes with regard to scheduling, and attendance at classes. Likewise, 50% agreed that the university supports athletics as much as it supports academic endeavors.

Table 11

*SPISE Responses Regarding University Support by Number and Percentage*

Statement	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
31. The university is supportive of the academic needs of athletes.	4 (33)	5 (42)	2 (17)	1 (8)
32. The university is supportive of the financial needs of athletes.	2 (17)	4 (33)	4 (33)	2 (17)
33. The university is supportive of the special need of athletes with regard to scheduling of classes and attendance of classes.	2 (17)	6 (50)	4 (33)	0
34. The university supports athletics as much as it supports academic endeavors.	2 (17)	6 (50)	3 (25)	1 (8)
35. The university places the same amount of importance on women's teams as men's teams.	2 (17)	5 (42)	5 (42)	0
36. The university supports the needs of the coaching staff.	2 (17)	8 (67)	2 (17)	0

*Note.* *n*=12 (Survey respondents)

Unlike the results of the SPISE with regard to university support of women's intercollegiate sports, the personal contact revealed a different perspective. FSAs perceived the university as "pretty involved" and "very involved" and three of the athletes cited that the president of the university was "a big fan", "at the games", and "always at the games." The fourth athlete believed that the "support directly correlates with how the teams are doing." As for their impressions of faculty, all participants expressed that their favorite professors were those who were accessible and approachable or who "pushed them academically" and FSA1 described her favorite professor as one who "will ask me about (my sport), what are you going to

do when you graduate, are you still going to play or are you coaching and all that. It was a nice relationship.” The same athlete stated:

The school paper always writes about all athletics, which I love because I could pick up the paper and I can learn about what’s going on in women’s basketball or rugby or anything like that. Also, when you go to a game you always see the president. You’ll always see professors, my professors always ask me, “Oh when is your next game? We want to come and watch you guys play.” So I think they’re very involved.

When asked what universities can do to help athletes to stay, FSA4 stated, “Encouraging close knit team, like camaraderie, maybe during pre-season and stuff, encouraging the teams to do like leadership activities and games and stuff like that, like sending them out and giving them money to be able to do things like that; to be closer to your teammates as a drive to keep you there for the four years.”

### **Family Support**

The SPISE responses relative to the FSA’s support of their families with their athletic careers (see Table 12) indicated that 100% of the women strongly agreed that their family was proud of their athletic accomplishments. Of those women surveyed, 92% strongly agreed that having their family present at competitions was important, but 50% and 42% of the athletes disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, that they would not play on a team if their family did not attend competitions. The athletes strongly agreed that their family valued their athletic ability as much as their academic ability (83%). The women strongly agreed (42%) and agreed (42%) that they played better when their family was present at competitions.

Table 12

*SPISE Responses Regarding Family Support by Number and Percentage*

Statement	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
37. Having my family present at competitions is important.	11 (92)	1 (8)	0	0
38. I compete better when my family is present at competitions.	5 (42)	5 (42)	2 (17)	0
39. I would not play on a team if my family did not attend competitions.	1 (8)	0	6 (50)	5 (42)
40. My family is proud of my athletic accomplishments.	12 (100)	0	0	0
41. My family values my athletic ability as much as my academic ability.	10 (83)	2 (17)	0	0
42. My family agrees with the philosophy of the coaching staff.	7 (58)	4 (33)	1 (8)	0

*Note.* *n*=12 (Survey respondents)

Although both the SPISE results and the responses during the personal contact confirmed the importance of family support on career completion, each instrument highlighted different factors. The support received from family was the third strongest theme that emerged from the personal contact and focused on emotional support that consisted of comforting and encouraging the athlete “when I wanted to quit” or “had a bad night with (my sport).” As crucial as family support seemed as evidenced by the following personal contact responses, the SPISE results indicated that athletes would continue to play even if their families did not attend competitions.

FSA1: I attended school that was about an hour and a half away, I mean it’s not that far away, but my parents, for them, it was a little hard to get there. So, my family wasn’t able



to see a lot of my games and so, transferring schools I did think of my family and having them being able to come to my games. It's definitely a big factor.

FSA3: I think for me, family is such an important part of my life and I knew that coming here, my parents were able to come see my games and I thought that that was a really important part.

FSA4: I'm really close with my mom. I'd definitely want my parents to be involved and be able to see me. So I would always think within an hour range; so I would never even picture going far away.

### **Athletic Personnel Research Results Questionnaire Summary**

Athletic personnel at both universities completed the Athletic Personnel Research Results Questionnaire (APRRQ) that outlined the theories that arose from the inquiry. The athletic personnel were instructed to mark whether or not they agreed or disagreed with the factors identified that positively influenced career completion (see Table 13), obstacles to career completion (see Table 14), and the supports necessary to encourage career completion (see Table 15) that were identified based on the results of the student-athlete survey, semi-structured interviews and the focus group. A space was provided for athletic personnel to include their comments about each factor identified (see Table 16).

Table 13

*Athletic Personnel Results Questionnaire Regarding Positive Influences on Career Completion*

<b>Positive Influences</b>	Yes <i>n</i> (%)	No <i>n</i> (%)	No response <i>n</i> (%)
Support of teammates	13(100)	0	0
Support of coach	13(100)	0	0
Support of family	13(100)	0	0
Athletic ability	11 (85)	1 (8)	1
Presence of team cohesiveness (willingness for the group to remain together)	12 (92)	1 (8)	0
Collective efficacy by team (belief in the team's capabilities)	10 (77)	2 (15)	1(8)
Passion for playing	13(100)	0	0
Quality of sports program	12 (92)	1 (8)	0
Desire to be part of a team	13(100)	0	0
Role on team	11 (85)	2 (15)	0

*Note.* *n*=13

The results of the APRRQ confirmed the factors that were identified to positively influence women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team to complete four seasons of eligibility. The support of teammates, coach, and family, passion for playing, and desire to be part of a team were endorsed by 100% of the athletic personnel who completed the questionnaire (*n*=13) as being factors for athletic persistence. While 92% of the athletic personnel indicated that the presence of team cohesiveness and the quality of the sports program contributed positively to career completion, 77% of the respondents affirmed that a sense of collective

efficacy influenced persistence. The importance of collective efficacy on career completion is supported by the following comment by one of the athletic personnel: “Even though we have a losing record, the team still believes in their own and the team’s abilities which brings them back every year.”

