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# Do You See What I See? Perception and Social Construction of Academic Success between Student-Athletes and Support Services

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Do You See What I See?  
Perception and Social Construction of Academic Success between  
Student-Athletes and Support Services

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communication

by

Lauren Kirby  
Wofford College  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2015

May 2017  
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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

The current study explores how academic success is defined and socially constructed between athletic academic support professionals and at-risk student-athletes. There continues to be an increase in academic support services provided to student-athletes, including learning specialists, academic advisors, and academic buildings (Wolverton, 2008). Although a significant relationship between support services and academic output of student-athletes has been found (Hollis, 2002; Ridpath, 2010), the relational and communicative dynamics of these groups have not been fully explored.

Using qualitative methods, one-on-one interviews were conducted with participants, and grounded theory and thematic analysis were employed to identify overarching themes for the research questions. Academic advisors identified academic achievement and personal development as academic success. Learning specialists identified academic success as maximizing individual potential. Student-athletes identified meeting grade-based standards and work ethic resulting in reaching personal goals as academic success for themselves. Student-athletes also perceived that their advisor would identify eligibility and effort as academic success, and that their learning specialist would view academic success as building academic skills and work ethic. In addition, overarching themes were found to explain how success is socially constructed among these groups. Academic advisors used communication and instrumental support, while learning specialists created accountability through problem solving and aided in socio-emotional development. Student-athletes identified that their advisor provided information and acted as a safety net, while their learning specialist facilitated academic success and helped them develop socio-emotionally. This study adds to research on the professional roles of learning specialists and advisors, explores at-risk student-athletes' experiences with academic

support staff, and identifies how the communication and relational dynamics between these groups may be improved.

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Additionally, I would like to thank the Office of Student-Athlete Success for the opportunity to work and learn about the field of athletic academic support services during my time at the University of Arkansas. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their encouragement, support, and patience throughout this entire process.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the students who do not yet realize their academic potential, and those who believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to obtain an education.

“The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you” – B.B. King

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## I. Introduction

In 1984, NCAA student-athletes graduated at a rate of 53% (Grant, Leadley, & Zygmunt, 2008). Currently, 82 percent of NCAA Division I student-athletes graduate within six years (NCAA, 2015b), and the Federal Graduation Rate for NCAA student-athletes has increased five points since 2004 (NCAA, 2011). The increase in student-athlete support services likely helped with this increase in academic success. Student-athletes at the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level have a plethora of academic resources available to them including, but not limited to, tutors, learning specialists, academic advisors, study hall, class checkers, academic buildings, math and writing labs.

The literature involving the effects support mechanisms have on enhancing overall educational experience and academic output of at-risk student-athletes is limited, but a significant relationship has been found between support and academic output (Hollis, 2002; Kane & Gropper, 2010; Ridpath, 2010). Studies show the importance of student-athletes being able to utilize support services that work in conjunction with their athletic activities and demanding schedules (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gayles, 2009; Simiyu, 2010). Broughton and Neyer (2001) suggest that for athletics programs to be successful, the support of well-trained staff, coaches, athletic department personnel, and the campus community is required. However, little qualitative research exists which attempts to explore how these services can best work together to help student-athletes succeed.

Studies have found that prominent institutions with high levels of available resources receive significantly fewer Academic Progress Rate (APR) penalties than lower resource institutions (Bouchet & Scott, 2009; Dohrn & Reinhardt, 2014). The higher budgets allow these institutions to provide their student-athletes with academic resources to increase their APR

scores (Bouchet & Scott, 2009; LaForge & Hodge, 2009). Athletic departments are increasingly building stand-alone student-athlete academic centers (Thamel, 2006). Ninety-six percent of Bowl Championship Series (BCS) institutions have academic centers for student-athletes (NCAA, 2009). Institutions with larger budgets can improve APR scores by paying for summer classes and hiring effective support personnel who impact higher scores (Gurney & Southall, 2012).

Athletic academic advisors function as a liaison between the academic and athletics communities. Their primary goal is to help increase student-athlete success in achieving educational goals, timely graduation, and preparation for lifelong learning and meaningful employment (Hanna, 2013). Athletic academic advisors at Division I institutions have increased nearly 200 percent (from 497 in 1995 to 1,567 in 2013) over the last 20 years. A study involving allocation of resources at the University of Kentucky, which built the first facility to provide academic and tutorial resources for student-athletes, found that athlete/counselor ratio played a significant role in academic achievement (Penrod, 2014). Consistently, research shows that academic advisors can increase student retention (Carstensen & Silberhorn, 1979; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004) as well as the overall student experience (Coll & Zalauett, 2007; Drake, 2011; Light, 2001; Thompson, 2009). Furthermore, academic advisors must be aware of not only the degree requirements and offerings at their institution, but they also must be able to navigate NCAA rules and regulations to ensure student-athletes are meeting continuing eligibility standards (Kelly, 2009).

NCAA institutions often admit student-athletes who are not prepared for the academic rigors of higher education (Ganim, 2014, O'Neil, 2012). The problem created is that while it is easier for an athlete to get into college, it is harder for them to stay eligible for competition. Due

to the increase in academic standards by the NCAA, athletic departments have increased the amount of support services available to student-athletes, especially this group of student-athletes who are labeled as “at-risk.” The term “at-risk” is commonly used to describe student-athletes who are “at-risk” of not graduating from college (White, 2008). This normally encompasses students with a low standardized test score, a low grade point average, diagnosed learning disability, entering as a first-generation college student, and/or graduated from a low performing high school. However, there appears to be no clear definition across athletic departments of what constitutes an “at-risk” student-athlete (Stokowski, Dittmore, & Stine, 2014).

Ridpath (2010) found that minority male athletes participating in revenue sports (football and basketball) at institutions that were not automatic qualifiers to play felt that academic support services were needed to academically persist and remain eligible. Stokowski, Dittmore, Stine, and Li (in press) found that athletic department resource allocation decisions do not necessarily correlate with APR scores. Study hall hours showed a significantly negative impact on football APR scores, and were negatively correlated with men’s and women’s basketball APR scores, while priority enrollment, budget, and number of full-time staff members were identified as factors that positively impacted APR scores. Stokowski et al. believe that these findings, in addition to a positive correlation between the use of tutors and APR scores, may indicate that many student-athletes benefit more from a one-on-one learning environment rather than from study hall that also includes many of their peers.

The rise in the number of admitted at-risk student-athletes has resulted in an increase in the number of “learning specialists” employed by athletic departments (Pickeral, 2012). The learning specialist position is often unclear since each institution has varying responsibilities and desired qualifications (Pickeral, 2012). However, the job typically involves working one-on-one

with a caseload of student-athletes to improve specific skills such as reading, comprehension, and test-taking, as well as helping handle students' accommodations if they qualify for any. In the past five years, at least one in five big-time athletic programs have created a learning-specialist position, and some departments have added several to their staff number. The number of learning specialists grew almost 70 percent between 2012 and 2015 according to the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A). In 2012, there were 51 members of the association who were learning specialists; last year there were 85 (Wolverton, 2016). Campbell and Andrew (2009) demonstrated that athletic departments with higher budgets and employed learning specialists had a higher APR score than institutions that did not employ learning specialists.

Since the field of academic support is growing quickly, it is important to examine the specific goals and desired outcomes of the different professional roles within academic support departments. The overarching goal of support services is primarily aiding student-athletes' persisting to graduation. And while support services attempt to quantitatively measure success, this is not always an accurate portrayal of a student's educational experience. Few studies address the relationship between professionals and student-athletes, and most of the information to date consists of media interviews in sports related magazines. There is a need for qualitative research that seeks to understand the experiences of these groups. The focus of this study is to understand the perceptions of success among at-risk student-athletes, learning specialists, and academic advisors, and comprehend how academic success is socially constructed among these groups. The goal is that the findings would aid in identifying the connection between what support staff and at-risk student-athletes believe to be success and how that idea is actually communicated and perceived by the student-athlete. Once the connection between the different

perceptions is established, support staffs can figure out the best way to approach students in an attempt to help them achieve their definition of success and then push them to their maximum potential.

## **Problem**

Widespread attention on retention and academic success has resulted in the NCAA and higher education institutions focusing on conducting research identifying the variables contributing to those outcomes (Brecht, 2014). The NCAA and most institutions measure academic success based on a preconceived/predefined definition. The NCAA and most research studies equate academic success with GPA, GSR/FGR, and APR. The problem with this approach is that academic success has a variety of meanings for different people in different contexts. There is a lack of research looking into how student athletes define and view academic success for themselves. In addition, few studies have qualitatively studied how athletic academic support staff members communicate and define academic success to the at-risk population.

The existing literature is inconclusive about what variables regarding academic support services increase the academic success of student-athletes (Autry, 2010). There is a gap in the literature identifying what facilitates academic success for student-athletes, as well as a lack of qualitative research exploring how student-athletes experience their schooling and the programs and interventions put in place to help them succeed academically (Benson, 2000). Few studies have looked at the roles of learning specialists and academic advisors, and most of the literature on these groups is found in non-academic sources such as sports news articles. If institutions are providing these resources, a qualitative approach should look at how persons in these professional roles operate in order to best utilize them. In conjunction, research must look at how

student-athletes perceive these relationships and their impact on academic success to identify how the relationships can most effectively support student-athletes. There also needs to a better understanding of the experiences of at-risk student-athletes and their perceptions and attributions of academic success.

The change in eligibility requirements by the NCAA is an attempt to decrease the number of underprepared student-athletes entering institutions; however, the reality is that as the monetary pressure to win continues to increase, coaches will continue to recruit the highest-rated athletes they can, despite their academic ability. The rise in the amount of support services provided in the last decade, including learning specialists, academic advisors, and academic buildings, indicates the need for research to attempt to define best practices for these positions.

## **Purpose**

This study serves to highlight the need to look at success from non-quantitative standards and find ways to measure success of every level for every type of student. The overarching purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of academic success and the ways that academic success is socially constructed among learning specialists, advisors, and at-risk student-athletes. It is crucial that student-athletes are comfortable within their environment to develop academic skills, form plans for graduation, and participate in their respective sport (Clark & Parette, 2002). Success may depend on establishing solid relationships with support staff and their co-constructing a meaning of success. This study investigates student-athletes' perceptions of academic success in comparison to academic support staff in an effort to better understand their academic experiences. The perceptions of academic success and learning outcomes desired by academic advisors, learning specialists, and student-athletes may vary, resulting in a need to

better understand these groups and their relationship with one another. Understanding the communicative dynamic of these groups may help to build a model for developing more satisfying and collaborative relationships resulting in shared goals and perspectives, ultimately leading to greater personal autonomy and academic success of the student-athlete in their education.

Thus, it is the goal of this research to find ways to improve the communication among these groups based on a better understanding of the roles of the student-athlete, learning specialist, and academic advisor in constructing academic success. The data may allow for the implementation of effective systems, policy, and potential interventions. The study's findings will help identify specific challenges and sources of support that influence academic outcomes within the athletic department in order to help improve the academic performance and autonomy of at-risk students. The results may provide Division I administrators, coaches, faculty, and support staff with information to create a successful educational environment conducive for student-athletes to not only persist to graduation, but to feel that they are an active participant in control of their education and their preparedness for the next step beyond college. The results of this study could offer suggestions for how to provide the best possible support for assisting student-athletes in their educational journey at a higher education institution.

## II. Review of Literature

The dilemma in higher education of maintaining high academic standards and successful athletic programs existed well before the creation of the NCAA (Butterworth, 2015). The NCAA “had no effective enforcement powers until 1948” (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998, p. 35), which attempted to help control corruption and exploitation at individual institutions. As intercollegiate athletics generates more revenue and time in the spotlight, the ethical decisions encountered in an attempt to have all performing athletes remain eligible and succeed academically have been magnified.

### *Eligibility Reform*

Student-athlete eligibility is a major concern for the NCAA in order to handle athletic contests and academic rigor for student athletes. In the past, the NCAA had difficulty tracking the academic progress of individual student athletes once they were admitted into an institution; however, they were able to control which student athletes would be eligible to be recruited by its member institutions (Butterworth, 2015). At the 1965 NCAA convention, it was mandated that in a student’s sixth, seventh, and eighth semester of high school, they must have earned a 1.6 grade point average. In the 1973 conference, the GPA requirements increased to 2.0 (Covell & Barr, 2001, p. 427), and “under pressure from coaches who wanted greater control over their players and the ability to ‘fire’ them for poor athletic performance, the NCAA instituted one-year scholarships, renewable annually at the athletic department’s discretion” (Sperber, 1991, p. 2). For the next decade, these renewable scholarships and GPA requirements were the standard for recruitment. Only 42.9% of Division I-A football players earned a degree and graduated from 1975-1980 (Covell & Barr, 2001, p. 431).



The need for greater eligibility standards to protect student-athletes became apparent in the early 1980s. The NCAA and the ACE (American Council on Education) worked to create legislation that would help correct imbalances of eligibility and admission standards for student-athletes without losing the aims of the NCAA and student-athlete academic pursuits: “Given these realities, the ACE (American Council on Education) committee sought to identify a piece of legislation that would: (1) Allow most schools to continue to apply separate and lower academic standards to athletes and (2) Convince the public that the legislation would do just the opposite” (Sack, 1984, p. 2). The result was Proposition 48, which stated that for a prospective student-athlete to be eligible to participate in college athletics during their freshman year, he or she must have a high school GPA of at least a 2.0 in a set of core curriculum courses and a ‘C’ average in eleven designated courses, including English, mathematics, social sciences, and physical sciences (Edwards, 1984). In addition, the student must have earned a score of at least 15 on the American College Testing Program (ACT), or a combined score of 700 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Students who met only some of these academic requirements were “partial qualifiers” (Sellers, 1992). Originally, Proposition 42 stated that partial qualifiers could not receive any financial aid, but it was amended in 1990 “to forbid partial qualifiers only from receiving athletic financial aid during their freshman year” (Sellers, 1992, p. 49) which still allows students to qualify for need-based aid.

A new set of Division I initial-eligibility standards became effective August 1, 2016 (NCAA, 2013b). There will be a core-course progression requirement where students must complete 10 core-course units before their seventh semester, and a revised core-course GPA calculation used to evaluate whether a prospective student-athlete meets the sliding-scale index for competition. The intent is that the Eligibility Center will be able to proactively identify

initial-eligibility issues and improve the rate in which academic information is shared among prospective student-athletes, high schools, institutions and the Eligibility Center. The hope is that these updates will lead to better informed prospective student-athletes in the recruiting process (NCAA, 2013b).

### *Efforts to Improve Graduation Rates*

The existing literature consistently shows that student-athletes perform at a lower level academically compared to the rest of the students at their institutions. Female student-athletes perform higher academically than males; with African American male student-athletes in revenue generating sports (basketball and football) performing the lowest academically (Hanna, 2013). In 2004, more than 33% of the student-athlete population was unsuccessful in graduating on time, marking the worst percentage since the NCAA began tracking data in 1990 (Curtis, 2006).

In an attempt to reform and enhance the academic performance of student-athletes, the most recent focal point has been the Academic Progress Rate (APR) (Comeaux, 2015). The Academic Progress Rate (APR) was implemented in 2004 as part of an academic reform effort in Division I. The goal of the APR is to “hold institutions accountable for the academic progress of their student-athletes through a team-based metric that accounts for the eligibility and retention of each student-athlete for each academic term” (Division I Academic Progress Rate). The APR emerged to provide a more timely assessment of academic success at colleges and universities. The academic measure is a tool that gives an instant snapshot of the academic culture, particularly the eligibility and retention of athletes in team sports (Comeaux, 2015). The APR system includes rewards for superior academic performance and penalties for teams that do not

achieve certain academic benchmarks. Data are collected annually, and results are announced in the spring (Division I Academic Progress Rate).

Under APR, each athletics program must have a graduation rate of at least 60% to ensure eligibility without penalties. The APR is “a two-point system, with one point awarded each term for each scholarship student-athlete who meets the NCAA's academic-eligibility standards, and an additional point for each student-athlete that remains in school” (Carson & Rinehart, 2010, p. 5). The APR is able to produce evidence of yearly academic progress instead of graduation rates calculated from a six-year period (Christy, Seifried, & Pastore, 2008). The Percentage Towards Degree (PTD) standard requires that after two years, a student-athlete must have completed 40% of a degree (as opposed to 25% under the old system); 60% by their third year; and 80% by the end of their fourth year of full-time enrollment (Christy et al., 2008; NCAA, 2012; Hannah, 2013). The 40-60-80 Rule is meant to help ensure athletes are moving towards completing a degree, but a consequence is that they must often pick a major sooner than other students and have less flexibility to change their major (Brady, 2008).

In addition to developing the APR, the NCAA adopted a new graduation rate methodology that more accurately reflects student-athlete transfer patterns and other factors affecting graduation, known as the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) (Butterworth, 2015). The GSR was designed to show the proportion of student-athletes on each team earning a degree. Calculating the GSR begins with the group of students the federal methodology identifies in the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR). However, the GSR also includes the groups of student-athletes that the federal methodology omits: transfers from two-year or four-year colleges who receive athletics aid on entry, freshmen on aid who first enroll at midyear, and recruited student-athletes at schools that do not offer athletics aid. These reforms were attempts by the NCAA to enhance

student athlete academic experiences (Butterworth, 2015).

David Goldfield was a member of the NCAA committee that created the Academic Progress Rate system that sets minimum NCAA academic standards for teams and sanctions for failing to meet them. He states the objective was to “change the culture of recruiting” to say to coaches,

do not recruit student-athletes who have no chance of maintaining their eligibility because if they don't, it will count against you. You'll get embarrassed. You'll lose scholarships and it will affect your wins and losses. ... We really haven't seen that change in culture. The initial eligibility standards are so low, and the efforts of academic-support services have been so heroic that, in fact, it is possible to maintain the eligibility of these student-athletes and not be penalized (Brady, 2008).

### *Academic Support Programs*

Currently, the NCAA places the responsibility for ensuring a quality educational experience on each institution, which should include providing quality majors, addressing the academic aspirations of the student-athletes, and striving to provide to student-athletes the same opportunities as non-athletes (Hanna, 2013). Almost all Division I NCAA member institutions have academic support programs for student-athletes (NCAA, 2009a), with 86% of NCAA institutions having academic programs specifically for at-risk student-athletes (Stokowski et al., 2014).

Athletic departments are increasingly building stand-alone student-athlete academic centers (Thamel, 2006). Ninety-six percent of BCS institutions have academic centers for student-athletes (NCAA, 2009a). However, few studies have provided an effective model for academic support. Hollis (2002) set out to determine relationships between graduation rates and support services offered to student-athletes. The study revealed “student athletes with higher high school grade point averages posted higher graduation rates” (Hollis, 2002, p. 265).

Furthermore, it was revealed that the only significant athletic support variable that showed a positive impact regarding graduation rates was student-athletes attending summer school prior to their freshman year. Similarly, Maggard (2007) discovered that high school grade point average was an indicator of first semester grade point averages of at-risk football student-athletes at the University of Missouri.

Jordan and Denson (1990) believe that an effective athletic academic support program “has been conceptualized around four primary areas: (1) academic mentoring, (2) consultation services with the university community, (3) outreach workshops and special programs, and (4) personal counseling” (p. 95). Clark and Parette (2002) in addition to Weiss (2011) discusses effective ways of advising student-athletes with learning disabilities. The researchers explained it is important to view student-athletes as individuals due to their changing needs and evolving skills and that too often the need to teach student-athletes educational/life skill development is neglected (Clark & Parette, 2002).

