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## Understanding the NLI: A Matter of Trust

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# Understanding the NLI: A Matter of Trust

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## Understanding the NLI: A Matter of Trust

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The realization for incoming freshmen to be able to balance education and participate in athletics at the college level takes complete dedication. Participation in athletics has been linked with reports of growth in the individual's personality and leadership skills and with their overall satisfaction with the college experience (Ryan, 1989). Using former student-athletes as participants, the study aims to look at college athletics through the eyes of the student-athletes.

The purpose of this study offers an inside look at former Division I football student-athletes perception of the recruiting process, along with the perception of the financial agreement and the National Letter of Intent. Although there are thousands of high school athletes that get recruited to attend a college or university every year, little is known about the recruiting experience of student-athletes. Eight former football student-athletes at an NCAA Division-I FBS institution was interviewed. Also, four significant themes emerged naturally from the interviews: feeling like a celebrity, feeling overwhelmed, lack of knowledge, trusting of coaches. The results of this study will allow those working with student-athletes to develop a greater understanding of their experience.

*Keywords: ncaa experience, football recruiting, student-athletes, national letter of intent*

Student-athletes face a major and often difficult life decision when they choose the college at which to further their education and refine their athletic abilities (Bradbury & Pitts, 2018; Klenosky, Templin & Troutman, 2001; Thomas, Good, & Gross, 2015). As an important component of collegiate sport, the recruiting process is intended to influence the student-athlete's choice (Schneider & Messenger, 2012). It is a lengthy process, as the observation of a potential student-athlete can begin when the student is a freshman in high school (Bass, Schaeperkoetter & Bunds, 2015). As indicated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA] (2016):

Recruiting is: Any solicitation of a prospective student-athlete or a prospective student-athlete's relatives (or legal guardians) by an institutional staff member or by a representative of the institution's athletics interests for the purpose of securing the prospective student-athlete's enrollment and ultimate participation in the institution's intercollegiate athletics program (p. 91).

Almost since the launch of the NCAA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been steady debate about the efficacy and integrity of the NCAA model. Presently, intercollegiate athletics function as a multibillion-dollar industry bolstered in part by lucrative television broadcasting rights contracts (O'Toole, 2010) and exclusive corporate sponsorships with apparel companies (Giroux, 2007). Concurrently, athletic expenditures have continued to rise as schools compete with one another for recruits, championships and fans (Bass et al., 2015).

## **National Letter of Intent and Athletics Financial Aid Award Letter**

Before being cleared to participate, each student-athlete must sign a financial agreement and a National Letter of Intent (NLI).

The NLI is a voluntary program for both institutions and student-athletes. No prospective student-athlete or parent is required to sign the NLI, and no institution is mandated to join the program. However, most Division I and many Division II schools participate, with NLI arrivals culminating in a biannual event known to fans and media as National Signing Day (Kenyon, 2018). Utilized as part of NCAA Division I sports, the NLI is a binding agreement between a prospective student-athlete and an NLI member institution (National Letter, 2015). The NLI prohibits a prospective student-athlete from being recruited by other colleges and universities, and in return the student-athlete officially commits to participate in sports for a particular university and is guaranteed a one-year scholarship. The NLI is not specifically the scholarship offer, but rather a written contract that indicates a student-athlete's acceptance of a scholarship which includes a list of terms and conditions both parties must meet, as well as the amount and extent of the award (Meyer, 2004; United Sports USA, 2016).

According to the NLI (2015), a prospective student-athlete agrees to attend the institution full-time for one academic year (two semesters or three quarters). Concurrently, the institution agrees to provide an athlete financial aid for one academic year (two semesters or three quarters), with the amount varying depending on the university as well as the particular sport in which the student-athlete will participate. The NLI is characterized as an acceptance of a bilateral contract offer, manifested through the student-athlete's promise to attend (Cozzillo, 1989). Generally, both the institution and the prospect benefit from this relationship, but sometimes circumstances occur in which the promises are not fulfilled, the athlete does not play, or the coach leaves the institution (Meyer, 2004).