Table 14

*Athletic Personnel Results Questionnaire Regarding Obstacles to Career Completion*

<b>Obstacles</b>	Yes <i>n</i> (%)	No <i>n</i> (%)	No response <i>n</i> (%)
Balancing academics, athletics, job, and social life	12 (92)	1 (8)	0
Conflicts with teammates	11 (85)	2 (15)	0
Conflicts with coach	11 (85)	2 (15)	0
Lack of a fan base and publicity for team	2 (15)	11 (85)	0
Player attrition	6 (46)	6 (46)	1 (8)
Pre-season practice	3 (23)	10 (77)	0
Lack of financial support	8 (62)	5 (38)	0
Lack of team cohesiveness	11 (85)	2 (15)	0

*Note.* *n*=13

As evidenced by the results of the APRRQ, the agreement by the athletic personnel’s assessment of the obstacles that arose from the inquiry revealed various degrees of affirmation. While 92% of the athletic personnel endorsed balancing academics, athletics, job, and social life as interfering with career completion, 85% of the respondents indicated that conflicts with teammates, conflicts with coach, and a lack of team cohesiveness were obstacles to persistence. Although 62% and 46% of the athletic personnel agreed that lack of financial support and player attrition, respectively, were obstacles, less than half of the respondents indicated that pre-season

practice (23%) and lack of a fan base and publicity for the team (15%) negatively influenced completion of athletic eligibility. Regarding the obstacle of balancing academics, athletics, job, and social life one of the athletic personnel stated, “But it makes them very well balanced. Gives them good time management skills. It gives them work/life balance and keeps them on track.”

Table 15

*Athletic Personnel Results Questionnaire Regarding Supports Needed for Career Completion*

<b>Supports Needed</b>	Yes <i>n</i> (%)	No <i>n</i> (%)	No response <i>n</i> (%)
Team building by coach	13 (100)	0	0
Increase university involvement with athletics	10 (77)	2 (15)	1(8)
Encourage faculty involvement with athletics	11 (85)	2 (15)	0
Encourage family involvement with athletics	10 (77)	3 (23)	0

*Note.* *n*=13

Team building by coach as a support needed to encourage career completion was endorsed by 100% of the coaches who completed the APRRQ. While 77% and 85% of the respondents, respectively, affirmed the need to increase university and faculty involvement with athletics as a way to support FSAs with career completion, 77% indicated that encouraging family involvement with athletics is a necessary support needed for career completion. Regarding university involvement, one of the athletic personnel commented, “We don’t have priority registration but at (prior university) we did and it made it much easier to retain athletes for four years.” The need for involvement by family elicited this comment from one of the athletic personnel: “Involved parents especially at championships assist not only their children in returning, but also (players) who lack parental involvement.”

Table 16

*Additional Comments by Athletic Personnel Regarding Research Results*

<b>Additional Comments</b>	<b>Factor</b>
1. Very supportive, great team chemistry	Support of teammates
2. Yes, 100%	Support of coach
3. Great support group for most student-athletes	Support of family
4. Positive sport support, not pushing it	Support of family
5. Also have had (players) with no parental support complete four years	Support of family
6. Chance to participate and play	Athletic ability
7. Sometimes if other intangibles are in place, no athlete will persist even if skill level precludes them from actually playing	Athletic ability
8. Team chemistry, bonds, and friendships they make over four years	Team Cohesiveness
9. Positive	Collective Efficacy
10. Even though we have a losing record, the team still believes in their own and the team's abilities which brings them back every year	Collective Efficacy
11. Very competitive	Passion for playing
12. Comes into play with some student-athletes	Quality of sports program
13. Need to know and accept their role	Role on team
14. It depends on if okay with role	Role on team
15. Especially if clearly defined	Role on team

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16. Some student-athletes need to work full-time to make it through college	Balancing academics, athletics, job, and social life
17. But it makes them very well balanced. Gives them good time management skills. It gives them work/life balance and keeps them on track	Balancing academics, athletics, job, and social life
18. Fans and publicity help but aren't a huge factor at all	Lack of a fan base and publicity for team
19. Some players realize competition is too much for them	Player attrition
20. Big one	Lack of financial support
21. We don't have priority registration but at (prior university) we did and it made it much easier to retain athletes for four years	Increase university involvement with athletics
22. As much as it educates the faculty on our program and the requirements of our program	Encourage faculty involvement with athletics
23. No, but it's nice. Sometimes students from far away, or students with limited family support play regardless	Encourage family involvement with athletics
24. Involved parents especially at championships assist not only their children in returning , but also (players) who lack parental involvement	Encourage family involvement with athletics

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### **Conclusion**

The results of the study suggest several factors that positively influence FSAs at the D-III level to persevere and complete four seasons of athletic eligibility. The factors that encouraged the women to complete their college athletic careers include the support of teammates, coaches

and family, the acknowledgement of their athletic ability, the presence of team cohesiveness, and a sense of collective efficacy. Each of the FSAs expressed a feeling of passion about the sport that despite obstacles propelled them to play for four seasons.

This study identified several obstacles that the FSAs overcame allowing them to complete their college careers. The major obstacle mentioned by the FSAs was balancing academics, athletics, jobs, and social life. Conflicts with teammates and to a lesser degree conflicts with coaches, lack of a fan base and publicity, pre-season practice, lack of financial support and a lack of team cohesiveness were identified as obstacles, also. Although player attrition was revealed by only one of the FSAs, it was such a strong theme throughout her semi-structured interview that it cannot be ignored as a factor that might discourage career completion.

According to the survey, the reasons that FSAs chose their universities were the course and degree offerings, meeting current team members, the reputation of the athletic program and the reputation of the coach and the location of the college. Little information was gleaned from the personal contact regarding factors that influenced them to attend their universities. However, positive recognition of their universities for various reasons such as the library and strong academic programs was mentioned by the athletes during the interviews.

Several supports that might encourage career completion emerged from the study. The support most frequently identified was that of team building by the coach. In addition, it appears that the involvement of the university and faculty in women's athletics along with the involvement of family will serve to increase the likelihood that FSAs at the D-III level will play out their eligibility.

