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# Community College Student-Athletes' Perspectives on the Transfer Process to a Four-Year Institution

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Community College Student-Athletes' Perspectives on the Transfer Process to a  
Four-Year Institution

by

Jodie Heinicka Libadisos

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career, Higher Education  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to all the family and friends who have influenced me, motivated me, inspired me, supported me, and most importantly, loved me through this process. There are too many to name, but all have made this journey possible. Even at times when my perseverance was dwindling, you all lifted me up and kept me on track. To the one who has stood closest, cheered loudest, and supported me most: My husband, Dylan. We began this journey as significant others, then as an engaged couple, and we are ending it as husband and wife. You have seen me through years of late night classes, countless hours of writing, endless papers, long study sessions, and even served as my sounding board as I completed my research. You carried more weight in our daily lives to allow me the time and freedom to pursue this venture, always supporting and never complaining. I am thankful beyond measure to have had you by my side from start to finish and am proud to share your name as I conclude this journey.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .....	iv
Abstract .....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem and Need .....	3
Research Questions .....	4
Significance of the Study .....	5
Definitions of Key Terms .....	6
Limitations and Assumptions .....	9
Organization of the Study .....	11
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature .....	12
Theories and Frameworks .....	12
The Community College and Its Students .....	14
Overview of the American Community College .....	14
Community College Student .....	15
Community College Student Challenges .....	15
Transfer Students .....	17
NCAA Academic Legislation and Background .....	21
NCAA Academic Support .....	25
Transfer Student-Athletes .....	26
Black Male Student-Athletes .....	30
Critical Risk Factor Overview .....	33
Summary .....	34
Chapter 3: Methods .....	36
Design of the Study .....	37
Researcher's Role .....	38
Site and Sample Selections .....	40
Data Collection .....	41
Background Information .....	43
Interviews and Researcher Notes .....	44
Focus Group .....	47
Data Analysis .....	48
Summary .....	49
Chapter 4: Findings .....	50
Participants and Sampling Selection .....	51
Data Collection Process .....	52

Data Analysis .....	54
Research Findings .....	57
Research Question 1 Findings .....	57
Theme 1: Emphasis on Education .....	58
Theme 2: Academic Setbacks .....	61
Theme 3: Late Recruitment .....	64
Theme 4: Difficult Childhood .....	66
Summary of Research Question 1 Themes .....	69
Research Question 2 Findings .....	69
Theme 1: Academic Confusion and Challenges .....	70
Theme 2: Focus and Commitment to Play Division I .....	74
Theme 3: Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletic Experiences. ....	76
Theme 4: Adversity and Internal Hardships .....	80
Theme 5: Wouldn't Change a Thing: Value the Struggle .....	83
Summary of Research Question 2 Themes .....	87
Research Question 3 Findings .....	87
Theme 1: Academic Clarity and Improvement .....	88
Theme 2: Early Recruitment .....	89
Theme 3: Strong Relationships .....	90
Theme 4: It Takes Time and Time Management .....	92
Summary of Research Question 3 Themes .....	94
Overarching Theme Findings – Sacrifice Yields Luxury: Community	
College versus Division I .....	94
Smaller versus Bigger .....	95
Barrier versus Opportunity .....	95
Stepping Stone versus Final Destination .....	97
Struggle versus Ease .....	98
Summary .....	99
 Chapter 5: Discussion .....	 100
Research Questions & Themes .....	100
Research Findings: Comparison to the Current Related Literature .....	101
Relationship Between the Literature and the Research Questions .....	104
Research Question 1 .....	104
Research Question 2 .....	106
Research Question 3 .....	108
Critical Risk Factor Categories & Theme Comparisons .....	109
Theme Relationships: Problems and Recommendations .....	113
Research Implications & Future Research .....	115
Future Research .....	117
Research Study Reflection .....	119
Conclusion .....	121
 References .....	 122
 Appendix A: Participant Consent Form .....	 128

Appendix B: Background Information Portfolio .....	132
Appendix C: Interview Protocol .....	133
Appendix D: Focus Group Interview .....	136
Appendix E: Initial Email to Request Participation in Study .....	137
Appendix F: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter .....	138

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Critical Risk Factor Summary .....	34
Table 2: Data Collection Methods .....	43
Table 3: Interview Question Relation to Research Questions .....	45
Table 4: Participant Background Information .....	51
Table 5: Research Questions and Related Themes .....	55
Table 6: Themes and Authenticating Participant Quote Selections.....	56
Table 7: Critical Risk Factory Categories and Themes .....	110
Table 8: Critical Risk Factor Categories and Subtopics .....	110
Table 9: Critical Risk Factor Subtopics and Theme Comparisons .....	111
Table 10: Theme Relationships: Problems and Recommendations.....	113

## **ABSTRACT**

There is a population of student-athletes who are in need of deeper understanding and additional support. Community college transfer student-athletes face different challenges than their non-athlete and non-transfer peers. Given these differences, this qualitative study was focused on understanding the experiences and perceptions of community college transfer student-athletes. More specifically, this study aimed to describe the preparation to transfer, the transfer process, and the recommendations for successful transfer as each relates to academics, athletics, and personal factors. For this qualitative study, data were collected through individual interviews, a focus group, as well as observation and reflection. Fourteen themes emerged through coding and analysis. These themes answered the three research questions as well as increased the literature on an under-researched population. Key implications for future research surrounding community college transfer student-athletes emerged including a focus on a need for academic clarity, earlier recruitment, strong relationships, and excellent time management skills.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chapter One includes a statement of the problem and need, research questions, significance of the study, definitions of key terms used within the world of intercollegiate athletics, the identification of limitations and assumptions, and the organization of the study.

College athletic competitions have captivated American fans for more than a century. In that time, student-athletes have seen greater opportunity, increased public exposure, superior athletic demands, stricter rules and regulations, and amplified academic standards. The well-known governing body called the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has been a major influence on intercollegiate athletics. Since its inception in 1906, the NCAA has played a primary role in cultivating and establishing legislation, rules, and governance policies and procedures at the university level. The NCAA Division I Manual devotes an entire section to initial and continuing eligibility as it relates to academics. One primary piece of legislation, NCAA Bylaw 14.4.3.2, commonly called the 40/60/80% progress toward degree legislation, requires student-athletes to complete a benchmark percentage toward their declared degree each year, starting at entrance into the fifth semester of college (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2013, p. 165).

Community college transfer student-athletes are one major population who may experience negative consequences as a result of this legislation. Many community college

transfer student-athletes are required to meet the academic standards at the community college level to maintain athletic eligibility, only to find themselves falling short of the academic requirements at the Division I level within the NCAA (Wong, 2006). These differing academic requirements pose a challenging dynamic for community college student-athletes who intend to transfer to the Division I level because, although they are eligible to compete while in community college, they may find themselves unable to sustain eligibility and meet the required percentage of degree completion at the school to which they transfer. In addition to the differing academic policies, many community college transfer student-athletes are also deemed non-qualifiers out of high school, meaning they do not meet the initial eligibility academic requirements to be authorized to receive an athletic scholarship at the Division I level. Thus, they attend a community college and must earn an associate's degree before being permitted to transfer to the Division I level and receive an athletic scholarship.

As a professional working in athletic academic and student-athlete development support services at the Division I level for the past decade, I have personally witnessed numerous community college transfers who enter a university setting unaware of the demanding academic legislation and athletic culture. Similarly, these same students are often upset if they do not have the quality of coursework they need to transfer to the university level and pursue specific majors containing fewer available credits for free elective courses. Combining the academic expectations and changes from the community college level along with the greater public interest of athletics at the Division I level, many community college transfer student-athletes find themselves encountering challenges they never expected. These challenges may be in the classroom, in the athletic

arena, or even on a personal level as they attempt to navigate the numerous changes through their transition to Division I. For these reasons, I was interested in better understanding the unique experiences of community college transfer student-athletes and how their decision to transfer impacted their academic progress, athletic experience, and overall well being. The objective of this study was to better understand the experiences and perceptions of community college transfer student-athletes and how these experiences and perceptions impacted their academic, athletic, and personal progress. An emphasis on the academic experiences of student-athletes served as a focal point for this study.

### **Statement of the Problem and Need**

Transfer student-athletes have different experiences and needs than their non-transfer peers, thus demonstrating the necessity to obtain a clearer understanding of these experiences, challenges, and differences. With limited literature and research related to the specific population of community college transfer student-athletes, a phenomenological case study was undertaken to determine general themes related to experiences, challenges, and successes surrounding academic, athletic, and personal progress for student-athletes in a Division I athletic department. Compiling and reviewing qualitative responses developed from community college transfer student-athlete interviews also provided an opportunity to consider possible themes relating perceived experiences and potential challenges to risk levels. This focused research provides a foundation from which to launch future studies.

This study explored the specific experiences of community college transfer student-athletes as they reflected on the transfer process and how these experiences

impacted their academic, athletic, and personal progress. Minimal research exists on the experiences and impacts transferring has on community college student-athletes. As a current professional in the field, I have witnessed many student-athletes' confusion about academic, athletic, and personal expectations as they transfer to a Division I institution. Some of the academic confusion may stem from the gap that exists between community college eligibility requirements when compared to that at the Division I level. Similarly, the increased pressures and demands athletically and personally may impact community college transfer student-athletes differently than their peers. In my experience, many community college transfer student-athletes seem to lack information about the requirements and expectations at the Division I level, and thus enter less academically, athletically, and personally prepared than desired. Additionally, transfer student-athletes in high profile sports face a significant increase in pressure in the athletic domain. By using qualitative inquiry, focusing on the phenomenon of transferring, and exploring on identified risk factor categories, a better understanding of how the transfer process impacted student-athlete academic progress was possible. Additionally, a deeper understanding of how community college student-athletes interpreted experiences and challenges through the transfer process was needed to determine what support could be established to aid them through the transition.

### **Research Questions**

This study was conducted with a phenomenological approach and examined three research questions relating to community college transfer student-athletes' experiences through the transition from a community college to a large Division I institution.

1. What are community college transfer student-athletes' perceptions about the adequacy of their academic, athletic, and personal preparation prior to transferring?
2. How do community college transfer student-athletes describe their academic, athletic, and personal experiences as they relate to the transfer process?
3. From the community college transfer student-athlete's perspective, what academic, athletic, and personal supports are needed for a successful transfer process?