It is crucial that student-athletes are comfortable in their environment to develop academic skills, form plans for graduation, and participate in their respective sport (Clark & Parette, 2002). Clark and Parette (2002) believe collaboration between coaches and university resources as well as effective support (educational/academic/transitional/social) are key to assisting student-athletes with learning disabilities. Weiss (2011) incorporated assistive technology, academic coaching, structured study hall, and study groups into her model of academic success for student-athletes with learning disabilities. (Gurney, Tan, & Winters, 2010) championed athletic academic support units and the involvement of stakeholders as vital to the success of at-risk student-athletes. However, despite the responsibility of academic support units to effectively meet the needs of all student-athletes, little is known about effective academic

programs provided to at-risk student-athletes and how those programs influence student-athletes' perceptions of their academic success. In the following sections, distinctions are made between the roles of academic advisors and learning specialists.

### *Academic Advisors*

When advising and counseling student-athletes began in the 1970's, there were three main areas of focus: scheduling classes, tutoring, and time management (Shriberg & Brodzinski, 1984). The assumption was that demands of a student athlete's time required adult-level maturity and time management skills (Hanna, 2013). The N4A was established to address the specific needs unique to the student-athlete population both academically and personally (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). In a guiding textbook for administrators published in 1971, academic advisors were trained in the idea that "not only must the student athlete do his best in studying, but he is also responsible for his own educational goals, for charting his progress toward that goal, and for requesting help should he need it" (Hawthorne, 1971, p. 278).

The number of athletic advisors at Division I institutions has increased nearly 200 percent (from 497 in 1995 to 1,567 in 2013) over the last 20 years (NCAA, 2014). Academic advisors serve as liaisons between the academic and athletics communities. The primary goal of the academic advisor for student-athletes is to help increase student-athlete success in achieving educational goals, timely graduation, and preparation for lifelong learning and meaningful employment (Hanna, 2013). The advisor should be knowledgeable about the unique stresses student-athletes face and will monitor the academic progress of assigned student-athletes in accordance with the NCAA, Conference, and University requirements (Hanna, 2013)

Some people have accused academic advisors as being “eligibility brokers” who are merely trying to keep student-athletes eligible to play (Meyer, 2005). The staff of academic support units face a negative perception, both inside and outside higher education, as enablers whose only job is to keep student-athletes’ grades high enough to maintain their eligibility (Butterworth, 2015). Athletes are sometimes advised with the objective of maintaining eligibility, as one former academic advisor admitted: “These kids are steered into these less rigorous majors, or majors with friendly faculty” (Brady, 2008). University of Louisville Associate Director of Academic Services Christine Jackson says advisors let students pick majors and courses while pointing out those courses which might conflict with practices: "I like to say I'm the reality check" (Brady, 2008). Dede Allen, Associate Director of Athletics at the University of Alaska Anchorage, states, "Our philosophy is that it is our responsibility [as advisors] to provide the leadership and mentorship for the structure that allows student-athletes to find success, not provide their success, as that must be earned” (Meyer, 2015, p. 18).

Some student-athletes are unsuccessful in college when they are advised based on maintaining athletic eligibility rather than for their personal development and academic interest (Hittle, 2012). Love (2003) claims that a common misconception about advising is that it is a one-way passing of information. Academic advising is different from giving advice because advising is a dialogue between two people. The idea is that advising forms a relationship that helps with empowerment and self-discovery (Love, 2003).

With the demanding schedules of faculty and the increased course offerings at colleges and universities across the nation, academic advisors frequently assist in providing students with academic guidance and ensuring degree requirements are met (Bush, 1969; Kuhn, 2008). Consistently, research has shown that academic advisors can increase student retention

(Carstensen & Silberhorm, 1979; Lotkowski et al., 2004) as well as the overall student experience (Coll & Zalauett, 2007; Drake, 2011; Light, 2001; Thompson, 2009). Furthermore, academic advisors must be aware of not only the degree requirements and offerings at their institution, but they also must be able to navigate NCAA rules and regulations to ensure student-athletes are meeting continuing eligibility standards (Kelly, 2009). Kelly (2009) contends advisors must have effective leadership styles and be familiar in career counseling. Kelly also believes that positivity and goal setting are key to a successful relationship for advisors who work with at-risk student-athletes. Academic advisors not only assist students in classroom triumph, but also assist students in achieving their professional aspirations (Drake, 2011). Therefore, it is important that advisors are engaged in the lives of their students and monitor their student's overall personal growth. None of these studies, however, examine specific ways in which advisors interact with student-athletes to assist them in meeting both their individual goals and NCAA standards.

### *Learning Specialists*

The historical background of learning specialists is unclear, but the position did not originate within student-athlete support services (Bethel, Biffle, & Scragg, 2012). Previously, learning specialists were employed to provide assistance to both underprepared students and those with learning disabilities. Only recently has there been a noticeable increase in the number of learning specialists hired specifically to support student-athletes. The rise in the amount of admitted at-risk student-athletes has resulted in an increase in the number of learning specialists employed by athletic departments (Pickeral, 2012). In the past five years, at least one in five big-time athletic programs have created a learning-specialist position, and some departments have



added several to their staff number. The number of learning specialists grew almost 70 percent between 2012 and 2015 according to the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (Wolverton, 2016). In 2012, there were 51 members of the association who were learning specialists; last year there were 85 (Wolverton, 2016).

Although the need for learning specialists in college athletics is recognized, it is often unclear what learning specialists do since the position has varying responsibilities and desired qualifications (Pickeral, 2012). Their jobs typically involve working one-on-one with a caseload of around a dozen student-athletes to improve specific skills such as reading, comprehension, and test-taking, as well as helping students keep up with assignments (Wolverton, 2016). Learning specialists also help handle students' special accommodations, which may include note taking services, audio textbooks, and time extensions on tests. Head learning specialist and director for academic achievement at Towson University, Elysa Newman, states that ultimately “the job of a learning specialist is to encourage students to solve such problems themselves....The goal is for them to not have to need me” (Wolverton, 2016).

In 2012, Bethel et al. set out to further define the role of the profession in attempt to create clarity for colleagues across institutions. A survey was distributed to learning specialists nationwide, investigating their professional experiences. Fifty seven percent of the respondents reported their supervisor had not directly explained the criteria for how they were evaluated for their job performance and 60% reported they were evaluated somewhat according to their students' grades. Open-ended responses of past performance evaluations indicated the use of generic evaluation tools that learning specialists perceived as incompatible with their positions.

Based upon the results of this survey, nine professional standards for learning specialists were developed. This framework was an attempt to help further define the profession, to serve as

the foundation for a learning specialist job description, to create a more accurate and effective performance evaluation tool, most important, provide a set of best practices for supporting student-athletes' learning needs:

- (1) Assessment: identify individual students' learning needs in order to find potential learning challenges, determine effective educational interventions, and make referrals for further assessment when appropriate.
- (2) Intervention: develop and implement effective educational interventions and teach research-based learning strategies that comply with individual students' needs.
- (3) Student Evaluation: monitor and evaluate individual students' learning progress and make data-based recommendations for further academic support.
- (4) Service Coordination: effectively coordinate learning-related services with external providers in relation to students' needs.
- (5) Organization: retain a comprehensive system for documenting and reporting students' learning needs and progress.
- (6) Communication: communicate clearly and consistently with academic advisors, coaches, and other groups involved regarding students' learning needs and progress.
- (7) Student Engagement: establish and uphold high expectations for students in conjunction with providing the encouragement and constructive feedback students need to feel supported.
- (8) Program Evaluation: develop evaluation measures for a learning program's overall effectiveness and in order to show its value to the student-athlete academic support program.
- (9) Professional Development: Learn and improve on the job, by remaining informed about advances in learning sciences and actively participating in professional organizations related to the field (Bethel et al., 2012, p. 2).

Weiss (2011) explains that student-athletes with learning disabilities need structure and centralized support. Learning assistance programs, coupled with meetings with a learning specialist, can assist student-athletes with learning disabilities throughout the transition process (Weiss, 2011). Similarly, Clark and Perette (2002) provide suggestions for how to best serve the growing number of student-athletes with learning disabilities. These students with learning disabilities should be informed about their accommodations, and taught strategies to optimize learning (Clark & Perette, 2002). Stokowski (2013) examined experiences of FBS student-athletes with diagnosed learning disabilities. She found that the majority of the sample did not have an adequate understanding of their learning disability and, more shockingly, many did not even know they had been diagnosed with a learning disability. Her interviews also indicated at-

risk student-athletes took advantage of the support services available to them (mentoring, tutoring, etc.), but few student-athletes used the accommodations provided to them. Although there are academic plans in place to assist student-athletes with learning disabilities, little is being done to evaluate the impact that such programs are making on student-athletes' perceptions of their academic success (Clark & Perette, 2012; Weiss, 2011), particularly those considered at-risk and/or those who experience learning issues.

### *At-Risk Students*

Literature notes the inconsistency and variance in the definition of at-risk students among scholars (Hewitt, 2002). Pobywajlo (1996) divided at-risk students into three categories: 1) academically at-risk, referring to a student that has a diagnosed learning disability, failed to graduate college, had a low grade point average, and did not take rigorous high school classes; 2) emotionally at-risk, meaning a student who lacks self-confidence, may have had a drug issue, or have had a negative home environment; and 3) culturally at-risk, meaning a student's background differs from that of a typical student and an emphasis may not be placed on the value of higher education. Other definitions of at-risk have centered on grade point average and standardized test scores (Witherspoon, Long, & Chubick, 1999), lack of college preparation (Beckenstein, 1992), self-defeating behaviors (Waterhouse, 1978), and difficulty transitioning to college (Waterhouse, 1978).

When referring to student-athletes, "at-risk" is the term that is commonly used to describe student-athletes who are "at-risk" of not graduating from college (White, 2008). This normally encompasses students with a low standardized test score, a low grade point average, diagnosed learning disability, entering as a first-generation college student, and/or graduated from a low

performing high school. At-risk student-athletes can also refer to a student-athlete who, upon entering an institution, is at-risk of being a non-qualifier, which according to the NCAA (2013b) regulations, means he/she is ineligible for practice, participation, and financial aid during their first year.

The term “at-risk” appears in many athletic department manuals and reports; however, there appears to be no clear definition of what constitutes an “at-risk” student-athlete. There also seems to be a large variance in the types of academic support services athletic departments provide student-athletes (Stokowski et al., 2014). Recently, athletics academic coordinators reached out to other institutions in an attempt to identify a “reasonable definition of at-risk” (Stokowski et al., 2014). The Florida Atlantic Academic Plan (2009) indicates that a student-athlete with “major eligibility concerns” is considered at risk, as well as a student deemed as at-risk according to their academic advisor’s professional opinion (p. 2). The University of Washington (2009) considers a student with a low high school grade point average and/or a low standardized test score at-risk. At Murray State University, an at-risk student-athlete is any first semester freshman or transfer student, any student-athlete diagnosed with a learning disability, and any student-athlete who failed a class the previous semester. Southern Illinois University bases at-risk status on high school grade point average (2.5 or lower) and an ACT score of 21 or below (Stokowski et al., 2014). Given the conflicting definitions of “at-risk,” it may be difficult for athletic departments to identify successful student-athlete service programs. Whether labeling student-athletes “at-risk” and providing these student-athletes with resources is necessary or simply a way to assist coaches in recruiting top-tier student-athletes to college campuses is a topic of concern in athletics (Thamel, 2006; Wolverton, 2008).

*Students with Learning Disabilities*

As the awareness about conditions of learning disabilities increase, the diagnoses of learning problems also increases for all college students, but the number of student-athletes diagnosed with learning problems is especially apparent. Gurney et al. (2010) found an increase since 2003 of the number of college-admitted at-risk student-athletes with learning disabilities. In the span of 10 years, 1994-2004, the number of student-athletes diagnosed with a learning disability increased ten-fold (Wolverton, 2016). Some learning specialists believe the increases have come as a combination of more athletes being tested and that players are more scrutinized in the recruiting and admissions process than a regular student. Special education experts have applauded the increased efforts in testing and intervention since they believe it will help more athletes succeed academically. On the other side of the argument, some psychologists are concerned that athletes are being over-diagnosed in order to get the accommodations that may help them stay academically eligible (Wolverton, 2016).

The number of learning specialists has grown as athletic departments spend more time and money testing players for learning and attention problems. Some programs spend more than three million dollars a year on academic support for student-athletes, with much of this budget used to help students with more serious academic challenges (Wolverton, 2016). Many schools are testing more than just the student-athletes with the lowest academic performance. After initial screening scores, students may later receive more extensive mental-health testing, which can cost up to \$1,800 per student (Wolverton, 2016).

The N4A surveyed 168 athletic academic support personnel who represented 45 different athletic conferences, primarily at the NCAA Division I level (2007) which revealed that 45% of participants had a program specifically for student-athletes with learning disabilities. Of the athletic academic support personnel surveyed, 17 individuals stated that their athletic institution

screened all student-athletes for learning disabilities, and 22 individuals reported that student-athletes were individually selected and screened for potential learning disabilities (N4A, 2007). The NCAA (2009b) conducted a survey of the resources and behaviors of NCAA Division I member institutions regarding academic support success. The survey revealed that 3% of all NCAA Division I student-athletes were assessed for learning disabilities (NCAA, 2009b). Most NCAA institutions do not assess student-athletes for learning disabilities. The NCAA (2009b) reported that 39% of NCAA Division I student-athletes are not tested for learning disabilities.

Many Division I universities have services in place to assist student-athletes with learning disabilities; however, providing a quality education and teaching applicable life skills to student-athletes with learning disabilities is not a priority among some institutions of higher learning (Clark & Parette, 2002). Although 75% of athletic academic advisors possess master's degrees (NCAA, 2009b), Clark and Perette (2002) contend that most individuals working with this population of student-athlete are unqualified, and due to a lack of sufficient training, the needs of student-athletes with learning disabilities are not being met. Learning specialists have expressed several concerns about working with student-athletes with learning disabilities (N4A, 2007). Some reported lacking adequate knowledge and training to work with this population and others expressed that coaches did not understand learning disabilities. Overall, the main concern reported was the high percentage of student-athletes referred for testing for a learning disability.

### *Special Admits*

NCAA institutions often admit student-athletes who are not prepared for the academic rigors of higher education (Ganim, 2014; O'Neil, 2012). Due to the increase in academic standards by the NCAA, athletic departments have increased the amount of support services

available to student-athletes, especially this group of special admits who are labeled as “at-risk” students. It should be noted that not all at-risk student-athletes are special admits, but all special admits are considered at-risk. While the academic standards increased, the NCAA eased admission standards for incoming student-athletes through the initial eligibility index, or the “sliding scale,” which allows a student-athlete with a lower standardized test score to qualify for eligibility if they have a higher GPA (Pickeral, 2012). This process has led to an influx in the number of "at-risk" students admitted in NCAA Division I athletics. The problem created is that while it is easier for athletes to get into college, it is harder for them to stay eligible for competition.

Some institutions have “special” committees who evaluate prospective students who do not meet the institution’s standard admissions, including student-athletes admitted for primarily their athletic ability (Espenshade, Chung, & Walling, 2004; Gurney & Stuart, 1987). Admitted students who did not achieve the traditional admission standards may face challenges acclimating to the increased academic rigor of college courses (Huml , Hancock, Bergman, 2014). The current NCAA minimum eligibility requirements normally fall well short of the admission requirements at many institutions (Butler, 1995). Therefore, a problem occurs when coaches recruit talented athletes that meet the NCAA minimum eligibility requirements but do not meet the regular admissions requirements of the institution. This places pressure on the coaches, the academic advisors, and other academic services staff to help students remain academically eligible, which can result in finding a less rigorous academic path. Unfortunately, for these students, providing a quality educational experience is not always the priority (Butterworth, 2015).

Walter & Smith (1986) described the process of academic assessment for incoming student-athletes at a BCS football university. Before the student was officially recruited to the football or basketball team, coaches made an initial assessment of a recruit's potential to succeed based on interviews conducted with the student-athlete's parents, coaches, instructors, counselors, high school principals, and alumni. Then, if the student was admitted into the school and accepted onto the team, the student was required to attend a summer orientation where their ability was reassessed. This was a discussion primarily involving a committee made up of the athletic academic advisor, the head coach, and the director of the student-athlete academic support program. Based on these assessments, students who were identified as "at-risk" were assigned specialists for academic tutoring and mentoring, along with mandatory study hours in the academic facility. Following the completion of a student's first year, the student was assessed again for a third time. These results indicated whether a student continued with instructional sessions during their second year or was allowed to phase out of mandatory requirements (Walter & Smith, 1986).

Some of the recent NCAA reforms lead to concerns specific to underprepared student-athletes who may need remediation courses to help develop their basic academic skills upon arrival to the institution. Jennifer Quirk, director of Academic and Student-Athlete Support Services at Fairleigh Dickinson University, states,

For those [underprepared] student-athletes, the new markers can be difficult to achieve with needing to improve their basic skills and meeting degree-percentage requirements. Student-athletes required to take basic (non-credit) preparatory courses are generally also the ones who cannot successfully take more than fourteen or fifteen credits a semester (Meyer, 2005, p. 17).

Blackman (2008) believes that because of the numerous mandates by the NCAA for increased academic standards and accountability, it has severely limited opportunities for students of low



socioeconomic backgrounds that do come from adequate K-12 systems, namely students of African American and minority descent.

### *Athletic Department At-Risk Studies*

Literature regarding academically at-risk student-athletes is scarce, although there has been a greater focus on the population in recent studies. Hewitt (2002) examined at-risk student-athletes in the PAC-10 Conference to identify characteristics that lead to retention. The study found that a student-athlete's high school grade point average, the parent's educational level, college freshman year academic performance, and on-campus involvement all contributed to retention (Hewitt, 2002).

A study of first year freshmen at-risk football student-athletes competing in Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) revealed that the student-athletes were not highly motivated intrinsically and participating in their sport was one of the main reasons they enrolled in higher education (Monda, 2011). Petrucelli (2014) interviewed freshman football players, a population normally treated as at-risk, about their perceptions of the instructional effectiveness in higher education after completing their freshman year. Five themes emerged from the data: self-motivation, developed academic confidence, build a pedagogy of understanding, academic engagement, and mandatory academic support.

The motivation to succeed in school for participants came from external factors (Petrucelli, 2014). The student-athletes stated that athletic access was only possible if they performed well academically. In addition, an NCAA (2011) study found that student-athletes who did not identify or see themselves as a student lead to them being unsuccessful in college. Petrucelli's (2014) study also found that students perceived they could accomplish their goals

when they felt supported in their coursework and also felt that people believed in them. Studies show that a strong self-efficacy promotes higher achievement (Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman & Clearly, 2006). Simons and Van Rheenen (2000) discovered that the grade point average is normally higher for student-athletes who positively believe they have the ability to attain their educational outcomes. After students experience a positive learning environment, their academic achievement and persistence increases (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Positive learning experiences can help change students' self-perceptions and foster more motivated and confident students (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Petrucelli's study indicates that there was a heavy influence on academic performance and achievement by those people with whom they shared experiences about learning (Petrucelli, 2014). Participants also expressed that they wanted people to intervene and communicate more with them about their academic assignments and goals. Student-athletes expressed that effective support in their learning was when teaching techniques were employed that encouraged participation. The student-athletes recommended that academic support programs be mandated (Petrucelli, 2014). Students reported that these programs are important because it shows that the institution and its administrators care about them as an athlete and a student. Fink and Janes (2005) state that the element of caring in learning helps students develop new feelings, interests, and values, helping motivate students to learn more. The freshman participants recommended that academic support programs have peer-student and faculty leaders, as well as older student-athlete mentors. The literature on self-efficacy shows if students follow the behavior of successful students, it may increase their self-beliefs (Jarvela, 2001; Schunk, 1991).