The results of the APRRQ provided support for the theories that arose from the inquiry. All of the athletic personnel that completed that survey agreed that the support of teammates,

coaches and family, and the presence of team cohesiveness and a passion for playing are factors that positively contribute to career completion. The major obstacle that athletic personnel indicated interfered with persistence was balancing academics, athletics, job, and social life. Other obstacles confirmed by the athletic personnel were conflicts with teammates, conflicts with coach, and a lack of team cohesiveness. The most important support necessary that encourages the completion of athletic eligibility according to the athletic personnel was team building by the coach. Likewise, university, faculty and family involvement with athletics were endorsed by the athletic personnel as support needed to encourage FSAs at the D-III level to play out their four seasons of athletic eligibility.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Chapter Five contains a review of the findings along with the relationship of the findings to the review of the literature contained in Chapter Two. The relationship of the findings with the literature will be presented for each of the following categories: support of teammates, support of coaching staff, collective efficacy and team cohesiveness, athletic ability and self-efficacy, university and faculty support, and family support. This chapter includes the limitations and implications of the study, and suggestions for future research.

The major topic considered for this research study was the identification of the factors that encourage women, according to the female student-athletes (FSAs), to make the four-season commitment as players on intercollegiate sports teams at the Division III (D-III) level. More specifically, this study focused on the reasons that caused FSAs to choose their universities, the factors that positively influenced them to remain a member of a team, and the obstacles that they faced during the completion of four seasons of eligibility. The student-athletes' perceptions of their athletic ability, their relationships with their team and coach, and the support provided by the university and family also were integrated into the study.

The goal of this study was to identify and categorize the factors that encourage completion of the intercollegiate athletic career for the FSAs at two D-III institutions. After these factors were delineated, viable supports that will increase completion of eligibility were identified to assist institutions to retain FSAs on teams.

### **Review of the Findings**

The results of the study identified several factors that positively influence FSAs at the D-III level to persevere and complete four seasons of athletic eligibility. According to the data collected from the FSAs who participated in the study, the factors that encouraged the women to

complete their college athletic careers include the support of teammates, coaches, and family, the acknowledgement of their athletic ability, the presence of team cohesiveness, and a sense of collective efficacy. In addition, each of the FSAs expressed a feeling of passion about the sport that, despite obstacles, propelled them to play for four seasons.

This study identified several obstacles that the FSAs overcame allowing them to complete their college careers. The major obstacle mentioned by the FSAs was balancing academics, athletics, jobs, and social life. Conflicts with teammates and to a smaller degree conflicts with coaches, lack of a fan base and publicity, pre-season practice, lack of financial support, and a lack of team cohesiveness also were identified as obstacles. Although player attrition was revealed by only one of the FSAs, it was such a strong theme throughout her semi-structured interview that it cannot be ignored as a factor that might discourage career completion.

According to the survey, the reasons that FSAs chose their universities were the course and degree offerings, meeting current team members, the reputation of the athletic program and the reputation of the coach and the location of the college. Little information was gleaned from the personal contact regarding factors that influenced them to attend their universities. However, positive recognition of their universities for various reasons such as the library and strong academic programs was mentioned by the athletes during the interviews.

Several supports that might encourage career completion emerged from the study. The support most frequently identified was that of team building by the coach. In addition, it appears that the involvement of the university and faculty in women's athletics along with the involvement of family will serve to increase the likelihood that a FSA at the D-III level will play out her athletic eligibility.

The results of the Athletic Personnel Research Results Questionnaire provide support for the factors identified from the inquiry. All of the athletic personnel that completed that survey agreed that the support of teammates, coaches and family, the presence of team cohesiveness, and a passion for playing are factors that positively contribute to career completion. The athletic personnel indicated that the major obstacle that interfered with persistence was balancing academics, athletics, job, and social life. Other obstacles confirmed by the athletic personnel were conflicts with teammates, conflicts with coach, and a lack of team cohesiveness. The most important support necessary that encourages the completion of athletic eligibility according to the athletic personnel was team building by coach. Likewise, university, faculty, and family involvement with athletics were endorsed by the athletic personnel as support needed to encourage FSAs at the D-III level to play out their four seasons of athletic eligibility.

#### **Relationship of the Findings to the Review of the Literature**

There has been much research in the area of college student retention that has led to a better understanding of why students are not retained in higher education, although implementing successful programs that encourage students to persist is lacking (Tinto, 2006-2007). While there has been some research regarding persistence in college athletics from the freshman to sophomore year (Leppel, 2005-2006; Wohlgemuth et al., 2006-2007) no prior research was found that investigated the factors that positively support FSAs to complete their athletic eligibility at the D-III level. Although a few studies have identified possible factors that will support the FSA during their athletic careers (Broughton, 2001; Jordan & Denson, 1990; Smith & Herman, 1996), the present study is unique in that the data collected from the FSAs clearly identified the factors that encouraged the participants to persist for four seasons and complete their athletic careers. Each of the factors that allowed for career completion will be

discussed relative to the review of the research regarding persistence and the theoretical foundation of this study as outlined in Chapter Two.

### **Support of Teammates**

The results of this qualitative research study indicate that without exception, the concept of teammate support was overwhelmingly the most cited factor that positively influenced career completion. The support of teammates was dual faceted as FSAs described being supportive of their teammates and being supported by their teammates. As stated by Tinto's (1993) Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure, if the experiences with other students are positive, successful integration into college life will occur and student retention will be realized. The FSAs revealed their teammates supported them in and out of the athletic arena, "becoming like family to one another, like sisters, best friends and being able to talk go to them and talk to them about anything." Nicpon et al. (2006-2007) concluded that support from peers decreased feelings of loneliness and improved feelings of connectedness to the university that results in an increase in persistence for freshmen students. One of statements made by a FSA was "Well I think it helped that whenever I made a mistake or even when I have an issue outside of (my sport) and I needed to talk to someone there was always someone their willing to provide comfort for me, support and encouragement whenever I needed someone to talk to." In a study of the relationship of self-beliefs, social support, and university comfort with persistence decisions, Rayle, Kurpius, and Arrondo (2006-2007) indicated that social support was found to be the strongest predictor of the three variables ( $p < .001$ ). When asked what helped the most to remain on the team for four seasons despite obstacles, one of the FSAs replied, "the camaraderie of the team, the girls whom I developed a relationship with on the team."