### **Significance of the Study**

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Division I athletic departments who have found themselves in the national spotlight concerning academic integrity and progress of their student-athletes. With the addition of a stricter academic barometer called the Academic Progress Rate, the magnifying glass has been increasingly placed on Division I athletics over the past decade. Despite continuous changes and increased expectations relating to the academic progress of student-athletes at the Division I level, community college transfers continue to demonstrate greater risk associated to achieving graduation than their non-transfer peers. The NCAA has completed quantitative research and compiled data to help determine where the greatest academic challenges exist for community college transfers. However, with limited qualitative studies in the current literature, a need for qualitative data relating to the experiences of these student-athletes is missing from the existing literature.

This study's analysis of community college transfer student-athlete experiences at the community college level and the Division I level, serves as a foundational study to relay the voices of the student-athletes themselves. Statistical data are critical in developing understanding of big picture challenges, but without the inclusion of actual

experiences, possible challenges and successes, the data are not complete. Understanding the specific transfer student-athlete experiences and their suggestions for improving these experiences provides a more in-depth understanding of community college transfer student-athletes in general. Additionally, this study serves as a foundation for future qualitative research as it relates to the highly specific population of community college transfer student-athletes.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

- *Athletic Academic Advisor*—A formal definition for this role does not exist and may differ from institution to institution. For the purposes of this study, this term refers to the staff in charge of providing academic support, guidance, and assistance specifically for student-athletes. At the Division I level, these employees often have a direct or semi-direct reporting line to the athletic department. In some cases, the term “Academic Advisor” is interchangeable with the term “Academic Coordinator”.
- *Community College*—This term represents a type of higher education institution found across the United States. In most cases, these institutions are regionally located, provide open-access to admissions in higher education, and are committed to life-long learning (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). For the purposes of this study, participants refer to community college interchangeable with junior college or JUCO.
- *Community College Transfer Student-Athlete*—This term signifies a college student who is also a varsity athlete and initially enrolled at a community college before transferring as a student and an athlete to a university at the Division I

level. For the purposes of this study, a community college transfer student-athlete transferred from the community college, and was in his first or second year at the university.

- *Division I*—Also referred to as “DI”, this term refers to the highest level of athletic departments in intercollegiate athletics. According to the NCAA, this division often has the largest student bodies, athletic budgets, and scholarships. Additionally, there is a high academic standard and a range of athletic sport opportunities (NCAA Division I, 2015).
- *Epoche*—This term means to “refrain from judgment” and requires that the researcher gains awareness of bias, assumptions, or perspectives and attempts to investigate the phenomenon from a renewed viewpoint, eliminating as much of his/her bias as humanly possible (Patton, 2002, p.484).
- *High Profile Sport*—Although no formal definition exists for the term “high profile sport” in the field of college athletics, it is similar to the term “revenue-generating sport” which is generally used for sports with the greatest public following and/or fan base and also produce revenue or financial resources to the institution (Horton, 2009a). For the purposes of this study, this term represents the higher revenue sports of football, men’s basketball, women’s basketball, and baseball.
- *High-Risk Student-Athlete*—There are numerous risk categories included in different high-risk student definitions. For the purposes of this study, this term represents student-athletes who are categorized at a higher risk to successfully

- persist toward graduation. Most often in the context of college athletics, a high-risk student-athlete implies significant academic challenges as an outcome.
- *National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)*—This term represents the major athletic governing body across athletic Divisions I, II, and III within four-year institutions.
  - *NCAA Progress-Toward-Degree (PTD) Legislation*—This term describes academic legislation currently used by the NCAA under Bylaw 14.4 to certify Division I student-athletes for eligibility purposes. There are four primary rules that make up the PTD legislation including the six-hour rule, the 18-hour rule, the GPA requirements, and the 40/60/80% rule. The six-hour rule requires all Division I student-athletes to successfully complete a minimum of six degree-applicable hours each term. The 18-hour rule requires all Division I student-athletes to complete a minimum of 18 degree-applicable credits in the fall and spring semesters combined. The GPA requirements require all student-athletes to meet minimum cumulative GPA's of at least 1.8 after the first year, 1.9 after the second year, and 2.0 after the third year and beyond. The 40/60/80% rule requires Division I student-athletes to complete 40% of their declared degree entering their fifth semester, 60% of their declared degree entering their seventh semester, 80% of their declared degree entering their ninth semester, and to graduate within 10 regular semesters (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2013).
  - *Non-Qualifier (NQ)*—This term signifies a high school student-athlete who does not meet initial eligibility standards according the NCAA Eligibility Center. A non-qualifier student-athlete is then required to attend a community college and

obtain an associate's degree before being permitted to compete on athletic scholarship at the Division I level. (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2013).

- *Qualifier*—This term signifies a high school student-athlete who meets initial eligibility standards according to the NCAA Eligibility Center and is therefore able to compete at a Division I institution on athletic scholarship immediately following high school graduation (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2013).

### **Limitations and Assumptions**

This study was a qualitative, phenomenological case study and was completed with a Division I athletic program at a large university in the Southeastern United States. Multiple sources were used for data collection including individual interviews, a focus group, researcher reflection and observation, as well as member checking. The cases selected in this study made up a purposeful sample by selecting participants with “different perspectives” of the transfer experience (Creswell, 2013, p.100). This was accomplished by selecting student-athletes who came from different community college institutions, who participated in different sports, and who arrived to the university setting at different times. Specifically, the arrival time to the university setting may have had a substantial impact on the perspectives, memories, and reflections of participants. Those who recently transferred and have not completed an entire year at the university may have reported experiences, challenges, and successes differently than those who transferred during the previous academic year. Additionally, the setting of the community

college, rural or urban, may have considerably impacted participant's community college experiences.

This study centered on the theoretical framework of constructivism and focused on its ideas of "meaning-making" by utilizing interviews and a focus group (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). Due to the heavy focus and inclusion on interviews, this study contained self-reported data, which may have been skewed based on unrelated experiences, attitudes, or other outside influences (Patton, 2002). It is also possible that academic, athletic, and personal challenges may have bled together and impacted student-athletes' abilities to accurately identify the origin of any reported issues or concerns.

In this study, the researcher was the key instrument by collecting data through interviews, a focus group, reflection, and observation (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher for this study, it was critical that I was diligently bracketing my own epoche, ideas, and experiences from the study. The ability of a researcher to bracket and separate personal experiences is not easy and I relied on personal reflections and observations to aid in this process by providing an avenue for reflective thought throughout the study (Creswell, 2013). It was also important to note that I have worked in close proximity to the student-athletes studied. Therefore, it was possible that prior interactions or pre-existing relationships could have impacted their responses or comfort levels generating authentic responses. Because the study concentrated on a small population of community college transfer student-athletes at one Division I institution, it lacked the ability to be generalized to greater populations (Morse, 1999). However, research on the transfer process of Division I student-athletes is limited; therefore, this study contributes to

forming a better understanding of experiences, potential challenges, risk assessment, and areas for improvement relating to community college transfer student-athletes.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter Two of this study examines the current literature relating to community college transfer student-athletes. Extensive literature on this highly specific population does not presently exist, so it was necessary to explore and review literature of sub-populations found within the community college transfer student-athletes. Additionally, this chapter expands on NCAA academic support, academic risk factors, as well as relating theories grounding the study. Chapter Three explains the methodology of the study including focus on the research design, sampling process, and instruments. Additionally, details on data collection and analysis are overviewed. In Chapter Four, the attention is on the findings and results of the study. Finally, Chapter Five includes discussion of the findings and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This chapter reviews related research on community college transfer student-athletes. There was limited research on this specific population and subpopulations of transfer students in general (Harper, 2009). Because of the limited research, some literature was dated and also necessitated attention in related populations such as community colleges, community college students, transfer students, and transfer student-athletes. This chapter also covers topics related to the general background relating to the NCAA, academic support from the NCAA as well a brief overview of Critical Risk Factors that were explored during this study. Before discussing each of the aforementioned areas of the literature, it is important to first introduce related theories to ground the study.

#### **Theories and Frameworks**

There are many theories that relate to the challenges faced by community college transfer student-athletes. Those I considered grounding for this study included Sanford's Theory of Challenge and Support and Astin's Theory of Involvement. In a review of relevant community college student research theories, both Astin's and Sanford's models were highlighted and considered to be foundational for learning more about community college students (Chaves, 2006).

Sanford's Theory of Challenge and Support proposes three areas including readiness, challenge and support (Evans, N., Forney, D., Guiddo, F., Patton, L., Renn, K.,

2010). As noted by Strayhorn (2008), the challenges associated with college life refer to challenges found in new circumstances, differences among people with whom students interact, and new ideas that trigger cognitive discord (Festinger, 1957). On the other hand, support signifies environmental factors that enable students to feel safe and accepted (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This theory was relevant for this study because of its close connection to the transfer process, the challenge, and the academic, athletic, and personal services provided to student-athletes, the support. By examining and gaining understanding of the perceived challenges of community college transfer student-athletes, a better understanding of the appropriate and necessary support to help them persist to graduation and to achieve athletic and personal success is possible.

In Astin's Theory of Involvement, Astin (1984) defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 134). He also suggests five areas for involvement including with faculty, peers, academics, work, and elsewhere, with a particular focus on involvement with faculty as the greatest impact on student achievement (Chaves, 2006). Astin (1984) also suggested that involvement relates both to the level of commitment and the time invested. For example, a student may not simply show up to class, but must also engage in the content to be considered as truly involved. By noting the level of perceived involvement of community college transfer student-athletes and combining these ideas with perceived challenges and support systems, better insight to the overall challenges faced by this specific population of students was possible. Using the aforementioned theories as a framework for the study, the literature must be reviewed in key areas as they relate to the specific population of community college transfer student-athletes.

## **The Community College and Its Students**

The first overarching population to review in the literature is community college students. The community college is the starting place for many students' college careers, including that of community college transfer student-athletes. However, this section focuses on the larger population of community college students as a whole.

