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An Academic Rollercoaster: A Phenomological Study of NCAA Division I Football

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An Academic Rollercoaster

A Phenomenological Study of NCAA Division I Football

By Chris Yandle, Independent Researcher; Sarah Stokowski, Clemson University; and B. David Ridpath, Ohio University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenology study was to explore the lived academic experiences and perceptions of academic success for NCAA Division I collegiate football athletes. This study utilized a qualitative approach informed by Pascarella et al. (1999) model for assessing student change within an intercollegiate athletics environment. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the lived academic experiences of collegiate football athletes at two institutions in the southeastern United States. Academic rollercoaster was the major theme that appeared throughout the data and three subthemes emerged: balancing demands, relationships with faculty, and course selection. Based on the lived academic experiences of the participants, current and incoming collegiate athletes as well as athletic department personnel may find it beneficial to further understand the academic perceptions of this population in order to offer a positive and fulfilling college experience.

INTRODUCTION

Collegiate football athletes find sport participation beneficial (e.g., Stokowski, Goldsmith, Croft, Hutchens, & Fridley, 2020); yet, this population is often deprived of a true academic experience (e.g., Stokowski, Blunt-Vinti, Hardin, Goss, & Turk, 2017a). Some scholars (e.g., Harrison, Bimper, Smith, & Logan, 2017; Newton, 2020) even argue that sport (particularly football) is not educational for those participating and that this population is in fact denied a college education. Although National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA; 2019a) legislation (see bylaw 17.1.7.1) states that collegiate athletes cannot spend more than 20 hours a week on sport related activities, the reality is that athletic participation is equivalent to a 40 hour a week (full time) job (New, 2015). With the athletic demands placed upon this population, athletics is the priority and collegiate athletes, especially those in high profile sports (basketball, football), are clustered in to majors to ensure athletic eligibility in accordance with NCAA (2019a) Article 14 (e.g., Fountain & Finley, 2009; Paule-Koba, 2019; Sanderson & Hildenbrand, 2010).

Due to the amount of time and effort collegiate athletes invest in their athletic endeavors, this population often struggles with self-defeating behaviors and isolation (e.g., Comeaux, 2010; 2011; Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Further, sport has consumed the college experience for this population leaving collegiate athletes feeling conflicted within their role (athlete, student); therefore, this population often experiences a high athletic identity (e.g., Hatteberg, 2020; Stokowski, Paule-Koba, Kaunert, 2019). Further, due to collegiate

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athletes' status on campus, this population is often stigmatized as lazy and entitled by faculty, academic advisors, and their non-athlete peers (e.g., Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Comeaux, 2011; Stokowski, Rode, Hardin, 2016). The NCAA (2019a) states its basic purpose is "designed to be a vital part of the educational system" (p. 1); therefore, it is vital to gain a keen insight and greater understanding into the lived experiences of collegiate football athletes. Through the use of qualitative inquiry, the purpose of this study is to explore NCAA Division I collegiate football athletes lived academic experiences and perceptions of academic success. Specifically, this study strives to answer the following research question: How do NCAA Division I collegiate football athletes perceive their academic experience?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Student-Athlete Perceptions of Academic Success: While the NCAA's academic regulations have increased collegiate athletes' academic and graduation successes, these regulations only establish a minimum standard for student-athletes (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Benson, 2000; Mathewson, 2000; Mondello & Abernethy, 2000). Such limited success tends to feed a negative academic culture within college athletics as it is based on the "de minimis concept, which provides universities with substantial incentives to maintain, and discourages them from investing in or exceeding, the minimum eligibility requirements" (Mathewson, 2000, p. 85). Research has shown that coaches and athlete peers may play a large role in creating a team culture that either values or devalues academic achievement which may adversely affect a collegiate athlete's own view of their academic expectations (Engstrom et al., 1995; Feltz, Schneider, Hwang, & Skogsberg, 2013). The literature suggested there is a positive connection between sports and academics for college athletes (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006; Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, Boyd, & Rullan, 2009; Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010). Based on data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, college athletes reported making greater gains since starting college while perceiving their campus environment to be supportive of their needs (Umbach et al., 2006).