Learning communities are considered to be one example of how higher education can encourage student retention. Tinto (1997a) defined learning communities as a type of block scheduling with the same group of students enrolled together in two or more courses so that cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and interdisciplinary projects can be implemented. An important facet of a learning community is that “these students form social groups outside their classrooms, bonding in ways that increase student retention” (Tinto, 1997a, p. 55). Learning communities increase persistence by “building supportive peer groups” (Tinto, 1997b, p.609). The relationship between the components of learning communities and the support of teammates is apparent. Sports teams are a natural form of block scheduling as the members cooperatively learn and practice their skills, provide peer support to one another and form a social group outside of the team setting. As one FSA stated, “She’ll (a teammate) tell me when I’m not doing something right and I can tell her when there’s something she can improve on. So, we’re always helping each other and working off each other.” On the Student Perception of Intercollegiate Sports Experience (SPISE), 42% of the FSAs strongly agreed and 58% agreed with the statement “I socialize with my teammates outside of the athletic environment.” Studies by Solder, Lee, and Duby (1999) and Colton, Connor, Schultz, and Easter (1999) revealed increased retention rates for freshmen who participated in a learning community program that included the use of students as peer mentors. The study by Solder, et al., specifically utilized upperclass students as the mentors. Davig and Spain (2004) studied the impact of a freshman orientation course on retention and found that attendance at group activities outside of the class and meeting other people were the most beneficial aspects of the course. Melendez (2006) posited that mentoring by senior student-athletes is one of the factors that increased positive adjustment by freshmen. Probability estimates for women showed significant relationships ( $p < .01$ ) between participation

in sports and the likelihood of persistence at the same institution (Leppel, 2005-2006). While the social aspects of learning communities can be associated with the support that FSAs feel from their teammates, being on a team may actually increase college persistence in general, presumably from the development of the social relationships that occur on teams. Clearly, the need to develop the social bonds provided by teammates and the importance of having seniors on teams as mentors cannot be ignored as a means to increase athletic persistence so that career completion can be attained. The development of positive connections to teammates and its impact on athletic persistence was the strongest theme to emerge from the personal contact. When faced with obstacles that interfered with the decision to remain on the team, it was the support of teammates that was the deciding factor to stay for four seasons. As one FSA said, “I would say teammates because, even if your family’s not there, they turn into your family, they become like your second family. I say also that some girls all notice that they don’t love the sport; but a lot of times they’ll even stay just because of their teammates.”

### **Support of Coaching Staff**

The FSAs who participated in this study cited the support of the coach as being the second most important factor that positively influences persistence. The support of the coach included not only developing a positive relationship with the coach, but also gaining an understanding of the coach’s expectations and the importance of team building strategies by the coach. At the D-III level coaches are expected to act in the role of educator both on and off the playing field (NCAA, 2007a). In the study by Solder et al. (1999) regarding college persistence, students that developed relationships with faculty that caused them to feel more connected to the university and provided support for them academically and socially were found to be retained at a greater rate than those students who did not receive faculty support. Davig and Spain (2001)

concluded from their research about persistence that encouraging connectedness with faculty increases the integration of the student in the life of the university, ultimately increasing retention rates. Wohlgemuth et al. (2006-2007) posited that being given more support from coaches as freshmen may be the specific factor that increases retention rates from freshman to sophomore year for student-athletes. Regarding her relationship with her coaches, one FSA said, "They were always available to talk outside of the sport about anything and they were very willing to help you in any situation. Another FSA stated, "I remember during the season I went through a few things in my life. I was just able, I went straight to him and I would call him up or go straight to the office and I would always tell him everything. It was like, it was a good relationship." Responding to the SPISE statement, "I feel supported by the coaching staff both as a team member and a student", 75% of the FSAs endorsed strongly agreed and 25% of the FSAs agreed. The use of specific team building strategies by the coach was recognized by the FSAs as an important factor for persistence. Noble, Flynn, Lee, and Hilton (2007-2008) found that participants in a first-year student program for which one of the components was team building activities were 50% to 60% more likely to earn degrees than non-participants. Regarding the positive influence of team building by the coach, one FSA said, "That was really important in our team. Our coach would do like specific team building things at practice to help because we didn't all know each other for a long time." When asked, "If you were the coach, how would you lead the team?" one of the FSAs said, "I would try to build team chemistry first off to help lead the team because without that ability to work with each other cohesively, you definitely struggle."

## **Collective Efficacy and Team Cohesiveness**

The FSAs recognized the connection between collective efficacy and team cohesiveness on persistence and expressed reliance on the coaches to develop each of these constructs through team building strategies. The importance of the presence of collective efficacy on a team was illustrated by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977). Collective efficacy is the ability of a group to believe in their capabilities, work together, and be effective (Bandura, 2000).

Individuals rely on other people to complete activities that are unattainable by the individual acting alone. These group activities create a mutual dependency between each of the members that is based on shared beliefs. The coach can influence the building of a sense of collective efficacy through group goal setting that can be an effective means to producing a belief in the team's capabilities. Bandura (2000) asserted that the shared belief that the group is capable of reaching its goal influences the continued association of the individual with the group. Related to the concept of collective efficacy is cohesion, defined by Carron (1982) as "a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives" (p. 124). If a team develops into a cohesive group, the willingness of the group to remain together becomes stronger and persistence increases. Brawley, Carron and Widmeyer (1993) found that for competition the most common predictor of satisfaction with team goals was cohesion. Carron, Bray and Eys (2002) conducted research that investigated the relationship between task cohesion and team success and found that the connection between team cohesion and collective efficacy influenced the success of the team. The onus for developing collective efficacy and team cohesiveness so that goal achievement is reached, and team success is achieved is placed on the coach. As one of the FSAs stated, "I think that's a huge part of our coach's goal when he recruits girls. So I think a lot of that has to do with him



and the fact that he recruits girls who he knows are going to do well in a team setting and be willing to work as a team instead of as an individual. Our coaches really did a good job of recruiting girls that are team oriented I guess is a good way of putting it and I just felt like there was a collective effort and support group that really kept the team together.”

