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THE VISITING TEAM:  
RESEARCH ON THE ENGAGEMENT OF URBAN, COMMUTER STUDENT-ATHLETES

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of  
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RESEARCH ON THE ENGAGEMENT OF URBAN, COMMUTER STUDENT-ATHLETES

ABSTRACT

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III mantra of “offering participation in a competitive athletic environment that pushes student-athletes to excel on the field and build upon their potential by tackling new challenges across campus” requires administrators to support and promote academic achievement, athletic success, and personal well-being. For Division III student-athletes who are also urban, commuter students, the path to engagement in those areas is not clearly defined. The intent of this two-phase, mixed methods study was to evaluate the priorities of urban, commuting student-athletes at a NCAA Division III institution in New York City.

The following research questions supported the study:

1. How do urban commuter student-athletes characterize intercollegiate athletics as part of their campus experience?
2. How does personal and career programming offered by the athletic department influence urban commuter student-athlete behavior and choices?

Fifty student-athletes participated in the quantitative portion of the study. An additional eleven student-athletes participated in the survey portion of the study. The REDCap platform was used to gather survey data, which was analyzed for themes on student-athlete engagement at the

institution. Interview data was gathered using the Skype platform and the interview transcripts were coded to determine themes and trends among the student-athletes.

Results from the study indicate that participation in intercollegiate athletics is not the top motivator for urban, commuter student-athletes. Ability to participate in athletics ranks third, behind ability to major in a chosen subject and cost of attendance. Student-athletes did not view athletics programming as a resource that could not be found in other departments on campus. Additional findings suggested that commuter student-athletes respond more strongly when programming is associated with teammates or coaching staff, rather than the athletics department generally. The results of this study recommend that future programming address commuter student-athlete academic challenges, lessen the personal burdens that student-athletes face, and be conducted by a dedicated administrator in a way that respects the unique schedules of the student-athletes.

*Keywords:* Athletics, Commuter, Engagement, NCAA Division III, and Student-athlete.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I actually take a bus and two trains plus the shuttle bus to get [here]. You know, it was going so well, until the B train turned local. So now, there's no B or Q that's express. So I had to change my route because I was getting late for class all the time. So now I take the 44 bus to the 2 or the 5, whichever one comes first. And then I'll take the 2 train...If I'm on the 2 train, I'll take the 2 to Franklin to get on the 4 or the 5. Get off at Fulton to take the A train to here (Regalado, p. 8).

This quote illustrates the experience of many undergraduate students who attend urban institutions. In fact, a 2016 survey of City University of New York (CUNY) students found that forty-nine percent of students spend at least six hours a week commuting to campus, and ninety percent fall into the category of spending at least one hour per week on a commute (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016). While having the dormitory experience may be considered to be a rite of passage for undergraduate students, this is not the case for urban, commuting students. The CUNY system, for example, only has residential facilities at six out of their twenty-four campuses (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016). Some institutions' residential facilities are located several city blocks away from campus, requiring students to commute via mass transit. It is estimated that less than five percent of CUNY's 270,000 enrolled students use the resident hall facilities (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016).

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athlete development programming bridges the gap between student affairs and athletics. Programming is facilitated at the national level and executed on campus to fully prepare student-athletes for life through college and after graduation. At campuses in urban environments, student-athletes deal with the

same commute struggles as traditional students. Further, they work around practice and game schedules while commuting, not only to campus, but to various athletic facilities around an institution's city.

While media often focuses on the graduation rates of student-athletes, they lag behind their non-athlete peers in terms of key career readiness factors (Linnemeyer & Brown). Like their peers, student-athletes often have other commitments: family, jobs, and schoolwork. This is especially true for urban, commuter student-athletes, who have their academic and personal lives closely intertwined. Providing development programming to support and engage student-athletes can be a struggle for athletic departments staffs because it is difficult to engage student-athletes who are being pulled in several different directions at once.

Student-athletes will ultimately determine the success of an institution's personal and career development programs through their attendance, engagement, and belief in the programming. There are several challenges to this process, including: creativity, travel time, and staffing. Many athletic departments in urban environments need to get creative with their athletic facility use, as there is often not sufficient room on campus to field all sports. As a result, departments are left to find alternate facilities in their areas that can adapt to budget and scheduling restrictions.

Student-athletes must also consider travel time in and around the city they are located to get not only to campus for class, but to these alternate sites. Student-athletes may consider the extra commute time to practices and competition to be the only additional time that they are willing to devote to the department and its programming. For departments with high numbers of part-time coaches it is difficult for staff to be ambassadors for student-athlete development programming. Burns (2010) argues that small groups can survive almost anything when they

find a way to personalize their experience with the larger goals and, as such, it is crucial for the student-athlete development professional and the department to secure commitment from leadership at all levels.

According to the NCAA, the average Division III institution has an undergraduate enrollment of just over 2500 students (2018-2019 Facts & Figures). For urban institutions in the CUNY system, like John Jay College, this enrollment can soar to over 13,000 students (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016). Urban institutions without established student-athlete development or academic support programs are not the norm within Division III, but adding such programming is an opportunity for improvement. If an athletic department can engage their student-athletes for the four years they have them, it may benefit from more engaged alumni to draw from in the future.

The NCAA Division III mantra is “offering participation in a competitive athletic environment that pushes student-athletes to excel on the field and build upon their potential by tackling new challenges across campus” (About Us: NCAA Division III). This directive requires administrators to support and promote academic achievement, athletic success, and personal well-being. That support can aid Division III student-athletes in taking responsibility for their own paths, following any interests they may have, and having an educational experience that is free of the expectations associated with athletic scholarships.

For Division III student-athletes who are also urban, commuter students, those paths are not as clearly defined. That is due, in part, to researchers regularly treating commuter students as a homogenous group instead of committing time and resources to study the in-group differences of the population (Dugan, Garland, Jacoby, & Gasiorski, 2008). According to Pokorny, Holley, & Kane (2017) some of those differences result from the heavy influence of a student’s family

and community. Commuter students feel that their social lives suffer, their choice of university is limited, and that if they engage with their college campus they will “experience a degree of alienation from their own background culture” (Pokorny, Holley, & Kane, 2017).

Athletic professionals who have previously worked on urban, commuter campuses have noted that student-athletes do not make the connection to how the NCAA priorities of academic support, career readiness, and immersive educational experience can benefit them (Dominguez, personal communication). This is an idea echoed by Kirk & Lewis (2012) who noted that for commuter students, the campus is not a place to connect and participate, but a setting where they attend class and leave, much like stopping at a mall or gym (p. 56). Even those who may have an interest in becoming engaged with their campus choose not to because it is easier to remain uninvolved than to rearrange their off-campus lives (Kirk & Lewis, 2012). The three most critical issues surrounding the lack of urban student-athlete engagement are an institution’s status as a commuter institution, the lack of support from athletic administrators at the top of the organization, and the priorities of the student-athletes (Dominguez, personal communication).

### **Commuter status**

Urban student-athletes deal with the same commutes as traditional urban students but must also account for practices and competitions. Given their locations in the middle of cities, urban institutions cannot always offer on-campus facilities to all of their NCAA sponsored teams. As such, student-athletes must find ways to commute to various athletic facilities around the cities where they live and attend school. For John Jay College student-athletes this is especially true because their academic and personal lives are so closely intertwined. At the time of this research, John Jay Athletics struggled to prove validity of NCAA endorsed programming



because it traditionally had been difficult to engage student-athletes who are being pulled in several different directions at once.

### **Lack of support from athletic administrators**

John Jay College is part of the CUNY Athletic Conference (CUNYAC), whose mission is to “provide all students with the opportunity to participate in a competitive athletic environment and supportive learning atmosphere, where life skills such as leadership development, sportsmanship, healthy living, and community service are of vital importance” (CUNYAC Mission, 2017). While there are concrete goals surrounding student-athlete recruitment and athletic performance, there is a lack of goals for student-athlete development. As a result, student-athlete development professionals arrange programming with little attendance or engagement from student-athletes. John Jay student-athletes see their athletic participation in terms of practices and games, only; they do not make the link with other services offered by the department (Dominguez, personal communication).

The athletic director at John Jay College is supportive of student-athlete development initiatives but is reluctant to devote resources to programming efforts because she feels funding is better spent elsewhere; programming is not a priority (Dominguez, personal communication). Athletic department support is most often found behind programs that are offered as a result of NCAA grants or stipends. This results in a lack of consistent programming because there is no guarantee of grants/stipends from year to year. The student-athlete development professional is left to determine how to deliver programming at events that are already attended by student-athletes, including pre-existing Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) meetings. The SAAC has club status at John Jay, meaning there is a small budget to use for committee events.

That budget is typically spent on food to improve attendance at meetings, instead of on enhancement of programming.

### **Priorities of student-athletes**

The question of whether athletics and student-athlete development programming matters at John Jay is an important one. As a Division III institution whose intention is to serve the population of New York City's five boroughs, John Jay offers student-athletes the opportunity to live close to home and to avoid extraordinary student loan debt. Eighty percent of those students who earned an undergraduate degree graduate did so with no student debt due to financial aid and affordable tuition. For 2016-2017 the tuition at a CUNY institution was \$6,330, compared to an average private college cost in the New York region of \$38,630 (Comparing College Costs, 2017).

At the time of this study, John Jay student-athletes did not see department programming as an important part of their college experience. They were more concerned with their schoolwork, jobs, and family commitments. Being able to compete while also benefitting from affordable tuition was an added bonus, but they had no interest in using athletic resources in other areas of their lives (Dominguez, personal communication). Student-athletes were unable to see how student-athlete development programming will shape their future because they are limited to only four seasons of a given sport.

### **Director of Athletics**

The director of athletics is crucial for both the support of student-athlete development programming and the dedication of resources to any change effort. They must be able to be transactional in some cases and transformational in others. Transactional leadership is key for institutions which run on limited financial resources and need help from campus partners to

make programming happen. According to Burns (2010), if leaders are unwilling to carry their representation of followers to the point of conflict with other groups, they may be viewed as someone with particular and individual goals. Transformational leadership is also important because it will compel others to work on behalf of the group (Burns, 2010, p. 157). In addition to wins and losses, the Director of Athletics must be willing to place student-athlete personal and career development among their top priorities.

### **Student-athlete development professional**

The student-athlete development professional at an institution is responsible for the day-to-day enactment of programming and engagement goals. Given the challenging environment of engaging commuter students, it is important for this position to engage in professional development and self-reflection. It can be tempting to try to institute programming to a diverse student-athlete base in the same way, but they must be able to work with those that learn in ways different from their own. Professional development programming is available through both the NCAA and the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A).

### **Coaching staff**

The coaching staff of any athletic department is also an important player in the delivery of student-athlete development programming. The connection may not seem obvious at first, however Rubin & Moreno-Pardo (2018) noted that administrators and coaches alike have a client-centered perspective. Coaches are critical to communicating the availability of programming to the student-athletes. For coaches the clients are student-athletes, and their performance on and off the field is important. Fisher et al. (2017) also found that when coaches are responsive to student-athletes' needs, the athletes feel confident in their ability to develop

both within and outside of their sport. With that said, it can be difficult for athletic administrators to convince coaches that programming is valuable and to potentially devote practice or preparation time to such programming. In order to increase the chances that coaches will embrace the department's priorities, student-athlete development goals need to be included in all head coach interview processes. Coaches in every sport are important but if high-publicity sports, like basketball and soccer, commit to this approach, chances increase that other sports will follow.

### **Statement of the problem**

For the CUNY Athletic Conference and for John Jay College, specifically, in addition to following the intricacies of NCAA and CUNY regulations, the focus is student-athletes. Their mission is to “provide all students with the opportunity to participate in a competitive athletic environment and supportive learning atmosphere, where life skills such as leadership development, sportsmanship, healthy living, and community service are of vital importance” (CUNYAC Mission, 2017). Within the CUNYAC, each campus is challenged to establish their own SAAC but often struggle with disinterest and low attendance at meetings. According to Gabby Dominguez, former Coordinator of Academic Success, Compliance, and Eligibility at John Jay College “we can't even get student-athletes to our own SAAC meetings because we're competing for their time” (personal communication, June 13, 2017). Dominguez suggested that the CUNY Athletic Conference would be wise to allow member schools to increase their own student-athlete engagement before focusing on similar initiatives at the conference level (personal communication, June 13, 2017). Urban commuter student-athletes' time is valuable and administrations are constantly competing for it.

According to Navarro & Malvaso (2015), no national assessment exists to ensure institutions and departments are providing consistent programming in the areas of student-athlete personal and career development. This, coupled with the fact that student-athletes in an urban setting have not been extensively studied, creates a problem for university systems like CUNY and campuses like John Jay College. Recommendations from the NCAA regarding programming have not been modified and, as a result, student-athlete development professionals are left to adapt on their own (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). A “one size fits all” approach to personal and career student-athlete development programming has not been proven to be effective for urban student-athletes.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this research was to use statistical data, supplemented by individual interviews, to document the priorities and perspectives of student-athletes in an urban, commuting population. The result of this documentation was insight into more effective methods of delivering student-athlete development programming. In a traditional campus setting, students are contained in a “bubble” on their campus and can easily be involved with institutional groups or events. This is not always the case with urban institutions because the student-athletes are balancing their academics and athletics with family commitments, jobs, and long commutes to school.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1: How do urban commuter student-athletes characterize intercollegiate athletics as part of their campus experience?

RQ2: How does personal and career programming offered by the athletic department influence urban commuter student-athlete behavior and choices?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Student-athletes often deal with the same struggles as traditional students at their institutions in terms of engagement and integration into the college community. Student-athletes enrolled at commuter institutions can face an even larger battle because their engagement is based on how much time they are willing and able to spend on campus. Work, family, and other commitments can result in less exposure to NCAA life skills programming, which aims to prepare student-athletes for life after athletics. Urban commuter institutions must find a way to respect the unique priorities of their student-athletes, while at the same time deliver and maintain the programming that the NCAA expects of their membership. Two main theories guide the research and discussion of student-athlete engagement at commuter institutions: Astin's (1999) Theory of Student Involvement and Tinto's (1988) Theory of Student Departure.

#### *Astin's Theory of Student Involvement*

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement has been updated and revised several times since its inception in 1984. Simply put, Astin (1999) considers student involvement to be the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. According to his theory a highly involved student is one who devotes energy to studying, spends time on campus, and participates actively in student organizations, while a student who does not do these things is not highly involved (Astin, 1999).