COLLEGE ATHLETE EXPERIENCES

Student-Athlete Climate Study: Since its inception in 1906, the NCAA has sought to ensure college athlete well-being (Crowley,

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Pickle, & Clarkson, 2006). In June 2011, Pennsylvania State University's Center for the Study of Higher Education released the initial findings of its Student-Athlete Climate Study (Rankin, Merson, Sorgen, McHale, Loya, & Oseguera, 2011). The study explored the relationship between collegiate athletes' experiences and climate perceptions based on three outcomes: academic success, athletic success, and athletic identity (Rankin et al., 2011). The results yielded 8,018 respondents (15% response rate) across 164 NCAA member institutions (Rankin et al., 2011). Division I collegiate football athletes showed statistically lower levels of academic success compared to their Division III counterparts, while Division I FCS and Division I non-football collegiate athletes reported the highest levels of academic success (Rankin et al., 2011). When examining racial differences among collegiate athletes, Black collegiate athletes reported lower academic success scores while White collegiate athletes reported lower athletic identity scores (Rankin et al., 2011). According to Rankin et al. (2011), faculty-student interaction had a significant influence on student-athlete's athletic identity, athletic success, and academic & intellectual development.

NCAA GOALS Study: Since 2006, the NCAA has been studying the experiences and well-being of current student-athletes through its *Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in College* (GOALS) studies (NCAA, 2019b). Data collected from 21,233 collegiate athletes (including 1,092 FBS collegiate athletes and 734 FCS collegiate athletes) found that while more than three quarters of collegiate athletes reported a positive overall academic experience, more than one-third of collegiate athletes felt that playing sports prevented them from taking desired classes (NCAA, 2016). Among Division I collegiate football athletes, 6% of FBS players felt they could keep up with their coursework during the playing season as compared to 55% percent of FCS players (NCAA, 2016).

Thirty-two percent of FBS and 28% of FCS collegiate football athletes reported that sport participation prevented them from taking certain classes but that they did not have regrets (NCAA, 2016). Less than one-third (28%) of FCS collegiate football athletes felt athletic participation prohibited them from choosing their desired academic major, but only 7% reported regretting their choice (NCAA, 2016). While 74% of Division I respondents reported feeling positive about their overall academic experience, only 54% of male collegiate athletes who selected an academic major they regretted reported a positive academic experience (NCAA, 2016).

Theory: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the internal and external factors that have contributed to the lived academic experiences and perceptions of academic success for NCAA Division I collegiate football athletes. This study focuses on the en-

vironmental origins of student change and development throughout college enrollment and eligibility for a college athlete. This includes how these changes exert influence on lived academic experiences and perceptions of academic success. The theoretical framework for this study is centered in Pascarella's (1985) model for the assessment of student development, or change, in which there is consideration of the direct and indirect effects of a college or university's structural characteristics as well as its campus culture on student development. Specifically, the aspects of change, meaning alterations in students' cognitive or affective characteristics that occur over time and the more abstract term of development. College student development is often viewed through a specific lens depending on the situation or in a more practical sense, a systematic, organized and successive process thought to serve an adaptive function or the nature, structure and processes that define individual and human growth (Lerner, 1986; Terenzini, 1987). For this study development focuses on academic experiences and perceptions of academic success, staying academically eligible to be able to compete in sports, and eventually graduating from college, which serves the developmental function for this research. This theory can also be applied to the structure, influences and culture of intercollegiate athletics. Pascarella et al. (1999) suggests that students' growth and development are primarily affected by five variables and these variables can also be applied to assess the lived experiences of college athletes during their period of competitive eligibility. The five variables are: (1) students' college pre-enrollment traits, (2) college or university's structural or organizational characteristics, (3) campus culture or environment, (4) socializing agents on the campus, (5) quality of effort put forth by the student. These five variables also are significant factors concerning the lived experiences and academic progress of college athletes as detailed in the results and the discussion.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived academic experiences and perceptions of academic success for collegiate football athletes at one NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institution and one NCAA Division I Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) institution. This phenomenological study analyzed interview data "by developing patterns and relationships of meaning" in order to explore and conceptualize the lived academic experiences of football student-athletes (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). This study strives to answer the following research question:

RQ1: How do NCAA Division I collegiate football athletes perceive their academic experience?

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METHODOLOGY

This study used phenomenological methodology to explore the internal and external factors that have contributed to the lived academic experiences and perceptions of academic success for football student-athletes at the NCAA Division I level. This study's phenomenological design was one through an interpretivist lens as interpretivism is the belief that reality exists within a participant's reflection, self-description, and their interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2006). Phenomenology is the study of the human experience (Sokolowski, 2000) and it focuses on the descriptions of what people experience and how they experience what they experience (Patton, 2002). While there are three types of phenomenology, the phenomenological method chosen for this study is transcendental, after phenomenology which is a philosophical approach to qualitative research seeking to understand the human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Semi-structured interview method was utilized. According to Dittmore and Stokowski (2019), there are several advantages to the semi-structured interview method specifically in regard to sport research, including the ability to ask follow-up questions in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomena. Further, this particular method allows for an enhanced exploration into the lived experience of the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