### **Athletic Ability and Self-Efficacy**

All of the FSAs who participated in the study confirmed that their athletic ability and the improvement of skills were factors that positively influenced persistence. Regarding their athletic ability, 75% of the FSAs endorsed “strongly agree” to the statements, “I feel confident in my athletic ability” and “I am able to execute in a competitive situation.” To the statement, “I think my skills have improved throughout my college career, 92% of the athletes surveyed strongly agreed. The recognition that athletic ability and athletic persistence are connected exemplifies Bandura’s construct of self-efficacy whereby people can execute behavior to produce a desired outcome that is based on successful experiences of their own and an acknowledgement of their capabilities. When people are apprised of their capabilities by others, they are willing to attempt challenging tasks that lead to the improvement of skills and increased self-efficacy. The development of self-efficacy in FSAs by acknowledging their capabilities and playing them in competitive situations that will improve their skills is another responsibility of the coach as faculty. Likewise, since appropriately interpreting the benefit of emotional and physical stress on the ability to perform is essential to creating a sense of self efficacy, the coach can be instrumental in ensuring that the FSAs learn to manage stress. Boughton (2001) emphasized the need for the implementation of support systems that include performance enhancement counseling to discuss topics such as mental and physical pre-game strategies and assessment of game performance. The success of support programs for student-athletes is related

to some degree to the cooperation between the coaches and the coordinators of the program given the influence over their players that coaches possess (Smith & Herman, 1996). Further, support programs for student-athletes rely on coaches as faculty to consult with support service staff to explore better ways to relate to and motivate their teams (Jordan & Denson, 1990).

### **University and Faculty Support**

While the results of the SPISE regarding university support indicates that only 50% of the FSAs agreed that the university is supportive of the special needs of athletes, personal contact with the participants in the study suggested a different feeling. Interestingly, three of the four FSAs interviewed mentioned the presence of the university president at competitions as being a positive factor when competing on a team. As one FSA said, “Well I know the president is a big fan of sports in general. So (the president) does his best to go to a game and be supportive in that way.” Regarding faculty involvement, favorite faculty were those who were “approachable and available” and showed interest in the women as students and athletes. Tinto (1993) suggests that commitment on the part of the college and university should be focused on the needs of all students. By providing educational and social supports, students can be successfully integrated into college life and retention rates will increase. Likewise, if the experiences with faculty are positive, successful integration and student retention will occur. Johnson (2000-2001) asserted that adding the development of a mentoring relationship with faculty outside of class as a dimension to a first-year learning community program serves to increase retention rates. Braxton, Brier, and Steele (2007-2008) stressed that respect must be shown for the individual needs and concerns of the various subgroups of students and that faculty members, through the development of positive relationships with their students, are an integral part of programs designed to improve retention rates. In a study by Landrum (2002-2002), students and faculty

agreed that good teaching and providing faculty who were genuinely interested in students is the responsibility of the university. One of the FSAs described her favorite professor as one who “will ask me about (my sport), what are you going to do when you graduate, are you still going to play or are you coaching and all that. It was a nice relationship.”

### **Family Support**

Although only 50% of the participants in the study who completed the survey endorsed the support of family as being a positive influence for membership on a team, being supported by family was confirmed by all of the FSAs during the personal contact phase of the study. When discussing family support of the student as an athlete, statements such as “They know me the best so they know when my breaking point is and when I wanted to quit they really wanted me to think about it. Of course, they would support whatever decision I made but I think they knew if I quit, I’d be making a terrible mistake and I trust their judgment so it helps” and “I think it definitely helped because I guess I knew I always had their support. They were just like a constant force I could always count on being there. They comforted me and encouraged me throughout my four years as an athlete whenever I had a bad night.” Tinto (1993) divides the process of acclimation into college life into three stages. First, the student must physically separate from family, high school, and hometown and abandon the culture and values of the pre-college setting. Next, the student begins to transition from home but in this stage may feel in limbo between home and college. Finally, the student becomes fully integrated into college life and it is at this stage that institutions need to provide support for the student to encourage persistence. Although Tinto (2006-2007) places the responsibility of retention on the university rather than on the student, he recognized that the implementation of the programs designed to encourage students to stay are often faulty and short-lived. It appears then, that the support of

family experienced by the FSAs who completed their athletic careers may be the necessary factor that augments the support provided by the university. All of the FSAs strongly agreed with the statement, “My family is proud of my athletic accomplishments.” Perhaps, continuing the internalization of values from the pre-college environment through the psychological presence of parents in the life of the FSA provides added encouragement for persistence not provided by the university.

### **Limitations of the Study**

For the purposes of this study, the factors that positively influenced women at the D-III level to complete four seasons of athletic eligibility were explored. Additionally, the obstacles that these female student-athletes overcame as they endeavored to complete their athletic careers, their perceptions of their athletic experience and its effect on persistence, and the criteria they used to select their universities were investigated. Finally, the supports necessary to encourage the completion of the athletic career for female student-athletes at the D-III level were identified. The limitations of this study will be discussed in relationship to assessing the trustworthiness of the qualitative research design utilized.

When establishing trustworthiness in a qualitative research study, strategies that insure the achievement of truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality should be employed by the researcher. While there are numerous strategies to insure the completion of each of the four criteria, the use of the strategy of triangulation is imperative when establishing trustworthiness. In the present study, triangulation was achieved using the various data methods that included a student survey, a student interview and a student focus group. However, it is acknowledged that because more than one researcher did not analyze the original data, the criterion of truth value relative to the resulting theories developed may have been compromised to some degree due to

researcher bias. Also, prolonged engagement with each of the four female student-athletes was not possible due to the inaccessibility of these participants during the time that the research was conducted is considered to be another threat to the truth value of the findings.

### **Implications of the Study**

FSAAs face many challenges not encountered by non-athletes since they must balance the demands of academics, social activities, and athletic involvement. The present qualitative research determined that the support of teammates is overwhelmingly the most crucial factor for positively influencing FSAAs at the D-III level of intercollegiate sports to persist for four seasons. Second in importance to teammate support is the support of the FSA by the coach. While the participants cited the relationships with teammates more often than any other factor as influencing athletic career completion, the responsibility of insuring the development of team camaraderie is that of the coach. Through the use of team building strategies, a coach can cultivate a sense of collective efficacy that creates a sense of mutual dependency between each of the team members so that that they believe in their capabilities, work together, and are effective. Similarly, the coach has a duty to implement interventions that promote cohesion so that team members are willing to stick together as a unified group in pursuit of a common goal. The presence of a sense of collective efficacy and cohesion on a team strengthens the bonds between team members further bolstering the support of teammates as a positive factor for persistence. As with collective efficacy, the development of self-efficacy in players can be influenced by the actions of the coach. By acknowledging the specific skills of their players and placing them in challenging situations, a coach can change the belief system of their players to one that allows them to believe in their individual capabilities, improve their skills, and be successful. The development of self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and cohesion are intertwined,

necessary for encouraging positive relationships between teammates, and are dependent upon the efforts of the coach.