In his theory, Astin (1999) noted that student involvement occurs along a continuum, with different individuals investing different amounts of energy in various objects at various times. Research that chooses student involvement theory as a guide must consider mixed

methods, as according to Astin (1999), involvement includes quantitative and qualitative components. Another tenet of the theory is that the amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement. Astin (1999) theorizes that the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement. As such, student-athlete development professionals cannot just *offer* life skills programming, they must offer programming that the student-athlete deems applicable and constructive.

### **Tinto's Theory of Student Departure**

Tinto's (1988) Theory of Student Departure takes the idea of student involvement one step further by exploring the impact involvement has on student persistence. Tinto (1988) argued that the more students learn, the more likely they are to persist. Throughout the discussion of this theory, a student persisting is how Tinto (1988) describes a student remaining enrolled at their institution. Like Astin, Tinto's theory has also seen revisions, including in 1993 when he included a more detailed discussion of the interaction between behavior and perception by students as they moved toward integration of their social and academic environments (Milem & Berger, 1997).

According to Tinto (1988), there are three stages for a student to navigate in order to successfully integrate into the academic and social systems at their college: separation, transition, and incorporation. Separation involves a student's ability to disassociate themselves from the norms of past communities, including families, high school friends, or other local ties (Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1988) noted that for virtually all students, the process of separation is at least somewhat stressful. For commuter students some of the stress may be lessened because they are not required to completely dissociate from their local ties (Tinto, 1988). With that said,

commuter students may be unable to take full advantage of the opportunities for integration into the social and intellectual life of their college (Tinto, p. 443). As a result, commuter students may be less stressed but their experience may also be less rewarding. Tinto (1988) noted that by staying at home, commuter students risk exposure to external forces that pull them away from incorporation into the communities of the college.

The transition stage of student departure is a period of passage between a student's associations of their past and potential new associations with communities of their present (Tinto, 1988). During this period students have yet to acquire the normal behaviors of their new community and they have yet to establish the personal bonds that accompany membership in the community (Tinto, p. 444). A student may withdraw from the college during the transition period if they do not receive assistance from the institution. This is due more to an inability to cope with the stress of the transition than with an inability to become integrated (Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1988) noted that an absence of assistance may cause a student to withdraw without having made a serious attempt to adjust to life at the college. This finding is also applicable for commuter students. Inability to deal with the stress of the transition stage results in a commuter student limiting the amount of time they spend on campus (Tinto, 1988). This restricts the student's interactions with members of the college communities and the learning of important norms required for full incorporation into the life of the college (Tinto, p. 445).

Tinto's (1988) final stage of student departure theory is incorporation, or when students adapt to and adopt the prevailing norms and behavior patterns of their college community (p. 445). Once incorporated a student become is fully integrated into the new community on their campus. Tinto (1988) made an important distinction: successful incorporation and integration into a new community does not necessarily predict student persistence.



According to Junco (2012) students who are more engaged inside and outside of the classroom exhibit a stronger sense of personal identity that can clarify career decisions and civic engagement after college. For urban commuter student-athletes, this would mean experiencing all three of Tinto's (1988) stages and finding them worthwhile, to satisfy Astin's (1999) requirement of student involvement. Both Tinto (1988) and Astin (1999) consider student retention in their theories; whether the students are becoming engaged with their campus in order to, eventually, reach graduation.

The conceptual frameworks of Tinto and Astin only tell part of the story for the urban, commuter student-athletes in this study. According to internal John Jay College data collected for the 2017-2018 NCAA Graduation Rates Report, the overall student body population is graduating at a rate of 42 percent, compared to 43 percent for student-athletes in the same six-year cohort (John Jay College NCAA Graduation Rates Report). Both rates are lower than the average for all of the NCAA Division III institutions who saw a 65 percent overall graduation rate, with 49 percent among student-athletes (Overall Division III, 2018). If engagement with campus initiatives results in higher graduation rates, there must be a gap in department programming engagement with John Jay's student-athletes.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

According to Tinto (1988), colleges are both academic and social environments (p. 448). Because of this, a student's retention at their institution can be affected by factors from either environment, or both. Campus groups like athletic departments can aid individuals who are going through the three stages of student departure. Tinto (1988) acknowledged that athletics establishes the opportunity for repetitive contact with members that can set up potential incorporation for new members. His theory is that formal groups like athletics do not leave new

students without assistance because they provide the rituals, ceremonies, and opportunities to learn the new norms and behaviors of the institution (Tinto, 1988).

A strength of Astin's (1999) theory is its ability to consider items in addition to grade point average when evaluating student involvement. Previous studies involving student-athletes use grade point average or community service hours as measures of success. Astin (1999) mentioned that this was an impetus for the development of his theory. He noted that there was something beyond grades that would explain how these educational programs translated into student achievement (Astin, 1999).

There are considerations that must be made when applying Astin's (1999) and Tinto's (1988) theories to commuter student-athletes. Tinto (1988) noted that all students may not experience the three stages in the same sequence or at the same time. For some students, the stages may even overlap or occur simultaneously (Tinto, 1988). Both Astin (1999) and Tinto (1988) focused the development of their theories on the early years of a student's collegiate career. Researchers must be cognizant of this when applying the theories to a student's entire tenure at their institution.

While there is extensive literature on commuter students and student-athletes separately, there is very little existing literature studying the treatment of commuter students and student-athletes as one population. Similarly, the application of Astin's (1999) Theory of Student Involvement or Tinto's (1988) Theory of Student Departure is limited.

### **Significance of the study**

On a small scale the results of this research can be used to influence the student-athletes at each of the CUNY campuses, and will help guide administration in following the tenets of the NCAA Division III experience. Success on the campus level translates into a more engaged

conference student-athlete population, benefitting the entire CUNY Athletic Conference. The research findings also have potential effect outside of the CUNY system. Urban institutions, regardless of NCAA division status, can benefit if the research results in a list of best practices for engaging student-athletes. NCAA Division III institutions that are looking to create student-athlete engagement strategies for the first time, or building upon existing ones, will also be able to use the information gathered in urban commuter student-athlete research.

If John Jay student-athletes become engaged with programming, the department's programming will most closely align with the goals set forth by the NCAA, resulting in more active and prepared student-athletes. It will also help the student-athlete development professional fulfill their job function, allowing them to validate their position in the department. Student-athletes will be better prepared for life after athletics, increasing the chances of securing employment upon graduation. Eventually this will translate into engagement at the alumni level and it will allow John Jay to say, without a doubt, that they are following the missions set forth by the NCAA and CUNY Athletic Conference.

The findings from this research can be immediately applied to student-athletes development programming at John Jay College. Because student-athlete development is currently being offered in conjunction with SAAC meetings, short-term goals will center on SAAC membership. This includes having representation from all 15 teams and transitioning from having to force membership to volunteers to join. A strengthened SAAC will focus on ownership of development priorities, so that administration can facilitate programming that will be meaningful to the membership. In addition to alumni engagement, the long-term goal of student-athlete development programming will be the establishment of the Bloodhound Leadership Academy. The Academy will become a routine part of the student-athlete experience

at John Jay, offering different leadership programming for each year of a student-athlete's time at the college.

Given many of the staffing and resource challenges that NCAA Division III institutions like John Jay face, transformational leadership is crucial. In order to secure funding or other resources the student-athlete development professional may need to work with other college departments and convince those departments that what they are asking for is warranted. When used effectively, transformational leadership will help student-athletes see that the programming that is offered to them meant to boost their career, financial, or personal preparedness instead of pull them down. A transformational student-athlete development professional will also be able to communicate to all stakeholders how their programming helps to elevate the overall goals of the athletic department.

The outcomes of attendance, representation, and participation will be crucial to success. First, student-athletes must attend SAAC meetings on a regular basis. If this happens, and happens voluntarily rather than by requirement, then the department can begin to shift programming from the SAAC meetings to independent events. Representation is slightly different from attendance in that success in this outcome will mean that attendance is coming from each of the fifteen teams at John Jay, instead of only a handful. Participation will be deemed successful in two ways. If there is a point when the student-athletes drive the programming choices, instead of the student-athlete development professional, this outcome will be met. Additionally, if more senior student-athletes are leaving John Jay Athletics with concrete career plans that will signal that they took advantage of the programming made available to them. Without success in these outcome areas, all further student-athlete development efforts will be futile.

According to Melendez (2016) four-year commuter colleges make up thirty percent of the total number of senior colleges in the country. With just under 500,000 total NCAA student-athletes competing today, it is safe to say that these two populations intersect (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2017). Many of the findings associated with engagement of residential students may not be applicable to commuter students, especially students who are also student-athletes.

### **Definitions**

*CUNY*: Acronym for the City University of New York.

*CUNYAC*: Acronym for the City University of New York Athletic Conference.

*Division III*: The division of NCAA membership of the CUNY Athletic Conference. Division III institutions focus on the entirety of the student-athlete experience, academic and athletic, and do not offer athletic scholarships.

*NCAA*: Acronym for the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the governing body of college athletics.

*SAAC*: Acronym for the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. Both member institutions and conferences have their own versions of SAAC, which allow student-athletes to have a voice in policy-making decisions.

*Urban institution*: an institution of higher education that is socially involved and serves as a resource for educating the citizens of the city or region in which is it located.

### **Conclusion**

Urban, commuting student-athletes break the mold in many ways, given the unique conditions placed upon them by their member institution and the NCAA. Given their substantial contributions to the campus environment and the CUNY Athletic Conference, student-athletes

make up a significant cohort. The NCAA has outlined specific expectations for the Division III experience and the John Jay Athletics student-athlete development staff is charged with finding ways to best align the department with those initiatives. The upcoming chapters will explore the current literature on the subject and detail the research conducted on this subject. Ultimately, recommendations will be made to John Jay Athletics on whether the engagement is a priority to the student-athletes, and how to best engage the urban commuter student-athlete population.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This integrative literature review will examine the existing research on two populations: commuter students and student-athletes. To obtain the research to be discussed, databases were searched for the keywords commuter students and student-athlete engagement. The goal of this literature review is to illustrate the need to devote research to these groups as one population so that institutions, especially in urban environments, can effectively integrate development programming for their commuting student-athletes.

National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) life skills programming bridges the gap between student affairs and athletics (Leach, 2015). Such programming is facilitated at the national level and executed on campus to fully prepare student-athletes for life through college and after graduation (Leach, 2015). No matter the division within the NCAA or the institutional resources available, student-athlete development programs can only be truly effective if student-athletes actively participate. At institutions with large commuter populations, student-athlete development professionals are tasked with convincing athletes that such programming will yield returns that are reflective of the planning and time investment.

### **Commuter Student Population**

Students who commute to campus represent a unique and under-assessed population of students, despite representing a majority on most college campuses (Biddix, 2015). Biddix (2015) noted that commuter students can be particularly difficult to research given their off-campus residencies because most studies involving students are conducted using e-mail lists of residents or are paper administered during meetings on residence hall floors or in campus-sponsored housing.

The existing research on commuting students typically focuses on how their external and non-academic commitments affect their academic performance. Burlison (2015) found those commitments compete for the student's time and campus engagement and can include work, family, and the time that they devote to their commute each day. Going to college becomes part of a commuter's existing routine; the student and their family see college experience as a nonevent because the other aspects of their life remain intact (Jacoby, 2015). This is a departure from residential college students who experience a clear transition from leaving home, moving into campus housing, and beginning a new life on campus.

That is not to say that commuter students do not experience any changes upon their college enrollment. Melendez (2016) detailed several additional stressors that commuter students are faced with. First, their neighborhood or community friendships can be abandoned, especially if a student's friends did not decide to attend college. Commuter students may seek out connections with peers only when the relationships will support college activities, but they rarely continue these friendships outside of the academic setting. In the instances where a commuter student would be interested in continuing a friendship made while attending college, their external responsibilities sometimes make that overwhelming and impossible (Melendez, 2016).

According to Jacoby (2015), many commuter students find they feel like strangers on their college campuses, fearful that they are not in control of their lives, and lack confidence in their ability to meet professor expectations. This lack of both social and academic engagement can lead to a sense of marginalization for commuter students (Darling, 2015). Students who feel marginal are less likely to engage in the types of college experiences that lead to educational success (Jacoby, 2015). It is a continuous cycle that many student affairs professionals have



been unable to break. As Newbold (2015) noted, the demographic characteristics of the commuter student are well understood, but the sources of their stress with college life and the coping strategies they employ have not been thoroughly researched.

Demographically, commuter students are often compared to, and grouped with, non-traditional students. Newbold (2015) and Darling (2015) define non-traditional students as those who have not followed a continuous educational path into college. These students tend to be older, often have family and home responsibilities, work part-time or full-time, and have limited time on campus to access faculty. Their access to support programs and facilities, co-curricular activities, and campus-specific technologies is also limited (Darling, 2015; Newbold, 2015).

Many studies of commuter students point to Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (Burlison, 2015; Regalado, 2015; Snyder, 2011). The theory, in part, suggested that students who commute and work off-campus have lower levels of involvement on campus than their peers. Snyder (2011) cited Astin's work on residency and academic performance and used it to suggest that the most direct effects on students' academic performance were associated with living at home and the distance from home to the campus. In this instance there were three residency options for the students: at home, in a college residence hall, and in a private room or apartment (Snyder, 2011).

The existing research on commuting students point to one overall theme: the greater distance that students have to travel from their residence to campus the greater the negative effect on academic performance and student engagement (Burlison, 2015; Darling, 2015; Kobus, 2015; Newbold, 2015; Regalado, 2015; Snyder, 2011). This can also affect student retention rates, satisfaction with faculty, and willingness to continue at the same university (Snyder, 2011). Specifically, for each additional hour of commute time, a student's time on campus is reduced by

0.65 days a week (Kobus, 2015). While they are on campus, commuter students will stay an average of fifty-two minutes longer for each additional hour of commute time (Kobus, 2015). Commute time is not the only factor in the equation, as Regalado (2015) found that the quality of a student's commute had significant impact on their ability to successfully accomplish scholarly work while commuting. Crowds, noise, and other undesirable conditions all have effects on the quality of a student's commute. Snyder (2011) found that when compared with commuter students, those living on campus reported more satisfaction with their overall college experience. Commuter students are left out of the direct benefits of living on campus, including developing leadership skills, interpersonal abilities, job skills, and cultural awareness (Snyder, 2011).

