University of Northern Colorado

Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC

Dissertations   Student Research

12-2019

Liminal Space in Higher Education: Lived Experiences in the Space Between At-Risk Academics and Big-Time Athletics in Division I Power Five

Lainey J. Brottem

Follow this and additional works at: https://digscholarship.unco.edu/dissertations

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

LIMINAL SPACE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LIVED EXPERIENCES
IN THE SPACE BETWEEN AT-RISK ACADEMICS AND
BIG-TIME ATHLETICS IN DIVISION I POWER FIVE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Lainey J. Brottem

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development: Higher
Education and P-12 Education
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

December 2019

This dissertation by: Lainey J. Brottem

Entitled: *Liminal Space in Higher Education: Lived Experiences in the Space Between At-Risk Academics and Big-Time Athletics in Division I Power Five*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in the Department of Leadership, Policy and Development: Higher Education and P – 12 Education, Program of Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership.

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

_____

Matthew Birnbaum, Ph.D., Research Advisor

_____

Tobias Guzman, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____

Jeraldine Kraver, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____

Eugene Sheehan, Ph.D., Faculty Representative

Date of Dissertation Defense: _____ November 7, 2019

Accepted by the Graduate School

_____

Cindy Wesley, Ph.D.
Interim Associate Provost and Dean
Graduate School and International Admissions

ABSTRACT

Brottem, Lainey J. (2019) *Liminal Space in Higher Education: Lived Experiences in the Space Between At-Risk Academics and Big-Time Athletics in Division I Power Five.* Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2019.

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretivist phenomenological study was to understand and provide a transferable, informed, and learned perspective of the daily experience of working in the liminal space between two powerful, ostensibly cooperative but often competing interests: major university undergraduate academics and big-time Division I athletics. Nine learning specialists from Division I Power Five institutions participated in phenomenological interviews. Findings indicated that the phenomenon constituted a liminal space between the opposing forces of academics and athletics, with student-athletes, faculty, colleagues, and coaches having influence on the liminality. Unit directors diminished the sense of liminality while faculty contributed very little to it. Advisors and coaches contributed most significantly to the negative liminal experience of the phenomenon, characterized by senses of dissolution, dislocation, reversal and uncertainty consistent and deleterious liminal effect. Participants indicated that the most powerful motivating force in the job was love for the students. Implications of this study for the profession include an understanding of forces affecting learning specialists and student-athletes and recognition of one reason for the high turnover rate among learning specialists. This study will assist in recognizing and understanding liminality, and may afford learning specialists the means to reduce its effects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my committee members: Eugene Sheehan, Tobias Guzman, and Jeri Kraver (in order of arrival). Each of you was willing to hop on board this train that had already left the station and then ride on it till the end. I cannot express my gratitude enough. I could never have imagined the strange, Dr. Who-like twists and turns this dissertation leg of the journey would take, and you all came along. With smiles, even. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To Matt Birnbaum, my chair. I am calling the Vatican and nominating you for sainthood. At an utterly crazy time for you when you were putting out fires and cleaning up a huge mess, you took over my chairship with nowhere near enough time to do so, you offered guidance, you encouraged me to write on the topic I wanted to, you read drafts on a moment's notice and over weekends (many, many times), you gave amazing constructive advice, you went to bat for me, you advised me, and you genuinely cared at the most crucial moment. You went way above and beyond what anyone could have expected you to in order to help me bring this train into the station. If I told the story, no one would believe it. Thank you, thank you, thank you, a million times, thank you. Did I mention I'm grateful? Thank you!

To Flo: wherever you are and whatever you're up to, I hope you're happy.

To Linda B: you were an amazingly understanding help in the midst of massive upheaval. Thanks.

To Cindy W, Carol S, and Laura H: thank you for the good wishes as the last month of this thing got a bit crowded with unexpected and urgent matters. It meant a lot.

To my dear friends Todd, Chuck, Julie, Jon, Jeff, Helen, Kurt, Karn, Dan, Lynn, Marcia, Bill, Anne, Josh, and Tom K: after all these years I just had to put you all in here for posterity. Thanks for being my friends.

To Kyle Quagliana, Chris Cords, and Kyle Nelson: thanks for taking a minute to answer the questions about eligibility and NCAA and stuff like that.

To Jimmy H: for starting me in this crazy athletics business. I appreciate you and your friendship.

To Mom, Dad, and Tracy: you know I'm anti-mush, so you'll understand when I just say this – thanks for being my family. I'm very, very glad this was the family I got to be a part of. I love you.

To Kevin and Brad: you two are the best thing that ever happened to me in my whole life. I am prouder of you than anything I have ever accomplished myself.

And to JT:

I don't have enough words for this one, so I'll just say this: you are the best. So glad I moved from Colorado to find you. Thanks for asking me to meet you at Whitey's, and thanks for every single day since then. You are wonderful. [insert smiling emoji here]

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Learning specialists are academic support professionals practicing in a space

between two powerful competing interests: university academics and intercollegiate

athletics. Learning specialists guide academically at-risk student-athletes to academic

success for the purpose of ensuring that the student-athletes maintain athletic eligibility.

The student-athletes least prepared academically are often those whose teams need them

the most. The questions for these professionals involve wondering if they do this for

students' graduation and degrees, or because it keeps student-athletes athletically eligible

and helps the athletic department succeed? Which priority comes first? Jobs and

professional careers are made and lost by getting this answer wrong.

Contemporary United States higher education is inextricably entwined with

college athletics (Gurney, Lopiano, & Zimbalist, 2017; Knight Foundation, 2001; Knight

Foundation, 2010). For many members of the public, the name of any major university

conjures images of sport, especially for the Power Five institutions, which occupy the top

five most powerful conferences and who appear most frequently on TVs across the

nation. However, some exceptional athletes who are crucial to their team's and athletic

department's success are academically at-risk and struggle the most in the classroom

(Harper, 2018). Student-athletes have dual identities – student and athlete – yet their

athlete identity often gets elevated to the point of risking identity foreclosure of non-

athletic identities (closing off and suppressing one or more pieces of the identity)

(Beamon, 2012; Beamon, 2010; Bimper, 2014; Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011). Restrictions intended to limit the time spent on sport (maximum of 20 hours per week) routinely get violated (Covell & Barr, 2010). For those professionals hired to specialize in the academic success of at-risk student-athletes, each of these factors could potentially play a role in their professional success and experience of their job environment.

Over the past ten years, student-athlete academic success units have increasingly taken to hiring learning specialists to work with academically at-risk student-athletes (Wolverton, 2016). Learning specialists typically work intensively with a small caseload of academically at-risk student-athletes (Wolverton, 2016), in academic success centers frequently housed within the athletic facilities, which also house coaches and athletics-dedicated personnel (Bernhard & Bell, 2015). Little research has been done regarding the individuals who work in these professional roles, yet there are 170,000 student-athletes competing in Division I athletics (Division I, 2018), and learning specialists are responsible for guiding the most at-risk of them to academic success while they navigate the culture and demands of athletics.

In understanding the learning specialist's experiences between academics and athletics, the concept most useful to this study is liminality. According to Andrews and Roberts (2015), liminality refers to the "in-between states" in a ritual or rite of passage through which a person or group moves from one "social stage to another" (p. 131). It could be usefully characterized as the area between events or places or situations in which a person is transitioning from one thing to another, e.g. engagement before marriage, stops on the road when a person has left one home but has not gotten to the

next, the time after finishing a degree before graduating (Andrews & Roberts, 2015). While this original concept of liminality describes the abstract passage one makes between two definitive things (e.g. between single and married), further refinement of the idea of liminality came to include those spaces in which a person or group is in flux, between boundaries, neither one nor the other, but at the same time both, "at once spaces of mobility and immobility, transition and stasis" (Andrews & Roberts, 2015, p. 131). Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, and Mao (2011) describe liminal spaces in time and space as places which individuals can choose to create and cross a threshold to enter, and they stress the existence of dual competing demands within a liminal situation. Beech (2011) characterizes liminality's use in organizational structures as "commonly taken to mean a position of ambiguity and uncertainty: being betwixt and between" (p. 287).

My study treats the phenomenon of the learning specialist position as occurring within a liminal space, in which the learning specialist is "betwixt and between" (Beech, 2011, p. 287; Turner, 1967, p. 81) academics and athletics. Both academics and athletics are present and given top priority simultaneously, demanding equal time yet constantly encroaching on each other. The learning specialist resides permanently in this ambiguous space.

This qualitative study examined the liminal phenomenon of working within college athletics as an academic guide to at-risk athletes for whom academic failure means athletic failure, which can also mean team and department failure. Using an interpretivist lens, the study sought to understand this phenomenon's essence by exploring the lived daily experiences of learning specialists straddling the divide between

the virtuously advertised importance of academics and the pressurized reality of athletics in National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Power Five athletic departments.

Background of Academics in Collegiate Athletics

The Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics warned that the attention and monetary expenditures devoted to athletics could create a "permanent and untenable competition between academics and athletics" (Knight Foundation, 2010). This came on the heels of a similar damning report from 2001 (Knight Foundation, 2001). The 2001 Commission warned that student-athletes "are often admitted to institutions where they do not have a reasonable chance to graduate. … Their ambiguous academic credentials lead to chronic classroom failures or chronic cover-ups of their academic deficiencies" (Knight Foundation, 2001, p. 16).

Despite the warnings from the Knight Foundation, and frequent calls for reform (Comeaux, 2015), intercollegiate athletics continues to dominate the airwaves, and endure shockingly blatant academic scandals (note the national media attention to the recent paper class academic scandal at North Carolina (New, 2016), and the less nationally noticed, but nevertheless severely sanctioned basketball academic scandal at Northern Colorado). Between 2006 and 2016, the NCAA handed down punitive measures for academic fraud to a minimum of 15 NCAA Division I institutions; in most cases, the fraud was committed by members of the institution's athletics department, and in the case of the 18-year long paper class scandal at North Carolina, some of the institutional employees were academic advisors working in the academic success unit (New, 2016). At Weber State, a math instructor completed assignments and tests in an online course for five football players, and an assistant director of student-athlete services

at Georgia Southern completed extra credit assignments for football student-athletes (New, 2016). One former academic advisor and college coach, seeking to find his way into big-time college coaching, orchestrated and perpetuated a cheating program for hundreds of college athletes, mostly in revenue sports, for whom he took tests and completed academic work which kept them eligible to play, and many of these student-athletes were sent to him by their college coaches (Wolverton, 2016). These are just a few examples of the environment in which academics and athletics coexist.

National Collegiate Athletic Conference [NCAA] standards are set in order that student-athletes will be successful academically at the same rate as non-athlete students, in theory, and academic progress rate standards have been created and are applied to force athletics departments to ensure the academic side of the student-athlete is upheld (NCAA, 2018). However, coaches still want, and athletics department routinely allow, the recruitment of student-athletes who are well below admissions standards of the universities for whom they will be playing, and are academically at-risk entering college (Browning, 2015). While the majority of student-athletes do graduate successfully, it is often the most visible student-athletes, to whom the most attention is paid and on whom the team and department's success is most dependent, who are the most likely to have been recruited below academic standards and given special admission (Browning, 2015). This whole scenario sets up two competing needs very much at odds with each other. Particularly in revenue sports, athletes are recruited and strongly validated for their athleticism but are required, under pressure, to succeed academically (Comeaux, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

To date, little scholarly research has considered this particular subset of student affairs academic professionals. Given the challenges faced by student-athletes who are often unprepared for the academic challenges of college, and the significant pressure on academic success professionals to provide guidance to these high-risk student-athletes, this research area is one that should not be overlooked. Comprehension of the lived experiences of learning specialists currently working within the world of college athletics may result in a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by learning specialists and of effective tools and interventions which may benefit the profession and the students with whom they work.

Learning specialists are tasked with navigation of the challenges faced by academically at-risk student-athletes while bearing the responsibility to teach these students how to be college students when they have already gotten to college and are facing extreme demands on time and energy (Bernhard & Bell, 2015). The responsibilities of the learning specialist profession largely take place in an environment balanced between two frequently competing interests (Bernhard & Bell, 2015), in which traditional remediation measures cannot be utilized without losing eligibility, since National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA] rules do not allow a student-athlete to use remedial coursework as a part of their mandated minimum number of credit hours to remain eligible, according to NCAA standard 14.4.3.5.4 (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2018).

Scholarly research and interpretation of learning specialists' lived experiences may help other professionals learn the field and avoid reinventing the profession on a

daily basis. The learning specialist field suffers from a lack of transferable knowledge about the experiences of working between academics and athletics interests in Division I athletics. This study will hopefully form the beginning of an effort to correct that fact and create a body of research regarding this segment of the student affairs profession.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand and provide a transferable, informed, and learned perspective of the daily phenomenon of working in the space between two powerful, ostensibly cooperative but often competing interests: major university undergraduate academics and big-time Division I athletics. Despite the identified need and subsequent increase of learning specialist hires over the past decade (Wolverton, 2016), research on the learning specialist profession has not been done. Learning specialists work with an at-risk population of student-athletes who are themselves subject to the opposing objectives of athletics and academics, navigating daily experiences within a phenomenon that creates stringent demands and stressful pressures from two directions. In providing an understanding of the phenomenon within which this student services profession, and their students, reside, this study offers the potential for examining practices and developing strategies that assist in serving this student population. This study explored, with an interpretivist lens and a phenomenological methodology, learning specialists' experiences of their daily work with academically at-risk student-athletes within the collegiate athletics environment, of the pressures and demands of being in a profession frequently at odds with itself, and of the intersection between academics and athletics interests.

Significance of the Study

This study's significance lies in informing approaches to effectively working in academic support in the athletics environment and in offering perspectives on what to expect as a member of the profession. As student affairs professionals working within a singular set of professional circumstances, learning specialists can provide an informed, educated, and experienced lens through which scholars may interpret and understand this phenomenon of working with academically at-risk collegiate student-athletes. The study offers insights into the common challenges faced by learning specialists and will inform the creation of tools and strategies based on the experiential accounts given by the participants and the interpretation of the profession by the researcher. Interpreting the experiences of nine learning specialists provided a look at the larger phenomenon of the profession, while allowing an understanding of the environment and context of the profession formed from the participants' recounting of their lived experiences. This interpretive study will provide a rich and deep understanding of ways in which other professionals in the field may effectively work within the common particulars of this profession. The accounts and interpretations included in this study will allow for learning specialist professionals to compare their own experiences with the experiential accounts of other professionals and allow for enhancement of existing learning specialist programs.

While accusations of exploitation and calls for reform on an industry-wide scale have been made for several decades (Byers, 1995; Comeaux, 2015; Knight Foundation, 2001; Knight Foundation, 2010), any scholarly effort to understand how those calls are being addressed at the practitioner level has been almost nonexistent. Interpreting day-to-

day experiences as they happened may inform the ways that learning specialists approach the job, handle the pressure, and decide on the methods they use to contribute to student-athlete academic success. This glimpse into the learning specialist professional's world will enhance understanding of the profession and environment in which they work, which may be beneficial to improvement efforts in the profession.

Research Design Overview

I used an interpretivist paradigm, which I defined by its recognition of the existence of singular, foundational things which can be found in the world, while at the same time acknowledging the multiplicitous meanings brought to singular things through interpretation by individuals. An interpretivist study searches for understanding of a text, event, or phenomenon through exploration of the individual interpretations brought by those studying, examining, or experiencing the text, event, or phenomenon under question. Phenomenological methodology was an ideal choice because the foundational tenet of phenomenology is to understand the essence of a phenomenon by exploring how it is experienced by individuals embedded in it as a part of daily life. This study was designed to develop a cache of informative, transferable perspectives from learning specialists experiencing the liminal space between academics and athletics on a daily, professional basis. The study's design structure relied on experiential accounts, offering multiple experiences of the singular phenomenon. Open-ended interviews of nine learning specialists recounting the essence of their experiences of the phenomenon formed the methods of the study's design. Data analysis included, first, identification and understanding of cultural, social, and philosophical influences impacting the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon and on the researcher's interest in the studied

phenomenon. Second, data analysis used three levels of reading – wholistic [sic], selective, and detailed, in that order (Van Manen, 2014) – to recover the foundational structures of the phenomenon's meaning. Thematic analysis depended on creative insight, detection, and revelation to understand and interpret participants' lived experiences. The purpose of the design was to create a multi-faceted interpretation of the lived experiences of learning specialists, creating a transferable tool usable by other learning specialist professionals to inform their own work within the profession.

Research Questions

Research questions provide a structural guide for a study, and create a framework ensuring that the researcher maintains a focus on the topic as envisioned in the study design. Following are the research questions designed for use in this study:

> Q1   How do learning specialists experience the daily interactions, happenings, and environment of academic success work with academically at-risk student-athletes in Division I college athletics?

This research question was constructed to allow for investigation into the essence of the lived experience itself rather than the opinions and interpretations of the participants. This question required interview questions regarding descriptions of the day-to-day job, details of environment and typical human interactions, and recounting of specific experiences with academically at-risk student-athletes, followed by discussion of emotional and psychological reactions at the time of the happenstance. Answering this research question involved the request for stories and recounting of daily happenings and descriptions of emotional and psychological reactions at the time they happened, to allow for the phenomenological requirement of interpretation by the researcher rather than the participant.

Q2   What are the contexts and situations that have contributed to the learning specialist's experiences in working within the phenomenon created by the daily overlap of college academics and college athletics?

This question was designed to expose the nature of the phenomenon, revealing the various occurrences contributing to the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon. This question will also provide the background for the necessary thick, rich description required for successful understanding and interpretation of the essence of the phenomenon. Answering this research question required revealing the nature of the academic and athletic environments. It asked for accounts and stories of experiences which exemplified this facet of the phenomenon.

Q3   What is it like to work in the atmosphere and environment of NCAA Division I athletics as a learning specialist professional?

This question speaks to the very essence of the phenomenological methodology: discover the experiences as they were lived at the time of their inception. The question also functions to engender the researcher's interpretation of the experiential accounts given by the participants, by asking the researcher to understand the experience as it was lived. This question gets at the emotional and psychological crux of the day-to-day lived experience within the intersection of academics and athletics, and the collected data will stem from questions regarding the impressions and perspectives the participant experiences daily.

The important note for all of the data collected was to encourage only accounts which re-created the moment as it happened, and the emotional reactions as they happened, not interpretations by the participants. Interpretation, in a phenomenological study, is strictly the responsibility of the researcher, not the participant. Therefore, any

interpretation done by a participant in the course of the interview, unless specifically asked for, was discounted from the data.

Researcher Perspective

A crucial part of phenomenological data analysis, as noted above, is for the researcher to recognize and acknowledge the philosophical stances, prior experiences, and biases which have led to the interest in the study, and which may potentially influence the interpretation of the data. While it is not possible nor desirable to attempt to render them nonexistent, it is necessary to acknowledge them and make their recognition, and subsequent control, a conscious decision and effort.

For seven of the years I was enrolled in this doctoral program, I was a learning specialist in Division I college athletics. At times, my own academic success suffered because of the energy and attention required to work in the student-athlete academic success profession. I began to find myself intrigued by the phenomenon of working in an area with academic eligibility as the goal and excellence in athletics as the driver. I found myself comparing my experiences with those of other people in the profession, going out of my way at conferences to find out if their experiences were anything like mine. What I found was that the context of our experiences were remarkably similar. Frequently, the only differences would be the monikers of high-profile coaches, or the names of institutions or mascots, or the prevailing weather (the learning specialists from Florida never talked about watching football games while snow was falling). Otherwise, the circumstances in which we plied our trades was eerily similar. What I was hearing about was a phenomenon that created a need to go in two directions at once.

I began to wonder how other learning specialists approached their jobs, whether these similar circumstances led to similar thoughts and feelings about the job, and why the burnout rate was so high. I wondered how they served students while in these circumstances, if they were able to do it well, and why they continued. I worked in the student athlete academic success profession for eight years before moving to the more purely academic side of the higher education world. If anything, moving on made me more interested in finding out how others experienced this professional phenomenon.

Researching athletics learning specialists led me to discovering little to nothing in the literature. The profession is relatively new (Wolverton, 2016), and I came to realize that new learning specialists, to find out how to do their jobs and serve their students, were having to do what I had done: hunt and peck for information during the limited opportunities afforded to meet with others in the profession. That knowledge, combined with my interest in understanding how other learning specialists lived and worked and served students in what appeared to be an almost identical professional environment, led me to this dissertation topic.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While little research and few scholarly publications have been devoted specifically to learning specialists or the athletics academic success environment, we can come to some understanding of the phenomenon by examining the literature on student-athletes, faculty/academic attitudes toward athletics/athletes, and athletics culture and environment. This chapter will contain an introduction addressing, in overview, those NCAA academic standards for student-athletes which affect learning specialists' work. It will also provide an overview of these three factors – student-athletes, faculty/academic attitudes, and athletics culture – since their intersection forms the space within which learning specialists experience their profession daily. The literature review in this chapter will offer studies which will serve as a framework for understanding the environment and circumstances within which the studied phenomenon takes place.

Introduction and Overview

The NCAA sets academic standards for student-athletes' continuing competition eligibility. The following academic standards are paraphrased from the National Collegiate Athletic Association NCAA Division I Manual, Article 14: Academic Eligibility. Those standards with the most potential impact on learning specialists, in working with academically at-risk student-athletes, are represented here.

- Student-athletes must maintain a 1.98 cumulative grade point average after year 1, 1.9 after year 2, and 2.0 years 3-5.

- Undergraduate student-athletes must be enrolled in a minimum of 12 credit hours to be eligible. The 12-credit hour rule may be waived if the NCAA is presented with verifiable proof that the student-athlete has an "education-impacting disability" and needs reduced-credit accommodation.

While this rule seems reasonable, the waivers are difficult to get. I have tried it with two at-risk students with verified severe learning disabilities and the student was denied both times. Colleagues across the country have told me the same thing.

- Remedial work will only be counted toward full-time status if the institution requires it for a major or it is given the same academic value as other coursework.

This particular rule creates a difficulty for student-athletes who are underprepared for collegiate level coursework. For example, the student who needs a remedial reading class would have to take the class, and pay for it, over and above the credits required to be eligible to play, often at another institution if the principal institution does not offer remedial work (K. Quagliana, Personal communication, October 28, 2018).

Occasionally, an institution will admit a student-athlete who is a non-qualifier by NCAA standards, meaning they do not meet the minimum academic standards to be allowed to receive athletic financial aid, compete, practice, or in any other way participate in team activities, but their athletic talent is such that the institution is willing to take the risk at the coach's request and bring that student in to work on academics for one year and become eligible to play. Given that NCAA academic admissions requirements are frequently below the standards of the institutions being applied to, the NCAA (2018) has the following crucial and distinct clause in its bylaws, which allows

institutions to admit student-athletes who qualify below admission requirements, commonly referred to as a "special" or "window" admit.

> 14.1.1.1 Special Admission. A student-athlete may be admitted under a special exception to the institution's normal entrance requirements if the discretionary authority of the president or chancellor (or designated admissions officer or committee) to grant such exceptions is set forth in an official document published by the university (e.g., official catalog) that describes the institution's admissions requirements. (Revised: 3/8/06). (p. 161)

This special admission rule has allowed coaches to recruit academically unqualified student-athletes who do not meet even the very low NCAA standards required for admission (Espenshade, Chung, & Walling, 2004; Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004). I would argue that this clause and the resultant special-admission recruitment of student-athletes is, in large part, the cause for the abundance of academically at-risk student-athletes (Wolverton, 2016) in the Division I athletics department ranks today.

Background and Governance of
United States College Athletics

Governing most of college sports in the United States is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), with three Divisions, of which Division I, Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), is the most visible and houses institutions with the biggest budgets (What is the NCAA?, 2018). Of the FBS schools, the institutions in the Power Five, consisting of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten, the Pacific 10 (Pac 10), the Big 12, and the Southeastern Conference (SEC), are the most visible, the most influential, and garner (and spend) the most money (Harper, 2018). These are the institutions I chose to focus on for this study.

In 1991, the NCAA adopted Standard 16.3.1 (revised most recently in 2014), which mandates that all Division I institutions "make general and academic counseling and tutoring services available to all student-athletes," supplied by either athletics or the general population's academic support services (NCAA, 2018, p. 238). In 2003, the NCAA implemented academic reform in the form of the Academic Progress Rate, requiring institutions competing in Division I to report the academic results for their athletics departments, which would result in rewards for superior academic performance and penalties for substandard academics (Division I Academic Progress Rate [APR], 2018). This 1991 standard and the 2003 program have resulted in the widespread implementation of student-athlete academic success units across Division I athletics programs. I have worked in two of these programs and have had the opportunity to interact with dozens of professionals who also work in these programs. While most of these programs started with academic advising, in recent years learning specialists have increasingly become a priority hire for academic success units, and work with a small percentage of the total student-athlete population: those who are athletically crucial but academically at risk of dropping below good academic standing and becoming ineligible to compete (Wolverton, 2016).

Student-Athlete Academic Performance

NCAA academic progress rate standards have been created to force athletics departments to ensure the academic side of the student-athlete is upheld (NCAA, 2018, p. 223). However, coaches still want, and athletics department routinely allow, the recruitment of student-athletes who are well below admissions standards of the universities for whom they will be playing, and are academically at-risk entering college,

and who are also often the most visible athlete who garner the most public attention (Browning, 2015). This scenario sets up two opposing and competing needs. Athletes are recruited and validated for their athleticism but required, under pressure, to succeed academically (Comeaux, 2015). This results in an "'eligibility game' in which advisers and advisors navigate NCAA policy and the athlete's academic proficiency to help maintain his or her progress toward a degree" (Browning, 2015, p. 110).

Other factors influence the environment in which learning specialists assist student-athletes. In addition to graduation rates, multiple studies demonstrate that athletic identity has been reinforced to the extent that it may foreclose the academic identity (Beamon, 2012; Beron & Piquero, 2016; Bimper, 2014; Clopton, 2011; Cooper, Davis, & Dougherty, 2017; Harrison et al., 2011; Harrison, C., Tranyowicz, L., Bukstein, S., McPherson-Botts, G., & Lawrence, S., 2014; Reynolds, L., Fisher, D., & Kenyatta Cavil, K., 2012), often resulting in lowered academic performance (Beamon, 2012; Beron & Piquero, 2016; Bimper, 2014; Clopton, 2011; Cooper et al., 2017; Fuller, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2017; Harrison et al., 2011; Harrison et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2012; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). In research on campus climate and campus perception of student-athletes, studies show evidence that negativity toward student-athletes is pervasive, from faculty and non-athlete students alike (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015; Comeaux, 2010; Comeaux, 2011; Comeaux & Snyder, 2016; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). Each of these factors forms a part of the phenomenon of working with academics while in athletics.

Statistics clearly show that student-athletes lag behind other undergraduates in graduation rates (Harper, 2018). Harper (2018) presented a bleak picture when

disaggregating graduation data in the Power Five (Baker & Hawkins, 2016; Harper, 2018). Revenue-sport athletes, typically football and men's basketball, also perform academically lower than any other student-athletes (Johnson, Wessel, & Pierce, 2013), and graduate at lower rates (Harper, 2018).

In an attempt to combat this issue, institutions across the country have formed student-athlete academic success centers, and hired learning specialists to work with the most academically at-risk of the student-athletes, an increase of 70% in just five years, to help provide "academic accommodations for student[-athlete]s with special needs" (Wolverton, 2016). The general parameters are these: "the responsibilities of learning specialists vary from campus to campus, but their jobs typically involve working one-on-one with a dozen or so athletes to improve their reading, comprehension, and test-taking skills and to help them stay on top of assignments" (Wolverton, 2016). Clearly, academic success centers are moving toward more intensive work in guiding at-risk student-athletes to better academic performance.

Faculty Attitudes Toward Athletics/Athletes

As the most significant contributors to academic content, faculty has a critical impact on the academic side of the student-athlete experience. While the design of courses will certainly impact a student's academic work, a faculty member's attitude - explicit or implicit - toward student-athletes and/or athletics may have a less tangible but no less impactful effect as well, and will have a commensurate effect on learning specialists' daily lived experience of working with academically at-risk student-athletes.

While some faculty members are supportive of athletics, higher education faculty at institutions with big-time Division I athletics programs have been found to be

generally critical of athletics' place in institutions of higher education, questioning the

ethical standards in athletics, and expressing resentment and dissatisfaction with

athletics' direction and adverse impact on a school's academic reputation (Lawrence, Ott,

& Hendricks, 2009). Faculty also question athletics' lack of adherence to the academic

mission and its potential detraction from the academic ideal and reputation of an

institution (Lawrence, Ott, & Hendricks, 2009; Weight & Huml, 2016). Faculty members

with under five years on a campus are more likely to view athletics positively, as are

those who have more frequent and specific exposure to athletics (Lawrence, Ott, &

Hendricks, et al., 2009). Thelin (2008) points out the disconnect between faculty and

athletics: many faculty members express apathy and disregard for matters pertaining to

athletics. Academics and athletics, according to Thelin (2008), are often separately

functioning areas with vastly different missions, and some faculty Senates have taken the

position that faculty should have nothing to do with athletic matters because they do not

pertain to academics. Because athletics is granted privileges not given to academic

departments, faculty resentment, ennui, and disinterest is common (Thelin, 2008).

Breaking down faculty responses from the Knight Commission survey, Lawrence

(2008) concurs that most faculty believe intercollegiate athletics operate under a structure

separate and different from the structure governing academics. Some faculty perceive

athletics as an auxiliary operation under administrative governance, not faculty

governance (Lawrence, 2008). Those faculty members who believe faculty are not

consulted in governance also believe that athletics are afforded anything they request and

do not have to adhere to the transparency required of other parts of campus (Lawrence,

2008). Faculty members perceiving a strong athletics fan base outside the university

tended to believe there was corruption and to suspect the integrity of their athletic departments, because of the heightened pressure to win (Lawrence, 2008).

However, only 21% of faculty surveyed expressed an opinion that athletes in general were underprepared (Lawrence, 2008). Nearly 30% did, however, express dissatisfaction with the academic preparation, effort, and performance of revenue sport athletes (football and basketball), and fully half did not believe that universities should compromise on academic standards in order to admit students who would have an impact in football and basketball (Lawrence, 2008). Faculty at institutions with more selective admissions standards were more likely to say that a compromise in admissions standards was needed, but faculty at less selective institutions were more against the practice (Lawrence, 2008). Despite the statistics indicating that student-athletes graduate at lower rates than the general student population, the acceptance rate for student-athletes, even at highly selective institutions, was 49.1% while all other students were accepted at a rate of 23.4% (Espenshade et al., 2004). From 1976 to 1999, the admissions advantage for athletes more than doubled, from 23% to 48% (Espenshade et al., 2004).

Because of unethical practices in college athletics, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) proposed that faculty should have authority over student-athletes and have governance over athletics and have direct control over athlete admissions (Lawrence, Ott, & Hendricks, 2009). The Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA) report concurred with the AAUP, recommending that faculty have involvement in athletics in the areas of "academics, student welfare, finances and scale, commercialization, and governance" (Lawrence, Ott, & Hendricks, 2009, p. 75).

Having athletics matters out of the hands of faculty creates a strain in the view faculty take of athletics. Faculty members expressed dissatisfaction with athletics having separate advising, and believe different academic standards are applied (Lawrence, Ott, & Hendricks, 2009). Faculty also have concerns regarding the significant amount of time athletes spend on sport, creating a burden above and beyond that experienced by non-athletes (Lawrence, Ott, & Hendricks, 2009). Thus, it appears that the faculty issues with athletics does not lie with individual athletes (Lawrence, Ott, & Hendricks, 2009), but rather with the system of athletics.

Athletics Environment in Division I

Despite the warnings from the Knight Commission (Evans et al., 2012; Knight Foundation, 2010), college athletics continues to garner huge attention, revenue, and pressure to win, and endure scandals from athletics department members determined to get the upper hand in the race for championships (Burton & Peachey, 2014; Gurney et al., 2017). Although significant academic reforms were implemented by the NCAA in 2003, these reforms have at times been received uncharitably by coaches who complain that the reforms negatively impact their ability to recruit desirable athletes for their teams (Evans et al., 2012). Some college presidents and chancellors also feel that the reforms implemented by the NCAA create a detrimental effect for student-athletes by robbing them of resources from the people they interact with the most, namely coaches (Evans et al., 2012). Burton and Peachey (2014) make the point that the atmosphere and culture in any athletic department will be dependent on its leadership and the ethical practices employed by that leadership, but, nevertheless, enough similarities exist across the profession to make note of their presence as potential influences on the environment.

Factors Affecting Student-Athlete Academic Success

As a part of the athletics/academic environment, studies examining student-athletes and at-risk status were appropriate to inform the research for my study. Campus climate, non-athletics faculty and staff, and general attitudes regarding athletics and athletes also influence the phenomenon; therefore, studies reflecting campus climate and attitudes toward athletes and athletics are included here as well. These studies shed light on the feelings and perceptions student-athletes may bring to the space and assist in understanding whether student-athletes tended to have positive or negative experiences on campus. How that data was divided up among student-athlete groups (gender, race, sport-type groups) provided potential context for the experiential phenomenon. A second purpose for inclusion of general campus attitudes and perceptions of athletics is that academic success personnel in athletics form the bridge between faculty/staff and the demands of athletics participation, simultaneously navigating the complexities of an institution's academic curriculum and faculty and the demands of athletics schedules, coaches, and NCAA standards.

The final section in this chapter addresses the limited number of recent studies done on academic support units for student-athletes. They cover tutoring programs, tools used for academic success by academic advisors, academic decisions regarding programs of study, and learning specialists' work with student-athletes with learning disabilities. The last portion of this section discusses conceptual models for student-athlete academic success centers, and examines success factors of units with high graduation rates. Unfortunately, very little literature exists specifically regarding the navigation of the space between academics and athletics. However, understanding the various components

of the larger environment in which the lived experiences take place assists in comprehension of the framework creating and affecting the phenomenon under study.

Student-Athletes and Academics

Student-athletes have dual responsibilities; prioritizing can be a significant challenge. Getting the privilege to play college sports, and, for some, getting an education paid for in its entirety, means filling both roles: student and athlete. Most student-athletes do succeed and graduate with degrees. However, their path to academic success runs directly through their athletic careers, which makes the endeavor more complicated. In this section are studies discussing graduation rates, major clustering, and student-athletes' sense of academic autonomy.

Student-Athlete Graduation Rates

Ferris et al. (2004) studied NCAA graduation rates to test the NCAA claim that student-athletes graduate at higher rates than the general student population. Adjusting for diversity factors, the authors found no statistical difference between student-athlete graduation rates and the rates of those of their student cohorts at the same university. Measured across universities, elite institutions graduate athletes at higher rates than do large public or smaller regional universities (Ferris et al., 2004). However, using cohort data, the study showed that athlete graduation rates decrease as general population rates increase, and the more academically select institutions have athlete graduation rates coming in lower than the student cohort at the same university. Also, as athletic programs gain more overall athletic success, the institution's athletic graduation rates drop in comparison to their cohorts (Ferris et al., 2004).

Southall, Eckard, Nagel, and Randall (2015) studied revenue sport athletes at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), examining the relationship between athletic success and the graduation rates of revenue sport athletes using the Adjusted Graduation Gap measure. The Adjusted Graduation Gap "accounts for part-time students included in the general student body FGR [Federal Graduation Rates] samples" (p. 401), in order to effectively compare student-athlete populations (who are always full-time students) to the full-time general student populations, since part-time students have a much higher drop-out rate than do full-time students (Southall et al., 2015). The study showed evidence that, in the football and basketball programs at the most athletically successful PWIs, African American student-athletes graduated at lower rates than full-time male students in the general population (Southall et al., 2015). This has significance for my study since the revenue-sport student-athletes who are most at-risk for failing to graduate are the students with whom a learning specialist is most likely to work.

Harper (2018) performed an analysis of NCAA federal graduation rates for African American male student-athletes on athletic scholarship at 65 Power Five institutions, comparing this population's graduation rates to the graduation rates of 1) all student-athletes, 2) all African American male undergraduates, and 3) all undergraduates at each institution. Harper found that, overall, African American male student-athletes graduated within six years at a rate of 55%, while 69% of all student-athletes, 60% of all African American male undergraduates, and 76% of all undergraduates graduated within six years of enrollment. This study places a sizable gap between African American male student-athletes and all other groups of students. Only four institutions – University of Miami, Georgia Tech, University of Arizona, and Vanderbilt – had African American

male student-athletes graduating at similar or higher rates than the rate for all student-athletes (Harper, 2018). Only three institutions had African American male student-athletes graduating at a higher rate than the overall rate for all undergraduates: Louisville, Mississippi State, and University of Utah. African American male student-athlete graduation rates declined between 2016 and 2018 at 40% of Power Five universities. Overall, graduation rates for African American male student-athletes have increased in the Power Five by very small numbers (2.5 percent), but so have the rates for all other student groups studied (Harper, 2018). Harper characterized as a "major loss" that an "average of 44.8% of Black male student-athletes on [Power Five] campuses do not graduate within six years" (p. 6).

Sack, Park, and Thiel (2011) studied retention rates for student-athletes at 116 Division I FBS institutions, using the Federal Graduation Rate to compare athletes to the general student population, and using the NCAA Graduation Success Rate, which is specific to student-athletes and takes transfer between institutions into account. The study indicated that more highly selective institutions had a greater retention gap between student-athletes and the general population than did less selective institutions. The authors suggest that highly selective institutions may feel forced to admit athlete recruits with lower academic credentials in order to stay competitive in athletics. A second finding was that institutions with winning and highly-funded football programs had a wider retention gap than schools whose football programs were less successful and less financially committed to football success (Sack et al., 2011).

The studies in this section served to identify the student-athletes who are at highest risk of academic failure. These students will make up the majority of a learning

specialist's caseload. The students with whom learning specialists work form one prominent component of the environment in which learning specialists experience their jobs, so these studies offer a statistical outline of the parameters and challenges of working with the caseload population.