**Overview of the American Community College.** The American community college system has been unique from its beginning. Community colleges made a dramatic entrance to the scene of American higher education, which primarily began in the mid 1940's and stretched through the 1980's. A new addition to higher education was initially realized under the Truman Commission due to the need to maintain an education system to sustain a post WW II workforce (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). During this time, a limited number of public "junior colleges" were established as feeder schools that provided the first two years of education in order for students to transfer to four-year institutions. Additionally, there were community colleges that offered a variety of occupational degrees and technical programs (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Even from the beginning, community colleges struggled to determine one steadfast mission and were considered to be "multifunction institutions" that aimed to assist more than one objective or population (Raby, 2009, pp. 5-6).

As time moved through the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the nation saw the baby-boom, the civil rights movement, veterans returning from the Vietnam war, and the women's movement (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). All of these movements combined, not only brought more students to the footsteps of American higher education and ultimately community college campuses, but also opened the door to a more diverse population. The

community college system could not seem to keep up with the demand fast enough. In fact, there was a time in the 1970s that a community college opened its doors somewhere in the United States every month (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). “Between 1950 and 2006, more than 900 community colleges were established” (p. 6). A general understanding of the birth, mission, general evolution, and history of the American community college system is important to understand its students today.

**Community College Students.** The American Association of Community Colleges (2015) reported in 2013 that community college students currently made up approximately 46% of all college students. Additionally, 36% of community college students today are reported to be first-generation college students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). This is an important fact to understand when considering what the definition of first-generation college student typically means. According to Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012), many use the term first-generation college student to refer to students whose parents did not attend college. It is thought that first-generation students are at a disadvantage because they do not have a parental figure who understands first-hand what the college landscape looks like and how to navigate it (Everett, 2015).

**Community College Student Challenges.** Many community college students face obstacles and challenges as they aspire to obtain a degree, credential, or the credits needed to transfer. A reference to an alarming statistic relating to retention and transfer demonstrates this fact. In a report in 2012, the American Association of Community Colleges and the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Commission revealed “only 46 percent of students who enter community college focused on earning a credential attain that goal, transfer to a four-year institution or are still enrolled six years later. The rates are even lower among

minority and low-income students” (Dembicki, 2012). This finding is substantiated by Dougherty & Kienzl (2006) and Laanan (2003) who also found that students from lower SES backgrounds were not as likely as students from higher-income families to complete a degree. In a longitudinal study, Dougherty & Kienzl (2006) also found there was a higher probability for community college students to transfer to a four-year university when they had no dependents and worked less than 40 hours per week or did not work at all.

In addition to SES and first-generation students, other individual challenges facing some community college students lie in their gender and desires to obtain higher degrees. Studies found that gender and full-time or part-time enrollment status impact community college academic progress and degree attainment (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach & Kienzl, 2006). Bailey et al. (2006) found that female students are more likely to complete a community college degree in addition to out-performing their male counterparts in the classroom. Additionally, Bailey, Leinbach, and Jenkins (2006) found that the students whose aspirations were to obtain a higher degree beyond the community college were 15 percent more likely to achieve community college success than students with no goals of obtaining a bachelors degree.

Another individual characteristic challenge facing community college students lies in the psychosocial make-up behind each student. Miranda (2014) found in his study that there are seven “false beliefs” that together explain how community college students get in their own way when it comes to achieving success as they enter community college. Citing myths that include a lack of in-depth understanding of missed classes or the idea that earning a degree will provide a student with more return than just a higher

salary (Miranda, 2014). Miranda suggests a need for community colleges and professors who are diligent in their attempts to educate students psychosocially, in addition to academically, according to his identified seven myths in order to assist students with obtaining their desired credentials or degrees. This finding, of course, requires greater time and attention from institutional faculty and staff in order to successfully address these challenges.

Institutional size has also been found to impact the success of community college students. In a study in 2005, Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach (2005) considered the connection between institutional characteristics and student results such as persistence and transfer. Bailey et al. found that institutions with 1,001 to 5,000 full-time enrolled students were 15 percent less likely to have a successful outcome compared to students attending institutions with an enrollment size of less than 1,000 full-time students. Additionally, they discovered that colleges with higher rates of part-time faculty also had lower associate degree completion rates for students. These findings also mirror the ideas posed by Astin in his theory of involvement, as well as Miranda and the seven myths, as both concepts suggest greater integration, activity, and interaction between students and faculty. After expanding on the community college, its students, and student challenges, it is critical to look in more depth at the community college students who persist and successfully transfer to a university setting.

### **Transfer Students**

One of the most important sub-populations to review in the existing literature relating to community college transfer student-athletes is that of transfer students. It is important to note that this section focuses on transfer students as a whole, but does not

refer to transfer student-athletes, which will be discussed later. There are no differences in the experiences of transfer students and their student-athlete peers. In many cases, significant research findings centered on transfer students, do not necessarily apply directly to the experiences, scenarios, or situations of transfer student-athletes.

However, it is also important to briefly review potential differences that may skew the findings of studies focused on transfer students as whole when compared to the experiences of transfer student-athletes. There are many assumptions suggested in the literature when it comes to community college students. For example, several studies such as that of Dennis, Calvillo & Gonzalez (2008) suggested that many community college students are non-traditional or work full-time while also attending classes. Although this may be the case with many community college students in general, it is likely not the case with the majority of community college student-athletes due to their time commitments in the athletic arena. Additionally, a study such as that of Townley et al. (2013) suggested that another major factor of success for transfer students is a sense of community. Although this concept applies to both non-athlete and student-athlete transfer populations, it is likely that it applies differently to student-athletes. Student-athletes are surrounded by an athletic team of individuals immediately, which may alter the sense of community experienced by student-athlete transfers. Horton (2015) suggested a similar concept by arguing “athletic participation increases the likelihood of success for student-athletes, rather than serve as distractor from academic performance, compared with students in the general population”. Although no studies exist to elaborate on these potential differences, due to the lack of literature on this specific population, it is important to consider differences that are often referenced in the literature as they relate

to transfer students as a whole. For these reasons, findings in this section should be considered as such, and serve as a foundational means to better understand the larger population of transfer students.

When it comes to the persistence of students in college, Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (Tinto, 1987) and Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984) are often used as the foundation for numerous research studies. Many researchers argue that these models were not intended for the populations of students at non-traditional or non-residential institutions such as the community college (Deil-Amen, 2011). However, in her 2011 study on academic and social integration, Deil-Amen suggests that Tinto's model could translate to the setting of the community college. Much of the current research focuses on the two on-campus elements of academic and social integration as key ingredients that fortify a student's ability to persist toward graduation. However, Deil-Amen also suggests that many researchers, including Tinto himself, "contend background characteristics and external circumstances have a greater impact on persistence than on-campus factors" (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 56).

Proof of the impact of external factors and background characteristics is evidenced in a study on Florida community college transfers. Horton (2009b) found that SES and gender play a significant role in the probability of a student transferring from a community college. Horton found that female students were almost twice as likely to successfully transfer to a university when compared to their male counterparts. Similarly, as previously suggested in the literature, Horton found that SES also plays a significant role in successful transfer predictability. Horton (2009b) found that Florida community college students from low SES backgrounds were approximately 51% less likely to

transfer when compared to their peers from high SES backgrounds. Taking into account the ideas about background and external situations impacting community college student persistence is critical for this study. Currently, there is no research to demonstrate if this same idea would apply directly to community college transfer student-athletes or if their on-campus athletic participation may impact their experiences in ways that serve as protective factors to facilitate successful outcomes and transfer.

Another widely researched and referenced aspect of the transfer process is often referred to as “transfer shock”, first coined in 1965 by J.R. Hills (1965). Hills defined transfer shock as the drop in grade point average through the first semester at a four-year university. In some cases, such as a study completed by Cejda, Kaylor & Rewey (1997), it is suggested that community college student-athletes are likely to experience transfer shock, but that their major selection may impact the degree to which they experience it, if at all.

Taking the research beyond the concept of transfer shock and Tinto’s models, Dr. Barbara Townsend (1995) became one of the first researchers to complete a qualitative study on transfer student perceptions relating to academic environment and the adjustment progression. Townsend’s study included 14 community college transfer students from 1987-1992. By incorporating information through interview and surveys from both graduating students and students who were currently enrolled, she found that most students reported the need to be “self-reliant.” In fact, she initially speculated that students would report perceived differences in academic rigor as well as experiences of greater attention or care from a community college. Students in the study reported

otherwise, leaving Townsend to speculate that peer support and assistance may be more desired and helpful to transfer students than institutional support and help.

While Tinto's model led the way with exploration and studies focused on academic and social integration on the college campus, Hills presented the idea of transfer shock, and Townsend introduced the importance of qualitative research and transfer students, other studies have looked beyond the scholastic performance of students. Frankie Laanan (2001) suggested that research is even more limited for the transfer population when considering the group of students beyond the typical academic benchmarks such as grade point average (Laanan, 2001). He suggested that emotional and psychological development also weigh heavily on their ability to adjust to the four-year institution. Laanan (2001) also implied that there are three key areas for college adjustment, which include the climate, environmental, and psychological. For these reasons, it was important to examine elements relating to each of these areas with the community college transfers in this study.

### **NCAA Academic Legislation and Background**

Before understanding the specific population of community college transfer student-athletes, it is necessary to review the background of the NCAA and its academic landscape over the decades as it dramatically impacts every collegiate student-athlete, including transfers. The NCAA has seen a changing landscape of academic regulations over the past 30 years. In the early 1980s, legislation entitled "Proposition 48" was passed after research indicated low graduation rates and a lack of focus on academic progress (Satterfield, Croft, & Godfrey, 2010, p. 1). This legislation required all high school students to meet established academic benchmarks to be eligible to compete and

receive athletic aid at the Division I level. The benchmarks are based on a sliding scale comparing a core course grade point average to ACT/SAT scores (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2013). Student-athletes who do not meet the recognized standards are considered to be non-qualifiers and must attend a community college and earn an associate degree to compete and receive an athletic scholarship at the Division I level. Although the new academic legislation emphasized a greater focus on academic standards, there was much controversy about the use of standardized test scores as a major aspect to establish standards.