### **Student-Athlete Population**

The study of student-athlete engagement has been documented for nearly forty years. By 1991, the NCAA issued a specific call to action to increase specialized programming at the campus level to focus on the holistic development of student-athletes (Navarro, 2015). This was a departure from the previous focus of many athletic departments: the maintenance of athlete academic eligibility. When the NCAA Life Skills program was created in the mid-1990s member institutions focused on five pillars: academic excellence, athletic excellence, personal development, career development, and community service (Navarro, 2015). According to Navarro (2015) despite these efforts no national assessment exists to ensure universities are consistently providing sound life skills programming.

As a result of the creation of the Life Skills program student-athletes are required to not only perform on the field but also to prepare to perform off the field. Self-identification solely with the role of athlete may inhibit the process of transitioning to life after competition in a profession other than professional sports (Navarro, 2015). This idea is echoed by Stone (2012)

who noted the dumb-jock stereotype can impact the academic performance and career readiness of college athletes. Stone's (2012) assertion that the term student-athlete implies an athlete on their own who is not academically high achieving can rob college athletes of the cognitive and emotional resources they need to succeed in college.

Umbach (2006) noted that self-identification as a student-athlete inspired their research. They worked under the assumption that student-athletes earn lower grades in college and that their institutions allow athletes to create their own subculture, isolated from the larger campus environment (Umbach, et al., 2006). Isolation was also addressed by Burns et al.'s (2013) study of career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE). Student-athletes may be more at risk for having poor career decision-making skills because of their conflicting roles and isolation with a peer group that focuses on non-academic outcomes (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2013). By defining CDSE as a person's confidence in making career decisions, Burns (2013) theorized that student-athletes with low levels of CDSE would be more likely to avoid tasks like choosing a major, learning about their interests, and seeking out career information.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement has also been applied to student-athletes (Huml, Svensson, & Hancock, 2017; Simiyu, 2010). Simiyu (2010) used the theory to stress that in order for a student-athlete to learn life skills, she or he must invest time and energy into the pursuit of learning. This requires effort, time, and commitment on the part of the student-athlete as well as an environment created by the institution that supports that effort. Huml (2017) used the theory as a lens to examine how intercollegiate athletic departments integrate community service into the educational experience of student-athletes, and to investigate variables associated with frequency of student-athlete community service (Huml, et al., 2017).

When considering student-athlete engagement with life skills programming, two themes emerged. Huml, Svensson, and Hancock (2017) believed that because the NCAA Divisions II and III have specific initiatives surrounding student-athletes performing community service, there would be higher levels of participation at such institutions. Mueller (2009) was guided by the role of emotional attachment to behaviors, the consequences of those attachments, and what educators can do to create emotional attachments. He suggested that a commitment to team building and publicly celebrating successes are areas in which educators can learn to better engage their students (Mueller, 2009).

The data collection methods used to research student-athlete engagement have been varied. McQuown Linnemeyer & Brown (2010) chose to work with two existing tools in order to gather their data. The Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status and the Career Maturity Inventory–Revised assessed student-athletes' identity status and career competencies by scoring them on different scales and subscales (McQuown Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Rettig & Shouping (2016) chose to pull data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in order to compare engagement in educationally purposeful activities in college, a set of educational outcomes, and the relationship between student engagement and educational outcomes for non-athletes and student-athletes. Others, including Czekanski (2015), Umbach (2006), and Huml, Svensson, & Hancock (2017) used their own surveys and analyzed that data for possible themes on engagement, support of their athletic department, and willingness to donate in the future.

Statistical analysis of student-athlete engagement has produced mixed results. Czekanski (2015) showed that student-athletes who planned community service events had greater perceptions of support from their athletic department. The degree of support student-athletes felt

from their athletic department was also found to be a significant predictor of their intent to donate money back to the athletic department (Czekanski, 2015). Rettig & Shouping (2016) found that their data varied for student-athletes in high-profile (football, basketball) and low-profile (Olympic) sports. Although both populations report similar levels of engagement, high-profile student-athletes face additional challenges to achieving the desired outcomes (Rettig & Shouping, 2016). For Huml, Svensson, & Hancock (2017) there were no statistically significant findings, which prompted the authors to express concern about applying Astin's theory of student involvement to student-athletes.

Other, non-statistical, conclusions on student-athlete engagement have been drawn in prior research. Student-athletes that primarily interact with coaches instead of professors tend to have lower grade point averages (Simiyu, 2010). Umbach, et al. (2006) noted that student-athletes at Division III schools also interact more frequently with faculty than students at Division I and Division II schools. Additionally, those that are provided assistance in achieving professional goals by their instructors tend to perform better academically in college (Simiyu, 2010).

Aside from conclusions, the existing literature on student-athlete engagement also presents direction for future research and best practices. Simiyu (2010) noted that the effort to help student-athletes evaluate themselves and set realistic goals on and off the field must be deliberate. This sentiment was echoed by Navarro (2015) and McQuown Linnemeyer & Brown (2010) who noted that all career programming for student-athletes should focus on communicating the significance of making career-related decisions and teaching student-athletes how to make rational career decisions regardless of competition level or type of sport.

### **Commuter Students and Student-Athletes as One Population**

There is very little existing literature studying the treatment of commuter students and student-athletes as one population. While Snyder (2011) is focused entirely on determining if a NCAA Division-I freshman student-athlete's residence during their freshman year had a statistically significant relationship to academic performance, Melendez (2016) only considered athletics to be a piece of the puzzle. Instead the purpose of that research was to examine the potential impact of gender, race/ethnicity, and athletic participation on the adjustment to college for a group of freshmen at a four-year urban commuter institution (Melendez, 2016).

Despite its varied ethnic breakdown (two-thirds students of color and one-third Caucasian students), the population in the Melendez (2016) study was exclusively made up of commuter students who were recruited to participate. The population studied in Snyder's (2011) research, however, were all chosen from the same NCAA Division I athletic department but may or may not have qualified as commuter students. Surveys to determine residence were conducted amongst those who elected to participate.

Melendez (2016) noted that the lack of residential status may hinder the development of identity and have had an effect on the personal-emotional adjustment for student-athletes on a commuter campus. Athletics, however, can provide a pathway for improved social adjustment for students at a commuter institution (Melendez, 2016). Because joining a team can give athletes something that other commuter students do not experience, Melendez (2016) concluded that athletic participation is an important social influence for diverse freshman populations attending nonresidential urban commuter colleges.

Snyder (2011) found no statistical differences in the academic performances of resident and non-residents in their study. As a result, it was concluded that living in an on-campus or off-

campus environment had no statistical relationship with how the total population of NCAA DI freshman student athletes performed academically (Snyder, 2011). The research did suggest that Athletics participation may create more detachment for freshman student athletes than freshman non-athletes (Snyder, 2011). This detachment is similar to that which was discussed by Umbach, et al. (2006) and can include expectations of coaching staff, fatigue, pressure to perform, ethnic background, gender, college preparation, socio economic status, and place of residence.

### **Student-Athlete Development Programming**

The existing literature on student-athlete development programming focuses mainly on identity. According to Navarro & Malvaso (2015) student-athletes are required to develop not only as high functioning athletes but also to prepare to be future contributing citizens. The identity of an athlete may take precedence over the process of transition to a life and a profession outside of sports (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). Wang, et. Al (2013) noted that the majority of past research has focused on the academic strategies of freshmen, and less on the students' social strategies.

The idea that first year students need to make sense of the standards and requirements that are expected of them upon entering a college environment is not a new one (Wang, 2013). According to Navarro & Malvaso (2015), specifically, this is the idea that prompted the NCAA to issue a call to action to create and increase programming focused on the development of its student-athletes. The five areas of focus, or pillars, were academic excellence, athletic excellence, personal development, career development, and community service (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015).

## Assessment of Existing Literature

### Commuter Student Population

The existing research and literature involving commuter students lacks a clear direction. Darling (2015) proposed that commuters are students who do not live in institution-owned housing. Biddix (2015) noted that by oversimplifying the definition to include just those who do not live on campus can be problematic. There are several nuances that must be taken into consideration, including distance from campus, year in school, age, and additional factors such as disabilities, race/ethnicity, and class delivery method (Biddix, 2015).

Comparing commuter students to non-traditional students is also not sufficient. Melendez (2016) used such a definition and noted that commuter students were more likely to be transfer students, were likely to work more hours per week, were likely to earn more income, were likely to be less involved in school sponsored activities, were less likely to believe the university is distinct, were less likely to believe the university had a good reputation, were less likely to identify with the university, and were less likely to be involved with the Alumni Association prior to graduation. This definition may work in some cases, but certainly not for traditional four-year institutions that happen to be located in urban areas.

Without a clear definition of commuter student, assumptions can be made (or missed) during the course of research. This is something that is clearly documented already, as four-year institutions are more likely to focus on the resident student experience as the predominant paradigm for considering student characteristics, access to degree programs, academic advising, support services, and student life activities (Darling, 2015). This is particularly discouraging given that, according to Darling (2015), for many institutions the commuter student population is



significant but has not been the primary focus in academic advising initiatives designed to make an impact on student success.

The existing literature on commuter students is also limiting because the primary focus of the research is academic performance. There are many other non-academic commitments and measures that can be analyzed using commuter students. Burlison (2015) noted that a specific weakness in the current literature is that all non-academic commitments are combined into one group; if different commitments were studied separately, it would give a more accurate depiction of the commuter population.

In the instances that other measures have been studied, it has been in the form of social engagement. While the importance of faculty to student and student to student relationships is well documented, research cannot lay only in those areas. Attendance at campus sponsored events or in campus owned facilities is also crucial. Regalado (2015) began to pursue this route, as the goal of that study was to provide libraries in urban settings with best practices to serve their students.

### **Student-Athlete Population**

Given the high-profile nature of collegiate athletics and the availability of athletic scholarships, it is not surprising that nearly all of the existing research on student-athlete engagement focuses on Division I NCAA institutions (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2013; Humlet al., 2017; Simiyu, 2010; Rettig & Shouping, 2016; Umbach, 2006). NCAA mandates on life skills programming are easily followed because some Division I institutions utilize previously established student-athlete organizations as a means to engage student-athletes in community service (Czekanski, 2015).

Some researchers do not see an imbalance in the attention paid to Division I institutions, including Rettig & Shouping (2016) who noted that more research is needed on student-athlete engagement and educational outcomes at Division I institutions, where large variability in student demographics exists and pressure to balance athletic and academic responsibilities is greatest. Other studies, like Huml, et al. (2017), were content gathering data from athletic administrators instead of the student-athletes themselves. Given that 39% of all NCAA student-athletes compete on the Division III level (National Collegiate Athletic Association), focusing all research on Division I seems irresponsible.

Further data inconsistencies and assumptions are present in the existing research literature. Umbach et al (2006) grouped all NCAA Division III institutions into one group of small and predominately liberal arts schools. In reality there are several large campuses, mostly in urban environments, that have enrollments that rival Division I schools. Umbach, et al. (2006) chose to do so, but Rettig & Shouping (2016) noted that the NSSE can skew data because it is only taking certain academic years into consideration. In other words, conclusions drawn using data that only represents first-year students cannot be applied to entire populations of student-athletes.

The current literature on student-athlete engagement leaves the definition of life skills programming open to interpretation. This fact is explicitly stated by Burns et al. (2013) who noted that, although the academic support services in their study differed between universities, the programs were based on the NCAA Life Skills program. The institutions in the Burns et al. (2013) study included some combination of an online assessment, career counselors, and resume workshops, but it is possible that institutions in other studies included different resources.

In similar fashion to the existing studies on commuter students, student-athlete engagement is typically measured, at least in part, by using grade point average. This literature review examined several studies that considered community service to be an acceptable measure of engagement (Czekanski, 2015; Huml et al., 2017). As pointed out by Czekanski (2015), community service as a measure may need further study because while the data can indicate the initial involvement of student-athletes, it does not clarify the extent of the role they took during the community service event. As noted by Simiyu (2010) there are other useful forms of engagement in addition to academic achievement. Involvement with faculty, involvement with student peer groups, and attendance at athletic department sponsored events all help to paint a clearer picture of effective student-athlete engagement.

### **Student-Athlete Development Programming**

The NCAA requires all member institutions to implement some degree of the life skills' five pillars on their campus, but according to Navarro & Malvaso (2015) the implementation varies and there is little guidance from prior research. The research that does exist suggests that athletic programming should coincide with other campus initiatives (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). This can be exhausting for student-athlete development professionals because the population he or she works with has specialized needs, especially in the area of scheduling (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). For urban, commuting student-athletes this point is even more profound.

### **Conclusion**

According to Melendez (2016) four-year commuter colleges make up over 30% of the total number of senior colleges in the country. With just under 500,000 total NCAA student-athletes competing today, it is safe to say that these two populations intersect (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2017). Many of the findings associated with engagement of

residential students may not be generalizable to urban commuter students, just as traditional student involvement theories may not be suited for student-athletes (Melendez, 2016; Huml, Svensson, & Hancock, 2017).

As commuter students continue to attend an increasingly wide variety of institutions, student affairs professionals must develop a thorough understanding of their needs and create strategies to increase their persistence and engage them deeply and productively in learning (Jacoby, 2015). Similar sentiments were expressed by Navarro (2015), who noted that student-athlete development professionals must work to offer programming strictly for student-athletes that serves unique needs while also attempting to provide inclusive opportunities for student-athletes to participate in campus-wide career development events.

Mueller's (2009) anecdotal article represents a clear meeting between traditional academia and collegiate athletics. He noted that it is important to engage students emotionally, and it is a professional's job to build emotional significance where it is lacking. These professionals include everyone that a student-athlete comes into contact with: student affairs administrators, coaches, faculty, and student-athlete development administrators. This connection is crucial, as results indicate that satisfying development programs will be beneficial to student-athletes who feel that they will be unsuccessful and to those who believe that their future outcomes are a result of outside influences (Burnset al., 2013). The NCAA Life Skills program does not designate any of its pillars based on residency status and future research should be conducted to reflect that.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter details a mixed-methods study to evaluate the priorities of urban, commuting student-athletes at a NCAA Division III institution in New York City. The researcher chose this format in order to use a quantitative survey to gather data from a large student-athlete cohort, but also to conduct interviews to assess some of the unique qualitative characteristics of the student-athletes. This research will help athletic departments at urban, commuter institutions to better understand what student-athletes at their institutions expect and value when it comes to student-athlete development and engagement. As a result, departments will be able to develop more effective programming, helping to prevent wasting financial and personnel resources on efforts that will not resonate with the student-athletes.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1: How do urban commuter student-athletes characterize intercollegiate athletics as part of their campus experience?