Student-Athletes and
Choice of Major

Kulics, Kornspan, and Kretovics (2015), using a survey designed for their study which measured 1027 student-athletes from Division I FBS institutions, studied the belief systems of student-athletes as related to academic decision-making, breaking down differences between gender and type of sport. Just under half of the study's participants were revenue sport athletes. The authors used closed-end demographics questions about the participants, their sport, eligibility, progress toward degree, and their athletic financial aid situation. The study also employed open-ended questions regarding student-athletes' opinions on the presence of athlete-friendly majors, whether such majors would be helpful, and how the student-athletes felt about increased academic eligibility standards. While the majority did not choose a major for eligibility purposes or because it was an athlete "friendly" major (p. 10), male and revenue-sport student-athletes more often chose majors that did not match with their future careers but rather aligned with sports goals and eligibility (Kulics et al., 2015).

Findings also indicated that revenue-sport head coaches were more likely to encourage student-athletes to pursue majors because they were easy as opposed to majors the student-athletes were interested in. Revenue-sport athletes were more likely to be advised by both coaches and academic advisors to change majors for eligibility reasons. Revenue sport athletes were more likely to need summer school courses and were more

likely to be ineligible due to lack of progress-to-degree requirements than were non-revenue sport participants. Results showed that football players, in particular, considered obtaining a degree important, but having a particular major was not. 23%, mostly revenue sport athletes, indicated they would be willing to change a major if it affected eligibility for sport (Kulics et al., 2015).

One theme in college athletics is academic major clustering, meaning the practice of putting multiple athletes into certain majors while recommending against others. Fountain and Finley (2011) conducted a ten year study of academic major choice for one Division I FBS football team, examining the number of duplicating majors and the movement into and out of majors during football student-athletes' collegiate careers. They looked for the answers to the following questions: "Did clustering occur over time? If so, was it different for white and minority players?" (p. 29). After data culling, the authors tracked 230 student-athletes' major choices and changes. The research indicated that clustering took place, one major was chosen over half the time, and clustering tended to happen over the course of the student-athletes' collegiate careers, as the variety of majors lessened significantly as students moved into second, third, and fourth years. The second most common major had nearly 14% of the players in it by their fourth year. Findings also showed that clustering was particularly evident for student-athletes of racial minority status. From 28 different majors during the first two years, the number of disparate majors fell to 19 by third and fourth year (Fountain & Finley, 2011).

Schneider, Ross, and Fisher (2010) did a multiple year study tracking football student-athletes' enrollment at 12 Division 1-A (now FBS) institutions. Selecting those majors in which ten or more student-athletes were enrolled, the authors compared the

numbers in those majors against the general student populations' enrollment. Their findings supported major clustering in high-level college athletics. The authors point out potential mitigating reasons including working around practice schedules, suggestions from other athletes, and choosing a major based on interest in sport, such as Sport Management.

Fountain and Finley (2009) also studied whether academic clustering could be influenced by the student-athletes' race. They explored the following questions: "1) Does academic clustering occur among ACC football players? 2) Is there a difference in prevalence of clustering when considering White and Minority subgroups? 3) Are there multiple majors at these schools that exceed the threshold to be considered clustered?" (p. 5). The authors analyzed the majors pursued by 394 football upperclassmen from 11 schools in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). They found major clustering of football players at all institutions. At one university, 73% of football upperclassmen were enrolled in a single major. At six of the ACC institutions, a third or more of the football student-athletes were enrolled in one major. At nine of the institutions, student-athletes of minority status were found to be clustered into one major at greater rates than their White teammates. Four of those universities had 62% or more minority student-athletes enrolled in a single major. Only one university had a White population at a similar rate in a single major. In considering whether clustering was taking place in more than one major, findings showed that the results applied only to minority student-athletes. At no school did White student-athletes cluster in more than one major, yet minority student-athlete upperclassmen clustered at a rate of over 50% into two majors at nine schools, and over 75% at six schools.

Sanders and Hildenbrand (2010) analyzed clustering patterns among student-athletes, looking to understand the timing of clustering, the group identity of student-athletes who cluster, and whether clustering has any effect on earning potential post-college. The authors examined data from student enrollment for five years in the mid 1990s at a Midwestern university. They found that athletes tend to cluster both at the beginning of their academic careers and then during their later years, readjusting their major choices, which also results in clustering with other athletes. They also discovered the greatest frequency of clustering occurred among African-American revenue sport male athletes. Female athletes in non-revenue sports were rarely engaging in major clustering at all, by comparison. The authors also found that academic major clustering resulted in athletes being precluded from the highest paying careers after college, as projected incomes were significantly lower in the majors used for clustering.

Not only does the literature on clustering explain something about the majors chosen by (or for) student-athletes, it also offers a glimpse into the attitudes and culture of athletics. One implication of these studies is that athletes and academic success personnel are pressured into major selection which benefits athletics. Another reason for including clustering literature is that student-athletes – some, at least – are being pushed into majors for reasons other than their interest in that field of study, which could potentially have significant implications for learning specialists' experiences in working with academically at-risk student-athletes, if students are not pursuing studies they like and have aptitude in.

**Student-Athletes and Academic
Autonomy**

Haslerig (2018) explored academic autonomy among student-athletes through

discussion with graduated student-athletes and student-athletes attending graduate school.

Participants indicated high levels of support and low levels of autonomy during their

initial year, and reported that the desire for academic autonomy made them work harder

to earn freedom from constraints. While they spoke highly of athletics' academic support

systems, they strove constantly for the independence to no longer need them. These

students had high self-efficacy and were of the opinion that working hard and advocating

for themselves were what made them more successful academically, but their constant

reference to academic support systems indicated unacknowledged external factors

beyond work ethic and self-advocacy (Haslerig, 2018).

The level of a student-athlete's desire for and capability of autonomy in academic

endeavors is a crucial component of their work with a learning specialist. Attitude forms

a crucial part of how a student approaches academic work. This study also addresses, at

least to some extent, the importance of student self-efficacy in successful academic

achievement, which is another potentially powerful facet the work environment for

learning specialists.

Athletic Identity, Academic Identity, and Stereotype Threat Effect

Studies show that the identities with which collegiate student-athletes most align

can have significant impact on academic success, as do the stereotypes other people apply

to student-athletes. Multiple studies explore athletic identity and its relationship to

academic success. Athletic identity, which is the relationship of sporting aspects to one's

self-understanding, begins to form in childhood and strengthens during adolescence if a person participates in competitive sport. It remains high into young adulthood as long as the individual continues to compete (Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010). As an important influence on how student-athletes see themselves, these studies on the strength of athlete and student identities strongly inform the daily work of the learning specialist.

Attributed Athletic Identity and
Resulting Stereotyping

Some researchers found that non-athletes on campus presume athletic identity in student-athletes and act on stereotypes based on that presumption. In one study of non-athlete perceptions of student-athletes, Lawrence, Harrison, and Bukstein (2016) used photo elicitation to ask White participants to react to a photo of a White male football player, during a graduation ceremony, shaking an institutional official's hand while receiving his diploma in a challenging major. Most participants attributed the academic success of the student-athlete in the photo to his privilege as an athlete (being given things in college or having it easy) rather than his Whiteness. Most participants did not acknowledge the athlete's race or racial privilege, the racial make-up of the institution as evidenced in the photograph, nor the gender privilege in evidence. Some participants, repeating a significant racial stereotype, remarked that the photo did not show an African American football player graduating because they seldom do, or because they only care about sports and not academics. Multiple participants doubted the authenticity of the photo because it was an athlete graduating from a difficult major, repeating the stereotype that athletes always take easy majors, also opining that athletes were not smart enough for difficult majors (Lawrence et al., 2016). This finding aligns with other studies in which athletes express their feeling that they are seen on campus as athletes only

(Beamon, 2014; Beamon, 2008; Griffin, 2017; Harrison et al., 2009; Harrison et al., 2014; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Despite their unhappiness about being seen as athletes only, research shows that many college student-athletes do have very high athletic identities (Beamon, 2012; Beron & Piquero, 2016; Bimper, 2014; Clopton, 2011; Cooper et al., 2017; Harrison et al., 2011; Harrison et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2012).

Academic Self-Perception within
Athletic Identities

Strong athletic identity and negativity related to an athletic performance were correlated with lower academic self-concept. Participants who did not react as strongly to a poor athletic performance tended to have better academic self-concept (Fuller et al., 2017). Other research also shows a negative correlation between strong athletic identity and academic success. In all sports, high athletic identity correlated negatively with GPA (Cooper et al., 2017), and Yukhymenko-Lescroart's (2018) research indicated that a strong athletic identity correlates with low academic aspirations. High academic identity correlated with having high academic performance goals (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). Research indicated that elevated athletic identity would correlate with low academic results. Researchers found that athletic identity was significantly high among the researched population, and the research supported the idea that levels of athletic identity could predict academic achievement: the higher the level of athletic identity, the lower the GPA (Bimper, 2014).

Athletic identity could play a salient role in the learning specialist's experiences of the space between academics and athletics. Athletically gifted student-athletes who strongly identify with the athletic portion of their identity would be at high risk for low academic performance, and would possibly be among the learning specialist's caseload.

It would seem logical that, rather than using the skills and inherent abilities honed in athletics as an asset toward academic success, a low academic identity would potentially preclude the student from realizing that these abilities could be valuable tools for academics.

**Athletes' Perceptions of Other
Athletes Academically**

Levine , Etchison, and Oppenheimer (2014) examined the perceptions of student-athletes about their fellow student-athletes' academic attitudes. While participants self-reported higher regard for academic achievement than athletic achievement, they believed their fellow student-athletes had lower regard for academics than athletics. The authors concluded that, while student-athletes may privately hold an esteem for academic success, their behaviors in public revert to their perceptions of the normal systemic belief within their peer group (i.e. other student-athletes). Therefore, the perception of others shaped the behaviors and inhibited the privately held beliefs (Levine et al., 2014), potentially shaping the way an academically at-risk student-athlete approaches academic effort when in the athletics space with other student-athletes.

Identity Foreclosure

The following studies point out the importance of identity as student-athletes navigate their place on a college campus. That it is possible to minimize the academic identity in favor of the athletic identity, as these studies indicate, could have serious impact on the way in which learning specialists guide student-athletes academically. Identity foreclosure occurs when an individual commits to an assigned identity, often the one expected by family or friends, and closes off other potential identities (Marcia, 1966). According to Danish, Petitpas, and Hale (1993), foreclosure is brought on by

environment and the decision not to investigate other possible identities, especially when the foreclosed identity has provided some kind of reward or positive reinforcement. Foreclosure would be significant in the case of a student-athlete who must necessarily act on two identities (student and athlete) to be successful in college.

Adler and Adler (1991) explored athletic identity in their game-changing participant observer study about student-athletes on a powerhouse southern DI basketball team, finding strong evidence of immersion in the athlete role. In 2010, Beamon conducted an ethnographic study of African American male former collegiate athletes examining the level of "sports socialization" (p. 281). Findings showed that family members were the earliest and most influential figures in sports socialization, often insisting on youth sports participation and sports as a way to make it to college, and emphasized sports skill far more highly than academic rigor. Most participants identified athletes and/or coaches as role models, and indicated neighborhood sports socialization and high expectation among neighborhood members that sports were an automatic choice for all the male children in the neighborhood. Media sensationalism of athletes' glowing success also played a part in strong sports socialization (Beamon, 2010).

Harrison et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between race and athletic identity in White and African American football student-athletes. African American football players had greater levels of athletic identity than did White football players. Specific assessment items indicated that African American student-athletes had much more single-minded focus on sports than did their White counterparts (Harrison et al., 2011). Other items proved salient, as well: African American student-athletes believed that the majority of other people on campus saw them only as athletes, especially as the

institution in question was a PWI. The authors speculated that this may reach a stereotype threat level (Harrison et al., 2011).

**Stereotype Threat Among
Student-Athletes**

Several researchers used identity priming to study stereotype threat among student-athletes. Coined by Steele, Aronson, and Kruglanski (1995), the phrase *stereotype threat* indicates the danger of affirming, to and about oneself, a negative stereotype regarding a group to which one belongs. When any action, reaction, or characteristic conforms to all or part of a stereotype about a person's group, that person will evaluate the self as belonging within that stereotype, and further react to verify the stereotype (Steele et al., 1995).

At a very selective liberal arts institution, Yopyk and Prentice (2005) considered the conflicting identities of student-athletes who are assumed to be good students by virtue of being in college, but assumed to be poor students because they are athletes. The researchers "primed" (p. 329) student-athletes with an identity (athlete, student, or neither), and studied their performance in certain tasks. For those who were primed with no identity, the performance was task-dependent and while participants rated themselves similarly to those primed as athletes, their performance when tested was similar to those primed as students (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Those participants primed as athletes, and those primed with no identity reported lower academic self-regard as compared to participants primed with academic identity (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). The only participants who reported high academic self-regard were those primed with the student identity. The test performance had similar results between non-primed and student-primed, but were significantly lower for athlete-primed. The authors concluded that

"student-athletes assumed different identities, depending on the task at hand," and these "shifts occurred spontaneously" (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005, p. 334). However, in considering self-regard, the authors found that priming made a significant difference in the participant's self-reaction with regard to academics (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005).

Harrison et al. (2009) explored "academic identity threat" (p. 78), or fear of being perceived as academically inadequate because of athlete status. Female athlete academic performance suffered when athletic identity was primed in an academic setting, and when their athletic identity was directly associated with their academic identity. Concerns of confirming the negative stereotype adversely affected the measured performance items (Harrison et al., 2009). Male college athletes' academic performance was not affected adversely by priming athletic identity in conjunction with academic identity (i.e. scholar-athlete as identifier), and males performed better on difficult items when their athletic identity was primed versus when their academic identity, or neither identity, was primed. In this study, female athletes saw the identity of athlete as a stereotype threat, while males did not (Harrison et al., 2009). The authors speculate that the differences between this study's finding on male student-athletes, and the ones found in the earlier study by Yopyk and Prentice, stemmed from the differences in institution in which the male student-athletes were enrolled: large state schools versus a very selective liberal arts institution. Students from the selective school may have been more invested academically and more threatened by the athletic identity stereotype (Harrison et al., 2009).

Riciputi and Erdal (2017) performed a stereotype threat assessment by giving 33 male and 27 female student-athletes a demographics questionnaire, in which priming for stereotype threat was implanted, and a 10 minute, 10 question math test. Students were

told the test was hard and they may not finish in time. Randomly chosen student-athletes were not primed and the rest were primed with athletic identity. Identity-primed student-athletes answered fewer problems and performed worse than did the non-primed student-athletes. Stereotype threat was supported, and the researchers speculated that either the identity priming caused a decrease in effort or caused the student to go more slowly in attempting to be accurate because of the stereotyped expectation of failure (Riciputi & Erdal, 2017).

Stone, Harrison, and Mottley (2012) examined whether stereotype threat is a danger for African American athletes compared to White athletes, when primed with the athlete identity. While priming the athlete identity did not produce stereotype threat in academically engaged White participants or academically disengaged athletes, test performance in academically engaged African American participants became significantly worse after having their athletic identities primed (Stone et al., 2012).

Lawrence, Harrison, and Stone (2009) measured perceptions and examined stereotypes, among the general student population, about two athletes' daily lives. In describing two student-athletes, the researchers primed the participants with one stereotypically White and one stereotypically African American name. While participants had some idea what an athlete's day is like, responses were principally based on stereotypes. The stereotypes created the potential for stereotype threat, or unintended assimilation and verification of a stereotype about one's group, in athletes' campus experiences (Lawrence, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2009). These findings echoed findings from McHugh Engstrom and Sedlacek in 1991, in which assessments of 293 students,

prior to their first year at a large NCAA Division I university, showed the participants to have negative opinions about the academic capabilities of student-athletes.

Strong athletic identity and stereotype threat have both been shown to have potentially deleterious effects on a student-athlete's chances of academic success. This is another instance in which the academic and athletics cultures intersect and have an impact. Stereotype threat creates a danger to academic success in its presence on a campus and, when internalized by the affected student-athlete, could have an effect on the learning specialist's lived experiences by affecting the way the student-athletes perceive themselves and their ability to do academic work.

Higher Education Faculty and Student-Athletes

Studies of faculty attitudes toward student-athletes show a mixed reaction broken down by race, gender, and academic discipline. A significant proportion of student-athletes reported negative treatment. based on athlete status, from faculty, TAs, or non-athlete students. Student-athletes commonly reported being identified, on campus, principally as athletes.

Student-Athletes and Campus Experiences

Simons et al. (2007) conducted a quantitative study of 538 collegiate student-athletes regarding how they were treated on campus by faculty and non-athlete students. Survey questions in various forms covered athlete/student identity, negative treatment from faculty and TAs regarding grades and athletic accommodations, and negative treatment other students. Student-athletes were asked to give quotes of negative remarks about athletes. Upon analyzing the data, the researchers found evidence of stigma. One third of the students reported negative treatment from faculty members and TAs, versus

15% reporting positive reactions from faculty/TAs. Almost 60% reported negative treatment from other students. Male, revenue-sport, and African American athletes reported higher negativity from professors and TAs than did female, non-revenue, and White. Gender, revenue sport, and race were not significant regarding negativity from other students (Simons et al., 2007).

While 9% of all athletes reported being accused of cheating, only 6% of White student-athletes reported cheating accusations while 28% of African American student-athletes were accused of cheating. Males were accused of cheating far more often than were females. Similarly, revenue sport athletes were 6 times more likely to be accused of cheating than those in non-revenue sports. Nearly 60% reported being hassled when asking for an athletic accommodation, and 42% were refused an accommodation they requested. In every category of this survey, African American student-athletes, males, and revenue student-athletes reported more negative treatment than did Whites, female, and non-revenue student-athletes, and African American student-athletes perceived a negative bias toward themselves at far greater rates than their White peers (Simons et al., 2007). These are the students most likely to be academically at-risk and, therefore, to work with a learning specialist.

Similarly, Comeaux and Snyder (2016) examined the student-athlete perceptions regarding faculty, TA, and non-athlete-student treatment of athletes in the classroom. The authors studied 174 student-athletes from two public midwestern Division I institutions. Using a survey instrument, the researchers asked questions regarding demographics, perceptions of negativity from professors, TAs, and non-athlete students, feelings about faculty reactions to asking for athletic accommodations, and fairness of grades as related

to faculty knowledge of athletic identity (Comeaux & Snyder, 2016). A significant number of student-athletes reported that faculty (47%) and TAs (37%) had a neutral view of student-athletes, and a high percentage of student-athletes (44%) perceived non-athlete students as viewing athletes positively. When asking for accommodations from TAs or professors, 53% of athletes said they felt uncomfortable doing so, but 70% of athletes felt that they were never refused (Comeaux & Snyder, 2016).

Comeaux and Snyder's study shows the inverse of some earlier studies in which a majority of athletes perceived negative treatment from faculty members, TAs, and non-athlete peers. A majority of athletes felt neutral treatment from faculty/TAs, and positive treatment from peers. Comeaux and Snyder's study also refuted earlier studies that faculty members tended to be negative about making athletics accommodations. As the authors pointed out, results from public institutions were quite different from those obtained at a highly selective university.

Potuto and O'Hanlon conducted a 2005 survey study of student-athletes at 18 Division I-A (now FBS) institutions, ranging across the US and representing most regions of the country. They limited the survey to those student-athletes who had completed 85 credits toward degree. The study's intention was to examine the student experience of student-athletes. While most student-athletes felt fairly positive about their majors, 20% indicated athletic reasons for their major choice, and 60% of respondents identified more with the athlete role than the student role (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Most student-athletes believed the academic support systems for athletes was strong and helpful; some believed that faculty offers differential treatment to athletes compared to non-athletes (both positive and negative) (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007).

Positive and Negative
Faculty Attitudes

Comeaux (2011) found that female faculty members tended to be more positive than male faculty regarding student-athletes. African American faculty tended to be less prejudicial and judgmental of student-athletes, while White, Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander were more negative in tested situations regarding student-athletes. Within colleges, faculty who study racial, ethnic, and cultural differences tended to be less negative toward student-athletes (Education, most notably), while those with the least (Management) and the most exposure to student-athletes (Social Sciences and Humanities) were more negative than faculty from other colleges (Comeaux, 2011).

Comeaux, in a 2010 study, identified four major themes in faculty's differentiated perceptions of African American and White student-athletes: 1) "success in academics in spite of sport demands"; 2) "color-blind ideology"; 3) "success in spite of race"; 4) "racially coded language" (p. 399). In 1), faculty were particularly laudatory of female student-athletes' academic success while competing, but were positive across the board in this area. In 2), faculty exhibited color-blindness by deliberately mentioning race and then insisting that it didn't matter to them and there were no differences They "were actively suppressing race labels" (p. 400) in their answers to prompts, and were uncomfortable discussing inequality based on race in higher education or acknowledging the influence of racially-based pervasive biases in society. In 3), the faculty members acknowledged that racial differences probably posed difficulties for African American student-athletes to be successful in higher education. In 4), faculty used deficit-driven language in describing African American male student-athletes, and implied that academically and athletically successful African American student-athletes were given

something (i.e. affirmative action) while White student-athletes earned what they got (Comeaux, 2010).

Harrison, Comeaux, and Plecha (2006) also explored the potentially positive side of faculty/athlete interactions, considering faculty members who serve as mentors to male revenue-sport athletes. Data showed the type of interaction between faculty member and student determines its impact on academic outcomes. Strongly academically-oriented interactions which challenged students intellectually, an indication of belief in their academic abilities by supporting graduate school attendance, assisting students with career goals, and making time for discussion outside the classroom all helped boost academic achievement (Harrison et al., 2006). In a follow-up study, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found that faculty support did not equally affect African American and White male revenue-sport student-athletes, based on the nature of the interactions. While faculty study-skills support was shown to positively impact academic outcomes, African American students did not benefit from that form of assistance based on probable hesitation to seek out help from White faculty, who make up nearly 90% of faculty at PWIs (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007).

These studies represent a potentially strong influential element in the intersection of academics and athletics. Any amount of discriminatory attitude and treatment from faculty and/or TAs toward athletes and athletics could theoretically have a powerful effect on the academic results for student-athletes, the make-up of athletic teams, and the interactions between academic success staff and faculty. This research may show a direct influence on the phenomenon under study as student-athlete academic success personnel

potentially encounter resistance to the idea of academics and athletics as acceptable co-pursuits in higher education.

Academic Support for College Student-Athletes

Given the rigorous time demands of a collegiate athletic schedule, the challenges of campus climate, the lack of acceptance from non-athlete peers and faculty members, the common practice of admitting gifted athletes who fall below admissions standards as students, the commonness of academic underpreparedness, the difficulties of navigating dual identities, the confusion and negativity of facing identity foreclosure and stereotype threat, and the prevalence of racism and discrimination on college campuses, many institutions have created student-athlete academic success centers to guide student-athletes toward success as college students.

While this area of student support has not gotten much attention in the literature, and some people are skeptical about its necessity, a few research studies make at least a glancing mention of the academic success function in supporting student-athletes. Adler and Adler, in 1991, wrote a participant-observer study of a Division I basketball team, watching and cataloguing the experiences of team members, coaches, and supporters. They explored the lack of adaptation to the college role and the immersion in the athlete role for these highly visible athletes. With this study, the authors demonstrated the special-population nature of college athletes, and created a resonating call for academic support units for these students as they struggle through college demands while navigating the adulation, time demands, and intensive focus on athletics from everyone who surrounds them (Adler & Adler, 1991).

Jolly (2008), a communications professor whose department's student population has a large percentage of student-athletes – 20-25% – makes the case for student-athletes as a special population, citing time demands, exhaustion, travel, and the extensive rigor of athletics responsibilities while handling a full courseload of credits, often 15 but no fewer than 12 (Jolly, 2008). Jolly points out the role of forced athletic identity, the general negative opinions surrounding athletes, and the stereotypes perpetuated by faculty members. The author also discusses the low help-seeking behaviors exhibited by student-athletes, perhaps because of the negativity surrounding college athletics and athletes in particular (Jolly, 2008). Jolly makes the case that academic success centers are highly necessary and calls on faculty to help the academic center offer the campus support student-athletes need (Jolly, 2008).

**Success of Mentoring for
Student-Athletes**

Sato, Eckert, & Turner (2018) studied how African American student-athletes experienced the mentor programs at a PWI. The students stressed that the "cultural mismatches in the daily use of English from the very beginning of their college education" (p. 561) made high achievement on papers difficult, and that lack of knowledge in navigating the online system for assignments created difficulties in understanding expectations; these students indicated that first-year, first-semester mentoring was the most crucial for successfully persisting in college (Sato et al., 2018). Students also stressed the importance that mentors outside of athletics had been to them (dorm-mates, writing center, academic advisors). Mentorship by White teammates was often perceived as unhelpful because the White teammates, despite making suggestions and giving advice about academics, encouraged independent learning, which required

prior knowledge of how college works. The participants also felt that White mentors did not have the cultural connection or knowledge to mentor African American student-athletes (Sato et al., 2018). Participants struggled with a feeling of disconnection in the mentorship relationships and with isolation from non-athletics campus members. All of the participants saw their own family members as supportive mentors, but since all the participants were first generation students, their family members, while encouraging and supportive, did not have the college knowledge to help them navigate (Sato et al., 2018).

Tutor Usage Among Student-Athletes

Johnson, Harris and Peters (2013) explored student-athlete tutor usage in a general tutoring center over a three-year period. Female sports used more tutors generally than did male sports. Despite similar tutor usage among student of all races, African American student-athletes still achieved lower GPAs than did White students, possibly indicating more profound underpreparedness in this group (Johnson, Harris, & Peters, 2013). Despite lower average GPAs, student-athletes in revenue sports (football and men's basketball) did not seek tutoring more than student-athletes in other sports (Johnson, Harris, & Peters, 2013). While it was mentioned, this study did not seek to parse the reason for tutoring or provide evidence for whether the students sought tutoring on their own or were mandated to do so by coaches or advising staff.

Academic Centers Perpetuating Student-Athlete Isolation

Rubin and Moses (2017) examined the academic center's role in isolating student-athletes from the rest of campus. The study revealed that athlete-specific academic centers do isolate student-athletes and create an athletic/academic subculture separate from the rest of campus (Rubin & Moses, 2017). However, student-athletes value the

separate space because they identify principally as athletes and because the separate space allows them to participate more constantly in their team's culture, which they value more than their place in the general population (Rubin & Moses, 2017). Athletes of both genders reported issues with the way faculty members, and the general student population, perceive athletes and express their disdain for athletes academically. Athletes acting on others' decisions (i.e. choosing a major because other athletes did) also affects the academic subculture because it results in de facto major clustering (Rubin & Moses, 2017). In light of studies mentioned earlier in which a sense of belonging on campus, campus engagement, and a sense of respect from campus members all contributed to academic success, this is a salient factor for comprehending the liminal space of the phenomenon.

Student-Athletes, Disabilities,
and Learning Specialists

Only one study mentions the role of learning specialists in student-athlete academic support. Weiss (2011) conducted a case study of a Learning Assistance Program at a large Division I institution. Originally designed in 2005 as an academic support program for student-athletes with disabilities, or for those who were struggling through the transition to college, the following justification was given for installing the program: "(1) an inability for students to access Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) because of their athletic schedules, (2) the long waiting list or cumbersome procedures for assistance through support services on campus, (3) the unwillingness of some student-athletes to seek help outside of athletic support services because of their highly public status, and (4) the need for progress monitoring for NCAA compliance" (Weiss, 2011, p. 162).

The program started with a Lead Learning Specialist who had been a special educator. The program relied on academic coordinators who oversaw eligibility and academic progress to refer student-athletes diagnosed with or suspected to have learning disabilities. The learning specialist liaised with disability services to set up accommodations or testing. Following program admission, the learning specialist created a plan for support and college success strategies tailored to that particular student (Weiss, 2011).

The aim of the program was for student-athletes in need of these services to get assistance during their transition into college and then gain independence by the end of sophomore year. In four years, the program had added another learning specialist and had worked with 60 students. The program incorporated a "College Success Strategies course" (p. 164) mirroring the general course offering but added elements particular to student-athletes. The outcomes were overwhelmingly successful, with 90% of the student-athletes earning a high enough GPA to remain eligible and continue their college careers. Of the student-athletes in the program for those four years, only 10% received a GPA below 2.0 (Weiss, 2011).

Models for Student-Athlete Academic Success

Several studies suggest models for setting up or improving existing programs. Comeaux and Harrison (2011) point out the prevalence of the use in the research of a "deficit lens" to explain student-athletes' academic success challenges, principally because researchers did not consider the "multiple characteristics and cumulative processes" affecting student-athlete academic success (p. 235), such as the factors of "sport commitment, educational expectations, campus climate issues, and academic

engagement practices" (p. 235), and precollege factors. They contend that Division I

universities, despite providing extensive support, have not been able to successfully

improve student-athletes' educational nor individual growth, instead merely aiming for

meeting NCAA eligibility standards, which are often the same as the threshold for

institutional probation and mean very low academic goals for student-athletes (Comeaux

& Harrison, 2011). The authors propose a model that will better support educational and

individual growth. The model would be "culturally inclusive," and take into

consideration all of the factors affecting academic endeavors for student-athletes

(Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, p. 237).

Cooper's 2016 recommendations mention unfriendly campus climates, lack of

academic support, and overabundant institutional weighting of the importance of athletics

as reasons for low academic achievement by African American male student-athletes.

The author created the "Excellence Beyond Athletics" recommendations to provide

guidelines for best offering support to African American student-athletes. The author

recommends a model using the following principles: "self identity awareness, positive

social engagement, active mentorship, academic achievement, career aspirations, and

balanced time management" (Cooper, 2016, p. 280).

Gaston-Gayles (2003) interviewed seven directors of student-athlete academic

support units with "relatively high graduation rates" (p. 50). The six common threads for

success were found within 1) reporting lines (reporting to an academic office rather than

to athletics), 2) institutional size and affiliation (smaller institutions were better, with

more one-on-one staff/student interaction and smaller faculty-to-student ratios), 3)

admissions standards which prevent the common practice of admitting student-athletes

who show unlikeliness of success, 4) widespread support from faculty and administration across the institution, 5) athletics administrators and coaches who actively support the academic mission of the academic success unit, 6) high levels of advising and support, especially for first-year students, tapering off as they gain knowledge and experience, labeled here as "intentional advising," but comparable to "intrusive advising" (p. 55), with an intensive focus on graduation and degrees as opposed to merely emphasizing athletic eligibility.

Grandy, Lough, and Miller (2016) evaluated the usefulness and effectiveness of athletics advisor's learning support approaches- study tables, assessment meetings, and outcome-based learning plans – with a secondary purpose of proposing a model for athletic departments with teams at risk of falling below minimum academic standards. The authors used data collected from 58 at-risk student-athletes allotted to an athletics academic advisor, representing men's and women's swimming and diving, and the cheerleading and dance teams. The student-athletes were deemed academically at-risk because their GPA at the end of fall semester was at or under 3.0 (Grandy et al., 2016). Neither study tables nor academic advising meetings, taken alone, resulted in positive change from the previous semester's GPA. Only the Outcome-Based Learning (OBL) plan had a positive effect on GPA. Student-athletes participating in OBL improved almost one letter grade over the previous semester, and continued to improve in cumulative GPA (Grandy et al., 2016).

While the outcome-based learning plan information is useful in that such a strategy may assist at-risk student-athletes, and the study is included here for that reason, this study does not reflect the population of at-risk student-athletes by most definitions.

The student-athletes in this study entered the university with an academic scholarship, not an athletic one. While the authors use the phrase "they are academically at-risk when [GPA] is near or below 2.0" (p. 206), the determining factor for the study was a GPA at or below 3.0. To state that a 3.0 GPA is at or near a 2.0 GPA is a loose definition, at best. The at-risk status here is based on institutional academic scholarship, adhering to a different standard than those student-athletes who are subject to the NCAA's 2.0 minimum. The student-athletes in this study are not at risk of being ineligible or at risk of suspension; it is their academic scholarship that is at risk. However, the study does contain some usefulness in pinpointing a strategy shown to boost academic performance.

Academic Success Professionals,
Student Views, and Burnout

Steinberg et al. (2018), noting the increase in both at-risk student-athletes and learning specialists hires, researched the roles of learning specialists. Using quantitative methodology, the authors surveyed 90 learning specialists, using organizational theory to examine the outcomes of the profession (Steinberg et al., 2018). They found three prevalent tasks: "developing learning strategies with individual students, sending reminders, and holding study hall" (Steinberg et al., 2018). The study found that the job responsibilities of learning specialists did not typically vary based on the learning specialist's level of education (Steinberg et al., 2018). Respondents indicated that they desired more time working with individual student-athletes on learning strategies and academic skills (Steinberg et al., 2018). Learning specialists on better-resourced staffs worked with significantly fewer student-athletes in their caseloads than did those who worked in schools with smaller budgets, with Power 5 learning specialists having the smallest caseloads. One final open-ended question allowed respondents to express their

thoughts, and common themes were a feeling of second-class citizenship behind academic advisors, role overlap, and effort duplication between learning specialists and advisors (Steinberg et al., 2018).

Hazzaa, Sonkeng, and Yoh (2018) studied student-athlete satisfaction with academic services: facilities, staff, tutoring, and advising. Using quantitative methods, the authors surveyed 225 Division I athletes to discover the overall satisfaction and what consequences the levels of satisfaction had on students' academic performance (Hazzaa et al., 2018). Overall, students showed high rates of satisfaction in the following order: advising facilities, advising staff, tutoring, and advising programs. However, data varied by class, with freshman reporting lowest satisfaction and upperclassmen greatest (Hazzaa et al., 2018). Up-to-date facilities and dedicated staff had the greatest effect on satisfaction, and had the greatest influence on student academic performance (Hazzaa et al., 2018).

Rubin and Moreno-Pardo (2018) studied burnout among student athlete services professionals and explored reasons for leaving the profession. The authors conducted interviews with 38 student-athlete services professionals, including directors, assistant directors, advisors, learning specialists, and development professionals. Themes included the following:

> "I Don't See a Career Path": little advancement, little challenge, lack of transferable skills, moving across country for jobs (p. 9).
>
> "It's Caused Me, Definitely, Some Health Issues": stress, anxiety, depression, chronic fatigue, poor nutrition, inability to sleep due to the job (p. 9).

"We're Talking All These Time Demands for Student-Athletes, but No One's Talking about Time Demands for Our Staff and for Ourselves" –excessive number of hours put in on the job, but lack of attention paid to it. A lack of caring or respect from administrators and coaches, being asked to do things not aligned with their personal values (p. 10).

"We're Not Paid Some Exceptional Amount of Money in Academics That We're Expected to Work 24 Hours a Day" –excessive hours worked for little money, working nights and weekends, limited time for vacation, far less compensation than athletics staff, and being expected to respond 24/7 to the needs of student-athletes or coaches (p. 12).

"All We Get is a 'Thank You' at the Banquet, If We're Even Invited" – frustration with under-appreciation and blame, coaches being compensated for academic success, job as "a set up for failure" because of too many factors outside the control of the student-services professionals, and the greater campus not understanding the work (p. 13-14).

Liminality and Liminal Spaces

The betweenness experience of liminality gives rise to several conceptual themes useful to understanding the findings of this study: "dissolution of order," in which prior experience shaping the understanding and interpretation of the present order is disrupted, and "dislocations of established structures," "reversal of hierarchy," and "uncertainty about continuity of traditions and future outcomes" (Wydra, Thomassen, & Horvath, 2015, p. 2). These uncertainties about configuration, purpose, and outcome give rise to emotional reactions, such as "loss of meaning," a sense of "ambivalence," and feelings of

"disorientation," (Wydra et al., 2015, p. 3). Szakolczai (2015) points out the "stressful, emotive character of liminal crises" (p. 25).

Studies exploring liminality or liminal spaces occur across a number of disciplines. The clearest application to this study are those employed in the study of organizations. Liminality in organizational literature "emphasizes the changeful nature" and "the multiple meanings that can co-exist and the negative psychological consequences of extended liminality" (Beech, 2011, p. 288). Liminality can be a short-term experience as someone moves from one thing to another, or it can be more long-term, approaching a permanent position of uncertainty and "in-between-ness" within a particular changeable framework (Beech, 2011, p.288).

Using datasets from two earlier, larger studies, Howard-Grenville et al. (2011) studied deliberate cultural shift and developed a model of cultural change using organizational gatherings as symbolic constructions of liminal spaces, separate from yet still a part of the daily functioning of the organization. The researchers studied this purposely constructed liminal space as a space allowing for examination, recognition, and understanding of oppositional elements, prompting participants to see which new resources were necessary for a cultural change and to introduce them into the familiar (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011, p. 530). Participants expressed satisfaction about this way of recognizing the need for change (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011).

Borg and Söderlund (2014) explored the ways in which "mobile project workers" deal with being in the ambiguity of lacking a definitive affiliation to any one company or work project (p. 182). They conducted interviews with 24 engineers working as technical consultants, going to unfamiliar workspaces filled with people with whom they had no

previous relationships and would most likely not encounter again. Such work in liminal spaces was found to cause stress, dampen the ability to reflect, and create the need to fend for themselves in attempting to shape a career (Borg & Söderlund, 2014). The project workers, to maintain resiliency and cope with the potentially negative, shifting, in-between effects of liminal space, relied on four strategies: "reputation reliance, role carving, relaxation, and redefinition" (Borg & Söderlund, 2014, p. 193). These involved using prior reputation to establish trusting relationships with the people in the liminal space, defining the role to create a definitive niche and avoid being given extra work, spending some time waiting on others' results while preparing for next steps, and finding less complicated processes for the work (Borg & Söderlund, 2014). Using these techniques allowed the mobile project workers to lessen the effects of extended periods in liminal workspace (Borg & Söderlund, 2014).

Ellis and Ybema (2010) studied the identity construction of people who work principally in interorganizational networks, leaving them in a constant liminal space of not belonging to either one part of the organization nor another, but at the same time belonging to both (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). The authors interviewed 13 mid-level managers working in interorganizational networks and studied the language the managers used to position themselves in relation to their firms and their place within the various networks, and how they brought together the various components of the networks (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). The managers indicated four types of boundaries between which they fell: organizational boundaries, market boundaries, relationship boundaries, and marketing management expertise boundaries. Findings included a blurring of boundaries between various parts of the networks (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). The participants were

discursively placing themselves in liminal spaces, which they redrew constantly to maintain relationships and interact with the various actors in the networks (Ellis & Ybema, 2010).