At the Division I level, athletic scholarships not only provide student-athletes with the opportunity to continue participating in sports at an elite level, but also to earn a college degree while re-

ducing their financial burden. Standard scholarship letters illustrate the university's overall commitment to provide financial aid to the prospective student-athlete (NCAA, 2018). Many scholarship letters intimate that the one-year scholarship is renewable each year up to four years, provided the student meets the university's requirements (Cozzillio, 1989). Due to the fact that most students consider their scholarships to be intended to provide them with financial assistance throughout their collegiate career, the parties' actions may reflect an intent to be bound for four years (Cozzillio, 1989).

However, research has shown that some student-athletes do not possess college-level reading skills. An examination of 175 UNC-Chapel Hill football and men's basketball student-athletes found that 60% of the individuals examined read between a fourth- and eighth-grade level, and between 8% and 10% of football and men's basketball student-athletes read below a third-grade level (Ganim, 2014). The study also found that between 7% and 18% of basketball and football student-athletes in a group of examined schools read poorly, potentially inhibiting their ability to fully comprehend the NLI.

In order to better understand the reading level needed to read and understand an NLI, a 2014-2015 NLI and athletic financial aid agreements from the University of South Carolina and the University of Illinois were examined. The NLI and financial agreement from both institutions were analyzed using Flesch-Kincaid readability, which indicated the difficulty of a reading passage. There were two tests, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade-Level Test and the Flesch Reading Ease Test. Both reading tests had different weighting factors, but used the same core measures pertaining to word length and sentence length. The Flesch Reading Ease Test scores ranged between 0-100. A score of 0-30 meant the passage is best understood by university graduates, the scores of 60-70 indicated passages best understood by 13 to 15-year old students,

and 90-100 indicated passages best understood by an 11-year-old student. The scores from 30-49 were characterized as “Difficult” and between 50-59 was “Fairly Difficult” (Readability Formulas, n.d.; Wylie, 2016). The NLI’s Flesch Reading Ease score was a 52.8, which fell into the range of Fairly Difficult, indicating that some teenaged students might find comprehension of the NLI to be a challenge (Wylie, 2016). The results from the financial agreements from the University of South Carolina and the University of Illinois fell under the 30 range. South Carolina’s score was 29.6, whereas Illinois’ score was 24.8 (readability-score, 2015).

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test was based on the equivalent U.S. grade level, and used frequently in education. The score of 10-12 was usually the reading level for high school students, and a score higher than 12 indicated a college-level reading. By this measure, the NLI’s grade level was a 10.5, which is directly in the middle of average high school graduates (readability-score, 2015). The University of Illinois and University of South Carolina were both above the reading level of 12. Illinois’ score was a grade level of 14.7, and South Carolina was a grade level of 14. The Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test stated “Text to be read by the general public should aim for a grade level around 8” (readability-score, 2015). Considering that Ganim (2014) found that public universities across the country had many students in the basketball and football programs who could read only up to an eighth-grade level, it is quite possible that those who are signing the NLI documents may fail to comprehend what they are signing.

Based on their personal statements regarding the recruiting process and the NLI, this study aimed to develop an inside look at former Division I football student-athletes’ perceptions of the recruiting process, along with their perception of the NLI and financial agreement.

RQ1: What perceptions do former NCAA Division I student-athletes have regarding the recruiting process?

RQ2: What is the athletes' perception of the contracts involved, specifically the National Letter of Intent (NLI) and the Financial Agreement?