The 1990s found continued change, much of which was propelled by the formation of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. This group was created after securing a grant from the Knight Foundation in order to provide a platform for university presidents to become more involved with decisions relating to college athletics (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2014). The “one-plus-three model” was unveiled by the commission in 1991, which called for increased presidential involvement and control in the three areas of academic integrity, fiscal integrity, and institutional accountability (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2014). This change began more than a decade of increased focus on academic progress at NCAA institutions, resulting in major changes relating to academic continuing eligibility standards.

Initially, the NCAA introduced the 25/50/75% percent-toward-degree requirement as part of a rule known as “progress-toward degree” (PTD). The 25/50/75% rule required all student-athletes entering their fifth semester of full-time enrollment to have completed at least 25% of their declared degree (Brown, 2002). In fall 2003, the NCAA increased

the PTD requirements to 40/60/80%. This change in legislation required student-athletes to complete 40% of their degree by the start of the fifth semester versus the previous 25% (Brown, 2002). In addition to the percentage increases, PTD also required student-athletes to successfully pass a minimum of 6 hours each semester, 18 hours in the fall and spring semesters combined, and to maintain GPA requirements of 1.8 after the first year, 1.9 after the second year, and 2.0 through the duration of years three through five (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2013). Then, in 2004 the Academic Progress Rate (APR) system was introduced as a means to hold athletic programs responsible for meeting the new academic standards (Satterfield et al., 2010, p. 1). The Division I Committee on Academic Performance completed significant research while developing the structure and benchmarks for the new APR system. A benchmark of 925 team score was established because of its projected correlation to a 50% Federal Graduation Rate (Hosick, 2009). Programs falling below the 925 average score were at risk of losing scholarships or being banned from post-season play (Satterfield et al., 2010, p. 1). In 2007, the NCAA began to realize the increased challenges associated with transfer student-athletes and completed preliminary research as a foundation to understanding how transfer student-athletes impact the APR.

The research revealed that the conferences with the most incoming transfers often have the lowest Academic Progress Rates. And some of the sports with the lowest APRs — men's basketball and baseball — have the highest number of transfer student-athletes. In those two sports in fact, more than a quarter of student-athletes have transferred into an institution, most from two-year schools.

Previous research has shown that transfers from two-year institutions to four-year institutions do not perform as well academically. (Hosick, 2007)

Likely as a result of this 2007 study, in 2009 the NCAA began to require all community college transfers to have completed “six credits of English and three credits of mathematics” as a prerequisite to compete at a Division I institution (Storch & Ohlson, 2009, p. 79-80). Additionally, in 2008, the NCAA passed Proposition 16 requiring “prospective students to have completed sixteen core courses while enrolled in high school—an increase from the previous requirement of fourteen core courses” (Storch & Ohlson, 2009, p. 79-80). This change in legislation raised the initial eligibility requirements for student-athletes to be considered NCAA qualifiers and have the ability to accept athletic scholarship offers at Division I institutions immediately following high school graduation. As the NCAA continued to increase academic standards, community college transfer student-athletes also found increased challenges.

In 2013, the NCAA passed new qualifying standards for both community college student-athlete transfers and incoming freshmen. A major standard increase was that of the GPA requirement of at least a 2.5 within a student-athlete’s transferrable credits (Crabtree, 2013). This increase was a significant one from the previous 2.0 GPA requirement. Additionally, the NCAA also increased the course requirements from the previous six credits of English and three credits of math. Now, community college transfer student-athletes must also complete at least three credits of physical or natural science as well as being held to a maximum of two credits of physical activity courses permitted to count toward their necessary 48-hour minimum to earn their associate’s degree (Crabtree, 2013). In addition to the transfer eligibility changes made, the NCAA

also implemented increased initial eligibility criteria. Starting with all freshmen entering college in August 2016 and later, student-athletes must have a minimum 16-core course GPA of 2.3 to be cleared to compete in their first year. This is up from a current core course GPA of 2.0 (2.3 or Take a Knee, 2015). With such dramatic increased benchmarks, there was initially controversy and kickback toward the NCAA for implementing increasingly strict academic standards.

**NCAA Academic Support.** The NCAA recognized the increased academic challenges for student-athletes and spent 15 years completing research before developing an academic risk-assessment tool called the Graduation Risk Overview (GRO) assessment (Graduation Risk Overview User Guide, 2013). This tool is available for free use to NCAA member institutions across the country and was created to assist athletic staff with identifying risk factors related to graduation success for student-athletes (Facilitating Learning and Achieving Graduation, 2009). The development of the GRO assessment began in October 2006 when the NCAA appointed a task force to examine issues related to academic risk for student-athletes (Facilitating Learning and Achieving Graduation, 2009). In February 2009, the NCAA Division I Academic Cabinet approved the system created by the task force. The committee first identified factors that could “reduce a student-athlete’s chances of graduating,” determining that many factors beyond that of academics should be considered as risk factors (Facilitating Learning and Achieving Graduation, 2009, p.2). They then separated the identified risk factors into three main categories including: factors impacting students during entry to an institution, factors inherent to the institution, program, or sports team, and factors that may occur during a student-athlete’s tenure (Facilitating Learning and Achieving Graduation, 2009,

p.2). After carefully examining over 50 risk factors, the committee narrowed them to include five primary categories including: “Academic background/achievement”, “Role of academics (in the student-athlete’s life)”, “Transfer status”, “Personal history”, and “Sport related issues” (Graduation Risk Overview User Guide, 2013, p. 1).

The task force then applied specific point values based on level of risk for each category. By generating a point system, the NCAA has provided a metrics system to evaluate and assess risk for incoming student-athletes that helps to provide better understanding of potential challenges relating to persistence to graduation. The GRO assessment along with ideas from Tinto and Laanan are key findings in current literature used to guide this study in the exploration of potential risk factors relating to academic, athletic, and personal categories. Understanding the NCAA academic background, support, and research surrounding risk factors associated specifically to student-athletes allows for a better foundation to understand transfer student-athletes.

### **Transfer Student-Athletes**

Although there is significant research on community colleges, community college students, and transfer students as a whole, the literature and existing research is quite limited when it comes to community college transfer student-athletes (Harper, 2009; Horton, 2009b). The first thing to consider is why student-athletes choose to attend community colleges before transferring.

In the world of college athletics, there are many student-athletes who launch their collegiate career at the community college level. Although this may not seem ideal from an athletic perspective for student-athletes in high profile sports such as basketball, football, or baseball, there are reasons that many high-profile student-athletes opt to take

the community college route. Some reasons might include staying closer to home, lowering expenses, comfort due to smaller institution sizes, or reservations about overall preparedness for college (Horton, 2009a). In addition to these reasons, many student-athletes may not desire to attend a community college, but do so as their only option to play their sport at the college level and receive athletic scholarship for doing so.

The NCAA has many requirements for high school student-athletes to gain initial eligibility. On the heels of low graduation rates and inattention to the importance of academics, the NCAA generated minimum academic standards for both initial and continuing eligibility (Satterfield, Croft, & Godfrey, 2010, p. 1). Initial eligibility included the development of the aforementioned sliding scale, which compared high school GPA with ACT/SAT scores. Student-athletes who do not meet the required sliding scale benchmarks are considered to be “nonqualifiers.” Nonqualifiers are not allowed to attend a four-year university on an athletic scholarship. They are, however, permitted to attend a community college on athletic scholarship. Student-athletes who are deemed nonqualifiers, then, must successfully complete an associate’s degree at a community college before being granted access to athletic scholarship at a four-year institution. In summary, for student-athletes who do not meet the NCAA’s initial eligibility benchmarks, the next best option is often to attend a community college and be able to receive athletic scholarship before transferring to a Division I institution.

For student-athletes who elect to attend a community college due to an academic record that prevents them from meeting NCAA initial eligibility standards, it is important to understand the academic standards they must meet as community college student-athletes. Across the country, there are three governing associations for athletics at the

community college level including the California Community College Athletics Association (CCCAA), the Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges (NWAACC), and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA). The NJCAA is the largest national governing body for student-athletes at the community college level (Horton, 2015) and has eligibility and legislation standards for its student-athletes. Academic standards and legislation as they currently stand are laid out in the 2015-16 Eligibility Rules Pamphlet for the NJCAA (Eligibility Rules Pamphlet, 2015). In summary, the legislation states that there are no specific initial eligibility requirements for incoming student-athletes in their first semester of college. Additionally, to remain academically eligible, student-athletes must always remain enrolled as full-time students, or in a minimum of 12 credit hours. Furthermore, student-athletes must pass a minimum of 24 credits with a minimum GPA of a 2.0 in order to remain eligible to compete in their second year. By reviewing the simplistic legislation that currently exists within the NJCAA, the gap in academic expectations between the NJCAA and the NCAA becomes apparent. As previously mentioned, the NCAA recently increased the GPA requirements for academic eligibility for community college transfer student-athletes from a 2.0 to a 2.5. This means that if student-athletes aim and meet the academic eligibility benchmarks set forth by the NJCAA, they may fall short of the GPA requirements needed to transfer and participate and earn athletic scholarship as a student-athlete at the Division I level.

Because of the gap between the aforementioned NJCAA academic eligibility standards and the increased standards in transfer eligibility legislation from the NCAA, increased barriers for successful community college student-athlete transfers exist. Based on my experience working in the field for nearly a decade, I have seen a high number of

student-athletes who were nonqualifiers out of high school and attended a community college before transferring to a Division I institution. These student-athletes often faced academic challenges upon transfer. It is important to emphasize, however, that not all student-athletes attending community colleges are non-qualifiers. Additionally, it is also important to note that the increase in NCAA GPA legislation from a 2.0 to a 2.5 is too new to allow us to see if further challenges will arise due to the gap in GPA expectations. With the legislation being passed in 2013, student-athletes who may be impacted are still making their way to Division I institutions.

Many studies on community college student-athlete populations are outdated as they occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Although these studies have laid minimal foundations in the literature, in many cases, their findings may not apply to today's community college student-athlete due to the numerous changes that have occurred throughout the NCAA's landscape over the past decade. One study that was completed in 2002 by Palomar College is helpful in understanding community college student-athletes at one college in the state of California. The Palomar College report (2002), compiled by the college itself, examined and compared the academic progress and persistence of student-athletes and non-athlete students in the same cohorts between the years of 1988-89 and 2001-02. The findings of the study demonstrated that in many cases, the student-athlete population was progressing academically at a higher rate than that of their non-athlete peers. For example, the study found that student-athletes received more associate degrees than their non-athlete counterparts. Student-athletes also completed their studies faster. Additionally, the study showed that the percentage of "transfer level" credits that

were completed by student-athletes increased throughout the course of the study (Palomar College, 2002).