Overview of the Literature

Literature on student athlete academic success centers is rare, and studies of learning specialists, as student affairs professionals who provide academic services to academically at-risk student-athletes, are virtually nonexistent. What few studies exist are reflected in this literature review. However, the existing body of literature does form a framework for understanding the space in which the phenomenon takes place. By examining student-athletes' experiences in athletics and academics, faculty and non-athletics campus members' attitudes toward athletics, and the limited studies reflecting the athletics culture, we can place the work and daily experiences into a framing context from which to pursue research. This study will contribute to the body of literature on academically at-risk student-athletes while providing a start to understanding the daily lived experiences of learning specialists working in one of the liminal spaces in higher education: the space between academics and athletics.

CHAPTER III

PARADIGM AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the philosophical paradigmatic considerations and methodological forms used in conducting this study. While learning specialists' job descriptions and work situations are markedly similar across Division I college athletics, any individual studying the experience will come away with a unique interpretation. Since this experience may be seen as a foundational phenomenon with different interpretations brought to it, interpretivism presents the most useful and pertinent paradigm. The paradigm used informs the epistemology, ontology, and methodology of a study. Methodologically, hermeneutic phenomenology provides the framework for understanding the daily lived experiences of the job as a common phenomenon interpreted by different individuals from their discrete points of view. This chapter also contains discussions of data collection and analysis, validity, trustworthiness, and dependability.

My study explored the essence of learning specialists' lived experiences as academically-focused professionals working with academically at-risk, athletically critical student-athletes in Division I athletics departments. The purpose of the study was to understand and provide a transferable, informed, and learned perspective of the daily work experience in the liminal space between two powerful, ostensibly cooperative but often competing interests: major university undergraduate academics and big-time Division I athletics. While some recent literature examines academically at-risk student-

athletes and their barriers to academic persistence, very little research probes the student-athlete academic support systems.

Interpretivist Paradigm

Paradigms constitute a way of thinking about and forming an understanding of the world and a basis for knowing (Guido, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2010). Beliefs and assumptions about the world intertwine and connect with each other, forming a "worldview" (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, p. 9), and providing a lens through which to look and comprehend. A paradigm provides a guide for the way we contemplate the surrounding world, and it offers direction in understanding what we learn about the world (Guido et al., 2010). As scholars, we form a belief system through interactions with others in the field, through advisors and classroom instruction, and through reading the literature that has come before us and shaped the field (Creswell, 2013). That belief system then informs "our choice of theories that guide our research" (Creswell, 2013, p. 15).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) characterized qualitative research as a way of using multiple symbols to convert the unseen world to something that can be seen. Situations and settings experienced by people become the subjects of study, and researchers try to "make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). Merriam (2009) points out that "the experience a person has includes the way in which the experience is interpreted" (p. 9). The express purpose of interpretivist study is to "describe, understand, interpret," while focusing on experiences which are "cooperative, interactive, and humanistic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 11). Rather than being concerned with measuring the *what* or *how many* contained within the data (Merriam,

2009), interpretivist research is characterized by a desire to interpret and make meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Interpretivism had its beginnings in hermeneutics (Crotty, 1998; Mertens, 2010; Yanow, 2006). Hermeneutics is the "study of interpretive understanding or meaning" (Mertens, 2010, p. 10), and denotes the study and interpretation of texts (Mertens, 2010). The foundational text is identical for each scholar when given to them, yet becomes different upon application of interpretation. The text itself does not change or transform; meaning is brought to it by each individual scholar, and each of those meanings/interpretations will be different because each scholar is different. Interpretivism constitutes "sense-making – interpretation – with respect to a specific event or experience informed by prior knowledge" (Yanow, 2006, p. 10).

Hermeneutics eventually began to include the study of "human practices, human events, human situations – in an attempt to 'read' these in ways that bring understanding" (Crotty, 1998, p. 87). Gadamer (1989), in his seminal work *Truth and Method,* wrote that "it is not only that historical tradition and the natural order of life constitute the unity of the world in which we live as [humans]; the way we experience one another, the way we experience the natural *givenness* of our existence and of our world, constitutes a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened" (p. xxiv). We are given something to interpret which exists outside our frame of reference, and we bring our frame of reference to it. We do not construct that world; it is given to us and we individually interpret it to form a reality in which to live.

Ontology

Ontology considers the "nature of reality" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Guido et al., 2010). While Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2009) both point out that qualitative research proceeds from the premise that there is no single reality, but, rather, multiplicitous realities, the use of an interpretivist lens creates a bridge between the positivist belief that a definable reality, or single Truth, lies out there somewhere waiting to be discovered (Merriam, 2009), and the constructivist philosophy that no single truth exists and all reality is constructed (Guido et al., 2010). Deconstruction of Merriam's statement regarding interpretive research – "interpretive research, which is where qualitative research is most often located, assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations of a single event" – reveals the essential nature of the interpretive lens, and differentiates it from the constructivist paradigm. Although Merriam does not concede the difference and lumps the two together with a slash (interpretivism/constructivism), the very act of acknowledging that a single event exists, to which people react differently, creates the differentiation between the ontologies of interpretivism and constructivism. The event is found or revealed, and Schwartz-Shea (2006) uses the word "reveal" thus: "interpretive researchers seek to reveal the intricate, evolving connections between taken-for-granted understandings and human activities and practices" (p. 92). Use of the word "reveal" clearly indicates something waiting to be found. Once found or revealed, the event is then interpreted to create the differing realities. Thus, while the interpretation creates individual, multiplicitous truths, the event or phenomenon is a foundational, common Truth, or reality.

Schwartz-Shea (2006) indicates that interpretive research studies "symbols, rituals, stories, and other artifacts" from which human beings interpret meaning (p. 92), Yanow (2006) references the observational, phenomenal world, Adcock (2006) refers to "material, social, and cultural setting(s)" and interpretive scholars working from "a complex of meaning, setting, and action as it develops in a specific time and place" (p. 61), and Crotty (1998) describes "'things themselves' to visit in our experience … objects to which our understandings relate" (p. 79). In these descriptions lie interpretivism's basic tenet: foundational things exist, and meaning springs from the interpretation of human action, reaction, and interaction in conjunction with them.

Epistemology

In interpretivism, epistemological considerations – questions regarding knowledge and its nature (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) – are characterized by the idea that truth is not absolute and objectivity is not the goal (Mertens, 2010). The researcher seeks to interpret and understand the event or phenomenon through those who experienced it, rather than seek objectivity as a path to truth (Mertens, 2010). Creswell (2013) points out that "knowledge is known – through the subjective experiences of people" (p. 20). In the interpretivist paradigm, meaning making is "iterative," all knowledge is "social knowledge," and understanding is derived from and shaped by earlier experiences, and "observations and 'facts' are theory-laden; and what we take to be objective 'facts' may well be shaped, if not affected, by the observer" (Yanow, 2006, p. 13). Knowledge, in interpretivism, seeks "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 112). This means that knowledge is inextricable from the culture in which it is produced; it cannot be formed independently without a common

base (e.g. different cultures and individuals will produce different knowledge upon the same base).

The epistemological goal of interpretivism is to first understand how human beings make meaning, because "being attuned to meaning making involves a recognition of, and sensitivity to, the ambiguities of human experience; researchers presuppose that meanings are negotiated and constructed … at the same time that they explore the variation of meanings across context" (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 92). Knowledge in interpretivism relies on context (Adcock, 2006).

In *Being and Time,* Heidegger (1962) characterized the understanding of Being, i.e. the interpretation of the world through the understanding of self, as the most crucial element in comprehension of anything. Therefore, even when interpreting a foundational text/event/phenomenon, we bring our concept of self, or Being, to bear on that interpretation (Heidegger, 1962). Thus, following Heidegger, while the text or phenomenon is fundamentally the same, the interpretation differs because of the Being we bring to it. Yanow (2006) acknowledges this link: "In a conceptual sense, evidence is not manifest in the observational world – it is not 'self-evident'; categories of mind are prerequisite to making sense of the phenomenal (empirical) world" (p. 10). In other words, things exist in the world, independent of us, and we are exposed to them; however, they do not have meaning until we interpret them.

Adcock (2006) characterized the intention of the interpretive paradigm thus: "interpretivists set out to grasp meaning and action together as parts of a complex, situated whole" (60). Yanow (2006) wrote that "it is for this reason that interpretive researchers focus on methods of understanding from the perspective of the actor in the

situation" (p. 13). Therefore, "we act; we have intentions about our actions; we interpret others' actions; we (attempt to) make sense of the world. We are meaning-making creatures" (Yanow, 2006, p. 9). We use an interpretivist lens to discern how a particular set of actions has meaning for the person to whom those actions belong (Adcock, 2006). Human beings are, however, subject to "taken-for-granted assumptions" which form a basis for much of our meaning-making, and interpretivist researchers must remain aware of the fact that the actors themselves may not be cognizant of how much of their understanding is driven by that which we take for granted (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 92). Yanow (2006) points out that "understanding is not possible from a position entirely outside of the focus of analysis: Prior knowledge is the mediating factor in sense-making" (p. 10).

Thus, crucial to the understanding of interpretivism is adherence to the idea that there is a single, foundational event (text) being understood and reacted to by multiple members of society. The disparate realities come from the act of interpreting the same, or a similar, event/text as that event/text differently impacts those who experience it. There is no singular Truth, but there is a singular event/text/phenomenon from which multiple truths are garnered. It is the act of disassembling the elements of the singular event, examining them, and interpreting them which creates the disparate realities. The interpretivist brings meaning to the event/text as it is, and even two or more people experiencing the same event will produce different interpretations/meanings of that event. Two people interviewed after getting off an intense roller coaster ride, in which they sat in the same row, will potentially have very different interpretations of that event: one may find it exhilarating and want to go again immediately; the other may describe abject

terror (or terrible motion sickness) and never, ever want to go on a roller coaster again. The nature of the ride was almost exactly the same for each person, yet they interpreted it differently.

For the purposes of my study, then, interpretivism began with an examination of a common phenomenon. Close and critical study of the elements of a phenomenon results in a unique understanding of that text or phenomenon by a scholar who brings a singular point of view to it. Following are studies which have effectively used interpretivism to glean meaning from a text or phenomenon.

Fong, Wright, and Wimer (2016) conducted a study exploring the non-use of food pantries by low-income Americans. This study qualifies as interpretivist for three reasons. First, the authors impose a foundational truth on the study – hunger, food insecurity, and the widespread fact that most Americans who qualify for free food assistance do not take advantage of it. Second, the study uses subjective explanations from participants as text. Third, meaning is not constructed by the participants. The respondents answer questions about why they do not use food pantries; the researchers offer the interpretation. Following is a passage used by the authors to interpret lack of food-pantry use: "I was gonna use [the pantry] – we needed some bread. We were low on funds. I thought about using one of the what they call food banks or one of the things like that, but when I approached the line, it was so many Asians out there that would outnumber us, no offense, I'm not prejudiced or nothing, I just couldn't do it" (p.83). The authors interpreted this passage to mean that the respondent saw the people in line as "other." Respondents used epithets which were later analyzed and interpreted by the authors as "symbolic issues of racial and behavioral difference" (p. 85). The

interpretations did not come from co-construction between authors and respondents but were brought to the text by the authors finding the material in the interviews. The purpose of the study was for the researchers to interpret and convey the reasons for the lack of use of food pantries, not for the respondents to come to a better understanding of themselves and their choices.

Another study employing interpretivism in a much more classic sense, but with a modern twist, is Dobson's (2002) study of what makes email a unique form of correspondence, distinct from letters or other kinds of corresponding. The existence of email, in this study, was the foundational phenomenon. The author examined a series of email threads sent and received during an overseas trip, considering how the author's correspondence during travel had significantly changed with the advent of email (extremely minimal correspondence prior to email; constant contact with multiple people after introduction of email). The author then compared a number of passages regarding people's reactions to old-fashioned mail in contrast to a query about why they love email, and began to identify themes and form interpretations. From the analysis, the author formed conclusions about speed, time, anticipation, space, distance, convenience, and intimacy as people's reactions differed in response to email versus other correspondence. This is a quintessentially modern version, but qualifies as an interpretive study.

Methodology

Methodology refers to the purpose for the research design of a study, the process and language of research, "the procedures of qualitative research" (Creswell, 2013, p. 22). The methodology informs the way the research is collected, the number of participants, and the type of findings produced. Rather than relying on the language of

quantity, as in *how many of this are there?* generalizability, qualitative methodology relies on depth and richness of data to create transferability, or similarities and differences in the experiences of one individual which can be understood by another individual (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2010). A methodology provides the means, context, and framework to "design the study, analyze data, and make sense of findings" (Jones et al., 2006). Methodology guides the decisions a researcher makes in conducting the research and gives it boundaries.

In qualitative research, the "researcher uses inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design," and the "researcher works with particulars (details) before generalizations, describes in detail the context of the study, and continually revises questions from experiences in the field" (Creswell, 2013, p. 21). This means that the researcher examines the parts first and then assembles them into an understandable, cohesive whole. However, an interpretivist researcher does not look at an individual part without considering its relationship to the other parts; unlike positivists, "they are skeptical of the act of conceptually isolating factors, without which it is impossible to even formulate the propositions about recurring relationships" (Adcock, 2006, p. 60). Therefore, a methodology used within interpretivism should allow the researcher to consider multiple facets and apply them to the whole. For this study, I used an interpretivist paradigmatic lens. Phenomenology provided the methodological framework revealing the data for interpretation.

Phenomenology

According to Moustakas (1994), in "phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher's

excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus" (p. 104). The beginnings of phenomenology lie with Husserl in the early 20th century (Merriam, 2009; Smith, 2007). Smith (2007) characterized Husserl's "new science of phenomenology" as a "reflective study of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view" (p. ix). The root focus of phenomenology is in examining phenomena as we experience them; we study "the ways things appear to us in our experience, the ways we experience things in the world around us. We practice phenomenology (with or without the name) whenever we pause in reflection and ask, 'What do I see?,' "How do I feel?,' 'What am I thinking?,' 'What do I intend to do?,' answering in the first person, specifying the way I experience what I see, feel, think" (Smith, 2007). Phenomenology is focused on the phenomenon, not on those experiencing it, as a "phenomenological study seeks understanding about the essence and the underlying structure of the phenomenon" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

Individuals who have experienced the phenomenon are acknowledged to have both subjective and objective experiences of the phenomenon, which places the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenological study somewhere between qualitative and quantitative methodology (Creswell, 2013). As a researcher, in order to comprehend a phenomenon's essence as entirely as possible, "if we lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning" (Crotty, 1998, p. 71). One important feature of phenomenology is that it "treats culture with a good measure of caution and suspicion" because culture creates a confinement of meaning by dictating the significance of

things/events/phenomena (Crotty, 1998, p.71). This therefore suggests that we set aside

the learned cultural assumptions of what a phenomenon is and attempt to understand it as

it has been experienced, thereby releasing it from the confinement of preconceived

applications of meaning. Again, the balance between positivism and constructivism is

demonstrated: as Adcock (2006) suggested, we do not attempt to conceptually isolate

individual factors in order to view them alone, as a positivist might. For Husserl, the

principal, central importance in phenomenology was meaning, "and it is meaning that

renders experience a consciousness 'of' anything at all" (Smith, 2007, p. 190).

Van Manen (2014) characterized the process of phenomenological research and

the subsequent writing of phenomenological text as "a reflective process of attempting to

recover and express the ways we experience our life as we live it" (p. 20). With

phenomenological research, we are trying to "break free and see the world afresh" and

shed the assumptions we make about them, engendered by a lifetime's reception of the

culturally/societally offered symbolism that helps us categorize and understand our lives

(Crotty, 1998, p. 86). However, the point of phenomenological research is not to separate

itself from culture entirely; rather, phenomenological inquiry emphasizes "engagement

with lived experience, toward a more 'existential' phenomenology in which the

individual is engaged in and with a social world" (Yanow, 2006, p. 12). If

"phenomenology is the science of the essence of consciousness" (Smith, 2007, p. 191),

then phenomenological research is aware of the following two steps in experiencing a

phenomenon: "First, every experience, or act of consciousness, is conscious: the subject

experiences it, or is aware of performing it. (some mental states are not conscious; they

are not the concern of phenomenology). Second, every act of consciousness is a

consciousness of something: in perception I see such-and-such, in imagination I imagine such-and-such, in judgment I judge that such-and-such is the case" (Smith, 2007, p. 191). The essence with which phenomenology is concerned is "prereflective" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 47). In other words, first comes the experience and realization of experiencing it; second comes the reflection on the essence of the experience beyond the everyday level. Thus, phenomenology acknowledges the social world surrounding a phenomenon but strives to understand the moment of consciousness at the time of engagement with the phenomenon, rather than the post-reflective-understanding impinged upon by cultural symbolism and training.

The principal thing that separates phenomenology from other forms of qualitative research is that it is not concerned with "taking the place of the other. [That tenet] is not central to phenomenology" (Crotty, 1998). Rather, phenomenology is "largely focused on how perception, thought, emotion, and action are directed toward things in the world … and thus the meaning things have for us in different forms of experience" (Smith, 2007, p. 193). Things are foundational and understanding how we perceive them is phenomenology's intention.

For Van Manen (2014), "doing phenomenology means to start with lived experiences, with how something appears or gives itself to us" (p. 32). Van Manen further explains it in this way:

> phenomenology is the project that tries to describe the prereflective meaning of the living now. However, phenomenology is also aware that when we try to capture the "now" of the living present in an oral or written description, then we are already too late. The moment that I stop and reflect on what I am experiencing

in the present – this moment inevitably becomes objectified – it turns from the

subjectivity of living presence into an object of reflective presence. (p. 34)

This means that in examining a phenomenon, awareness of consciousness is paramount,

so that we can recognize the difference between what constitutes our understanding of a

moment as it happened and the later meaning we make of it in reflection. Jones et al.

(2006) point out that most scholars today believe that the ability to actually "bracket" our

understandings and preconceived notions is not possible, and we therefore strive to

thoroughly understand them and make ourselves aware of them, so that we understand

the way they "influence our interest in a particular phenomenon" (p. 49). Creswell (2013)

also points out this potential difficulty, and suggests, instead, "suspending our

understandings in a reflective move that cultivates curiosity" (p. 83). Recognizing the

difference allows us to most closely capture the moment of happening, or the essence, of

the phenomenon. Following are studies exemplifying the effective use of this

methodology.

Howard (2002) conducted a phenomenological study on an experience she had

undergone and which was common to teachers: the everyday-yet-uncomfortable

experience of undergoing a teaching evaluation by the school's principal. Howard

described the phenomenon as something all teachers endure, breaking it into its general

"collective shared" experience: how often it happens, at what times of year, and in what

parts of a teacher's career (p. 51).

After laying out the basics of the phenomenon, Howard broke down the

experience of the phenomenon as it had happened on a specific occasion during

Howard's teaching life. Howard described the events and feelings as they occurred

during each section of the evaluation: The Anticipation, The Preparation, Feeling the Look, Becoming Object, Being Measured, Regaining Subjectivity, Getting the Evaluation. Howard described, in detailed present tense rather than as a reflection upon its later meaning in context, how it felt to get the note from the principal indicating that an inspection was coming, and the emotional state of receiving it: "Myself, I feel confident in my abilities, and comfortable with my students. So why the uneasiness? What is gnawing at me? I am surprised at how ruffled I am feeling" … "Yet, at this moment, I do not feel very sure of myself" (p. 51). These five sentences are a quintessential phenomenological description. There is no attempt to explain in hindsight why Howard was feeling this way. Note the lack of anything like an "I was feeling this way because of…" clause in the description. During the description portion, at no point does Howard move into past tense and attempt to provide post-event meaning-making. Not until the description of the phenomenon's essence is complete does Howard become the scholar looking for themes and meaning.

In the penultimate portion of the essay – Afterward – Howard returns to an explanation of the phenomenon as it happens to many teachers, explaining the evaluation form and the numbers associated with an evaluation. While it remains in the present tense, it again becomes "we" and is characterized as a commonly experienced phenomenon, including a description of what teachers do with an evaluation once received (stick it in a drawer, keep it hidden, don't mention it), and how the relationship, for many teachers, commonly changes with an evaluator. For the final section of the essay – What Has It All Meant? – Howard separates from the event and examines the data, reflecting on it, characterizing themes from the phenomenon, ascribing meaning to

the daily lived events experienced by teachers, and analyzing, as the chosen focus of post-reflective understanding, a single pertinent characteristic of teaching evaluations: being reduced to an object in order to have competency judged, and the resultant change in behavior, demeanor, and effectiveness (Howard, 2002).

Howard's essay, while short and very incisive, is a perfect example of phenomenological writing and thought. The essence of the phenomenon is gathered through description of the recollected moments of the event, conveying those parts of the event available to the five senses, and those thoughts occurring as a result of the events at the time they occurred. Howard, despite being both the experience-er of the events and the later reflector on the events, kept the two separate.

Van Manen (2014) points out that "phenomenology tries to distinguish what is unique" (p. 85) without reaching the point at which "a phenomenon is no longer recognizably what it was" (van Manen, 2014, p. 85). Li (2002) studied what makes classroom conversation a distinguishable phenomenon from discussion or lecture, with teacher participants relating their recollections of classroom experiences with discussions that became conversation.

Li gathered stories from high school classroom teachers and students about moments in their classrooms when a classroom discussion became a conversation. Passages such as this exemplify the teachers' stories: "This is when Richard, who usually sits in class with a detached gaze, suddenly became animated. He blurted out that it is hard to talk with your parents when they start relaxing with drinks as soon as they come home from work."…"The effect of his sudden outburst was amazing. Abruptly the whole class was quiet and looked at him" (Li, 2002, p. 87). The teachers did not use present

tense the way Howard did, but their statements still had the feel of a story told as it happened. Li analyzes the teachers' lived experience descriptions of classroom conversation for understanding of the nature of conversation as distinct in quality and structure from other kinds of pedagogical talk that might occur in the classroom.

The conclusion in Li's phenomenological study establishes that classroom conversation is a unique phenomenon distinct from other classroom techniques, and considers how the phenomenon is born from other forms of communication in the classroom. Li concludes that the singular phenomenon of classroom conversation has pedagogical value and may be an effective communication tool for certain topics, creating a sense of personal, shared relevance.

Data Collection

In phenomenological inquiry, the primary method of data collection is the phenomenological interview (Merriam, 2009). I conducted phenomenological interviews which "focus[ed] on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Van Manen (2014) detailed the approach to collecting data which focuses much more closely than we normally do on daily experiences. In eliciting the "living details of this lived experience," a researcher engaged in phenomenology will be able to interpret the essence of a phenomenon as the participant experienced it (Van Manen, 2014, p. 34-35). Creswell (2013) offers two broad questions which must form a part of every phenomenological study: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?" and "What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?" (p.81). Phenomenological questions try to get to the essence of experiencing the phenomenon at

the moment that it actually happened: "'What is it like to sip coffee?' 'What is it like to daydream?' 'What is the nature of conversation?' 'How do we experience a memory from our youth?' 'What is it like to share looking at water from a bridge?'" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 35). These questions guided me in the types of questions I used for data collection (see Appendix C).

Moustakas (1994) characterized phenomenological questioning as a request for the participant to "immerse him- or herself in incidents that stood out in the experience" of the participant (p. 67). In keeping with this tenet, I sought stories which were told from the point of view of the moment they were experienced, guiding participants to avoid making meaning from a perspective of looking backward. Jones et al. (2006) specified that collecting data in phenomenological research should emphasize "getting at the core and structure of an experience, rather than a conceptualization of it," concentrating on the "everyday and ordinary occurrences in human life and on generating thick description" (p. 49). The phenomenological interview is the most relied-upon and comprehensive form of data collection, but Creswell (2013) pinpoints observation as another possibility for phenomenological data, which I used in creating descriptions of the athletics/academics environment. All of the learning specialist participants' workspaces were inside the athletics facilities, and I accepted tours of the academics/athletics facilities, in order to understand the physical context of the phenomenon.

Participants. I spoke with nine learning specialists, all from Division I Power Five institutions, with varying levels of experience in the profession – from just under a year to ten years - and of varying ages ranging from late 20s to late 50s. Four of them worked within organizational lines in the academic affairs office; the other five worked in

units that answered to the athletic director. Since phenomenology concerns itself with understanding and describing a phenomenon from the participant's point of view (Mertens, 2010), participants come from a group of people who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009); however, only in this sense is the group homogeneous. The pool of participants should otherwise be heterogeneous, and should consist of 3 – 15 individuals (Creswell, 2013). Jones et al. (2006) recommend a small number of participants, not usually in excess of ten, and in this study I spoke with nine participants. Since the phenomenological focus is on "the living of lived experience" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 13), participants will have experienced the phenomenon as a part of everyday life, in order that the researcher may study the participants' "conscious experience" of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). Further, human beings who are experiencing the same phenomenon will tend to create "shared meanings" by using similar thought processes and using similar language in understanding the experience of the shared phenomenon (Yanow, 2006, p. 14).

Sampling. Sampling for participants in a phenomenological study involves identifying a phenomenon of interest and then identifying individuals who have experienced the common phenomenon in the course of daily life (Creswell, 2013). Because the phenomenon in this study is one that occurs similarly at multiple sites and across every region of the United States, participants do not necessarily have to come from the same institution, although doing so does not preclude their participation because each participant's lived experience of the common phenomenon's essence will be different, even if they work in the same space. Since the phenomenon is common across higher education institutions at the Division I FBS level, having participants from

multiple institutions is also appropriate. Since I worked in the field of student-athlete academic success for a number of years and attended conferences and professional development opportunities, I know enough learning specialists from different institutions to employ purposive sampling within a designated and targeted group of individuals.

Recruitment. Upon requesting and receiving Institutional Review Board approval to collect data (see Appendix A), I contacted learning specialists at NCAA Division I Power Five institutions and garnered nine participants fitting the established parameters. Given the public nature and intense scrutiny placed on athletics Division I Power Five, the institutional and public power of administrators and coaches at this level, and the potential risk to the learning specialists' jobs or ability to comfortably do their jobs, participants stipulated a very high level of confidentiality prior to agreeing to participate, so, in addition to the names and locations of the institutions, the name of the conferences in which the institutions compete remains confidential. Further, any reference, even at the vaguest level, which might allow a reader to identify any of the institutions from which the participants came, has been generalized. All institutions represented here are from one of the major Division I Football Bowl Subdivision athletic conferences known as the Power Five.

After initial contact and explanation of the nature of the study and its purpose, nine participants agreed to be interviewed. Given the nature of their work and the high expectation of confidentiality, every participant chose a pseudonym. The crucial similarity among the participants, as required by the phenomenological nature of the study, was that they all had lived experiences with the same phenomenon. Each participant chose to be identifiable by gendered pronouns, but all other demographic

information was agreed upon as confidential, in order to protect the identities of the

participants, with a single exception: one participant wished to be explicitly identified as

a person of color, and I complied with that request in the findings section.

Site selection. Although I was willing to use snowball sampling should my own

contacts not provide enough participants, I was able to get enough participants by acting

as gatekeeper and directly contacting colleagues via email. Upon receiving permission to

interview (Creswell, 2013), I was able to conduct the interviews in all but two of the

places of employment where the experience of the phenomenon takes place. The final

two interviews were conducted by phone due to time constraints for the participants.

Participants in the final interview chose to be interviewed by phone in a group, as they

were at the same institution and shared with each other the information regarding the

contents of my recruitment email. Each of these participants took turns telling individual

stories of the phenomenon during the phone interview. After the phone interview, I used

a Facetime video call with participants so I could observe the space in which they work.

My decision to find study participants among learning specialists at Division I

Power Five institutions was both practical and context-oriented. Division I Power Five

institutions are the biggest schools with the highest athletics budgets, and, logically, are

therefore the most likely to employ extensive numbers of staff, including learning

specialists, in their academic success units. As a phenomenological context, these are also

the highest-profile institutions in collegiate athletics, the ones bringing in the most

revenue, and the ones that most frequently occupy the airwaves every week. Anecdotally,

logic suggests – borne out by personal experience and conversations with learning

specialists and academic staff members from multiple institutions - that the higher the

exposure, the higher the pressure for coaches and athletics departments to succeed, for student-athletes to perform well athletically and academically, and for learning specialists to ensure that those who are academically at-risk remain eligible to compete.

Interviews. In qualitative methodologies, interviews are often the principal method of data collection, allowing for a comprehensive and accurate picture of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Collecting data via interviews typically requires face-to-face conversation between a researcher and a participant. We use interviews to learn how people experience the world, and when we cannot glean data from observation (Merriam, 2009). Interviews provided the data in this study since they allowed for the best understanding of the essence of the participants' experiences. Interviews done in depth will result in stories that will be rich repositories of understanding and interpretation (Mertens, 2010). An interview in phenomenological methodology should be "an informal, interactive process and utilize open-ended comments and questions" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Creswell (2013) recommends that any questions must "focus attention on gathering data that will lead to a textual and structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants" (p. 81).

Van Manen (2014) described the phenomenological interview as serving "the very specific purpose of exploring and gathering experiential narrative material, stories, or anecdotes that may serve as a resource for phenomenological reflection and thus develop a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon" (p. 314). Interviews should be done in a place that is most conducive to remembering the experience (i.e. a hospital room if the phenomenon is the experience of an illness), in a spirit of friendliness

and trust (engendered by the researcher), in an un-rushed environment, and should remain focused on the particular experiences of the phenomenon under investigation, using recorded conversation (Van Manen, 2014). In each of the interviews for this study, the participants were in the work space in which they met with student athletes. Van Manen (2014) offers further examples of questions which lead very specifically to the experience of the phenomenon, such as the following: "When exactly did this happen? What were you doing? Who said what? And what did you say then? What happened next? How did it feel? What else do you remember about the event?" (p. 316). Particularly important is not to request "interpretations, explanations, generalizations, speculations, or anything that may get away from the telling the experience as lived through," and, rather, detail "concrete stories of particular situations or events" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 316-317).

The most important thing to remember in phenomenological interview is to glean the participant's experience of the lived experience as it happened (Van Manen, 2014). The participant is telling the experience, not the meaning. To that end, my interviews began with a conversation establishing the purpose of the interview and of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013), and some practical matters to establish parameters of the individual situations (e.g. the organizational structure of the academic success unit: is it under the academic affairs line or the athletics line). Following the initial conversation establishing the nature of the study and, where possible, friendliness and trust (Van Manen, 2014), the questions became the "What is it like…" variety, as referenced above. The job of the researcher is to elicit the experiences the participants have had with the phenomenon; thus, a listing of phenomenological questions ahead of time, beyond broad questions establishing an idea of the participant's context within the

phenomenon (organizational situation of athletics versus academics, sports competed in, basics of participant's daily interactions), were not likely to remain usable, since each participant's individual experiences within the confines of the phenomenon would be different. Opening questions to establish the factual information surrounding the phenomenon fell along these parameters:

- Tell me about the athletics department.

- Tell me how the academic success center is situated in athletics.

- Tell me about the people who work here.

- Tell me about your job

Following these kinds of questions were the types of phenomenological questions as outlined by Van Manen (2014):

- What is it like working at your job?

- Tell me about a time when…

- What was it like…

- When did it happen?

- What was your role in it?

- How did that feel?

- Who said what?

- What was it like to…

The questions for my interviews evolved based upon the stories and personal experiences related by the participants, and were constantly redirected through the course of the interviews to return and adhere to studying the phenomenon under discussion. When participants veered into interpretive territory, I asked questions to bring them back

to the phenomenological nature of their experiences. All participants gave informed consent, and interviews were recorded for later transcription and analysis.

Li's (2002) study, as outlined above, used this type of interview effectively. Clark (2011) used phenomenological interviews to great effect, garnering vividly expressed experiences of bodily shame and heightened self-consciousness from women who changed clothes in public spaces like fitness and recreation centers. The women told their experiences in recollected detail, describing both their surroundings and their feelings and thoughts at the moment of changing clothes. Clark connected the socialized and objectifying view of women's bodies with the experiences these women describe as they recount being seen naked and feeling immensely vulnerable because of it. The vivid phenomenological interview passages weave together with the theory and author's interpretation, creating an effective picture of the affecting phenomenon.

Robinson (2015) used phenomenological interviews of graduate students describing their lived experiences with supervisors and mentors. Robinson gleaned recollected detail from the participants, who principally relied on descriptions of emotions and thoughts, as the space was not unusual and did not need significant description for conveying understanding. The words "hallway," "classroom," and "meeting" were enough to convey the surroundings, while the thoughts and emotions resulting from disrupted relationships and intimidating encounters provided the crucial phenomenological data. This strategy was in keeping with the strategy I employed for my study. While surroundings were not the principal driver of the phenomenon, they did form a backdrop that was telling within the confines of the research question, so I made note of them.

Observation. Observation often forms a primary source of data in a qualitative study (Merriam, 2009). Since Creswell (2013) specifically noted that observations could form a useful secondary data collection method, I used observation of space as a source of data since it could contribute to the understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Observation is the "act of noting a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer" (Creswell, 2013, p. 166). I made note of surroundings during face-to-face interviews, asked for descriptions from the phone participants, and viewed their surroundings through a Facetime call. Observations of interactions between people was not possible, as confidentiality extended to the fact of participating in the interview, and I met with each participant during a time when students, coaches, and non-learning specialist coworkers would not be present. Given that parameter, I tailored the questions accordingly and relied on participants' stories of interactions to interpret that aspect of the phenomenon.

Skogen and Mulatris (2011) used observation in their study of racialized immigrant student teachers' experiences of hospitality in Canadian schools. The authors described the participants' postures, expressions, and body language as they answered questions, and interacted with their surroundings and other people. The observations were effective in that their descriptions of bleak expressions, struggles to understand and read, and hesitation in speaking conveyed a heightened and vivid sense of the feeling of being *other* and being viewed as foreign to their surroundings. While it was not possible to interview my participants while they were interacting with students, given confidentiality concerns, I was able to observe the surroundings in which they experience this day-to-day

phenomenon, and to observe their expressions and body language as they presented these spaces to me.

Extensive observation also formed a part of Rugseth and Oyvind Forland's (2015) study of an obese man's practice of martial arts in spite of the common perceptions surrounding obesity and the capability/desire/need of obese people to exercise. Rich, thick description of scenes observed by the author formed a colorful backdrop and elicited keen visuals of the participant as he took part in a martial arts class. The author's purpose was to examine a rare side of obesity research: an obese person's experiences as a willing, eager, and capable participant in physical activities. The descriptions of both the participant and his surroundings while at the dojo provided an effective companion to the participant's phenomenological interview about his experiences with martial arts and exercise. The counterpart in my study was the tapestry of institutional branding and athletic achievement that formed the spaces surrounding the work of academics within athletics.

Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) sums up data analysis: it "is the process of making sense out of the data" (p. 175). In qualitative inquiry, data analysis pares down rough and unstructured raw data into logically-organized themes and coherent findings, and then presents the findings in a form that works with the study and the data (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis usually means "a process of moving from concrete words and categories to more abstract ones" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 169), and requires a constant forward and backward flow "between inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning, between descriptions and interpretation" (Merriam, 2009, p. 176).

In phenomenological data analysis, we lay bare our preexisting set of views, opinions, presumptions, prejudices, and philosophies, in order to understand the influence their presence will have on our understanding of the phenomenon we are studying (Jones et al., 2006; Van Manen, 2014). The "abiding concern with a basic experience," for phenomenologists, is "getting at the core and structure of an experience, rather than a conceptualization of it" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 49). Steps in phenomenological data analysis reflect this very deliberate awareness of consciousness and of influences on consciousness.

Creswell (2013) delineates the steps in this way: "Building on the data from the first and second research questions, data analysts go through the data (e.g. interview transcriptions) and highlight 'significant statements,' sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (p. 82). The researcher then uses these statements, sentences, or quotes to write a thematic description of the participant's experience. The statements also provide the tools to write a physical description of the surroundings and "context" within which the experience occurred, and which had an influence on the way the participants "experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). Writing, according to Jones et al. (2006), is the crucial activity through which researchers discover and reveal the structure at the core of the phenomenological experience. Drawing themes from the data requires extensive close reading of the interviews, and requires writing and rewriting (Jones et al., 20006).

Theme, in phenomenological analysis, differs from the way theme is used in other qualitative methodologies (Van Manen, 2014). In fact, "codifications, conceptual abstractions, or empirical generalizations can never adequately produce

phenomenological understandings and insights," because, in phenomenology, the goal lies in "recovering structures of meanings that are embodied and dramatized in human experience" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 319). Thematic analysis, or the act of analyzing a lived experience, does not follow rules; rather, it relies on "insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 319-320).

Van Manen (2014) outlines three reading strategies, in order, for finding themes in phenomenological data: the wholistic [sic] reading approach, the selective reading approach, and the detailed reading approach. First, we use wholistic reading to see the text in its entirety, exploring for "eidetic, originary, or phenomenological meaning or main significance of the text as a whole" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 320). We move to selective reading and identify particular "statement(s) or phrase(s)" which seem to reveal the essence of the phenomenon in a particularly pointed fashion, then attempt to encapsulate their meanings with rich, thickly descriptive paragraphs (Van Manen, 2014. p. 320). We keep, in their original form, essential passages from the original text which seem particularly insightful or essential to understanding the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 2014). Finally, in detailed reading we are looking at every sentence in conjunction with the surrounding sentences, and finding their importance to uncovering the fundamental essence of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2014). I used these strategies in my analysis of raw data, first taking the document as a whole, then identifying important phrases that revealed the essence of the phenomenon. Finally, I read the sentences with their surrounding structure, seeking to further enhance the meaning of the phenomenon.