Pettit (2013) looked at the institutional and individual challenges that at-risk student-athletes must overcome to perform academically at San Diego State University. The quantitative

results showed that despite having lower GPAs, the graduation rates and progress towards graduation suggest the at-risk students examined are still persisting to graduation. This is consistent with previous research involving at-risk student-athletes predicted not to succeed but who overachieved and persisted to graduation (Kane, Leo, Holleran, 2008). Incoming eligibility index scores do not have a statistically significant impact on GPA, but a significant relationship between high school GPA and college GPA does. This also was true in Astin's (1993) study finding that input variables, such as high school GPA, are strong predictors of academic performance in college. This finding suggests that athletic departments need to create a new threshold based on an index score that more accurately represents student-athletes' potential to succeed academically in college (Pettit, 2013). Additionally, admittance criteria should focus more on high school GPA than eligibility index, including college entrance exam scores, giving less consideration to test scores as an indicator of at-risk student's ability to succeed. As a result, coaches and administrators may look at recruiting and admitting at-risk student-athletes under special admission status based on their high school GPA rather than index scores.

### *NCAA Studies*

The NCAA conducted studies in an attempt to define and assist at-risk student-athletes. They developed the Graduation Risk Overview in 2008-09 "to help institutions perform real-time assessment of an individual student-athlete's potential barriers to graduation" (NCAA, 2009b, p. 1). The NCAA (2009c) also created the Facilitating Learning and Achieving Graduation (FLAG) report to identify factors and characteristics that may cause a student-athlete to be academically at-risk. This report established a data-based definition of what being at-risk means, and provided a system that academic support personnel can utilize to assist at-risk individuals.

The FLAG report identified three modules that, if implemented correctly, will address academic challenges with the at-risk population: (1) One for assessing individual student-athlete risk; (2) One for assigning suggested support services, based on the student-athlete's specific risk factors; and, (3) One for evaluating the overall effectiveness of the institution's student-athlete support services (NCAA, 2009c, p. 3)

After an extensive evaluation of the at-risk population, the risk factors were narrowed to include variables within five categories: academic background and achievement, role of academics and effort, transfer status, personal history and family demographics, and sport-related issues with team culture and profile level (NCAA, 2009b). The report and recommendations by the NCAA show the need for Division I level institutions to collaborate in order to successfully address potential concepts and solutions for supporting the at-risk student-athlete population (Pettit, 2013).

The Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in college (GOALS) studies look at the experiences and well-being of current student-athletes to help better inform NCAA committees, policymakers and member institutions on a range of important issues (NCAA, 2009b). The most recent GOALS survey, conducted in June 2016, showed that 16% of student-athletes are first-generation college students (NCAA research report, June 2016). First-generation college students are a population commonly labeled as at-risk. Twelve percent of white students and 24% of ethnic minority students reported being the first in their family to attend college. Only 46% of first-generation student-athletes said they would have attended a four-year institution if they were not participating in athletics. Parents were identified as the lead role in helping first-generation students choose a school, and 26% of students indicated that their family had expressed expectations of them playing professionally from a young age. Most (93%)

first-generation students expressed they are confident they will graduate college, but they also expressed at higher levels than non-first-generation students that they will become a professional athlete or have a job dealing with sports (NCAA research report, June 2016)

### *Student-Athlete Experience*

In order to assist student-athletes academic achievement, the student-athlete experience must be understood (Monda, 2011). There is still much to learn regarding the obstacles that student-athletes endure (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011) and the best resources for assisting them cope with these obstacles. The NCAA policies do not reflect the individual needs of student-athletes, specifically those who are at-risk (Hishinuma & Fremstaf, 1997). Student-athletes have unique needs, although academic support programs strive to meet the needs of student-athletes, appropriate action cannot be devised without proper understanding of the diverse student-athlete population and how they relate to support services personnel (Preacco, 2009). Comeaux and Harrison (2011) believe that “the failure to fully understand the distinct experiences of college student-athletes can have a significant impact on the extent to which we understand the need for specific forms of campus assistance and can affect questions of policy in higher education” (p. 235). Research on student-athlete experiences can assist in the development of policies and practice (Gayles, 2009).

For some student-athletes, academic difficulties can lead to emotional and social dissatisfaction (Barton & Fuhrmann, 1994; Clark & Parette, 2002). Stokowski (2013) found that most of the participants felt overwhelmed by their course load, and did not take advantage of accommodations or ask faculty members for assistance out of fear of being labeled with a disability. Further, White (2008) found some of the participants felt that the faculty, staff, and

even peers held them to low academic standards. The student-athlete's' relationship with their coach, and the willingness for their coach to help them, provided the participants with incentives and encouragement which appeared to play a significant role in the experience of most of the participants. White (2008) concluded that through education and perseverance, student-athletes could possibly overcome their perceived perception of being labeled; ultimately, providing the student-athletes with a more satisfying experience.

Benson (2000) found that throughout recruitment, orientation, and the first year, some at-risk student-athletes experienced limited academic expectations, which correlated with low academic performance and low perception of ability. In interviews, participants expressed that if the initial expectations of their academic counselor had been higher, they probably would have been higher achieving down the road. The student-athletes' accounts of their college experience suggest poor academic performance corresponds with their own understanding of and conclusions about what is happening to them in school. Poor academic achievement was not caused simply by a lack of ability, but produced by a series of actions by the students themselves and by others in the academic environment (Benson, 2000).

Peter Snyder (1996) found three major factors affecting the academic motivation and success of male student-athletes: academic preparation, post-graduate athletic expectations, and the social environment of the university. Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward (2013) studied how black college athletes articulate their perception of the following areas: definition of academic success and how support networks provided social support for their academic successes. The social support of black college athletes was based on their role as a college athlete and as a racial minority, reinforcing the idea of social isolation and alienation for black college athletes

attending predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWIHE). Academic success depends on interpretation and is based on each individual's preference and perspective.

Krystal Beamon (2008) interviewed former Division I African American student-athletes from revenue generating sports about their educational experience as a collegiate athlete. The athletes felt they had given far more than they had gained in their collegiate experience; they claimed they were underprepared for careers outside of playing professional sports. Most of the participants felt that their intrinsic motivation was the reason for their educational attainment and not a reflection of the institution's emphasis on their academic success. Participants felt that any reference to education was directly related to eligibility and discussions of academic achievement was merely "lip service." Most (15 out of 20) said they were in majors with courses known to be easy to pass or athlete-friendly departments. Combined with the pressure to remain eligible, student-athletes often selected more pragmatic educational goals.

Nowhere in Beamon's (2008) study did participants share that their academic advisor asked what major they thought they would be successful in or what that success would look like tangibly. When they were not finding success, many students were stuck and forced to keep going with poor grades and no interest in pursuing a career in their major field. These conversations were not productive or geared towards setting goals for the student-athlete academically. Only 20% of the students reported having an overall good collegiate experience on campus and 90% reported that the university was reaping greater benefits than the student-athletes (Beamon, 2008, pg. 362). With advising communication geared more towards student-athletes' needs and interests, majors can be selected that lead to more fulfilling career options and academic success that prepares them for life after college. Improved communication in athletics programs could help eliminate the feeling of student athletes being exploited.

Student athletes, especially minority students, when lacking proper support, tend to perform unsatisfactorily academically in the resulting hostile environment (Melendez, 2008; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). There is a stereotype present in higher education settings that student athletes are “dumb jocks” who are unconcerned with academics (Czopp, 2010; Lally, & Kerr, 2005). In a study looking at athletes' views of how they are perceived and treated by faculty and other students, the research showed that “fully a third of the athletes reported negative perceptions by their professors and TAs and less than 15% reported positive perceptions” (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, Jensen, 2007, p. 256). These negative perceptions were reported at a higher level for revenue athletes at 42.9% than non-revenue athletes at 30.6% (Simons et al., 2007).

When faced with overt hostility from other students regarding their supposed elite status and special accommodations, Simons et al. (2007) found that student-athletes' most common response was to reject the stigma and work harder (35.0%). Only 3.0% reject it by complaining to the professor while 7.1% complain to a higher power, which in most cases is their athletic academic advisor. However, a substantial percentage implicitly accept the stereotype by not participating in class (32%), dropping the class (15.8%), or not attending (5.0%). For nearly half of the student athletes surveyed, “many implicitly or explicitly accept the stigma by attempting to hide their athletic identity from their professors in order to avoid the stereotype” (p. 267). The report found negative stereotypes for both men and women and all races of students who participated in the study.

Ridpath's 2010 study focused on the perceptions of the student athletes' usage of academic services, conducted with a survey distributed to 358 senior standing student athletes at non-BCS Division I schools. The results concluded “for certain segments of the surveyed



population, specialized academic support services are viewed more as a necessity rather than a luxury in the APR era” (Ridpath, 2010, p. 265). The study found that male minority students felt that the service was necessary to remain academically eligible, men’s football and basketball used the services more than other groups, and male students use the services more than female students (Ridpath, 2010).

Stokowski (2013) found that many participants expressed that they took advantage of the resources offered to them by the athletic department. Since many students with learning disabilities tend to fall behind in their school work (Lerner & Johns, 2012), all of the participants in her study had tutors, and all but one participant worked with a learning specialist. Participants learned strategies that helped their learning process. They used flashcards, memorization techniques, studying before the test, repetition, taking notes, and sitting at the front of the class as strategies to help them learn. Stokowski (2013) found that at-risk student-athletes felt that their tutors, mentors, and athletic academic advisors played an important role in their academic success, and many of the participants relied so heavily on the support of tutors and mentors that several did not study or do any schoolwork when they were not with a tutor or mentor. Furthermore, the literature describes the large amount of money that higher education is spending on academic support for student-athletes (Wolverton, 2008). Thus, if there is a need for these services and clearly student-athletes are utilizing such resources, investing in tutors and mentors appears to be a positive experience and a wise investment.

### *Restrictions*

Many of the student-athletes who do graduate have less marketable majors. The NCAA and member institutions have been accused of exploiting the talent of athletes while

simultaneously denying them access to a quality education and limiting employment opportunities upon finishing their athletic careers. This is seen as especially true for African American student-athletes (Beamon, 2008). Many student-athletes are not able to change their major or drop courses because of eligibility requirements. Certain majors may be off limits due to class scheduling conflicts with practices (i.e. majors with afternoon labs or night classes). These restrictions often cause student-athletes to choose majors based more on athletic participation compatibility and less on those in which they have interests (Adler & Adler, 1987; Beamon, 2008; Cornelius, 1995). As a result, many student-athletes enter majors in which they are underprepared and non-invested, leading to a higher probability of under achieving academic success.

Academic clustering is a phenomenon that occurs when 25 percent or more of the members of one team share a single academic major (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987). One theory for why major clustering occurs comes from the idea that athletes are more comfortable in classes that have more athletes enrolled; therefore, they tend to choose majors and classes with more athletes (McGuin & O'Brien, 2004). Academic clustering has been found to negatively impact future career earnings and increase probability of students leaving college without earning a degree (Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010). In some cases the players later argue that their General Education degree is virtually worthless and even refuse to include it on job applications (Steeg, 2008). Ridpath says,

Whenever you see a team with a high percentage of players in one major, you have to ask if the advisers are advising athletes on staying eligible for four or five years or advising them how to prepare for their next 55 years (Brady, 2008).

A study involving most of the Big Six Conferences (The Big Ten, Atlantic Coast Conference, Southeastern Conference, Big East, Pac-10, and Big-12), found that clustering went

beyond the 25% value. Fountain and Finley (2010) discovered that the upperclassman minority football players clustered at a rate of 50% or higher in a single major in eight of the 57 football programs they studied. One of those eight teams had 75% of upperclassmen players in a single major. These categories were classified as “super clusters” (50% and higher) and “mega clusters” (75% and higher) of minority football players. In a study of football players in the Southeastern and Pac-10 Conferences, Otto (2010) found student-athletes are not picking majors reflecting their interests or career aspirations. In the media guide, some players listed favorite courses and subjects that were not in their stated major. Fountain and Finley (2011) found that a BCS football program had a staggering number of its most talented players in the clustered major.

The high levels of clustering promote the idea that athletics programs will encourage the academic plan of least resistance in order for highly recruited student-athletes to maintain eligibility. Despite the efforts of the NCAA in academic reform and the phenomena of major clustering, college football programs continue to produce low graduation rates, particularly for minority players (NCAA, 2008a). The NCAA’s continual increase in academic accountability will most likely increase the clustering problem in the future, as some academics have warned (Capriccioso, 2006).

### *Theoretical Framework*

Social constructionism is a sociological theory of knowledge that investigates how social phenomena or objects of social knowledge develop within certain social contexts. Berger and Luckmann (1991) championed the idea of social constructionism that asserts all knowledge about reality is socially constructed. Reality is always socially defined, but it is individuals and groups of individuals who define it. People’s ideas and beliefs about reality can differ greatly in

comparison to another group of individuals based on social location and interests (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

One key problem with investigating the social construction of “academic success” is identifying how this construction came about. The origin of these beliefs could be attributed to the student-athletes, the academic support staff, coaches, friends, or family. For instance, it is possible that a student-athlete’s perception of success involves experiences in school before college that were either refuted or reinforced during their experience in higher education. Or, for professional participants, their perception may be constructed from personal experience in school or from experiences working with student-athletes. Regardless of where these definitions first originated, individuals have their own construction of “academic success.”

Relationships are continuous negotiations of goals, perceptions, and identities. Relational dialectics theory (RDT) describes this process and has its roots in the central idea that both literal and metaphorical meaning is created through dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981). RDT is based on the idea that relating is a complex process of meaning making (Baxter & Norwood, 2014). An RDT analysis looks to understand how meaning is constructed through the interpenetration of competing discourses. In RDT, discourse is a system of meaning or “a set of propositions that cohere around a given object of meaning” (Baxter, 2011 p. 2). The theory looks at the communicative processes and features that enable understanding of the dialogic nature of relating.

RDT has been found to be most productive theoretical framework in interpretive communication research since the goal is to understand how meanings are socially constructed and sustained through communication. The current form of RDT involves both the interplay of competing discourses and the discursive power that creates inequality (Baxter and Norwood).

RDT in its current form provides a way to examine the “monologic *and* dialogic potential of communication: how some meanings get reproduced to the point of calcification as well as how new meanings can be created through dialogic struggle” (Baxter & Norwood, 2014 p. 281). RDT is the appropriate framework for understanding how the meaning of academic success is constructed from the intermingling of the competing discourses of the student-athlete, advisor, and learning specialist. RDT proposes that every utterance is embedded in a larger utterance chain and that meaning is constructed through struggle among different, often opposing, discourses of varying force. Specifically, the goal of this study is to analyze how student athletes, advisors, and learning specialists co-construct the meaning of academic success based on the individuals’ own competing perceptions of what academic success encompasses—their similarities and differences. The study will examine the interplay of these competing discourses and how they affect constructing the meaning of academic success for the student-athlete. All voices must be heard in order to avoid a monologue where students have no autonomy.

Desires are psychological constructs, and our meaning-making of a need or desire is embedded in a system of meaning or discourse, which is the focus of RDT. The desires of student-athletes’ involving academic success may differ from the desires of learning specialists and advisors. At the same time, the needs of each student-athlete to perform academically are different and so are the services that the advisor and learning specialist can provide. In looking at co-construction, the way one group speaks depends on to whom they are talking. Student-athletes may speak differently with their advisor than their learning specialist and vice versa.

Self-determination theory (SDT) maintains that an understanding of human motivation requires a consideration of innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Social contexts and individual differences that support

satisfaction of the basic needs facilitate natural growth processes including intrinsically motivated behavior and integration of extrinsic motivations, whereas those that forestall autonomy, competence, or relatedness are associated with poorer motivation, performance, and well-being.

SDT states that autonomy is the major factor for people to consistently engage in activities. Autonomous individuals engage in behaviors and activities that interest them or that they personally value (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Engaging in autonomous activities causes individuals to believe that the resulting behaviors and activities represent who they are (Friedman, 2003). Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2002) claim that autonomy is the key to integrating behaviors into one's sense of self and is required for people to experience self-determination. They claim that people have an innate need to both be in control of their choices and to have those choices determine their behaviors. The choices of self-determined individuals result from their ability to assess the environment, their needs in that context and, in some situations, to choose to give up control to others.

Relational autonomy describes how persons' self-concepts are influenced by relationships, mutual dependencies, and power dynamics (Christman, 2004). Given this idea, student-athletes may find attachment and unity with others as a source of motivation, but this does not decrease their sense of autonomy (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Consequently, even if external forces (such as learning specialists and advisors) influence a student-athlete's behavior, autonomous individuals still believe they are engaging in the behavior because they want to and because it is important to them. This is the case given that the individual is not choosing that behavior due to compliance, coercion, or conformity (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Friedman, 2003).

Through this framework, student-athletes may be motivated due to the relational influence of their learning specialist and advisor, but as long as student-athletes do not feel they are forced by the support staff to make certain decisions, they still can have autonomy. Deci and Ryan (2000) claim three steps in internal motivation: acknowledging wants, coming up with options, and letting go. In a setting for student-athletes and academic support services these steps would encompass: (1) Acknowledge wants-listen to the student-athlete and their perception of academic success; (2) Come up with options-advisor-put together degree plan/courses of interest, Learning specialist-help the student better understand their learning style and disadvantages. Then provide support and implement educational strategies that they can use to be successful, and (3) Let go- at the end of the day, the student is responsible for their education and all we can do is set them up for success the best way we know how. Ultimately, it is up to the student-athlete to engage in academic practices and behaviors that positively affect their academic performance. However understanding the individual wants, needs, and desires, of student-athletes coupled with academic motivation, can help advisors and learning specialists set students up for academic success (Ridpath, Klger, Mak, Eagle, & Letter, 2007).

There is a need for greater transparency in whether student-athletes truly are making academic progress and receiving a meaningful academic experience. The NCAA reforms are based on quantity (e.g., numbers of graduates and GPA) and this emphasis will most likely have an impact on quality (Fountain and Finely, 2011). Studies show that an effectively regulated academic progress measure that satisfies all institutions, students, and the NCAA is still missing. Environmental challenges pose a risk to academic achievement, but the degree of this risk varies. Some research shows that even when students are given support, they are not taking advantage of it. Opinions vary regarding what is the best support system to use, and institutional support

varies (Butterworth, 2015). Research is needed to further examine how student-athletes perceive their relationship with academic support staff and their academic success. The current study seeks to better understand the communication process between academic support staff and at-risk student-athletes involving their perceptions of academic success and how academic success is socially constructed. Specifically, the following research questions are offered:

Research Question 1: What is academic success?

RQ 1a: How do academic advisors define academic success?

RQ1b: How do learning specialists define academic success?

RQ1c: How do student-athletes define academic success?

RQ1d: What do student-athletes perceive their advisor and learning specialist would identify as academic success for them?

Research Question 2: How is academic success socially constructed among academic support staff and at-risk student-athletes?

RQ 2a: How do academic advisors socially construct academic success with student-athletes?

RQ 2b: How do learning specialists socially construct academic success with student-athletes?

RQ 2c: How do student-athletes perceive academic success is socially constructed with their advisor and their learning specialist?



### III. Methodology

The current study is exploratory. The relationships/interactions among learning specialists, academic advisors and student-athletes, have received little research attention. The voices of persons who play those three roles provide the richest types of data for gaining a better understanding of how academic advisors and learning specialists function in instilling in student athletes a positive attitude of academic success. Qualitative research is an inductive method that starts with the data and develops theories based on that data (Orcher, 2016). This makes it the appropriate method to use when researching a new phenomenon since there is not much previous data or existing theories on which to draw. A qualitative approach is also helpful when studying the knowledge and practices in a particular field from a variety of participants' perspectives and backgrounds.