## **Review of Literature**

### ***The “Student-Athlete”***

Walter Byers, the first executive director of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, was a driving force behind the development of the term “student-athlete.” Byers also acknowledged that the development of this concept helped form the foundation of the pay-for-play debate (Byers & Hammer, 1997). The term “student-athlete” was a tool designed to deflect attention away from the pay for play system created by the adoption of the athletic scholarships (otherwise known as grant-in-aid) in the 1950's (Huma & Staurowsky, 2013). The Center for Athletes' Rights and Education (CARE) studied the academic and athlete experience with 644 athletes across all NCAA divisions. In response to the question “Do you feel pressure to be an athlete first and a student second?” 41 percent of Division I athletes responded “yes”. The study reported also that Division I athletes felt that due to their sport they took fewer courses a semester, cut classes, enrolled in less-demanding majors, and engaged in other academic shortcuts (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Football and basketball players in the nation's elite programs shouldered a burden that other students did not. If an athlete in a high-profile sport (e.g., football, basketball) did not perform as well as expected athletically or was permanently injured, the coach could choose not to renew the scholarship without consideration for the athlete's academic performance or future (Huma & Staurowsky, 2013).



### *Athletic Scholarships*

According to the NCAA (2018), full grant-in-aid covered tuition, fees, room and board, books, and other expenses related to attendance at the institution, up to the cost of attendance. Most student-athletes who received grant-in-aid received an amount covering a portion of these costs. At NCAA Division I institutions, each sport had a maximum number of scholarships (known as grants-in-aid) available to provide to student-athletes (each institution must at least award half of the scholarships allowed). Regarding financial aid at the Division I level, the NCAA divided sports into “head-count” sports and “equivalency” sports (NCAA, 2018).

Athletic scholarship awards required student-athletes to perform services for the university, a requirement that distinguished them from other students in a unique and increasingly significant relationship with the university (Nestel, 1992). It is important to note that individual schools awarded athletic scholarships, not the NCAA. In most cases, coaches decided who receives a scholarship, the scholarship amount, and whether it would be renewed (NCAA, 2015).

In 1951, a Chicago Tribune headline proclaimed that the “NCAA is dead,” citing the gambling scandals, academic fraud, the misuse of eligibility, mishandling of scholarship money, and the problems with amateurism (Crowley, 2006). In its effort to adhere to the principle of amateurism, the NCAA’s “Sanity Code” had a few years prior proscribed the awarding of financial aid based on athletic ability (Crowley, 2006). The Sanity Code was an attempt to ban a full scholarship, stipulating that student-athletes could receive a scholarship for tuition and fees, but not room and board (Muenzen, 2003). Economic need and academic talent were the only acceptable reasons for assistance covering tuition and fees (Crowley, 2006). If an athlete was either in the top 25% of their high school class or maintained a B average in college, the

participant was eligible to receive tuition and fees (Byers & Hammer, 1997). In 1951, the section of the NCAA constitution that featured the Sanity Code was eliminated. In 1952, the principles governing financial aid that reappeared in Article III, Section 4 of the NCAA manual, gave individual institutions freedom to set their own financial aid policies for athletes, the only requirement being that such aid could only be administered by each athlete's institution (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

In 1957 an "Official Interpretation" specifically defined educational expenses to include tuition and fees, room and board, books, and \$15 per month for laundry (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). The financial aid could not be revoked because of injury, or if the athlete no longer wanted to be on the team. The award was also for four years and could not be reduced or canceled based on the athlete's impact or the success of the team. To qualify for this award, a student had to be a potential athlete, maintain a 2.2 grade-point average while carrying 12 units of college courses, and be recommended by the coach to the scholarship committee (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). At the 1973 NCAA convention, a one-year limit on athletic grants was approved, rewriting financial aid policy to fit the needs of a rapidly expanding college sport industry. Four-year scholarships were dropped in favor of one-year awards, thus giving coaches the power to remove athletes who had been "recruiting mistakes" (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

There remained unanswered questions when addressing the athletic scholarships. While the full athletics grant-in-aid often referred to as a "free ride" may be significant, and recent NCAA legislation allowed for multi-year athletic scholarships, the cost of tuition was often less than the revenues generated by high-profile athletes (Van Rhee, 2012). Some felt that athletic scholarships were more than enough compensation for the services that athletes provided, while others viewed athletic scholarships as contracts and athletes as employees. As of August 1, 2015, the NCAA's

annual convention changed athletic scholarships for the Atlantic Coast, Big 12, Big Ten, Pacific-12, and Southeastern conferences, often referred to as the “Power Five.” The vote, taken during the NCAA’s annual convention, redefined an athletic scholarship so that it would not only cover the traditional tuition, room, board, books and fees, but also the incidental costs of attending college. This included such expenses as transportation and miscellaneous personal expenses. Conservatively, this meant Division I men’s and women’s athletes collectively stood to gain at least \$50 million a year in additional benefits (Berkowitz, 2015).