It is in this way that a researcher can "focus on methods of understanding from the perspective of the actor in the situation" (Yanow, 2006, p. 13). Included in the phenomenological writing is the researchers' description of their "own experiences and the context and situations that have influenced their experiences" (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). Creswell recommends that these personal reflections by the researcher be placed at the beginning of the phenomenology or be inserted into a "methods discussion of the role of the researcher" (p. 82). This took on particular importance in this study since my interest in exploring this phenomenon was based on my own experiences within the athletics/academic world. In the study on women's perspectives of changing clothes in public spaces, Clark (2011) effectively wove descriptions of her own impressions of these spaces into the descriptions from other women, creating an indelible impression of understanding between the author and the participants. Similarly, Howard's (2002) study offered a personal perspective on the common phenomenon of teachers' reaction to being under the watchful eye of an evaluator.

Research Goodness and Quality

In positivist and post-positivist research, scholars have traditionally depended on "the benchmarks of 'rigor'" as the foundational criteria for what constitutes good research: "internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity" form the backbone of verifying that research can be relied upon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112). The data is testable and quantifiable, and can be generalized to demonstrate a singular Truth (Guido et al., 2010). In interpretivist research, the quality of the research is dependent upon the validity of the data's trustworthiness and dependability (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Evaluation of a study is crucial to finding the validity in the

research (Creswell, 2013). In phenomenological research, specifically, a layer is added –

that of originality, precision, and exactness (Jones et al., 2006; Van Manen, 2014), which

in turn leads to the uniqueness of phenomenological validity.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in interpretivism contains several criteria to confirm the inquiry's

goodness or quality: credibility is the counterpart to internal validity in positivism,

external validity's counterpart is transferability, and dependability and confirmability

parallel reliability and objectivity, respectively (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These criteria

can be satisfied through "methodological adequacy, theoretical sufficiency, and analytic

exhaustiveness" (Guido et al., 2010, p. 7). What this means is that the chosen

methodology must be adequate for the study and for exploring the research question(s),

the study must satisfy the demands of the theoretical underpinnings, and analysis must be

thorough to ensure that all evidence has been gleaned from the data. Trustworthiness

represents the multiple steps an interpretive researcher must take to "ensure their efforts

are self-consciously deliberate, transparent, and ethical" (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 101).

Congruity and consistency are important aspects of the trustworthiness of a study (Jones

et al., 2006).

Evaluation of this study's trustworthiness was accomplished using the following

processes outlined by Creswell (2013): rich, thick description (providing the reader an

opportunity to decide on the transferability of the data); peer review or debriefing

(employing an auditor from outside the study to examine the research and pose queries

about its various parts, keeping "the researcher honest" (p. 251). I employed a form of

member checking, as well, although not within the usual understanding of the phrase.

Van Manen (2014) cautioned that the usual methodological sense of the term is not applicable to phenomenological inquiry. To use member checking to ensure accuracy based on the participants' explanation, opinion, or post-experiential reflection, or to ensure that the researcher's interpretation jibes with the participant's own, would invalidate the purpose of a phenomenological study. In phenomenology, a researcher will not use the member check to ensure accurate representation of meaning as understood by the participant, because "phenomenology studies the existential meaning structures of the phenomenon" being examined (Van Manen, 2014, p. 348). Given distinction, I reserved member checking only to ensure that an experiential moment had been reproduced accurately, and to ask questions if data analysis revealed gaps in the experiential account (Van Manen, 2014). I employed this phenomenological style of member checking in two instances, using a phone call to check a portion of a story that had not come through on the recording.

Dependability

Dependability is the qualitative equivalent to reliability in quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Rather than the expectation of reliable stability over time, dependability reflects the belief that change can occur, but it will be accessible, identifiable, and available (Mertens, 2010). For example, when emerging patterns in the data suggest changes or additions to the research, dependability allows for such additions, as long as the reasons for and process of change is transparent and available to the reader of a study (Mertens, 2010). The form of dependability in this study was the concern for maintaining the "living sensibilities" of experiential accounts: to maintain the data as "prereflective" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 55). All data used for this study was of the

prereflective variety, with one exception: I asked the participants to explain their motivation for continuing in their jobs. That question did not form a part of the data of the study, but was included as a post-findings coda.

Originality, Precision, and Exactness

A phenomenological study's validity "has to be sought in the appraisal of the originality of insights and the soundness of interpretive processes demonstrated in the study" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 348). Van Manen (2014) warned that a predetermined way of validating the data restricts the data; therefore, validation criteria themselves must undergo methodological validation (Van Manen, 2014). Van Manen's warning means that, for example, "rich, thick description" must be validated by its originality and insight before it can validate the study. This also means that theoretical parameters must be decided after data analysis. Therefore, I determined the liminal themes applicable to the phenomenon after data analysis.

Precision and exactness play a role in phenomenological validation because it is essential that an existential experience be reproduced as closely to the way it was experienced and was subsequently presented by the participant, in order for the study to remain phenomenological (Van Manen, 2014; Yanow, 2006). The following questions may form a part of the evaluation of a phenomenological text, which exemplify the need for originality, precision, and exactness (bold and italic emphasis original):

> **Heuristic questioning**: Does the text induce a sense of contemplative wonder and questioning attentiveness – *ti estin* (the wonder what this is) and *hoti estin* (the wonder that something exists at all)?

Descriptive richness: Does the text contain rich and recognizable experiential material?

Interpretive depth: Does the text offer reflective insights that go beyond the taken-for-granted understandings of everyday life?

Distinctive rigor: Does the text remain constantly guided by a self-critical question of distinct meaning of the phenomenon or event?

Strong and addressive meaning: Does the text "speak" to and address our sense of embodied being?

Experiential awakening: Does the text awaken pre-reflective or primal experience through vocative and presentative language?

Inceptual epiphany: Does the study offer us the possibility of deeper and original insight, and perhaps, an intuitive or inspirited grasp of the ethics and ethos of life commitments and practices? (Van Manen, 2014, p. 356)

Study Overview

This qualitative study used an interpretivist paradigm and a phenomenological methodology to inquire, from the perspective of the learning specialist working with academically at-risk, athletically crucial student-athletes, into the prereflective, recollective, lived experiences engendered by living and working in the space at which the demands of college academics and the pressures of college athletics intersect. The study focused on learning specialists who had al had experiences in Division I Power Five institutions, as the most scrutinized, highest budget, and most visible institutions in college athletics, to ensure that the foundational phenomenological experience has the necessary similarities between participants. The study functions as a means for

understanding the common daily working experiences of an understudied population of

student affairs professionals, and, in so doing, will provide insight for other professionals

in their efforts to more effectively serve this student population.

CHAPTER IV

THE PHENOMENON: LIVED EXPERIENCES
IN LIMINAL SPACES

The purpose of this study was to understand and provide a transferable, informed, and learned perspective of the daily phenomenon of working in the space between two powerful, ostensibly cooperative but often competing interests: major university undergraduate academics and big-time Division I athletics. I collected data through participants' stories of past experiences, told in a relived manner to capture their essence as they occurred, in keeping with phenomenology. The following research questions drove my study:

Q1   How do learning specialists experience the daily interactions, happenings, and environment of academic success work with academically at-risk student-athletes in Division I college athletics?

Q2   What are the contexts and situations that have contributed to the learning specialist's experiences in working within the phenomenon created by the daily overlap of college academics and college athletics?

Q3   What is it like to work in the atmosphere and environment of NCAA Division I athletics as a learning specialist professional?

The findings represent the daily lived job experiences of nine learning specialists: Melissa, Marco, Anna, Jody, Ellen, Bill, Jose, Penelope, and Kathleen. Eight spoke at length; one, Penelope, joined the phone interview briefly before she went to a meeting.

Themes

Several conceptual themes help to explain the experience of liminality in this phenomenon. These themes reflect the uncertainty and sense of discontinuity consistent with daily entrenchment in this liminal space.

- Dissolution of order

- Dislocations of established structures

- Reversal of hierarchy

- Uncertainly about continuity of traditions and future outcomes.

In many cases, a situation described by the participant has had a liminal effect reflecting multiple themes. Each of these themes often also contain one or more subthemes, explaining the reactions of emotional unease characterizing daily exposure to liminality:

- Loss of meaning

- Ambivalence

- Disorientation

- Stressed and emotional reactions.

Not every participant experienced the same levels of emotion; however, each thematic finding contained at least one negative emotional reaction, and typically more than one. These themes and subthemes of liminality assisted in analyzing and explicating the findings of this study.

To establish the phenomenon's physical parameters, I discuss first the learning specialists' physical work spaces, which were, without exception, housed in some portion of the athletics facilities, which contributed to the experience of liminality associated with the phenomenon. Next, I offer participants' stories of their daily lived experiences,

organized thematically by liminal effect. After the four thematic sections, I offer a section containing stories of occurrences that helped to diminish or reduce the liminal sense of the phenomenon.

The participants' stories recounted the academic influences surrounding their work with student-athletes: experiences with faculty, syllabi and course demands; their students' reactions to classroom atmosphere; and the sometimes overly supportive offers of assistance from faculty. Participants also delved into their experiences with their unit directors and advisors. Most cogent for the sense of liminality, the participants discussed coaches and coaching staffs and their influence on student-athletes and on their experience of the job. Some stories reflected supportive positives, including coaches employing punitively-based support, caring about student-athletes, and acting generally in support. However, many stories contained significant negatives influences on liminality, in which coaches' lack of emphasis on academics was reflected in their athletes' attitudes and actions, and in which coaches placed the onus for academic success on the participants instead of their students. Participants discussed the differences between coaches as a major influence on the phenomenon.

Findings

I spoke with nine learning specialists from Division I Power Five institutions, with varying levels of experience in the profession – from just under a year to ten years - and of varying ages ranging from late 20s to late 50s. Four of them worked within organizational lines in the academic affairs office; the other five worked in units that answered to the athletic director. All of the participants' working spaces were housed either in a competition area or in buildings housing practice facilities, administrative

offices, and coaches' offices. All participants stressed that absolute confidentiality,
beyond gender pronoun use, and, in one case, a wish to be identified as a person of color,
was paramount, given the possibility of athletics administration, coaches, press, or fans
reading anything identifying them or their institution. Stories that would have served well
in exemplifying the situation had to be redacted because the incident they referred to had
been in the press. In one case, a participant related a funny, endearing story about a
student-athlete, and then told me I could not use it at all because "everyone in [this town]
will know who I'm talking about," and she hadn't even given the student a name or
indicated what sport he played. That concern from all of them was my first clue that, by
the end of my study, I would find that this phenomenon constitutes a difficult liminal.

Table 1

Participants

NAME	STATED GENDER PRONOUNS	YEARS IN PROFESSION	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	NCAA LEVEL & UNIV TYPE
Melissa	She/her	10	MA	DIV I FBS; R1
Marco	He/him	1	ABD	DIV I FBS; R1
Anna	She/her	4	MA	DIV I FBS; R1
Jody	She/her	2	ME	DIV I FBS; R1
Ellen	She/her	4	MA	DIV I FBS; R1
Bill	He/him	11	MS	DIV I FBS; R1
Jose	He/him	1	MA	DIV I FBS; R1
Penelope	She/her	6	BA	DIV I FBS; R1
Kathleen	She/her	1	ME	DIV I FBS; R1

The learning specialists participating in this study told stories, got mad, laughed, shook their heads, smiled, grimaced, gesticulated, leaned back, furrowed their brows, leaned forward, hemmed, hawed, and talked. They recounted stories of spaces, people, attitudes, pressures, frustrations, love, triumphs, satisfactions. Their words were a story of many places that were really only one place: the space between college athletics and college academics.

**The Academic Spaces in
Athletics Places**

I visited five of the participants' places of work. The other four spoke with me on the phone in two different phone interviews, but after the interview we used Facetime to show me the facilities. Given the high bar for confidentiality, I cannot provide a detailed description of each space without potentially revealing the participants' identities. However, the spaces were similar in that each academics unit was housed inside the athletics facilities, and carried the same hallmarks described below; therefore, I describe all of the facilities as a single space, leaving out any potentially identifiers. Unlike the stories told, the facilities finding could be broadened, beyond the confines of these interviews, by visiting the campus maps and athletics website photos of the academic areas at other institutions matching the parameters of the institutions in the studies: Division I, Power Five institutions, of which there are 65. With little variation, my description fits any of the Power Five schools at which the academic facilities are in the athletics facilities, whether a stadium, arena, practice facility, or other competition venue.

The athletics facilities are huge and imposing. They're welcoming and intimidating at the same time. They tell fans of their teams that they should please come

in, sit down, be loud, be as exuberant as the colors bedecking the seats and walls; they tell the other team's fans they had better watch out. No one can walk into them after hours without having a pass or a door opened for them from the inside. Many internal areas require a pass at all times. During business hours, the doors are open to the main areas, but non-athlete students seldom go into the facilities, thinking they are not allowed. Most of the facilities are away from campus, covering several acres of one corner or the very edge. Athletics facilities often have their own cafeteria spaces. At many campuses, it's a decent hike to the libraries or the classrooms or the campus cafeterias; the people here do not seem to be a part of the people there, although they wear the same colors and sing the same song. The athletics spaces feeling inaccessible to all but student-athletes, and the rest of campus being far away, enforces athletics' dominance and the liminal feeling of being between academics and athletics while in the academics spaces.

Inside these imposing walls are the academic spaces devoted to student-athletes. Except for the colors and the specific dimensions of the spaces, the academic areas are remarkably similar at institutions across the country, helping make the liminality similar from campus to campus. To even get to the marginally more academic-seeming spaces requires a walk past impressive athletics spaces, oozing with reminders of the school's athletic identity and layered with the imprint of the money it took to build them. In the academic areas, school colors wash across the walls. The academic spaces are new and modernly open, with windows making up one wall and letting in the light that washes over adjoining courtyards, or football stadiums, or practice fields. Couches and comfortable chairs intermingle with tables and chairs and computer stations; students may also sit in smaller glass-enclosed rooms whose doors dot the lengths of hallways or

whose window-walls look outside at the athletics grounds. Although the tables and chairs lend a studious air, the walls indicate athletics' space: always painted in bright school colors, they are festooned with reminders of past athletic glory. Even plaques indicating Academic All-Americans have pictures of athletics glory, mascots, or athletics slogans.

Learning specialist participants work in these ostensibly academic spaces. Athletics posters adorn the walls of many offices. The offices, unlike the spaces leading to them, have an academic feel. Academic supplies are readily available for students who need them. Whiteboards offer a hint of the kind of work that goes on in here, some blank and waiting to be filled but still carrying, just visible, faint ghosts of prior work erased into the realm of already-did, others alive with different color scribbles and notes and outlines of papers. Some desks are scrupulously tidy, reflecting daily purging prior to off-hours; others bear the burden of thoughts and to-dos and never-ending tomorrows of work to be done. Second or third or fourth chairs sit in the offices, designated for athletic bodies to take their places and do academic work. Some offices have both a desk and a table; in some students sit at the desk opposite from the learning specialist. These small academic spaces add to liminality: they exist within enormous spaces in complete opposition to them in size, in money spent, and in purpose.

It was summer when, physically and virtually, I visited each of the spaces. Without the students, there was a temporary sense of large-space quiet. According to the participants' stories, the peace is broken when students arrive, and the rooms become a study in controlled turmoil, with each learning specialist hopping and sliding from student to student as three or four of them sit in the room, each with different needs, familiar with each other, frequently interrupting studying to tell stories of practice or

games or to say hi to the teammate walking down the hall. The academically at-risk students in those chairs will be mostly young men of color playing in the revenue sports, struggling day after day with college-level work for various reasons, whether learning disabilities, lack of preparation, elevated athletic identity, or lack of efficacy about academic ability. Each day, learning specialists will meet them and guide them through the academic demands that they must navigate in order to keep playing the sport they love.

Not only do learning specialists work within an athletics setting, but student-athletes are surrounded by the markers of their athletic identities and within easy reach of athletics interests at all times they are working on academics. Almost the entirety of student-athletes' college experiences can be had here, including dining, making it almost unnecessary to leave the athletics facilities except to attend classes. The academic setting within the athletics facilities creates a liminal space in which academics and athletics attempt to exist simultaneously, with academics never able to fully command attention because it is intruded upon by the athletics opposing force at all times.

The participants, in walking me through the facilities in which they work, remarked on the newness of the facilities. Obviously, a great deal of money had been spent making these facilities up-to-date and as enticing as possible, yet the athletics trophy cases and slogans emphasized old, long-held athletics traditions. These facilities enhanced a sense of between-ness as pride in the physical new and allegiance to the traditional old put me in two spaces at once.

Participants proudly showed me both the athletics and academic spaces. I went with one participant out onto the football field, a storied venue in college athletics. Other

participants showed me athletics practice facilities, team meeting rooms, trophy cases, and athletics and academics plaques. In every case, participants were proud of the athletics facilities, and their tours had the distinct feel of showing off. In touring the academics facilities, some participants indicated that they wished their offices were a little bigger because they have multiple students in them at a time, and they also remarked on the placement of their offices. One participant, Marco, talked about the positioning of his office back in a corner, and he wished it would be out more in the middle where other athletes could be inspired by the work of his students. Melissa's glass-walled office was out in the middle and she laughingly talked about how everyone who walked by it could look into it. Several of the participants - Anna, Melissa, Marco, Kathleen, Jody - described the banter between the students working in their rooms and those walking by.

The fact that the athletics facilities are much more extensive and opulent than are the academics spaces, that the participants have to walk through them to get into the academics spaces, and that the academics spaces are covered in reminders of their position within athletics, reflects two of the themes: a reversal of hierarchies, and dislocation of established structures. The broadly accepted principal mission of colleges and universities is academics, which takes precedence over any other activity or pursuit carried out within their walls. Other pursuits are important, but academics tops the hierarchy and is the established principal reason for being. Both this structure and hierarchy are understood within the nature of the learning specialist's job, and they are also contained within the title of the population learning specialists serve: student-athlete. However, the studied phenomenon creates a definitive dislocation and reversal. The

impression generated by the overwhelming emphasis on athletics is one of the importance of sport, despite the stated hierarchy of the jobs of both learning specialists and student-athletes being academics first, athletics second. The hierarchy is reversed by the size, effort, and financial resources put into athletics, reflected, for example, in the plastic chairs furnishing the learning specialists' offices and the leather chairs in the team meeting rooms. Prioritizing the hierarchy in its supposed order becomes difficult when the importance is so evidently placed on the reverse order, which also dislocates the structure of priorities, resulting in the subtheme of disorientation.

Liminal Space

Understanding the phenomenon lies in understanding the liminal space in which learning specialists work. In every academic endeavor, athletics makes an intrusion. Academics can seldom be fully attended to because athletics has access to and influence over them: athletics interests, especially coaches, dictate the importance placed on academic success, and also dictate the amount of time and energy student-athletes and, in turn, learning specialists can put into academics. While faculty are supportive of student-athletes' academic endeavors, and academic center directors are very helpful in clearing the way for learning specialists to assist student-athletes with academics, athletics coaches and, to some extent, athletics academic advisors, under the influence of coaches, emphasize athletics needs as a priority, which never allows the space to be purely devoted to academics. Learning specialists, hired to ensure academic success, must bow to the dictates of athletics, creating a daily lived experience of liminality.

Each participant had experienced some conflict between helping students academically and ensuring that they met sports demands. Marco gave the phenomenon a

fitting description, explaining it as a "polarity, [or] you can even say conflict" in the

interactions between athletics and academics, and even in the word "student-athlete." He

described his frustration in

> constantly trying to get them to get out of the [athletics space]. To go, as they say,
> on campus. "I'm sorry, we are on campus too." "Oh, yeah, you're right." But it's
> always on campus. Someone will send an email [to me], "I have a meeting on
> campus." "Well, you're already on campus. Just tell me what building you're
> going to." Let's not act like we're not part of the community. We are. Quit trying
> to isolate. And so I'm always pushing them—

When I asked Marco how that felt, he said, "I guess I feel conflicted. I feel conflicted

because what I do know is while I'm trying to get students to engage with other resources

on campus besides what's available here in this building, I also know their coaches don't

want them to."

He described an athletics spaces comfort zone for athletes, supported by coaches

who discouraged athletes from studying or seeking resources on other parts of campus,

although Marco encouraged it, wanting athletes to join the campus community. Marco

continued:

> Because as I've heard them say, "Everything you need is in this building." That's
> not true. That's absolutely not true. But they're encouraged not to get away from
> their teammates because of team culture and accountability. So you shouldn't
> have friends that are just artists. You shouldn't hang out with the writing group on
> Fridays because you should be in the [athletics space].

Anna described being told by coaches that a recruited student-athlete was only

valued for his athleticism, and that he couldn't succeed academically. However, they

gave her the responsibility to make sure he did. Her voice grew strident and hard as she

related that moment.

Melissa, who used the phrase "push and pull" to describe the job, told a story about a student who had been told, by everyone, that he didn't need to put effort into academics because

> Since he was in college, people have been telling him, "You're going to go pro. You're going to go pro." And the draft came this year, and he didn't even get signed as an unsigned free agent… last I saw, and he was driving a Range Rover that his sports [agent] bought him, wearing Louis Vuitton, and didn't graduate because he didn't do any of his classes. And now, here he is, and I'm like, "You have a kid. What are you going to do with your life now?" And then, in the spring, he came back, and he's like, "Well, I'm going to try to graduate." Well, at that point, he had dug such a big hole in his GPA, in order to graduate, he had to go a full 'nother year because he just needed to get his GPA up to get back into the program to then take the classes he could take.

Jose described the emotional difficulty in letting go of a student who didn't make it academically and was summarily dismissed from his team. Jose had had professional experience in the high school setting, and described the difference: "it's a little bit different, a little change of mindset, because in high school, I guess, the student's always your student regardless. Here, if they're not doing their job, no matter how much we help them, there could be an end of the line." He described being moved on to other student-athletes and having to just put the former student out of his mind because that student-athlete no longer existed for Jose.

Frustrated with the perception about the student-athletes he worked with, Marco described encounters with the public asking about his job:

> If you live in [this city] or anywhere in [this state] and you tell someone that you work for the athletic department, it's kind of a big deal. And so, "What do you do?" I tell them, "I'm a learning specialist. I work with students at risk of dropping out for grades or students diagnosed with learning disabilities and I help them learn how to learn and I teach them and get them to learn why they should care. Why does education matter? That's my job." And then frequently, the response is, "Oh, I bet you work with a lot of football players."

Marco objected to fans automatically thinking football players are dumb and don't care about school. Fans prioritize athletics, yet are demonstrably derogatory toward athletes being students, especially revenue athletes. Marco told the story of his only football player:

> I work with nine different sports. Men and women. Racial and ethnic diversity on my lists. I only have one football player. One. And he's going to graduate in December. He's really smart and he has a vision for what he wants to do in the future. He's going to probably go to the League and he knows it and he has a plan. He's getting his education, and he cares, because he wants to create a nonprofit community center that will support and educate poor people to do things that will earn them money. I was like, "What is that?" He goes, "I don't know yet but I need to help people learn how to do things." He's not sure what it all looks like yet but he's thinking about scales. He's going to do it in his neighborhood first back home. And then he's going to build it nationally. Then he wants to go global. But for some reason, he's dumb. People think he is.

His frustration was palpable in the moment, as he leaned forward and clenched his teeth. His gestures grew more emphatic, yet his face softened when he talked about the player and his plans for an altruistic future. Jose described the relationship-building and the space that learning specialists create for the student-athletes to be students, athletes, and human beings:

> We wear maybe the most hats, I think. Is that weird? I think work with our students, there are times when they're in great moods, bad moods, they're homesick—they got dumped or they dumped somebody or somebody bashed them on social media. So we kind of deal with it all. We don't do it from just a sports end or just [the] academic end. We kind of do it all. So most of the time, players will come to our office. They don't come in and right away start working. The first thing is, "Hey, how's it going? What's up? What's new?" Kind of make conversation first. … They … have our office where they can get to work, roll up their sleeves and also kind of open up, lean back and share what they have to say regardless of—they don't have to worry about who's here.

Marco found himself, at the outset of the job, without a clear picture of his daily work. He asked, during his interview for the job, how they knew their program works. The interviewers gave a very general response:

> Their answer was graduation rates. That is the one that matters. So if you're on scholarship then you count toward the graduation rate. …What I've come to learn is that my purpose is to make sure that these student-athletes remain eligible. And eventually if they remain eligible, they'll graduate. But it's not about graduation. It's not even really about learning. It's about 2.0 or better. It's about advancement toward a degree. It's about maintaining one's eligibility. And that's what happens with [that one sport]. It's all about the eligibility. It doesn't matter that I'm working with someone who now has a junior standing who is a sociology major, let's say, and doesn't know shit about sociology. This person is going to end up with a degree in sociology from a R1 institution. What's the problem with that? Well… the problem is I also have a degree from this institution.

In essence, Marco was told that his job was to help students maintain eligibility to play their sport; he was told to do the job to benefit the sport, not told how to do the job to benefit the student.

The day-to-day experience of the job, described by each participant, lies in welcoming, bringing, cajoling, pursuing, ushering academically at-risk student-athletes into their offices and working with them one-on-one to assist them in achieving the academic success that will allow them to continue competing in their sports. While working through syllabi and assignments and success strategies, they spend each day navigating the competing demands of coaches and battling the students' desire to focus on sport rather than academics. The liminality characterizing the phenomenon can be most clearly seen by understanding how the stories fit into four dominant themes of the liminal experience.

Dissolution of Order

In this theme, the participants felt as if an existing order of things had been dissolved and, therefore, no longer applied nor could be used to understand or do the job. The reaction was frequent loss of meaning and/or disorientation, and the occasional descent into ambivalence.

Dissolution driven by students. Melissa went into the job with the idea that the students would be motivated to do academic work because they're college students. She thought she would see Bs at the lowest. She didn't expect any of the student-athletes to be anywhere close to ineligibility, or below a 2.0 GPA. So she expected her first student to "do great things." Instead,

> I thought they were going to be really motivated, and we enrolled him in his first class…it was a summer class…[he] was only taking one. And he sits down and he says. "The book's hard." And I said "what do you mean the book is hard?" He said, "I can't read my book. Can you make me read my book?" "No." And you know it was just like I don't know what the hell I got myself into.

A strong feeling of order dissolution accompanied this statement. The student was defying her authority while going against his interests as both an athlete and a student, since he could not play his sport if he didn't do his academic work. With the dissolution of the expected order came a sense of disorientation and a stressful feeling of trepidation about having taken the job.

Most of the participants had a similar moment: realizing that many of the at-risk students cared about school only in its importance of keeping them athletically eligible. Melissa kept hearing, from students on the revenue teams, "'You know we're all going pro. We all don't need these [academic] skills.' But most of them are a long ways from it." Then she smiled and said wryly, "But I learned, real young, you're not going to win an argument with an 18 year old who thinks he's going to the NBA." She had experienced a dissolution of order as the students negated several kinds of established order: first, academics being more important than athletics; second, that a student graduate from college before seeking a job. Her emotional reaction, however, was past the point of disorientation and, instead, she expressed ambivalence. She no longer

wanted to try to convince them that academics were important; she would just continue doing her job because she knew academics were important.

Jody echoed Melissa's refrain: "Now, you're always going to have the ones that are like, 'I'm going to make it pro. I don't need this,' but it's always like, 'You could blow your knee out tomorrow, knock on wood.'" Jody had experienced the same dissolution of order as Melissa had: athletics being more important, and pursuing a pro career before succeeding in college. Jody describe the frustration of trying to convince a student who didn't try academically because he thought he was going to the NFL, at which he ultimately did not succeed:

> He very much struggled academically. He was not a strong student. I don't think he came from a good home life, but these people have been telling him forever [he'd go pro]. No one was honest with him and said, "You need to have a backup plan," and then, if I tried to tell him, he wouldn't listen. I'm just some academic person who doesn't know anything. He need[ed] this backup plan, and it was sad to watch. I don't know where he's at now.

The established order feels dissolved. The participants knew the appropriate order for student-athletes, even Division I, is to prioritize academics because the odds of making it to the pro ranks are miniscule: under 2% in football and basketball (Estimated, 2018), yet these students reverse the order and work toward a professional athletic career. The emotional reaction for both Melissa and Jody was resigned ambivalence. The students were convinced they were going pro no matter the effort by the participant. Jody also had a stressed emotive response to her student discounting her encouragement to study for his own good, in that she found it "sad" to watch him fail to go pro and have nothing to fall back on, even though she tried to tell him.

The thought surfaced for Kathleen, "I remember working with the student and just feeling at times that maybe I had failed, like 'okay maybe I should have seen this

coming.' At times I felt I had more care and concern than the student themselves did."

Ellen had a similar moment:

> I get to points where it's very frustrating that I feel like that I care a lot more than the student cares. I will talk to them about that, "Why am I feeling like I am caring more than you're caring in this situation." With [one] student it helped so they are good conversations because I care and I hope to motivate them. I think being new in the field too, I have to remind myself constantly that, in the end, it is his job to figure this out and I'm here to help him but if he doesn't want to do it that's not my fault. I think I feel that a lot and I'm constantly reminding myself that it's not my fault.

Both these thoughts represent dissolution of order. They expect student-athletes will care about their academic outcomes, and the dissolution of order, and resulting disorientation, came from the feeling of caring more about their academics than they did, and of putting in more effort than the students were. Each of them had the disorienting and stressful feeling of self-blame, although they knew the student was ultimately responsible for caring and putting in effort.

Jody described a particularly contrary student whose resistance to academic work caused problems for him, and whose behaviors later caused him to be cut from his team:

> He disrupted study hall constantly, very much an attitude problem, [and] had ADHD. Got him tested and then he would complain he couldn't study because he had ADHD but wasn't willing to take the medication, wasn't willing to use the accommodations, just expected them to be given to him by the teachers. In the first semester, the teachers did give them to him, and he didn't even have the official documentation. And he did very poorly that semester, and the second semester we put him in lockdown. He had to go into his own private room to do study hall, and he would fight that every day.

This student strongly contributed to a sense of dissolution of order for Jody. She offered every kind of support and follow-up available to her, but it did not make a difference. Every intervention fueled reasons to complain, contributing to dissolution of her sense of the job's parameters. In striving to provide interventions, and being rejected constantly,

Jody experienced stress and frustration. While talking Jody sighed and shook her head. This was the only student about whom she did not express fondness, although she tried very hard to work with him.

Ultimately, the student's behaviors caused him to lose his spot on his team, which was the one area about which he showed enthusiasm and willingness. Jody described a feeling of defeat that she could never manage to get through to him. He had potential to be a very successful student, and she never was able to figure out how to help him or why he struggled: "I could tell him yes and give him what he wanted, and he still had to fight with me. I'm like, 'I just gave you what you wanted. What do you want me to do?' I was never right. He was always right." Her frustration was palpable, and, while she had expressed sadness at the plight of the other student who was sure he would make it to the NFL, she expressed ambivalence about this student after trying so hard and being constantly rebuffed. She was ultimately glad to see that he got kicked off the team because, despite her love for most athletes, this student pushed her so far into the sensation of liminal space, with his extreme emphasis on sport and his refusal to accept her help, that she lost her sense of concern and caring for how he did. She did not dislike him and she hoped he did well, but she was happy to let someone else take over dealing with him.

Multiple participants had had students who did not let on that they were struggling. They said they were okay and just sat down and did their work, and it took awhile to realize, said Kathleen, "at the beginning of the semester that his smile and an "I'm okay" wasn't actually, "I'm okay." Sometimes, however, Kathleen said, students would ask for too much help:

> I had two students. They truly, truly struggled with reading and they were at senior in college level classes. Their instructors expected their reading skills to be there and they expected their information gathering skills to be there, et cetera. Hours in my office. They would interrupt me with other kids, which got to be annoying, I had to tell them to knock it off. [They'd say] "I can't do this, I need your help." "Okay, just… you have to wait five minutes, I'm doing this." Man, there were times that it really, seriously felt like I was pulling teeth to help them get it done and pulling my own hair out because one of the hardest things for me is not helping too much. …It would literally go phrase by phrase. Section by section. It was so hard.

The hardest thing for her was to watch them struggle and know that she couldn't offer help. She had been an educator for a long time, and her instinct was to help them, and she couldn't. She was experiencing the dissolution of order that came with constantly being careful to adhere to NCAA rules against extra benefits for athletes and too much assistance. The students were struggling and she couldn't do what her instinct told her to do about it. Her stress and emotional reaction took the form of frustration and helplessness.

> Jody described a student who went in cycles:

> I had one of my students who commonly missed study hall, and when he was doing bad, it was not like, "I'm going to do bad in one aspect of my life." It was either he was 100% good in every aspect, or he was 100% bad, and he would spiral out of control. So, if he was missing tutoring, I knew he was missing class, which meant he was going to be late to practice. And then he had a [punishment], and that was the end of him being late.

Jody was experiencing the dissolution of order that took place when a student began to struggle. If he made the decision to miss study hall, the entire order would dissolve and he would miss all academic requirements and be athletically delinquent, as well. Jody had to rely on the punishment from the coaches to know she would see him again for academic work, which contributed to the dissolution of order by making her authority ineffective.

Jose had a student on the edge of ineligibility who went home near the end of the summer term and just did not complete his work. Jose had to come to the realization that he could no longer work with nor care about the student academically:

> I was working with him throughout the summer. He needed a C to stay off probation. So he didn't finish a paper. He went home for the [end of] summer, and returned and he had a D. He got expelled. He could not rejoin the team. As summer progressed, I thought we made a lot of good progress. [It] was frustrating because he left and went down south instead of finishing the paper. He turned it in late, it was a rushed effort, and it was a bad grade. I guess when it happened, that was very frustrating because once he got his status changed with the athletic department, he wasn't allowed on the facility … and I kind of had to step away from him immediately. So that was a hard thing to adjust to, I guess.

Jose had to face a dissolution of order in realizing that working with this student academically was entirely dependent on the fact that the student was an athlete, and he was not allowed to continue a relationship with a student if he was no longer an athlete. The sense of dissolution, however, was more dependent on the intensive nature of the learning specialist's work with students than on the fact of the student being an athlete. The student could not even enter the facilities, so the relationship ended precipitously after working very closely. Jose suffered loss of meaning as an educator: he had been unable to educate the student about the importance of on-time submissions or quality work. While it adds to the liminality, however, this particular situation is not unique to athletics. Anytime a student fails and is expelled, the educators who had contact with that student feel a sense of loss. The sense of liminality was rather more enhanced by the relationship's intensity than by the fact that the student was an athlete.

Academic sources of dissolution of order. Sometimes the source of order dissolution came from the academic side of the liminality, which learning specialists are

involved with on a daily basis as students return from classes and the learning specialists

go through homework and exam preparation with their students.

Assignments. Kathleen told this story about a sociology assignment:

The prompts for this individual's papers were longer than the papers she was requiring to have written. I am not exaggerating. The students were expected to write an essay of approximately a page long. … The prompt for writing it was two full single sided pages.
The kids just come in and go, "I don't have any idea what I'm supposed to do." I'd be like, "Okay, let me grab my highlighter," and I'd start reading and think, "What the hell is this?" That's incredibly frustrating to me, because the kid's looking at me like, "Please help me decipher this," and I can't decipher it [either].

Kathleen expressed frustration with the assignment; however, she had not attended class

and the students had, so the root of the frustration probably came from trying to decipher

an assignment the students should have known better than she did. Despite this moment

occurring within the phenomenon's space, the frustration is not directly attributable to the

athletics/academics liminality. All students in the class received the same assignment. An

argument could be made, however, that the athletes knew they had someone to help them

decipher the assignment, so they didn't feel the necessity to pay close enough attention,

which would be attributable to the support systems set up in athletics that are not

available to other students. A dissolution of order would result because the student-

athletes skipped over a portion of the learning and counted on someone else to fill it in

for them. Kathleen experienced stress as a result of this.

Classroom. More than one participant described students coming back and

expressing substantial anxiety or disappointment about occurrences in the classroom, but

Anna qualified such interactions with something of a caveat: "I don't necessarily always

see the positives, 'cause obviously my students don't tell me a whole lot about having a

good day in the classroom. It's usually when they're having a bad day that they stomp into

my office." Stories arose about their students' identities in the classrooms, and Anna

described a situation in which the course grade is 1/3 participation, and her student had,

many times, been the only black student in a classroom. She recounted listening to their

frustrations about being "the only person of color in their entire class so they're expected

to answer for their entire race," and her reaction in that moment is that

> they come in and they talk to me about that, then sitting here realizing that I don't know what that looks like. I don't know what that feels like. And realizing empathy is the only option I have in working with my students in those regards and figuring out how do I help them participate? … And they look at me and go… "I don't know what to do."

Her emotional reaction to this situation, which she describes as happening to

multiple students, is frustration, in trying to figure out how to be sympathetic and at the

same time help the student navigate the situation because they are at risk and cannot

afford to lose those participation points. Her expectation of proper order is that all

students would be treated equally by faculty in higher education, and that sense of order

is dissolved by her students' stories.

She describes the aftermath of these encounters with students in her office, feeling

as if she needs to do damage control, and wanting to advocate for the students, but not

wanting to drag students in deeper than they wish or need to be:

> this is the fifth time we've had a student with this professor and they always go to the black kid in the class to answer all the questions and going…this is not just this individual student. They're getting called out by this professor because you're an athlete and she can't stand athletes. Even though I know it…I don't want to belittle a faculty member to the point a student no longer [respects them]…I don't want to add to it. I've heard the same story 15 times from 15 different students all saying the same damn thing.

Anna specified that the incidents have happened with the same professor, and she

speculated that the professor hates athletes. She did not indicate why she thought so but

pointed out a pattern of calling on athletes of color to speak for their race. If this could be demonstrated to only occur with athletes, then it could be said that the faculty member was directly contributing to the strain between academics and athletics. That is not demonstrable, but the athletes feel that they are being asked to speak for their race and they are complaining about it to Anna. Therefore, these incidents do contribute to the feeling of order dissolution for Anna, because of her assumption that it has to do with the students' status as athletes, and faculty are supposed to value and teach students equally. The sensation of liminality and accompanying stressful feeling comes from her belief in what her students tell her and her assumption that it is related to their athlete status.

A similar story came from Jose, regarding a student-athlete who was the only student of color in his class:

> I had a student that had missed a class and it was his fault he missed it, missed once or twice I think. … But the professor did tell the advisor that he missed. The only way he knew that he missed was because he was a big minority player in that class, he was the only minority in that class. So his absence stood out. So I thought that was a little BS. But it is what it is though.