Another qualitative study completed in 2009 by David Horton researched the perceptions of community college student-athletes as they relate to their athletic and academic experiences. Horton was curious to learn if claims were true about student-athletes forgoing academic success and progress for the sake of their focus and commitment to athletics. The research included an initial pool of numerous community colleges across the nation before finalizing a participant pool of eight student-athletes for phone interview sessions. Some student-athletes were currently enrolled at a community college while others had just recently enrolled at a four-year institution. The student-athletes spanned the sports of baseball, basketball, football, soccer, softball, and volleyball. Through interview analysis and thematic coding, three key themes emerged including the community college difference, academic commitment, and shared responsibility. The community college difference evidenced that student-athletes who were interviewed felt welcomed by their community college and had close relationships with staff and faculty. The academic commitment theme emerged as student-athletes reported a commitment to academics that was not displaced by their athletic commitments. Finally, the shared responsibility theme suggested that student-athletes felt mutually supported by the institution regarding their academic and athletic endeavors.

**Black Male Student-Athletes.** The black male student-athlete population is important to consider and understand because many high-profile sports such as football and men's basketball have a high number of black male student-athlete participants. It has also been said in the literature that college athletics provides a mode for black male

student-athletes to have greater access to higher education (Horton, 2015). There has been minimal research completed on black male community college student-athletes (Harper, 2009; Horton 2015) despite the high populations of black male student-athlete transfers. Studies that do exist and have focused on black male students have found a significant difference in graduation rates when compared to their white counterparts.

For example, Harper completed research concluding that “47 percent of black men graduated within six years, compared to 60 percent of white males and 62 percent of student athletes overall” (Harper, 2009, p. 30). Noting the difference in graduation rates is important, but probably more important is determining the reasons why such differences exist. Benson completed a study that found many black male students were being socialized to concentrate on athletics over academics during high school. This mentality is then carried into the college ranks and continues to present challenges regarding academics (Benson, 2000). Harper (2009) also found that many black male student-athletes who attend community colleges have ambitions to transfer to a Division I institution and play at a higher level. However, in some cases, this is not a possibility because black male community college student-athletes also transfer at lower rates (Harper, 2009). In a study of four institutions, Harper (2009) also found considerably inferior transfer rates among black male student-athletes.

Another key concern as it relates to black male community college student-athletes is student-athlete SES and the general mission of the community college system (Horton, 2015). Most community colleges aim to provide open access to higher education for students who may not otherwise gain admission into college. This open access also applies to student-athletes, who desire to both attend college and have the opportunity to

play their sport. Add in the opportunity to also receive athletically related financial aid, and the appeal to low SES student-athletes becomes greater. To meet the goals of the open-access mission as well as assist student-athletes to achieve academic success, Horton (2015) suggests that community colleges must commit to strong support services focused in these areas. Coaches must first recruit student-athletes who they believe are capable of successfully balancing academic and athletics since there are not generally admission standards. Additionally, support services in the areas of academic advising, career development, and financial management are key to assist low SES student-athletes to achieve success (Horton, 2015).

Harper (2009) found that for numerous black male student-athletes, “the opportunity to play their chosen sport on a bigger and more competitive field or court is appealing” (p. 32) Because of this desire, “aspirations of transferring to a four-year college or university are more common than not for this group” (Harper, 2009, p. 32). Additionally, Harper (2009) claimed that these same aspirations are linked to a desire to play their sport professionally. Combine the strong desire to continue professionally in their sport with the challenges surrounding academic initial eligibility, and black male community college transfers seem to face substantial barriers distancing them from persisting toward graduation.

In addition to considering the academic and graduation challenges black male community college transfers face, the NCAA has also developed important measurement tools to arm support staff to assist this population. For example, the NCAA has developed what is called the Graduation Success Rate (GSR). This calculation is very similar to the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) with the exception of one primary difference. The FGR

“assesses only first-time full-time freshmen in a given cohort” (NCAA, 2013, p. 2). The GSR “begins with the federal cohort, and adds transfer students, mid-year enrollees, and non-scholarship students” (NCAA, 2013, p. 2). Additionally, the major difference between FGR and GSR is the ability to remove transfer students who are in good standing from the cohort (NCAA, 2013, p. 2). Because of this significant difference, the GSR is often much higher than the FGR, but both are currently the best comparisons from student-athletes to non-athletes. When comparing the GSR trends during the 1995-2006 cohorts, two important African American groups have shown dramatic increases. Black men’s basketball student-athletes saw a 22 percent increase while this same population in the Football Bowl Subdivision saw an increase of 11 percent. Both populations were higher than that of the general population or their white counterparts (NCAA, 2013, p. 4). One interesting item to note is that when comparing the most recent 2006 cohorts for FGR and GSR, the “African-American male student-athletes graduate at a nine percentage point higher rate than African-American males in the student body (49% to 40%)” (NCAA, 2013, p. 5). Furthermore, a recent study focused on black male community college student-athlete transfers in the state of Florida found that student-athletes were completing college degrees, regardless of their levels of college readiness (Horton, 2015). Although black male student-athletes seem to be persisting toward graduation better than their male counterparts across campus, barriers still exist that make the achievement of graduation challenging.

### **Critical Risk Factor Overview**

For this study, it was important to identify, combine, and summarize the Critical Risk Factors in the current research that are associated with the academic progress of

transfer students. Key risk factors were used to guide and target the scope of this study. As previously mentioned, Tinto’s model suggests that student involvement on campus, both academically and socially leads to persistence toward graduation. Laanan (2001), built onto this when he suggested that emotional factors including the environment and climate as well as psychological factors play key roles in successful student adjustment. Finally, incorporating the NCAA’s research focusing specifically on the student-athlete population as a whole, it is critical to consider the aforementioned risk factors identified through the GRO program. The five risk factors include “Academic background/achievement”, “Role of academics”, “Transfer status”, “Personal history”, and “Sport related issues” (Graduation Risk Overview User Guide, 2013, p. 1). A summary of the Critical Risk Factors compiled from current research that will be utilized for this study is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Critical Risk Factor Summary*

Critical Risk Factor Categories	Risk Factor Subtopics
Academics	Background (GPA, Qualifier Status), Achievement, Campus Environment/Climate, Role in Life/Identity, Effort
Athletics	Team Environment/Climate, Sport Profile, Role in Life/Identity, Perceived Success
Personal	Social, Emotional, Psychological, Personal History (family, finance, homesick, health)

**Summary**

The population of community college transfer student-athletes is highly specific. Although extensive research on this population did not exist at the time of this study, there was much research on components of this profile including community colleges and

their students, transfer students, NCAA academic support, transfer student-athletes, and overarching risk factors. By combining this information, a strong understanding of the NCAA's focus on academic support, and the frameworks relating to challenge, support, and involvement, the experiences and potential challenges associated with community college transfer student-athletes were made clearer.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

The review of the literature demonstrated a need for further research on the highly specific population of community college transfer student-athletes. By reviewing aspects of this population such as transfer students and transfer student-athletes, a realization of the need for greater understanding became apparent. Before attempting to comprehend a larger population, it is helpful to take a closer look at some specific experiences of community college transfer student-athletes.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of experiences and perceptions of community college transfer student-athletes who transferred to Division I institutions. How did they report their experiences? Did they perceive there to be challenges? Did they feel prepared for academic, athletic, and personal success? The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are community college transfer student-athletes' perceptions about the adequacy of their academic, athletic, and personal preparation prior to transferring?
2. How do community college transfer student-athletes describe their academic, athletic, and personal experiences as they relate to the transfer process?
3. From the community college transfer student-athlete's perspective, what academic, athletic, and personal supports are needed for a successful transfer process?

Each of these questions were addressed through various research techniques including interviews, a focus group, as well as reflection and observation. The questions were also

viewed through the lenses of the previously identified academic, athletic, and personal Critical Risk Factor categories.

### **Design of the Study**

The study used a phenomenological approach, which focused on the experiences of transfer student-athletes. Researchers within the phenomenological philosophy believe that even when people experience a similar phenomenon; their experiences are distinctive and often deciphered differently (Creswell, 2013). The goal of the phenomenologist is to develop the descriptions of participant experiences, but not to provide explanation (Owens, 2007). The phenomenological framework was appropriate for this study because of the focus on the phenomenon of transferring as a community college student-athlete as a life event that was explained by those who have experienced it (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 384). More specifically this was a multiple case study, as it explored the specific transfer experiences of multiple community college student-athletes (Creswell, 2013).

There were several reasons a case study model was appropriate for this research including the strong emphasis on the “how” within the research questions, the inability to control the actions of the subjects of the study, and because the “boundaries are not clear between phenomenon and context” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). Additionally, this study relied on multiple sources of information, such as interviews and observations (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, this study took on the form of a descriptive case study because I attempted to describe the phenomenon of transferring in the “real-life context which it occurred” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548).

## **Researcher's Role**

The researcher's role is critical, especially in the field of qualitative inquiry. Based on my background and experiences both as a student-athlete and working professional in the field of college athletics, it was paramount that I demonstrate strong epoche. According to Creswell (2013), epoche is the ability to "refrain from judgment" and separate what we already know so we can revisit and explore new phenomena (p. 484). As a qualitative researcher with familiar experiences surrounding community college transfer student-athletes, it was critical that I consider each case uniquely and abstain from formulating conclusions or explanations about the phenomena. This was especially important to implement during the interview and focus group stages of data collection.

Not only is the qualitative researcher's role important when considering epoche, but also when it comes to the ideas of reflexivity and triangulation. Reflexivity is similar to that of epoche in that it requires extensive focus on one's own "self awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective" (Creswell, 2013, p. 64). According to Creswell (2013), a great way to maintain reflexivity is by writing in the first-person throughout a qualitative study. This idea requires me as the researcher to actively engage in what I am explaining, learning and reporting, which causes me to reflect at a deeper level. Not only is it important to be aware of one's own perspectives, but also of those being studied. This brings forward the idea of triangulation.