## **Methodology**

This research utilized an interview-based process for gathering data. Interviews have been used in conducting qualitative research when the researcher was interested in gaining insights into or understanding opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviors, or predictions of individuals’ lived experiences (Rowley, 2012). Rossman and Rallis (1998) noted, “there are a few truths that constitute universal knowledge; rather, there are multiple perspectives about the world” (p. 29). By exploring the perceptions of student-athletes who signed the NLI to play football for their respective schools, it was possible to obtain multiple perspectives that furthered understanding of the contract and the recruiting process. Each participant had certain experiences based on several factors at a particular institution. This study was designed to gain an understanding of whether student-athletes receive what they perceived was promised when signing the NLI. Merriam (1998) noted that qualitative research offers “the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education,” because it is “focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied” (p. 1).

Semi-structured interviews were the primary investigative method used in this study. These interviews took on a variety of different forms, with varying numbers of questions as well as regular adaptation of questions and question order to accommodate the interviewee (Rowley, 2012). Seidman (1998) noted that semi-structured interviews help the researcher guide the conversation, and also allowed for participants to provide information that is important to them but not necessarily reflected in the interview questions.

For this study, eight former NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) student-athletes were interviewed. In Division I football at the FBS level, African Americans account for 51.6% of football student-athletes while Caucasians made up 43.3% (Lapchick, Augusta, Kinkopf, & McPhee, 2013). For this study, six African American former student-athletes and two Caucasian-American former student-athletes were interviewed. Participants were able to recall their athletic experience, academics, and the overall experience at their institution. The participants of this study were no longer part of their respective college institutions at the time of data gathering. Snowball sampling was utilized to identify participants (Berg, 2006). Two participants who were former Division I football student-athletes were initially identified for this study and were asked to refer others who might be interested in participating. Each participant signed an informed consent statement.

Interviews were conducted by telephone. Although used less often than face-to-face conversations in qualitative research (Opdenakker, 2006; Sweet, 2002), telephone interviews may nevertheless be a “versatile” data collection tool (Carr & Worth, 2001, p. 521). Qualitative telephone data have been judged to be rich, vivid, detailed, and of high quality (Chapple, 1999; Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Sweet, 2002). When compared to in-person interviews, the advantages of using the tel-

ephone include decreased cost (Chapple, 1999), increased access to geographically disparate subjects (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Sweet, 2002; Tausig & Freeman, 1988), decreased space requirements (Sweet, 2002), increased interviewer safety (Carr & Worth, 2001; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004), and the ability to take notes unobtrusively (Carr & Worth, 2001; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Tausig & Freeman, 1988). Telephones allow participants to remain on “their own turf” (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, p. 399), permit more anonymity (Sweet, 2002; Tausig & Freeman, 1998) and privacy (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004), decrease social pressure, and increase rapport (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for meaning by the first author. Interview transcripts were examined using open coding to identify the themes that appeared within the data (Creswell, 2016). In order to validate the themes that emerged in the data, previously coded interviews were constantly reviewed. The use of open coding assisted the researcher in identifying themes that might not have been expected (Merriam, 2009).

## Results

Eight interviews took place via telephone. The length of the interviews ranged from approximately 18 minutes to approximately 44 minutes. Prior to the beginning of each interview, the former student-athlete was e-mailed the informed consent form, and each participant e-mailed the statement back to the researcher. To begin each interview, the interviewer verbally explained the purpose of the study, and informed the participants they could discontinue the conversation at any time without penalty. Each participant consented to be digitally recorded.