Jose had experienced some dissolution of order, in that such singling out is not supposed to happen and he felt it happened because the student was obviously, from his size, an athlete and he was a student of color. Jose demonstrated a response of ambivalence when he said "It is what it is." He is letting it go because it is not going to change. Both of these participants were disgruntled by their perception of student-athletes being singled out because of race. However, Jose also said, in the next breath, "For the most part, yes. They are treated fairly [by faculty]. It's not a disadvantage in being an athlete." While this situation is troubling, it cannot definitively contribute to the liminality just because the students were athletes. The fact that athletes, as pointed out in the literature, often form

the largest racial diversity group on a campus, means that an incident like this may very well happen to a student-athlete, but may not occur intentionally because of athlete status.

Avoidance of athletes. Some experiences of order dissolution in connection with faculty were more pointedly athletics-related, however. Said Jody: "from my understanding in the past some of the majors had even raised their GPAs so that athletes couldn't be in the majors." Again, a sense of dissolution of the correct order of things – that faculty should care equally about, and offer equal opportunities to, all students – occurred here.

Advisor effect on order dissolution. The term advisor refers only to athletics academic advisors, unless otherwise noted. While participants made generally positive statements about advisors as a group, numerous participants described incidents in which individual advisors contributed to order dissolution. Since the advisors interact with the coaches and report on their student-athletes to the coaches, the learning specialists often had in-depth meetings with them, and, in fact, most of them described something very much like this from Jody:

> Whereas with the advisors, it's very in-depth, "This is what happens. This is what I'm seeing. This is a concern, or this is…" I've even gone down and been like, "This kid sat here for eight hours and didn't complain once and then thanked me for staying with him." And I was like, "He needs to be thanked for not complaining once."

Despite the positive-sounding nature of the interaction, the impression is that Jody is answering to the advisors, which contributes to the feeling of dissolution of order since she does not report to advisors organizationally, but is rather on the same organizational level as they are.

Anna told a story of a particular student-athlete who was extremely difficult,

resistant, and hard to work with, but when she expected help from the advisor, she said

> I don't want to say [he] bends to his coaches, but he bends to his coaches. God
> bless him, but he bends to his coach. And there have been times where I had one
> student in particular, a glorified asshole… there's no nice way to put it. In terms
> of, he was just a pain in the ass and I would tell this to [that advisor] and in no
> capacity or another did he ever—I never felt like he had my back in that regard.
> He's just like "Go figure it out."

Anna experienced a dissolution of order because the advisor was acting in the way coach

was demanding, when the coach was not his boss and did not work in the academic unit,

and did not have the interests of the student's academics as first priority. She found it

stressful in itself and also because she was already feeling the difficulty of working with

a recalcitrant student. She did not feel the expected support. She also told the following

story about the same advisor:

> [The advisor] won't even go to certain graduate programs [for his students to
> attend] because the frickin students piss all over it. And the coaches don't do
> anything about it. They keep abusing the system. [They're] going to run out of
> favors at some point in time, but here we go. It's just like, it is what it is. They
> don't show up in the morning, but they've got a paper and I have to wait till after
> practice, but it's my responsibility to stay. Honestly, it's not necessarily a
> personality conflict with [the second advisor]. I like him. [But] every time I say,
> "But would you please stop shitting on me?" [he just says] "Don't you know what
> it's like to have a coach shit on me?"

Again, she experienced the dissolution of order, but this time, it was because the advisor

deflected her request for support by indicating that he had no support from the coach,

implying that she should not expect any from him. The advisor did nothing to lessen the

sense of dissolution, instead heightening it by not taking her side in her protest about

staying well after hours. Despite her protestations of liking this advisor, the conversation

got decidedly heated as she spoke about him. She gesticulated and swore more when she

talked about him, and about the coach whose team he advised, than she did with any other story she told during the conversation.

Other advisors affected the day-to-day in similar ways. Several participants told stories about collaborations with advisors, and the results of those collaborations. One story from Jose:

> It's kind of a mixed bag. There has been times where you're being collaborative with an advisor and things have worked out. There have been times where we're both all hands on deck and then the advisor is worried about, more focused about the end result. Then they're questioning … maybe inquiring, about what I'm doing and how—Often their suggestions are how *they* would do it. Often a different approach.

Jose's experience reflects a dissolution of order, in that the advisor, who is not his boss, is telling Jose how he should do his job. Bill echoed that description: "I had advisors who were definitely over our shoulders asking what we were doing with the students. But, generally, we had pretty good rapport that if we said, "This is what I'm doing and why," we're going to get the space to do it." Jose and Bill were experiencing the same dissolution of order as Anna described, but they were not as upset about it. They were more ambivalent than stressed or disoriented, and were more sure that their way was the appropriate way, and they had the support to pursue it. So the feeling of liminality was not as strong despite a similar situation. The advisors might recommend a different approach, but the learning specialist felt comfortable rejecting the suggestion.

Coaches' effect on order dissolution. Coaches loomed large in the participants' stories. While the participants referenced coaches positively as a group, individual coaches were a significant contributing cause for the phenomenon's liminality, both in their influence on student-athletes and on the ability for learning specialists to do their jobs.

Coach influence on athletes. Melissa described the influence coaches have on the student-athletes, and how important coaches are to the learning specialist in being able to convince at-risk students to do academic work:

> But [the student would] just sit in here. He's like "you're the only one who ever cares [about academics]. You're the only one who ever fusses at me if I don't do my stuff." …So it's frustrating in that it was like okay [the coach is] threatening cause you know he's got to do it but there's no follow through. You know and in this field, coaches have the stick and the carrot.
>   It was so frustrating because there's always the false threat. You know, it's the parent who's constantly saying, "Okay, you're going to be grounded. You're going to be grounded." ….he knew full well going in there's no penalty and he'd sit in my office and be like "I'm only doing this so you get off my ass." [I said] "yeah, and you're doing it for you." And he's [saying] "nope, just so you get off my ass. They don't care what I do. Football doesn't care what I do."

This kind of influence from coaches – 1) allowing student-athletes to believe that academics are not important and 2) not assisting in holding them accountable for academic work – results in the order of importance within Melissa's job being dissolved. She feels she cannot stress the importance of academic work during academically-devoted time because the coach has effectively undermined its importance. This response from athletes, knowing they won't face consequences from coaches, made it difficult to do the job effectively with that coach's players. Melissa expressed stressful emotion in the form of frustration at coaches who, in her experience, would threaten a student but then would not follow through, leaving the student-athlete with the understanding that no one with any power was going to require him to do the academic work. As she spoke, she gestured from the doorway where a non-existent coach was standing, to the chair where the student-athlete would have been sitting, and her gestures became abrupt and her voice more forceful as she described the interaction. That reaction, with minor variations, accompanied many of the descriptions of daily experiences with coaches. The coaches

are the ones with the power to have expectations that will be followed, as Anna

summarized here:

> And until a coach says, "No… academics, they go here," like go at those level playing fields, it doesn't matter. Because I don't have that power. I don't have that authority. I can get to know them. I can do all these developmental pieces. But fundamentally getting them to buy in or even do it in the first place has to come from a coach.

Anna was describing the dissolution of the authority she should have in guiding the

students academically, yet she could not do her job effectively without coach

intervention. No matter how she stressed the importance of academics, the student-

athletes looked to the coach's level of academic commitment to determine whether they

had to do academic work or not. The order of academics coming first in academic spaces

underwent dissolution as academics were effectively subservient to athletics until a coach

prioritized them. In this situation, Anna loses the meaning of her authority to do her job,

and the tools she offers the students have no meaning as methods for helping them

achieve unless the coach has indicated that they matter.

   Putting the onus on learning specialists. Coaches would occasionally express

astonishment that someone besides the student-athlete hadn't taken on that student's

academic responsibilities, such as in this story from Bill:

> The coach was definitely like, "How the hell did this happen?" You know, ultimately, [he] knew it was her responsibility. But he felt that we should have been double checking, triple checking her and I was like, "No. She's a fifth year student and she knows what realities of this university [are] and she's either going to address it or she's got to ask for help in addressing it." We can't be treating her like she's a 13 year old anymore. …They didn't work with me anymore. I stopped asking them questions.

   Bill experienced a dissolution of order in that the expectation of college-level,

especially upperclass, students taking responsibility for their own work had been placed

on him. College students are expected to bear the onus for turning in assignments and doing routine college things, yet the coach expected that responsibility to be taken by the learning specialist. The job loses its meaning when, instead of guiding the students in learning, comprehension, and skills that will help them be independently successful academically, learning specialists are tracking assignments and ensuring that students turn them in. The situation caused a rift that involved no longer being able to enlist coaches' help, which created another dissolution of order: learning specialists expect to work with coaches as part of the team ensuring student academic success. That ability was gone because Bill enforced ordinary expectations applicable to every student.

Some coaches placed blame on the academic staff if their students didn't remain eligible. In telling a story about a player who struggled and had trouble with daily life and responsibilities, Kathleen said this:

> If he has a terrible, horrible semester and loses his eligibility, I could probably be questioned pretty thoroughly. I think they would come back at me going, "What happened? Why didn't this happen?" So I do recognize that that could happen, but it's not my job to make him pass. My job is to help him be as successful as he will allow me to help him be.

Kathleen was experiencing a sense of dissolution similar to Bill's. With this student, the coach's expectation was that she would "make him pass." She felt her job was to give the student whatever tools he would accept, and show him how to use them himself, not ensure that he pass. The coach thought she should do whatever it took to ensure he passed. The onus for the student's success would be on her. Again, the job loses its meaning.

All the participants gave some variation of the above statement about what their job responsibilities should be, yet implied strongly that some coaches seemed to feel it

was the learning specialist's job to make their athletes pass. Every learning specialist had multiple stories about the challenges that came with working with particular students and their coaches. One story was of a student who had come in as a potential star and had not panned out athletically. Melissa described mixed feelings: when he stopped playing, she felt bad for him, but she felt, at the same time, a sense that she would finally get to teach him how to be a student because the team didn't demand him so much anymore. In her words:

> We went round and round and I remember just sitting there about the first month, like "I don't know how we're going to get this kid to ever do anything." He has no skills, he's not willing to work on them, which to me is a bigger problem than not having them. And [football] needs him all the time. And then you know after we got about half way through fall camp and The D coordinator came in and said "he can't learn my play book." And then… I hate to say it for the student's sake because he never did see the field as much as he probably should have. But in that moment I was like "Yes! Now I can get it. We can look at bigger than football. Cause if he's no longer their immediate priority I can have him a little more. We can get him to do the things and at least build some skills where he's walking out of our door better than when he came in."

Melissa felt a dissolution of order conflict here because she was rooting against the student's success as an athlete in order to help him succeed as a student, which was clearly not what the student would have wanted. She was dissolving the order of expectation for the student, who wanted to be a successful college athlete, to ensure his future beyond athletics. She felt a loss of meaning on his behalf, because what it means to be a college athlete had been taken away.

Dissolution through perceptions and expectations of students. A significant dissolution of order occurred throughout the interviews, yet was unconsciously created and went unnoticed until reading through the findings. During the course of conversations, both the participants and I referred to student-athletes as "kids"

consistently and frequently, in discussing both individuals and the general population. None of us remarked on it, and none of us appeared to notice we were doing so. However, simultaneously with calling the students kids, we were discussing our expectations that student-athletes behave like adults. Participants repeatedly used the word "frustration" when referring to the non-adult behaviors of these "kids." Unintentionally, we were forming, displaying, and reinforcing a dissolution of order, in placing importance on behaviors that belonged at a maturity level we were not granting the people from whom we were expecting them.

Dissolution of order occurs because the between nature of liminality renders the expected order unclear or nonexistent. The learning specialist approaches the job with expectations based on the nature of the job, their own conviction of what is right for the students, and their understanding of the proper order of priority for college students. Each of these expectation of appropriate order is dissolved when athletics takes priority over academics, when students are not held accountable for their own work, and when learning specialists are expected to take over the responsibility for the routine everyday tasks expected of college students.

Dislocations of Established Structure

With the liminal sense of dislocation of established structures, the participants experienced the feeling that organizational structures and meanings previously in place and understood as unassailable had been moved or shifted. This dislocation was frequently accompanied by the feeling of disorientation, loss of meaning, and/or stressful emotions.

Dislocation of expectations. The participants recounted many stories of this kind of dislocation. Melissa came in over summer break as an intern with no experience, but with an education and a sense of wanting to help willing college students succeed, and was given a student without any instructions about what to do with him. That is, in itself, a dislocation of established structure, in that a person newly on a job has an expectation that structures are in place to provide her with knowledge of the job. She had to figure it out for herself. She had already described her expectation that student-athletes would be motivated to succeed academically, and would achieve Bs at the minimum. This same student who refused to read his book was her first student. She described the moment he walked through the door:

> My first student they gave me … he got off the plane, he came in my office and he was like "what the fucking shit is this." And I just looked at him and went "Okay." He had to register with our student services for disability and twice while we're walking over there he stopped to talk to girls. [I'm saying to myself], "I can do anything. I made a commitment. I can do anything." I was here for like two weeks and it was this time everybody's on vacation. I have no idea what I'm actually supposed to be doing.

Melissa was experiencing dislocation of established structure because her first experience was one in which the student-athlete demonstrated blatant disregard for the importance of academic work, providing her with a sense of dislocation of academics as first priority. Her emotional reaction was disorientation. She came into the job thinking she was equipped to succeed at it, but she quickly felt a disorienting sense that she had no idea how to do it.

Anna related a similar story about her first week as a learning specialist. She was new in the profession and hadn't been told how to really do her job, but she was eager to work with students, so she asked to be given a student. She was given an at-risk student.

She told the story of his first few weeks, her attempts to connect with him, and her

feelings of incompetence:

> The very first week, I was given his stuff, I was given his file. I was told all these
> things and I remember looking at this going what the hell did I just agree to get
> myself into. I want[ed] a student. They're like okay, "we'll give you him." And I
> was like, "great!" And then I started reading it going "can I do this? Do I have the
> abilities to do this by myself?" And the first six weeks, the kid wouldn't hardly
> talk to me when he came in. He'd do the work, he'd do whatever I asked him to
> do. …But for me, I felt like I was drowning, literally, with him. I don't know how
> to connect with this kid, he won't talk to me. …. Six weeks into school and he just
> blows up. And I'm going what the hell just happened. I had been struggling for six
> weeks to get him to even talk to me, then suddenly he's storming out. I'm sitting
> here going, they gave me one damn student and I've pissed him off, I can't
> connect, I don't know anything. They're never going to give me another student
> again. Completely self-doubt. I don't think I've even told him this, but that first six
> weeks, I think I called my mother crying basically every day going, I can't
> connect to my students, I can't do this … have one student, and he won't talk to
> me. And I don't know what I'm doing.

Like Melissa, Anna experienced the disorienting effect of dislocation of established

structure in being given no guidance for the job, yet entering the job feeling that she was

ready. She also experienced rapid disorienting change of structure. Initially, although the

student was assigned to her, he was unresponsive and wouldn't talk. The student had

established a structure of silence, during which he would work but not connect. He was

taciturn and Anna worked in a daily atmosphere of engulfing silence. Suddenly, the

structure was violently dislocated and the student stomped out. Anna was left feeling that

she couldn't do the job and that the job structure as established had been dislocated. She

had come in feeling competent and ready, and suddenly didn't feel she was capable of

doing the job, based on the explosive dislocation occurring with her only student. The

end of the passage describes an extreme emotive state in reaction.

Melissa also described rapid, almost ping-pong like, dislocation of structure. She

told the story of a student about whom the coaching staff was very enthusiastic

athletically, but they would not enforce his attendance because they were sure he would

"be [academically] fine eventually." They expected the student to emphasize football

and, once they didn't need him anymore that season, he would catch up academically by

the end of the semester. He was a very difficult student to handle, but they wanted him to

continue playing:

> I mean he was a kid who was a big deal and he had a whole slew of problems
> outside of academics, but academics was not a walk in the park for him either. …
> And it became very much the moving goal post of "get him to December." Then
> "Okay, well now we need him for the bowl game so we gotta get him to the
> spring." And it just became this kind of like hands-on always. And it was so
> frustrating cause… it would just be everything. I mean he was the kid we would
> fight and fight and go round and around about doing a paper. And then he'd get it
> perfect and he would work his butt off and he would be so proud of it. And then
> he would skip class and not turn it in. It was just one thing after another and then
> after that he wouldn't miss class for two more weeks. He would find something
> else to do. It was almost like a manic energy that just went in 55 ways that were
> all wrong.

Melissa was describing ongoing dislocation of established structures. Each time a

structure would be established with the coaches, the coaches would come back and

change the structure because of a new athletic need. And the student would also create a

structure and then dissolve it, over and over. He would fight about the work, then give in

and work hard on something and do it well, be proud of it. Then he would do something

to dissolve that structure and re-create the old structure. Such a constant battle was a

stressful, disorienting liminal experience for Melissa because she was always

experiencing the betweenness of inconsistency from the student: one day he was an

athlete who refused to do his academic work; the next day he was an outstanding,

hardworking, capable student, then the next day he was back to being recalcitrant.

The following story from Ellen highlights a related problem with a similar liminal effect. A student would be very confident at the start of the semester, and then things would begin to go less well, but he didn't seem to notice:

> I have had a student the past two semesters, he starts off very confident in his ability to succeed in the classroom and then does not put in that effort at all. And so, the advisor and I, the past two semesters, have had to be very hands on, team-oriented, to get him to stay motivated, to stay on track. Towards the middle of the semester he was failing two classes and had a D in another. He's still really confident which is confusing when you can literally see the grades. He was just in yesterday and we talked about, "Let's have a consistent 15-week, instead of 2-weeks really well and then taking a 10-week break and then taking it back up the last three… because it's happened the last two semesters."

The student had established the structure of his academic work by putting in effort and doing well, creating an expectation for Ellen of his style of work and success, and then he would suddenly reverse and dislocate the structure by ceasing to try. Ellen described a disorienting feeling, and a sensation of having to always be on guard against this behavior every semester.

Marco told a similar story about a student who kept getting himself into trouble academically, and how Marco allowed him to fail in order to convince him that there were more effective ways to go about studying:

> Stephen's problem is that he digs holes. Then, he spends all this time at the end trying to dig himself out of that hole. My idea isn't to, from the beginning, start pressuring him and making him do things, but instead to keep him tethered. Let him fail. Let him do what he normally does. Then, I can have a discussion about, "Remember when I mentioned the tutoring? Remember when I mentioned you should come in, we could do some flash cards? We could talk it out. Remember that? You said you were good, and I said we'll do it your way. This is the result of your way. Can we try my way between now and next weekend? Then, we'll reevaluate whose way we're going to do after that. Maybe we can take turns. Your way, my way, your way, my way, exam to exam.

Marco's experience of structure dislocation was in choosing to allow the student to fail in order to help him understand how not to fail. The student created a situation in which he

went against well-established structures of success, and then refused to allow Marco to show him a more effective way. Marco chose to allow him to do that, although he knew the student would get the grades he needed if Marco forced him to do the work, which was the established way to ensure academic success in athletics. Instead, Marco dislocated the structure, risking the student's overall success, to get the student to learn for himself what was effective and what was not.

Dislocation of established structures in k12. Jody, who has education and experience in special education, took issue with the lack of diligence from educators when some of her students were at the k12 level:

> I think the most frustrating part is when I get a student who I know has a learning disability, and I can tell it within the first 10 minutes, and they've gone 18 years without being diagnosed. At that point, I know their education has failed them because you've had more than 18 teachers, and not one of them could tell you that there's something here?

Jody was noting that k12 has structures in place to create equal opportunities for students with learning disabilities, and that often it is k12 teachers who initially notice and acknowledge a learning disruption and begin the process leading to testing and diagnosis, yet it had not been done for student-athletes who had gotten to the college level. She was feeling the stressful liminal dislocation of established structure because her expectation is that students will enter college having been diagnosed and given accommodations that would create better possibilities for academic success. As a former special education educator, she would particularly have a loss of meaning because she knows what to expect from the k12 system in this regard.

Some students come in drastically underprepared from high school, having benefited from a relationship which meant they did not their own work. Melissa related such a situation:

> I've had one tell me he had an arrangement with his high school English teacher and if he brought him French fries twice a week, he'd get his grade. And I was like "what are you talking about?" This is absolutely insane to me. So he sat down, and he was in college writing a bare bones 5 paragraph essay like my 2nd grader writes. And it was just okay. And he's like "well but this is how we get it done." No no no no no no no no no! This is how THEY got it done. Welcome to [this institution]. This is not how we do things here.

The dislocation of established structures in this situation, occurring even before the student came from high school, intensified the feeling of liminality at the college level. The high school English teacher, by allowing the student-athlete to, in essence, bribe him into giving him passing grades, had undone the expectation that k12 – an established societal structure – was responsible for a student's preparation for college, and created a situation in which the student came into college expecting work to be done for him so he could just play sports. This resulted in loss of meaning for Melissa, with high school as purposeful preparation for college academics no longer identifiable. The student-athlete had been reinforced in prioritizing athletics over academics even before coming to college, adding to the sense of liminality in college.

Participants shared stories of gaps in learning from earlier years of school. Students who had been admitted to college had not been taught how to read properly, had not learned how to read a syllabus or structure an argument, or had been given unfinished learning, resulting in incomplete understanding. Such academic difficulties manifested in unique ways:

> The weirdest one that I can remember right now is a student last spring. I was helping him writing a paper and he just kept getting stuck. We had the whole

> outline and he'd just say "I'm stuck." "Why?" and come to find out somebody in second grade [told] them you don't start sentences with "The." Nobody had corrected that. So he was trying to write a paper without starting a sentence with "The, and, or but." And I was like well you can start sentences with "The." He was like No. Yes. It's a weird mistake that they should have caught and fixed in 3rd grade but no one bothered to look closely enough at this kid. It took me a while to figure out. It's frustrating because this could have made your life so much easier and no one took the time to correct it back in 3rd grade. And then I pulled a book off the shelf. I said "look, your teacher assigned this book. It has 'Thes.'" In about 15 minutes he had a whole paragraph.

One dislocation of established structure here lay in the expectation that the k12 environment would provide a foundation of important educational building blocks, and then would continue to build on them throughout the student's time in k12. The second dislocation of established structure lies in the fact that an R1 university had admitted a student who did not have the ability, at the time of application, to effectively write a paragraph. Both expectations of structure were dislocated, heightening liminality and bringing a disorienting feel to working with that student.

All the participants spoke at length about students' lack of preparation for college-level work, and some had students who had come in without even the most basic skills. Melissa talked about computer skills:

> I mean it's ridiculous. It is 2019 and I have helped a student this summer learn how to use Microsoft Word. And it wasn't because he was using google docs. I mean he just had no idea. He would write it and somebody else would put it together for him. I was like I had better computer skills [when I graduated] in 2002 than you do today. With all the technology we have out there…

Again, the expectation is that the established structure of k12 will teach the student the skills necessary for doing even the most basic work in college, yet the student had been able to have the work done for him and not learn basic computer skills before enrolling in college.

One student-athlete was constantly misbehaving and being disruptive in Jody's room. When she called him out on it, she found out why:

> I had a kid that would act up in study hall every day, and I finally sat him down, and he was like, "I don't understand anything I'm doing. So, if I act up, I don't have to do my work." He admitted that because I finally was like, "What is going on?" And I was looking at his work, and I'm like, "You're not doing well in your classes." And he's like, "I don't understand." But [he told me] he's never been in a position where he's really had to understand.

The student had been a top player at his high school, and had not had to try scholastically. Again, the sense of established structure suffered a dislocation because the student had had his athletic ability catered to even in high school, which should have been the space in which he was being prepared for college academics. That contributed to the liminal feeling of dislocation for Jody once he began to be disruptive to avoid facing academic work he wasn't prepared for.

Dislocations of established time structure. Kathleen had a student, whom she described as "brilliant," who had such severe focus issues that he couldn't absorb any of what he was reading, so Kathleen fell back on reading his text to him, and he would repeat back what had been read, almost verbatim, until he lost focus, and then:

> So we would go like that for about 10 minutes and all of a sudden he would be playing with his phone or grabbing one of my fidget spinners and just be gone. I realized that I had to give him that time. I would watch the clock, it'd be about five to seven minutes, all of a sudden he'd look at me and say, "You can't let me do that, we've got work to do." And he'd put the fidget spinner back and we'd continue reading. It would happen seven times in an hour. He hated how he felt when he was on medication for ADD so he would not take it. He was just not comfortable in his skin [but] he made it, he did it. So many long nights, it was just insane. But he got there. We did it.

Kathleen's words contain an underlying sense of concern that the student would not be able to succeed, but they also contain a dislocation of established structure: she referenced numerous nights of working late hours. Disorientation accompanied this: "it

was insane." The student's inability to concentrate for more than a few minutes resulted in Kathleen taking on work hours far longer than the established number she was supposed to put in.

Anna, in her stories of having to wait until after practice to work with her football and basketball students on assignments due the next day, had the same sense of dislocation of established working hours structure. In another story of late hours, Anna expressed frustration over not knowing when she would work with a particular team, during post-season preparation:

> And so it was all basketball, all the time. Schedules changed all the time. They got to leave early, they got to go do weights, they got to do this, they got to do that. And [I'm] going, "And they have a three-page paper due at midnight tonight. Who the hell is going to get them done?" So if men's basketball don't get their shit [done], I have to be here. I have to babysit them, right, writing a fricking paper. So I'm literally just sitting here watching them do it [till midnight].

She was finally getting access to students near midnight. Added to the sense of dislocation was the fact that she didn't know when to expect this to happen. She had appointments set up with the students and their coaches would change schedules at the last minute, forcing her to unexpectedly work much longer hours than her established work time. The effect was disorientation and frustration for both Kathleen and Anna.

Reversed dislocation. Ellen related the story of a student who dropped a class because he was about to fail, took it again, and then did fail it, despite working diligently to pass it:

> I felt so sad watching it happen because he worked so hard. He goes to tutoring all the time. …His advisor and I communicate all the time and try to figure out if group tutoring, individual tutoring, whatever it might be to figure out what's best for him. I've worked really closely with our disability services center to make sure he's getting all the accommodations he is eligible for. He has note takers and extended time on tests. He is able to be enrolled in only nine credits instead of 12.

He works so hard. That is definitely one of those situations where he is probably my most motivated student. It's really hard to watch.

This situation creates a reverse dislocation of established structures, compared to the more common scenario related by Melissa: the expectation that student-athletes will be motivated to succeed academically and are not. In the case of Ellen's student, she describes a distinct and distressing sense of sadness when s student-athlete very badly wants to succeed academically, has been given all the tools, uses them to the best of his ability, but is still struggling to succeed. The established structure of academically unmotivated students has been dislocated, and the resulting liminal situation creates disorientation and intense, stressful emotion.

Dislocation through academic dishonesty. Participants found it discouraging when they had to deal with student-athletes' attempts at academic dishonesty. The intensity of the work with the students – many hours per week with each student, and the relationships they formed because of it – made dealing with the issue that much more difficult. Jody said,

> And that's kind of the sucky part of our job is, sometimes, you have to turn kids in, and you're like, "I like you, but I have to turn you in. This can't keep happening, and I have documentation to back it up."

From Melissa regarding multiple offenders:

> Ahhhhh. I mean you don't want to turn them in but you can't not. But [it's] "why are we still [cheating]? You have so many resources. You have all this stuff set up and this is what you choose." It's like the rich kid stealing something. He had everything, [so] "why are you doing this?" You know it's not a guilt trip of "oh do I turn them in or not?" No, turn 'em in. He had all this stuff and that's what you're choosing to do. You should pay the piper every time. So you just go in and [then] it's more frustration that this is what the kid keeps doing.

She described putting in all the work to help the student succeed, and, when they choose to cheat instead, her emotional reaction to it: "we do put the ball in the teachers'

court. and sometimes you just wanna be like 'nail him. Just nail him. That's how he's going to learn.'"

The instances of academic dishonesty after putting in long hours and effort resulted in feelings of ambivalence for both Jody and Melissa. It became difficult to care about the student's academic progress when they ignored the effort and cheated. This situation also resulted in the feeling of dislocation of established structures, as the learning specialists had to take on a role usually left to faculty: turning in students for cheating. This is also a situation not unique to learning specialists. Academic dishonesty happens on other parts of campus as well. It contributes to the learning specialist's sense of athletics/academics liminality not because of its uniqueness to student-athletes, but more likely because of its effect on the students athletically, and because it could create the potential for confrontation with coaches and colleagues.

Dislocation through academic structures. Another example of curricular frustration arose from testing, with Kathleen judging the exams based on the students' reactions to them. In this case, Kathleen responded to the students' complaints about their failing grades on an exam, and its difficulty, by generalizing, for the students, about faculty at a large institution:

> As an educator, I do get frustrated when kids come back and they have—"Well, my test in this class. Yes, it was multiple choice. There was a hundred [questions] to do in 50 minutes, …I only scored 30%." It was like how—How? … I personally get very frustrated. I have told the kids, "…This is just not okay. This is not good teaching." and I'll explain to them professors at university campuses are not always intentionally wanting you to learn. In a certain way, I want the students to realize it's not them. You know, you're not stupid because you can't take this test, and you're not a failure because this didn't go well. Now that I've been at it for a while, and they recognize certain people's names, it's like, "Oh, you have this professor. Okay. Here's what you got to do. You just need to know, this is what you've got to do to get through it."

The liminal sensation of dislocation of established structures to which Kathleen is referring in this instance is possibly more attributable, since she was formerly a k12 educator, to the feeling of being between k12 and college than being between athletics and academics, but the same premise from Kathleen's prior example holds: the student-athletes may have been relying too heavily on the academic support structures in athletics. Also, the student-athletes Kathleen is working with are at-risk, and may be more challenged by the academic work in that class than some of the other students who generally take that class. Kathleen is experiencing the stress of the liminal situation, but it is not directly applicable to the faculty member's exam, although she assumes it is attributable it to a general trait of some college faculty members.

Dislocation through assumption. Kathleen had a student with learning disabilities who had been described by coaches as "lazy," and she didn't agree with that label. She had this to say about him:

> one student… totally blew things off because he struggles so much that there are times he gives up. He is truly diagnosed learning disabled as well as attention deficit as well as a full-time athlete, and that guy works his butt off, and last semester he just kind of quit. What he did was quit showing up. He just didn't show up for meetings and didn't necessarily go to all his classes. [Now], I just know that he's turned over a leaf again, he's trying hard again this semester. I refuse to believe that it's just him being quote "lazy" because I don't see that. I see really frustrated, I see really defeated academically.

Her response was to break his requirements down so he could see it in little pieces instead of in what seemed to be an enormous pile. Then she helped him schedule when to do the work, and that was how he succeeded. Frustration at the idea that he might be labeled as lazy was evident:

> So the "quote, lazy," if you didn't know him and you didn't know his struggles, and you were just looking at the smiling face who's fantastic on the court but getting in trouble academically, many people would think, "This is a kid who

hates school and therefore he's being lazy and doesn't want to go to school, so he's just skipping school. He's sleeping in, he's being lazy." They'd blow it off as that because that's the simple answer.

Kathleen disagreed with the frequency with which coaches and fans would throw "lazy" out there as soon as a student began to struggle academically. While the established structure dictated validation and support of academic effort, it enhanced the liminality when it became dislocated as soon as a student who was gifted athletically showed a less than acceptable result. As a result of this dislocation of established structure, Kathleen felt extreme frustration and anger, when she was seeing a student who really was trying hard but was assumed to hate school or not care. Part of the dislocation for Kathleen in this instance came from her sincere belief in the fact that students have valid underlying reasons for academic struggles, which are not based on a negative choice by the student, as coaches and fans so often assume them to be.

Dislocation through team culture. Another struggle involved how to keep students doing academic work when the learning specialists can't be there to guide them, and it came down to the culture of the team. Kathleen related the following about team culture:

> With one of my teams, they say, "Yeah, the whole team studies on the bus." This is [one of the women's teams]. They have an amazing academic culture. "Yep, no, we all study on the bus, and we get a lot done. We just do it." Okay, cool. The [men's] teams have a little bit more of a struggle. I've had an argument with freshmen about the fact that "When you're gone, Thursday nights you should study. You should put in some time somewhere along the way." "Nah, we won't need to do that. It'll be fine." "Okay, when you're not doing fine, come back and tell me about that." I've just been really kind of blunt with them, because they seem to be ignoring me, so I'm being kind of blunt with them. I was like, "No, that's not going to work. You're going to fail. Okay, fail. Go ahead. I'll pick you up when you get back." I didn't really say fail [but that was the gist].

When Kathleen's students traveled, she was unable to meet with them face-to face, and the established structure of academic meetings suffered a dislocation. She experienced loss of meaning as to her job and her ability to be effective in it when she had no control over or influence on whether students were doing the work she felt responsible for, and she felt the disorientation of being unable to do her job effectively.

Dislocation through advisors. Learning specialists work closely with advisors, since advisors liaise with coaches regarding student-athletes academically. While advisors are a part of the established academic team concerned with ensuring academic success, advisors occasionally contribute to the liminal effect through dislocation of established structures. Anna's experience with an advisor who "bends to the coach" is an example of dislocation, since the advisor is actually deferring decision-making about academics to the coach, allowing the coach to dictate the structure of the relationship between Anna and her students, and between Anna and the advisor. Jody's reference to in-depth meetings with advisors, although positive-sounding on the surface, was also a dislocation of established structure since she was, de facto, answering to advisors about what she does in her job, instead of to the director, her direct report. In describing an incident with an athlete and a coach in which the learning specialists got the advisor involved, Bill noted, about the differences in advisors' personalities, "I think the advisors are all over the place. But they throw you under the bus." Despite being on the same level organizationally, the advisors can and will take the opportunity to place blame on the learning specialists, resulting in dislocation of structure and a feeling of ambivalence about members of the same team with the same supposed goals.

Dislocation through coaching staffs. Anna related dissimilar attitudes from two different head coaches: "but to his credit, they show up in my office every day, they're generally polite, they're generally respectful." That was in stark contrast to another head coach. When a student-athlete didn't show up to his appointment with the learning specialist, the coach's reaction was to take no responsibility: "Versus, from [the other coach], 'this is your frickin' problem.' And the coach won't do anything. … 'I'll deal with the basketball, you deal with school. It's not my problem if you can't get the shit figured out over here.'" This dislocation of established structure stemmed from the lack of assistance from the coach in enforcing academic work. While the situation is not ideal for students to have to be forced to do academic work, rather than being motivated to do it themselves, that was the established structure recounted by all the participants: since they had no power to enforce completion of academic work, they relied on the coaches to use, in Melissa's words, "the carrot and the stick" to enforce academic effort. Anna experienced a dislocation of structure when the coach refused to help in ensuring academic success.

Marco had a similar experience. A coach, who never required his athletes to put in academic study hall hours no matter their level of academic success, responded with derision when Marco contacted him with an urgent request to help find a student-athlete who had not shown up for academic meetings after placing highly in a competition at the national level:

> So trying to get this guy to come in and I'm in the academic advisor's office, the wrestling [team] advisor, and he gets the coach on the speakerphone and says, "Hey, we're looking for this student. Can you help out?" [The advisor]'s like, "We can't get him in here. He needs to drop this class or get his head out of his ass because last we knew, he's got a low F and he needs a C in this class." It's the student's responsibility to register or to un-register, withdraw from a course, not

> ours. We don't do that. This is about three weeks after [nationals]. This guy was one of the [high place finishers]. And all three of these guys that we are having trouble with, same thing. …The coach says to me and the advisor, "A couple of weeks ago, those guys were at [nationals]. They're [high place finishers]. I did what I needed to do for them, what's your fucking excuse?" That's what he said. And then he hung up. Not, "Hey, let me text him. Let me run his ass until he pukes. He'll be in there." Some coaches are that way.

Marco experienced the same dislocation of structure that Anna had experienced, receiving no help from the coach in enforcing something academically crucial. Particularly noteworthy in this case is that the situation Anna was referring to was one of attitude; the situation Marco related was about a very specific academic need potentially affecting the student's ability to compete athletically. The coach refused to help, putting both the student's academic and athletic future in doubt and leaving the academic staff responsible for both failures if they were unsuccessful, creating a very high-pressure and stressful situation for the academic staff. Although the incident was in the past, it had pushed Marco enough that his final words about it reflected a lingering sense of resigned ambivalence: "some coaches are that way."

The same coach, when one of his student-athletes skipped academic meetings for a week, did nothing to enforce the importance of the meetings, or make him go to them. During these meetings each week Marco required all of his students to go through their syllabi and fill out a sheet for that week's upcoming academic requirements, to learn academic accountability. Then Marco would assist the student in tracking and remembering everything they needed to do. This coach's student hadn't been in for his meeting to figure out what he had coming up:

> They were headed to the [conference championship], hadn't seen Student X all week, they're going to go get on an airplane. The coach texts me and says, "Hey, what does Student X have to do this week while we're gone?"
> I text him back, "I don't know."

He writes me back. He goes, "Why don't you know? It's your job to know."

I said, "It's not my job to know what Student X has to do this week. That is not actually my job."

He's like, "Well, can you send me his homework list?"

I wrote him back. I said, "No. I can't. I don't have it."

"Well, why don't you have it?

"Well, because he didn't come in. We didn't work it out."

And so now, I have to interrupt my day to go through the syllabus for a kid who doesn't give a shit, to tell a coach who doesn't care, what homework is due? That he isn't going to get done [while traveling], anyway. Right?

The coach had dislocated established structures in letting his student-athlete miss his academic meetings in the week before being gone for multiple days, and then demanded that Marco treat it like an emergency Marco was responsible for. Marco felt ambivalence toward both the coach and the athlete, but he also experienced loss of meaning, in that the coach's expectation did not lie within the understood parameters of Marco's job: it was not his responsibility to do the student's job just because the coach let him skip his meetings. He was forced to do it anyway, leading to the ambivalence and loss of meaning. Part of Marco's disgruntlement, he said, lay in the fact that he had to take time away from students who were doing it right in order to attend to a student whose coach had allowed him to shirk his academic responsibilities.