RQ2: How does personal and career programming offered by the athletic department influence urban commuter student-athlete behavior and choices?

### **Setting**

In addition to following the intricacies of NCAA and conference regulations, the focus of the urban, commuter institution in this study is its student-athletes. Their mission is to “provide all students with the opportunity to participate in a competitive athletic environment and supportive learning atmosphere, where life skills such as leadership development, sportsmanship, healthy living, and community service are of vital importance” (CUNYAC Mission, 2017). Effective student advocacy is also a focus of the institution and they attempt to honor that value through the creation of a Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC). SAAC members are

able to offer their opinions on current and proposed conference and NCAA legislation so that those making the ultimate decisions are as informed as possible. Members of SAAC also create, promote, and execute programming for student-athletes at different points during the semester.

The institution's athletic department relies heavily on funds generated by the annual Student Activity Fee, a portion of a student's cost of attendance (City University of New York Athletic Conference Strategic Plan 2012-2016, p. 9). The athletic department must continually prove itself as an essential piece of the student experience in order to keep receiving financial support from the fee. This includes performance on the field, as well as promotion of how student-athletes are contributing to their campus on a larger scale. According to Gabby Dominguez, a former athletic coordinator at John Jay College, this is not the case because "we can't even get student-athletes to our own meetings because we're competing for their time" (personal communication, June 13, 2017). This competition does not help to strengthen the argument to continue using the student activity fee for athletic purposes (Dominguez, personal communication, June 13, 2017).

Given its urban location in the middle of New York City, the institution must be flexible with the expectations placed upon student-athletes. Of the fifteen varsity sports offered, only five have a facility on campus that can support home competition (About Us: John Jay Athletics, 2017). As a result, the department must partner with additional organizations such as Randall's Island Park (soccer, softball), the USTA National Tennis Center, and MCU Park (baseball) in order to secure space to hold competitions for the remaining sports (About Us: John Jay Athletics, 2017). Student-athletes are then expected to travel for their home competitions, something that is unique to the institution and the conference of which they are a part.

As a former assistant athletics director who was tasked with creating and implementing student-athlete development programming at the institution in this study, the researcher has experience working with urban, commuter student-athletes. That knowledge contributed to the decision to use both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather data for the study. Because the researcher no longer works for the institution whose student-athlete cohort will be studied, they will access the participants through virtual means. A survey was distributed to the student-athletes through the professional currently in the Assistant Athletics Director role. Participation in the qualitative interviews was offered at the end of the quantitative survey. Student-athletes volunteered to participate in the interviews, which were conducted over the Skype platform.

Founded in 1964, John Jay College of Criminal Justice is one of the nation's most prestigious liberal arts institutions. The theme of justice is at the heart of each program, ranging across the arts, sciences and humanities. The breadth and diversity of scholarship at John Jay promises a rich learning experience to their students. According to the Fast Facts on its website, John Jay offers the following academic programs and student-body composition (Fast Facts):

- 31 Majors
- 40 Minors
- 17 Master's Programs
- 3 Doctoral Programs
- Undergraduate students: 13,000
- Graduate students: 2,000
- Student body: 47% Hispanic, 20% White, 17% Black, 10% Asian
- Nearly 400 Veterans enrolled

- 130+ nationalities represented
- 47% first-generation students
- 33% foreign-born students

### **Participants/Sample**

The participants for this study were chosen based on their status as a student-athlete at an urban, commuter institution. They were contacted through email to participate in the study, but it was made clear that participation was optional. Demographic details including age, gender, ethnicity, year in school, sport, and commuter status were asked and noted at the onset of the online survey. All current student-athletes at John Jay College of Criminal Justice were included in the solicitation for participation in this study. As of the survey's first distribution on March 4, 2019 the student-athlete cohort at John Jay totaled 215 participants across fifteen varsity sports. Seven of the sports are able to conduct both practice and competition on John Jay's campus, while the remaining eight sports must commute additionally for practice and/or competition.

Participants were contacted three times to fill out the quantitative survey. The first email with the survey link was distributed when the survey went live, the second contact was sent a week into the study (March 11, 2019) and a final attempt to solicit participation took place the final day the survey was open (March 18, 2019). The researcher reached out to the coaching staff at John Jay College the Friday preceding the survey's distribution (March 1, 2019), to recruit their support in encouraging their teams to participate in the research project. Student-athletes who elected to participate in the interview portion of the research study included contact information at the conclusion of the survey so that the researcher was able to contact them. By providing contact information the student-athletes understood that their answers were no longer anonymous, but their identity would be kept confidential and used only by the researcher.



## Data

Data for this study was collected using an online survey created on the REDCap platform and was supplemented using video (Skype) qualitative interviews. The surveys were distributed during the Spring 2019 term, aiming to minimize the conflict between participation and schoolwork for the student-athletes who chose to participate. The submission deadline for the online surveys was such that those who volunteered for qualitative interviews were also able to participate before midpoint of the Spring 2019 term.

Due to the limited preexisting research on the topic of urban, commuter student-athletes the quantitative survey instrument was adapted from the *College Mattering Inventory* created by Tovar, Simon, & Lee (2009). The framework for the instrument was that the perception of mattering is emotionally and cognitively related to a sense of belonging to and with others, thereby reducing feelings of marginality and disconnectedness (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). The creators of the instrument felt the need to address what had not yet been researched: the impact of psychosocial factors, such as the perceived experience of a greater sense of mattering (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). Prior to the Tovar, Simon, & Lee (2009) study, mattering in higher education had been reserved to studies with nontraditional college students. As illustrated in Chapter 2, urban commuter students exhibit several nontraditional qualities, making it an applicable and adaptable instrument for this study.

For the student-athletes who elected to participate in the quantitative portion of this research, questions were sorted into the following themes: demographics, being the object of attention of others (administration, coaches, student-athletes), perception of support in various student endeavors by others, supportive athletic department, sense of fit within the college, and perceived marginality owing to personal characteristics. These themes were adapted by the

researcher from those used by Tovar, Simon, & Lee (2009) to fit the setting of a NCAA Division III athletic department.

Student-athletes that participated in the qualitative portion of the research were asked questions in following areas: academic motivations, athletic motivations, and other considerations affecting engagement. These themes were developed by the researcher, based on her experience as a student-athlete development professional at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice from September 2015 through September 2018.

### **Demographics**

Demographics questions assessed information about gender, ethnicity, generational status, commuter status, team participation, and employment off campus. The questions aimed to identify patterns around factors such as how many hours a week the student-athlete commutes to/from campus.

### **Being the object of attention of others**

The questions created to address this theme assessed how student-athletes feel about being the object of attention for the athletics administration, coaching staff, and other student-athletes.

### **Perception of support in various student endeavors by others**

Questions designated to address this theme assessed a student-athlete's perception of support from others (athletic administration, coaching staff, and other student-athletes) for their pursuits on campus that are unrelated to athletics practice or competition.

### **Supportive athletic department**

Questions related to this theme assessed to what degree the student-athlete believes they are supported by John Jay College's athletic department.

**Sense of fit within the college**

Questions in this area addressed the student-athlete's sense of overall fit at John Jay College. This is inclusive of their experience as a student-athlete, as well as any other groups or clubs that they are involved with.

**Perceived marginality owing to personal characteristics**

The final quantitative theme was addressed using questions that assess the student-athlete's perceived marginality. Instead of measuring the effects of others on the student-athlete, these questions measured the characteristic with which the student-athlete identifies.

**Academic motivations**

The qualitative questions that focused on academic motivations secure information on the student-athletes major, career goals, and how those factor into their decision to attend the institution.

**Athletic motivations**

The questions in this area sought to ascertain the role that athletics plays in the student's experience. An example of a question on athletic motivations was "if athletics was not offered would you still have decided to attend John Jay College?" Questions from this part of the survey helped explain the role/importance that athletics have for student-athletes.

**Other considerations affecting engagement**

The other considerations questions asked the student-athletes about any other items that may have affected their decision to attend John Jay College, or their decisions on whether or not they have engaged with student-athlete programming. Examples of such items were familial commitments, cost of attendance, or lack of desire to engage.

## Analysis

Due to the dual nature of this research study, two separate analyses took place. For the quantitative online surveys, a statistical analysis was performed using the REDCap platform. Prior to the distribution of the surveys, each of five themes discussed in the previous section were assigned a minimum of six survey questions. The specific breakdown of questions per theme was as follows: being the object of attention of others – eight questions; perception of support in various student endeavors by others – nine questions; supportive athletic department – eight questions; sense of fit within the college – ten questions; and perceived marginality owing to personal characteristics – six questions.

Each of the online survey questions and theme were assigned to address the two research questions explored by this study. RQ1 was addressed by documenting students' perceptions of support in their various student endeavors; by others, athletic department staff, and by their peers. The prompts also addressed students' sense of fit within the college, sensitivity to being the object of attention of others, and perceived marginality owing to their personal characteristics. RQ2 was addressed by the questions on perceived marginality.

A second analysis was conducted once the Skype interviews had been completed. Student-athletes had the opportunity to opt into participation for the qualitative portion of the study at the conclusion of the quantitative survey. The interviews were recorded using the Skype application and transcribed using the TranscribeMe online service. Interview transcripts were coded by summarizing themes and then by focusing those themes into specific ideas that could be used for data. Based on the themes that emerged from the coded interview transcripts, best practices for engaging urban, commuter student-athletes will be suggested in the following chapter.

### **Participant rights**

In order to protect the rights of the participants in this study precautions were taken by the researcher. First, a proposal for research was presented to the IRB at the University of New England (UNE). Once approval for research was secured from UNE, the proposal and other required materials were presented and submitted to the department of Research Compliance at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. In addition to the proposal itself, John Jay required the researcher to secure permission from the Director of Athletics, as well as to answer several questions regarding the research and its potential for impact at the College. The research was also approved by the NCAA, the national governing body of college athletics, since the participants of the study were current college student-athletes. The NCAA was the researcher's employer at the time of the study and the approval had to be secured to limit bias and/or conflict of interest.

Before beginning the online quantitative survey and, if applicable, the Skype qualitative interview all participants agreed that they understood the risks involved in participating in the research. All participants in the survey selected a radio button designated as "yes", indicating that they consented to participate in the survey. The researcher did not know who had not or had not filled out the survey at any point, unless a student-athlete voluntarily chose to participate in the additional interview.

All interviewees were read consent information prior to the start of the interview. Interview participants were labeled by interview number and all names were kept confidential in the research results. All interviews were scheduled at a time picked by the student-athlete and it was understood that interview could have been terminated at any time by the interviewee or

interviewer. The invitation to participate in the research study stated that participation involved an online survey with the possibility of a follow up interview.

There were not any anticipated physical risks for the student-athletes who elected to participate in this study. Surveys were completed through REDCap and the platform did not collect any identifying information from participants. All student-athletes who did not wish to take part in the survey simply did not click on the survey link to begin participation.

### **Potential limitations of the study**

At its onset, the researcher in this study had a vested interest in conclusions drawn from the data because of their position as the assistant athletics director for the institution. The researcher had served as the NCAA compliance officer, academic advisor, and student-athlete development professional for many of the potential participants of the study, as those areas were job functions during her tenure at the institution. When the quantitative survey was distributed there were potential participants who had never have had contact with the researcher because they became student-athletes after the researcher's departure from the institution. The researcher continued to work in the field of collegiate athletics after her departure from the institution used in the research study. As such, she still had an interest in the outcomes of the research.

Before collecting and analyzing the data, the researcher theorized that the urban, commuter student-athletes in this study would suggest that athletics were not among their highest priorities. In other words: other factors more significantly impacted their decision to attend and engage with their college. This theory was based on the researcher's own experience working at the institution in the study and her conversations with student-athletes during their tenure.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The intent of this two-phase, mixed methods study was to evaluate the priorities of urban, commuting student-athletes at a NCAA Division III institution in New York City. In the first phase, quantitative data was collected using survey questions with Likert scale responses that addressed the perceptions that student-athletes have about the support and development programming they currently receive from the athletic department at their institution. Information from this first phase was explored further in a second qualitative phase. In the second phase, interviews were used to probe more specific aspects of the student-athlete experience at the institution. The reason for following up with qualitative research in the second phase was to better understand what student-athletes at their institutions expect and value from their institution regarding student-athlete development and engagement.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1: How do urban commuter student-athletes characterize intercollegiate athletics as part of their campus experience?

RQ2: How does personal and career programming offered by the athletic department influence urban commuter student-athlete behavior and choices?

The researcher used a quantitative research design that included two data collection procedures: the first was an online survey sent to 215 graduate and undergraduate student-athletes at the institution. The survey was distributed on three different occasions and was sent to all student-athletes, whether they had previously completed the survey. Participants were asked to rate their agreement based on a Likert-type scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The response rate was 23.2 percent, for a participant cohort of 50 student-athletes (n=50). For the second part of data collection, the

researcher contacted student-athletes who had indicated at the conclusion of the online survey, their willingness to participate in an interview. Seven student-athletes had initially volunteered to participate and the researcher conducted interviews with two student-athletes over the Skype video platform. At the suggestion of the research advisors, the researcher separately reached out to student-athletes to secure more interviews. By using the direct message function on Instagram, the researcher contacted an additional seven student-athletes. Two of the additional seven student-athletes had also participated in the online survey, while the remaining five only participated in the interview portion of the study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to evaluate the priorities of urban, commuting student-athletes at a NCAA Division III institution in New York City. As a result, athletics departments serving a similar student demographic may garner a better understanding of those factors influencing urban students' participation in athlete development programming. They may then use these recommendations to develop more effective programming, helping to prevent wasting financial and personnel resources on efforts that will not resonate with the student-athletes.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study was to provide evidence-based recommendations to improve engagement with student-athlete development programming that can be presented to the athletics administration, so student-athletes are provided programming based on their needs and wants.

### **Survey Data**

To analyze student satisfaction with the researched institution's current student-athlete development programming and engagement with the programming, the researcher reviewed the



answers to thirty-six survey questions which organized into five thematic clusters. These questions explore student-athlete attitudes around being the object of attention of others, the perception of support in various student endeavors by others (administration, coaches, student-athletes), the perception of a supportive athletic department, the student-athlete's sense of fit within the college, and their perceived marginality owing to personal characteristics. An additional six questions assessed the student-athletes' attendance at various campus events, eight questions collected demographic information, and a final section asked the student-athletes to rank six different priorities from most important to least important. In total, the student-athletes answered 56 survey questions.