The average age of the participants was 27 years old. The former student-athletes were asked to self-identify their race or ethnicity: three student-athletes self-identified as African American,

two student-athletes self-identified as Caucasian, and three student-athletes self-identified as Black American. Five student-athletes reported that they were from urban cities, while three student-athletes reported that they grew up in rural towns. All participants were from the Southern United States. Six of the student-athletes stated that they were starters on the football team when they played at their university. All of the participants attended college on a full scholarship and graduated from their university. When asked about their major choice, three student-athletes reported they were business majors, two majored in secondary education, while the other student-athletes majored in recreation and sport management, nutrition, and sociology.

The first research question asked, what perception do former NCAA Division I athletes have of the recruiting process? The first major theme that appeared in the responses was *feeling like a celebrity*, which refers to the experience the participants were accustomed to when playing for their University or being recruited. The second theme that appeared consistently throughout the data was *feeling overwhelmed*, which refers to the emotion some of the participants felt during the recruiting process.

The second Research Question asked, what is the perception of the contracts, specifically, the National Letter of Intent (NLI) and the Financial Agreement?" *Lack of knowledge* was one of the themes that appeared throughout the data. It referred to the participants' experiences of not reading the NLI or financial agreement. The final theme that appeared in the data was *trusting coaches*, in which many of the participants described instances where they trusted the coaches and what they said during recruitment. Participant interviews provided an in-depth, descriptive narrative of their recruiting experience, and perceptions of the NLI and financial agreement.

### ***Feeling Like a Celebrity***

The student-athletes revealed they felt like celebrities for various reasons. Mason explained that during his recruiting process: “You know you have a lot of different colleges coming to your high school, which is always cool. It is fun when coaches come see you practice, and talk to you after practice, and your friends get to see that and that was always fun.” Regarding his official visit to a university he said “They treat you well, they take you to dinner, you get to meet the coaches, players, get to put on the uniform, and just catering to you.” He also stated on the day of signing day, “you have the news station there at your high school, and your friends are there. It was like they shut the school down for me. It was just so I can sign that letter for signing day.”

All of the participants indicated that they felt like a celebrity at their university during their playing years.

George said, “you got to go to frat and sorority house. Everyone respected you. You got into parties.” Mason expressed when he played for his university “It was awesome. You get to meet a lot of people and get to play in front of thousands of fans.”

### ***Feeling Overwhelmed***

Participants described the recruiting process as overwhelming. George said, “it was cool but weird because all of a sudden you are getting phone calls every day and letters. It was a fun process but kind of stressful if you don’t know where you are going.”

Robert said,

I hated every bit of it. People were afraid to take a gamble on me and my athletic ability because I didn’t necessarily fit the mold of that position. So I dealt with a lot of schools that would be telling me to come on a visit. Then the week of, they would say no and they decided to go with another athlete and we are sorry but good luck type of stuff.

Pearson liked the attention of the recruiting process. He said, “I think it gets overwhelming when you think you are ready to make a decision. Because the next thought that enters your mind after you get ready to make your decision is all the schools you have to say no to.” He expressed that it was tough for him to do as an 18-year-old, with coaches reacting negatively at times. “You are a 50-year-old man making \$500,000 and you shouldn’t be hanging up on an 18 year old kid because he decided to go to a different school....(recruiting) is just a bunch of grown professional men lying to children and their families for their own benefit.”

Following the recruiting process, some of the participants said they felt overwhelmed during their time at the university. Three of the participants stressed that they felt more like athletes than students, including the realization that while the recruiting process implies a four-year commitment from the coach and university, the student-athlete’s performance remained key to that commitment. Robert expressed that “playing football on a college level is more of a full-time job... You were there to play football and I say that because if you don’t produce in your specified sport then your scholarship will not be renewed.” He wished he would have known that the scholarship was performance-based and felt it was unfair. “If you didn’t produce, they had a right to terminate you. When you are a kid, you don’t think you can be fired from going to school.”