Melissa recounted a laissez faire attitude toward academics until the student is near ineligibility. She described a situation in which a coaching staff did as little as possible regarding academics, just believing that students would do the minimum and stay eligible, taking the attitude that "I'm going to coach and I'm not even going to worry about this other stuff," as they took the easier, short-term road to "assuage the [the athletes' complaints] and not deal with [academics] because we'd rather be dealing with the other stuff."

> If he wasn't [good] on the football [field] they would have run him off two years ago. They'll come down on them hard if they start causing problems over [in football]. Then all of a sudden everything's an emergency and everything's a problem. That's when [the coaches] try, and you see everything from "we're not taking them on this trip to we're running them, to…he's not practicing." … I hate to say it takes a lot to rile a coach about academics, but sometimes it does. Some coaches I mean they've gotta be on the door step of [academic] death before…they become very concerned about them being ineligible. I mean and that's the kind of [thing]… you're not going to tell the [coach if the] coach isn't going to do anything.

The dislocation of established structures was occurring because coaches were actively avoiding enforcement of academics until students were in an emergency situation, then suddenly deciding to use extreme punitive measures to force academic success. Melissa's emotional reaction was one of stressed frustration about the situation, followed by ambivalence about informing coaches of a problem because they would not be willing to do anything constructive about it.

The expectations of established structures crossed a spectrum from routine expectations of job knowledge, to expecting students to adhere to meetings and perform consistently, to expectations of consistent work hours, to expectations that coaches would help enforce performance of academic work. With some situations, the dislocation lasted and created a new structure, which could then be dislocated in its turn, such as the structure of learning specialists' authority being dislocated by students willing to do only what a coach tells them to do, forcing reliance on coaches for enforcement, only to then have a coach refuse to offer that enforcement. Occasionally, the structures changed rapidly, causing disorientation. When structures were dislocated, participants also felt stressful emotions, loss of job meaning, and ambivalence.

Reversal of Hierarchy

When the participants experienced the liminal theme of reversal of hierarchy, they

had the sense that organizational hierarchies, whether clearly established or implicit, had

been reversed or upended. This often resulted in disorientation, loss of meaning, or

stressful emotions. Melissa described a student who had struggled but was now eager to

return and get back to academic work, because he had had success with his spring finals

in the spring:

> It was frustration cause we got a new [coaching] staff. During finals week they
> cut three of our [guys who were] going to be sophomores.[I had a] conversation
> with one of the students and he was like "I'm going to see you in a week. I'm
> going to go home for a week. But [then] I'm going to come back and we're going
> to [get on] summer school." And he sent me a text after his final. He's like "I
> killed it." 'Cause we'd studied for hours. And then it went dead silence. And
> come to find out he had been not invited back [by the coaches]. We were making
> such good progress… And it's done. He was just… "you don't fit the scheme." So
> you know just that part of this job I don't think will ever get less frustrating. You
> know we've had kids cut and… that's where we are.

In this case, the end of the relationship with the student was because of his status as an

athlete, and Melissa experienced a reversal of hierarchy, in that the student succeeded

academically but left the university because he was dismissed by his athletic team. The

usual relevant hierarchy was that students who succeeded academically stayed at the

institution and continued to play. Those who failed academically had to leave. This

student had been an at-risk student and Melissa had seen him making significant

progress. But, in a reversal of the usual hierarchy, the coaches chose to cut him, and

Melissa never saw that student again. She heard that he was trying to find another college

team to play on. Melissa worried because he struggled academically and might not have

someone who would know how to help him. She expressed stress and apprehension that

he would not get a college degree, when she had been so hopeful about him at the end of

that spring semester. She also suffered loss of meaning, in that she had done her job and guided an academically at-risk student to success, and it hadn't ended up mattering.

When Anna told the story of her first student, and the shock that accompanied initially working with him, she also expressed a reversal of hierarchy. Her expression as she talked about this student spoke volumes about the fondness and warmth and pride she feels for this student, who was diagnosed with a learning disability at seven, had been targeted for athletics since the time he was six, could barely read when he started college, and went on to complete a Bachelor's and a Master's degree before his college football career ended. Her story as it unfolded: "And suddenly, they told me he couldn't read. … and [I'm] realizing he's literally here to be an athlete. … So for me, it was 'okay, why school?' Why are you doing this? What's your motivation?" She had been brought in to help student-athletes with academics and was suddenly forced to realize that both the student-athlete and his coaches were unconcerned with academics except that it be just good enough to allow him to play.

The reversal of the expected hierarchy lay in the fact that athletics was revealed as more important, and with that reversal came a loss of meaning. The traditional view of school as a place to learn, and the importance of her job to academic endeavors, suddenly became reversed and academics existed in service to athletics, as did her job. Anna had experienced sudden, extreme feelings of disorientation and a stressed, emotional reaction to this sudden and unexpected liminal crisis. She had been unable to communicate with a student who valued athletics far above academics, she was already in doubt about the position of her role in the athletics/academics hierarchy, and suddenly the student "blew up." She became acutely disoriented by not knowing what she was supposed to do and

not knowing whether she had had any pertinent preparation for this job, although she had come in sure that she had.

Melissa, like Anna, had also experienced a reversal of hierarchies with her first student when she was an intern. Her job was to assist the student in learning to succeed in college, and in her first experience the student-athlete showed immediate disrespect for her, which reversed the respect hierarchy of him as a student and her as instructor. This reversal caused loss of meaning because the situation was so unexpected: a student-athlete had been brought to her so she could assist him academically, and he immediately devalued her work.

Melissa had described a student about whom the coaching staff was very enthusiastic athletically, but they would not enforce his attendance because he would "be [academically] fine eventually." While this constituted a dislocation of structure, it also served as a reinforcer of the sense of reversal of hierarchies, in that the learning specialist was supposed to be the figure in authority in the relationships with the students, but the student's reluctance and the overwhelming influence of coaches on students' actions and priorities forced a need to bring in coaches and other authority figures to intercede with the student. With that situation, a hierarchical reversal begins, with the student taking some power away from the learning specialist's position. If the learning specialist cannot do the job without bringing in someone to enforce discipline, the hierarchy feels reversed and the liminal experience is reinforced.

Faculty voluntarily reversing hierarchy. A few of the participants told stories of faculty members being overly supportive, such as the following from Melissa, in

which faculty members offered to make exceptions for athletes who were traveling and

needed to take exams, in a manner expressly forbidden by the NCAA:

> They're like "You could just take the test [with you] and watch him. You could just give him the test. Is a staff member going along? They could just administer my test." We're like no, no, no, no. We don't do that.
>
> And [then they were] like, well "What about coach?" "No, a coach cannot do it."
>
> "What about…" well I mean they're just thinking "Oh well another coach from another team could just sit down and give this exam."

The hierarchical reversal here is proceeding from Melissa's sense of the faculty being

eager to help but being restricted by the athletics rules and not recognizing the conflict of

interest. The faculty are voluntarily offering a reversal of hierarchy – allowing a coach or

member of athletics access to something over which faculty are expected to keep control

- and it puts Melissa in the position of having to turn down an offer from a person in

authority over a section of her student-athletes' lives. As an academics person, she is

forced to ensure the athletics rules are followed.

> Ellen exemplified the overly helpful instances in this way:

> I've actually had a couple situations where I feel like the professors are trying to help out too much. Where, you know, "Oh, is this not a good—should I change quiz due dates from Saturday to Sunday for the student athletes?" And it's, "No no— Do what you do for everybody." I think that's kind of interesting. They want to be supportive and helpful.

Ellen is experiencing the same thing as Melissa was: having to enforce athletics rules

with faculty, creating a reversal of hierarchy. Both, however, seemed to appreciate the

offer rather than feel put out or stressed by it. They were pleasant and laughing when they

said it, as opposed to angry or frustrated. The liminal sense was only minimally activated

in these occurrences.

Uncertainty about Continuity of
Traditions and Future
Outcomes

The experience of liminality sometimes caused the participants to become unsure about whether their jobs or priorities were going to continue as they had previously, and caused tension and concern over how future outcomes would be affected, most notably in concern for a student's future academic success and chance of graduating.

Uncertainty due to learning disabilities. Numerous of the participants spoke about the struggles students with learning disabilities have handling academics on top of athletics, given the roadblocks they are already facing. One example was Ellen's apprehension over a student struggling with remedial math, which did not count toward his degree nor as credit toward athletic eligibility, before he could even take the math courses that would count:

> I'm still going through this currently and I worry because I don't know what we're going to do. The remedial math, it doesn't even count towards his GPA and he's worked so hard. And it's like, I just don't know—But definitely everyone involved is super—we're doing everything we can. The student, he's been tutoring and everything. He is able to, in a class where they can't normally use a calculator, he has accommodations for a calculator. We have exhausted all those accommodations. He—We're not taking math, we're taking a break from it this semester, to get some other things out of the way. But he's going to have to go back to it.

This situation creates the liminal sense of uncertainty about future outcomes. Ellen actively worried about his potential for being successful which, in turn, sets up a concern about future athletic eligibility for the student, which would damage his future as an athlete, and about his potential to graduate, which would damage his future as a non-athlete. While Ellen refers to everyone working together, which lessened the liminal effect, the concern about future outcome for the student maintains the sense of liminality.

Kathleen's student, who would play with a fidget spinner for many minutes before returning to focus, creating far longer work hours for Kathleen, produced the same kind of concern for Kathleen: a liminal sense of uncertainty about future outcomes and fear that the student would not be able to succeed academically.

Anna's first student, with whom she struggled so much in her first six weeks, came to college with severe learning disabilities diagnosed at age seven, and she was very concerned about his ability to do the academic work required of him, to continue playing football, and to graduate. She had been assigned to help him and was uncertain she could so successfully, given the obstacles he had to overcome, and that caused uncertainty about outcomes for him.

Uncertainty related to overriding athletic identities. Several participants told stories about students who had numerous factors affecting academic success, including but not limited to athletic factors. Jose talked about one:

> I had a player the last two semesters and there's little margin for error. When you factor in all the other stuff that he's dealt with as far as maybe not being properly prepared in high school, being homesick, being upset that he's not playing, he's red shirted, and not being happy here, that all mixed into one. It was a constant and weekly motivation to keep him engaged and working in class and being successful. Yeah, there's not enough leeway to miss class or not study or not perform the same [effort] as his peers. So that's the biggest challenge.

Jose experienced the liminal effect of uncertainty about the outcome for this student. The student was facing multiple intersecting issues common to college students, and had the overriding difficulty of not being able to act on his athlete identity. His academic work suffered because he was upset that he was not able to play his sport. The liminal experience was in effect here for both Jose and the student. The student was both a student and an athlete, yet neither a student nor an athlete, in that he was not playing and

wouldn't be able to for this season (he is a red-shirt), and that was causing loss of athletic

meaning, which affected his academic work, making him ambivalent about academics,

while homesickness was making him feel disorientation. Jose was feeling the

disorientation of constantly having to decipher which factor was playing into the

student's lack of motivation, while trying to provide reasons for the student to stay

motivated.

Jody told a similar story about a student whom she characterized as her most

difficult to date, who could not engage in academic work until he had hashed out

everything else first. She outlined his single-mindedness, his moods, and her own

frustration with him:

> He could not get over the fact that he was going to be red-shirted. I mean, every
> day, the first half hour, we had a talk about how he was going to be red-shirted.
> So, at first, it's kind of rationalizing with him, "I understand you feel this way. I
> would feel this way, too." But then, it gets to a point where it's like, "Okay. We
> are past the pity party. We have to get to work." And I had to lay it out for him
> every day: "This is the reality, but now look. You're going to have four years of
> playing time as a better player," and it slowly— It's a day-by-day basis. But when
> the student wanted to work, he could work and get it done very fast and did not
> need help. Had the full ability, but some days, it was an hour of getting through
> the pity party to get to the work. So, there was days where the kid would get mad
> at me, yell at me, and I would tell him it's not acceptable. And the next day, he'd
> come in, and he'd think I'm going to be mad, and I'm like, "Yesterday's over with.
> We are on a new day. How are we going to act today? We are not talking about
> yesterday. That is done." We didn't dwell on the past.

Jody, like Jose, was also experiencing uncertainty about the student's outcome,

but it was on a daily basis instead of concern about a more distant future, like graduation.

She experienced the accompanying disorientation of trying to figure out which mood and

motivator would be in effect for that student on that day, and which tactics would work at

any given time. The student was in the liminal space of having been sure that he would

play and suddenly discovering he wasn't going to. His athletic identity was overriding his

academic identity, and not playing created a loss of meaning for him, which he needed to address every day to try to regain meaning, bringing Jody with him into the meaning loss each day.

Uncertainty due to lack of control. Kathleen's stories about team travel and her lack of control over their academic work while they were traveling also produced the uncertainty about outcomes effect. Kathleen was struggling with uncertainty about future outcomes in addition to dislocations of established structures. When she couldn't control what the students were doing academically, although she felt responsible for ensuring it, she felt uncertainty about whether they would pass their classes. When her students traveled, she was unable to meet with them face-to face, reinforcing the uncertainty. She experienced loss of meaning as to her job and her ability to be effective, and the disorientation of being unable to do it effectively.

Uncertainty about coursework outcomes. Melissa related discipline-specific differences in faculty support of athletics and belief in the difficulty of being a student-athlete:

> we have a lot of support of "I won't [only] grudgingly help you." And we have some support of "oh it's so hard what you're doing." It's a smaller number, but we're seeing more and more and you tend to see them in the softer areas. You don't tend to see any biology professors who are like "this is all really hard to manage." [laughs] You know, we see that in English, we see that in those [softer areas].

Melissa's point was that faculty may be following the typical style of the discipline to which they belong, which would be disorienting in not knowing how various faculty members would treat the students with whom she worked, and would contribute to uncertainty about the outcomes for students in different classes, not dependent on the students' quality of work, but on the sympathy of the faculty member teaching the class.

Uncertainty about advisor support. In relating her encounter with the advisor who had the extremely difficult, resistant student-athlete, Anna's story reflected a sense of uncertainty about the future in that she had no idea what any encounter with this advisor would be like. She also experienced uncertainty because of the extreme inconsistency of that student's coach, never knowing how the future would look nor what results would come of his decisions.

Uncertainty because of coaches. Coaches figured prominently in the sense of uncertainty about outcomes. Some coaches were just directly disrespectful, as Jody recounted:

> We had a meeting with the old coaching staff, and we'd get there five minutes early, even though we were across the hall, and we'd sit and wait. And one day, they kept us waiting out there for an hour, and they were like, "Oh, sorry. We forgot about you." And we were like, "Well, we've got kids in the learning center. We're trying to sit here and wait for you while monitoring the learning center. This is our busiest time of the day." It was kind of like, "Wow." It was almost like a slap in the face. Like, "You just forgot about us? You told us to be here at this time, and then, you made us sit out here for an hour."

The coaching staff created a sense of uncertainty about how to plan a working daily schedule. Their conduct also created an uncertainty about the future level of respect the academic staff could expect from that staff. Given the number of stories of student-athletes behaving entirely in accordance with coaches' examples, it would be reasonable to expect that Jody would also be uncertain about getting respect from that coaching staff's student-athletes, as well.

Jody also described an atmosphere in which a coaching staff was in danger of losing their jobs because they weren't winning, and suddenly they gave no thought nor support to the academic side of their players' careers, allowing them to have "no, per se, consequence for not coming to study hall, and the players knew that." She described that

semester as "very tough." She could not be certain students were going to show up, leading to uncertainty about their academic success, logically leading to uncertainty about her ability to effectively do her job.

Like Melissa's experience with coaching staffs suddenly acting only once an academic situation had reached emergency level, Jody had a similar incident. She related a moment when she had to take an issue to a coach. She had been warning him about it for some time, but he didn't listen until the issue became potentially disastrous for the student: "One kid, I was like, "Well, this is going to affect his graduation." And the head coach went off, and I was like, 'I've been telling you this for three weeks, but today...'." Jody had been uncertain about the student's future academic outcome for some time, and had been trying to relate it to the coach, but he didn't take it seriously until it had become an emergency. His lack of diligence toward academics enhanced the liminal effect for Jody because she was unable to garner any assistance in staving off the negative outcome until it was almost too late.

Concern for students and uncertainty about their future outcomes may be the most pervasive of the themes. While I related only a few specific stories that spoke to this theme, it was woven throughout the stories told by every participant, which makes this theme the one most inextricably entwined with the nature of working with academically at-risk students. The students have been brought in with the looming prospect of being unsuccessful academically, based on their prior scholastic and test performances, or they have been placed with a learning specialist because their collegiate academic career had begun to slip, sometimes drastically. The sense of uncertainty for these students' futures is already in place when their relationships with the learning specialist begins.

Diminishment of Liminality

Certain occurrences and actors did, however, serve to lessen the effects of liminality, whether preventing dissolution of order, relocating established structures to their expected place, maintaining hierarchies, or reducing uncertainties.

Faculty. Faculty, both as a group and individually, could play an important role in diminishing liminal effects, and, in fact, the participants had far more positive than negative to say about faculty, since faculty priorities about academics aligned with what the learning specialists' job priorities were supposed to be. Melissa described the faculty athletics representative (FAR) as an excellent liaison between athletics and academics:

> Our faculty athletics rep is very involved. She's very involved with both us, here, and at the NCAA level. … So she regularly meets with us. … She writes our goals. She sends us stuff.

She told stories of Faculty Senate involvement, and "pet projects" chosen each year by the Senate regarding athletics, either tutoring programs, graduation success rates, or other facets of athletics academic success: "they review everything and then they make recommendations of, 'Hey we'd like you to start doing this" or "we'd like to switch this part to here.' So I mean they are very involved. … they have standard monthly meetings and they're pretty involved."

> She followed up by saying

> But I mean the faculty. They're great. I think they see [the athletes] balance it with [the hard work in athletics]. Instead of being jealous here that our student athletes have all this, they're like, "everybody should have that." … we're lucky that the faculty is pretty supportive. I mean there's only been a few times. It's like "Oh, that teacher's a jerk. … [But for the most part] we've almost gotten really insanely good relationships with campus. I mean, we've got support of faculty members.

For Melissa, the sense of liminality is reduced by interactions with faculty. Since the learning specialist is concerned with academic success, and faculty are, for the most part, supportive of both academics and athletics, the extremes of the liminal sense are lessened. She attributed any sense of frustration to the individual faculty member's personality, not to faculty in general.

Jose said he had had great interactions with the only two professors he had had contact with, and I also heard descriptions of conversations with professors who were very willing to allow athletes into closed classes because they were aware of the strict natures of their schedules. This also helped reduce the liminality, given the level of understanding and the act of allowing students to do what they need to to work toward their degrees.

Directors. In every case, participants' experiences of their directors were positive. Some directors had been in place for decades; some had been at their posts for only a few years. Overwhelmingly, the participants described situations in which their directors had been supportive of them, whether intervening with coaches, calling out faculty, or going to administration for issues, creating circumstances professionally in which academic support could thrive, or supporting and approving expenditures for professional development and training.

Some participants expressed minor philosophical differences with their bosses, mostly disagreement on what the focus of the unit should be with a given student issue, e.g. allowing a student to learn from an academic failure versus not allowing them to fail, or focusing on data and graduation rates instead of individual students, but stories of these infrequent experiences of disagreement were told with respect and understanding.

Most participants gave some mention of an incident which brought home to them what a challenging and frequently difficult job the director has. Ultimately, the directors were very supportive in the participants' day-to-day lived experiences. As Anna said, "luckily for me, he's got my back and his boss has his back." Bill related the difference in the calm way the director, and, subsequently, administration, handled the case of the fifth-year athlete who was failing, versus the vitriolic way the coach handled it:

> [The director]'s been there before, he's seen it happen before and he was definitely like, "All right, let's see what she can do, we've got time because we don't register grades until January so if she can get it changed before then we're good. If not, we can always get a waiver." So after that date he was definitely in the problem-solving mode.
>
> And you've got the administration, who's definitely like, "If you've done what you were supposed to do for the student, and the student knew what they were supposed to do, it falls on the student." They would ultimately say, "We don't like it, we're not happy… But, if you laid it out, and the student knew what she had to do, and he or she chose not to, it falls on the student."

The potential for a reversal of hierarchy or dissolution of order is clearly present in this situation, but the director helps diminish it by being willing to help and by problem solving from a position of experience. Those were the common sorts of experiences participants had with their directors, and all of them praised their directors without fail. Rather than intensifying the liminality, the directors reinforced the importance of academics and, therefore, the learning specialists' feelings of sure footing in their jobs, lessening the sense of uncertainty about the future.

Advisors. Despite the occasionally strained relationship with advisors, some of the participants' stories of advisors indicated a reduction in the sense of liminality. Jody related her close and friendly working relationship with the advisors:

> I do like to report to the advisors, and I write daily on things because I like to keep documents. So, if we're seeing a trend in behavior and attitude, we have it documented, and then, from there, whatever needs to be done. … But I feel like I

> like reporting to the advisors because, so far, I've gotten trust from them. They trust me, "Do what you want to do. I'll help you if you need help," but I've kind of been able to run my office how I want to run it.

Jody was feeling a reinforced sense of autonomy and responsibility because of the advisor's willingness to work with her and trust her to run her program. The sense of disorienting liminality was at a low ebb here. Some advisors' personalities are a very good match with being in a negotiator position, which is often what the job requires, as in this story from Kathleen:

> I work with one advisor who's been an advisor for 30 years. She did this with me the other day. "The coaches really missed you at the meeting." I had a stupid incident, right, and I missed a meeting with the basketball coaches. "They're sympathetic to your [incident]." She was so funny. Then she said, "They would really appreciate an email of who your students are, and how often you see them, and what's going on." What she really was bringing me was, "Please have Kathleen do this." Which makes it really easy for me to go, "Of course I will do that right now."

While the advisor here was requesting something from coaches, and setting up a potential for an increase in liminality, she was able to deliver it in such a way that Kathleen felt needed and respected, and, therefore, did not feel the various senses of concern usually present in liminality. Instead, she felt willing, if not eager, to do the thing that had been asked of her.

Anna had felt disorientation and loss of the meaning of her job when she had to work with one advisor, but she had experienced positives with another advisor, who consistently defended Anna's actions to the coaches and provided unexpected support. Anna told the story of two such supportive moments, wrapped up in one incident:

> There's been one time, when camp started in the middle of the last week of school, students who refused to just give a five minute speech instead chose to write a cumulative five page paper. And couldn't get the students till frickin 11 o'clock at night [because of athletics obligations]. But the advisor stayed with me. Was here until I left, did not leave me alone. Ordered me a frickin pizza for

staying so long. And then walked into her boss—I didn't even get to the boss, 'cause she already walked into the boss and said "this happened last night. I'm going to need you to back me up when I address it - this is never going to happen again."

While she had experienced the dissolution of order and accompanying feeling of disorientation of having to stay at her job after 11:00 PM because of a coach, the advisor reduced liminality by staying, supporting her, and objecting, to the director, about the situation. Anna emphasized that the advisor had never allowed the coach or the players to blame Anna for something that wasn't her fault. The advisor will ask for a future plan to prevent the incident from recurring, but "it's never been dumping. It's never been, "Well, *I'm* not getting support." The advisor allowed her to get to know the students, work with them her way, and bring advising suggestions. Liminality is diminished because Anna feels respected, needed, and defended by a person in a position of greater power than she has. The hierarchy is intact and the sense of uncertainty lessened.

Other participants recounted good relationships with advisors, such as one about which Penelope talked regarding a situation in which advisors helped bring students around who were struggling, became the touchpoint for an avoidant student, or teamed up with the learning specialist to communicate a consistent message. Such collaboration results in a sense that the job is important and the learning specialists will get help when they need it.

Team effort. Sometimes something would be wrong with a student on both academic and athletic fronts. The learning specialist, coaches, and advisors would have to work together to figure out what was wrong, as Kathleen recounts:

> The student was maybe not coming to meetings, wasn't communicating. When you were in conversations with the coach, that things were always going south in regards to practice, and they noticed that something was going on. There was a

personal situation … and so we all had to put our heads together. I think that we as a staff felt good about it; we are wrapping arms around this young person, and it's going to be tough but it's going to be okay. They didn't get 4.0 but they passed their classes and it was definitely an achievement, I think, for all of us and especially the student.

The student-athlete was having difficulties affecting both his academics and athletics performances, yet the liminal sense was diminished because the academic and coaching staffs worked together to solve the problem and help the student succeed. The satisfaction of that moment reflects the fact that the order and hierarchy felt appropriate and the future outcomes were assured rather than uncertain. The student succeeded because of the joint effort.

Coaches. While coaches were the most significant contributors to the sense of liminality, they could also be very understanding and helpful and did, at times, provide moments in which the sense of liminality was diminished. Marco described his interactions with a coach when a student missed an academic meeting even after being warned ten minutes before meeting time:

> I would text the academic advisor, she would immediately text the coach, who would immediately respond back. Immediately. Then I would get the notification on what was going to happen, all within a minute. And so the student would be up the crick because they missed an academic meeting. Now, instead of throwing a ball, now they're running around laps until they puke and then they come back over here. Now they have to do twice as much time in the study room. So they're learning their lessons on academics. Now that is good leverage. Those guys [from that team] didn't forget their meetings. They didn't forget to tell me if they were going to be late. And they always showed up on time and they would be prepared because it was expected from them.

This coach's actions, in being responsive to Marco when he alerted him and enforcing academics as an important part of his athletes' college careers, validated Marco's position in his job and made him certain of future outcomes from that team. He also described the helpfulness of another coach very succinctly: "If that was the football

coach [asking], I would be like, "Yeah, sure." Not because he's the football coach, but because he cares every day."

Anna related a moment when an advisor went to a meeting with the head coach, and "the position coach kind of wanted to blame me. And the head coach goes, oh hell no. This is [the student's] fault. Let me call him. Literally stops the meeting and calls the student and goes what the hell are you doing kind of thing." She described that coach's attitude: "Because it's 'you do [your job], I'll do mine,' but [he says] 'the purpose of this whole thing is still the student and making sure that they walk out of this space a better man because that's what I promised their parents when I brought them here.'" Anna feels the hierarchy is in place because the head coach takes her side on academic matters, and the coach openly values academics and enforces it with his students, maintaining Anna's sense of proper order and structure.

Kathleen described a moment when she had difficulties with a player:

"So I try to present any issues with students along with a solution. Like, "Yes, he skipped class three times, here's my plan. Here's what I'd like to do. … Occasionally I will turn it over to them like, 'I think I need your intervention. I think I need your support on this one, can you do some? Can you talk to him? Can you give a consequence? Can you make it happen?' Then I have felt absolutely 150% supported."

While the structure is not ideal that learning specialists have no power in enforcing academics, a coach who is willing to help without question when she needs intervention makes her feel supported and validated in her job, makes her feel that the coach finds academics important, and lessens uncertainty about future interactions with that coach.

Punitive support. Sometimes support from coaches will be punitive: "I had 15 prima donna [players], but they showed up. They showed respect, they got their shit done, they did all that stuff because the first time one of them didn't show up he cleaned

the weight room by himself all day the next day," said Anna. That kind of consequence

constituted a recurring incident in coaching support for academics: when players don't

show up, don't complete their academic work, they will be required to do some physical

activity to the point of extreme discomfort. Marco told this story about a football player:

> I [reported him] twice last year because it just got to the point where he wasn't getting his work done, he wasn't coming around when he said he would, he wasn't responding to me. I'd text him, "You have 10 minutes to respond or I'm going to have to send your name on the list. They need to know." And I didn't hear from him. I send his name on the list and I know once he gets on it, it's going to be hard to get off. When your name lands on the list, the first thing you do the next morning is report at 5:00 AM and you run the [stadium] stairs. This was February and it had just snowed. And they hadn't scooped and it's 5:00 in the morning. And he had to hold a 25 pound weight against his chest and run up and down the stairs. Believe me, he showed up from then on. That was torture. This kid's from [a warm US city]. He's new. He doesn't like this kind of weather to begin with and now he's up at 5:00 in the morning in the dark running down the stairs. Ice.

In both these instances, despite the corporally punitive methods being used, the coaches

made the participants feel supported in their jobs and prioritized academics, lessening

liminality.

> *A coach caring about students*. Kathleen described a moment, after coming to a

coach with issues about a student, in which Kathleen had knowledge regarding a

student's mental health issues, and she had not passed them on to the coach. She thought

the coach seemed to be unsupportive at first, but she eventually came to a different

realization:

> There was one question asked [by a coach] that put my teeth on edge a little bit. The question that came up was, "Why didn't you tell me about that?" Right. I just sat there like, because among other things it's none of your business. Mental health issues are not something that I'm going to come running to you with. But I did not answer him. I sat there and I waited while he continued what he had to say, [then] he backed off on his own by saying something about, "I just felt so powerless." So that's cued me in like, "Wait, he's not threatening me as much as he's frustrated with his circumstance. He loves these kids," right, like I do.

Kathleen experienced a reduction in the sense of liminality when the coach expressed

care for the student's wellbeing. Kathleen had particularly expressed her fondness and

caring for her student-athletes, so this coach's reaction would, particularly for her, lessen

the sense of dissolution of order, since caring about the students would come first for her

over athletics.

Supportive coaching staffs. Coaching changes can make a difference in the ways

learning specialists experience their jobs. Jody, who had had a very difficult time with

one unsupportive football staff, described a coaching change to an academically

supportive coach, and the ripple effects on the student-athletes:

> The head coach is fired before the last game … and then the new coach came in, and it was like night and day because [the students] realized, "I've got to straighten up, and I've got to listen to his rules, or else, I'm gone." And so, one of my kids that would skip study hall constantly…or they'd go just take a nap in the players' lounge. Still swiped in to get their hours. You saw less and less of that.

The new coaches were responsive, respectful, and sought and followed recommendations

from the academic staff. It made a significant difference in the experience of the

liminality. Suddenly the order of things was in place, and the sense of established

structures had been relocated to their rightful place, resulting in students' academics

being prioritized once again. She also described the difference between her prior

institution and her current one:

> [At that school], I'd look at a kid with a 2.5, and I'm like, "You've got three semesters before you can even fail out of the university." Whereas here, we look at a kid with a 2.5, and we're like, "What do we need? He's super high risk," whereas, my study hall cut-off at my old school was a 2.7. At a 2.7, you did not have to come to mandatory study hall anymore, and a 2.7 here, you were considered extremely high risk. So, it's very much a transition even for me, and just, I felt like here, you had the coaches that set the standard: "You're going to meet this standard. This is my expectation. If you can't meet it, you need to have an explanation why, and it's not because you're not trying."

The coaches at her current institution emphasize the value of academics and enforce adherence to academic expectations because it is their culture. Liminality was reduced because proper structures were in place with academics as a top priority. Sometimes a coach will be fully behind academics and the players don't even realize it, as Anna described here:

> And my guys will tell me, "[Coach is] full-on athletics," and I'm like, "Yeah, you say that and yet you know damn well he isn't because if he was, we wouldn't have just had …80-something students [on that team] above a 3.0. We wouldn't be having the record-breaking years and all." And we wouldn't be having those things if [academics] wasn't [his priority]." And it's coming from him.

The liminal sense is diminished because the coach is prioritizing academics and the students are succeeding. The reason for which Anna was hired – to assist student-athletes with academic success – is being enforced by someone with the power to do so, giving her the feeling that things are being prioritized in the right order.

Students. Sometimes the liminal effects were reduced by the students themselves, as in Marco's story about a wrestler who had been really having difficulty improving his writing:

> He really did well in this last session. He wrote a great paper. He worked on it for two and a half weeks. Five drafts later—He was doing the final read-through. When he was about halfway through, he started laughing. And I said, "What's so funny?" And he goes, "This paper sounds way smarter than me." I said, "No. The paper might sound way smarter than you think you are. But those are your words, dude, those are your ideas. Those are your citations. You read the articles. You read the books. You made this paper happen, this is you. You're that smart. Can you believe that shit?" And he's just like, "Oh, God." So he's walking tall. "I am that smart." He couldn't believe it. And so he turns in the paper, he gets the 90%, and he texted me the screenshot of the grade.

This moment of academic success created, for Marco, a renewed sense of the purpose of his job and the order of importance of academics in the hierarchy, diminishing the effect

of the liminality. Meaning was clear and negative stress was minimized for both Marco and the student.

Jody had a similar moment of satisfaction when her student, who had seemed to be simply unmotivated to do the work, suddenly realized how to do a small thing that made a significant impact on his understanding of how to read an assignment sheet:

> So, I had a student I worked with, and you'd give him instructions, and he could sit there for an hour and just stare at them and not get anything done. So, I started taking the instructions before. He would bring them to me, and I would literally, each sentence, I would break into a new step. And I gave it to him, and he's like, "Oh, my gosh. You are a genius. This makes so much sense." He didn't know I was just breaking it down. Eventually, I told him, "This is what I'm doing. Watch me," and he was able to learn himself, "Okay. If I just take it apart and read it one sentence at a time, it makes so much more sense." Instead of looking at it as a whole of everything you need to do, he started to look at it as a step, "This is step one. This is step two," and he found that he was successful.

Jody described frustrated ineffectiveness at having the student in her office but not accomplishing anything, and contrasted it with the satisfaction of having the student suddenly not only capable but enthusiastic about being able to decipher the meaning of an assignment because of something she had done. Academics suddenly became a high order of priority for the student-athlete, which restored the sense of order for Jody, decreasing liminality.

Another student who had shown he could do well, but fell behind in the middle part of every semester, had a revelation about himself, fostered by Marco's work with him. He came into Marco's office and told him about it, illustrating his point on the office whiteboard on which Marco allowed the students to write inspirational messages or epiphanies or reminders:

> [He says], "Check this out." Final grade of the class was a B+. He's never gotten more than a C+ in his career here, three years in. Comes in to talk to me before he leaves for the summer. And he's like, "I think I learned my lesson." "What lesson's

that?" He goes, "You know how I usually would be around a few weeks, and then I'd kind of disappear three or four weeks? And then I'd show up again." I'm like, "Yeah. I know how you do that." He's like, "Yeah. School is hard. And so I'll do it for awhile, and then I'll have an A, because I did the first three things. And then I can just relax. And I know I've got to, then I've got to struggle really hard to get a C. That's what I've been doing for three years." I'm like, "That's what I heard you've been doing for three years." He goes, "But, I saw it this time, and I can't forget what I learned."

The whiteboard in the room is a patchwork of intersecting lines and blocks of text, written in different student's hands, ranging from the congratulatory – "I managed my time well so it was fine…" – to the philosophical – "IS hope there or do we have to find it" – to reminders designed to keep its author on track, such as the one this student wrote:

> So, he goes, "Beginning. Start strong. End. Finish strong."
> And I go, "Oh, so you've been listening to the motivational tapes in the locker room. You know how to start and finish strong. Way to go. Lesson well learned."
> He goes, "No, no, no. The middle's the important part."
> "Well, what's the middle?"
> And he goes, "Middle. Before you can finish strong, you've got to keep your head out your ass."
> I go, "Write it down." He goes, "I can write that?" I'm like, "you can write whatever you want up here." He [writes], "Keep your head out your ass." I took a picture of it and texted it to his mom.
> So I said, "What's your plan for the fall? What are we going to do?" He's like, "I'm going to keep my head out of my ass."

The student, after much patient work from Marco, had suddenly prioritized academics, re-establishing the sense of proper hierarchy and order for Marco. Although it was not elegantly stated, the student had suddenly realized that he needed goals and had to work to overcome the temptation to become complacent in the middle of the semester. Marco helped him understand how the goals he set could be achieved. Marco felt good because it was a moment of self-realization and a real step toward change, but it had taken three years to get there. This moment of re-prioritization also presented Marco with

a better sense that the student would succeed academically, which diminished the liminal

sense of uncertainty about future outcomes.

Ellen described the feeling when a student ultimately succeeded at the end of a

semester, after battling it out for the whole semester:

> But when they do turn in the paper, get the grade back, and they passed and
> they're like, "Oh thank God." Just that alone too makes you feel good, even
> though you're frustrated for a whole semester like, "Why aren't you doing
> anything I ask for you to do?" But then they pull it out in the end, and I'm just
> happy for them.

Ellen's liminal sense of uncertainty about future outcomes was abruptly

diminished. It was at the end of the semester and specific to one student, not the whole

phenomenon, but for that moment, she was able to feel certain about her job's meaning

and the success of the student.

The daily experience is perhaps best summarized in this description from

Kathleen:

> Anyway, so what it's like. It is like a crazy kindergarten room where everybody
> needs me at once and loves to tease, and laugh, and have fun, and learn. Seriously
> there are times where I'm laughing so hard as I'm working with them that I can't
> understand how anybody's learning anything. I do an awful lot of research into
> study skills, learning skills, how best for you—"Okay, you've got this content you
> have to learn, I'm not a tutor, I'm not the subject matter, so how can you learn
> this? What is the best tools you can do?" Then convincing them that, "No, I mean
> that. You actually need to do that."

Kathleen felt needed for her job's stated purpose: to guide the students to academic

success. She also felt that her diligence in researching and learning how best to do her job

was vindicated in the enjoyment of learning that the students were experiencing in her

room.

There are relatively few stories of reduction in liminality, possibly because the

study questions were about experiences of liminality and not the lack of it, but these

stories appeared spontaneously even though I wasn't asking for them. Participants felt

that they had done the job and succeeded in it as it was intended. Those were moments

when they felt more sure of future outcomes like academic success and graduation, and

felt academics had been prioritized appropriately, leaving order and structures intact as

they were established.

Summary

The most telling summary of the findings in this study may lie in what was not

told. The participants were simultaneously eager and apprehensive about sharing stories.

Several participants specifically asked stories to be redacted because "everyone will

know who I am." All participants requested that no identity be revealed beyond gendered

pseudonyms and pronouns, except one: Marco specified a Latino-sounding name (his

words) and identification as a person of color. Removal of any mention of school colors

or mascots, requests to remove the name of the sport in some stories, requests to remove

the name of the conference, redacted stories of student-athletes' behaviors and scandals,

of encounters with coaches, of highly controversial situations that had appeared in the

press: all of these stipulations were requested by participants as protection from

discovery. In one case, my request to research was taken to the director's supervisor

before they decided to allow my research with redactions ensured. Therefore, while the

stories were honest and eye-opening and the findings were rich and colorful, the job does

not appear as fraught with pressure as the raw stories showed it to be.