PROCEDURES

Upon receiving IRB approval, purposeful (or purposive) sampling as well as convenience sampling was utilized to identify participants (Merriam, 2009). As the present study desired to study a specific population, the primary researcher identified an informant (an athletic administrator at two NCAA Division I institutions) to serve as a guide and assist the primary researcher in identifying potential participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Athletic administrators (i.e., informant) at two different private NCAA Division I institutions (one FBS and one FCS) in the southeastern United States arranged for the primary researcher to interview five student-athletes. As such, a total of 10 NCAA Division I collegiate football athletes (five from each institution) participated in this study (see table 1). The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes, and the interview protocol consisted of demographic questions as well as 15 questions regarding the participants lived experience. The interviews took place in a room on campus that was identified by the informant. Each participant was informed of the purpose of the study and asked to sign an informed consent statement. Further, each participant agreed to allow their interview to be digitally recorded and the primary researcher assigned each participant a pseudonym.

POPULATION

The population examined for this study was scholarship Division I

collegiate football athletes who are academically eligible to compete by NCAA, applicable conference, and institutional rules and who have completed at least two semesters of academic coursework at their NCAA Division I institution. This specifically includes all respondents having a 2.0 GPA or higher (per bylaw 14.4.3.3) and any satisfactory progress and percentage of degree (per bylaw 14.4.1) requirements required for athletic eligibility (NCAA, 2019a). For this study, the population was limited to NCAA Division I collegiate athletes for three reasons. First, Division I is the only NCAA classification that is required to provide academic support services for student-athletes (Banbel & Chen, 2013). Second, Division I schools participate at the highest level of intercollegiate athletics where revenue generation and winning games are perceived by many to be more important than Division II or Division III (Clotfelter, 2011). The third reason is that Division I FBS college athletes' total time commitment to athletics adversely affects other aspects of their life, including academic pursuits (Jenny & Hushman, 2014; Ridpath, 2007; 2010). According to the NCAA Division I 20/8-Hour Rule per week (see bylaw 17.1.7.1 depending on in-season/out-of-season), athletes at the Division I level are subjected to limitations of four hours of daily countable athletically-related activities and no more than 20 hours per week during the competition season, but these restrictions do not include an institution's vacation period (NCAA, 2019a). Once the competition season is over, athletes are limited to eight hours of countable athletically-related activities per week (NCAA, 2019a).

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1

<i>Description of Study Participants, Metro University</i>			
Pseudonym (Race)	Athletic Year	Academic Year	Major
David (B)	Redshirt Junior	Senior	Applied Computing Systems
Caleb (W)	Sixth Year	Graduate Student	MBA
Josh (B)	Sophomore	Sophomore	Health & Wellness
Corey (B)	Junior	Junior	Finance
Kevin (B)	Redshirt Junior	Senior	Finance
B = Black, W = White			

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Research data can be analyzed by reviewing interview transcripts, highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how a participant experienced a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2006). This process of aggregating text or data into smaller categories of information is known as coding the data (Creswell, 2006). The primary researcher reviewed the data and coded the interviews to identify initial keywords or units. These units reference descriptive or inferential information based on words, phrases, or sentences compiled during the interviews (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The data was imported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and axial as well as thematic coding was used to identify additional themes, patterns, and commonalities that appeared throughout the interviews (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2003). During the axial coding stage, the researcher connected categories to related subcategories in order “to form more precise and complete explanations” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 24). After categories and subcategories were created through axial coding, the researcher organized the categories around a central theme or explanatory concept (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data was analyzed using phenomenological analysis techniques (Moustakas, 1994).

TRUSTWORTHINESS

For research studies qualitative in nature, member-checking provides research participants with an opportunity to help ensure and improve the accuracy and credibility of the study. Both Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Colaizzi (1978) have advocated for the use of member-checking as a final step in validation of qualitative research studies. However, a recent study by McConnell-Henry, Chapman, and Francis (2011) viewed that revisiting a participant for clarification (or member-checking) is a “potential threat to the rigour of interpretive studies” (p. 30). Furthermore, McConnell-Henry et al. (2011) noted that returning to the study participants is “antithetical to phenomenology’s requirement that a recounting is presented in native, or original, form and that is considers a snapshot in time, not a generalizable right answer” (p. 31). For this phenomenological study, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcribed data from the audio recorded interviews. All 10 participants reviewed the transcribed data and ensured their words were interpreted correctly.

RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the internal and external factors that have contributed to the lived academic experiences and perceptions of academic success for NCAA Division I football student-athletes. Specifically, this study strives to answer the following research question, how do NCAA Division I collegiate football athletes perceive their academic experience?

Table 2

<i>Description of Study Participants, Metro University</i>			
Pseudonym (Race)	Athletic Year	Academic Year	Major
Walter (B)	Redshirt Junior	Senior	Marketing
Aaron (B)	Redshirt Senior	Graduate Student	Organizational Management
Chad (W)	Redshirt Junior	Senior	Marketing
Ryan (W)	Redshirt Freshman	Sophomore	Marketing
Michael (B)	Redshirt Junior	Senior	Criminal Justice
B = Black, W = White			

AN ACADEMIC ‘ROLLERCOASTER’

While the premise of the research study was to learn about collegiate football athlete’s lived academic experiences, thematic underpinnings of time management, prioritizing tasks, and an inherent battle between academics and athletics emerged among the participants’ responses. As such, an academic rollercoaster was the major theme that appeared throughout the data. Some participants described their college experiences as a ‘rollercoaster’ like David:

My experience has been a rollercoaster, and at certain points, I felt like I was doing great academically, doing great athletically at the same time. Sometimes I felt like I was struggling academically but doing great in football. It’s just been an up and down rollercoaster throughout my time here and I feel like that’s just because of college. I guess that’s just my experience that it’s been a rollercoaster—sometimes tough, sometimes not. It just depends.

When asked if he found it more difficult academically during the playing season itself or it was dependent upon the coursework, David further explained:

I felt like it was the courses I was taking because during the season it’s tough with juggling school and football, but that’s when you make your schedule to the point I feel like certain classes that I took that I felt it would be easier or you know, easier to maintain and end up not being that then you missed the deadline and like

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drive or something. So you got to go in and just push through it, you know? And that makes it, it makes it tough to, once you, once you figured out like, okay, there's a course I have to take, but it's harder than I expected, you know?

Graduate students David and Aaron offered similar viewpoints of what they did or didn't learn during the beginning of their academic careers. David said:

I think it was challenging at points. I think especially at the (Ivy League) school where it's a very rigorous academic environment. I think it's tough because you'll get kids where they care about school, but it's not entirely 100% that way. I feel like the average intensity to which kids bring to the classroom that was a lot higher. So I mean to even keep in the upper half, it was difficult. So I mean I think that was one thing that it can wear on your for after a while.

David further expounding on the similarities academically between his former Ivy League school and Metro University, focusing more on his status as a graduate student:

I think being a graduate student has its own intrinsic differences than being an undergraduate student. I think that graduate school, you're choosing your own path. It's things you're more passionate about, making it easier to sit in the classroom. You want to read more. It's actually things you enjoyed doing, where a lot of undergraduate stuff is things you're forced to do. You're forced to take those basic level courses, even if it's stuff they're not interested in. I think that makes it a little easier to go to class each day down here. I'd say I definitely enjoy it academically a bit more down here. And I think also it's been a little bit easier of a load in itself. I think a lot of the MBA's have already done their undergraduate degree, so they understand they already worked a bit in the real world. So then I understand it's not really exactly just getting 100% on everything and being in the highest grade in the class. It's a little bit more fundamental and understanding things and you don't have to have the answer all the time as long as you kind of understand that and do well you can get through.

While the learning experience appeared to be enjoyable for David, the college experience for Aaron who began his undergraduate career at an HBCU institution has been much more of a challenge as he felt that he's been let down from a learning perspective:

I think it's an interesting experience. I don't necessarily feel like I learned that much in the classroom, to be honest with you. And a lot of that is on me. Some of the information I just

didn't see as very relevant to anything I was going to get into. I really wanted to do mass communications, but they didn't have that here. I came here because this was the first school in (my home state) to offer me a scholarship as I was transferring and I was getting pretty impatient, so I went ahead and went with (City College). I knew they were a good academic school and I didn't even look at the majors. I wanted to go into communications, but communications here is more of the psychology behind communicating and it was just more of a psych class. I didn't necessarily want to do psychology. So I went with media studies. We really just broke down films and things like that and it was basically I just got through it because I knew I needed a degree. I feel like I got more, I feel like I got more out of the social experience because in high school I hung around other football players that were just like me. I feel like I became a smarter, well-rounded individual when I started hanging out with people that never even wanted to play football. People that never wanted to play sports, people that were in the arts, people that were into moviemaking, people that wanted to get into politics. Just different people that came from completely different backgrounds than me. I felt like that was probably the most useful part of college, in my opinion.