Pearson explained the instances where he did not think of himself as a student first.

What became evident to me and my teammates is when it would be a time conflict for class and practice. It was highly frowned upon by the coaches when kids would leave practice and go to a night class and it would be the only time the class is offered and had to do it for their major. Another time was during the ‘dead period,’ or the times before finals they referred to those as optional workout days. But if you aren’t in



the weight room every day during those two weeks, it was highly frowned upon.

### ***Lack of Knowledge***

All of the participants who were interviewed affirmed they did not read the NLI or the financial agreement. When asked about reading those documents, Harrison said:

Hell no. I signed it! Because for me, it wasn't even about reading it. Reading it or not reading it, I was going to sign it. You have to understand growing up, like most young black males grow up: They go to college sports coming from poverty-stricken homes and it's nothing else for us to do. It's either sign that and deal with everything else that comes with it, or don't sign it and do nothing.

For Desmond, he felt as though it was not a focal point. He stated,

I wasn't thinking about that. All I knew was I was going to get to play football at a (Major) program, school was paid for, and the room and board was paid for, and they said it was full scholarship and everything would be taken care of.

Robert also did not read the NLI or financial agreement. He stated "I didn't know anything about it. All I knew was they said you need to sign this letter and fax it back."

### ***Trusting Coaches***

All the participants spoke about trusting the coaching staff during the recruitment process. The NLI and financial aid agreement is only for one year, but the coaches told Pearson not to worry about it because it will be for all 4-5 years, depending on whether he redshirted. Pearson trusted one of the position coaches enough to sign with the university, but was disappointed because he did not enjoy the university itself and felt as though the classes were not interesting or did not feature high quality. Harrison had a different experience: "I know there are some coaches that don't

care about their athletes, but I was around some genuine people. They treated me like I was their son.” George said “it was a scholarship and I was happy. You understand from the coaches that everything is getting paid for, so you just take their word for it.” Fred also said he believed what the coaches were telling him and believed in the coaching staff. “I just received full understanding from the coaching staff and took their word.” He also emphasized that he had a great time at his official visit and met some really genuine people.

Most of the athletes were not promised anything that was unfulfilled. The participants were offered the scholarship and amenities as indicated during recruiting. Desmond explains “For the most part, while I was in school and I was on a full scholarship, I didn’t have many worries. I felt like the university held up their end of the stick because I did get my education. I got my checks every month.” Seth noted,

They did promise me that I would have all the resources that I needed to be successful in the classroom, which turned out to be true. They said they would provide me a platform where I come play competitively and to continue my collegiate aspirations on the field, which was true. Every kid’s dream is to have the option to play at the next level. They promised me that I would have equal opportunity, and as much of their resources to help prepare me for that. They definitely stayed true to that, because a lot of my coaches came from the NFL or had connections with the NFL. So they were very knowledgeable about the game and pointed me in the right direction, so I could be successful on and off the field.

However, there was one participant who was promised two things during the recruiting process that were not fulfilled. Robert noted:

I was told that the stadium that is now built at my university would have been built by my sophomore or junior season. The on-campus facility that is now there opened the week after my last game at my university, but was supposed to be built while I was there. That was a part of my recruiting.

Ultimately, each participant trusted their coach enough to sign with the university and play on the football team.

## **Discussion**

Among the football student-athlete participants in this study, there were differences in their perceptions of the recruiting process and the signing of the NLI and the Financial Agreement. The first research question was: “What perception do former NCAA Division I athletes have of the recruiting process?” Throughout the data, the themes of feeling like a celebrity and feeling overwhelmed appeared in the interviews.

It should be noted that six of the participants who were interviewed identified the recruiting experience as overwhelming, while only two felt like the experience was enjoyable. However, in the literature it states that the original NLI “was designed with the same goals in mind as today’s program, to preserve amateurism and reduce the pressure the recruiting process put on prospective student-athletes” (Meyer, 2004). Some of the student-athletes who were interviewed said their situation was performance-based on the field more than in the classroom. If an athlete in a high-profile sport does not perform as well as expected athletically or is permanently injured, the coach can choose not to renew the scholarship without consideration for the athlete’s academic performance or future (Huma & Staurowsky, 2013).