Some participants characterized their departments' goals as too focused on

graduation rates and not enough on the individual student. The participants' jobs focused

on academics, yet they were housed in an area paid for by athletics. This allowed easy

access to student-athletes, but also allowed coaching staffs easy access to participants. At-risk student-athletes, the participants' student population, were more pressured to succeed in their sport than they were to succeed academically, whether by coaches, athletic identity, or by assurances of going pro.

All participants had high praise for their directors. They felt supported and told stories of directors intervening with coaches and faculty. Regarding advisors, most participants were positive, with only minor philosophical issues and sometimes the feeling that advisors sided with athletics or shifted blame to the learning specialists. Mostly they described a collaborative environment. One participant had vitriolic stories of one advisor, but largely blamed the coach and simply wished the advisor would stand up to the coach instead of constantly acquiescing.

The participants were generally positive about faculty support of student-athletes in both student and athlete roles. Two participants expressed dismay about convoluted and difficult assignments, and one participant spoke with frustration about her students complaining that faculty were singling them out as African-Americans. One other participant mentioned a faculty member noting the absence of an African-American athlete out of large numbers of students, but those were the only real complaints about faculty.

The greatest pressure and frustrations came from coaches. Coaches created dissolution of order by prioritizing athletics over academics, dislocated established structures essential to the participants' job success, allowed or encouraged hierarchical reversal to accomplish athletic goals, and created a disorienting sense of uncertainty about future outcomes for students and for the participants themselves. Negatives

included refusing to curb their student-athletes' resistant behaviors toward academics then treating poor academic results as emergencies once they showed up, allowing appointment skipping without consequences, placing blame on participants for academic failure, keeping student-athletes long after practice hours and expecting participants to be available, getting angry at advisors who in turn got angry at participants, and not caring about their students-athletes' academics except as they served athletics.

Coda: Motivations to Continue

The final question I asked each participant was to describe their motivations for continuing in the job. All of them had described daily frustrations and pressures as the responsibility was placed on their shoulders for the academic success and, more stressfully, academic failures of individuals who frequently were not invested in getting an education, yet who were vitally important to an industry, to a community, and to powerful, influential coaches who could make the participants' lives very difficult. At the heart of these stories of lived experiences lie people who keep coming back to this pressure-filled job day after day, year after year. The question of motivation does not fit within the phenomenological framework, as it does not ask for recounting of daily lived experiences as they happened but instead asks the participants to make meaning of them, yet it seemed vital to include as a coda to a study of people who worked long hours every day at a job with a high incidence of burnout, little monetary compensation, no accolades, and only intrinsic satisfaction as the reward for the work So I asked them why they keep coming back. Those who answered offered these responses:

This from Marco, who went back to college later in life but had dreamed of doing so from the time he left school:

So here we go, in four weeks, everybody will be back, fresh, new year, new me, right? Everybody's got their shiny new shoes. New chance at life that happens. It's what I love about college, is that it happens every year the same way. I love to watch it happen. And when I dropped out of school, I used to drive by this campus during the move in. And I used to love the fact that there was a whole 'nother group of brand new students here, leaving home for the first time, to learn and try to live their lives. I thought that was such a beautiful thing. First of all, I'm a perfectionist. And at the same time, I'm emotional. I feel what I feel earnestly. When I see a student succeed, I get so happy. I almost cried telling you about students moving into a dorm. That's how much I like the idea of open road for young people. I went back to school, I finished when I was [older than most]. They've got a life. They could miss out on the way I did it and burned up 17 years of digging ditches and working in a beef plant. That's what I did. But they don't have to do that shit. And if I do my job well enough, they won't. Right? They won't even know what they didn't have to do. So, that's what motivates me, is the students. My heart beats when I get to work with students. When I can give away my knowledge. It's when those students come through my door. That's what it is. The more students I work with, the more enthusiastic I'm getting. You see how I'm talking now we're talking about my students. And I'm really— excited. That's what it is for me.

Marco identifies his excitement at seeing the dorms and classrooms fill with academic life every year because he missed his chance to go to school when he was the traditional age for college. Now that he knows how important college is, and how much it did for him once he went back, he gets enthusiastic and excited about having the opportunity to guide these students – who might not otherwise have had a chance to go to college – to a degree and on into a life that can be what they want it to be instead of working low-paying, back-breaking labor jobs that weren't what they envisioned for themselves.

This from Melissa who was a first-generation student and had very little guidance when she went to college:

You know there's the high point of we had a student, a fabulous kid, love him to death. Graduated first in his family. I also had a student who came back. I think it had been 8 years since he left. So he came back to finish. You know he had been doing one class at a time. Go back home. One class at a time. And at graduation with his mom and his wife and their kids. And he was crying. I mean this big old D lineman. And he's boo hooing. And his mom's boo hooing. And his kids are crying 'cause their daddy's crying. And it was like this is why we do it.

Melissa is motivated by the fact that she can provide these students with the guidance and help she did not have when she went to college as a first generation student. She felt out of place and overwhelmed in college because she came from a very small town and had no one to tell her how college would work or how to succeed. Seeing a student she identifies with, and whom she was able to help, walk across the graduation stage provides her with the job satisfaction she needs.

This from Anna, who was diagnosed at a young age with a learning disability, and whom no one thought could succeed in school:

> The learning specialist part of it just fit, as a kid who had a learning disorder growing up, had a teacher that told my mom in my second-grade IEP meeting that I would never amount to anything, I would never succeed at anything, to a third-grade teacher that was brand new, who knew I had one, knew I could succeed, but had no idea how to help me figure out how to do it, to a fourth-grade teacher, who the first week of class figured out what the hell my problem was, figured out how easy it was to create and rectify the problem and gave me the tools and gave me the tricks to make me fit into school without the whole damn world knowing that I wasn't as smart as everybody in the space, but that I could do it. And it gave me that. I realized, "I have the ability to do that now and to give back." And I look around and I want to be in higher ed. It's those things that makes me keep coming back. I'm doing a job that's paying enough for me to live the life that I want to live. I'm making an impact, and I can see it. I can see it in the fact that they're graduating, and they still call me. It's the passion piece. It's the fact that I don't have to fight myself to show up to work.

Anna became a learning specialist because of her past in dealing with the difficulties of school for a person with learning disabilities. She remembers what a difference educators made in her life when they recognized that she had the ability to do well in school if they just helped her understand and work with her learning disabilities. She felt a pull to do the same and is able to give the same kind of guidance and support to the student-athletes she serves. She no longer feels as if she has to struggle to embrace work; she gets satisfaction from being a learning specialist.

This from Jody who went into special education because she believes that education can be for everybody, and that understanding the reasons behind behaviors can lead to success:

> I would say this is like the aha moment. There was a kid I had to sit next to and watch him do his work, or else he would not do it. And the last time I talked to the student, he told me he was in grad school, and he realized, "I can do this, and look where it's going to get me," because I think that realization of, "I'm no longer going to have my sport anymore," really came to a head. And when he was texting me last, he was like, "Yeah. I'm either going to go for a second degree, or I'm going to get my Masters. I'm really leaning towards my Masters." And I was like, "Good for you." Just seeing the change in them and seeing how they grow and can become independent, and then realizing that is really what drives me. It's not necessarily their success on the field, their success as a football player, but it's more their success in becoming the person they want to become.

Jody went to school with a passion for helping special needs children realize their potential and succeed, and she translates that to the student-athletes who see themselves primarily as athletes and not students. She gets satisfaction from seeing them grow into confident students and college graduates who believe they can be something besides an athlete.

This from Ellen who went into education because she loves the building of relationships and the blossoming of human beings into what they're going to be:

> I have always been somebody who likes to help, I just like to help people… I like creating and building relationships. So the reason I'm passionate about this job is because I get to help people find what they like, help people be successful and then create relationships that are going to, you know, my student's going to graduate and I'm going to keep talking to them. I can see my impact happening. I love being able to go to the game on Saturday, and we're not going to work, we're going to watch the people that we just spent all week with, grinding out something that they don't want to do. But we get to go then watch them thrive and do what they want to be doing. [But] I'm not working to do this for the coach, I'm doing it for these guys, for the personal connection and helping them. Just yesterday, one of them came up here to go over their schedule. He came in and we went over it and just right before he left, he said, "Thanks." He gave me a hug and went out the door. I thought back to two years ago when I first met him and I don't think, "Thank you" ever came out of his mouth. I could tell how the

relationship has changed and the fact that he even came up when I asked him to come up. Just little things like that make me remember why I'm doing it. I think that's just part of the reason why.

Ellen is motivated by the relationships she can form in this profession, which provide her the opportunity for being a helper. She appreciates working on a small, personal scale where she can see the impact of her guidance and assistance happening right in front of her on a day-to-day basis. The students come in without a real idea of who they want to be after college, and she helps them discover that, and, in the meantime, she forms long-lasting relationships with them.

This from Jose, who is from a family of educators who instilled the value of education:

> I think just the connection with students, that's always been my go-to, always something I enjoy at every level. Their ways are my ways; that's my satisfaction. It's not a paycheck or the free gear. I think seeing them make progress is kind of my motivation. I had a player; I met him last summer. He was really negative about school and he was also negative about his sport because he was kind of not high up on the depth chart. I told him to keep grinding and keep working at it, and he did. He kind of sucked it up, he just kept plugging away at it. I think the third or fourth game he finally actually started. They had a good game and they won. He texted me from the team bus, "did I see it, how did it go? Did I like it?" I couldn't have been more happy and thrilled for him. He thought he wasn't going to play, and he hated it and he's homesick, and they didn't like him. Then he went from playing up, starting the game and doing a great job. He went from zero to 100 just like that in a couple months span. I enjoyed seeing that, I enjoyed that growth. I enjoy seeing him achieve—I can't wait until my first players start graduating. I mean, that's going to be a great moment. They're going into adulthood.

Jose gains satisfaction from the students' attainment of pride and confidence in themselves. As a lifelong educator, he values assisting in the growth of students as they move forward in their lives and gain maturity by working toward goals and facing challenges. He revels in the connections creating moments when the students come back to him with their achievements.

This from Kathleen who was a k12 educator for many years before moving to student-athlete academic success:

> When they finish that goddamn paper, pardon my French. When they finish that paper, and they feel good about it, and we've looked it over the 50th time, and it is ready to go, and they hit submit, and they give me a hug, and they say, "Thank you so much. I could not have done this alone." I know that to be true. They're not exaggerating. That's success. That's success. And [another student] who struggled and she ended up succeeding. She did it herself, but she came back and gave me a hug and a thanks for helping her, when I really was like, "Sweetie, you really— You did it yourself. I don't do math. I didn't do that. You did that." Those are the successes. It's cool. It's a great job.
> What is going to keep me doing it is the fun, and the energy, and the—Oh, you know what else is really cool about my job? Just think how many things we're learning, because we're helping them learn. I'm constantly learning new stuff, and new ways, new content that I have to explain to a student, and new ways of doing it. Their ideas on how to put it together. I had a kid who was not my student who came in last year, and he had to do this research project
> He finally writes the paper. I proofread the paper. He looks at me and goes, "I have never done that before. That was so much fun." I was like, "How cool is that?" He is—I turned him into a bit of an academic. That's just really, really fun. That's the type of thing. The kids' energy, the kids' fun, the smiles. The goofing around. The learning something new every day. Truly learning something. I really, really, really, really, really love teaching. It's sort of my—What I do. I just teach, and I can't help but teach. I get to do that all the time. I have to find new ways all the time. I have a great deal of respect for these students. I just respect the amazing things I see.

Kathleen, also a lifelong educator, derives satisfaction from the reciprocal relationship she and the students have with each other. She watches them grow and learn from her and she learns from them. She appreciates their gratitude when they succeed after a struggle, and their satisfaction when they gain a piece of knowledge or learn how to do something with which they previously struggled. The growth and the appreciation and the atmosphere surrounding their learning brings her back each day.

Finally, the motivation that sounded in every voice, showed on every face, rose into every story even when it wasn't said explicitly, is summarized in a single sentence from one participant:

"And you know, we do love these guys."

And from another:

"Yeah, yeah, and I also—I just, I love every one of them."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS,
RECOMMENDATIONS

In the previous chapter, I presented the lived experiences occurring within the daily working lives of student affairs professionals who work in the liminal space between academics and NCAA Division I athletics, and I analyzed and interpreted them through themes of liminality. The first part of this chapter contains the discussion of these findings. Since little academic focus has been given to these student affairs professionals and their work with academically at-risk students, the second part of this chapter contains the implications this study may have for the practice of this profession.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the experience of the learning specialist profession as a phenomenon existing in a space between the often conflicting influences of major university academics and upper level intercollegiate athletics. The intention for the study was to understand the phenomenon of daily lived experiences and the nature of the influences affecting daily work with academically at-risk student-athletes. Findings revealed a sense of liminality, or in-betweenness, with the attendant negative associations indicated in the literature regarding the experience of liminality. Learning specialists, hired ostensibly to teach effective learning techniques and strategies enabling college athletes to become independent learners, often became de facto eligibility specialists in service to athletics, increasing the sense of liminality in the phenomenon.

In Chapter IV, I discussed the themes and subthemes related to the experience of liminality, presented the data I collected in phenomenological interviews with participants, and applied the lens of liminality to their experiences to make meaning of the phenomenon. In this section I will consider these findings in relation to the three research questions I used to guide the study.

> Q1 How do learning specialists experience the daily interactions, happenings, and environment of academic success work with academically at-risk student-athletes in Division I college athletics?

The physical environment, interactions, and daily occurrences described by participants effectively demonstrate a substantial enough number of commonalities to consider the daily familiar happenings of this professional environment a phenomenon. Learning specialists, who are hired to work as academic professionals for the purposes of athletics, experience the phenomenon as a liminal space, feeling a sense of betweenness as athletics interests compete with academics for priority.

Characteristics of Job

The physical spaces, job description, and daily appearance of the job were similar for all participants. The general day-to-day events and work with students were also similar across all participants. All participants had daily prolonged contact with their student-athlete populations and frequent contact with advisors and unit directors. All participants had intensive experiences with coursework, syllabi, assignments, exams and expectations from faculty at their institutions without having much direct contact with faculty. For every participant, athletics coaches formed a significant part of their experiences, whether in direct contact with participants, or through advisors.

Spaces. The spaces in which the work takes place are similar not only between the institutions at which the participants work but at institutions across the country. Academic spaces frequently inhabit athletics facilities, as did all the academically-devoted spaces in this study. The construction of the academic staffs were very similar across all the units in this study: a director, advisors, and learning specialists were all common to each experience. Each learning specialist had a small assigned population of academically at-risk student-athletes, largely, but not always, consisting of revenue sport student-athletes of color who were frequently male and often first-generation students.

Daily work. The daily nature of each participant's work was to meet one-on-one with student-athletes for intensive, often daily, sessions of academic work. These sessions had the universal broadly stated purpose of, ostensibly, helping at-risk student-athletes become effective and successful college students through teaching of skills and learning strategies designed to create independent learners. The reality of the meetings was often different from the stated purpose, in that they frequently became sessions in which the learning specialist participant tracked assignments and due dates, watched to ensure students submitted assignments, combed through syllabi and course platforms to answer questions or seek faculty statements about assignments, checked student grades, watched to ensure students were doing the course readings, spent substantial portions of the meetings finding ways to convince students to do their academic work, or spent significant time talking with students about issues in their sports instead of their academics.

Colleagues. All participants had similar relationships and contact with colleagues, with whom they were supposed to work as a team to ensure academic success. Advisors

were responsible for academic advising for the various teams and interacted with learning

specialists frequently when their at-risk student-athletes were assigned to a learning

specialist's caseload. For all academic units, that caseload was populated predominantly,

but not exclusively, by student-athletes from revenue sports – football and men's

basketball – and from other high-profile sports, such as women's basketball, volleyball,

wrestling. Participants also had student-athletes from other teams but proportionately not

as many. Advisors also constituted the principal liaison between participants and coaches,

for all participants. Periodically, all participants had meetings with the academic unit

directors, and with coaches and advisors.

Summary of Question 1. The characteristics of the job are noticeably similar

among participants from every institution in this study. Athletics facilities and academics

spaces, their positions in relation to each other and the campus, and their interior make-up

were strikingly similar across institutions. Descriptions of student populations, learning

specialist job descriptions, job descriptions of colleagues, organizational structure within

the unit, supposed job responsibilities versus actual, and the nature of contact with

athletics and academics interests all bore strong resemblance to each other. The

similarities of the job responsibilities, structure, interactions, and daily occurrences create

a common phenomenon within which all participants had daily lived experiences.

Q2 What are the contexts and situations that have contributed to the learning
specialist's experiences in working within the phenomenon created by the
daily overlap of college academics and college athletics?

Each of the participants outlined a liminal feeling of being pulled in one direction

by academics and another by athletics, and expressed the difficulty of working in service

to the students' futures while the forces around them pulled the students in other

directions. Learning specialist participants discussed students, faculty, curricular demands, academic center colleagues, and coaches. Each of these groups contributed, to a greater or lesser degree, to the liminal experiences that characterized the daily working lives of the participants. Student athletic identity and academic identity foreclosure formed one of the contexts. Academic underpreparedness, learning disabilities, athletic travel, inappropriate academic choices, and individual satisfactions and triumphs all contributed to the student-driven context of the job experience.

In general, the conflicting nature of the relationship between athletics and academics does not seem to stem from faculty for these participants. While feelings of distress toward faculty and academic work on the part of the student-athletes contributed to the daily lived experiences of the participants as they worked with their students, faculty did not seem to directly contribute significantly to the liminality of the phenomenon of working in both academics and athletics. Academic unit directors did not contribute to increasing the sense of liminality, and, in fact, decreased it by being supportive. Coaches and coaching staffs were the single most influential group in determining the level to which participants experienced feelings of support or frustration in working within student-athlete academic success centers. Athletics academic advisors also comprised a group with whom interactions could be fraught with liminal triggers.

Students. The participants' stories about student-athletes and their conviction about their athletic futures aligned with the literature regarding heightened athletic identity and often foreclosed academic identity. This conviction reinforced the liminality of the situation for those individuals working with academically at-risk student-athletes: their students were never fully students in any given moment because they see

themselves, and other people see them, as athletes. The athletic identity constantly diminished the ability to work within the academic identity and created a liminal space in which the students reside, as well. Members of the athletic side who strengthened and validated the athlete identity of student-athletes, over the academic identity, impacted the effectiveness with which the participants can encourage and support academic work. Participants spoke about their support of the students in their athletic endeavors, and about the amount of time they spend, prior to beginning academic work each day, talking about the student-athletes' athletic success and frustrations, enforcing the reversal of hierarchy in the liminal space by bringing athletics thoughts, emotions, and interests into the mental space supposedly reserved for academics.

Student identity. In stories of student-athletes, liminality was reflected in the student's identification with the role of athlete and rejection of the role of student. Often, influenced by some coaches' dismissive attitudes academics, students resisted academic work. This resistance from the student-athletes resulted in the liminal feeling of uncertainty about traditions and outcomes, such as graduation, upon which heavy weight is placed in service of athletics goals.

When students, every day, brought multiple non-academic issues to the learning specialist's room, dislocation of established structures happened continuously. In the liminal space lay a constant struggle to re-establish the structure before the academic work can take place. Spending valuable work time every day convincing students to work on the thing for which they were there contributed to the ambivalence characteristic of long periods spent in the confines of liminality.

K-12 and athletics validation. The validation of the athletic role as far back as k12 contributes to the feeling of order dissolution. The accepted order of academics first was disrupted by an emphasis on athletics and, therefore, a lack of enforcement of academics as an important pursuit. The order, even before the students came to college, was switched to allow athletics to take priority, so the student-athletes are entering college with some parameters of the dissolution of order already in place, reinforcing the liminal experience for the learning specialist.

Learning disabilities. Learning disabilities, whether diagnosed or suspected but not yet confirmed with testing, formed a distinct challenge for all the participants. Several of them spoke about how hard these students tried, and how dedicated they were to doing well, only to be stymied by a learning disability. Participants experienced uncertainty about the educational and athletic outcomes for these students. Feeling sad and feeling ineffective were two phrases used in conjunction with this context. The increased sense of liminality didn't come from the students having learning disabilities; that is not unique to athletics. The liminal sense stemmed from the fact of the extreme demands placed on athletes' time and attention, which exacerbated the liminality for student-athletes with learning disabilities, and for learning specialists in helping them. College is often difficult for a student with a learning disability and adding the rigorous demands of athletics caused the liminal effect to intensify.

Student travel. Athletic travel created liminal sense, as well. Students would swear they would study while traveling, the learning specialists would go over with them what they needed to do, and they returned not having done the work. Athletics took priority over academics and enforced the feeling for learning specialists that their

established structure devoted to academic success had been dislocated, which was disorienting and also created uncertainty about the students' success in their classes.

Inappropriate academic choices. Every learning specialist had stories of student-athletes who did not take responsibility for the demands related to their academic work. They spoke about skipping class, missing appointments or neglecting to show up for tutoring, about completing papers but not turning them in, about swiping into study hall and then going to the player's lounge to take a nap or watch TV. However, in almost every story of these instances, the driver responsible for this behavior was the attitude of that student's coaching staff. Consistently, students who made appropriate choices academically came from teams whose coaches emphasized the importance of academics; student-athletes who made choices interfering with their potential for learning came from teams whose coaches did not hold them accountable for academics, or treated academics as something in which to the minimal amount of work in service to athletic eligibility. Given the formative age of student-athletes, and the immense influence athletics coaches have over their players, potentially to the extent of being their most influential role models, the deficit here can most likely be often attributed to coaches instead of athletes. Several participants told stories of coaches who enforced academics, albeit sometimes punitively, and how significantly that lessened the issues of students' inappropriate choices.

These situations clearly contributed to the liminally-spurred feeling of uncertainty about future outcomes. In each of these stories, the participant described a feeling of being responsible for the academic result without having any control over the situation in which the work needed to happen. This not only contributed to stress, but created a loss

of meaning, as well, in that they are expected to do their jobs, but cannot do them due to circumstances out of their control. The meaning of being a learning specialist becomes ambiguous and uncertain.

Satisfaction and triumphs. Despite the ongoing struggles with athletics creating a liminal space in which academics could not take priority, and despite disheartening stories about coaches, fans who were judgmental, colleagues who were difficult to work with, and students who were unmotivated or struggling, every participant related moments of satisfaction and triumph with students. The moments of triumphs they had with their students were the single most significant factor in diminishing the sense of liminality, whether because they graduated, finished a semester, completed a paper, or made the small step of suddenly understanding how to do something and expressing their gratitude.

Faculty. Of the actors who were on the periphery of the direct relationship between learning specialists and student-athletes, the relationship with faculty was the area in which the space was the least liminal, meaning the devotion to academic importance tended to reign and athletics didn't have as strong an influence. Regarding faculty, in general, participants' remarks were positive, describing faculty members as mostly supportive. Stories of faculty were positive and described people who almost always supported student-athletes in both academics and athletics, with only a few exceptions. Overall, despite minor grousing about assignments or exams, and some feeling of indignation at athletes' perceptions of being singled out in the classroom, participants' experiences of faculty as a group were generally positive. They characterized faculty as caring, supportive, and cooperative.

Despite the frustrations evident in discussions of assignments and syllabi, very little if any of the sense of liminality between athletics and academics came directly from actions by faculty. That the student-athletes were academically underprepared and expected help with comprehension was the factor contributing to the liminality in this situation, but the athletics/academic liminality was not reinforced by the assignments or exams coming from the academic side of the campus. Largely, the participants spoke in praise of the faculty at their institutions, with regards to their support of athletes, even though there were isolated instances of frustration. Some participants related differences between faculty attitudes dependent upon discipline, which was supported in the literature.

In some cases, faculty members were so overly accommodating of athletes' schedules that they didn't realize they were suggesting something that would be a violation of policy and a conflict of interest, to have a coach, whose principle job was to win games, administer an exam to a student-athlete who needed to pass it. In this case, the liminality is somewhat reinforced by the position of being between athletics and academics, in that the learning specialists have to enforce the athletics rules in order to protect the students' athlete status. They must turn down offers of help – which faculty would, with other students, have the autonomy to offer – because of the students' position as a part of an athletics team. Learning specialists are forced, in this instance, to protect the athletic interests over the academic interests of their students, again reinforcing the liminality by placing them between competing interests.

Academic center colleagues. Academic success center colleagues formed an integral part of the participants' daily experiences, significantly impacting the way in

which participants could do their jobs. They described interactions and experiences with their directors and athletics academic advisors. The academic unit directors contributed very little to the sense of liminality, and in fact diminished it by supporting the participants, taking their sides in potential conflicts, and maintaining the understood hierarchy that academics should be the top priority. Some advisors, however, did contribute to the liminality by emphasizing athletics at the urging of the coaches, and placing athletics interests above academics. This seemed to happen rather often, but the intensity of the liminal effect for the learning specialist depended on the individual participant.

> *Advisors.* In the departments in this study, athletics academics advisors were the liaisons between the coaching staffs and the daily academic work of the learning specialists, so the participants worked very closely with them. General statements about advisors as a group were positive; however, there was undoubtedly an *us-and-them* feel to the conversations about advisors. Several participants conveyed frustration that advisors seemed to be under the impression that the learning specialists worked for them, when in reality they were on the same organizational level, both reporting to the director. That dynamic enforced a sense of hierarchical reversal, and caused a resultant feeling of disorientation.

Despite the generally positive feeling about advisors, liminality was still frequently perpetuated in the relationship between advisors and learning specialists. Advisors worked on the same team as learning specialists, supposedly in advocating within the realm and for the importance of academics, but the learning specialists could never be sure when the advisor might align with coaches and athletics interests, so the

uncertainty would still be strongly present as to whether academics would be maintained as the highest priority or moved into second place behind athletics at the behest of a coach, with advisors as the enforcers. Important to this sense of discontinuity and dislocation of structure was the fact that several participants remarked about advisors suddenly shifting position, or allowing blame to be placed on learning specialists when something went wrong.

  Coaches. In contrast to faculty, athletics coaches form an integral part of the athletic department and of interactions with academic success staff. In discussing the general nature of coaching, all the participants uttered some variation of "I mean, I get it: it's their job to win games." A coach's priority is athletic success, but in that pursuit, they can either provide substantial help or create difficult challenges for learning specialists. The attitude of coaches toward academics trickled down to and was reflected by their teams, affecting student-athletes willingness toward academic work. All of the participants expressed the most frustration and dissatisfaction when talking about coaches. Every participant, without fail, had had serious difficulties with one or more coaches at their institution, and these were the situations that contributed most significantly to the sense of liminality. While some coaches were understanding and helpful, those who eschewed academic importance in favor of athletics, whether with shifting and excessive practice times, a cultural disdain for academics, or a deliberate ignoring of academic needs of student-athletes, significantly influenced the day-to day experience of the liminal space between athletics and academics. Most of the coaches who negatively influenced the sense of liminality were revenue sport coaches, although

not all. Coaches could, however, have a positive influence if they emphasized academic importance.

The Positive. A coaching staff who supports academics and places emphasis on academic achievement as a requirement of being a student-athlete on their team can be among the most powerful allies a learning specialist has. Given the importance which athletes place on succeeding in their sport, and a coach's ability to help or hinder that effort, coaches often provided the measures the participants could rely on to keep their students on task. Positive support and ready responsiveness characterized coaching staffs who supported academics as an important part of the student-athlete experience, and they succeeded in having some diminishing effect on the sense of liminality. Several participants referred to players having run to laps as punishment or to run until they vomited, and Kathleen related the story of an entire team having to run back-and-forth suicide drills because two students missed academic meetings. Even though that kind of support is punitive in nature, it helped the participants keep their students motivated and moving toward academic success.

The Negative. While coaches can and often do have a positive effect on student-athletes' attitudes toward academics, a negative and unaffirming, or outright hostile, attitude toward the importance of academics caused participants significant job tension, stress, and frustration. When they spoke about coaches, expressions hardened, occasionally changing to expressions of outright frustration. In stories about a particular coach, at least one participant was almost spitting out the words. While they all had positive things to say about their institution's coaches in general, and did relate positives about specific coaches, the contrast was stark when they spoke about coaches with whom

they clashed or who placed blame on the participants for their athletes' actions. All of the participants but one had at least one story of these encounters with coaches, and these stories revealed that coaches had enormous impact on the daily lived experiences of the participants and, by extension, their students. Some variation of the phrase "they don't care about academics" was uttered by most participants.

There were coaches who didn't hold their students accountable and placed the blame and the onus for academic diligence on the learning specialists. Several participants expressed indignation at not being able to help deserving, academically-oriented, hard-working students because they had to devote time to chasing down and badgering these coaches' student-athletes, who were not taking responsibility for their own academics because their coaches weren't demonstrating that it was important. Each institution had one or more coaching staffs who heightened the level of frustration and negativity the participants experienced in the liminal space day-to-day. Participants particularly noted those coaches who did not offer support for the academic staff in trying to enforce academic work with their student-athletes. Coaches who emphasized the importance of academics lessened the feeling of liminality; coaches who dismissed academics or derided the academic staff significantly increased the feeling of liminality and the accompanying disorientation, loss of meaning, and ambivalence.

The greatest levels of frustration showed in the participants' voices, faces, and body language when they spoke about coaches. Yet there was a curious resignation, too. The tone underlying their words was one of acquiescence to the fact that coaches will be that way, they were powerful, it's part of the job, and there's no sense in fighting back against it. The words of Marco, who endured "what's your fucking excuse?" from the

coach on speakerphone, spoke volumes about this feeling of ambivalence and resignation: "Some coaches are like that." Evident from the participants' stories of coaching staffs is the fact that athletics coaches, more than any other part of the job, have the ability to negatively influence the learning specialist's ability to do the job and their ability to enjoy it and feel effective.

Summary for Question 2. Of all the actors in the phenomenon, coaches have the most influence on the sense of liminality for learning specialists, and, by extension, student-athletes. A coach who sincerely believes, or acts as if, academics are important, and supports the academic staff in prioritizing academics, can diminish the sense of liminality by reinforcing the higher education hierarchy as it was intended, with academics first. They will help maintain the sense of order and keep established structures intact by emphasizing academics as the highest priority of the student-athletes and the academic staff. This, in turn, creates a more intact sense of certainty about established traditions and outcomes such as the constantly touted excellence in the classroom and the high rate of student-athlete graduation. Praising these things in public but undercutting them behind closed doors serves, conversely, to enforce the feeling of liminality, heightening the sense of disorientation and the loss of meaning as the importance of academics is de-emphasized, and the academics first hierarchy boasted about by institutions of higher education and the NCAA is undermined within the confines of the athletics facilities.

Q3 What is it like to work in the atmosphere and environment of NCAA Division I athletics as a learning specialist professional?

The nature of the daily interactions and occurrences made the phenomenon a liminal experience for the participants. While they are hired to guide college students to

academic success, learning specialists often encounter situations in which athletics

stakeholders make demands which prioritize athletics over academics. The participants

found themselves existing on a daily basis in a space that felt liminal, or between, two

competing interests often at odds and pulling the participants in opposing directions

simultaneously. While the nature of the job itself created liminality, the intensity of the

liminality depended on the actors in a given situation and what was being requested.

Feelings of liminality occurred in the form of dissolution of order, dislocation of

established structures, reversal of hierarchy, and uncertainty about continuity of traditions

and future outcomes. These distinctly unsettling feelings caused a sense of unsureness

and disruption as the participants could not be sure how the job would manifest on any

given day, as it was between two things – academics and athletics – and was not wholly

either one nor the other, but both at the same time. These ongoing feelings of

organizational disruption brought with them feelings of disorientation, loss of meaning,

and ambivalence as the participants interacted with various people through their working

days. Daily entrenchment between opposing demands was the principal cause of the

sense of liminality, and coaches, colleagues, and faculty all contributed to the sense of

liminality to a greater or lesser extent, as did student-athletes, who were not only

contributors but experiencing the liminal space with the participants.

Liminal environment. The environment of academic success units contributes to

the liminality because they are housed within the athletic facilities; to get to their

workspace participants walk through huge spaces reflective of immense amounts of

money spent on athletics, and past décor and finishes redolent with emphasis on athletics

past and present. Academics spaces themselves are painted in the colors of the athletics

teams, and pictures and posters of athletics teams and slogans on the walls emphasize the fact that athletics big business surrounds the work of academics. Participants are surrounded by constant reminders, as they work to emphasize academics, that the priority of the space is athletics. While college is understood as a place where its very reason for existence, and top priority, is for students to get an education, the athletics space, although a part of college, sends the clear message that the top priority is sports. The hierarchy – academics as the top priority – is reversed and the participants who were hired to emphasize academics must work within this space which is clearly, both financially and idealistically, devoted to athletics.

Liminal interactions. The tension between academics and athletics occurs whenever participants feel the sense of both priorities making simultaneous demands, or feel that academics, for which they are hired, is being downplayed by athletics, with whom they work. These incidents happen frequently. The priority of the learning specialist participants was demonstrated to be guiding their students to attainment of a college degree to ensure their futures beyond athletics. The degree was seen as an end in itself. However, the priority of collegiate athletics is winning in their sport and keeping athletes in a position to assist in that goal. Academics goals exist principally in the service of keeping student-athletes academically eligible to play their sport, the NCAA requirements for which align with the threshold for academic probation at many institutions. Given these disparate goals, those interactions that pit the priorities of academics against the priorities of athletics, most frequently with coaches or advisors, creates a deepening of liminality for the learning specialist.

Liminal happenings. Daily occurrences frequently affect how learning specialists experience the liminality of their jobs. Student-athletes face overlapping academic and athletic requirements every day. Since many of the student-athletes with whom learning specialists work are athletically crucial, coaches will require them for athletics needs because they are an integral part of the team and need to prepare for an upcoming competition, even when they have assignments or papers due or exams the next day. As postseason competition approaches, the athletic demands become heightened even more. Learning specialists must find ways to successfully accommodate both demands.

Summary to Question 3. That the athletically crucial student-athletes with whom learning specialists work are academically at-risk means that successful navigation of both academics and athletics becomes an even greater challenge and increases the sense of liminality further, since these students require more time devoted to academic eligibility, but they cannot use time dedicated to athletics. Failure in academics means failure in athletics, because, for a student-athlete, falling below certain academic levels will also cost them their ability to play their sport. Navigating these instances are daily occurrences for learning specialists and ensure that being a learning specialist means occupying liminal space for the duration of the job.

Implications

This qualitative study explored the phenomenon of working as an academic success professional within the confines of Division I Power Five college athletics. Learning specialists working in the field told stories revealing the nature of the phenomenon, and results showed that working in this situation constitutes a daily working experience of liminality, characterized by a perpetual sense of betweenness and

feelings of dissolution, dislocation and disruption of the established expectations for the working environment. Various members of the higher education community contributed to this sense of liminality, and, in this section, I will discuss the state of the profession and implications for professionals in the field.

Learning Specialist as a Profession

The job of learning specialist is relatively new within the field of academic support for student-athletes (Wolverton, 2016). The participants in this study were passionate, dedicated, and professional. However, based on the research and findings in this study, a question arises as to whether these professionals have a profession.

If a profession is defined by having strong standards, consistent professional practices, minimum educational criteria for practitioners, clearly defined competencies required for practice, and established goals to strive for, then an argument could be made that the job of learning specialist is, so far, merely a job and not a profession. No scholarly research exists to define best practices or establish models. Based on the participants in this study, educational levels are not well-defined. Every participant had chosen ways of approaching their daily jobs that were based on their own instincts and background rather than a professional standard of practice. None of the participants mentioned competencies, although Marco discussed some classes he had attended, but they were general educational seminars, not specific to the profession. Goals were a particularly muddy area, in that programs and athletics defined appropriate academic goals for student-athletes as overall graduation rates and eligibility for competition, which were clearly not satisfactory goals for the participants, based on their remarks during interviews. They were forced to establish their own goals, which were

occasionally at odds with the goals established in agreement with athletics, smacking of, again, academics working in service to athletics, which brings the job back into its persistent state of liminality.

Some strides in this direction have been made. Learning specialists have a dedicated educational track at the annual conference of the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A), and, during the annual conference, the association offers a small professional development institute for learning specialists, which I have attended. The setting of goals and discussion of best practices are anecdotal and stem from longer-tenured learning specialists offering their preferred methods to the attendees, which is a step in the right direction, but has not resulted in profession-wide standards or required certifications. The profession still has the air of everybody doing what seems right to them. To avoid a piecemeal reinvention of the position by each professional taking the job, *learning specialist* needs to become a profession, not just a job subject to the whims and priorities of other interests.

Implications for understanding and recognition. Since practitioners in this line of work have been very under-studied, this study constitutes a first step in exploring academic work with student-athletes by establishing the parameters within which the work takes place. This study's usefulness lies in exposing and understanding the phenomenon and the likely circumstances student service professionals will encounter while working in the confines of this phenomenon. The contents of this study offer a possible explanation for the high rate of burnout in the profession.

Recognizing liminality. This study provides an explanation for the source of negative and detrimental emotional and psychological reactions experienced while

working as a learning specialist. As such, this study will serve as a means to recognize the presence of liminality and its effects and understand the underlying causes for its presence. While the presence of the liminal effect is probably an indelible characteristic of the job for as long as college athletics continues to garner national attention and big money, and, in all likelihood, is not possible to eliminate entirely, knowledge of the causes for the liminality and comprehension of the results of extended stay in liminality, for both themselves and for student-athletes, enables learning specialists to take identifiable steps to diminish its negative effects.

Each of the participants in this study, while all experiencing the liminal effect, had slightly different experiences of it, as individual sources of liminality and their own personalities and backgrounds dictated differing ways of approaching it. However, the study shows clearly defined commonalities within experiences of the profession, and these may serve to provide a sense of community among practitioners in the field. This opens an avenue for professional development in the form of community discussion regarding effectively combatting the effects of liminality.