### *Demographics*

As a City University of New York (CUNY) institution, the college used in this study serves a unique and diverse student population. This population was reflected in the student-athletes who participated in the online survey for the research. Sixty-two percent (n=31) of participants in the study were female, while 38 (n=19) percent were male. Ethnically, 4 percent (n=2) of participants in the study identified as Black or African American, 10 percent (n=5) identified as Asian, 38 percent (n=19) identified as Hispanic, 36 percent (n=18) identified as White, 4 percent (n=2) identified as Two or More races, and 2 percent (n=1) responded as Unknown.

Prior to the study, the institution's website reported a first-generation student population of 47 percent (Fast Facts). Of the student-athletes who participated in the study 48 percent (n=24) of participants were first generation college students, while 50 percent (n=25) were not first generation, and one student-athlete (2 percent, n=1) preferred not to disclose their status. Scholastically, 16 percent (n=8) of participants were freshmen, 20 percent (n=10) were

sophomores, 38 percent (n=19) were juniors, 24 percent (n=12) were seniors, and 2 percent (n=1) was a graduate student.

Athletically, the student-athletes from all fifteen varsity teams across three seasons participated in the study. The fall sports accounted for 48 percent (n=24) of the participants; with men's and women's cross country each having 2 percent (n=1) of the student-athletes, men's soccer having 10 percent (n=5), women's soccer having 18 percent (n=9), women's tennis having 6 percent (n=3), and women's volleyball having 4 percent (n=2) of the cohort. Winter sports contributed the lowest participation rate, with 22 percent (n=11). Men's basketball, women's basketball, and rifle each had 4 percent (n=2) participation, cheerleading had 2 percent (n=1), and women's swimming resulted in 8 percent (n=4) of the participants in the study. The spring sports of baseball (14 percent, n=7), softball (4 percent, n=2), men's tennis (2 percent, n=1), and men's volleyball (10 percent, n=5) rounded out the 30 percent (n=15) participation from spring sports.

The demographic information that was collected also included how many off-campus hours a week the student-athlete works and the student-athletes recruitment status. 28 percent (n=14) of the participants worked zero to five hours, 14 percent (n=7) work six to ten hours, 20 percent (n=10) work eleven to fifteen works, 14 percent (n=7) work sixteen to twenty hours, and 24 percent (n=12) work over twenty hours per week. When asked whether or not they had been recruited to play at the institution in the study 30 percent (n=15) answered yes, while the remaining 70 percent (n=35) indicated that they had walked onto their respective teams.

As the main characteristic of the study was to assess *commuter* student-athlete preferences, the participants were asked to comment on the length of their commute, each way, to campus. With its residential facility twenty-five blocks away, every student-athlete commutes

in some way because there are no opportunities to live on campus. The student-athletes who do not take advantage of the residential facility either commute from their family home or they rent an apartment in one of New York City's boroughs. A staggering 70 percent (n=35) of student-athletes commute a minimum of thirty minutes to campus, compared to 30 percent (n=15) who commute less than thirty minutes. Of the 70 percent, 28 percent (n=14) of participants commute 61 to 90 minutes and 14 percent (n=7) commute for more than ninety minutes each way to campus. Table 1 summarizes the demographic data for the student-athlete participants in this study.

Table 1  
*Student-Athlete Participant Profile*

<u>Gender</u>		<u>Ethnicity</u>		<u>First Generation</u>	
Female	62%	Asian	10%	No	50%
Male	38%	Black	4%	Prefer not to say	2%
		Hispanic	38%	Yes	48%
		Two or More	4%		
<u>Year in school</u>		Unknown	2%	<u>Commute</u>	
Freshman	16%	White	36%	0 to 30 minutes	30%
Graduate student	2%			31 to 60 minutes	28%
Junior	38%	<u>Recruited</u>		61 to 90 minutes	28%
Senior	24%	No	70%	Over 90 minutes	14%
Sophomore	20%	Yes	30%		
<u>Fall sports</u>		<u>Winter sports</u>		<u>Spring sports</u>	
Men's Cross Country	2%	Men's Basketball	4%	Baseball	14%
Women's Cross Country	2%	Women's Basketball	4%	Softball	4%
Men's Soccer	10%	Cheerleading	2%	Men's Tennis	2%
Women's Soccer	18%	Rifle	4%	Men's Volleyball	10%
Women's Tennis	6%	Women's Swimming	8%		
Women's Volleyball	4%				

During the analysis of the demographic information, the researcher discovered that the freshmen student-athletes responded at the lowest rate overall. This data point corresponds with one of the emerging themes of the research study: the idea that commuter student-athletes desire a personal connection with those delivering department programming. Before conducting the study the researcher had limited contact with the freshmen student-athletes, which may explain lower response rate.

### **Being the object of attention of others**

Student-athletes were asked seven questions pertaining to their opinion on being the object of attention of others. In this case, “others” referred to the athletics administration, coaching staff, and other student-athletes.

Table 2

*Being the object of attention of others*

Q1: There are people in the athletic department who are determined to see me succeed.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
0%	4%	12%	42%	40%	
Q2: The athletics department generally does not care about student-athletes' well-being.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
26%	40%	22%	12%	0%	
Q9: Athletes on my team show interest in me because I make good contributions.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
0%	2%	16%	62%	20%	
Q15: The athletic department is generally receptive to what I have to say.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
6%	8%	40%	34%	12%	
Q17: If I stopped participating in athletics, the athletic administration would be disappointed.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
4%	30%	42%	18%	6%	

Q27: There are people in the athletic department who are genuinely interested in me as a person.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
2%	16%	20%	42%	20%

  

Q28: Most of the athletic administration knows my name.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
10%	24%	18%	22%	26%

When asked if there are people in the athletics department who are determined to see their success, 40 percent (n=20) of student-athletes strongly agreed and 42 percent (n=21) agreed. Only 12 percent (n=6) neither agreed or disagreed and 4 percent (n=2) disagreed that there are people invested in their success. That sentiment was echoed when the student-athletes were asked if the athletics department cares, generally, about their well-being, as only 12 percent (n=6) agreed that the department does not care. The student-athletes were asked if their peers show interest in them because of the contributions they make; 20 percent (n=10) strongly agreed, 62 percent (n=31) agreed, 16 percent (n=8) neither agreed or disagreed, and 2 percent (n=1) disagreed.

There was not strong agreement that the athletics department is receptive to what student-athletes have to say, as 54 percent (n=27) neither agreed or disagreed (n=20), disagreed (n=4), or strongly disagreed (n=3) with the statement. The student-athletes' ambivalence was also shown when asked how much they agree with the statement that if they stopped participating in athletics, the athletic administration would be disappointed. Neither agree or disagree was the most popular answer (42 percent, n=21), followed by disagree (30 percent, n=15), agree (18 percent, n=9), strongly agree (6 percent, n=3), and strongly disagree (4 percent, n=2). Finally, student-athletes were asked their opinion on whether most of the athletic administration knows their name. The outcome of that question was 26 percent (n=13) strongly agree, 22 percent

(n=11) agree, 18 percent (n=9) neither agree or disagree, 24 percent (n=12) disagree, and 10 percent (n=5) strongly disagree.

### Perception of support in various student endeavors by others

Student-athletes were asked six questions pertaining to their perception of support from others in various student endeavors. “Others” again referred to the athletics administration, coaching staff, and other student-athletes.

Table 3

*Perception of support in various student endeavors by others*

Q3: I often feel my coaches and administrators care more about other things than me as a student.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
18%	56%	48%	18%	0%	
Q4: Knowing that other people at the college care for me motivates me to do better.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
0%	4%	12%	48%	36%	
Q8: Administrators tell me how much they appreciate my participation in athletics.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
12%	18%	28%	34%	8%	
Q13: It is comforting to know that my contributions are valued by other student-athletes.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
0%	6%	12%	56%	26%	
Q18: Sometimes the athletic administration simply does not listen to what I have to say.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
10%	22%	42%	22%	4%	
Q19: The athletic administrators are sensitive to my non-school responsibilities.					
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
0%	24%	48%	22%	5%	

The student-athletes did not often feel that their coaches and administrators care more about other things than their status as a student, as 56 percent (n=28) disagreed with the statement. Eighteen percent (n=9) strongly disagreed, 48 percent (n=24) neither agreed or disagreed, while the remaining 18 percent (n=9) agreed that coach and administrator priorities are elsewhere. They are also motivated by being the focus of care for others, as indicated by the 84 percent of participants who either agreed (n=24) or strongly agreed (n=18) with that statement. Only 4 percent (n=2) disagreed with that being a source of motivation.

When asked if administrators tell them how much their participation in athletics is appreciated, 12 percent (n=6) strongly disagreed, 18 percent (n=9) disagreed, 28 percent (n=14) neither agreed or disagreed, 34 percent (n=17) agreed, and 8 percent (n=4) strongly agreed that that behavior was happening. When the appreciation comes from their peers, the answers changed, as 26 percent (n=13) strongly agreed and 56 percent (n=28) agreed when asked if it was comforting to know that contributions were valued by other student-athletes.

Perceptions of the athletic administration not listening to what they have to say saw the majority of student-athletes neither agreeing or disagreeing (42 percent, n=21), with 10 percent (n=5) strongly disagreeing, 22 percent (n=11) disagreeing, another 22 percent (n=11) agreeing and the final 4 percent (n=2) strongly agreeing. Student-athletes had similar responses to the question of whether athletic administrators were sensitive to non-school responsibilities; with 24 percent (n=12) disagreeing with the statement, 48 percent (n=24) neither agreeing or disagreeing, 22 percent (n=11) agreeing, and 6 percent (n=3) strongly agreeing with the sentiment.

### **Supportive athletic department**

Student-athletes were asked seven questions pertaining to their opinions on the support they receive from the institution's athletics department.

Table 4

*Supportive athletic department*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Q5: There are people at the college that sincerely appreciate my involvement as a student-athlete.	6%	10%	20%	40%	24%
Q7: Sometimes I feel that I am not valuable to anyone in the athletic department.	22%	28%	24%	25%	0%
Q12: There seem to be many people in the athletic department who wish to see me succeed.	0%	18%	14%	54%	14%
Q21: The administration appears happy when I develop and prepare for life after athletics.	0%	6%	36%	42%	16%
Q22: I feel supported by the athletic department.	6%	14%	16%	46%	18%
Q25: If I had a problem, I believe the athletic department would be willing to discuss it with me.	4%	14%	22%	44%	16%
Q29: Administrators in the athletics generally show their concern for student-athletes' well-being.	2%	16%	24%	40%	18%

When asked if sometimes they feel that they are not valued by the athletics department, there were no student-athletes who strongly agreed, however 50 percent (n=25) either agreed (26 percent, n=13) or neither agreed or disagreed (24 percent, n=12). Twenty eight percent (n=14)



disagreed with the statement and 22 percent (n=11) strongly disagreed. Based on the experience of the student-athletes in the research study, 18 percent (n=9) disagreed that there were many people in the department who wished to see them succeed. Fourteen percent (n=7) neither agreed or disagreed, 54 percent (n=27) agreed, and 14 percent (n=7) strongly agreed. Feelings of acceptance in the athletics department are high, as 20 percent (n=10) strongly agreed with the statement. An additional 60 percent (n=30) agreed that people in the athletics department are generally accepting of them, while 18 percent (n=9) had no opinion, and 2 percent (n=1) disagreed.

When asked about their post-athletics personal development, 68 percent (n=29) of student-athletes either agreed or strongly agreed that the athletics administration appeared genuinely happy for them. Eighteen percent (n=9) strongly agreed that they felt supported by the athletics department, while 46 percent (n=23) agreed. Thirty six percent of student-athletes did not agree or disagree (n=8), disagreed (n=7), or strongly disagreed (n=3) with the same statement. Similarly, 16 percent (n=8) strongly agree and 44 percent (n=22) agree that if they had a personal problem the athletics department would be willing to help. Just 4 percent (n=2) strongly disagreed that the athletics department would help, 14 percent (n=7) disagreed, and 22 percent (n=11) neither agreed or disagreed. Two percent (n=1) of participants strongly disagreed that administrators in the athletics department generally showed their concern for student-athletes' well-being, compared to 16 percent (n=8) who disagreed, 24 percent (n=12) who neither agreed or disagreed, 40 percent (n=20) who agreed, and 18 percent (n=9) who strongly agreed. Finally, when asked if there are enough social or academic opportunities offered through athletics for them to get connected with others at the college, the majority of student-athletes

agreed (40 percent, n=20) or had no opinion (28 percent, n=14). Four percent (n=2) strongly disagreed, 16 percent (n=8) disagreed, and 10 percent (n=5) strongly agreed.

### Sense of fit within the college

Student-athletes were asked five questions pertaining to their opinions on their sense of fit within the college as a whole.

Table 5

#### *Sense of fit within the college*

Q6: It is comforting to know that my contributions are valued by my coaches and administrators.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
0%	0%	20%	48%	32%
Q14: People in the athletic department are generally accepting of me.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
0%	2%	18%	60%	20%
Q20: Sometimes I get so busy with off-campus activities that I distance myself from athletics.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8%	26%	22%	32%	12%
Q30: My opinions are generally valued within the athletic department.				
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
2%	10%	40%	36%	12%

When asked if there were people at the college that sincerely appreciated their involvement as a student-athlete 6 percent (n=3) strongly disagreed, 10 percent (n=5) disagreed, 20 percent (n=10) had no opinion, 40 percent (n=20) agreed, and 24 percent (n=12) strongly agreed. Eighty percent of student-athletes either strongly agreed (32 percent, n=16) or agreed (48 percent, n=24) that it was comforting that their contributions were valued by coaches and administrators. The remaining 20 percent (n=10) of student-athletes did not agree or disagree.

Student-athletes were asked if they had ever become so busy with off-campus activities that they distanced themselves from others in athletics. Eight percent (n=4) strongly disagreed with that behavior, 36 percent (n=18) disagreed, 22 percent (n=11) neither agreed or disagreed, another 22 percent (n=11) agreed, and a final 12 percent (n=6) strongly agreed. Student-athletes did not feel isolated while involved in student activities outside of athletics, as 12 percent (n=6) strongly disagreed and 48 percent (n=24) disagreed when asked. Twenty-six percent (n=13) had no opinion, 10 percent (n=5) agreed that they felt isolated, and 4 percent (n=2) strongly agreed.