#### *Sample*

Once I obtained approval from the University's Institutional Review Board I began conducting my study. To recruit individuals to participate in the interviews I sent out a letter to the director of student-athlete academic support at every institution in the Power Five FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision) conferences. The letter requested permission to conduct a semi-structured one-on-one interview with a learning specialist, an academic advisor, and an academically at-risk student-athlete at their institution. In addition, I sent the IRB protocol approval forms and the list of interview questions that would be used. Overall, I interviewed 18 individuals at six different FBS institutions from varying conferences and regions in order to get a broader range of experiences. Participants from the SEC, ACC, PAC 12, and Big XII conferences are represented.

Mason (2002) emphasizes the importance of sampling and the selection of participants in qualitative research projects. For this reason, participants for this study were selected using processes that Patton (2002) and Hennink, Hutter, and Baliey (2011) termed purposeful sampling and purposive recruitment, respectively. Individuals were sought out who could share insight and understanding to uncover the process taking place. These types of participants are referred to as “information rich” (Patton 2002; Hennink et al., 2011). I was given the contact information of either an advisor or learning specialist from each school, and they identified the student-athlete. The student-athlete needed to have regular meetings with both a learning specialist and advisor, and I preferred that they were a junior or senior academically. These guidelines were to ensure the student could speak about their relationships with their academic counselor and learning specialist about their academic pursuits.

Demographic information was obtained in the initial portion of the interview through verbal self-identification. This information was collected in order to describe the sample. The learning specialists and advisors were asked their race, sex, age, level of education obtained thus far, and the amount of time they have worked in academic support services. The professional participants (learning specialists and advisors) varied in race, as there were nine Caucasian, one African American, one Pacific Islander, and one Hispanic participant. There were two male and ten female interviewees, with the learning specialist participants all being female. The ages ranged from 26-57, and the years of experience in the field ranged from 2-19. The level of education obtained among participants included two bachelor’s degrees, seven holding master’s degrees, and two PhD’s. The student-athletes were asked to self-identify their race, sex, and age. Student-athlete participants varied in race as there were four African Americans, one Caucasian, and one participant who was African American and Caucasian. Participants’ classification in the

classroom had a broad range, including one second semester freshmen (early enrollee), two juniors, two seniors, and one student in their first semester of graduate school; ages ranged from 18-23. All participants identified as male, and all were a part of the football team at their institution.

### *Instruments*

I conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with each participant via phone calls or face-to-face interviews. I conducted three face-to-face interviews and 15 phone interviews: six with learning specialists, six with advisors, and six students who were from six different academic institutions. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview that was audio recorded. Interview questions were developed specifically for the study (Appendix A). Interviewees could give as detailed of an answer as they saw fit. If the opportunity allowed or was necessary, responses were probed to allow for greater detail. The interviews ranged from 14-45 minutes for academic advisors, 24-61 minutes for learning specialists, and 8-29 minutes for student-athletes. Participants were informed that they could remove themselves from the study at any time.

Informed consent forms were issued to each interviewee guaranteeing the anonymity of any answers or identifying information released by the participants (Appendix B). Per IRB request, the student-athletes were not asked to sign a consent form, but instead to provide verbal consent at the beginning of their interview. The information obtained from participants was held in strict confidentiality. To uphold confidentiality, participants were referred to as “one learning specialist/advisor/student stated....” or “one participant stated” in order to ensure anonymity.

Participants' names, personal information, and/or answers were kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and the University of Arkansas policies.

### *Pretest Data*

I conducted a pilot study to evaluate and determine the effectiveness of the interview questions. Individuals participating in the pilot study were recruited using personal access from my job working with these specific populations. Pilot participants helped with modifying interview questions to make them clearer and more applicable. The only changes made included adjusting wording to help clarify the main intent of the question and adding a few ideas for probing questions. The final draft of the interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited through my own personal network and a standard email sent to athletic academic support directors at BCS institutions inquiring about participation in the study. When institutional representatives expressed interest, I sent them the IRB approved forms, including the informed consent form to sign, as well as the interview questions I would be using. Through email exchanges, individual one-on-one phone interviews were set up with the advisors and learning specialists. After persons from the two professional roles were interviewed, a student that had agreed to interview with me from each institution was selected. The advisor or learning specialist helped coordinate an interview time with the student-athlete. Each interview was conducted over the phone and audio recorded in an empty tutor room in the Jerry and Gene Jones Family Student-Athlete Success Center on campus at the University of Arkansas or at my apartment.

I called participants during the scheduled interview time and began by thanking them for agreeing to participate in my study. To refresh the participants' memory and inform them on the topic of the interview, I read them the study's purpose statement. A confidentiality agreement and consent form had been signed prior to the interview by the learning specialists and advisors, and the student interviews began with a statement of verbal consent after the informed consent statement was read. Once the interview was completed, I stopped the audio recording after I had ended the call.

### *Data Analysis*

Content analysis is a method that enables the researcher to make legitimate inferences about the content and context of messages through the process of analyzing data for reoccurring themes (Baxter, 1991). I employed thematic analysis, a form of content analysis, which uncovers common themes among narrative accounts (Krippendorff, 1980). I used thematic content analysis to identify emerging themes within the data and used a grounded theory approach to create overarching themes and a theory that would answer my research questions.

After I finished the majority of the interviews, I went back and started transcribing the interviews verbatim. I listened to the audio recordings and typed down exactly what I heard, including incorrect grammar and mispronounced words. After finishing all transcriptions, I began a thematic analysis of the data. Thematic analysis generates common themes about relational discourse using specific criteria: "(a) recurrence, (b) repetition, (c) forcefulness" (Owen, 1984, p. 275) Recurrence occurs when a theme is expressed multiple times throughout discourse. Different words can be used to describe the phenomena, as long as the language denotes similar meaning. Repetition indicates that a theme is conveyed through use of exact

discourse. In addition, forcefulness, including “vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses serving to stress and subordinate some utterances from other locations in oral reports” can indicate a theme present in the data (Owen, 1984, p.275).

I analyzed the data in separate groups based on roles: academic advisors, learning specialists, and student-athletes. I began with the transcripts from interviews with academic advisors, moved on to learning specialists, and finished by analyzing the student-athletes’ transcripts. I conducted each group’s analysis the same way. First, I read through each transcript for comprehension and to refresh myself on the interview data. I then re-read each transcript at least two more times or until I gained a sense of overall meaning. Next, as I read each transcript, I wrote down the key phrases, explanations, examples, and ideas expressed by each participant. I re-read and repeated this step multiple times to make sure all of the key components were pulled out.

Once I narrowed down the text and had an overall sense of meaning, I began the grounded theory approach of open coding. I re-read the compilation of keynotes taken from each participant’s transcript and began to “code” for separate ideas identified through the reoccurring, repetitive, or forceful thoughts and language I had previously identified. I created a list of bolded codes for each interview question along with subcategories. For example, growth might have two sub codes: academic and personal. I re-read the transcripts again to make sure the codes identified were accurately portrayed.

The final stage of the grounded theory approach involves developing core categories. To derive common units of meaning across participants, I looked for similar ideas/codes that emerged repeatedly throughout each transcript. I created a table (Appendix D) for research question one that illustrated the overarching themes and reoccurring major themes found for each

population based on the codes and categories collected from the interview questions. To develop into a theme or subtheme, the code had to appear in the data at least two times.

I then looked for the best ways to compile the themes from the table into overarching themes that encompass the other themes and subthemes. These overarching themes attempt to describe the process and relationship of how the themes and subthemes work together (Orcher, 2016). Finally, I compiled all of the relevant data and organized it to answer each of the research questions. After completing separate analyses of the groups, I noted similarities and differences in themes between and across the groups to use in the discussion portion of the study.

The final stage of the grounded theory approach involves developing core categories. To derive common units of meaning across participants, I looked for similar ideas/codes that emerged repeatedly throughout each transcript. I created a table for each interview question that labeled the themes and subthemes and then retrieved quotes from the transcripts that illustrated the reoccurring themes. To develop into a theme or subtheme, the code had to appear in the data at least two times by two different participants.

## IV. Results

### Research Question 1

RQ1 posited, “What is academic success?” I broke up the question into three parts in relation to participant group:

RQ1a How do academic advisors define students’ academic success?

RQ1b: How do learning specialists define students’ academic success?

RQ1c: How do student athletes define academic success?

RQ1d: What do student-athletes perceive their advisor and learning specialist would identify as academic success for them?

Overarching themes were found for each research question subset.

*RQ1a: “How do academic advisors define students’ academic success?”*

Two major themes were found in the data: personal development and academic achievement in the form of degree completion and individual standards.

#### Academic Achievement

Degree completion. The most identified theme for Research Question 1a was graduation/degree completion. In every interview except one, graduation or degree completion was identified in relation to academic success. Although other factors pertaining to success were identified, it was communicated that the ultimate goal was degree completion/graduation based on its frequency in the data. For example, an advisor stated,

I think always when we look at (academic success) we look at maximizing ability and potential for each student. I think that being said, graduation is always the ultimate goal for all of our students that we have that come through our program, so that is the main one.



Another advisor expressed that the ultimate level of success is graduation since student-athletes are working towards a degree while they are enrolled:

I think that graduation is definitely probably number one or key priority... They are coming to school maybe to do other things, but they are coming to school to get their degree and work towards that degree. I think that is the ultimate level of academic success.

One advisor expressed that the importance and lasting value of a degree in regard to it setting up student-athletes for success once they leave campus: “For me, the degree is probably the biggest piece of helping these young people walk out of here with something that nobody can ever take from them.”

Individual Standards. Advisors acknowledged that students come in at different levels of academic skills and preparation, which influences academic achievement. One P stated,

Academic success is based on the ability of the student-athlete you are working with and is that student meeting the standard that their ability provides... Some students are far less prepared for college and the rigor of college. Academic success for them is garnering the skill set to become independent. So it is definitely dependent because it is always about meeting the individual standards for that student.

Another P described success as meeting the student where they are at academically and then push them further: “To me, that is successful if they can achieve what their baseline is and if I can push them a little bit further.”

### **Personal Development**

The second major theme identified for RQ1a was personal development. Many advisors expressed the importance of students growing as a person during their time at an institution:

I also think for some students experiencing new things and being active can be success. Growing as a person, maturing... I think students obviously mature, they come in young and naïve and wide-eyed and silly, and they kind of grow up a little bit.

Another P expressed academic success as a range that includes if they “walk away having some value and just different life experience... figuring out what life is about.” While degree

completion was expressed as the overall goal, some P's expressed the ability to do what it takes to get a degree as a sign of success: "How do they become independent learners and how are they able to utilize support, but grow through that person in order to become able to do work in their own ... it is a process."

*RQ1b: "How do learning specialists define students' academic success?"* The overarching theme identified for RQ1b was maximizing individual potential. The data reveal that there is a type of academic success that involves pushing limits, and there is success that comes from skill development, sense of self-awareness, and level of engagement that leads to autonomy.

### **Maximizing Individual Potential**

Personal Best. Participants expressed the importance of evaluating success based on the individual's ability. One learning specialist identified academic success as

a student-athlete performing to the best of their abilities, especially when they exceed those standards that are expected for them or set for them. I think for some people those standards are higher and for some lower. I think as long as they are doing the best they can . . . and figuring out how to be successful then I would call that success.

Self-Awareness and Skill Development. Learning specialists expressed a student's ability to be self-aware as a learner and develop skills to help them academically that they did not have before as academic success. One P stated that success is about "being able to understand your strengths and weaknesses." Another P stated success is "figuring out how to be successful." Self-awareness was expressed by another P as

...having a sense of competence and knowing where to go to get help or being able to ask for help when you know that you need it or being able to handle things on your own and being aware of your own stuff. Your own learning style, your own learning approach, being aware of how you learn best for whatever topic.

One participant gave an example of what skill development might look like: “they couldn't put three sentences on a piece of paper when you first started but by the time they graduate they are over there just typing away on a paper and only ask you a few questions.”

In a more general sense, one P expressed that grades do not define academic success. Instead, if a student leaves the institution with a different level of thinking: “being able to analyze, evaluate, and create which would be the hierarchy of Bloom’s taxonomy. To me, that would be academic success, being able to achieve that level of thinking in multiple disciplines.”

Engaging in the Process. The last theme for academic success that appeared in the learning specialists transcripts dealt with effort and navigating college. One P expressed that success occurs if a student struggled to pass in high school or “didn't care...and they come back and (they are) proud of the C.” Or when a student “buy(s) into academics, getting a degree, being here, and then eventually the goal of success is getting them to be independent.”

Embracing and appreciating the value of their opportunity and where it can take them was found to indicate success to one P:

I want them to embrace that and appreciate that and to do the best that they can do within their own based on who they are. I want them to embrace that and appreciate that and to do the best that they can do within their own based on who they are.

Along with caring and buying into the system, participants also expressed adjusting to college as success

It is just a total shock to come in to a school like (institution’s name) where the academics are so rigorous and to be able to settle into that...to understand the system, to be able to operate within it, to be able to complete the academics...

*RQ1c: “How do student athletes define academic success?”* Two major themes were identified: Meeting Grade Based Standards and Work Ethic Resulting in Personal Goals.

## **Meeting Grade Based Standards**

Student-athlete participants indicated GPA as the main indicator of academic success. Some P's expressed a specific GPA as an academic goal: "finish above a 3.0 overall when I graduate. Get a degree." Others were more vague and only indicated GPA in its relationship to passing or even merely not failing: "Having a good core GPA, having a good GPA at the end of the semester, passing all of my classes..." or "... good grades, I feel like that is success. Just not failing any classes, that is a huge success for me too." Other P's expressed staying on track and completing assignments, but again, it came back to GPA:

Stay on top of your stuff, your assignments, your grades. Keep your GPA up... Do all your assignments on time so that at the end if you do bad, your grade won't drop bad because you were always doing the assignments and you were always on track.

## **Work Ethic Resulting in Personal Goals**

The other theme for RQ1c went beyond grades and dealt with work ethic and personal goals. One P expressed that passing doesn't indicate success; success is performing academically like he is capable of and putting in the work to achieve that standard:

Academic success is basically getting everything of school right now... I want to finish it how I know I can. Like I don't wanna just pass, I want to be the best that I can... That is academic success to me, just really putting an effort towards everything I am doing now.

Another student expressed that success is built on his own standards and expectations: "To me, I know what I am capable of and when I feel like I am living up to the standard that I set for myself." One student noted that while "passing with a good grade" was the goal, he would be satisfied knowing he put effort in and worked for: "The grade I get, I would want to be an A or B, but if I knew I tried and I still got around a 70, I would be fine with it." It also was mentioned that success could deal with work ethic that will transition after college: "... learning how to do the work that needs to be put in for the workplace and regular life after college."

*RQ1d: What do student-athletes perceive their advisor and learning specialist would identify as academic success for them?* Student-athletes perceived that their advisor would identify eligibility (e.g., graduation/degree and GPA) and effort (e.g., showing up to appointments and going to class) as academic success. Student-athletes perceived that learning specialists would say that work ethic is more important than the grade and academic success is building academic skills.

### **Eligibility**

Success, from the student-athletes' perspective, included the components of eligibility. One student identified "Graduating on time." Another stated, "Getting a degree." One P explicitly claimed he thought his advisor viewed maintaining eligibility as academic success:

Getting all 12 hours so that you are eligible to play. So that is the goal no matter what. You have a low GPA, but as long as you are eligible I feel like is the ultimate goal as far as academics go. And they are the one that has to tell the coaches he can't play this season because you aren't eligible.

Specific grades were also identified: "A's and B's." One student believed that the standard for success was set by their past academic performance and the labeling of a team role model reinforced the academic expectation:

Well C's are definitely not in the picture. I don't even remember the last time I get C's unless it is a really tough class or if I knew I would get a C... Sometimes you think that another class is more important, but if bring back C's everybody is like that is unacceptable because they know I can do better. Every semester for the past 4 semesters I have had a 3.3 or higher so I have a high standard and they expect me to be that role model for the rest of my teammates and show the younger people that this is what you need to be at and lets not settle. That is the minimal; C's is the minimum. And some classes and courses or harder than others and certain majors but you set the example like you can do it and that if you just put the work in you get great results.

## **Effort**

Effort was expressed as something advisors see as academic success. For example, one student identified an academic behavior as success in their advisor's eyes: "coming in and everything, being in class all the time..."

## **Work Ethic**

Student-athletes indicated that work ethic is more important to a learning specialist than grades:

They want you to get good grades, but they really want you to put the time in your work. Like if you get a C and put all your work ethic is good. Like you get work done and you get a C then so be it because you worked hard on it and you finished it. But you have to do everything possible for you to get a good grade. I used to turn my papers in four or five days early to get it viewed by the teacher and then they will send it back and I fix whatever, if I still got a C but I did everything possible to get an A or a B but if I still got a C then as long as I put the effort in. You gotta know what you are putting in. I think academic success to them is just doing everything you can possible to get the best grade possible.

Learning how to work hard to set yourself up for success in the working world:

Just learning how to put in the effort that is going to make you successful in whatever job you do. She doesn't really care about what grades I get as long as I put in the work and do the best that I can.

## **Building Academic Skills**

Learning specialists see academic growth during a student's time in college as academic success:

Like when I first came in I didn't like doing papers as much. My papers were kind of bad, like grammar and stuff. I used to just write and didn't make any grammar corrections. And now, she will read my papers and say I am a better writer.

and that small achievements are considered success: "Pretty much the small things. The small achievement that you may have like doing good on a discussion board."

## Research Question 2

Research Question 2 posited, “How is academic success socially constructed among academic support staff and at-risk student athletes?” I broke up the question into three parts in relation to participant group:

RQ 2a: How do academic advisors socially construct academic success with student-athletes?

RQ 2b: How do learning specialists socially construct academic success with student-athletes?

RQ 2c: How do student-athletes perceive academic success is socially constructed with their advisor and their learning specialist?

Overarching themes were found among each group: Academic Advisors use communication and instrumental support, Learning Specialists develop accountability through problem solving and socio-emotional development. Student-athletes’ responses were broken up into how academic success is socially constructed with their learning specialist and with their advisor. Student-athletes identified communication with their advisors in the forms of information (courses/requirements) and serving as a safety net as the main components of success construction, while they indicated learning specialists facilitate success academically and socio-emotionally.

*RQ 2a: “How do academic advisors socially construct academic success with student athletes?”* Two major themes emerged for RQ2 from advisor transcripts: communication and instrumental support. Each of these themes is illustrated through detailed descriptions of subthemes as expressed in the data.

## Communication

Relationship Building through Conversations. All participants indicated that communicating with students, Learning Specialists, and Student-Athletes builds positive relationships. Being available for conversations was identified as important for relationship building:

Just communicating, being available. I think that is also a key. Guys will call or text or Facetime at sometimes the most inopportune time, but just being available to them. I think if you are available, they see that and if you are not, they also see that.

Another P expressed that an open door policy builds relationships and promotes effective communication:

I love to have one on one, I love to have that conversation. The only way I am going to know is if you communicate with me and I try to be very open door. Most of my guys will come in and say I don't like this tutor it is not working. We have a lot of open door discussions about how can I support you best.

Honest communication was emphasized, even if the conversation is hard. As one P explained, "Be honest, and communicate. I would much rather deal with garbage that is truthful as opposed to concocting lies. Honestly, do your own work. If you suck at it, you suck at it."