The term triangulation is based off what is thought by many to be the sturdiest geometric shape (Creswell, 2013). The idea behind triangulation is that multiple approaches of inquiry fortify the methodology of any qualitative research (Creswell,

2013). Triangulation can be applied in various aspects of inquiry. In this study, the combination of individual interviews, a focus group, and my own researcher reflection and observation were used to generate triangulation. Additionally, Creswell (2013) identified the concept of reflexive triangulation. In this model there are three populations to consider: the participants of the study, the audience reading or receiving the study, and the qualitative researcher. The researcher is at the central peak of the triangle as the person who acquires information from the participants, filters it, and disperses the information collectively for the audience. For each of these participating groups, there are reflexive screens such as culture, values, age, or gender that must be taken into account as their reflexivity (Creswell, 2013). It was also important to consider the role of the researcher, especially for this qualitative case study.

As the researcher, I interacted with student-athletes in my sample and it was crucial to understand the lenses from which I approached this topic. For example, I am a former Division I student-athlete myself. I have worked as an administrator in the academic and student-athlete development services section of Division I athletic departments for ten years. Although I have never been through a transfer experience myself, I have helped guide many student-athletes through this process during my career. I have realized over time that many transfer student-athletes often struggle with the transition personally, academically, and athletically. In many cases, student-athletes have not achieved in the classroom and brought with them a number of concerns and challenges before arriving on campus. Although I did everything in my power to remain neutral as I interacted with the study participants, it was likely that their knowledge of my

position, experience, existing relationships, and any previous interactions may have impacted the study.

### **Site and Sample Selections**

The site and sample selections for any study are important, but are highly critical for case studies. For this study, I used a collective case study format in which I selected multiple cases to explore the issues relating to community college transfer student-athletes. As suggested by Yin (2009), I replicated the methods and process for each case while also recognizing their similarities and differences. Additionally, I relied on purposeful sampling to obtain participants for this study. As recommended by Creswell (2013), I attempted to intentionally identify participants whose cases represented various experiences, sports, or backgrounds relating to the study. By incorporating multiple cases through purposeful sampling, I was able to gain greater insight of the common experiences, possible challenges, and perspectives of community college transfer student-athletes.

It is important to take a closer look at how multiple case studies were selected specific to this study. Because of my current proximity and access to student-athletes at a large Division I athletic department in the Southeastern United States, I selected participants for the study from the existing population at the time of the study. I applied criterion sampling where all participants shared the same experience or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), which in this case was transferring as a student-athlete from a community college to a Division I university. The sample was a convenience sample of seven participants taken from a pool of current community college transfer student-athletes. All seven participants included in this sample were male. These participants

represented three sports including baseball, men's basketball, and men's track and field. I purposefully narrowed the sample to focus on males and limited it to three sports to allow focus on shared experiences within the phenomenon. The student-athlete participants were asked to join in the study during the 2015-16 academic year. They transferred to the Division I level during fall 2015 semester or anytime during the previous 2014-15 academic year, as I was also interested if elapsed time impacted the perceptions of participants. The reason for selecting seven student-athletes was to keep the population small enough to seek detail, but large enough to explore differing experiences within the phenomenon. Targeted differing experiences included an array of aspects such as sports, locations, background, and academic or athletic profiles.

### **Data Collection**

I used triangulation to guide and strengthen validity. To fulfill this, the method of data collection for this study was separated into four categories: Background Information, Interview Question Response, Small Focus Group Response, and Researcher Notes. Each participant signed a consent form before progressing with the study. Due to the nature of college athletics and the probability for some student-athletes to be in the public spotlight, each participant's name and likeness was changed by using a pseudonym.

After determining a pool of participants for the study, I asked each participant to complete a consent form (See Appendix A) before beginning the study. Once the consent form was completed, I scheduled a one-on-one interview with the participant. I used email, texting, and/or verbal communication to schedule times to individually interview each of the selected participants. I also asked each participant to provide brief background information, which served as foundational information to ground the

experiences of each participant and the combined cases overall. Each interview was audio recorded on a portable recording device to ensure that I was able to capture the exact words of the participants (Patton, 2002). *Production Transcripts, Inc.* transcribed each interview. After transcribing all interviews, I asked each participant to review their individual interview transcript for accuracy. This is called “member checking” and is an important step to ensure the truest account of the participant’s experiences and perceptions is being relayed (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556). I asked each participant to review his transcripts and verify the transcript was accurate based on the interview. I also executed coding to extract common themes and ideas generated by the participants. Based on the findings from the initial interviews and the coding process, I generated follow-up questions to administer to a focus group consisting of three of the previously interviewed participants. This session provided an opportunity for additional member checking. During the focus group interview session, I facilitated six open-ended questions to seek clarification from the group about questions, gaps, or themes I derived from their individual interview responses. I also asked follow up questions to evoke discussion on experiences and potential challenges throughout the transfer process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). After completing the questioning, I provided the participants of the focus group with copies of the identified themes to seek feedback and further discussion. I also recorded researcher notes and points of reflection throughout the interview process and the focus group session.

I compared and coded the responses from the provided background information, individual interview transcripts, and my researcher notes to extract common themes and differences. After obtaining the common themes and outcomes, I shared them with the

participants during the focus group session as an additional member checking strategy. By combining both strategies of individual interview and focus group, I was able to gain rich perspective on community college transfer student-athlete experiences and to increase the validity of the emerged themes from the study. A summary of the data collection methods is below in Table 2.

Table 2

*Data Collection Methods*

Collection Method	Format	Purpose
Background Information Portfolio	See Appendix B for details	Foundation, Provide important reported data for each participant.
Individual Interviews with Selected Participants	Semi-Structured and Open-Ended. See Appendix C for details.	To obtain details on experiences for each case.
Focus Group Interview	Semi-Structured and Open-Ended. See Appendix D for details.	To gain clarity and perspective of experiences and triangulate the study.
Researcher's Notes/Interview Protocol	Personal Reflection Notes.	To demonstrate reflexivity.
Member Check of Transcripts and Final Themes	Checked via email or in person with participants.	To fact check and determine validity.

**Background Information**

Background information was critical for this study to provide a strong foundation of information for each participant. Items that were compiled from the gathering of background information included NCAA qualifier status, location of the community college, sport and general athletic accomplishments, family background, and level of financial resources. This information was helpful to generate a more detailed description of the participants included in the study.

## **Interviews and Researcher Notes**

As I interviewed, I employed an interpretive constructionist perspective (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This means that I focused on each individual's perspective of his experiences and how he interpreted and made meaning from these experiences (p. 19). For the individual interview data collection, I personally met with each participant for approximately one hour to learn more about his personal experiences and perspectives through the transfer process. The most important aspect of the interview process was to establish trust through the creation of a "conversational partnership" (p. 7). I did this by acknowledging each participant's experiences and opinions on the transfer process. Additionally, I employed the interview technique of "responsive interviewing" to further the comfort and partnership of each participant (p. 7). This model focused on the flexibility of the research question design while also allowing the researcher to alter questions based on responses and direction of the interviewer (p. 7). This model was important in this study because I intimately understand the world of the participants, and I needed to ask detailed questions to gain in-depth understanding of specific experiences and perspectives (p. 101). The interviews took place in the athletics center on the campus of a Division I university in the Southeastern United States. The athletics center is where the participants spent the majority of their time. I asked each participant what area of the building he felt most comfortable completing the interview in order to establish trust and comfort from the beginning.

Before beginning each interview, I re-explained the purpose of the study, reviewed the three research questions, and overviewed the main areas of focus during the interview. I allowed each participant to ask any questions and explained that their

interview was completely confidential. I also reminded each participant that the individual interviews would be audio recorded and sent to *Production Transcripts, Inc.* to be transcribed. Each individual interview lasted approximately one hour and followed the semi-structured interview format in which I utilized a prepared set of interview questions, but also asked follow up questions as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As previously mentioned, participants were asked to review their individual transcripts for member checking.

In addition to recording each interview, I also took researcher notes throughout the interview. It was important to take notes even though interviews were recorded for a number of reasons. The notes taken during the interview helped me to generate new questions and focus in greater detail on key points (Patton 2002). Notes also allowed me to create early insight and assisted with analysis after the interview (p. 383). Specifically, I used the note structure suggested by Creswell (2013) as an “Interview Protocol” to pre-organize my notes and reflections during and after each interview (p. 165). The interview questions as they related to the study’s research questions are listed below in Table 3.

Table 3

*Interview Questions as They Relate to Research Questions*

Research Question	Interview Question
1. What are community college transfer student-athletes’ perceptions about the adequacy of their academic, athletic, and personal preparation prior to transferring?	1. What does your family structure look like? How supported do you feel by your family? 2. How do you feel about your athletic ability and athletic goals? 3. How do you feel about your academic status while enrolled at your community college? 4. Tell me about your recruiting process and how you chose your community college.