Outside of the athletics department, 12 percent (n=6) of student-athletes' strongly agreed that their opinions were generally valued, 36 percent (n=18) agreed, 40 percent (n=20) did not have an opinion, 10 percent (n=5) disagreed, and 2 percent (n=1) strongly disagreed.

### **Perceived marginality owing to personal characteristics**

Student-athletes were asked nine questions pertaining to their perceived marginality due to personal characteristics.

Table 6

#### *Perceived marginality owing to personal characteristics*

Q10: Most of my coaches would not miss me if I suddenly stopped participating in athletics.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	10%	30%	18%	18%	4%
Q11: I believe that the athletic administration would miss me if I suddenly stopped attending college.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	8%	28%	30%	20%	14%
Q16: If I stopped participating in athletics, I would have no access to personal/career programming.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	22%	46%	22%	8%	2%
Q23: Other students on my team would miss me if I suddenly went away.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

	Disagree		Disagree		Agree
	2%		2%	18%	48%
Q24: I often feel isolated when involved in student activities (e.g., clubs, events).					30%
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	12%	48%	26%	10%	4%
Q26: There are social or academic opportunities offered through athletics to connect me with others at the college.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	4%	16%	28%	40%	10%
Q31: I chose John Jay College because of the academic programming (majors).					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	4%	8%	8%	40%	40%
Q32: I chose John Jay College because of the opportunity to be a student-athlete.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	14%	22%	16%	28%	20%
Q33: I receive personal/career programming from athletics that I could not get from other departments on campus.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	18%	24%	24%	20%	14%
Q34: If I could no longer participate in athletics I would remain at John Jay College.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	0%	12%	10%	46%	22%

First, the student-athletes were asked if they agreed that most of their coaches would not miss them if they suddenly stopped participating in athletics. Thirty percent (n=15) strongly disagreed with the statement, 30 percent (n=15) disagreed, 18 percent (n=9) had no opinion, 18 percent (n=9) agreed, and 4 percent (n=2) strongly agreed. When “coaches” was replaced with “teammates”, the student-athletes were more in agreement. Forty-eight percent (n=24) agreed that their teammates would miss them if they stopped participating in athletics, 30 percent (n=15) strongly agreed, 18 percent (n=2) had no opinion, and 2 percent (n=1) each disagreed and

strongly disagreed. When the same question was asked from a broader perspective, whether the athletics administration would miss them if they suddenly stopped attending college, 8 percent (n=4) of the student-athletes strongly disagreed, 28 percent (n=14) disagreed, 30 percent (n=15) neither agreed or disagreed, 20 percent (n=10) agreed, and 14 percent (n=7) strongly agreed.

The student-athletes were asked if they would have access to personal and career development programming if they stopped participating in athletics, in order to assess how much departmental programming is valued. Ninety percent of student-athletes either had no opinion on the statement (22 percent, n=11), disagreed (46 percent, n=23), or strongly disagreed (22 percent, n=11). The other 10 percent of student-athletes agreed (8 percent, n=4) or strongly agreed (2 percent, n=1). When asked if the personal and career programming they received from the athletics department was unique from what they could access elsewhere on campus, only 34 percent strongly agreed (14 percent, n=7) or agreed (20 percent, n=10). Twenty-four percent (n=12) had no opinion, another 24 percent (n=12) disagreed and 18 percent (n=9) strongly disagreed.

The remaining three questions in this section assessed the priorities of the student-athletes. Forty percent (n=20) each strongly agreed and agreed that they had chosen the institution in the study because of the academic programming, including majors. Eight percent (n=4) had no opinion and 8 percent (n=4) and 4 percent (n=2) did not agree that they chose the institution based on academic programming. When athletics was switched with academic programming, the strongly agree (20 percent, n=10) and agree (28 percent, n=14) responses were slightly lower, with 16 percent (n=8) without an opinion, and 22 percent (n=11) and 14 percent (n=7) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Finally, student-athletes were asked if they would remain at the institution if they could no longer participate in athletics. Sixty-eight percent of

student-athletes agreed (46 percent, n=23) or strongly agreed (22 percent, n=11) that they would remain. Only 10 percent (n=5) did not have an opinion or were part of the 12 percent (n=6) that disagreed.

### **Attendance at various events**

The survey also assessed the student-athletes' attendance at various campus events. The most well attended campus events were on-campus athletics competitions, with 80 percent (n=40) indicating that they had been to a game in a sport other than the one that they played. Similarly, 66 percent (n=33) had attended off-campus athletics competition in a sport other than the one they played, compared to 34 percent (n=17) who had not. The student-athletes who disclosed why they had not attended events off-campus indicated that it was because of other priorities. The third most attended campus event was the college-wide career fair, with 58 percent (n=29) of student-athletes having attended at some point. Of the 42 percent (n=21) who had not attended the career fair, 4 percent (n=2) said it was because they already had career plans and/or internships. Another 4 percent (n=2) admitted to not knowing about the event and not going out of their way to find information about it. The remaining 17 student-athletes did not indicate why they had not attended.

The three least attended campus events were all non-competition athletics department programming: student-athlete advisory committee (SAAC) meetings, the SAAC potluck, and athletics resume workshops. Of the three, the potluck had the highest attendance rate at 52 percent (n=26), followed by SAAC meetings at 50 percent (n=25), and the resume workshops had only been attended by 12 percent (n=6) of student-athletes surveyed. When asked why they had not attended the SAAC potluck, 6 percent (n=3) indicated that they had other plans, 8 percent (n=4) indicated that they did not know about it/had never heard of it, and the remaining

34 percent (n=17) did not respond. SAAC meeting non-attendance solicited similar responses, with 14 percent (n=7) of student-athletes claiming they were too busy or had other priorities/responsibilities. Four percent (n=2) student-athletes attributed their non-attendance to athletics (practice or competition) conflicts, and the remaining 6 percent (n=3) who responded indicated that they had no interest. When asked about non-attendance at athletics resume workshops, 8 percent (n=4) responded that the workshop was not necessary for their career development and/or that they had received similar services elsewhere on campus. Thirty percent (n=15) of the student-athletes indicated that they did not know the workshops existed. The final 6 percent (n=3) who reported why they had not attended athletics resume workshops due to time conflicts. An important note: the researcher had conducted athletics resume workshops during her time at the institution and at the time of the research study it was unclear if those workshops still existed.

### **Ranking of priorities**

In the final section of the survey the student-athletes were asked to rank the following priorities from most important to least important: ability to major in a chosen subject, ability to participate in athletics, cost of attendance, family obligations, other considerations, and proximity to home.

Ability to major in a chosen subject was overwhelmingly the highest ranked priority, with 60 percent (n=30) ranking it as most important, 14 percent (n=7) ranking it second most important, and another 14 percent (n=7) ranking it third most important. Only 6 percent (n=3) ranked their major as the fourth most important priority, 2 percent (n=1) ranked it fifth most important, and 4 percent (n=2) ranked their major as the least important priority. Ability to participate in athletics was ranked as most important by 8 percent (n=4) of student-athletes,

ranked second and third most important each by 26 percent (n=13), fourth most important by 14 percent (n=7), fifth most important by 12 percent (n=6), and least important by 14 percent (n=7). Cost of attendance was ranked second most important overall, with 38 percent (n=19).

Family obligations were ranked most important by 10 percent (n=5) of student-athletes, second most important by 6 percent (n=3), third most important by 18 percent (n=9), fourth most important by 32 percent (n=16), fifth most important by 20 percent (n=10), and least important by 14 percent (n=7). Other priorities were ranked most important by 6 percent (n=3) of student-athletes, second most important by 8 percent (n=34), third most important by 4 percent (n=2), fourth most important by 16 percent (n=8), fifth most important by 16 percent (n=8), and least important by 56 percent (n=28). The final priority, proximity to home, was ranked most important by 4 percent (n=2) of student-athletes, second most important by 8 percent (n=4), third most important by 12 percent (n=6), fourth most important by 16 percent (n=8), fifth most important by 46 percent (n=23), and least important by 14 percent (n=7).

When considered overall, the priorities were ranked in the following order: ability to major in chosen subject, cost of attendance, ability to participate in athletics, family obligations, proximity to home, and other.

Table 7  
*Ranking of Commuter Student-Athlete Priorities*

	Q51: Please rank the following priorities from Most Important to Least Important					
	Most important	2nd most important	3rd most important	4th most important	5th most important	Least important
Ability to major in chosen subject	60%	14%	14%	6%	2%	4%
Ability to participate in athletics	8%	26%	26%	14%	12%	14%
Cost of attendance	12%	38%	28%	10%	6%	6%
Family obligations	10%	6%	18%	32%	20%	14%
Other	6%	8%	4%	10%	16%	56%
Proximity to home	4%	8%	12%	16%	46%	14%



## Interview Data

Following the completion of the online survey, seven student-athletes volunteered to participate in an additional Skype interview to further the conversation about their academic, athletic, and other motivations surrounding engagement with student-athlete development programming. Of those seven initial participants only two ultimately completed the qualitative portion of the study. At the suggestion of the research advisors, the researcher separately reached out to student-athletes to secure more interviews. By using the direct message function on Instagram, the researcher contacted an additional seven student-athletes. The student-athletes were asked a total of ten open-ended questions to assess their feelings on existing student-athlete development programming at the institution, as well as to discover their academic, athletic, and other motivations that affect their engagement with such programming.

### *Demographics*

In total, nine student-athletes participated in an interview. Five out of nine were female and four were male. Six of the fifteen teams were represented, with three student-athletes from women's soccer, three from men's volleyball, and one each from baseball and women's swimming. The final interview participant was a dual-sport student-athlete, representing women's volleyball and cheerleading. When considering the facility limitations of the institution, five student-athletes out of the nine practices and competed on-campus, while the remaining four had to use off-campus facilities for athletic participation. Ethnically, two student-athletes identified as Black or African American, three student-athletes were Hispanic, and four student-athletes identified as White.

Table 8  
*Student-Athlete Participant Profile*

<u>Gender</u>		<u>Ethnicity</u>	
Female	56%	Black	22%
Male	44%	Hispanic	33%
		White	44%
<u>Teams</u>		<u>Year in school</u>	
Baseball	11%	Graduate student	11%
Cheerleading	6%	Junior	33%
Women's Soccer	33%	Senior	44%
Women's Swimming	11%	Sophomore	11%
Men's Volleyball	33%		
Women's Volleyball	6%		

### **Academic motivations**

The interview questions that aimed to assess academic motivations focused on the participants' perception of their experiences compared to other NCAA Division III institutions and their connectedness with the institution as a whole.

When asked how their college experience was similar to student-athletes at other Division III institutions, four out of the nine student-athletes only spoke of athletics. Of those answers, three cited deficiencies, including lack of facilities, gear, and transportation, between their experiences and those of student-athletes at other institutions. The fourth student-athlete spoke of a shared discipline, dedication, and love of their sport. Two student-athletes cited athletic and academic similarities, including a lack of recognition on the campus and needing to work while going to school.

The participants were also asked to describe the perceived differences between their experience and those of other student-athletes. Resources was a common theme across all answers. One student-athlete noted that they are commuters because of a lack of a residential facility which was "harder because of commuting, but in another sense more of a real-world type

of lifestyle because we're in the city" (Student-athlete #3). Another student-athlete noted that "some other institutions are able to provide student-athletes with more space on campus, choice in equipment, and presence all over campus" (Student-athlete #7). No student-athletes mentioned any academic differences between their experience and that of their peers.

To assess their connection with the institution, the student-athletes were asked if and how they planned to stay in contact with the institution after graduation. While one student-athlete indicated that they had no interest in staying in contact, the remaining participants planned to stay connected in some way. Seven of the nine student-athletes mentioned staying connected to the other, non-athletics groups with which they were affiliated. For some student-athletes this was their specific major or academic program (i.e. Honors) and for others it was less specific, as they noted they would be interested in speaking to high school students on the institution's behalf.

### **Athletics motivations**

Data on the student-athletes' athletics motivations were established by asking questions on existing and ideal programming and how athletics factored into their college decision.

Seven of the nine student-athletes that were interviewed indicated that the SARGE program offered by the athletics department was the programming that most benefitted them. At the institution, the SARGE program stands for "student-athlete retention and graduation effort" and consists of regularly scheduled meetings between the student-athletes and an academic advisor. The student-athletes who did not mention SARGE in the interview answered that the department's athletic trainer as the most worthwhile program offered by the athletics department. Two student-athletes also mentioned athletics career planning events offered by the department to be helpful and one cited priority registration as a benefit of being a student-athlete.

There was more variety among the answers given when the student-athletes were asked what their ideal programming would be. One student-athlete could not think of any additional programming that they would like the athletics department to offer, while another suggested that a program to offset transportation costs would be worthwhile. Athletic training staffing and facility upgrades was also suggested, with the student-athlete adding that “sometimes the availability of the student does not match up with the trainer, leading to the prolonging of possible treatment” (Student-athlete #6). Specific career training was suggested by two of the nine student-athletes, including by Student-athlete #4 who indicated that “although we can already get help, actual workshops would be beneficial.” A final answer to the question of ideal programming focused on academics. Two student-athletes mentioned a more finely tuned academic support program, including tutors for student-athletes. One student-athlete mentioned a desire for a better relationship between the athletics department and other student programs on campus, citing difficulties that a teammate had experienced with professors in the past.

Only two of the student-athletes interviewed agreed that the ability to participate in athletics contributed to their decision to attend the institution. An additional two out of the nine student-athletes indicated that they had looked into the athletics program while they were in high school and saw the ability to continue playing as a benefit, but that it was not a deciding factor in their choice. According to Student-athlete #7 “athletics led me to feel less afraid to start this new college journey.”

The student-athletes were asked to assess whether or not the athletics department produced effective programming for commuter student-athletes. No student-athletes indicated that the institution was currently producing effective programming. Three student-athletes had a mixed reaction, citing staff deficiencies as the reason the existing programming was not effective

for all student-athletes across all teams. Student-athlete #6 answered “though our advisor was great, it comes down to not being staffed well enough to support the students. When there is only one advisor it can become overwhelming for that individual to keep track of all the student athletes and develop a helpful relationship with them.” The remaining six of the nine student-athletes indicated that the existing programming offered by athletics was not effective for commuters. “They say it’s not an excuse for being late, not being able to attend or other things, but they don’t think about our unique commuter status” said Student-athlete #4.