Conversations also helped advisors figure out how to approach their student to motivate them to be successful: "Some of my students really need encouragement, some of my students need positive reinforcement, some need a tough stance." Through strong relationships, advisors are able to figure out what type of learner students are to be able to structure them with support and classes where they can be successful:

I think it is about learning how the student is, how they work, what makes them tick, recognizing things like okay coming into study table after practice this kid is lethargic and having issues getting down to work so maybe we should have study table in the morning. Like things of that nature should be very beneficial and the only way you learn things like that is if you take the time to get to know the students.



Task Reminders. Advisors also communicate with students by creating assignment sheets with the students and/or sending reminders. The following quote is an example of how a conversation regarding tasks would go:

we do something called weekly task sheets here. They do that each week with their mentors and as a coordinator (advisor), I get those each Friday from the mentors. So what I do each time I sit down with my student is we sit down and go through day to day: what has been done, what needs to get done, what fire do we need to put out today, is there something due today. Advisors also send reminders about tasks and assignments to students through texts and phones calls. For example, one of the P's told me that they just sent reminders before our interview: "one of my guys I will text, you know here is what you have got for the week or this is due today, what is your plan? I sent a few of those this morning.

### **Instrumental Support**

Information: Major/Career/Resources. Advisors work to inform students of course requirements in order to help them make a game plan that includes informed decisions about careers/majors and preparation for course expectations. This can occur in the form of conversations, as one P notes it is a discussion with them:

I try and sit down with my students and see if this is what you want to do or this is where you want to go, this is what you need to do. It is kind of the direction you need to take, you think you want to be in broadcasting, well you can't be scared to take a public speaking class. If you are, then we need to kind of rethink some things here. I mean be very, very, very open.

Advisors also look to expand the horizons and inform student-athletes of all options:

Talk to them about the different areas. You know I think a problem with many of the students that I deal with is they don't know what majors exist, they don't know. They all say they want to, not all, but football guys say I want a job that makes a lot of money. Well there is not a degree that leads to that, that is not how it works. I try and tell them from my own experience, study something that you are going to enjoy because you will work a little harder at it, you are gonna do it a little bit more.

One P explained that their institution provides a visual aid to help students see the breakdown of their requirements and options:

If we are talking about strictly classes and what we have to do and need to do and here is where we can add some things that are interesting. We literally have the visual in front of them to be like, okay this is what we have to do, when do we have to do this, lets talk about that.

Advisors look to figure out what students want to do and then provide them with options based on their assessment of the student and knowledge of programs:

We will definitely have a lot of conversations and a lot of it is through that that we talk through certain interests and things like strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes either through academic requirements and certain classes we will have the discussion of hey this didn't go very well, was it because it was more paper based is it more test based? How are you performing in each of these different classes? And then if you do better with papers than exams, let's maybe try and focus more on that when we do advising.

Sometimes advisors have to present the reality of a situation to the student as well, and then come up with a new plan:

If this is what you want to do, this is what you are gonna have to take. Students know what they like and don't like, so they know if you are saying hey, you got to take calculus, and they know they don't like math then calculus is gonna sound bad real quickly. So they won't get to calculus because they don't wanna deal with other math. So that maybe isn't a good choice for you, so let's look at other things like this ...there are other options for them.

Structure: Appointments/Study Hall. Advisors indicated that they create and manage support plans for students. Advisors monitor all the moving parts of a student's plan not only through setting up support and structure, in the form of tutoring and learning specialist appointments and/or study hall, but also communicating with those supports in order to maintain an effective system. For example, one participant claimed,

I manage everything; I organize everything. So with that, I set up tutoring. I will communicate with tutors if I need to....setting up sessions with our learning specialists. Supporting our learning specialists, supporting our different tutors as far as making sure guys are where they need to be, guys are doing what they need to be doing, and then just following up.

Another P emphasized the importance of individualizing support based on student needs:

...make such individualized plans for each one of our student-athletes. So what that support looks like might be different...One might have all learning specialists and that is all that they are meeting with and they are checking in with their advisor and that is how we are gonna make their weekly schedule look like. Or they are going to be in all tutoring because they work better with that kind of stuff and that is how they would prefer it and they just check in with their advisor. It really is dependent on that at-risk student-athlete and what their strengths and weaknesses are.

Advisors use these structures as motivation for students. For example, one P stated at their institution the

philosophy is objective-based study hall. I try to motivate my guys by saying if you get your work done, we can cut an hour of your study hall off. So we try to motivate through getting work done earlier in the week so that we can cut somebody's hours at the end of the week.

The same is done with weekly meetings or tutoring:

As a freshman, everyone meets with an academic coordinator or advisor weekly, and as they progress and grow and their grades get better and we feel like we can trust them more and give them a longer leash, we kind of scale it back. So a lot of times tutoring may be mandatory and you have to do it or you have to do study table or certain hours, but as they continue to do better in school we might say okay after your freshmen year you got to just check in unless your GPA is still really low. Or you don't have to meet with me weekly anymore, let's just touch base every couple of weeks or so.

The idea behind why advisors believe that structured support fosters success is, as one participant expressed, "Being present is 90 % of the battle and 10% is doing the work." By structuring support in the form of appointments and meetings or study hall, advisors can control 90% of the battle. A student actually completing the work is the last 10%, which has a greater likelihood of happening with structure and supervision.

*RQ 2b: How do learning specialists socially construct academic success with student-athletes?* The common themes found in learning specialists' responses were creating accountability through problem solving which occurred by asking questions promoting responsibility and ownership, figuring out big picture goals and breaking them down into manageable tasks, and equipping students with the skills and strategies they need to master the

process themselves. The second theme found was socio-emotional development, which dealt with building confidence and trust through genuine interactions, creating a positive environment, and developing life skills.

### **Create Accountability through Problem Solving**

Asking questions promoting responsibility and ownership. When answering research RQ2, P's explained the process they go through to help at-risk students develop into autonomous learners. It was emphasized that learning specialists wanted to help give students power which is accomplished by asking students questions and letting them drive the conversations and sessions as they gain confidence and begin navigating the system. Questions could be geared towards figuring out assignment due dates and plans of study:

asking what do you have going on instead of saying here is what you have got going on here, let's talk through each class. It is like okay what do you have going on today? What is your top priority? Turning some of that control over to them, making them responsible for what is going on, giving them the tools to do that.

One P added that the big part in student's becoming autonomous is them "learning how to ask for help about what they need."

Participant's also expressed they ask questions that help students figure out what they want out of school and/or life which gives them control, but making sure they hold students accountable to their goals. For example, one P stated,

There are some who need to be redirected at points in the semester and reminded of their goals because they are 19/20-year-old kids and it is easy to lose sight of them, especially at a place where athletics is also very emphasized. So I do think it is an ongoing conversation about what is it that you want out of your experience? What do you expect from yourself type of thing? And I am going to hold you to those standards.

Figuring out big picture goals and breaking them down into manageable tasks.

Participants expressed that they begin by helping students figure out their goals and then assist them by breaking down those goals in a way that they understand and can manage.

A student may express they want a certain grade, but the learning specialist helps them understand what goes into achieving that grade and helps create a game plan. One P expressed,

If someone says I want to get an A in the class, I am like okay that is doable, but going forward this is what you have to do. You have to do these things. So then we break those tasks down and it seems more manageable and they can reach or get close to their goal.

Goals are created at the beginning of semesters but also weekly in order to stay in line with the overall goals. One P starts with overall goals and then applies those to specific classes and sessions:

Typically at the beginning of the semester we talk about what they want their GPA to be for this semester, individual classes like how they want to do in those, let's look through the syllabi, let's think goals and things that they can accomplish or get done. I mean obviously every week we come up with goals and getting work done, how that will be accomplished.

Participants also expressed the reality of accomplishing a goal set for the current session and then using that to launch into future goals and behaviors;

Some days it is just the goal of what do we get done today and what needs to be done today, and then looking ahead on that. What do we want to get out of this year and what do you want for yourself? Do you just want to get by or do you want to push yourself further?

The emphasis in goal setting was that while the learning specialists helps students figure out their goals, the student is the one in control of deciding their own goals. One P expressed that

I let the student lead pretty much, their goal could be anywhere from I want a 3.0 this quarter or I want to get on the deans list, or it could be I really want to work on not getting behind in my reading. The student can really pick their goals. Most of the time they do GPA stuff but sometimes they will have a specific skill or something they want to work on.

Another P mentioned that while the student is in control, they try and help them see beyond their perspective to see the overall picture and more options:

I am trying to obviously lead them and guide them to be the best they can be, but I have to also respect where they want to go too. I think it is a joint venture on hearing them and really listening to them, but also expanding their horizons because they are 18, 19, 20

years old and there is a lot that they haven't seen so I think we do that jointly.

Equipping students with the skills/strategies to master the process themselves. One of the ideas expressed in response to RQ2 was that in order for students to be academically successful they need certain tools, and a lot of them do not possess those tools when they get on campus. P's discussed that they attempt to figure the areas where students struggle. One P expressed that students "don't know how to navigate certain things... These kids come in and they don't know how to do research, so showing them the process, modeling certain things..." In one interview, a P gave an example of this process through a story about a struggling freshman:

The first time I worked with him the other day and he wasn't retaining information after you gave it to him in small chunks. That tells you, okay, we have to be really, really repetitive with him and work on vocabulary because he didn't understand the vocab words.

Another participant illustrated the modeling process in relation to organization:

Right now, we are going on week four and so with the objective sheets that we do I write it out for them but we do it together. I am basically modeling the objective sheets. So I am reading the syllabi, I am checking the blackboard and showing them these things because I tell them pay attention because by week four you will be doing your own sheet. So they already know that they better pay attention. They start on week four, they are writing what I was writing, but I am right there with them saying did you look at this, what about this, you missed that. And then eventually, and you know trial and error you have to correct them, they get it and they get the system.

P's expressed that how they approach working with a student is individualized to each student's needs. Part of the problem is that students are not aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. As one P explained, the process of:

Helping them to understand themselves. The majority of these kids are not meta-cognitively aware, so if you say, 'how do you learn best? What works for you?' They have no idea. So helping them discover that and deciding what works best for them.

After the needs are identified and participants understand how individual students learn, they utilize skills and strategies. One example was given about a student who was a visual learner:

Give them the visual, so that is the reason for the white board. Put it up there so that he has a visual reference. What we are trying to do is train him eventually hopefully he will do that with his classes. I'm gonna sit down with him and try and work with him on Sociology and give him visual cues on his flashcards so that we get him to start thinking visually. He plays a sport; he is a visual thinker. He does not know how to apply that to academics, so you figure these things out and then we directly apply it to their learning.

It is important to teach students with skills and strategies that work for them because as one P expressed:

It is making sure to incorporate all of that into a master plan that is going to sit down and make them want to do the work, to want to dig in. For some kids it is like let's make an outline, let's do this, let's get it lined up. And other kids it is just like just talk to me, lets just talk here, and we just talk about what this paper is about and tell me what you think, okay now write it down. I think I implement it by getting to know them and figuring out what works for them, because you will lose them fast if you do not individualize those things.

### **Socio-Emotional Development**

Building confidence and trust through genuine interactions, The second theme found from RQ2 involved socio-emotional development expressed by building confidence and trust through genuine interactions and creating a positive environment. One of the most common explanations for building relationships and confidence occurred through celebrating successes, no matter how small. One participant indicated that they

make a big deal out of the successes. Like I have a student has been working hard and he is still not getting great grades, he is getting like 2.5 and he really wants like 3.4 but I continually tell him that I am proud of him and sometimes for some students that means a lot.

Or in another response,

building that confidence in them and see little successes, I got a see C on that and me saying that is good, (institution) English is so hard, so difficult, I am so proud of you for that, let's keep going. I just think encouraging them and complimenting them and then little by little backing off from that. As they get more confidence, turning that control over to them.

Participants expressed the importance of guiding a student early on when they are lost and may not be able to admit it. For example,

I think I guide them a lot early on and hold their hand a little bit because they are scared. They are in environments that they are underprepared for and it is scary, and they can't show it because I am working with football players and they are tough and they are strong, but I can tell.

In order to help students build confidence in the initial stages, a P expressed that she tries to provide freshmen with “a safe space for learning and making mistakes.” Another P emphasized the difficulty in balancing the relationship aspect with accountability and the importance that genuine interactions make in that balance:

You let them know that you are an ally, an ally that is going to hold them accountable and have expectations and want to push them. It is kind of like walking a tightrope sometimes, but I think most of the time as long as you genuinely care for them, you are going to see positive results in your relationship with them and your demands of them.

Creating a positive environment. A positive learning environment was identified as a component of building self-confidence and positive relationships. Positive learning environment through expressing excitement that causes students to know they care and want to be there. One participant explained how she does this,

I always act happy to see them. I'm always like ‘YAY’ ‘HI.’ First of all, this isn't a bad place to come. They like me; they want me here. They don't see me as being dumb. So I think a lot of that perception of building an excitement around their presence and being genuine about it.

Another P indicated that creating this type of rapport and environment involves “taking time to get to know the student and getting them to want to come because they “know that you care kind of thing.” Another participant expressed the approach and type environment that can negatively affect students:

I am not here to control them, they are young adults and that is not going to happen. I think some people get into that and think that they are, and that is a recipe for disaster . . .you have to be able to adapt, to be flexible, to be creative in your approach



with them. I like humor, a lot of humor, getting a smile out of them, getting a laugh out of them. I try to just meet them where they are at for the day is important.

Participants also indicated tangible strategies they use to motivate and encourage students: “I do a student of the quarter that I put on my board and then I take a picture of it and tweet it out, and it is funny how they really want to be the student of the quarter.” Another example included rewarding students for attending meetings with the learning specialist:

For a year or two we were doing sticker charts and that totally started as a joke but they loved it... We would give it for coming to meetings, they would get to put a sticker on the chart and if they had all the stickers at the end we would have during finals week, when they don't have training table, we would have a hot wing party for everybody who got all their stickers.

Developing Life Skills, Participants pointed out that they worked through personal issues and life skills with students regularly, including “can you help me register to vote? How do I pay for my speeding ticket? Can you help me order flowers for my mom's birthday? I am having girl problems or I am getting a dog.” However, working through these questions and situations was linked to helping with academics. One P stated,

You have to meet their personal needs first before you can get anything done. They have to be emotionally in good shape, and you can really see when they are not which is obviously going to affect their academics for at least a session.

Another P explained they work through personal issues because “helping them deal with some of the clutter so that they can focus on the classroom.” Learning specialists indicated that their job is bigger than academics and they see the value in helping students work through personal issues and develop life skills: “I think that part is almost bigger than the school work because it is more about the life skills and helping them be successful beyond.”

*RQ 2c: “How do student-athletes perceive academic success is socially constructed with their advisor and their learning specialist?”* Student-athletes’ responses were broken up into how academic success is socially constructed with their learning specialist and with their advisor.

Student-athletes identified that success is socially constructed with their advisor through information about class requirements and selection as well as by providing a safety net for students. Students identified that their learning specialist facilitated academic success through aiding with understanding and assignment completion/organization, while they also developed socio-emotionally through the relationships they built and the environment in which they learned.

### *Academic Advisor*

#### **Providing Information**

Class Selection/Requirements. When asked what is helpful in meetings with their advisor, P's answered that their advisor has the information regarding course selection and requirements for their degree and for NCAA regulations. For example, one P explained "They (advisor) have it planned out what course you are gonna take and when you are gonna graduate when you are supposed to." One student found this assistance by their advisor helpful because "I don't have to do it on my own. You have somebody with knowledge about what to do and the proper class to put you in." Advisors also helped students "get an idea of what they (classes) are about" as well as mediate with their advisor on campus to make sure they are on track: "giving me the right classes and making sure that I am taking the right amount of hours and contacting my major advisors to make sure that we are all on one accord"

In addition to having someone with knowledge of rules and requirements, P's indicated that advisors helped them figure out the type of class would be best suited for them based on their strengths and learning styles. For example, one P stated, "They (advisor) might see that you struggle in online classes so they may not put you in those classes or might not recommend it." Another student explained,

I am more of a hands on person, like you do it and then I will do it. I am more of that type of learner so we try to get myself in more of those classes instead of putting myself in a class where I know I am going to drift off and stuff like that.

Providing a Safety Net, A common theme found in participants' answers about their relationship with advisors and learning specialists involved communication with the advisor that attempts to stop a student from missing assignments or getting behind. One participant mentioned the idea of their advisor acting as a safety net:

They (advisor) notify me whenever anything is like going good or bad. It is just good to have them like that safety net right there knowing before you get too far behind because you have someone else on top of things too.

Participants found that meetings with their advisors help their grades since it is harder for them to miss assignments or fall behind. One student described a typical meeting with his advisor:

I go in and we talk about the upcoming assignments and they show me the due dates...they tell me what I have to do, what is completed...they keep me on track with my schoolwork so that I don't miss any assignments. Like if I have an assignment at the end of the school year my grade will still be up, it won't fall to a bad grade.

P's understood the reality of getting behind and how their advisor helps them avoid that. One P expressed their advisor is there to "make sure that I stay on track and don't let it slip because once it slips it will be hard to get yourself back to where you need to be. So just talk about just staying on top of everything."

The safety net not only applies to reminding students of assignments, but to structuring students with help and support before they actually need it: "When (advisor) thinks that I need help or another tutor or anything, she gets it done before I do and then help is there before I needed it." Providing an effective safety net takes time from the advisor, one P mentioned,

Sometimes the coordinators stay longer than she should, sometimes till 10 at night and that is when the doors close. Students here, I know it is tiring, and sometimes you see them drinking coffee. I know it is hard dealing with us.

## *Learning Specialist*

### **Facilitating Academic Success**

Aids Understanding. When asked what is helpful about meetings with his learning specialist, one P stated, “she knows what kind of person I am when it comes to learning. She can break things down and make them easier for me to understand.” Another student indicated that the learning specialist helps correct them: “she show(s) me what I did wrong so if she wasn’t here I could just go back by myself and know how to do it.” One P’s response exemplifies the process of working towards understanding and the role the learning specialist plays in that process:

Sometimes you have no idea. You sat in the class all week and you still don’t have no idea because it is in a way that you cannot understand. And (learning specialist) knows it so she will help dumb it down so you are like whoah that is what this is asking. She will put it in whole different words or phrases or examples for you to understand. If it can be put into football terminology or a way that you can understand it because sometimes the syllabus or what you have is too wordy when it is actually only asking for one thing and you just need to get that one thing out of it. So she will help simplify it so you can be able to work....she will break it down.

Assignment Completion/Organization. Part of facilitating success was expressed in the form of helping students get organized in order to complete assignments. One P said his learning specialist

knows that when it comes to long papers, like me I will wait until the last minute. But (she) will make me get it one or two weeks ahead of when it is due so that way it won’t just pile up on me. So I can do a couple of paragraphs here, a page here, so that I have time to spread it out and have it done by a certain time.

Another form of organization involved learning specialists making sure they had the correct supports set up. For example,

she helps me stay organized...she checks to see if I need extra tutoring or a study plan or someone to read one my papers. If I need to email a professor, I will send it to her before I send it to the professor to make sure it is all good.

Participants emphasized that work gets done in their meetings with their learning specialist:

The meetings between me and her are more like we are going to get things done. We talk about other stuff and have fun in there, but we get work done... Whatever you are doing, if it is a paper or a project, she helps you get it mapped out. She basically do her job well and helps you understand and dumb down the words and narrow them down.