The connection between university and faculty involvement with students through the implementation of learning communities and increased retention rates, at least from the freshman to sophomore year, are confirmed in the literature (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000-2001; Johnson, 2000-2001). The participants in the present study refer to the positive feelings they experienced when their participation in athletics was acknowledged by the university president and faculty, either by attendance at competitions or through contact in the classroom. Universities would be wise to apply some of the retention increasing components of learning communities to student-athletes in the hope that completion of athletic eligibility will be realized. Persistence of FSAs might be improved if a mentoring relationship through contact with faculty outside of the class, perhaps at a sports competition, develops as suggested by Johnson (2000-2001) or if FSAs participate in social events with faculty as mentioned by Colton et al. (1999).

Being supported by family as a positive factor for persistence was recognized by all of the FSAs in the study. The support of their families experienced by the seniors throughout their careers may be a necessary factor that augments the support given by universities that Tinto (2006-2007) claimed is often ineffective. Given the positive influence of family support on career completion, coaches would be prudent to incorporate some strategies that encourage family involvement with athletics.

Although the support of teammates, coach, and family have been identified by the participants in the study as factors that positively affect athletic persistence, an intangible factor emerged that cannot be developed by the efforts of another person. All of the FSAs who participated in the present study cited a passion for playing that transcends the relationships with

teammates, actions of coaches, the involvement of university and faculty and the support of family. As one FSA so aptly stated, “The bottom line is that I am just so passionate about the sport that I’m never going to give it up ever.”

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

In general, more research is necessary in the area of athletic career completion for female student-athletes so that strategies that increase persistence can be identified. The present study established the factors that encourage the completion of eligibility that include support of teammates, coaches, and family and the involvement of the university and faculty with female student-athletes. However, specific interventions for each of these supports that will insure the presence of these important components have not been delineated. Given the influence that the coach has regarding the success of a team, it is imperative that further research be conducted to pinpoint the explicit approaches that can be utilized which will increase self-efficacy, collective efficacy and cohesion. Discovering the precise team building activities that improve relationships between teammates is another area to be investigated.

While the study by Wohlgemuth et al. (2006-2007), examined the retention rates of FSAs from the freshman to sophomore year, further study is necessary to research the retention rates of FSAs through the senior year. Although Melendez (2006) studied the adjustment to college life of FSAs during their freshman and sophomore years, research is needed to investigate the commitment to institution of juniors and seniors. Through the research of retention rates and institutional attachment for upperclass FSAs, strategies that increase persistence could be identified that when implemented would increase the completion of athletic eligibility.

The participants in this study included six soccer players, three softball players, one swimmer, one lacrosse player, and one field hockey player. Given that 50% of the participants

represented one sport, and 25% of the participants played another sport, an additional area of study might be the investigation of the relationship between the sport played and career completion. Factors related to length of season, the time of year during which the sport is played, whether or not the season spans two semesters, the academic major of the FSA, and the conditioning requirements of the sport might be incorporated into such a study.

Finally, replication of this research that would mitigate the threats to trustworthiness in this study that are acknowledged by the researcher is indicated. To increase truth value, a similar study that includes prolonged engagement with the participants and the use of more than one researcher to reduce the possibility of bias is suggested. Replication of the present study to expand on the factors that encourage FSAs to complete four seasons of eligibility and to determine the specific interventions needed to insure career completion is recommended.



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Appendix A  
Student Survey

## Student Survey

**Directions: Please respond to the following questions as they apply to you. The survey should take about 15 minutes to complete. Please put a question mark next to any statement you did not understand.**

1. Number of years played on the same intercollegiate team : \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sport: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Academic Major: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Housing: (Check One)     Commuter     Dormitory             Off campus
6. Are you currently completing a Bachelor's degree?     Yes             No
7. Current level in degree program:  4<sup>th</sup> year     5<sup>th</sup> year
8. Race/Ethnicity: (Check one):  
 African-American                       Native American                       Hispanic  
 Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)             Asian/Pacific Islander             Alaskan Native  
 Other (Please indicate) \_\_\_\_\_
9. How many hours does it take you to get from campus to home by car? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What are the main reasons that you chose to attend your college or university?  
(Check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> Academic reputation	<input type="checkbox"/> Athletic program reputation
<input type="checkbox"/> Course/degree offerings	<input type="checkbox"/> Coach's reputation
<input type="checkbox"/> Financial Support	<input type="checkbox"/> Team's reputation
<input type="checkbox"/> Location of college	<input type="checkbox"/> Friends also attending
<input type="checkbox"/> Contact by coach	<input type="checkbox"/> Coach's description of team concept
<input type="checkbox"/> Campus tour	<input type="checkbox"/> Perceived ability to play
<input type="checkbox"/> Overnight visit	<input type="checkbox"/> Attendance at games
<input type="checkbox"/> Meeting current team members	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:



11. What are the main factors that contributed to your ability to be a member of an intercollegiate sports team? (Check all that apply)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic support  | <input type="checkbox"/> Athletic ability                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial support   | <input type="checkbox"/> Role on team                                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family (Non-financial) support                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling of satisfaction regarding playing a sport |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support of teammates  | <input type="checkbox"/> Desire to be part of a team                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support of coaching staff   | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding of team concept                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support of peers not on team                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding of coach's expectations             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support of faculty/staff  | <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of belonging on team                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Housing situation   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quality of sports program   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Team cohesiveness (willingness for the group to remain together). |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collective efficacy (belief in the team's capabilities)           |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other:  |  |

12. What are the factors that made it difficult to be on an intercollegiate sports team? (Check all that apply)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of academic support   | <input type="checkbox"/> Athletic ability                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of financial support  | <input type="checkbox"/> Role on team                                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of family (Non-financial support)                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling of satisfaction regarding playing a sport |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of support by teammates                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Little desire to be part of a team                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of support by coaching staff                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagreed with team concept                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of support of peers not on team                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Did not meet coach's expectations                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of support of faculty/staff                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> No sense of belonging                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Housing situation  | <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-season practice                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quality of sport's program                                       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Job  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Team cohesiveness (willingness for the group to remain together) |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collective efficacy (belief in the team's capabilities)          |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____   |  |

Student Perceptions of Intercollegiate Sports Experience (SPISE)

**Directions: Please put a check in the box that best describes the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement. There are no correct or incorrect responses. Please put a question mark next to any statement you did not understand. Please respond to all statements.**

**Athletic Ability**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
43. I feel confident in my athletic ability.				
44. I am able to execute in a competitive situation.				
45. I play to my athletic potential.				
46. I am satisfied with the amount of playing time I received.				
47. I think my skills have improved throughout my college career.				
48. I think my athletic ability has been overlooked.				