Burnout. Some of the literature indicated a high burnout rate for learning specialists, but the learning specialist job is well known in the field for undergoing high rates of burnout and turnover. While that perception is largely anecdotal, it can be borne out by looking at the tenure of the participants in this study. Six of the nine had been a learning specialist for fewer than five years, one had only been in for two, and three had been in that position for only one academic year or less. Approximately half of those positions had been filled recently because someone had left. This unfortunate truth of the phenomenon adds to the liminality experienced by both the practitioners and the student-

athletes. Colleague departure and replacement creates uncertainty about the future under the best of circumstances; in this case, liminality is already prevalent and acting upon those working in the academic success unit.

Frequent turnover creates a constant sensation of dissolution of order and uncertainty, contributing to the experience of disorientation and loss of meaning. At-risk student-athletes are already subject to liminality by virtue of strong athletic identification and the need for equal attention to be paid to both academics and athletics while unequal importance is placed on them by their coaches and fans. They are in need of academic support to succeed and stay eligible, yet face instability in the form that support takes. If six of these learning specialists have been in position for four years or fewer, then the students with whom they work, often in college for five years, have had to face the uncertainty of not knowing who they will be working with from one semester to the next. If those same student-athletes have also undergone coaching changes – a frequent occurrence in big-time college athletics – then the uncertainty inherent in liminality is playing a powerful role in their college careers and success.

Limitations

Institutional Type

Some limitations of this study should be noted. The study focused solely on one type of institution – Division I, Power Five – because these institutions have the highest budgets, get the most public scrutiny, and are the most likely to have extensive academic success staff. However, the Power Five conferences reflect only 65 of the 353 Division I institutions. Other institutions operate under different budgets, different competition models, and have difficulties unique to these conditions. Any of these different

institutional or athletics program types could shape learning specialists' experiences of the liminality between academics and athletics, so the findings could differ somewhat for academic staff in other types of institutions, athletics programs, and competition levels. Researchers in follow-up studies could benefit from studies of academic staff in other kinds of institutions than those represented here.

Burnout and Turnover

Another limitation for this study lies in the high burnout and turnover rate in the learning specialist profession. While the high burnout rate may be attributable to the phenomenon under study, and forms an important point for consideration of implications, it also resulted in limited learning specialist experience for approximately half the participants. All of the participants had at least one academic year of exposure to the profession, but that relatively brief time restricts the number of potential stories the participants can harvest from their experiences. That said, however, one of the participants with one year of experience – Marco – was the participant with whom I had the longest conversation and who offered some of the most telling insights into the experience of liminality. Therefore, the repository of stories may rely as much on the participant's personality and the uniqueness of their individual experiences than on the length of time in the job. That Marco had some of the richest moments in the findings with only one year of experience in the profession indicates that the experience of liminality is immediate upon entry into the job, and remains an ongoing phenomenon from that point forward given that all participants, regardless of tenure, continued to experience it up to the present, and several told stories of liminal experiences that happened within days of starting the job. That may indicate that this limitation is not a

highly impactful one on whether the participants had liminal experiences. However, follow-up studies could seek to limit participants to those with a certain number of years of experience.

Structures

The scope of this study did not include research into institutional power structures, specific budgets and budgeting choices, or hierarchical entrenchment. All of these factors could play a role in both the experiences of participants and surrounding actors, and in any discussion of change engendered by the results of this study. Further research within this field may warrant study of datasets providing this kind of information, which could inform recommendations for the field.

Limited Participant Type

This study sought stories only from learning specialists and did not seek experiences of the liminal space from other higher education personnel exposed to the phenomenon. These could include advisors, who are equally as entrenched within the liminal space, and whose experiences may strongly inform the findings of liminality, since they have more direct and persistent contact with coaches and faculty. Faculty perceptions of the phenomenon are also not present in the current study, and would form a valuable voice in studies of the phenomenon. Unit directors, coaches, student-athletes, and athletics directors would all be potential sources for enrichment of understanding of the phenomenon and are not represented here.

<div align="center">

Recommendations

</div>

This study offers insights that may enable learning specialists to more effectively serve the academically at-risk student-athlete population, diminish the sense of liminality,

and maintain their own job satisfaction and sense of accomplishment and order. This study serves to highlight potential weaknesses in the field, engendered by the rapidity of job increase unaccompanied by relevant research and educational attention, as well as a number of strengths that have yet to be effectively tapped within higher education. In this section, I offer possible strategies which may help strengthen the profession and create cohesion, diminish liminal effects, and strengthen networks and professional practices in service to the student-athlete population.

Recommendations for the Profession

No matter how passionate and dedicated the practitioners in the field are, without a clear set of goals and standards to guide the profession, it faces the danger of creating poor outcomes with good intentions. In order to create cohesive effectiveness on a profession-wide basis, the profession would need to form standards based on competencies and specific outcomes. For such an effort to be effective, training and education would be necessary; therefore, a certification program requiring them should be established. Establishment of certification programs within colleges of education, specifically those dedicated to higher education practices, would be a logical step toward creating such profession-wide standards; however, the possibility of offering such a certification through the professional association could be explored as well. The scope and form of those programs do not lie within the purvey of this study, but the need for them is indicated in the findings and research contained here.

**Recommendations for Diminishing
the Effect**

As evident in this study, each participant had developed their own personal standard of practice that enabled them to navigate the liminal effect and maintain passion for the job. Taken together, the individual experiences and strategies could form a practical and effective guide for practitioners in the field to learn how to diminish the effects of extended exposure to liminality, potentially lessening the rate of burnout in the field. Education about the liminal effect and its detrimental nature over long exposure would provide new practitioners with tools and strategies for seeking remedies and lessening its effects. Such a guide could be added to the certification curriculum, and, as has been practiced on a limited basis at the annual conference, experienced practitioners could serve as teachers and mentors for newer professionals, working from the comprehensive guide established for that purpose.

**Recommendations for Working
with Students**

The pressure of the liminal space is at least as high, if not higher, for student-athletes as it is for learning specialists. Academic failure means loss of the ability to participate in athletics. The literature, supported by data from this study, indicates that heightened athletic identity and academic identity foreclosure pose a threat to academic success among student-athletes. The data from this study indicates that coaches, and athletic environments, have a strong influence on perpetuation of heightened athletic identity, and the literature indicates that heightened athletic identity interferes with the accomplishment of daily academic work.

Diminishing the influence coaches have on student-athletes would be an ineffective strategy, since coaches have power over athletics careers, and decreasing athletic identities would be difficult given the environment and the forces at play; therefore, learning specialists should work to increase the student-athletes' academic identities. Given that the individual successes of students were the most effective way to diminish the liminal effect for the participants, this strategy would benefit learning specialists as well. Clues to the strategies for accomplishing this can be found sprinkled through the conversations that took place for this study, and strategies may be gleaned from the satisfactions, triumphs, and gains made by the students the learning specialists discussed in this study. Each participant had moments of success and satisfaction, and diminishing of the liminal effect, by using a strategy that proved successful and provoked moments of motivation and academic confidence in their students, lowering the liminal effect temporarily for the students, too. These individual strategies can also enable at-risk students to feel more confidence in their abilities academically and should form a best practices section within the comprehensive guide.

Connection was perhaps the most powerful tool these participants had with their students, and all of them used it. The strategy is simple, yet highly effective when used along with learning strategies. Every participant indicated that students responded best when the participant got to know them and demonstrated that they cared about them and believed in their academic abilities. That set the foundation for the small academic triumphs they would later enjoy.

Using a strength-based approach to increase self-efficacy in the academic role, learning specialists can diminish the sense of liminality for both students and themselves

by using the students' athletics-enhanced natural strengths to gain confidence in their academic abilities. Using lessons learned in athletics and applying them to academics provides the student with a sense of solid footing and an idea that something previously learned will be useful for another purpose, strengthening critical thinking skills and cross-purposing skills. Since an at-risk student-athlete's confidence and identity lies primarily with sport, teaching academic lessons using physical examples, anecdotes, and skills will also provide the student-athlete with the sense that athletics and academics can be connected, increasing confidence in their ability to accomplish academic success. When teaching critical thinking and argument, Marco used sport-oriented documentaries to maintain the students' interest in the topic and show the students that they already had the ability to analyze and had done so many times.

Another athletic skill with useful purpose in the learning specialist room was the ability for breaking down. Athletes constantly break down plays and tactics into small chunks in order to see how another team was effective, or how they themselves can be more effective. Connecting that skill to academics would not be a difficult leap, and, in fact, Jody and Kathleen both referenced using a very similar skill in showing something to their students. They both broke an assignment down into small chunks and made a step-by-step guide for doing the assignment using the assignment itself, much like a coach does while showing film to players. The crucial next step, which Melissa used, is to teach the students how to use that skill gained in athletics as a tool for academics instead of doing it for them. When they realize they already have the skill, they will feel a sense of success and the learning specialist can build on that. The same strategy can be

used in teaching students to read and decipher the syllabi and learning platform, instead of reading and interpreting it for them.

Coaches often drill athletics and character lessons into student-athletes' heads using slogans and constant repetition and reinforcing the lesson with some kind of meaning. Such a practice can be easily converted to the academic side of the house, using athletics references as the connection. Athletes have used slogans all their lives; asking them to come up with slogans that illustrate an academic point, and then, more crucially, reinforcing the lesson by connecting it to something athletic gives it meaning and interest for the student. Marco did this with one of his wrestlers. It gives the student an understandable and memorable meaning, and, more important for the student, supplies the implicit idea that the whole of their identities can be useful for academics. Bolster the academic identity by validating the athletic identity academically.

Student-athletes have the ability to memorize a half-inch thick book of plays, yet they have very possibly not ever made the connection between that ability and what a prodigious academic skill it can be. Demonstrating to an athlete that this strength built in athletics can be a superpower for studying for exams can be a powerful confidence booster when they return from an exam with the highest grade they've ever gotten. That was actually a strategy I developed in my work with student-athletes, and one I still use with my students now.

Perhaps the greatest strength an athlete has is an utter and fierce tenacity when it comes to something they are enthusiastic about. Bolstering academic skills using athletics strengths may not create the love for academics that they have for athletics – although it might – but it may create enough confidence to tease that tenacity out of hiding in the

academic setting. The athletic identity will still be strong, and the athletic influences will still be demanding attention, but raising the academic confidence and identity to meet them will create a better balance and help to diminish the sense of liminality for both the learning specialists and the student.

Recommendations for Directors

The other parts of this liminal experience are not as easily influenced by the learning specialist, but they bear noticing as future possibilities for development in the profession. The actor within the phenomenon who had the most positive effect on decreasing the liminality of the situation were the academic success center directors. All of the learning specialists identified trust and close relationships with their directors, and expressed the conviction that the director would support them when they needed it. Since the directors have more power and influence than do the learning specialists, the contents of this study might be a useful tool to use in approaching the director with ideas for improving cooperation and situations that would lessen the difficulties inherent in prolonged immersion in a liminal phenomenon.

And faculty. This study shows that faculty are supportive of student-athletes in both of their roles. Faculty members would also be in the position to understand the concept of liminality and understand its application to student-athletes and academic success personnel, since faculty are also in the position of having to navigate the simultaneous demands of academics and athletics. Their role as the principle purveyor of academic material is frequently infringed upon by athletics travel requirements and student-athletes who, because of athletics schedules, cannot take required classes at times offered, such as a single-section offering of an upper-level required major class which

conflicts with practice or meeting times. Given their own navigation of the space between academics and athletics, and this study offering evidence of faculty support for student-athletes, faculty members could become the most significant allies the academic success center has in reprioritizing academics as the central goal. A director would have the influence and contacts to accomplish the meetings leading to a firmer relationship between faculty and academic success centers.

And advisors. Directors also have significant influence over advisors. It would be within their power to help slow the rate of burnout among learning specialists by reducing the sense of liminality coming from advisors. Taking a firm approach emphasizing that learning specialists are an equal part of the team with advisors, when that is organizationally appropriate, would help lessen the liminal sense from that direction. Another area in which directors can help reduce liminality and create a more cohesive team would be to reinforce the academic mission with those advisors who tend to allow coaches to influence them too heavily in athletics demands.

And coaches. Directors also constitute the most significant and powerful barrier between academic staffs and coaching staffs. Reducing coaches' access to academic spaces or academic staff when they create stressful situations may lessen, considerably, the coaches' influence on the negative liminality of the phenomenon.

Recommendations for Faculty

Melissa highlighted the strength and dedication of the Faculty Senate and the Faculty Athletics Representatives as a strong factor in her department's success. Their model is one that could be useful to academic success units in establishing their learning specialist programs and keeping the burnout rates lower. The Faculty Senate at Melissa's

institution takes on a new project every semester related to the success of the student-athlete academic success unit. Higher education faculty, as an inherent part of their jobs, are experts at researching, educating, and implementing research into practice. They are also strongly versed in understanding and applying theory. Since liminality has been shown to be an indelible part of the learning specialist profession, and probably plays a significant part in the burnout rate in the profession, faculty could be instrumental in educating on its effects and guiding academic success staff in recognizing it and resisting its effects. This education could form part of the certificate program, which would enable faculty to take charge of its creation, approval, and implementation, ensuring the academic integrity of the program. Having faculty in a more influential role in student-athlete academic success programs, as the staunchest ally of student-athletes outside of the confines of athletics, would both increase the strength of the success unit and help diminish the effects of liminality.

Summary

The findings of this study clearly show evidence of a consistent and deleterious liminal effect within the phenomenon of working as a learning specialist in student-athlete academic success. This liminality affects both learning specialists and the student-athletes with whom they work, contributing to stress and disorientation, and possibly demonstrating a significant reason for the high turnover rate among learning specialists. Recognizing and understanding liminality may afford learning specialists the means to reduce its effects, as this study clearly shows several factors contributing to diminishing liminality. A comprehensive guide and certificate program established as a profession standard may begin to render the field into a profession and provide a means for ensuring

that learning specialists are qualified and equipped to use their passion and dedication toward positive outcomes for students. Directors and faculty members offer potential as the most significant allies for learning specialists and their students, and strengthening their involvement in diminishing the liminal effect and establishing programmatic standards would have positive and lasting effects for the profession and for the students with whom they work.

REFERENCES

Adcock, R. (2006). Generalization in comparative and historical social science: The difference that interpretivism makes. In D. Yanow & P. Schwartz-Shea (Eds.), *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn* (pp. 50-66). Armonk, NY: Sharpe.

Adler, P., & Adler, P. (1991). *Backboards & blackboards: College athletes and role engulfment.* New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Andrews, H., & Roberts, L. (2015). Liminality. In J. Wright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences, (2nd ed.)* (pp. 131-137). New York, NY: Elsevier.

Baker, A. R., & Hawkins, B. J. (2016). Academic and career advancement for Black male athletes at NCAA Division I Institutions. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, *2016*(150), 71–82.

Beamon, K. (2012). "I'm a Baller": Athletic identity foreclosure among African American former student-athletes. *Journal of African American Studies*, *16*(2), 195–208.

Beamon, K. (2014). Racism and stereotyping on campus: Experiences of African American male student-athletes. *Journal of Negro Education*, *83*(2), 121–134.

Beamon, K. K. (2008). "Used Goods": Former African American college student-athletes' perception of exploitation by Division I universities. *Journal of Negro Education*, 77 (4), pp. 352-364.

Beamon, K. K. (2010). Are sports overemphasized in the socialization process of African American males? A qualitative analysis of former collegiate athletes' perception of sport socialization. *Journal of Black Studies*, *41*(2), 281–300.

Beech, N. (2011). Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction. *Human Relations, 64*(2), 285-302. doi: 10.1177/0018726710371235

Bernhard, L. M., & Bell, L. (2015). Best practices in academic support services for student-athletes: Considerations for location. In E. Comeaux (Ed.), *Data-informed practices in academic support centers for college athletes* (pp. 125-142). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Beron, K. J., & Piquero, A. R. (2016). Studying the determinants of student-athlete grade point average: The roles of identity, context, and academic interests. *Social Science Quarterly (Wiley-Blackwell)*, *97*(2), 142–160.

Bimper Jr., A. Y. (2014). Game changers: The role athletic identity and racial identity play on academic performance. *Journal of College Student Development*, *55*(8), 795–807.

Borg, E., & Söderlund, J. (2014). Moving in, moving on: Liminality practices in project-based work. *Employee Relations 36*(2), 182-197. doi: 10.1108/ER-11-2012-0081

Browning, A. (2015). Bridging the gap: Academic support for entering special-admit college athletes. In E. Comeaux (Ed.), *Data-informed practices in academic*

support centers for college athletes (pp. 109-124). Charlotte, NC: Information
Age Publishing.

Burton, L., & Peachey, J. W. (2014). Ethical leadership in intercollegiate sport:
Challenges, opportunities, future directions. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport, 7,* 1
– 10.

Byers, W. (1995). *Unsportsmanlike conduct: Exploiting college athletics.* Ann Arbor,
MI: University of Michigan Press.

Carter-Francique, A., Hart, A., & Cheeks, G. (2015). Examining the value of social
capital and social support for Black student-athletes' academic success. *Journal of
African American Studies*, *19*(2), 157–177.

Clark, M. (2011). Whose eyes?: Women's experiences of changing in a public change
room. *Phenomenology and Practice, 5*(2), p. 57 – 69.

Clopton, A. (2011). Using identities to explore social capital differences among White
and African American student-athletes. *Journal of African American
Studies*, *15*(1), 58–73.

Comeaux, E. (2010). Racial differences in faculty perceptions of collegiate student-
athletes' academic and post-undergraduate achievements. *Sociology of Sport
Journal,* 27 (4), pp. 390-412.

Comeaux, E. (2011). A study of attitudes toward college student-athletes: Implications
for faculty-athletics engagement. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 80 (4), 521-
532.

Comeaux, E. (2015). Organizational learning in athletic departments: Toward an anti-
deficit and data-driven approach to academic support for Division I athletes. In E.

Comeaux (Ed.), *Data-informed practices in academic support centers for college athletes* (pp. 1-16). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Comeaux, E., and Harrison, K. C. (2011). A conceptual model of academic success for student-athletes. *Educational Researcher*, 40(5), pp. 235-245

Comeaux, E., & Harrison, C. K. (2007). Faculty and male student-athletes: Racial differences in the environmental predictors of academic achievement. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, *10*(2), 199–214.

Comeaux, E., & Snyder, E. M. (2016). View of campus community members of Division I athletes in classroom settings. *Journal of the Professoriate*, *8*(1), 1–21.

Cooper, J. N. (2016). Excellence beyond athletics: Best practices for enhancing Black male student-athletes' educational experiences and outcomes. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *49*(3), 267–183.

Cooper, J. N., Davis, T. J., & Dougherty, S. (2017). Not so black and white: A multi-divisional exploratory analysis of male student-athletes' experiences at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institutions. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *34*(1), 59–78.

Covell, D., & Barr, C. (2010). *Managing intercollegiate athletics*. Scottsdale, AZ: Holcomb Hathaway.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Qualitative inquiry and research design.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: SAGE Publications Inc.

Crotty, M. (2011). *The foundations of social research: Meanings and perspective in the research process.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Danish, S., Petitpas, A., & Hale, B. (1993). Life development intervention for athletes: Life skills through sports. *The Counseling Psychologist, 21*(3), 352-385.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research,* (4th Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 1-19.

Division I Academic Progress Rate (APR). (2018). *NCAA.* Retrieved November 12, 2018, from http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/division-i-academic-progress-rate-apr

Dobson, T. (2002) Keeping touch by electronic mail. In M. van Manen (Ed.), *Writing in the dark* (99 – 114). London, Ontario: The Althouse Press.

Ellis, N., & Ybema, S. (2010). Marketing identities: shifting circles of identification in interorganizational relationships. *Organization Studies 31*(3), 279-305. https://doi-org.unco.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0170840609357397

Espenshade, T. J., Chung, C. Y., & Walling, J. L. (2004). Admission preferences for minority students, athletes, and legacies at elite universities. *Social Science Quarterly 85*(5), 1422-1446.

Estimated probability of competing in professional athletics. (2018). Retrieved October 20, 2018, from http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/estimated-probability-competing-professional-athletics

Evans, J. P., Alden, M., Anderson, K., Cartwright, C., McPhee, S., & Perlman, H. (2012). Institutional experience with academic reform: A panel discussion. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport, 5,* 98 – 120.

Ferris, E., Finster, M., & McDonald, D. (2004). Academic fit of student-athletes: An analysis of NCAA division I-A graduation rates. *Research in Higher Education, 45*(6), 555-575.

Fong, K., Wright, R., & Wimer, C. (2016). The cost of free assistance: Why low-income individuals do not access food pantries. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 43*(1), 71-93.

Fountain, J. J., & Finley, P. S. (2011). Academic clustering: A longitudinal analysis of a Division I football program. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics, 4*, 24-41.

Fountain, J. J., & Finley, P. S. (2009). Academic majors of upperclassmen football players in the Atlantic Coast Conference: An analysis of academic clustering comparing White and minority players. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 1–13.

Fuller, R. D., Harrison, C. K., & Bukstein, S. J. (2017). A study of significance of racial and athletic identification on educational perceptions among African American male college athletes. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 20(5), 711–722.

Gadamer, H. (1989). *Truth and method* (3rd ed.). (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.

Gaston-Gayles, J. G. (2003). Advising student-athletes: An examination of academic support programs with high graduation rates. *NACADA Journal*, 23 (1 & 2), 50-57.

Grandy, J., Lough, N., & Miller, C. (2016). Improving student-athlete academic success: Evaluation of learning support tools utilized by academic advisors for athletics. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education, 10*(3), 199-217.

Griffin, W. (2017). Who is Whistling Vivaldi? How Black football players engage with stereotype threats in college. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)*, *30*(4), 354–369.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative Research (3rd Ed.)* (pp. 191-216). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Guido, F. M., Chavez, A. F. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2010). Underlying paradigms in student affairs research and practice. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 47* (1)*, 1-22.

Gurney, G., Lopiano, D. A., & Zimbalist, A. (2017). *Unwinding madness: What went wrong with college sports – and how to fix it.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

Harper, S. (2018). Black male student-athletes and racial inequities in NCAA Division I college sports. *USC Race and Equity Center.* Retrieved on November 3, 2018, from https://race.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/2018_Sports_Report.pdf

Harrison Jr., L., Sailes, G., Rotich, W. K. ., & Bimper Jr., A. Y. (2011). Living the dream
or awakening from the nightmare: Race and athletic identity. *Race, Ethnicity &
Education*, *14*(1), 91–103.

Harrison, C. K., Comeaux, E., & Plecha, M. (2006). Faculty and male football and
basketball players on university campuses: An empirical investigation of the
"intellectual" as mentor to the student-athlete. *Research Quarterly for Exercise &
Sport*, *77*(2), 277–284.

Harrison, C. K., Stone, J., Shapiro, J., Yee, S., Boyd, J. A., & Rullan, V. (2009). The role
of gender identities and stereotype salience with the academic performance of
male and female college athletes. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, *33*(1), 78–96.

Harrison, C., Tranyowicz, L., Bukstein, S., McPherson-Botts, G., & Lawrence, S. (2014).
I am what I am? The baller identity measurement scale (BIMS) with a Division I
football team in American higher education. *Sport Sciences for Health*, *10*(1), 53–
58.

Haslerig, S. J. (2018). Lessons from graduate(d) student-athletes: Supporting academic
autonomy and achievement. *New Directions for Student Services*, *2018*(163), 93–
103.

Hazzaa, R. N., Sonkeng, K., & Yoh, T. (2018). Antecedents and consequences of
student-athletes' contentment with academic services. *Journal of Intercollegiate
Sport, 11,* 65 – 81.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time.* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.) Oxford,
UK: Blackwell. (Original work published 1927)

Houle, J. L. W., Brewer, B. W., & Kluck, A. S. (2010). Developmental trends in athletic identity: A two-part retrospective study. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, *33*(2), 146+.

Howard-Grenville, J., Golden-Biddle, K., Irwin, J., & Mao, J. (2011). Liminality as cultural process for cultural change. *Organization Science 22*(2), 522-539. doi 10.1287/orsc.1100.0554

Howard, P. A. (2002). "The look" in teacher's performance evaluation. In M. van Manen (Ed.), *Writing in the dark* (p. 50 – 60). London, Ontario: The Althouse Press.

Johnson, J. E., Harris, J. R., & Peters, T. M. (2013). Tutor use by student-athletes: An exploratory analysis. *Learning Assistance Review,* 18 (2), 35-50.

Johnson, J. E., Wessel, R. D., & Pierce, D. A. (2013). Exploring the influence of select demographic, academic, and athletic variables on the retention of student-athletes. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *15*(2), 135–155.

Jolly, J. C. (2008). Raising the question # 9: Is the student-athlete population unique? And why should we care? *Communication Education*, *57*(1), 145–151.

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2006). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Knight Foundation (2001). *A call to action: Reconnecting college sports and higher education*. Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

Knight Foundation (2010). *Restoring the balance: Dollars, values, and the future of college sports*. Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

Kulics, J. M., Kornspan, A. S., & Kretovics, M. (2015). An analysis of the academic behaviors and beliefs of Division I student-athletes: The impact of the increased percentage toward degree requirements. *College Student Journal*, *49*(1), 1 – 12.

Lawrence, J. H. (2008). Academics and athletics: Do position and field of play matter? A response to 'academics and athletics: A part and apart in the American campus.'" *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport, (1),* 84 – 97.

Lawrence, J., Ott, M., & Hendricks, L. (2009). Athletics reform and faculty perceptions. *New Directions for Higher Education, 148*, 73 – 81.

Lawrence, S. M., Harrison, C. K., & Bukstein, S. (2016). What is this "White" in the White male student-athlete?: White students' perceptions of academic and athletic success on campus. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *33*(4), 334–346.

Lawrence, S. M., Harrison, C. K., & Stone, J. (2009). A day in the life of a male college athlete: A public perception and qualitative campus investigation. *Journal of Sport Management*, *23*(5), 591–614.

Levine, J., Etchison, S., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2014). Pluralistic ignorance among student-athlete populations: A factor in academic underperformance. *Higher Education,* 68(4), pp. 525-540.

Li, S. (2002). Classroom conversations. In M. van Manen (Ed.), *Writing in the dark* (p. 86-95). London, Ontario: The Althouse Press.

Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 3*(5), 551-558.

McHugh Engstrom, C., & Sedlacek, W. E. (1991). A study of prejudice toward university student-athletes. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *70*(1), 189–193.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mertens, D. M. (2010). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2018). *2018-2019 NCAA Division I Manual*. Indianapolis, IN: NCAA.

NCAA recruiting facts. (2018). *NCAA*. Retrieved November 3, 2018 from https://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/Recruiting%20Fact%20Sheet%20WEB.pdf

New, J. (2016). An epidemic of academic fraud. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved on November 3, 2018, from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/07/08/more-dozen-athletic-programs-have-committed-academic-fraud-last-decade-more-likely

Potuto, J. R., & O'Hanlon, J. (2007). National study of student-athletes regarding their experiences as college students. *College Student Journal*, *41*(4), 947–966.

Reynolds, L., Fisher, D., & Kenyatta Cavil, K. (2012). Impact of demographic variables on African American student-athletes' academic performance. *Educational Foundations*, *26*(3/4), 93–111.

Riciputi, S., & Erdal, K. (2017). The effect of stereotype threat on student-athlete math performance. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, *32*, 54–57.

Robinson, L. (2015). Toward experiencing academic mentorship. *Phenomenology and Practice, 9*(1), p. 17 – 40.

Rubin, L. M., & Moses, R. A. (2017). Athletic subcultures within student-athlete academic centers. *Sociology of Sport Journal,* 34, pp. 317-328.

Rubin, L., & Moreno-Pardo, M. (2018). Burnout among student-athlete services professionals. *Journal of Higher Education Athletics & Innovation, 1* (3), 1 – 24.

Rugseth, G., & Oyvind Forland, S. (2015). "My body can do magical things": The movement experiences of a man categorized as obese – a phenomenological study. *Phenomenology & Practice 9*(1), 5-15.

Sack, A. L., Park, E., & Thiel, R. (2011). Watch the gap: Explaining retention gaps between FBS football players and the general student body. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 55–73.

Sanders, J. P., & Hildenbrand, K. (2010). Major concerns? A longitudinal analysis of student-athletes' academic majors in comparative perspective. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport, 3,* 213-233.

Sato, T., Eckert, K., & Turner, S. L. (2018). Perceptions of Black student-athletes about academic mentorship at a predominantly white institution in higher education. *Urban Review*, *50*(4), 559–583.

Schneider, R. G., Ross, S. R., & Fisher, M. (2010). Academic clustering and major selection of intercollegiate student-athletes. *College Student Journal*, 44(1).

Schwartz-Shea, P. (2006). Judging quality: Evaluative criteria and epistemic communities. In D. Yanow & P. Schwartz-Shea (Eds.), *Interpretation and*

method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn (pp. 89-114). Armonk, NY: Sharpe.

Simons, H. D., Bosworth, C., Fujita, S., & Jensen, M. (2007). The athlete stigma in higher education. *College Student Journal*, *41*(2), 251–273.

Singer, J. N. (2005). Understanding racism through the eyes of African American male student-athletes. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 8(4), 365–386.

Skogen, R., & Mulatris, P. (2011). Experiences of "hospitality" by racialized immigrant pre-service teachers on Canadian school landscapes: A phenomenological perspective. *Phenomenology and Practice, 5*(2), p. 20-39.

Smith, D. W. (2007). *Husserl* (2nd Ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Southall, R. M., Eckard, E. W., Nagel, M. S., & Randall, M. H. (2015). Athletic success and NCAA profit-athletes' adjusted graduation gaps. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *32*(4), 395–414.

Steele, C., Aronson, J., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*(5), 797-811.

Steinberg, M. A., Walther, C., Herbst, M., West, J., Zamagias, D., & Smith, J. (2018). Learning specialists in college athletics: Who are they and what do they do? *Journal of Higher Education Athletics & Innovation, 1*(4), 77-118.

Stone, J., Harrison, C. K., & Mottley, J. (2012). "Don't call me a student-athlete": The effect of identity priming on stereotype threat for academically engaged African American college athletes. *Basic & Applied Psychology,* 34 (2), pp. 99-106.

Szakolczai, A. (2015). Liminality and experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events. In A. Horvath, B. Thomassen, & H. Wydra (Eds.), *Breaking boundaries, varieties of liminalities* (pp. 11-38). New York, NY: Berghahn.

Thelin, J. R. (2008). Academics and athletics: A part and apart in the American Campus. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 1(1), 72–81.

Turner, V. W. (1967) *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Van Manen, M. (2002). Writing phenomenology. In M. van Manen (Ed.), *Writing in the dark* (p. 1-8). London, Ontario: The Althouse Press.

Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Weight, E. R., & Huml, M. R. (2016). Education through athletics: An examination of academic courses designed for NCAA athletes. *Journal of Intercollegiate Athletics, 9,* 352-378.

Weiss, M. P. (2011). Supporting student-athletes with disabilities: A case study. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability,* 24 (2), pp. 161-163.

What is the NCAA? (2018). *NCAA*. Retrieved October 23, 2018, from http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/ncaa-101/what-ncaa

Wolverton, B. (2016, March 4). The hottest hire in athletics? Learning specialists. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A14.

Wydra, H., Thomassen, B., & Horvath, A. (2015). Liminality and the search for boundaries. In A. Horvath, B. Thomassen, & H. Wydra (Eds.), *Breaking boundaries, varieties of liminalities* (pp. 1-10). New York, NY: Berghahn.

Yanow, D. (2006). Thinking interpretively: Philosophical presuppositions and the human sciences. In D. Yanow & P. Schwartz-Shea (Eds.), *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn* (pp. 5-26). Armonk, NY: Sharpe.

Yopyk, D. J. A., & Prentice, D. A. (2005). Am I an athlete or a student? Identity salience and stereotype threat in student-athletes. *Basic and Applied Psychology, 27*(4), 329-336.

Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M. A. (2018). On identity and sport conduct of student-athletes: Considering athletic and academic contexts. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, *34*, 10–19.

APPENDIX A

Email form for recruitment of participants

EMAIL FORM FOR RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

Subject: Study on learning specialists

[Name of potential participant],

This is Lainey Brottem, Learning Specialist at the University of Minnesota Lindahl Academic Center for Student-Athletes. I hope your semester is going well. As you may know, I am in the dissertation stage of a doctorate in Higher Education Student Affairs Leadership at the University of Northern Colorado. My doctoral dissertation study will investigate the phenomenon of working in the space between academics and athletics at the Division I FBS, Big Ten level. I am interested in exploring the daily lived experiences of learning specialist professionals concerned with academic success but employed for the purposes of athletics, working with academically at-risk students who simultaneously face the demands of big-time athletics participation.

Since we are acquainted from our participation in _____, and I have respect for your work as a learning specialist with this group of student-athletes, I am writing to ask if you would be willing to volunteer to participate in my study. If so, I would like to interview you in your working environment, so that I can observe the space and get an idea of the context within which your work takes place. An alternate location is an option if you would prefer not to be interviewed in your work environment. The interview should require approximately three hours of your time, and we will work it around your schedule, since I will be in town solely for that purpose. The study will be strictly confidential, and neither your name nor the name of your school will appear anywhere in the findings. I will only ask that you choose a pseudonym to make writing about the findings a little easier for me.

There are very few scholarly studies that explore what we do and how we succeed in this profession, and I'd like to change that with your help. Would you be willing to help me? Please send me a return email and let me know. If you have any questions regarding the parameters of the study, or any concerns before you consent, please do not hesitate to email me and we can set up a call to discuss it.

Thank you for your consideration,

Lainey Brottem, MA
Learning Specialist
Lindahl Academic Center
University of Minnesota

GO Gophers!

APPENDIX B

Consent Form for Human Participants in Research

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: LIMINAL SPACE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LIVED EXPERIENCES
IN THE SPACE BETWEEN AT-RISK ACADEMICS AND BIG-TIME
ATHLETICS AT NCAA DIVISION I FBS
Researcher: Lainey Brottem, M.A., Higher Education Student Affairs Leadership
Phone: 970-396-9862   Email: john7277@bears.unco.edu

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of
working in the overlapping space between academics and big-time college athletics,
specifically the daily lived experiences of learning specialists working in that
environment with academically at-risk, athletically crucial student-athletes. If you
volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a conversational-
style interview at, preferably, your place of employment (an alternate location can be
chosen at your request), during which we will discuss stories of your experiences with
academically at-risk student-athletes, academic concerns, and the athletic environment.
You will be asked to provide a tour of your work environment. In the event that such a
tour is not feasible, you will be asked to describe your work environment in detail. The
estimated time you will be asked to participate is approximately three hours. The
interview will be digitally recorded, in order to interpret, analyze, and transcribe the
stories and information you share. Both you and your institution will be given a
pseudonym to ensure confidentiality of the information you choose to share. The location
of your institution will not be disclosed, other than a rough region of the country. Any
students or staff from your institution whom you discuss or with whom the researcher
comes in contact will also be given pseudonyms or referred to only by title.
Confidentiality: All stories and information you share during this process will be strictly
confidential, and only your pseudonym will be associated with the data and findings; at
no time will your name or any identifying information about you be associated with the
data. All recordings and notes/observations taken during the interview will be locked in a
file cabinet in the researcher's residence. The researcher is the only person who will ever
see any of your responses. Your responses will be combined pseudonymously with
responses from other participants and placed in the study as findings. The researcher may
potentially use these findings in a published journal article in future, but confidentiality
will be maintained. Consent forms will be maintained for three years, and will be
destroyed at the end of that time, along with notes, recordings, and transcriptions of your
interview.

Risk and benefits: Risk arising from this study will be minimal. Because you are being asked to recount stories of your work environment and students with whom you work closely, there is the possibility you may experience some emotional distress during the interview. If at any time such emotional distress occurs, you may ask that we pause the interview or you may ask to end it. There are no tangible personal benefits to be gained from participating in this study; however, your perspectives may help to grow the learning specialist profession by informing the ways in which fellow learning specialist professionals design their programs. Compensation for your participation will consist only of food or beverages purchased for you by the researcher. There will be no associated travel costs or expenditures on your part; the only costs will be the time spent during the interview and answering any later follow-up questions, if necessary, which will take place electronically.

AUTHORIZATION and CONSENT: I have read the above and understand the nature of this study, and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that my participation is strictly voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time, and that my withdrawal will be respected by the researcher. I agree to allow the researcher to digitally record all interview sessions, and to make observational notes during the interview and during the tour. I also understand that I have the right to request that any particular piece of information not be included in the transcription of the interview or in the observational notes, and I understand that request will be strictly honored. I understand that I will be provided with a copy of this consent form. If I have concerns about my treatment during the interview or about my selection as a study participant, I understand that I may contact the Chair of the Internal Review Board at the University of Northern Colorado.

_____

Participant Signature   Date

_____

Participant Printed Name   Phone # and Email Address

_____

Researcher Signature   Date

_____

Researcher Printed Name

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Following are questions which formed part of this phenomenological study. Some questions are presented in partial form, because the nature of the study will require questions to be built from the experiences being related. Since phenomenology is concerned with pre-reflective lived experiences, and relies on detailed stories containing sense impressions, emotions experienced, and thoughts occurring at the time of the event in the story, the questions contained herein are designed to elicit pre-reflective, detailed stories of events and happenings as experienced by the participant. Related questions followed as necessary to glean the entirety of what the event was like for the participant. In preparation for the interview, the participants were specifically instructed not to reflect on the experience being related, but relate it exactly as experienced, in effect returning to the moment, as it were. Beyond establishment of the environment in which the work takes place, the questions cannot be specifically listed because they were entirely dependent on the unique stories and experiences related by the participant. Exact predetermined questions would undermine the phenomenological nature of the study. Iterated here are the questions I initially outlined in Chapter III, starting with questions to establish environment, and then reflecting only several potential types of questions that may be used:

- Tell me about the athletics department.

- Tell me how the academic success center is situated in athletics.

- Tell me about the people who work here.

- Tell me about your job

Following these kinds of questions will come the types of phenomenological questions as outlined by Van Manen (2014):

- What is it like working at your job?

- Tell me about a time when…

- What was it like…

- When did it happen?

- What was your role in it?

- How did that feel?

- Who said what?