One participant expressed that their learning specialist has a strategy to motivate them to complete assignments: "...she will have printed out what I have to do the whole week. So if I don't get it done she will nag me and keep nagging me. When I get done she will put a checkmark next to it, so a checkmark feels pretty good. "

### **Socio-Emotional Development**

Relationship Building. The second theme identified in the data was the impact that relationships had on students. Several P's referred to their learning specialist as a mom figure, which they associated with trust. For example, "(Learning specialist) is like a true mother... you know she is somebody you can trust. She has your best interest at heart... She goes to bat for you." The familial type of relationship was formed through intentional conversations: "We just talk about basically when it is school it's school, but other than that we will just have a regular conversation because (learning specialist) is like another mom to me." Part of that impact was expressed in the form of motivation: "She is that person where if you are having a bad day, she is the person that will lift you up and keep you going, make you stay in school." Another student said, "She is the one who really keeps me on top of my game really... keeping your head where it is supposed to be at."

Relaxed Environment. The relationships built were associated with and contributed to an environment where students felt comfortable. For example, "We get stuff done in there. Her whole room is set up for students to be comfortable. She has candy in there, she has music playing; there are good vibes in there." One student expressed,

When I meet with (learning specialist) it is like home away from home...like with your advisor it is always kind of sort of serious no matter what, but with your learning specialist it is not like that...it is easy going kind of laid back.

### Additional Findings

Other themes emerged from the data that did not directly address the research questions but were noteworthy for improving the communication and relational dynamics among support services and student-athletes. Student-athletes described their perception of the difference in professional roles along with their overall view of support services and the evolution of their academic goals. Learning specialist and advisors spoke about role perception and conflict strategies between professionals. Lastly, the influence of coaches and the perception of a good cop and bad cop as working relationship among groups were expressed. These findings are further discussed in the following section.

Role Breakdown. One finding dealt with how student-athletes viewed the difference in the roles that their learning specialist and advisor play in their education. The breakdown identified that advisors dealt with the overall academic picture and learning specialists attend to specifics, such as individual classes, skills, or requirements: “With my advisor, I feel like it is big picture like altogether, but with my specialist it is class by class.” Or, “(Learning Specialists) look at it individual, piece by piece. The academic advisor are always talking about the overall picture.” The advisor would inform students of what they need to take and do in classes, but the learning specialist would “dig in” and actually help with work:

My advisor is more of a class standpoint. Like okay, this is what you are going to take and this is why you need to do it, and this is how many hours you need and stuff like that. But (learning specialists), if I need help and my tutor is not there, (learning specialist) will help me. Or if I have a question then I just ask (learning specialist).

The advisor sets students up with an academic plan and the learning specialist helps execute the work:

The difference between the academic coordinator is the coordinator has to deal with attitude issues, adding or dropping classes, credit, or they have to map out the plan for you in three to four years; they have all of that to take care of. And the learning specialist is more strict on what do you have to do because we have to get it done. So you talk to the coordinator about school and what you are going to be doing or what you want to take and how to attack it, and then you go to the learning specialist and are like okay we got to get this done, this is what I have to do. You got to dumb it down for me so that we can get it done, so it is more work related.

Student-athletes' views were similar to how both learning specialists and advisors described the role breakdown:

We (advisors) are the keepers of eligibility and class schedules, and we are definitely more of the backbone of the (sic) this is everything that you need to do. And they (learning specialists) are more of the arms and legs that help them get it done.

In one example scenario, one P stated,

I (advisor) am the 'what.' So what needs to get done, what books do they need, what classes do they need to be enrolled in, what is their eligibility situation. I answer what, and the learning specialist is the one dealing with 'how.' So what needs to be done, this student needs to get his English paper done before Friday because they are traveling for their game, and then the learning specialist is how is that going to get done. Okay there is a five paragraph essay and the learning specialist breaks down how they get that done. And then with the what (sic) comes a certain level of support. I am the person that is running behind the coaches and making sure that they have all the 'what' so all she has to worry about is the specific 'hows' (sic) as it pertains to completing assignments.

As one P expressed, "advisors are supposed to be the expert in picking the classes and eligibility but learning specialists are supposed to be the expert on that student and the way they learn."

Student-athletes' view of academic support services. Another finding involved the progression of how student-athletes viewed academic support services as a whole. In general, at the beginning of their time at the institution, student-athletes had a negative view of support services, but as they matured they saw the value in it:

At first, like when I first came I was an early enrollee so I kind of didn't want to be in there, I was just there. But that is the place to be because if I don't go there then I will stay on track but I won't be 100 percent on it like I am when I go there.

One student-athlete mentioned they come in past their required times:

I am in here every day anyways. This is my favorite place. Honestly speaking, after my freshmen year I still come. Sometimes I don't have anything to do but sometimes I just stay in here 3 or 4 hours doing nothing. There are good vibes in there. It is good to just have that kind of relationship. If you have an issue or if you have a school problem, it is easy to talk to them. I text them weekly and let them know. They pretty much know who they have to keep their tabs on, but I still let them know that I am doing well.

Student-athletes indicated almost a reliance on their advisor and learning specialist. One P explained,

It is crazy but without them I don't know where I would be. I would be completely lost. They help me with understanding different things within the school and everything. They keep me up to date with a lot of things going on around campus so that I can be the best person that I can be, be the best student that I can be.

The only consistent finding for what students wished was different about their meetings was having more control over the times that they met: “Just in the season it gets aggravating sometimes because you have to come in here every Monday. But when you are free it is cool, like a cool breeze.” One P explained it is

frustrating when you just want to work on your own time and then they want to work when you know I got time to help you at this time, and you are like I don't feel like working then. You don't understand. It is like I want to work on my own stuff. Sometimes it is overwhelming and you need a break but sometimes they we aright they don't want to do this today, but sometimes we just really really need a break.

When students were physically tired it affected their ability to perform academically:

Sometimes I am like dang, I just got out of workouts and am burnt. I am so burnt and now I have to come to tutoring and it is hard. Sometimes you wanna change the time, ‘nahh you gotta come now.’ I really can't function or lets break it up, but other people have times so we can't really.

Evolution of goals. Findings also included the evolution of the academic goals of student-athletes. Student-athletes spoke about how their goals had changed during their time at the institution. Participants indicated that 1) They created goals after not having any initially; 2) Their goals remained the same; 3) Their goals changed to become more realistic. Participants



indicated that initially they did not have academic goals for themselves, but once they saw they were academically capable they wanted to put forth the effort to do their best:

At first, I wasn't big into school so I was more like just do all the work I can, but over the summer I did better and the goals have gone up I guess because before I came in and wanted to just do what I had to do. Now, I choose to get good grades and things like that.

Another P expressed a similar experience:

When I first got here it was just to maintain and just get there. But now I see that I can do it, so now I am just like I did in high school, I just want to have the best grades possible. A's and B's if I can.

One participant expressed that his perspective was changed by his advisors, which in turn changed his goals and behaviors:

Well I ain't have (sic) academic goals really. I'm like I want to graduate of course, but my actions didn't show that I wanted to graduate because I had a terrible first semester. I had two academic coordinators, and my first academic coordinator actually walked me through a lot and gave me a different perspective on things. It really shaped my thought process on things, like I have to think about the long run like getting a job or what do I want to major in and what job or skill do I want to be in when I get older. So I started thinking about that kind of stuff and then I just started to notice that everything just started to work for me. Some of that stuff don't even be hard. I mean you have those classes that is hard, but some of it is work but it is about the work you put in. So I set up meetings all week with my teachers. Every day, I have a meeting with my teacher to really understand the material. And they see you putting that work in and they are really willing to work with you. They are thinking about work ethic. So it has just changed like that.

Some participants indicated that their academic goals had not changed: “They are the same thing. I just still keep track of my grades, keep my GPA up, that is just my main goals” and “They are kind of the same mostly. Just hopefully finish above a 3.0 overall when I graduate. Get a degree. So that is what it is still.” One student-athlete expressed that they changed their academic goal to be more realistic (based on their situation) and also saw utilizing a skill set as a goal:

Well of course when you first come in your goal is like keep a 4.0 (laughing) and then you go on and it kind of becomes that time management thing. Like being able to manage

your time. My academic goals as far as keeping a 4.0 is out of the question, so to maintain a 2.5 or better is the goal now.

Role perceptions between professionals. Throughout the interviews, information was gleaned about the communicative dynamic between learning specialists and advisors. Role perception and conflict were discussed in detail through probing questions. A few common themes were found among the two professional groups. Learning Specialists indicated that there was a large amount of confusion and misperceptions when it came to what their job entails. Participants wished that advisors understood that their position is multi-faceted. As one learning specialist explained “(we) are not merely tutors.” Role perception was identified as a major problem in the field of learning specialists: “...I think that the biggest thing, and I have talked to other learning specialists in the field, is that we are not tutors” Which led to inconvenience:

I feel like everybody has a different interpretation of what they think I should be doing, and there are so many things that people have no idea that we have to deal with and so it will be like hey, can you do this? And I am like yeah, but I have to reshuffle all of this. I don't know, I think they see me as a glorified tutor.

And it was an indicator of conflict in some situations because they cannot do their job. As one participant explained,

I think they see us as a tutor. I think this a constant battle between, not a battle but a source of contention between the advisors and learning specialists. Like we would love to do more strategy type stuff and advisors are more about getting work done.

Second, learning specialists identified wanting to be more involved in the process. This could occur in the form of collaborating where each focuses on their academic expertise:

I think just that we do have the best interest of the student-athletes in mind and we can be used as a resource. I think that is kind of the key thing, like yes, advisors are supposed to be the expert in picking the classes and eligibility but learning specialists are supposed to be the expert on that student and the way they learn, so we should work together as a team to create a plan for each student instead of just one person choosing this and one person choosing that. But again, we can really work together and create a plan of success for each student.

Wanting more involvement seemed to stem from a lack of contact with the coaches even though the majority of learning specialists indicated they did not want contact with coaches:

I would like more collaboration. It seems as though we report to them as opposed to working together for a student. And we don't have any interaction with coaches here and not that I want that because that would bring extra work, but I think that the coaches maybe knowing that there is professional people working with their student, not just their tutor but someone, I don't know I just wish there were more ways for us to be present and part of the equation, part of the team.

Advisors wished that learning specialists understood the accountability involved with their position. This accountability comes in the form of communication with coaches and NCAA regulations. Relaying information to coaches can involve hard conversations:

I think that it is always important for learning specialists to know that sometimes we are in a tough spot as far as having a lot of accountability on us. We kind of are the ones that deliver the information to the coaching staff both good and bad, so I think that sometimes, where as a learning specialist doesn't have that responsibility as far as weekly or any kind of dialogue on a regular basis with the coaching staff. The advisor, the counselor is definitely expected to communicate some information that sometimes isn't easy or fun to do.

Communicating with coaches also involves a specific type of communication style:

I think the biggest thing is to relay to them that to talk to a coach, especially football coaches, is a very unique style. It is very short, to the point, with the right type of information, with the solution already in hand. Where I feel like our learning specialist, if they could, would tell you what the kid ate for breakfast lunch and dinner and how it affected their mood, and what went on in between. We need both parts to work, we need both parts to keep the car running, but the coaches only want the brevity of it.

Advisors identified the difficulty to involve learning specialists in everything:

So I think that it is important for them (learning specialists) to realize that we need all of that stuff that they are in to do our jobs effectively, but that they are not missing out by not participating in the communication with the coach.

And to make them feel important because of their lack of time:

I think for me it just the accountability that is in it. I think for me it is hard to make everybody feel as if they are important if that makes sense. So if I'm not changing something right away and it could be an urgent matter to you, it is like I have three other different fires that I am trying to put out at that same time.

Advisors also expressed that juggling regulations from the NCAA and the institution puts them in a unique position when dealing with students:

There are other things and majors that have these requirements that I am trying to get the students to meet, but at the same time make them progress and all these other sorts of things. It is a lot of rules that are, and not just by the NCAA but (institution) and schools that I have to juggle and deal with. So sometimes that puts the burden on learning specialist well this kid is telling me that he wants to do this, well why is he taking that. Well he is taking that because he can't do that, the other thing. So just kind of juggling and managing all of those regulations.

Conflict strategies between professionals. Learning specialists and advisors identified communication strategies used to deal with conflict. First, they mentioned being “direct” and confronting it “head-on.” From a relational standpoint, to avoid conflict, conversations were employed that encouraged a feeling of being on the same team: “Just kind of working with the learning specialist on that and figuring out a plan of attack together.” Teamwork was also built through constant communication between both parties: “We have really made a push lately to have ongoing meetings and conversations about where our students are academically, eligibility wise, etc,. I think one of the big things is that shared responsibility.” And lastly, keeping the student at the forefront:

I think conflict in general is difficult, it is like a learned art that you learn over time in your career, but I think that if you approach the situation with the same goal in mind which is student first and how can we help the student, then it can be resolved. I think that sometimes it is okay to ask for help solving that conflict if you can't see eye to eye; bring in your director, bring in someone else that you both respect in the office to be maybe mediate the situation and try to figure something out.

Participants from two instructions indicated that their staff had set aside time to navigate through role conflict and perceptions. One intervention focused on defining roles:

We just spend a lot of time going through what each people do, what our roles are, and just really got a lot out on the table. Meetings would talk about the things that we do in our meetings and why we do them, and then they could ask questions. Then the next meeting the advisors would talk about what they did and why they did it. Then we kind of talked about general where the conflicts kind of come up, and (director) really facilitated that

discussion and in the end basically it was like okay learning specialists make sure you stay in your lane and with the advisors, be more open minded about what work we are doing and how we are doing it.

Taking the time to clearly define roles lead to a sense of comfort in dealing with conflict:

We have done retreats and we have tried to do all different things like that to really be clear about what the roles are and kind of hash out what our concerns were with each other. We did that about three years ago or so, maybe more, and ever since then through that development process, since we were able to be comfortable enough to talk to each other face-to-face and address the conflict, we have been able to be where we are at now.

Or as one P explained,

Now, when something comes up and I have to tell an advisor maybe the student comes after putting their schedule together and I'm like there is no way in hell they can take that class, like they don't have the skill-set to do it. So I can go to that advisor and say ask what the thought process about this class, and sometimes it is like well I told them it is really hard and they want to take their shot, and then you just have to let them take their shot. But other times it is like okay let's see if we can maybe, because they are like oh well that is just an elective or there was no real reason they don't really need to take that class, then we might look for other options. But I think at this point since we have done the hard work of getting everything out on the table and really talking about our roles and how they are different and what each group does, I think we now can directly if there is a conflict the most of the time we directly go and have a productive healthy conversation about it.

Another strategy used to deal with conflict was learning communication preferences through relationship building:

The way we negotiate or talk to them is all based on their own personalities and the types of kids that I have with each learning specialist. So it is really getting to know that person and how they prefer to be communicated with. Things that I know that they would like to know, if I do know it or things like that, it is really just getting to know them as a person as well to know best ways to work with them.

Influence of coaches. Comments regarding coaches were frequently found in interviews among participant groups. For advisors, having a coach's support was of utmost importance for them to do their job. Ultimately, coaches were the ones who could actually get students to show up to class, appointments, etc. because they control the athletic side. As one participant expressed,

You really do have to have coaches buy in. Because as much as I can support a student academically, if the student doesn't go to class or doesn't go to tutoring and we are like hey you need to make sure you go to this or do that they are like okay what are you going to do about. Once again, it goes back to them caring more than we do. I can't walk all of them to class. So if we have a coach's support, and you know if we know you miss this is what is going to happen. Or if they have repercussions or discipline of being constant across the board with all students, I think that helps a lot to be able to support them. We have to work together in order to be acceptable because for the most part, I can do anything and everything but if they can't follow through with a situation with a student or they are like oh it is okay don't worry about it, it kind of nullifies everything that I have ever done. So I think it is working as a team and not just as an individual entity to be able to make it work.

Another participant expressed the difference seen in coaches that are bought into academics compared to those that are not:

Working with multiple coaches staffs, you know football in particular, it is interesting to see the difference from coach to coach and with coach (coach) being so invested in their education and academics, it definitely makes our jobs a lot easier when our student who is struggling. For the most part at least, I would definitely say it makes a huge difference.

When asked what advisors wished that learning specialists understood about their role, the majority of answers involved something about coaches. There are no NCAA rules against learning specialists interacting and/or communicating with coaches. However, advisors from this study alluded to wanting to avoid ethical issues that could arise. For example, one advisor explained why their learning specialists do not interact with coaches: "We keep them very isolated because I feel like when you start opening that door. I think coaches have certain expectations for what they should or shouldn't be doing, and I don't really need them weighing in on that."

It was mentioned in the interviews that advisors are in constant communication with coaches staying on the same page and being available to students helped strengthen relationships. However, the idea of being available to communicate with coaches and students at all time seemed to interfere with separating work and personal life. As one P expressed,

You know it would be good down the line to not have that need of the 24/7 communication. And I know that you don't have to do that. You really don't have to respond to a coach. You don't have to respond to a student. I try to monitor and make sure that if it is not something super important that can wait until the next day, I try and wait and make a point to wait until the next day and not to email them back; but it is still there and then you are thinking about it and are like, well I might as well just do it.

Similarly, for learning specialists, the idea of constant availability to students helped build relationships:

If they (student-athlete) have anything that they need, and I say that they have my number, we text, you can stop in, you can ask me anything, you can call me at home. That is what I am here for, I am your resource.

However, the importance of personal boundaries was also expressed: “I think the boundary piece is important too so that they don't walk all over us and become too reliant for things.”

Bad cop and good cop. Contact with coaches seemed to impact relationships between student-athletes and their advisor and learning specialist, creating a “good cop and bad cop” mentality. The advisor was labeled as the bad cop, which seemed to be due to the fact that advisors communicate with coaches and have the added pressure to make sure students maintain eligibility so they can play their sport. Student-athletes noted that advisors “...are the one that has to tell the coaches he can't play this season because you aren't eligible.” And advisors “usually are the ones that relay the negative information back to the coaches. That I guess is the challenging part.”

The idea of a “good cop” and a “bad cop” in the relationship was found in multiple interviews, both from student-athletes and advisors. One Participant indicated that

The academic advisor is the bad cop. They are just the person that wants to see you like, I don't want to say fail, but they are just very tough on you. And the learning specialist is always the good cop. It is just like you know we are going to work through this, we are going to get you a lawyer (laughing).

However, the student saw both roles, learning specialist and advisor, working together as necessary.

Honestly, I think it is a good balance going on, like good cop bad cop kind of sort of...I feel like it is a good balance. You have both of them in your corner. I feel like you should always have both opinions.

Academic advisors similarly expressed that they thought student-athletes viewed them as the “bad cop” in the relationship, especially when compared to the learning specialist:

I think what they would say is that I am often the bad cop if it comes between the learning specialist and the advisor relationship, so I am definitely more of the manager, bad cop, some guys if they are going to see me, know they are in trouble.

“Drill Sergeant”, “babysitter”, and “monitor” were all used as terms advisors said their students would use to describe their role. Advisors also indicated that reporting to coaches leads to the perception of “snitching” and “being on their ass.” As one P expressed, they believe students see them as “This is who will make sure that I stay on track of my stuff and if I miss class they are the ones who know and will talk to our coaches and meet with our coaches each week to let them know how I am doing.”

Advisors expressed that since their job requires them to communicate with coaches, they mainly work in the black and white. This dynamic contributes to them being seen as the “bad cop.” As expressed by one P,

I think sometimes it is hard because I work more in the black and white, so for me, if a guy doesn't show up to an appointment I am turning him in because I have to make sure the coaches know that he wasn't here to get something done. He missed a tutor, he missed a mentor, he missed me.

Advisors did indicate that student-athletes' perceptions of them usually change over time. One advisor explained this process:

You know it is funny, as a freshmen and sophomore, probably not good. They probably see me as a snitch, as a babysitter, monitor all their crap. It is interesting though, as they get older and when they get a little more autonomous...once they have demonstrated that



they are going to do things well and the right way, they are going to get more of that freedom.