**Team**

49. I feel a part of the team.				
50. I am a productive member of the team.				
51. I enjoy playing on this team because of my team-mates.				
52. I socialize with my team-mates outside of the athletic environment.				
53. I think my team shows that we are cohesive (willingness for the group to remain together).				
54. I think my team exemplifies collective efficacy (belief in the team's capabilities).				

### Coaching Staff

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
55. I understand what the coach expects of me as a player.				
56. I agree with the philosophy of the coaching staff.				
57. I feel supported by the coaching staff both as a team member and a student.				
58. I think the coach is able to match my athletic ability with my role on the team.				
59. I think the coaching staff contributes to the success of my team				
60. I think the coaching staff has helped me to improve my athletic ability.				

### University

61. The university is supportive of the academic needs of athletes.				
62. The university is supportive of the financial needs of athletes.				
63. The university is supportive of the special need of athletes with regard to scheduling of classes and attendance of classes.				
64. The university supports athletics as much as it supports academic endeavors.				
65. The university places the same amount of importance on women's teams as men's teams.				
66. The university supports the needs of the coaching staff.				

### Family

67. Having my family present at competitions is important.				
68. I compete better when my family is present at competitions.				
69. I would not play on a team if my family did not attend competitions.				
70. My family is proud of my athletic accomplishments.				
71. My family values my athletic ability as much as my academic ability.				
72. My family agrees with the philosophy of the coaching staff.				

## Appendix B

### Semi-structured Interview Questions

### Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Describe your university for me.
2. Describe your practice/competition sites.
3. Can you tell me what your typical day is like from dawn to dusk?
4. What did you do yesterday from the time you left your dorm/apartment until the time you returned home?
5. Describe the life of a female student-athlete.
6. If you could open your own university what would it be like?
7. What were some of the deciding factors that caused you to choose your university?
8. What was it about \_\_\_\_\_ that caused you to choose your university?
9. As you were looking for schools, what were some things that concerned you about attending college?
10. Was there anything about U/UNIVERSITY B that caused you some doubt about attending this university?
11. How did you manage to overcome this doubt?
12. Describe your college career, year by year.
13. Describe the best season of your career.
14. Give an example about a competition in which you were successful.
15. What did you like best about playing on a team for four seasons?
16. What was it about \_\_\_\_\_ that made it the best thing about playing?
17. Describe the worst season of your career.
18. Give an example about a competition in which you were not successful.
19. What did you dislike about playing on a team for four seasons?

20. What was it about \_\_\_\_\_ that made it difficult to play?
21. How did you overcome this difficulty?
22. Describe a typical female student-athlete.
23. Describe your athletic ability.
24. If you were a reporter writing article about you, how would you describe yourself?
25. Tell me about your role on the team.
26. What is involved with being a \_\_\_\_\_ on the team?
27. How did your athletic ability help you to complete eligibility?
28. How did your athletic ability make it difficult to complete eligibility?
29. Describe your teammates.
30. Can you tell me about one of your favorite teammates?
31. Can you tell me about one of your least favorite teammates?
32. Describe your relationship with your teammates.
33. How did your team experience a sense of collective efficacy and cohesiveness?
34. How did your relationship with your teammates encourage you?
35. Tell me about the best coach that you ever had.
36. Tell me about the worst coach you ever had.
37. Describe your coach
38. Describe your relationship with your current coach.
39. How did this relationship affect your ability to remain on the team?
40. If you were a coach, how would you lead the team?
41. Describe your university's involvement with women's sports.
42. Describe how student-athletes are viewed by the faculty at the university.

43. Describe a favorite professor.
44. Describe a least favorite professor.
45. Describe the role of the university in women's sports at your university.
46. How did the role of the university influence your decision to play?
47. If you were the President of the university, what would you change in regard to women's athletics?
48. Tell me about your family.
49. Describe your family's involvement in your athletic participation.
50. How did your family's involvement affect the completion of your college career?
51. Describe a time in your career when you thought about leaving the team.
52. Describe any obstacles or challenges that you encountered that may have caused you to think about leaving the team?
53. How did you overcome these obstacles and challenges?
54. What helped you the most to remain on the team even when you were faced with obstacles?

## Appendix C

### Scenarios



## Scenarios

### *Scenario One*

Jayne is a senior and the captain of her team. She is the leading scorer on a team that has never won more than half of their games in one season. Despite being a starter and playing significant minutes in each competition, she often feels that in the eyes of her coach she cannot do anything right. She has had several negative interactions with the head coach about compliance with team rules. She feels disconnected from the head coach. She is well liked by her teammates.

Jayne chose her university because it had her major, and she liked the campus, especially the new dormitory in which she would reside. She also anticipated being an integral part of her team. Because her home is far from the university, her parents were upset in her choice because they would not be able to see her that often or attend many of her athletic competitions.

Jayne sometimes has had difficulty prioritizing the time needed for academics, athletics, and social activities. As a sophomore, she met the GPA required by the university, but her grades were not up to her coach's standards. She was placed on academic probation by the coach and mandated to attend extra study hall sessions until her grades improved. As a junior, one of her professors dropped her final grade by one letter due to her decision to miss several classes to compete.

### *Scenario Two*

Tina is a junior who had started every competition until she sustained a season ending injury near the end of the year. Her injury required surgery and rehabilitation and she was unable to play half of her junior season. When she returned to competition, her coach did not immediately place her back into the starting lineup because a new player had been recruited and was playing well. Tina had to compete for her former starting spot on the team. Her team has made it to post season competition not only in the league but in the NCAA.

Tina is a minority student who chose the university because her sister is also a student who happens to be a member of another team. Both sisters live at home in the same city as the university, and their parents are able to attend all of their competitions. Because Tina has five younger siblings, she must maintain a part-time job to supplement what her parents are able to contribute for tuition.

Tina has attained the highest GPA on the team for the past two years. The coach recognized this accomplishment each year by honoring her with a trophy at the team banquet. Tina had tutored several of her teammates during the time that she was unable to play. While she is cordial to all members of her team, she does not socialize with them much outside of the structure of team activities.