Michael has experienced both academic success and disappointment. He's focused on trying to finish strong in the classroom:

It's been a rollercoaster for me. I had a 3.3 (GPA) at the end of my freshman year, but then I had a not-so-good summer. Then in my sophomore year, I picked it up again and finished with a 3.2 (GPA). This shit has been up and down. I've just tried to keep my head above water really and finish strong.

Academic rollercoaster was the major theme that appeared. In fact, only one participant mentioned a positive academic experience as their most memorable moment of their time in college. Walter shared that he achieved a 4.0 GPA with 16 hours during the fall semester. "I got a 4.0 and that was my first 4.0 since the summer of my sophomore year. I was proud of it and that was during the football season too so that's probably my proudest accomplishment while in college." Data analysis lead to several subthemes that assisted in understanding the lived academic experiences of the participants: (1) balancing demands, (2) relationships with faculty, and (3) course selection.

Balancing Demands: Participants referenced both time management

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and organizational skills when they were asked how they balanced their athletic and academic commitments. David explained that balancing athletic, academic, and social demands are like a college athlete's Venn diagram:

I'd say there's definitely a huge learning curve for freshman year about what you are able to do and what you're not able to do. I think you learn that there's those three pillars in life. You have the football and athletic side of it – your meetings, your training room, eating right, weight room, all those things – and then there's the school side of it, which again is studying a lot of your time, going to class, not skipping class. There's also that third aspect which is like your social life and I think you learn pretty quickly that it's like a three-way Venn diagram and you have to pick two (of the three pillars). That's the way it is. It's really hard to live in that one middle part that has all three overlapping, but I think you got to pick two and if you want to be a student-athlete, those are the two you got to pick.

While David said student-athletes generally have to pick the student and athlete portion of their lives, Walter said time management “is the first thing you have to do. You have to realize that there's a time for everything. There's time for fun. There's time for academics and there's time for athletics.” Time management and procrastination became recurring sub-themes within the student-athletes balancing theme. “I am actually a procrastinator,” said Aaron.

I do procrastinate a little bit simply because I don't want to do the work most of the time. So it's a lot harder for me to do it when the deadline is very far away. But when the deadline is tomorrow, I don't know why, but that's when I get all my motivation. That's when my best thoughts come to me.

Aaron's teammate Chad possessed a similar procrastinator mindset:

I'm procrastinating just as much as the next athlete and that's one of those things that I get into to it where I become friends with someone else in the class or I talked to another person that holds me accountable, helps me out. So that's definitely how I get through academics, and I really push it on my days off. Morning is athletics, afternoon is class time or just trying to rest and get my mind right between like an hour between class or something. And then at night is when I really start having to lock stuff down. It's all academic – take the laptop out and really start knocking out papers or go to the library. That's also helpful with (City College) is that all of our stuff is in the morning and we got academics and the rest of the day. So it's just sectioning out your days, getting into that rhythm of, ‘oh it's about 6:30, I need to start looking at some academic

stuff.’ And it doesn't always work out like that. You're dog tired and you've got to take a nap and then you wake up and it's freakin' (sic) 8 o'clock. Well, you did that to yourself, so let's get it over with. So it's kind of one of those things where you have to section off your days.

Relationships with Faculty: Participants at both research sites noted that their coaches and academic support staff encouraged collegiate athletes to sit near the front of the classroom and to introduce themselves to their professors. Perceptions on their own relationships with faculty varied, including Caleb who made plans to go fishing with one of his professors. David noted that one of his professors came to support him at their spring game, but that's the extent of his relationships with current or past professors:

I don't have a relationship with my teachers. Well, I got a relationship with like one of them since I've been here, maybe two. And I feel like it's just because when I'm in the class, I'm just in the class to figure out what I need to do and get it done. Sometimes I feel like they want us to come up to them, but I don't really have the time to come stand, it's a line of people waiting to talk to the professor after class. I don't have time to wait in that line to talk to them and get to know him and let him know my name is because I have another class to go to or I got studying I need to do because I'm not trying to be up all night, you know what I'm saying? So I don't have any relationship with too many of my professors, I've had relationship with a professor I'm taking now. She even came to the spring game. Other than that, no it's not, it's not really a relationship. They know my name. I know some of my professors, I can't even tell you their name. I'm taking their course and that's just being honest, I'm taking the course, I know what class it is, but not the professor's name. Cause (sic) I'm just here to take the class, pass the class, move on.

Aaron was struggling in a statistics class, but he was able to pass because he had forged a relationship with his professor.