### **Other considerations affecting engagement**

The final grouping of interview questions assessed feelings surrounding the other motivations that affect the student-athletes’ engagement with programming.

Four of the nine student-athletes responded that their commuter status resulted in them spending more time on campus than they would if they lived within a reasonable distance.

According to Student-athlete #5

Sometimes that even means staying on campus after practice to finish homework in the library because I knew I won’t do anything once I get home. It forces me to be organized and manage my time well. The 8am days are the worst sometimes, but they aren’t totally terrible because I like being on campus and around my friends.

The five student-athletes who indicated that being a commuter resulted in less time spent on campus indicated that it was because of a choice between spending time on campus and other priorities. Student-athlete #4 said that “if it is between staying for a 7 p.m. basketball game or getting home before 10 p.m. I am going home.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Student-athlete #7, who said that safety factored into their decision not to spend more time on campus – “I do not live in the safest of neighborhoods so that also factors into the time I feel I should be

back home. With these things in mind I sometimes miss out on opportunities and events that happen later on in the day.”

A majority of student-athletes (seven out of nine) suggested that some sort of attendance should be required at athletics department programming. Of those who answered affirmatively, three student-athletes suggested that given the different schedules of commuter students, the attendance requirement should be akin to “maybe being required to attend one or two a semester” (Student-athlete #4) or “required to do during the semester as juniors and seniors” (Student-athlete #6). The two student-athletes who did not believe attendance should be required at department programming indicated that such a policy would be ineffective because it would make student-athletes resent the department. “People who want to go will go and people who don't want to will get nothing out of it” (Student-athlete #3). Student-athlete #9 saw things similarly, noting

I see it as a teenager and parent dispute, the teenager (athletes) do not want to do something even though it's for their benefit and therefore argue with their parents (athletics department), several years down the line that teenager will thank their parents because they were not rational. But maybe mandatory attendance will provide positive outcomes for student-athletes down the road.

When asked if they planned to stay connected to the athletics department following their time at the institution, all nine student-athletes answered yes. Only two student-athletes also mentioned the athletics department as a whole, supporting initiatives like Homecoming or fundraising. Seven student-athletes, a majority, indicated that they were planning to only stay in contact with their teams and/or coaching staffs.

## Summary of the Findings

Following the analysis of the survey responses and interview data, several themes emerged. The first was a lack of knowledge about, and indifference for, student-athlete development programming. The idea that athletics is not the biggest motivator for the student-athletes also emerged. A final theme that emerged from the data analysis was that, above all, student-athletes want a personal connection to the development they receive from the athletics department. A table summarizing the findings of the research can be found below.

Table 9

### *Emerging Themes from Survey and Interview Data*

Survey		
Focus of questions	Outcomes	Emerging theme
Being the object of attention of others	General athletics questions rated	Student-athletes desire personal
Support in various endeavors by others	"neither agree or disagree"	connections
Supportive athletic department	Questions about coaches/peers	Athletics is not top motivator
Sense of fit within the college	rated "strongly agree" or "agree"	
Perceived marginality	They can get programming elsewhere on campus	
	Do not assign value to non-game athletics programming	
Interview		
Focus of questions	Outcomes	Emerging theme
Academic motivations	Rather go home than spend extra	Athletics is not top motivator
Athletic motivations	time on campus	Indifference to topic
Other motivations	Asked for definition of programs	Student-athletes desire personal
	Athletes are not recognized by the college as a whole	connections
	Athletes have other stuff to worry about - classes, food, jobs	
	Programming only works when someone genuine is running it	
Other		
Response rate	Low, despite multiple contacts	Indifference to topic
	Lack of follow-through during interview process	Athletics is not top motivator

No connection of how research  
could benefit future programs

### **Lack of knowledge and indifference about student-athlete development programming**

A lack of knowledge and an indifference about student-athlete development programming became apparent very early in the data analysis. Generally, these themes revealed themselves in the low response rates to both the surveys and the interviews. The survey, which was distributed to 215 student-athletes on three different occasions, only resulted in a final participant cohort of 50 (n=50). Further, only three of the initial seven qualitative interview volunteers followed through to participation; the remaining interview participants were secured separately by the researcher. Those interview participants had not also taken part in the survey portion of the research.

Prior to conducting the research study, the researcher expressed concerns about a low response rate. Her campus experience at the institution studied led her to believe that despite the student-athletes knowing that the research was going to take place, there would be a lack of follow through. This concern was amplified when the researcher left the institution for new employment because she knew she would no longer have access to the student-athlete cohort and would not be the individual distributing the survey. Without her being there to connect the student-athletes with the significance of the study, the researcher knew that the participant cohort would not be as large as if she had still be employed by the institution.

Specifically, indifference to student-athlete development programming was illustrated most strongly with quantitative survey questions #16 and #20. The student-athletes did not assign value to athletics department programming, as only 10 percent (n=5) either agreed or strongly agreed that the department offered programming that they could not find elsewhere on



campus. That is compared to 68 percent (n=34) of student-athletes who either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same sentiment. Similarly, 44 percent (n=22) of student-athletes either agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes distance themselves from athletics because of their off-campus responsibilities.

According to one of the student-athletes interviewed, “personally, I’d rather not spend time on campus unless I have some responsibility” (Student-athlete #1). This further shows that student-athletes are not connecting athletics department programming with their other responsibilities, nor are they assigning it much value. Six of the nine student-athletes who participated in the qualitative interviews needed the researcher to define student-athlete development programming at some point during the interview. The remaining two student-athletes associated the concept with just one program; either athletic training or the SARGE academic support program.

### **Athletics as a motivation tool**

Another outcome that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data surrounded the extent to which athletics is a motivator. The research study suggested that athletics is not the top priority for commuter student-athletes.

When the survey assessed the student-athletes’ attendance at various campus events, non-game athletics programming was the least attended. This suggests that the student-athletes connect with obvious athletics department programming, such as attending home or away contests, but they do not assign value to events like student-athlete advisory committee meetings, potlucks, or resume workshops. Those events were less attended than similar programming offered by the college, generally. Similar sentiment was expressed when the student-athletes

were asked to rank their priorities. Participating in athletics was third most popular, behind both ability to major in a chosen subject and cost to attend the institution.

Throughout the interview process, the student-athletes suggested alternate motivations that may be more effective than athletics. For example, Student-athlete #5 indicated that he feels “like athletics is not as well supported at [here] as it is at other DIII institutions. Student-athletes aren’t recognized as much and the school’s general populous just doesn’t know about competitions and the status of our teams.” In other words, the athletics department and the student-athletes were not perceived to be part of the campus and integration in that community would motivate student-athletes to engage with programming. This sentiment was echoed further by Student-athlete #1, who expressed:

We'll look at other clubs like the Dominican club. It's huge. It's one of the biggest clubs. But somehow they're able to sustain such a huge community. But then athletics is such an alienated thing that people still think is like, "Oh, only athletes are allowed to go to these things," when it's like, "No, everybody should come. You're all Bloodhounds." So it's just, I guess, trying to foster a good feeling around athletics. Not just, "Oh, they're athletes. They look down at us because we're just students." But it's not like that. We're representing just as you're representing with your knowledge. And we're all doing the same thing. We're just sweating a little more.

Academics emerged as a strong motivator for student-athletes and data suggested that by focusing on academic issues, the athletics department would be able to prove to student-athletes that its efforts are genuine. Student-athletes ranked their major as the highest priority in the quantitative survey and this was confirmed throughout the interview process, including with Student-athlete #9 to expressed that he “didn’t really think too much about the possibility of

participating in athletics when choosing [the institution] to be honest. I knew I wanted to play volleyball in college but I was really looking for a school that offered the major and courses that I wanted to study.”

Student-athletes also expressed a desire for the athletics department to support their academic motivations. This is not limited to the pre-existing academic support meetings, according to Student-athlete #5 who said that there needs to be better communication and a better relationship between the athletics department and the various programs that student-athletes are a part of on campus. Further suggesting that student-athletes are not effectively integrated in the campus community, Student-athlete #2 wished for a closer relationship between athletics and student-athletes' professors, where possible.

### **Desire for a personal connection**

Above all, the data from this research study suggested that a personal connection may be the key to engaging commuter student-athletes with departmental student-athlete development programming. As Student-athlete #3 succinctly put it: “I do think [its] important but its effectiveness greatly relies on the person it is with. If it’s not someone you feel comfortable with or who you feel is genuinely interested, then it won’t work.”

The quantitative data also suggested this. The four survey questions that broadly asked about support from, and being the object of attention of, the athletics department solicited the highest percentages “neither agree or disagree” as responses. Conversely, the three survey questions with similar circumstance but that specifically named coaches or peer student-athletes elicited fewer non-committal responses. In these questions the student-athletes were clearly able to select whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements. This suggests that when the student-athletes had to think about their personal relationships with coaches or teammates, they

were better able to arrive at an opinion. This proved to be more difficult when they were asked to qualify the same questions about the athletics department, generally.

While remaining cognizant of the importance of personal connections when engaging commuter student-athletes in development programming, the research participants were mixed in their opinions on whether engagement should be required. All nine student-athletes who participated in the qualitative interviews indicated that there was room for improvement in the delivery of student-athlete development programming, and seven indicated that participation in programming should be required. This idea is counterintuitive to what the quantitative data revealed, as attendance at athletics non-competition events (SAAC meetings and resume preparation sessions) was the lowest of all the events surveys.

Table 10  
*Student-Athlete Attendance at Campus Events*

	Q37: Have you attended the following events during your experience?					
	SAAC meeting	SAAC potluck	Athletics resume	College career fair	Game on campus	Game off campus
No	50%	48%	88%	42%	20%	34%
Yes	50%	52%	12%	58%	80%	66%

Those student-athletes who were in favor of required attendance at student-athlete development programming noted that the alternative would result in no attendance and that “otherwise it’ll be a waste of time, space, money, and so forth” (Student-athlete #9). Other student-athletes disagreed and commended the existing manner in which programming was being delivered. According to Student-athlete #7, “our advisors are really good with planning out times that fit with our schedules for meetings which is very helpful instead of us having to plan our schedule around them.”

## **Conclusion**

Results from the study indicate that participation in intercollegiate athletics is not the top motivator for urban, commuter student-athletes. Ability to participate in athletics ranks third, behind ability to major in a chosen subject and cost of attendance. Student-athletes did not view athletics programming as a resource that could not be found in other departments on campus. Additional findings suggested that commuter student-athletes respond more strongly when programming is associated with teammates or coaching staff, rather than the athletics department generally. The results of this study recommend that future programming address commuter student-athlete academic challenges, lessen the personal burdens that student-athletes face, and be conducted by a dedicated administrator in a way that respects the unique schedules of the student-athletes.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research project is the first of its kind for the institution. Student-athlete responses to the online survey indicated that athletics department sponsored student-athlete development programming is not a priority during their college experience. This sentiment was confirmed during interviews, where it was noted that the ability to participate in intercollegiate athletics was an added benefit of attending the institution, but not a motivating factor. Student-athletes also had a lack of knowledge of what constitutes student-athlete development programming and did not express a strong desire to discuss it, as evidenced by the low response rates to the research participation solicitations. Finally, both the quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the student-athletes are impacted more by programming or support when it comes from someone with whom they have a personal connection. This can include coaches, teammates, or athletics administrators.

Because the student-athletes at the institution do not assign value to the development programming that is offered, the result is indifference to the efforts by the athletics department. In order to combat this idea, the recommendations forming from this research center around student-athlete support. By continuing to offer development programming without building a strong base of connection with the cohort, there will be no increases in student-athlete attendance or engagement. As such, the findings from this study led to recommendations that an environment of student-athlete support be built, beginning with the areas of academics, empathy, and staffing.

### **Review of Research Questions and Summary of Responses**

The intent of this two-phase, mixed methods study was to evaluate the priorities of urban, commuting student-athletes at a NCAA Division III institution in New York City. In the first

phase, quantitative research questions addressed the perceptions that student-athletes have about the support and development programming they currently receive from the athletic department at the institution. Information from this first phase was explored further in a second qualitative phase. In the second phase, qualitative interviews were used to probe more specific aspects of the student-athlete experience at the institution. The reason for following up with qualitative research in the second phase was to better understand what student-athletes at their institutions expect and value when it comes to student-athlete development and engagement.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

RQ1: How do urban commuter student-athletes characterize intercollegiate athletics as part of their campus experience?

RQ2: How does personal and career programming offered by the athletics department influence urban commuter student-athlete behavior and choices?

### **Research Question 1**

The urban commuter student-athletes in this study did not characterize intercollegiate athletics as the most important part of their campus experience. In fact, when asked to rank participating in athletics among other possible priorities athletics ranked third overall, behind ability to major in a chosen subject and cost of attendance. Only 8 percent of student-athletes ranked athletics as their highest priority. The student-athletes who were interviewed as part of the research study expressed that athletics was not a deciding factor in their college choice; instead it was a bonus that they could continue to participate, while also satisfying their other interests and priorities.

Because athletics is not the highest priority for urban, commuter student-athletes athletics professionals must cater to the two areas that ranked higher: academics and cost. Traditionally

John Jay student-athletes perform at a high academic level; in fact, following the spring 2018 semester 56% of student-athletes had a GPA of 3.2 or higher. Given the fact that academic achievement is not an issue, in order to engage the cohort the athletics administrators must be more proactive in their outreach throughout the campus structure. This will show that the department values the student-athletes' top priority.

The athletics department cannot have any influence over the cost of attendance for its student-athletes. In order to address the second highest priority in the urban, commuter student-athlete college experience, the athletics department can use the institution's existing resources. By promoting specific programming in the offices of financial aid and wellness, student-athletes will be more informed about the options for emergency funding, transportation stipends, and food that are open to all students.

### **Research Question 2**

At the time that the research study was conducted, the personal and career student-athlete development programming offered by the athletics department was not strongly influencing urban commuter student-athlete behaviors. The "one size fits all" approach to personal and career student-athlete development programming had been proven ineffective, evidenced by low attendance rates at non-competition events. The student-athletes indicated that if the choice was between attending department programming or going home, they would choose the latter. Even for the student-athletes who said that their commute resulted in more time spent on campus, that time was not spent at programming offered by the athletics department. Independent from the type of programming that was offered, student-athletes indicated that their connection with *who* was delivering or encouraging the programming had the biggest influences on their engagement with it.