The participants also revealed they were treated like celebrities during their official visits and on signing day, as well as during their playing career at their university. Several participants described being thrown parties on signing day including media coverage, and said they received a special welcome during their official visits. The literature showed that intercollegiate athletics functions as a multi-billion-dollar industry bolstered in part by billion-dollar television broadcasting rights contracts (O’Toole,

2012) and exclusive million-dollar corporate sponsorships with apparel companies (Giroux, 2007). Interestingly enough, the athletes received perks including free gear, television exposure, playing in front of thousands of fans live with millions more watching on TV, and free admission into college parties.

The second research question asked “What is the perception of the contracts, specifically, the NLI and the Financial Agreement?” Lack of knowledge and trusting of coaches were two major themes that appeared throughout the data. The participants all had different opinions about the NLI. The NLI is not a scholarship offer, but rather an indication of the acceptance of a scholarship offer (Myers, 2004). However, the participants did know that the institution agrees, as part of the NLI, to provide athletics financial aid for one academic year (National Letter, 2015). All of the participants said they did not read either the NLI or financial agreement. This may proceed from not only the stated eagerness of the participants to secure their college opportunity, but also from the NLI’s Flesch Reading Score of 52.9, making it “Fairly Difficult” with a readability that falls between college graduates and individuals aged 13-15 (Wylie, 2016).

Many of the student-athletes described the trust they had in the coach as well as the coaching staff when signing the NLI and financial agreement to attend their institution. However, some gave examples of coaches promising there would be a new stadium or facilities built, but which were built years after the student-athletes left. There were also instances where some of the participants trusted their coach, and received everything they were promised. Two participants described having received the resources they needed to be successful, including a platform to play competitively and continue their aspirations both on and off the field.

Overall, it appeared that many of the findings were inconsistent with the literature. However, it must also be noted that

while the interviews were conducted with rigor, it would have been preferable to have achieved a larger sample size. In addition, the sample may also have included a similarity of views among the interview subjects due to some participants being acquainted with each other. Initially, the researchers thought statements regarding false promises would be found throughout the data, but seven of eight participants received what was promised to them. The single outlier was a specific case, as a coach cannot necessarily control when a new building is created.

## **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study will serve as a building block for future research into student-athletes' perception of the NLI. Results here have shown there are notable gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of student-athletes, as well as their perception of the NLI and financial agreement. Future researchers should examine female student-athletes as well as student-athletes from non-revenue sports to learn about their experience and perceptions. Future studies also should not be limited to interviewing participants from schools in the Southern U.S., but other institutions nationwide. Further, an expansion beyond football to other sports including non-revenue sports should be considered. Also, researchers should focus more on the academic side rather than the athletic. In addition, a survey-based methodology would be effective in determining the views of many student-athletes. The survey questions can be derived from the interviews in this study, utilizing these former student-athletes' views as a focus group would be used to create survey questions.

## Limitations of the Study

This study is qualitative and as such, should not be generalized. However, the results of this study can assist student-athletes going through the recruiting process. Furthermore, the present study may serve as a reminder that student-athletes should read the NLI and ensure that all promises are made in writing. Student-athletes should also check with their institutions to understand their policy regarding athletics related injuries and coaching changes. The present study also interviewed former student-athletes and although their world view and reflection regarding the recruiting process is important, a more recent experience might yield different results. The candid and anonymous views and experiences of current student-athletes would potentially result in stronger answers, as those individuals are currently going through the challenges inherent to being a student-athlete immediately following their recruitment, and do not yet have the benefit of hindsight or further (e.g., post-college) life experiences from which to draw in their answers. While the views of former student-athletes are valuable for current and future student-athletes, those of people who are immersed in the student-athlete world at the time of being interviewed would potentially provide a higher level of guidance for those who hope to navigate the recruiting process successfully.

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