Statistics was destroying me, but I had a very good relationship with my professor, so he gave me like extra help, even after class sometimes. I'd go see him during his office hours. And I felt like he was more open to helping me because we had a good relationship. I still talk to him if I see him now around campus.

Josh still talks to one of his freshman-year professors who attended their games during the season, but he's also experienced professors

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who “didn’t really care (about me)”. He credited his desire to know people as a positive result from growing up in athletics:

I like to try to get to know people. So when I reach out to a professor and tried to talk to him or her after class, they’ve brushed me off and everything when I was just trying to talk to him. So I’ve had everything from one extreme to the other. Yeah, definitely. I feel like that’s how it’s been from growing up in athletics. I want to have a good relationship with my coaches so we can be honest (with each other) and tell him what I need to work on. So same thing in the classroom. I want to have an honest relationship and say, ‘hey, you need to pick it up and this and that.’

David shared that being a collegiate athlete “can work in your favor,” but you need to be careful as to avoid a “dumb jock” stereotype threat:

I’ve always enjoyed school. I think it’s something like football where I’ll take a competitive attitude in it, where I don’t want to just get by. I want to do well in it. So I think that as long as you put the best foot forward always when you’re walking a class, introduce yourself the first day, sit up in front, ask questions, pay attention. I think that they’ll always respect you, especially knowing that you’re an athlete and they know that you have more than the average student workload. So I think that being a student-athlete can work in your favor, but if you’re kind of one of those kids that sits in the back, have your hoodie up, they can tell you’re not really listening, that they’re going to be like, ‘oh, it’s just another dumb jock. He doesn’t want to learn. I’m not gonna (sic) really care about him too much.’ I think you get out of it what you put into it and if you really do care that they’ll have even more respect for you.

Course selection: Five participants mentioned course scheduling or degree selection as the one thing they would change about their academic experience. All five shared that they should have put more of an effort into specific classes in order to get the desired final grade. David wanted to change “some of the courses that I took that I ended up getting a D in or retake them” because he felt “I could have put more effort into it and got a better grade.” On a similar note, David wished he “always did a little bit more.” He explained that he avoided difficult classes and wished he tried to take “that little bit of a more challenging road” in order to get more out of his academic experience.

Before enrolling at Metro University, Corey was not aware of the full breadth of academic majors and degree offerings at the school. “I just wish I took more time on the front end to see what majors

(Metro University) offered so I had an idea of what I wanted to do when I first got here,” said Corey. He went on to further explain:

When I first got here, I wanted to do engineering, but they didn’t have it. And knowing that’s really hard to balance with football. So I feel like if I would’ve come (sic) in with a plan knowing exactly what I wanted to do, I could’ve jumped in and that would have made my academic experience a little smoother.

Corey did not declare an academic major until the spring semester of his sophomore year. “That’s four semesters into college that could have been spent knocking out my core classes.” Chad who is simultaneously finishing the final semester of his undergraduate degree and beginning the first semester of his master’s degree was originally a biology major before switching to marketing.

I realized what I’m good at and I accepted for what I’m good at. I was originally a biology guy, and then I was like, ‘you know what? A lot of people are doing this better than me and not working like I’m working.’ So I realized I gotta (sic) find my fit. I moved over to the business school and just found it very easily that I could go through academics without having to spend copious amounts of time on work that is just out of the ordinary.

Because he started as a biology major, Chad thought he “might have wasted a year early on getting into a rigorous, rigorous major, but knowing that’s a part of life, you make a decision and you get through it.” There were points in his academic career where he said he wished had more guidance into what classes to take:

I’m fortunate enough to be able to graduate early, but I would have to say (I wish) maybe (I had) a little bit more guidance as in I want to go talk to people and I want to say like, ‘if I dropped this class, where will it put me,’ and that is what happened this semester. I was having a knee surgery and I said (to our academic counselor) ‘I need to drop something to get my mind right and get myself enough time to get better.’ They said ‘no, you’re fine, you’re fine.’ Then I drop it and then it’s like they never knew I wanted to graduate early and now I’m taking 17 hours during the season and they’re like, ‘oh, it’s two P.E. classes.’ Well, you still got (sic) to write papers in P.E. classes and then I’m still taking 15 hours in the middle of the season. And so maybe (I wish I had) a little more attention to detail. Maybe a little more for thinking and writing it down rather than trusting someone else’s opinion completely.

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Walter cited dropping courses as one of his least favorite things he's experienced during his academic career. "It's not just one, it's how many I had to drop, since my time here," he said. "That's a disappointing time for me because it's like I've quit or I've given up on it, but that's the best option because I'm not going to pass it." Other than his negative experience of dropping classes because he was fearful that he would not pass them, Walter said the only things he's going to remember about his academic experience are "passing (classes) and graduating." When asked why he felt those were the only things he'd remember about his academic experience, Walter said he could not devote the appropriate amount of time to his academic demands.