Appendix D

Student-Athlete Consent Form

Student-Athlete Consent Form

*Department of Education and Educational Psychology  
181 White St.  
Danbury, Ct 06810*

November, 2008

Dear Student-Athlete,

I am a doctoral candidate enrolled in the Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership Program here at Western Connecticut State University. For many years I have been interested in ways to encourage female athletes. I am planning to research the factors that influence female student-athletes' completion of four seasons of athletic eligibility at Division III colleges and universities. You are invited to participate in this study because you meet the criteria of having completed or are in the process of completing your college athletic career.

Please be assured that I will hold any information that you provide in strict confidence. Your responses will be anonymous and will have no relation to any kind of performance assessment in the athletic program. At no time will any identifying information be reported along with your responses. All data will be reported in group form only. Please understand that your participation in this study is totally voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study and to remove any of the data that you have contributed at any time. This research study has been reviewed and approved by Western Connecticut State University's Institutional Review Board. It is hoped that the results of this study will help coaches and directors of athletics learn ways to encourage the college career completion of female student-athletes at the Division III level.

There will be three parts of this study; a survey, an interview, and participation in a focus group. If you are willing to participate in any or all of these parts, please sign the form on the bottom of this page. Interviews and focus groups will be audio-taped; all tapes will be erased at the conclusion of the study. A small stipend will be provided to everyone who participates in the study, and the amount will vary according to your level of participation. Place the **signed form** and the **completed survey** in the envelope provided and return it to me as soon as possible.

I thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [morgatto002@wcsu.edu](mailto:morgatto002@wcsu.edu)  
Sincerely,

Sara Festa Morgatto MS, NCSP  
Doctoral Candidate WCSU

I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of and understand the nature and purpose of this study and freely consent to participate in the **survey**\_\_\_\_, **an interview**\_\_\_ **a focus group**\_\_\_\_. (Check all aspects of the study in which you are willing to participate)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (Please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix E

Athletic Personnel Content Validity Letter

Athletic Personnel Content Validity Letter



43 Briarwood Dr.  
Seymour, CT 06483

January 19, 2009

Dear

As you know, I am researching the factors that influence female athletes' completion of four seasons of athletic eligibility at Division III colleges and universities. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at WCSU.

The reason for my letter is to ask for your assistance with this project. I devised a survey for completion by the student-athletes who participate in the study. Whenever a survey is created, content validity must be established to demonstrate that the test items measure the categories of each of the survey sections. Please review the enclosed student survey and evaluate it for the purpose of assisting me to establish content validity.

**Please return your completed evaluation AND the survey to me in the envelope provided.**

If you have any questions, please e-mail me at [morgatto002@wcsu.edu](mailto:morgatto002@wcsu.edu) or call me at 203-645-2665. Thank you for your anticipated assistance.

Sincerely,

Sara Morgatto MS, NCSP  
Doctoral Candidate, WCSU

## Appendix F

### Content Validation Questionnaire

Content Validation Questionnaire

**Content Validation Questionnaire**

When examining each of the sections in the “Student Perceptions of Intercollegiate Sports Experiences” survey, please assess whether or not each statement adequately represents the category under which it appears in terms of an athlete’s sports experience.

**When examining the statements contained in “Athletic Ability” section, do the statements represent this category?**

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**Do these statements relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?**

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**When examining the statements contained in the “Team” section, do the statements represent this category?**

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**Do these statements relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?**

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**When examining the statements contained in the “Coaching Staff” section, do the statements represent this category?**

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**Do these statements relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?**

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**When examining the statements contained in the “University” section, do the statements represent this category?**

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**Do these statements relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?**

Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_ Comments:



**When examining the statements contained in the “Family” section, do the statements represent this category?**

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**Do these statements relate to factors that might affect completion of eligibility?**

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Comments:

**PLEASE COMPLETE THIS SECTION!**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G

### Athletic Personnel Research Results Questionnaire Cover Letter

Athletic Personnel Research Results Questionnaire Cover Letter



*Department of Education and Educational Psychology  
181 White Street  
Danbury, CT 06810*

Dear Athletic Personnel,

As you may recall, I am a doctoral candidate at Western Connecticut State University and I am researching the factors that influence female athletes' completion of four seasons of athletic eligibility at Division III colleges and universities. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at WCSU.

Student-athletes participated in three parts of this study; a survey, an interview, and participation in a focus group. The data from this study have been analyzed and synthesized and factors that contribute to career completion have been identified. I have developed a questionnaire that highlights the results for three of my research questions. I am asking athletic personnel from Western Connecticut State University and Eastern Connecticut State University to complete the questionnaire for the purpose of discerning the plausibility of the theories developed from the study.

If you are willing to assist me with this important aspect of my research, **please complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it to me in the envelope provided by November 22, 2010**. A small stipend in the form of a gift card will be mailed to everyone who returns the questionnaire.

If you have any questions, please e-mail me at [smorgatto@sbcglobal.net](mailto:smorgatto@sbcglobal.net) or call me at 203-645-2665. Thank you for your anticipated assistance.

Sincerely,

Sara Morgatto MS, NCSP  
Doctoral Candidate, WCSU

## Appendix H

### Athletic Personnel Research Results Questionnaire

## Athletic Personnel Research Results Questionnaire

Name:

Sport:

University:

Total years as a coach:

Please indicate if you agree or disagree that each of the factors identified positively influence women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team to complete four seasons of eligibility:

Factor	Yes	No	Comments
Support of teammates			
Support of coach			
Support of family			
Athletic ability			
Presence of team cohesiveness (willingness for the group to remain together)			
Collective efficacy by team (belief in the team's capabilities)			
Passion for playing			
Quality of sports program			
Desire to be part of a team			
Role on team			

**PLEASE TURN TO NEXT PAGE**

Please indicate if you agree or disagree that each of the obstacles identified interfere with the completion of four seasons of eligibility for women competing on a D-III intercollegiate sports team:

Obstacle	Yes	No	Comments
Balancing academics, athletics, job, and social life			
Conflicts with teammates			
Conflicts with coach			
Lack of a fan base and publicity for team			
Player attrition			
Pre-season practice			
Lack of financial support			
Lack of team cohesiveness			

Please indicate if you agree or disagree that each of the support services identified are necessary to ensure that female student-athletes will complete four seasons of athletic eligibility:

Support	Yes	No	Comments
Team building by coach			
Increase university involvement with athletics			
Encourage faculty involvement with athletics			
Encourage family involvement with athletics			

**THANK YOU!**