Table 3 (Continued)

Research Question	Interview Question
	<p>5. Tell me about your team culture at your community college. In what ways did your team culture help or hinder your preparation for transfer?</p> <p>6. Tell me about the academic support structure at your community college. In what ways did this academic support help or hinder your preparation to transfer?</p> <p>7. How do you feel about your overall community college experience?</p> <p>8. Tell me about how prepared you felt before you arrived to campus. Now that you've been here awhile, tell me about how prepared you think you were when you arrived.</p>
<p>2. How do community college transfer student-athletes describe their academic, athletic, and personal experiences as they relate to the transfer process?</p>	<p>9. Tell me how you felt during the recruiting process from community college to this university and how you ultimately made your decision.</p> <p>10. What were your experiences with the transfer process?</p> <p>11. How does being a student-athlete at this university feel different from being a student-athlete at your community college?</p> <p>12. Tell me about your team culture at this university. How do you feel as a member of that culture? In what ways has your team culture helped or hindered your transfer process?</p> <p>13. How does being a student-athlete at this university feel different from being a student-athlete your community college?</p> <p>14. Describe what you think is a successful transfer process. Do you think your transfer process was successful?</p>
<p>3. From the community college transfer student-athlete's perspective, what academic, athletic, and personal supports are needed for a successful transfer process?</p>	<p>15. Tell me about your biggest accomplishment so far in your collegiate experience? How does this make you feel?</p>

Table 3 (Continued)

Research Question	Interview Question
	<p>16. If you could go back, how would you change your college experience to this point?</p> <p>17. When did you feel most settled during the transition process? What helped you feel settled?</p> <p>18. In what ways could your community college and this university have better assisted you to improve your transfer process?</p> <p>19. Tell me about your goals when you leave this university? Do you see yourself graduating before you leave? How will you feel in that moment?</p>

### **Focus Group**

The focus group interview for this study was an important aspect to establish consensus on participant viewpoints. There are many reasons that focus groups are beneficial to a study because they can “enhance data quality”, determine shared perspectives and experiences, and allow participants to interact and draw on each other’s experiences (Patton, 2002, p. 386). The focus group questions for this study were based on follow up questions that would provide clarity after completing initial coding on individual interviews. There were only six questions to allow enough time for each participant to participate in discussion. The focus group was conducted with three of the previously interviewed participants and occurred in the athletic academic center on the campus of a Division I university in the Southeastern United States. Additionally, the focus group session was a means to provide further validity to this study as it served as a second form of member checking. In addition to asking follow-up questions, I also reviewed and discussed the themes that emerged through coding and analysis of the

individual interviews. This allowed an opportunity for participants to weigh in on the themes, their meaning, and their perceived accuracy when compared to their individual experiences and perceptions.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a critical aspect to a successful study, in particular for a qualitative case study. By pairing the results from the individual interviews with the responses generated during the focus group session and my own researcher notes, I was able to develop a more comprehensive analysis to the study.

It is important to note in qualitative study, researchers are simultaneously collecting and analyzing data (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554). A major focal point was to consider the data and outcomes to collectively paint a picture of the experiences, potential challenges, and areas in need of greater support services for community college transfer student-athletes. The steps for analysis began with thematic coding. A code is a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). Coding is possible through multiple reviews of the data until themes, patterns, and codes arise. Some forms of codes identified by Saldaña (2013) include affective methods such as “emotion coding”, “values coding”, “versus coding”, and “evaluation coding” (p. 59). According to Saldaña (2013), “coding is only the initial step toward an even more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation for a report” (p. 8). It is cyclical and requires multiple reviews of the data to derive codes that sufficiently represent the data (p. 8). The analysis focused on the three research questions and identified themes among

participants that further explained the phenomenon of the transfer experience of community college transfer student-athletes.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three outlined the design of the study, the sample, the researcher's role, the data collection process, and provided a brief overview of data analysis. This study collected data using four different collection methods including background information, individual interviews, a focus group, and researcher notes. A more detailed discussion of data collection and analysis is also provided in Chapter Four.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to describe and gain a better understanding of the perceptions and academic, athletic, and personal experiences of selected community college transfer student-athletes. The focus was on their preparation to transfer, the actual transfer process, and the supports needed to assist with a successful transition. Data were gathered through one-on-one explorative interview sessions as well as a focus group session through which semi-structured and open-ended questions were used (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A total of seven community college transfer student-athletes participated in the study. Chapter Four includes a review of the participants as well as the sampling selection. This chapter also discusses the data collection process, data analysis, as well as the research findings. The study's three research questions were:

1. What are community college transfer student-athletes' perceptions about the adequacy of their academic, athletic, and personal preparation prior to transferring?
2. How do community college transfer student-athletes describe their academic, athletic, and personal experiences as they relate to the transfer process?
3. From the community college transfer student-athlete's perspective, what academic, athletic, and personal supports are needed for a successful transfer process?

## Participants and Sampling Selection

A total of seven community college transfer student-athletes participated in this study. Criteria to participate included being a community college transfer student-athlete who initially enrolled at a community college as a student-athlete, transferred to a Division I institution during the 2014-15 academic year or the fall 2015 semester, and who was currently participating as a student-athlete at a Division I institution. I was able to gain access to this specific population through my years of work within Division I athletics. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure the proper criteria were met to participate in this study. An initial request to participate was sent via email on February 1, 2016 (See Appendix E) to 22 community college transfer student-athletes who met all criteria for this study, with a goal to include 4-8 total participants. Some student-athletes were aware of this study and were excited to participate before getting an email, while others learned about it from the email or word of mouth. Each participant received a pseudonym to protect his identity. The pseudonyms used for the participants in this study were: Juice, Bradly, CJ, Steve, Harold, Ben, and John.

Table 4

### *Participant Background Information*

Pseudonym	Identified Race	NCAA Qualifier Status	Received AA Degree	Scholarship	Financial Resources	Rural/Urban Community College
Juice	Black	NQ	Yes	Yes	Moderate	Rural
Bradly	Black	NQ	Yes	Yes	Moderate	Rural
CJ	Black	NQ	Yes	Yes	Moderate	Rural
Harold	White	NQ	Yes	Yes	Abundant	Urban
Steve	White	Q	No	Yes	Abundant	Urban
Ben	Multiracial	Q	Yes	Yes	Abundant	Urban
John	Black	NQ	Yes	Yes	Moderate	Rural

All seven participants for this study were males. The pool of seven participants represented three sport categories including men's basketball, baseball, and men's track and field. The pool of participants portrayed differing backgrounds and demographics as listed in Table 4 above.

Four of the seven participants identified as black, two as white, and one as multiracial. Additionally, five of the seven participants were non-qualifiers out of high school. All were on scholarship and none reported low individual financial resources, although some reported having families who would identify this way during their interviews. Finally, four of the seven participants attended rural community colleges that were located in small towns while the other three participants attended urban community colleges located in large cities. Additionally, participants transferred in at different times, but all entered the Division I level sometime during the 2014-15 academic year or during the fall 2015 semester. Four participants entered the Division I level during 2014-15, while three enrolled in the fall 2015 semester.

### **Data Collection Process**

As student-athletes expressed interest in participating in the study, the purpose and process of the study was explained to them and they were also asked to sign a consent form. Once a signed consent form was on file, an in-person one-on-one interview session was scheduled. Each participant was allowed to choose the location of the interview, provided it was in an athletics building and could provide privacy by closing a door. Each participant completed one in-person interview with the shortest lasting approximately 39 minutes and the longest lasting approximately 109 minutes.

On the day of the interviews, participants arrived at the time and location they selected to conduct each interview. Prior to beginning, each participant was asked to complete a background information form. Then, the purpose of the study was reviewed and summarized. At this time, each participant selected a pseudonym, which was used in any documentation throughout the study. Participants were also reminded that the interview would be audio-recorded to obtain written transcripts containing our exact conversation. It was also explained that anything discussed in our interviews or throughout the study would be kept confidential and any identifying characteristics would be removed from the final paper. Additionally, participants were notified that copies of the transcripts would be available for their review at a later date.

Each interview was recorded on an electronic device and then uploaded to a third-party transcription service company called *Production Transcripts, Inc.* Each transcription included direct quotes of the entire interview in a Microsoft Word document. Each participant was asked to review his transcript for member checking and accuracy. Some participants were asked to review their transcript in-person while others were emailed. Those emailed were provided five days to review, and in the case they did not respond within five days, it was understood no response also suggested their approval. Five of the seven participants responded with approval, while two did not send a response.

Upon completion of the one-on-one in-person interviews, data analysis on all seven transcripts was conducted. Once this process was completed, I reviewed initial codes and themes to determine appropriate follow-up questions for the focus group session. The focus group session was meant to allow a group of the participants to reflect

on their experiences once more and to further discuss among their peers. The focus group was an important aspect to triangulate the study as well as to serve as a means to substantiate initial findings from the analysis of the one-on-one interviews. There were six semi-structured focus group questions that were asked to a group of three participants who also participated in one-on-one interviews. Additionally, at the end of the session, each participant was provided a copy of the initial themes derived from the analysis of the one-on-one interviews. Each theme was reviewed and asked them for their thoughts on the themes. The group discussed each theme and provided feedback, affirming agreement and support of the initial themes.

### **Data Analysis**

To complete the analysis of the data, I began by reading and re-reading each one-on-one interview transcript, my own notes and observations, as well as my reflection journal notes. I began with initial coding where I examined the raw data and assigned labels to content that related to the study. In this phase, I used the holistic coding method as a guide by analyzing data in chunks, rather than considering each individual sentence (Saldaña, 2013). As I assigned a code, I tracked it on a master page, which I used to record all codes as they were labeled. I used code mapping to review the master page of codes and then began to consider reorganization and possible categories (Saldaña, 2013). Axial coding was used to determine which codes were abundant in number and which codes could be connected and codified (Saldaña, 2013). I then used the three Critical Risk Factor Categories including academics, athletics, and personal classifications as a framework to complete the second round of focused coding. In this step, I used pattern coding to review all initial codes and placed them in the Critical Risk Factor Category

that most suited them (Saldaña, 2013). I found that I had a small group of additional codes that did not directly correlate to one of the three Critical Risk Factor Categories. I recorded these codes in an additional group entitled “Other/Important”. I then began examining the more focused codes under each category to determine connections and the themes that emerged. For this step, I used the three research questions as a framework as I considered the list of themes under each Critical Risk Factor Category. I then reviewed and re-read my reflection notes and found that many themes that emerged aligned with commonalities I noticed while in the field collecting data. By the end of this extensive analysis process, 14 total themes emerged, 13 of which connected with a specific research question while one emerged as an overarching theme not associated with a specific research question. The themes and research questions are listed below in Table 5.