I don't feel like I have the time because some classes are asking for a lot and they don't understand that I don't have the same amount of (free time). Everybody has the same 24 hours, but most of my 24 hours are already taken up by something else so I don't have the extra time to sit down and do all these homework assignments that you have us do cause (sic) I won't get any sleep trying to do it. Sometimes it's that. Sometimes I feel like when I get in a course, it's not exactly what I thought it was and I don't like it. So I leave and drop it. And other times it's just like, man, I can find an easier class to take and then take this one.

DISCUSSION

Participant responses to how they perceived their academic experience ranged from a 'rollercoaster' and a 'mountain climb' to being successful. This correlates with Pascarella's (1985) theoretical variables in that things such as pre-enrollment traits and campus or athletic department culture significantly affect the lived academic experiences and perceptions of academic success. Effort of the student was also suggested as a significant factor such as when David acknowledged he "bit off a little bit more" than he could handle when he arrived at Metro University because he went to a magnet and engineering high school and he thought he could handle the rigor of both academics and athletics.

Pascarella's (1985) student development factors also influenced other respondents such as Caleb, a graduate student, who said his academic experience was "successful." Graduating from an Ivy League school with a 3.56 GPA, he learned the most from the classes where he struggled the most. For Josh, the time between his high school graduation to the start of his college career were a number of days. He chose to attend Metro University because "if you succeed academically, it'll rub off on you in the future." Corey said he was growing as a student because college is like the real world in which

there's "not going to be someone telling you, 'hey, you gotta do this, gotta do this.'" Kevin was grateful for what he's learned in college by putting it into his everyday life.

After a bad first semester, Walter, a high school valedictorian, learned how to be more organized because "you really don't realize the workload until it actually happens or until you have that first bad grade on a test. You don't realize how important it is to study, be organized, and make sure you get everything done." Aaron felt like many of his classes were unnecessary and simply a formality "for the sake of the prestige of the institution." To further his view on his classes, Aaron thought that most of the credit hours required for his degree weren't crucial for his success in the job field.

I know I have a pretty decent personality. I'm happy and I feel like I'm a charismatic person. But as far as knowledge that came straight from college, I felt like if I came to college, a blank individual and all I did was go to classes. Of course you need a social aspect. But I think if I just retained all that information from these classes, I was still being kind of wandering around like, 'okay, what do I do now? How do I apply this to a workspace?'

Chad called his academic experience a 'mountain climb' because he started as a biology major before realizing "a lot of people are doing this better than me and not working like I'm working." He eventually switched to a marketing major and found that he could "go through academics without having to spend copious amounts of time on work than just out of the ordinary." After completing his second year in college, Ryan said his academic experience was "exactly what I wanted to get out of it so far. I have a good GPA. I spend time studying, but not too much." Michael called his academic experience a 'rollercoaster' after starting with a 3.3 GPA at the end of his freshman year and dipping after an unsuccessful summer academically. He picked up his GPA as a sophomore, but he mentioned that in addition to being a rollercoaster, "this shit has been up and down."

While the NCAA's GOALS studies (e.g., NCAA, 2016; NCAA, 2019b) have provided quantitative data in relation to student-athletes' academic experiences, they were unable to offer why the student-athletes felt the way they felt about those experiences. The GOALS Study in 2016 did indicate that nearly one-third of NCAA Division I collegiate football athletes were unable to take certain classes they wanted because of their athletic participation (NCAA, 2016). However, none of the participants said their football participation precluded them from pursuing an academic major they desired. In fact, David, Corey, and Aaron said their school did not have the

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academic major they initially wanted so they settled for something similar. Additionally, Chad chose biology when he started college, but he switched to marketing because it was easier to navigate.

One of the negative side effects of the NCAA's current eligibility standards was how it excluded non-sports minorities from accessing the same flexible admissions standards as sports minorities (Petr & McArdle, 2012; Gatmen, 2011). The seven Black participants did not receive special admission status into their respective institutions as they met the academic standards for admission. According to Duderstadt (2000), "some universities take advantage of their student-athletes" while recruiting them into college "without possessing the necessary abilities or background to have a reasonable chance of succeeding academically" (p. 5) and that change significantly influences academic development, positively or negatively (Figler, 1981; Leonard, 1986; Van Rheenen, 2012). One Black participant (Aaron) has already graduated from City College with a bachelor's degree and the other six Black participants are on schedule to graduate from their institutions within their five-year eligibility (see bylaw 12.8.1) window (NCAA, 2019a).