With time develops a deeper understanding of the advising purpose:

I think over time trust develops and then they realize that you are not just there to nag on them or to snitch on them, and you are not there to just be the bad guy, but that you are actually there to help them.

Since learning specialists do not normally deal with coaches, student-athletes saw them as being on their “side” compared to the advisor, which led to the idea of the “good cop.”

Learning specialists indicated the need to maintain good relationships with students in order to do their job, which meant that sometimes they must work in the gray area to uphold relationships. As an advisor expressed, a learning specialist

is less likely to turn a guy in because she has to gain relationships in a much more intimate setting. Sometimes philosophically her and I can butt heads because I want to turn a guy in who doesn't come to her office while she is trying to make sure that they know that she is there for them. They know she wants them to continue to show up and if you start turning guys in, they are gonna start getting mad, they are not gonna show up, or they are going to resent it, or they are going to be mad and it is going to be hard for her... she also has to build those relationships in a much more intimate way.

Being the “good cop” and relationship building helped learning specialists do their job because it caused students to complete things and show up to appointments, which connects with the learning specialists’ explanation of student-athletes being motivated in part by their desire to not disappoint them since they are on their “side.” As one P explained, “we do develop good relationships and they do not want to disappoint me sometimes, which for some they don't care which is kind of nice because sometimes I feel a little manipulative, but sometimes educating people is manipulative.”

This chapter explained the major themes found in relation to the study’s research questions looking at the perceptions and social construction of academic success, as well as additional data found among participants. Although the participant groups defined academic

success in different ways, effort and academic growth/achievement were identified as overall ideas. In addition, communication styles were related to role responsibilities and overall goals and desired outcomes between professionals and student-athletes. The next section discusses the results in greater detail and the implications of the study with previous research.

## V. Discussion

### **Restatement of the Problem**

The argument of whether a student-athlete is successful or unsuccessful is based on a preconceived/predefined measure of academic success. The NCAA and most research studies equate academic success with GPA, GSR/FGR, and APR. The problem with this is that academic success has a variety of meanings for different people in different contexts. In higher education literature, various student accomplishments are used to measure student success. Academic success is a value-laden term used to indicate that a student has completed their intended educational goals or aspirations (Floyd, 1988). It can be defined in relation to the extent that intended goals are achieved (Braxton, 2003) and can be applied to varying degrees of accomplishment experienced by students during their academic tenure (Horton, 2009). At the institutional level, success occurs when staff members are less focused on the skill students bring to college and more focused and intentional in developing the skills students have when they leave (Roueche & Baker, 1987). There is a lack of research looking into how student-athletes define and view academic success for themselves. In addition, few studies have qualitatively studied how athletic academic support staff members define and socially construct academic success with at-risk students. The current study looks to fill these voids.

Researchers have looked at variables of academic success with hopes of finding the answer to make sure student-athletes are successful. They have also focused on identifying which types of variables most significantly affect academic success. Research explores these variables in hopes of changing behaviors to model those of the factors of success. The problem is that in order to change a behavior, you first need to know where you are starting. If support staffs do not know what a student identifies as success, how can they know how to best approach and

implement a plan for change and growth? In order to really understand the experience of the at-risk student-athlete, support staffs must first look at students' perceptions of academic success in comparison to their own. Once that is established, support staffs can figure out the best way to approach students in an attempt to help them achieve their definition of success and then push them to their maximum potential.

There is a gap in the qualitative research exploring what it takes to facilitate academic success for student-athletes identified as "at-risk" when they enter college, as well as a lack of qualitative research exploring how student-athletes experience their schooling and the programs and interventions put in place to help them succeed academically (Benson, 2000). This study explored six Division I at-risk student-athletes' perceptions of academic success, as well as the perceptions of the academic support given to them by learning specialists and advisors in an effort to better understand their academic experience and give administrators information to make data based decisions on how an institution can best support their academically at-risk student-athletes.

## **Summary of Results**

I employed the grounded theory approach to answer research questions through "open coding, axial coding, and developing core categories (Orcher, 2016). When analyzing the transcripts, I searched for common themes using the following criteria: "(a) recurrence, (b) repetition, (c) forcefulness" (Owen, 1984, p. 275). In the process of coding the data, I discovered a large amount of self-reported communicative codes and themes, which related to the research questions. The research questions focused on two main issues: perceptions of academic success and how academic success is socially constructed between professionals and student-athletes.

After compiling codes and creating themes and subthemes for each participant group, I was able to identify overarching themes revealed in the data.

The first research question sought to determine what academic success is from the perspectives of academic advisors, learning specialists, and student-athletes. Themes emerged regarding perceptions of academic success. Academic advisors identified academic achievement in the form of degree completion and individual standards, as well as personal development as academic success. Learning specialists identified academic success as maximizing individual potential through personal best, self-awareness and skill development, and engaging in the process. Student-athletes identified meeting grade-based standards and work ethic resulting in reaching personal goals as academic success for themselves. Student-athletes perceived that their advisor would identify: eligibility (e.g., graduation/degree and GPA) and effort (e.g., showing up to appointments and going to class) as academic success, and that their learning specialists would say that work ethic is more important than the grade and academic success is building academic skills.

The second research question sought to identify how academic success socially constructed among academic support staff and at-risk student-athletes. Overarching themes were found to explain how success is socially constructed among these groups. Academic advisors used communication in the form of relationship building through conversations and task reminders, in addition to instrumental support consisting of information (career/major/resources) and structure (study hall/appointments). Learning specialists created accountability through problem solving in the form of asking questions that promote responsibility and ownership, figuring out big picture goals and breaking them down into manageable tasks, and equipping students with the skills and strategies to master the process themselves. Learning specialists also

identified socially constructing academic success through socio-emotional development by building confidence and trust through genuine interactions, creating a positive environment, and developing life skills. Student-athletes' responses were broken up into how academic success is socially constructed with their learning specialist and with their advisor. Student-athletes identified that their advisors provided information in the form course selection and requirements, and students also saw advisors as a safety net, which contributed to their success. Student-athletes indicated learning specialists facilitate success academically by aiding in understanding and helping with assignment completion and organization. They also indicated that they built relationships and had a relaxed environment with their learning specialist, which helped them develop socio-emotionally.

## **Interpretation of Results**

### Research Question 1: What is academic success?

#### *RQ 1a: How do academic advisors define academic success?*

Advisors indicated that academic success is personal development and academic achievement in the form of degree completion and individual standards. As the results showed, advisors did not see graduation as the only measure of success. However, every advisor except for one mentioned it as being “the ultimate” form of academic success. This makes sense since the NCAA created the advisor position in an attempt to increase graduation rates of student-athletes (Hanna, 2013). The main features in their job description deal with facilitating progression towards graduation, and more broadly eligibility. It may be that advisors define academic success for students in a way that coincides with their primary responsibilities as an advisor, and in turn influence their communicative style and relationships with student-athletes.

*RQ1b: How do learning specialists define academic success?*

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*RQ1c: How do student-athletes define academic success?*

Horton (2009) found that student-athletes defined success as finding personal happiness, passing all of their classes, being productive in the classroom, meeting academic requirements to maintain athletic eligibility and each semester, and having a good athletic season both individually and collectively. Similarly, this study found that student-athletes identified meeting grade-based standards and work ethic resulting in reaching personal goals as academic success for themselves.

In his study, Heinel (2008) found that at-risk student-athletes thought successful academic behavior included sitting and listening to teachers and then finding someone that would either assist them with their assignments or complete their assignments for them. While no students in this study identified anyone else doing their work, student-athletes in this study did indicate that learning specialists helped them get organized and stay on track of completing

their assignments. Assignment completion was a major component in the perception of academic success and how it was socially constructed.

*RQ1d: What do student-athletes perceive their advisor and learning specialist would identify as academic success for them?*

Student-athletes identified effort and components of eligibility (e.g., graduation degree completion, and GPA) as what their advisor would identify as success for them. It is interesting that factors of eligibility were identified with what student-athletes thought their advisor would identify as academic success since that is the primary focus of the advisors role. Student-athletes indicated not just graduating, but “graduating on time” not just passing classes, but “getting all 12 hours so you are eligible to play” as success to their advisor. Behaviors that affect eligibility were also communicated as being part of success, this included “being in class all the time.” At-risk students are normally class checked to assure attendance and then advisors communicate to coaches when students miss class. How student-athletes answered what they believed their advisor would identify as academic success for them may be influenced by the communication style of advisors, which is impacted by the fact that advisors deal with coaches, institutional standards, and NCAA eligibility requirements

Student-athletes said that their learning specialist thinks that work ethic is more important than the grade and that academic success is building academic skills. They also indicated that growth and small success was ultimately seen as successful to their learning specialist. The idea of working hard even if the grade earned is not as high as expected reflects that learning specialists and student-athletes worked together towards growth in the academic process, which can take time. Overall, there was accuracy between what student-athletes believed their advisors



and learning specialists would identify as academic success for them and what learning specialists and advisors described as academic success.

Academic Effort. Effort was an overarching theme of every participant group in this study; and expressed in the form of expectations and also in what is considered academic success. The findings indicated that students increased their effort and their standards/goals for themselves when they experienced a small taste of academic success and saw that they were capable. This could indicate that a students' lack of effort could be from a lack of experiencing academic success or by a lack of academic standards set for them as previously noted by Benson (2000). However, the findings from this study are inconsistent with the findings from previous studies that found at-risk student-athletes felt lower academic expectations by staff (White, 2008) and did not ask for assistance out of fear of being labeled (Stokowski, 2013).

In the interviews, student-athletes accurately identified what they perceived their advisor and learning specialist would identify as academic success for them. Participants did not express that there were lower academic expectations for them, despite meeting with a learning specialist. While this study did not deal specifically with student-athletes with learning disabilities, participants did not have an issue asking for help from their learning specialist or advisor. The results showed that student-athletes thought they were successful and the academic support staff was a part of that.

Research Question 2: How is academic success socially constructed among academic support staff and at-risk student-athletes?

*RQ 2a: How do academic advisors socially construct academic success with student-athletes?*

Results from this study show that advisors and learning specialists use different communication styles to construct academic success with student-athletes based on their role and the skills each professional is trying to develop. The themes found for how advisors construct academic success with students can be broken down into two parts: the message and the action. The message is provided and created through communication. This study found that communication involved eligibility and academic concerns, but communication was also used to build relationships with student-athletes. Other studies have also shown similar findings about the importance of relationship building academic support staff and student-athletes. Rowland (2014) found that advisors try to get to know their student-athletes and build a good working relationship with them in order to identify what students are interested in and their academic strengths and weaknesses to help with selecting a major and setting realistic academic goals. The instrumental support is the action taken by the advisor in the form of information and structure for the student-athlete to set them up for academic success. The data indicates that academic advisors employ a directive communication style because their job responsibilities and the pressure created by accountability to institutional and NCAA requirements and coaches require them to work in the black and white.

Advisors work with hard skills; this would include outcomes such as completing and turning in assignments, showing up on time, picking classes, etc. Hard skills require a communication strategy that deals with situations as black and white. Dealing in the black and white leads to instrumental support being a major component of constructing academic success. Tutoring sessions, learning specialists appointments, weekly advising meetings, study hall/table, class checking, weekly objective/task sheets, and sending text reminders, and phone calls were all examples of instrumental support provided by advisors to ensure students stay on track

academically. Curtis (2006) argues that advisors should take a task-oriented approach when working with student-athletes in order to adjust how student-athletes view goal setting and achievement. Additionally, research has shown since student-athletes are used to structure in an athletic environment, they are predisposed to learning better in a structured learning space as well (Logan, 2015).

These findings are consistent with Rowland's (2014) views, whose interviews with revenue sport student-athletes and their academic advisors indicated that advisors are experts in NCAA and institutional rules and requirements and communicate information to student-athletes to help them navigate eligibility and time demands. Academic advisors believed their job was to "inform and encourage the student-athletes" as well as make sure that they are doing what needs to be done in the classroom. Advisors viewed themselves as a valuable resource available for "helping their student-athletes succeed off the field, so that they can succeed on the field" (Rowland, 2014).

*RQ 2b: How do learning specialists socially construct academic success with student-athletes?*

A common theme found with all learning specialists was the importance of relationship building in constructing academic success. Trust was essential in constructing academic success because students are in vulnerable learning situations with their learning specialist, so trust is needed in order for meaningful learning to take place. Learning specialists indicated that in order to do their job they had to get to know the student to figure out how they learn best and their strengths and weaknesses. As a result, learning specialists helped develop a student-athlete both academically and socio-emotionally.

A positive learning environment was identified as a component of building self-confidence and positive relationships. Learning specialists expressed excitement that causes

students to know they care and want to be there and this helped create a positive environment. This is consistent with prior research (e.g., Clifton & Harter, 2003; Lyubomirsky, 2007), which found that positive learning experiences helped change students' self-perceptions and foster more motivated and confident students. In addition, after students experienced a positive learning environment, their academic achievement and persistence increased. Logan (2015) emphasized the importance of creating comfort and familiarity in a learning space to motivate student-athletes and help them build confidence. The interviews from this study also showed tangible strategies that celebrated success were linked to motivating students and increasing meeting attendance.

The social-emotional side of the relationship dealt with developing soft skills, identified by learning specialists as life skills. Registering to vote, figuring out how to pay bills, creating a plan to save money over the summer were examples of life skills that learning specialists helped inform students. From a relational standpoint, learning specialists helped students navigate through roommate problems, give relationship advice, and build relationships with professors through channels like email. While these things are not directly related to academics, having these skills can help the student-athlete perform better academically as well as later in life. This idea is expressed by previous research that emphasizes multiple characteristics contribute to academic success. Student-athletes must effectively balance athletic, academic, and personal responsibilities for academic success to occur (Ferrante et al., 1996; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). Estler and Nelson (2005) expressed the challenges for student-athletes to meet the academic demands today due to time constraints, institutional and national governance eligibility requirements, economic burden, legal and regulatory context, and social and cultural challenges.

The data from this interview shows that learning specialist may be a source of help in bridging the gap between academic and personal help for student-athletes.

Learning specialists used a communication style appropriate for aiding in understanding, increasing confidence, and developing accountability. Unlike the direct approach of the advisor, learning specialists took a more indirect approach by asking questions that gave students power and gain confidence. In addition, a collaborative approach was taken in co-constructing goals with students and then collaborating with them by modeling skills and strategies. Since learning specialists are dealing with soft skills sometimes they must act in the gray area due to their need to uphold good relationships. If you lose a student's trust or good standing in the relationship, it was hard to help that student be successful. This means that sometimes learning specialists had to give students grace when they were late or missed an assignment. This idea of working in the gray was reinforced through the perceptions of academic success. Student-athletes believe that their learning specialist was more concerned about their work ethic and the effort they put into something than the grade they earned. Developing soft skills requires a different approach, which is seen in the interactions between learning specialists and at-risk student-athletes. Relationship building helped learning specialists do their job because it students complete things and show up to appointments, which connects with the learning specialists' explanation of student-athletes being motivated in part by their desire to not disappoint them.

*RQ 2c: How do student-athletes perceive academic success is socially constructed with their advisor and their learning specialist?*

Student-Athlete-Advisor. Student-athletes indicated there is a sense of comfort in someone else overseeing their development as a succeeding student, which was expressed through the idea of their advisor acting as a "safety net." This may lead to them not having as

much control, but the student is okay with that because they believe that their advisor knows what they are doing to keep students eligible. Previous literature suggests that student-athletes do not have as much control in their situation or are pushed into “easy” or “athlete friendly” classes and majors; this is often identified as clustering (Adler & Adler, 1987; Beamon, 2008; Case et al., 1987; Cornelius, 1995; Fountain & Finley, 2010, 2011; McGuin & O’Brien, 2004; Otto, 2011; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010) The findings from this research indicate that student-athletes may not push back during their time at an institution because they find comfort in having someone else in charge who knows the rules and requirements. These actions by advisors were seen as comforting to the students in helping them not feel overwhelmed.

Student-Athletes expressed conversations with their advisors as the avenue in which academic success is constructed. There were two types of conversations that constructed success: collaborative or directive. Collaborative conversations occur when the topic is class related (e.g., course selection, asking how a class is going, talking about the future plan). Directive conversations act as a safety net in regard to assignments (e.g., informing them of assignment due dates/completion and sending reminders).

An example was given by one participant regarding the communicative dynamic with their advisor:

Sometimes there are certain things we want to do that they should be concerned like dropping a class. Sometimes we just talk about it just because it is like the first couple of weeks and it seems like something we don’t like. Every class we not gonna like, we get that. So (advisor) am not concerned about that, you are gonna get your work done though. They are more concerned about what you gotta do in a class, not so much if you are trying to drop or add a class. They are concerned with what you really really need. I think they are concerned with what you want, but to a certain extent.

Logan (2015) posits that student-athletes are used to being told what they need to do to accomplish goals in an athletic environment, so they may struggle in an academic environment if

they are left without someone closely directing them. However, advisors must be careful that they communicate in a way that ultimately leaves decisions up to the student-athlete. Thus, academic support staff members are at the forefront of the change process and must recognize that they need to change the way that the student-athlete thinks before they can change the behavior of the student-athlete (White, 2008).

While research has found that some student-athletes did not view their education as valuable after they graduated (Beamon, 2008; Fountain and Finley, 2011; Meggyesy, 2000; Steeg, 2008), this may not have been the case when they were enrolled at the institution. Although this study did not look at students-athletes' majors or career interests, no interviews indicated that students were in majors that they did not choose or did not see valuable. The only consistent finding for what students wished was different about their meetings and interactions with advisors and/or learning specialists was having more control over the times and frequency in which they met. The findings from this study may indicate that students are okay with joining a major or taking a class based on guidance from their advisors because of the comfort that stems from trusting their advisor will keep them on track and in compliance with institutional and NCAA requirements, which in turn will keep them athletically eligible. However, after student-athletes have left the institution, they may not feel the same way about their major.

Student-Athlete-Learning Specialist. Student-athletes mutually identified the feeling of relationship building. Student-athletes expressed that the learning specialist was someone who they trusted, expressing that they took on the role of a mother. Students let learning specialists in to non-academic parts of their lives and learning specialists helped with socio-emotional development.

Rendon (1994) found that student-athletes with learning disabilities felt more comfortable and motivated when coaches, administrators, and academic counselors treated them as “real people”, which is done through relationship building. Student-athletes with learning disabilities have indicated that coaches and schools who took an interest in helping them succeed academically had a big impact in their decision because trust was gained (Graham, 1999).

Use of Support Services. Studies looking at academic support have recognized that students were more likely to be academically successful if they had access to academic support systems (Astin, 1977; Tinto, 1993). These findings have been supported by research looking at athletic academic support programs (Freeman, 2009; Ridpath 2010; Stokowski, 2013). This study found that at-risk student-athletes saw their learning specialist and advisor as an integral part of their academic success; every student-athlete interviewed except one attributed their academic success to their learning specialist and/or advisor. Participants even expressed not knowing where they would be without the help of their support staff. This is consistent with research that suggests student-athletes may be overly dependent on the help of tutors and academic support staff (e.g., Freeman, 2009; Stokowski, 2013). Research has shown that male minority student-athletes on the basketball and football teams felt academic support services were necessary to remain academically eligible (Ridpath, 2010), which is the same population this study dealt with.

It is clear that both learning specialists and advisors are active participants in the construction of academic success, maybe even more active than the student. It is good to build relationships and credibility with student-athletes, but athletic academic support staffs must make sure they are not creating an overdependence on services to the point that student-athletes are relying on them and do not see themselves as capable without help. This study also indicates the



importance of pointing out success of student-athletes no matter how small in order to show them that they can do it on their own successfully. Moving forward this should be the goal of support staffs. As on P stated, the goal of a good learning specialist is to “work yourself out of a job.”