Connectedness with campus can be a systematic problem for commuter institutions and the student-athletes who attend them. This could help to explain some of the response rate challenges during this study. Further, the student-athletes that agreed to participate in the surveys and be interviewed for this study may have had more concerns about the existing student-athlete development programming offered by John Jay College. From frustration can come innovation, which was the case with this research, as the solutions offered during the interview process offered tangible ways for John Jay Athletics to influence urban, commuter student-athlete behavior moving forward.

### **Interpretation and Alignment of Findings with Literature**

As noted in Chapter 2, there has been very little previous research on commuter students and student-athletes as a single population. The existing research on commuting students typically focuses on how their external and non-academic commitments affect their academic performance. Similarly, the literature involving student-athletes focuses on grade point averages, graduation rates, and community service. The research in this study set out to separately study the different commitments of commuter student-athletes, and address the weakness cited by Burlison (2015), of grouping things together. The results found both similarities and differences with the existing literature.

#### **Similarities**

Jacoby (2015) found that student affairs professionals must develop a thorough understanding of the needs of commuter students and create strategies to increase their persistence and engage them, especially as they continue to attend a wide variety of higher learning institutions. Navarro (2015) also noted that student-athlete development professionals must work to offer programming that is tailored for student-athletes and that serves their unique

needs. These lines of thinking align with the results of this research study, which found that commuter student-athletes desire development programming that caters to their non-athletic priorities. Further, commuter student-athletes want to work with professionals with whom they have a personal connection and who understands those priorities.

Both Mueller (2009) and Burns (2013) noted that it is important to engage students emotionally, and it is the administrator's job to build emotional significance where it is lacking. This theme also emerged as a result of this study, with student-athletes expressing a desire to make personal connections with those delivering the student-athlete development programming. This study also revealed that commuter student-athletes are lacking the emotional connection to the programming that is offered by the athletics department, so in order to be engaged moving forward the foundation of that significance must be built.

Using Astin (1999) as a guide, this research study involved both quantitative and qualitative aspects; realizing that student engagement with programming occurs along a continuum, and that a mixed methods approach would best capture the student-athletes' differing opinions and priorities. Another tenet of the theory is that the amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement. Astin (1999) theorizes that the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement. As such, student-athlete development professionals cannot just *offer* life skills programming, they must offer programming that the student-athlete deems applicable and constructive. The research showed that the most popular answer as to why student-athletes were not attending non-game athletics programming was because they had "no interest." Because of this, that aspect of Astin's (1999) seems particularly applicable.

## **Differences**

This research study on commuter student-athletes differed from the existing literature in that it used an adapted quantitative survey instrument. The work of McQuown Linnemeyer & Brown (2010) and Rettig & Shouping (2016) used existing survey tools in order to gather their data. Others, including Czekanski (2015), Umbach (2006), and Huml, Svensson, & Hancock (2017) used surveys that they had originally created. For the purposes of this research study, the quantitative survey tool was adapted from Tovar, Simon, & Lee (2009). The instrument had previously been used to study just commuter students, and the researcher made the questions applicable to intercollegiate athletics.

Choosing to participate in intercollegiate athletics, according to Melendez (2016) gives student-athletes something that other commuter students do not experience. That is: athletic participation is an important social influence for diverse freshman populations attending nonresidential urban commuter colleges, and athletics can aid in social adjustment for students at a commuter institution (Melendez, 2016). The results of this research study, however, show that connection is not currently being made with the commuter student-athletes at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Action**

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the research reported in the literature review and the findings from data collection for this study lead to recommendations that the institution build an environment of student-athlete support. According to the results of the data collection that environment must focus on the areas of academics, empathy, and staffing.

## Academics

The ability to participate in intercollegiate athletics ranked third among the student-athletes who participated in this research study; a ranking that saw “ability to major in chosen subject” as the biggest motivator. Because of this, athletics departments that are made up primarily of commuter student-athletes must cater to academic priorities. As Student-athlete #9 indicated, “athletes breed leadership and other qualities and yet I do not feel supported by the college.” This sentiment was echoed by five of the other student-athletes (total: n=6, 66 percent) who were interviewed.

At the time that the researcher of this study was employed at the institution, the athletics department engaged basic behaviors to increase support of student-athletes in the academic environment on campus. These included a progress report program, which contacted professors twice a semester to solicit input on academic performance, and competition verification letters, which sought to lessen the conflict between student-athlete class and competition schedules. The athletics department also employed the use of a faculty athletics representative (FAR) to serve as an impartial party in any conflicts that arose between student-athletes and their professors or academic departments. Finally, the athletics administration had created a campus compliance team, and communicated student-athlete academic achievements to campus partners at bi-annual meetings.

Based on the results of the research data, further actions need to be taken in these areas. The student-athletes suggested beginning with an improvement to the communication between the athletics department and the various campus programs that they are a part of. The student-athletes indicated that those groups included the Accelerate Complete Engage (ACE) program, the Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) program, the APPLE Corps, and the

Honors programs. The student-athletes also desired a closer relationship between the athletics department and professors, where possible.

In order to improve the communication with the academic side of the institution, the athletics department can build upon the behaviors that already exist. For example, directors from the programs listed by the student-athletes should be invited to campus compliance team meetings. Representatives from the athletics administration should attend faculty orientations to discuss the academic expectations and performance of the student-athlete cohort, and the administration should explore more effective means to distribute progress reports. Perhaps most importantly, the athletics department must periodically check-in with the student-athlete cohort to ensure that their needs are being met. As one of the interviewed student-athletes put it, “I have already enough problems in life and the (other) programs seems to make it much harder to be a student-athlete. I need the athletics department to stand up...and say you cannot treat them like that” (personal communication).

### **Empathy**

The student-athletes studied ranked cost of attendance the second most important priority between ability to major in chosen subject and ability to participate in intercollegiate athletics. As a result, the athletics department must show empathy to the issues that student-athletes regularly deal with work to lessen the burdens that they already have. The student-athletes who were interviewed for this study expressed a general feeling of lacking resources – gear, facilities, or other perks. Specifically, when asked how his student-athlete experience differed from peer NCAA Division III institutions, Student-athlete #9 answered “How can we possibly have the same experience as other DIII schools when funding for things that students need or enjoy is being cut left and right? It truly amazes me how one of the richest cities in this world cannot give

money to a conglomerate of colleges, that is so diverse and brilliant, so it can keep up with everyone else” (personal communication).

Given the diverse geographical, ethnic, and financial composition of the NCAA Division III membership, there may not be a typical student-athlete experience. Some institutions’ teams may exclusively travel by charter bus, while others may fight for van usage with other campus groups. Some institutions may have endowments that fund all team expenses, while others may need to fundraise for any and all team needs. Regardless of the given resources of an institution, Division III athletics departments are governed by NCAA legislation, specifically Bylaw 16 – Awards and Benefits. For example, Bylaw 16.02.3 states that a student-athlete may not receive an extra benefit that is not generally available to the institution’s students (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018). Similarly, Bylaw 16.8 details the expenses that student-athletes may receive in conjunction with practice and competition (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018).

The commuter student-athletes in this research study proposed the following solutions to their perceived lack of resources: a dedicated student-athlete space and transportation stipends, in the form of MetroCards. At the time of the research study, the intercollegiate athletic teams had access to a student-athlete locker room, but access to that area was only granted to teams who were in-season. When asked what kinds of programming they would prefer, Student-athlete #3 answered “place for us to relax - usually we are in the atrium but that gets loud and crowded. But it’s all we have” (personal communication). Five of the nine student-athletes who were interviewed (56 percent) answered that they would like to see the athletics department offer MetroCards, the item needed for subway transportation in New York City. According to Student-athlete #1 “I know everyone talks about it...it's like people say like, ‘Oh, I can't get to

practice because I can't afford a MetroCard.' And that sucks because it's like, I have run into that, but at least I have my mom to help me. But some people don't have that advantage" (personal communication). Student-athlete #2 also noted that MetroCards consistently put a dent in student-athletes' budgets and, especially when in-season, can become a large expense.

Although the student-athletes' suggestions would require a monetary commitment from the institution, both are permissible under NCAA Division III legislation. Student-athlete #4 suggested that if she was provided with a MetroCard "my life would be a lot easier- even if it's just five dollars a week" (personal communication). NCAA Division III Bylaw 16.8.1 states that if a student-athlete is eligible, an institution may provide them with transportation expenses incidental to practice and competition (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018). Traditionally this could mean van or bus transportation, but as suggested by the student-athletes in this study: this may also mean contributions toward MetroCards. Institutions will be limited, however, to only providing such assistance while a commuter student-athlete is in their competitive playing season.

Similarly, so long as private space is provided to student groups, generally, a student-athlete only space may be provided. At the time of the researcher's employment at the institution in this study, all student-run clubs had dedicated space in campus student affairs space. As such, the athletics department should pursue options to secure dedicated facility space for student-athletes.

### **Staffing**

Institutions with a predominantly commuter student-athlete cohort must also consider how they are using their staffs to deliver student-athlete development programming. The quantitative results of this research study suggested that student-athletes respond more strongly

to personal relationships - with their coaches or teammates - than they do to the athletics department, generally. The same idea was suggested by the student-athletes who participated in the qualitative interviews, as they noted that they find student-athlete development programming to be most effective when they have a personal connection to it, or motivation for it. Specifically, the student-athletes who mentioned the SARGE academic support program in their interview noted that it is only effective when the athletics department staff member is “genuinely interested in what I’m saying” (Student-athlete #4).

The student-athletes that were interviewed for this study suggested that if the athletics department had a staff member solely dedicated to student-athlete development and support, the result would be more effective programming. This idea was universal across each of the existing student-athlete development programs offered by the athletics department in this study, as Student-athlete #1 said she would “love to have an administrator that is for SAAC or coming with the outlook that SAAC is their main thing because it is hard...with you, you were such a huge help. But then when we lost you and we were lost in regard to talking to [the] athletics [department]” (personal communication). Student-athlete #5 added that the academic support program had the potential to be valuable, but “with the way it is being run at the moment it isn’t” (personal communication). He attributed this to the athletics administrator being responsible for tasks other than student-athlete development programming. A positive aspect of the existing programming at the institution, cited by Student-athlete #7, was flexibility in scheduling. She believed that if student-athletes are given reasonable choices or session options for events in addition to the academic support meetings, that there is potential for a better relationship between student-athletes and the athletics department (personal communication).



The researcher acknowledges that recommending an athletics administrator be exclusively dedicated to student-athlete development is an ideal, albeit unlikely, prospect for many NCAA Division III institutions. Limited resources can make it difficult to enact staff specialization to such a degree, and “wearing multiple hats” is a quasi badge of honor for Division athletics administrators (Dominguez, personal communication). As such, this research study also recommends that athletics departments with commuter student-athletes take steps to personalize student-athlete development programming as much as possible with their existing staff.

Extension education, an idea that is traditionally used for rural agricultural purposes, should be a guide for athletics departments with commuter student-athletes. Williams (2017) noted that in extension education, facilitators meet learners where they are and teach topics over a limited few meetings (p. 263). The reason behind meeting the learners at their location and not simply disseminating pre-prepared materials, is that if the learners feel that they are not being held accountable, they will choose to participate in other activities (Williams, 2017). If accountability is established, learners will become more engaged and, eventually, contribute ideas to the learning process.

When considering extension education and how it can be applied to intercollegiate athletics, the student-athletes are the learners and the athletics administrators are the facilitators. The results of this research study recommend that the athletics department deliver student-athlete development programming to the student-athletes where they are. This can take place in one of two ways. First: academic support meetings can be increased in length and decreased in frequency, in order to allow for time to personally discuss academic, career, and other priorities with individual student-athletes. Second: the athletics administration can partner

with the coaching staff to secure specific times, before or after practice sessions, to deliver student-athlete development programming. Teams would access and participate in programming as a single unit in order to foster collaboration. Both of these recommendation options will hold commuter student-athletes accountable for their participation in athletics department programming, and they will also ensure that the athletics department delivers programming to all commuter student-athletes.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The results of this mixed-methods study serve as a baseline for research on commuter student-athletes, as previous studies have not focused on commuter student-athlete engagement with development programming. According to Melendez (2016) four-year commuter colleges make up thirty percent of the total number of senior colleges in the country, therefore further research on commuter student-athletes is crucial.

#### **Comparison to peer institutions in New York City**

The most obvious opportunity for continued research on commuter student-athletes is by conducting a similarly structured research study at other commuter institutions in New York City. The City University of New York (CUNY) system is comprised of over twenty campuses, some of which have residential facilities. Because of their close geographic proximity, as well as their similar resource challenges, comparing the student-athlete development experience at a peer CUNY institution could further detail the themes and challenges that commuter institutions face.

#### **Study commuter institutions in other urban environments**

John Jay College of Criminal Justice is located in midtown Manhattan, in the middle of New York City. The commuter student-athletes at the institution regularly use the extensive public transportation system to travel to campus, practice, and competitions. Future research

should study commuter student-athletes in other urban environments across the United States. Chicago, for example, has a large city university system, similar to the CUNY system. Researchers can determine the similarities and differences between the student-athletes in different geographic locations.

### **Study an ideal institution**

As stated in the Implications and Recommendations for Action section of this research study, having an athletics administrator exclusively devoted to student-athlete development programming is not the norm among NCAA Division III institutions. Studying an institution with such an administrator would provide an opportunity to assess whether the recommendations made by this research enhance student-athlete engagement and satisfaction with programming. The insights gained by this type of study could be used to either rework or validate the findings of this research study.

### **Conclusion**

There is a belief among student-athlete development professionals that great programming finds a way to relate, and to *serve*, the entire spectrum of a student-athlete cohort. This research study sought to provide guidance to those professionals who work with a previously unstudied cohort: commuter student-athletes at an urban institution. The research results revealed that commuter student-athletes desire programming in, and support for, their highest priority: academics. Further, commuter student-athletes look to their athletics departments for empathy and relief from the regular stressors in their lives. Finally, commuter student-athletes search for personal connections with development programming, those who encourage their engagement with it, and those who deliver it.

An important consideration for the outcomes of this research is how easily they can be incorporated into the day to day processes of an urban, commuter institution. What is the best immediate next step to build connections; one with the potential for high impact without wasted effort? Telling the stories of urban, commuter student-athletes is the place to start. Whether it be by inviting more campus partners to join bi-annual athletics compliance team meetings or by communicating more effectively with the academic side of campus, student-athletes are looking for recognition at their institutions. When the recommendations resulting from this research study become commonplace at urban, commuter institutions the student-athletes will engage; they will no longer be *the visiting team*.

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