CONCLUSION

Overall, the participants described their lived academic experience as a "rollercoaster" with "highs and lows." Interestingly, most of the participants described their experience in regard to their GPAs. Although it is positive that the participants wanted to do well academically (Umbach et al., 2006; Harrison et al., 2009; Martin et al., 2010), it is also concerning that their academic identity appeared to be tied to their GPA. Perhaps the idea of majoring in eligibility (e.g., Fountain & Finley, 2009; Paule-Koba, 2019; Sanderson & Hildenbrand, 2010) was in fact very much a real part of the academic experience for these participants. Further, although GPA is important, collegiate athletes should not be told their self-worth is tied to their academic GPA.

The present study also demonstrated the need for support for the participants. This support may come from coaches and teammates (Engstrom et al., 1995; Feltz et al., 2013). Further, as the subthemes in this study spoke to: (1) balancing demands, (2) relationships with faculty, and (3) course selection, it should be noted the importance of faculty and institutional support in the collegiate athlete experience (e.g., Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh, & Berry, 2012; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Stokowski et al., 2019). Although faculty have been shown to demonstrate negative bias towards collegiate athletes (e.g., Engstrom et al., 1995; Comeaux, 2011), the participants in the present study appeared to have developed a positive relationship with faculty. The participants in the present study felt supported by faculty and in essence, such support assisted in their overall academic experience.

The participants also spoke to balancing demands and such demands not allowing this population to be college students. Given the time constraints placed on collegiate athletes, academic support should be tied to effective academic services. Stokowski, Dittmore, Stine, and Li (2017b) found that directed study (e.g., tutoring, learning specialist) assisted high profile collegiate athletes academically. As such, perhaps effective services should be made available to this population as opposed to services (e.g., study hall, class checking) that have been shown not to contribute to retention and/or graduation rates of collegiate football athletes (Stokowski et al., 2017b).

Lastly, given the time demands and NCAA (2019a) continuing eligibility (see Article 14) legislation, collegiate athletes are given little room for major/career exploration (Stokowski et al., 2019). One way that collegiate athletes may be able to take more courses of interest is by coaches rotating practice schedules. For example, every other fall, practice is in the morning (as opposed to the afternoon). Collegiate athletes should also participate in high impact practices (e.g., internships, study abroad) that can further assist this population with not only lowering athletic identity, but with having a college experience that will benefit this population in adapting to a life after sport (Stokowski et al., 2019).

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

There were multiple limitations for this study. First, although saturation was met (Dittmore & Stokowski, 2019), the sample size was 10 collegiate football athletes. As with any qualitative study, the sample size and the data collected are not generalizable and are not representative of the NCAA Division I collegiate football athlete population. As such, individual experiences should not be compared and institutional experiences should not be compared. Second, the qualitative research design limited the researcher to the number of collegiate football athletes to include in the study whereas a quantitative research design could have yielded a larger sample size. Although participants had similar experiences as Division I collegiate football athletes, they still have different lived academic experiences. Third, the researcher's access to athletes as only the selected participants were available to be interviewed for this research study. Another limitation was the participants' freedom (or lack of freedom) to be transparent about their athletic and academic experiences because of their obligations to their institutions or fear of potentially violating NCAA rules. Lastly, the primary researcher is a former intercollegiate athletics administrator, as such, researcher bias could have indeed impacted the findings in the present study.

There were a number of delimitations for this study. First, the researcher restricted the population and study sample to academically

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eligible scholarship collegiate football athletes who have been a full-time student for at least two semesters. Second, the researcher opted to focus solely on football rather than including multiple sports in this phenomenological design as football is the revenue-generating force that funds most major college athletics departments. Third, the researcher chose the two research sites based on proximity to his location and personal relationships he had with key informants at each institution.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The participants' lived experiences shared during this phenomenological study offer a wealth of information for future studies. Future research should be quantitative in nature and perhaps scales devoted to the themes (e.g., academic success, academic identity, quality of life) in the present study could be utilized in order to have more generalizable data. Further, future work should involve collegiate football athletes at every level (e.g., Division I, Division II, Division III), institutional makeup (e.g., public, private, religiously affiliated, HBCU), sex (female, male), and sport (e.g., basketball, baseball, soccer, track). In addition, this study only focused on academically eligible collegiate football athletes at the NCAA Division I level. To get a better understanding of this population, a study of academically at-risk collegiate athletes could be of benefit to researchers and college athletic departments. ■

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