### *Additional Findings*

Additional findings from the study addressed how success was socially constructed among the roles of academic advisors, learning specialists, and student-athletes. The influence of gender in job responsibilities and the relational dynamics with student-athletes was found in the data, which led to a discussion of support services taking on a parenting role. In addition, coaches impacted the relationships with and between student-athletes and academic support services. These findings further the idea that academic advisors and learning specialists coordinate their unique roles to provide adequate support, academically and relationally, to co-construct academic success with at-risk student-athletes.

Gender dynamic. Gender influenced the role and relationships among groups. The responsibilities expressed by learning specialist in this study emphasized developing academic and life skills through relationships with student-athletes. The majority of learning specialists in the field are female, and every learning specialist participant in this study was female, which may have affected why student-athletes identified that learning specialists played a nurturing role in their life. It should also be noted that all student-athlete participants were male, which may have further influenced the nurturing role that learning specialists were perceived to take. If the learning specialists interviewed were male or the student-athletes were female, the dynamic may have been different and success might have been constructed in a completely different way that

did not include socio-emotional development. It may be that the job expectations of the learning specialist are set up in a way that encourages women to work more effectively in that role. The academic advisors included a mix of participant genders (two male and four female). None of the advisors were referred to as a mother or father figure, although some student-athletes did indicate having close relationships with their advisors. This may be due to the fact that advisors' jobs focused on academic issues and requirements than socio-emotional development. Gender had an influence on the dynamics of the participant groups used in this study.

Parenting Role. Along with student-athletes indicating that their advisor and learning specialists play a vital role in their college experience, parents of student-athletes from this generation may feel as though they are handing over the parent role to the academic support services personnel. Student-athletes identified that support staff helped them navigate academic and life situations, indicating that they take on a parent role for the students during their time at the institution. With this role come varying ways to fulfill that "parenting" role. This was found through the communicative dynamic and the need for the advisor to be more strict, as indicated by working in the black and white, and learning specialists to be more lenient since they work in the gray.

Privacy. Prior research found that one of the most important roles of an advisor was managing privacy boundaries around the information that student-athletes frequently disclosed to them (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Jordan & Denson, 1990; Thompson, 2011). However, given the fact that advisors must maintain relationships with multiple groups (student-athletes, coaches, athletic administrators, and parents), they may have trouble navigating all relationships and as a result feel caught in the middle (Thompson, 2011). It may be possible that the emergence of the learning specialist has taken the place of the advisor as the role that student-

athletes feel comfortable disclosing information. The fact that they are not normally in contact with other people regarding a student-athlete (i.e., professors and coaches) reinforces the possibility that one reason students develop strong trust with their learning specialist is because they feel as though their advisor is dealing with other people about them.

As prior research has shown (e.g., Thompson, 2011) and one participant in this study indicated, learning specialists are in a unique position because they can be privy to confidential information if a student-athlete is at-risk due to a learning disability. Laws prohibiting disclosing information about a learning disability with others may lead to students feeling as though the learning specialist is a confidant. However, being a confidant can also be conflicting for learning specialists because of laws. Regular communication with coaches could hurt this trust and put confidentiality in jeopardy because coaches may want to talk to a learning specialist about why a student-athlete is not doing well. Or, if they have been given consent regarding the diagnosis of a learning disability, they may try and pressure a learning specialist to make a student use certain accommodations. The factors abovementioned could signify that it is better if learning specialists do not have contact with coaches, both for reasons involving laws of confidentiality and trust with student-athletes.

Influence of coaches. Student-athletes are often caught between being underprepared and the demand for academic success in order to remain eligible to compete in their sport. Recruiting “at-risk” student athletes presents challenges for coaches and support staff. Student-athletes may perform on the field, but if they struggle to keep up academically and the team APR suffers, recruiting restrictions could be put in place (Pettit, 2013). With the pressure for coaches to keep recruiting players that can win, pressure is put on academic support staff to maintain individual and team eligibility.

These interviews show that as Logan (2015) found, it is vital for student-athletes to have advisors, faculty members, and coaches that support their academic commitment to success and have an accurate understanding of their unique dual role on campus as a student-athlete. Pettit (2009) found that coach involvement could be the biggest difference maker with academic success of at-risk student-athletes. As a participant from his study stated, “You know if coaches and our staff are engaged in the student’s academic success, they are gonna be successful” (Pettit, 20013, p. 157). Similarly, Sharp and Sheilley (2008) suggested that for academic achievement as well as success beyond graduation to occur, the value of academic achievement must equal that of athletics.

As mentioned previously, a difference in role responsibilities requires different approaches by advisors and learning specialists. Advisors deal with eligibility, which in turn means they deal with professors, coaches, and administrators. This added pressure creates a different view of academic success and construction of success, resulting in more directive communication and support for student-athletes. The majority of learning specialists (all but one) did not communicate with coaches regularly and none of them indicated that they communicated with professors. This seemed to allow learning specialists to focus on the student-athlete’s individual progress instead of worrying about relaying information to other groups involved about a student’s behavior or eligibility.

The findings indicate there is a strain/constant negotiation between wanting students to put in effort and excel individually and wanting to make sure students excel to the degree where they can uphold accountability with coaches and institutional and NCAA rules. These findings are significant because they explain the difficulties advisors encounter in effectively conducting

their job responsibilities due to the split between needing to build positive relationships with students while simultaneously pleasing coaches and academic administrators.

Of the institutions interviewed, only one learning specialist expressed having regular communication or interactions with coaches, although one indicated that with some sports they sit in on individual meetings composed of a student-athlete, advisor, and learning specialist when there are special issues. This participant also indicated that just because they don't have regular meetings, it "doesn't mean that they don't stop me in the hallway and ask me about a student because they do." Only one institution that was interviewed allowed learning specialists to have regular contact with coaches, and interestingly enough, that was the institution that seemed to have the best working relationships between advisors and learning specialists. It is unclear as to if communication with coaches and involvement in team meetings was an indicator of this.

Along with wanting to protect learning specialists from academic integrity issues due to pressure from coaches, advisors also talked about the specific communication styles of coaches and the added pressure that comes with communicating about hard subject matter. The majority of advisors indicated that they did not want and/or see it as beneficial for learning specialists to communicate or meet with coaches regularly. Interestingly enough, the majority of learning specialists did not want regular communication and/or contact with the coaches either. As mentioned in the interviews, advisors are in constant communication with coaches staying on the same page and being available to students helped strengthen relationships. However, the idea of being available to communicate with coaches and students at all time seemed to interfere with separating work and personal life. For learning specialists, the idea of constant availability to students helped build relationships for some, while others also expressed the importance of boundaries.

Good cop and bad cop. The results from this study seem to indicate that one reason trust is able to develop between student-athletes and learning specialists is because they do not have communication with coaches. The idea of trust and different “sides” also led to a dynamic where student-athletes identified learning specialists as the “good cop” because they are on their side in comparison to their advisor, the “bad cop,” who is on the coaches’ side since they report to them. The idea of a “good cop” and a “bad cop” in the relationship was found in multiple interviews, both from student-athletes and advisors. Academic advisors similarly expressed that they thought student-athletes viewed them as the “bad cop” in the relationship, especially when compared to the learning specialist, because they report to coaches. Advisors indicated that student-athletes’ perceptions of them usually change over time when they develop a deeper understanding of the advising purpose. In addition, one student indicated both roles, “good cop” and “bad cop”, working together was necessary. The data seem to suggest that the job responsibilities of professionals lead to a working dynamic that balances the relationship and accountability needed to construct academic success.

The data seem to indicate that through personal experience, student-athletes have come to believe academic accomplishments that maintain eligibility are considered success in the eyes of their advisor. This may be due in part to the fact that advisors are in charge of making sure students adhere to institutional and NCAA requirements, and must communicate this information to administrators and coaches. The multiple layers of accountability seem to put a strain on the relationship between the student-athlete and the advisor, resulting in the advisor being labeled as the bad cop. One suggestion for alleviating some of the relational tension with students and pressure from coaches is getting support from coaches to be academic enforcers.

Theoretical framework. This study was created using social construction theory (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and relational dialectics (Baxter & Norwood, 2014) theory as the framework. Initially, SDT was used to look at the autonomy of at-risk student-athletes and how that autonomy was impacted by relationships with support staff. However, the information presented in the interviews caused a shift in the theoretical framework used to understand the phenomena described by participants. As a result, SDT was no longer relevant for this study. Relational dialectics theory was still relevant because an RDT analysis looks to understand how meaning is constructed through the interpenetration of competing discourses. I analyzed how the different roles viewed academic success and how those roles influenced relationships and connected to communicative styles and goals. In order to take a deeper look into how student-athletes construct academic success with learning specialists and advisors, social construction theory was employed in the analysis.

## **Implications**

Rogers and Fuller (2012) explain that each person brings a pre-conceived notion or experience of learning with them into the academic setting. They emphasize that in order for effective learning to take place, we must recognize each student's history/background, along with current expectations. When student-athletes first arrive on campus, they should sit down with a learning specialist and advisor and have a conversation. Begin by asking with the student would identify as academic success for them and their academic goals. Next, inform students of both roles that will be working with them, learning specialist and advisor, and what the goal of their meetings with them will be. Finally, inform students of the expectations of each professional. This step is vital in the communicating with at-risk student-athletes (Pettit, 2013).

Summer bridge programs are recommended as a way to have a mini-academic experience and learn what it will take to succeed academically (Heinel, 2008) and can help support staffs and students have these conversations and interactions early on before students are busier academically and athletically.

Listening to student responses will give professionals a starting point for where a student is and may help in indicating a need to change academic behaviors before the student ever gets in a situation to get behind or encounter eligibility issues, thus, making a smoother transition. In addition, it can help at-risk student-athletes embrace rather than avoid academic challenges. Conversations between student-athletes and support staff promote self-awareness and consciousness raising which can lead to a change in behavior. Academic exercises can help bridge the gap between knowing what to do and actually putting it into action can help equip students (Heinel, 2008). However, starting with this type of dialogue clarifies the roles and expectations of each person and creates an avenue for open communication, which may help increase satisfaction for everyone. Students should have conversations with support staffs to employ strategies to help change certain behaviors. In addition

Support services should also create a generic list of skills and tasks a student can do when they get to college and have at-risk students check off when they have mastered those abilities and skills along the way. Then, at the end of their time at an institution, they can see what they actually were able to accomplish skill-wise and development-wise, resulting in a non-quantitative measure of success.



## **Limitations**

This study was designed to provide insight into the academic experiences between a specific group: at-risk student-athletes, learning specialists and academic advisors. However, there are a number of limitations to this study. To start, the sample size was small for each population and the sample of student-athletes used was not diverse, as all participants were male student-athletes of Caucasian, African American, or mixed ethnicity. This limitation hinders the ability of the findings to be generalized to the total population of at-risk student-athletes since the participant sample lacks diversity in race and sex. In addition, the professional participants were not a diverse sample. The majority of participants were female, with only two male participants, and the majority was Caucasian. Replications of this study with participants of various ethnicities, divisions, sports and members of each sex can provide greater insight into the experiences of at-risk student athletes and support services at the postsecondary level.

There is some difficulty in effectively establishing criteria to determine which student-athletes and professionals should be included in this study. To be chosen as a participant, professionals either volunteered or were chosen by their director. Similarly, the advisor and/or learning specialist approached student-athletes who participated. There is much discrepancy in the factors that label a student-athlete “at-risk” among the institutions that participated. Therefore, it is not possible to generalize the perceptions or social construction of academic success to all at-risk student-athletes.

This study is also limited by its reliance on information given in interviews. There is no method to test whether a subject is telling the truth since participants were self-reporting. The participants could have been chosen because it was known that they would speak positively about their experience and/or other participant groups.

Another limitation to this study is that participants were only used from Division I institutions in the “Power Five” conferences. To provide greater insight into the academic experiences between learning specialists, academic advisors, and at-risk student-athletes, researchers should examine institutions outside of the Power Five conferences.

Qualitative analysis offers valuable insight into personal experiences, but is limited in its focus on the subjective realities of individuals and by the possibility of researcher bias (Charmaz, 2006). This limitation is enhanced in this study because the researcher worked within student-athlete support services as a learning specialist, and was a former student-athlete. These factors lead to the potential for biases, which may have influenced the interview process or interpretation of results.

### **Future Research**

Future research should further investigate the relational dynamic between advisors and learning specialists, as well as coaches and academic support services, in order to develop best practices. There is also a need to look more in depth at the role of learning specialist since there is little research available and the responsibilities differed greatly among participants. In addition, the influence of gender on job responsibilities and the relational dynamics with student-athletes should be explored, along with how advisors and learning specialists function in parenting roles. Further studies should examine the experiences of female athletes with support services and should attempt to create a sample matching the racial composition of intercollegiate athletes. Studies should also look to understand if student-athletes feel that they are academically successful based off their own perceptions like those described in this study.

## **Conclusion**

This study looks to change the perception that talking about academic achievement is only “lip service” and talking about education only relates to eligibility (Beamon, 2008). With the pressure of accountability from multiple sources and the load that advisors already have, they may not have been able to provide all student-athletes, specifically at-risk, with the academic assistance and support that they needed. It is possible that the addition of learning specialists to academic support staffs could be the link needed to give students the time and help they need to actually engage in meaningful learning. The results from this study indicate that both advisors and learning specialists are vital parts of the academic success of student-athletes but they play different roles. Advisors deal more with the logistics and learning specialists deal more with the relational, but both roles are needed when working with at-risk student-athletes.

The study fills a gap in the literature regarding the relational and communicative dynamic of learning specialists, academic advisors, and student-athletes. No studies were found that explore this phenomena. This could be due in part to the fact that the learning specialist profession has recently emerged in college athletics so there has not been a significant need to conduct research up to this point. As pressure increases for coaches to win, there will most likely continue to be an increase in the number of student-athletes entering college who are special admits, underprepared, and/or have a learning disability. In turn, the number of learning specialists employed in athletic academic support services will also most likely continue to increase. As a result, there is a need to understand the learning specialist role in order to streamline job title responsibilities across institutions, create accurate and effective accountability measures, and develop best practices for the profession. This study may be used as a scholarly resource in the academic field and a practical source for academic support services.

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## VII. APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

#### **Student-Athlete**

1. What roles do academic advisors and learning specialists play in your life as a student-athlete?

2. Describe a typical meeting you have with your advisor.

What is the goal for these meetings?

What about these meetings are satisfying?

What about these meetings are challenging?

3. Describe a typical meeting you have with your learning specialist.

What is the goal for these meetings?

What about these meetings are satisfying?

What about these meetings are challenging?

4. How have these interactions changed over the course of your time at the institution?

5. Compare the academic goals you had when you first were a student at (institution) with the academic goals you have today.

6. What do you think your academic advisor would identify as academic success for you? 7.

What do you think your learning specialist would identify as academic success for you?

8. In what ways is your academic advisor concerned with your academic wants and needs/strengths and weaknesses?

9. In what ways is your learning specialists concerned with your academic wants and needs/strengths and weaknesses?

10. What about these meetings that could be changed to make them more helpful for you?

11. What is academic success?

12. Who or what do you perceive as the greatest influence or contributor to your academic success in your collegiate experience?

**Learning Specialist and Academic Advisor**

1. What are your job responsibilities at your institution?
2. How would you define academic success?
3. What is your academic expectation for a student-athlete?
4. How do you co-construct goals with a student-athlete?
5. What is your role in helping a student-athlete?
6. What do you perceive student-athletes view as your role in the relationship?
7. How do you assess a student's academic wants and needs/strengths and weaknesses?
8. How do you use that information?
9. How do you support and/or motivate at-risk student-athletes?
10. How do you help them become more autonomous?
11. How do your interactions with a student-athlete change over time during the course of your relationship?

IX. APPENDIX B

**INFORMED CONSENT**

Title: The Role of Communication in the Co-Construction of Student-Athlete Success

Principal Researcher:	Lauren Kirby University of Arkansas Department of Communication 417 Kimpel Hall Fayetteville, AR 72703 email: llkirby@uark.edu phone: 903-821-6818	Compliance Officer:	Ro Windwalker, CIP IRB Coordinator 109 MLKG Building University of Arkansas Fayetteville, AR 7270 email: irb@uark.edu phone: 479-575-2208
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*Description:* This study will examine the communication roles among student-athletes, academic advisors, and learning specialists. Specifically, the research will focus on the interactions of student-athletes with learning specialists and advisors and how they co-construct goals towards their academic success. You will be asked to participate in an interview that will be audio recorded and last approximately 40 minutes.

*Risks and Benefits:* The overall benefits include gaining a greater understanding of the student-athlete experience and how student-athletes perceive the roles of learning specialists and advisors. In addition, the study will help better define the roles and contributions of learning specialists and advisors in athletic support services. There is no expected benefit to the individual participant. There are no anticipated risks to participating in the study.

*Voluntary Participation:* Your participation is completely voluntary. There are no payments for participating.

*Confidentiality:* All responses will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. If at any time you would like to see how your information has been used, please contact the principal researcher. Interviews will be audio recorded, but no contents of the interviews will be linked to personal identity. Rather, responses will be aggregated with all participants' responses. Recordings of the interviews will be transcribed and then destroyed. The transcriptions will be coded so that they can be matched up with information only identifying which of the three groups they are in (student-athlete, advisor, learning specialist). Summaries of data analysis will only include the use of pseudonyms rather than the interviewees' true identities.

*Informed Consent:* I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the description, including  
(please print your name)

the purpose of the study, the procedures to be used, the potential risks, the ways confidentiality will be maintained, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty; each of these items has been explained to me by the investigator. The investigator has answered all of my questions regarding the study, and I believe I understand what is involved. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the investigator. I may contact Dr. Patricia Amason at [pamason@uark.edu](mailto:pamason@uark.edu)/479-474-4949, project director, if I have further questions or Ro Windwalker at the address above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

IRB #16-07-025  
Approved: 08/29/2016  
Expires: 08/07/2017



August 29, 2016

MEMORANDUM

TO: Lauren Kirby  
Trish Amason

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 16-07-025

Protocol Title: *The Role of Communication in the Co-Construction of Student-Athlete Success*

Review Type:  EXEMPT  EXPEDITED  FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 08/29/2016 Expiration Date: 08/07/2017

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscpi/index.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

**This protocol has been approved for 18 participants.** If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior* to implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

X. APPENDIX C

**Research Question 1: What is Academic Success?**

Population	Overarching Themes	Major Themes
Academic Advisor	1. Personal Development 2. Academic Achievement 2a. Degree Completion 2b. Individual Standards	1. Graduation/Degree 2. Growth/Development 3. Individual Standards
Learning Specialist	1. Maximizing Individual Potential 1a. Personal Best 1b. Self-Awareness and Skill Development 1c. Engaging in the Process	1. Reaching Individual Academic Potential 2. Autonomy/Independence 3. Leaving better than they came
Student-Athlete	1. Meeting Grade Based Standards 2. Work Ethic Resulting in Personal Goals	1. Achieving what I know I am capable of 2. Passing/good grades 3. Work Ethic

1.2a What do you think your academic advisor would identify as academic success for you?

Population	Major Theme	Sub Theme
Student-Athlete	1. Eligibility 2. Effort	1a. GPA 1b. Degree/Graduation

1.2 b What do you think that your learning specialist would identify as academic success for you?

Population	Major Theme	Sub Theme
Student-Athlete	1. Work Ethic 2. Building academic skills and behaviors	1a. Effort is more important than the grade