Table 5

*Research Questions and Related Themes*

Research Question/Title	Theme
Research Question 1: What are community college transfer student-athletes’ perceptions about the adequacy of their academic, athletic, and personal preparation prior to transferring?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Emphasis on Education</li> <li>2. Academic Setbacks</li> <li>3. Late Recruitment</li> <li>4. Difficult Childhood</li> </ol>
Research Question 2: How do community college transfer student-athletes describe their academic, athletic, and personal experiences as they relate to the transfer process?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Academic Confusion and Challenges</li> <li>2. Focus and Commitment to Play Division I</li> <li>3. Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletics Experience</li> <li>4. Adversity and Internal Hardships</li> <li>5. Wouldn’t Change a Thing: Value the Struggle</li> </ol>
Research Question 3: From the community college transfer student-athlete’s perspective, what academic, athletic, and personal supports are needed for a successful transfer process?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Academic Clarity and Improvement</li> <li>2. Early Recruitment</li> <li>3. Strong Relationships</li> <li>4. It Takes Time and Time Management</li> </ol>
Overarching Theme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sacrifice Yields Luxury: Community College vs. Division I</li> </ol>

The General Overarching Theme entitled “Sacrifice Yields Luxury: Community College vs. Division I” was compiled from overwhelming references to the stark differences between the community college experience and the Division I experience as noted repeatedly by participants. Some of the codes within this theme derived from the “Other/Important” category list, while others overlapped with Critical Risk Factor Category lists as well. Further discussion around this overarching theme will be discussed in the Findings.

After determining the themes from this study, I reviewed each theme with initial codes and crosschecked it with direct quotations from interviews to further substantiate that theme. In many cases, there were multiple references to the same theme or subcategory by participants. At times it was difficult to select direct quotations, because so many powerfully illustrated the theme. I selected direct quotes that best described the theme in the participant’s own words. I also included quotes from all participants, as each had a unique perspective and experience on the transfer process as a whole. Table 6 shows the direct quotes that were selected to authenticate each theme.

Table 6

*Themes and Authenticating Participant Quote Selections*

Theme	Participants Quoted
1. Emphasis on Education	Juice, Harold, Ben, CJ, John
2. Academic Setbacks	Juice, Bradly, CJ, John
3. Late Recruitment	Juice, Bradly, John
4. Difficult Childhood	Juice, Bradly, John
5. Academic Confusion and Challenges	Juice, Bradly, CJ, Harold, John
6. Focus and Commitment to Play Division I	Juice, Bradly, CJ
7. Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletic Experiences	Juice, Bradly, CJ, Harold, Steve, Ben
8. Adversity and Hardships	Juice, Bradly, CJ, John

Table 6 (Continued)

Theme	Participants Quoted
9. Wouldn't Change a Thing: Value the Struggle	Juice, Bradly, CJ, Harold, Ben, John
10. Academic Clarity and Improvement	Bradly, CJ, Steve, John
11. Early Recruitment	Harold
12. Strong Relationships	Bradly, CJ, Harold, Steve, Ben
13. It Takes Time and Time Management	CJ, Steve, Harold
14. Sacrifice Yields Luxury: Community College vs. Division I	Juice, Bradly, CJ, Harold, John

### Research Findings

Through detailed analysis and coding, the findings from this study resulted in the emergence of 14 themes that answered the three research questions. These findings are outlined below.

**Research Question 1 Findings.** For the first research question, “What are community college transfer student-athletes’ perceptions about the adequacy of their academic, athletic, and personal preparation prior to transferring?” four themes were established. I found as I completed this study that the adequacy of the participant’s preparation to transfer often stemmed as far back as childhood and high school in many cases. This is notable because the preparation process often began before participants even enrolled at the community college.

1. An emphasis on education was often present during the preparation phases leading up to transferring for community college student-athletes.
2. Many of the community college transfer student-athletes faced academic setbacks, which led to or occurred during the transfer process.

3. Several community college transfer student-athletes seemed to experience a late recruiting process for varying reasons, which impacted their preparation to transfer.
4. It was not uncommon for the community college transfer student-athletes to have grown up with difficult family and childhood circumstances.

***Theme 1: Emphasis on Education.*** I found it to be fitting that a primary theme that emerged when considering the preparation to transfer was the *Emphasis on Education*. The community college transfer student-athletes who participated in this study described various circumstances that brought forward an emphasis on education such as influence from their parents, academic pressure due to academic challenges, and academic accomplishment such as reaching the goal of graduation and earning a degree.

In the best cases, the participants described a family dynamic that valued education and helped set the tone for them at a young age that earning a college degree was important. This was illustrated when Juice remembered his dad during childhood.

But school was a big thing for him. He always made sure I wake up in the morning and get to school... My dad always lay out a strategy, as in like "Okay, you go to school, I pay your phone bill, I support you long as you doing something positive with yourself. And if you don't go to school you're going to work, and you're going to work and pay this and pay that for yourself." And I chose school because I always wanted to go to school.

Juice was talking about his dad planting the seed and emphasizing education when he was a child, but other participants had a parental influence with education at the

collegiate level as well. Harold recalled this when he described his parent's stance on earning a bachelor's degree.

My mom and dad are all for that. They've always said that from the get-go, even last year when I was getting all that hype and all that. "Don't forget school... So that's definitely going to be a huge accomplishment just not for me, but for them too, proud.

Or from Ben's parents as they reminded him about life outside of athletics when he stated, "That's why it was kind of a big deal to my parents because, again, [they] come from higher education. They were like, "Baseball's just a game. Go to school." Ben also found himself playing for a community college coach who placed a strong emphasis on education,

My head coach, yeah. He would rather take a kid that got a 3.2 than a kid that got a 2.8. Because that was the thing is you have to qualify to transfer from the JUCO to Division I... coaches call you and that's one of the first things asked is, "What's your GPA?" Tell them 3.6, they go, "Okay. You could fail three classes and still have 2.5.

Parental and coach focus on education from early childhood through college made an impact on participants and how they viewed their educational goals. This includes the desire to attend college in the first place, as well as to persevere to play their sport at the Division I level.

No matter how strong a parent or coach influence might have been, some participants faced academic challenges that generated an emphasis on education for different reasons. Many of the community college transfer student-athletes faced

academic challenges that required them to focus and emphasize education out of necessity. Sometimes, it was on the heels of a previous academic shortcoming that provided a learning opportunity and re-emphasized education in the future. Juice remembers this well as he had the opportunity to begin anew when he enrolled at his community college.

It was just like the opportunity that I got in [community college] was everything that I always wanted to start all over, start all over school with my grades, my career and where I need to head, because starting in high school I never had anybody to tell me "You need grades to get where you need to be." I always thought college was-- I meant running was going to get me to a university. I didn't know grades at the time was so important, and by me getting a chance to attend a junior college I was like "Yeah, I'm going to start off with As and Bs. I won't let my grades slip. I'll have the highest GPA on the team and everything.

In some cases, participants found an emphasis on education in their lives as they focused on earning their degree. In Harold's case, he valued his education so much that he noted it as his biggest accomplishment thus far in college.

Getting my AA degree...I was pretty stoked when I got that. Just because I don't know, I feel like it's a big thing when you get your degree. I don't have many friends that have a degree, so I just feel like that was kind of a big deal and then the fact that I got it for free. I didn't pay a dime for it, I thought that was pretty cool.

At least three participants directly noted the opportunity to earn an education because of participation in their sport, and in all seven cases, to do so on an athletic scholarship. For

many, without this scholarship and the access provided by their athletic talent, college may not have been an option in their lives. At least four participants noted that they are first generation college students alongside their siblings. This was evidenced when John stated, “I'm not the first person to go to college, but after this year, I'll be first person to complete college... Yeah, that's pretty much my whole goal.” For some, the opportunity to receive an associate’s degree and even a bachelor’s degree has made them hungry for more. CJ noted this when he said, “People ask me what I want to do, and I just tell them I want to go back to school... get a master’s in mental health.”

It became clear to me that all seven participants in this study greatly value their education. All plan to earn their degree, even if they exit college early to play their sport professionally. This emphasis on education, whether influenced by parents or coaches, or brought on by a fresh opportunity to be a college student, seems to have positively impacted their academic preparation prior to transferring to a Division I program.

***Theme 2: Academic Setbacks.*** All seven participants faced some level of academic setbacks during their educational careers. Some occurred during high school and may have resulted in them attending a community college out of necessity. In fact, two participants did not earn their high school diplomas. The first, CJ, did not finish high school and ultimately earned his GED. He then remained at home, not enrolled in college for another two years before deciding he was ready to begin his collegiate career.. He recalled this when he said,

I was pretty much like... growing up-- where I grew up, it was just like... you either go to college or you just stay home. So I was one of those kids. I stayed home, and I seen all my friends go off for two years. And I finally decided, when

I turned 19, I wanted to go to college, and the only route was junior college... To this day, I'll tell you all the time, I never pictured myself getting a bachelor's degree.

The second participant who did not earn a high school diploma was Juice. He explained his situation and the toll the stress of his academic situation took on him.

I had a certificate of attendance, because I didn't pass the state standardized tests, so when I got to junior college the coach find out, and I thought I was going to get kicked out but came to find out that Florida-- if you pass the ACT it'll take the score for it for the FCAT, so I studied, I studied, I studied... If you don't pass it you won't be able [sic] to run, you won't able to be there anymore. So that was another toll on me as well, because I didn't want to go off to a school and then people see me come back home for any sorts of reason, and I stayed focused... Basically I had a toll on my body from training, from lifting, from running so much, from doing all of this work, and for it to go in vain, it was just like I couldn't do it. And I stayed focused. It was no partying. It was no nothing, no enjoying college.

Sometimes the participants found themselves facing an academic setback that required them to take additional courses in order to fulfill requirements for admissions to both community college and to Division I. Bradly faced this out of high school.

I only had one math course to do. See, I procrastinated. I only had [the] math course do in summer and then it took me like most of the summer just to do the first semester of it. And then the counselor called me into her office. She was like, "Well, I understand, that's good, you just finished the first semester, but you

only have a week left... it was really stressful. I was like, "Man, if I really want-- I can't squander this opportunity. If I really want to do this, I really have to decide and make the adult decision and do what I have to do." So I think for, like, four to five days straight I slept for, like, 10 hours. And I sat on my computer and finished the entire second semester.

After completing this course, Bradley successfully earned his high school degree in the summer just before enrolling at a community college.

Other participants faced academic setbacks relating to NCAA Initial Eligibility requirements by not meeting core course GPA and ACT/SAT test score benchmarks out of high school. This resulted in their designation as a NCAA non-qualifier (NQ). As noted earlier, five of the seven participants were NCAA non-qualifiers out of high school. This designation requires that they attend a community college and earn an associate's degree before they are permitted to participate in intercollegiate athletics at a Division I university. John remembered his experience well as he was unaware that he was a non-qualifier until it was almost too late to be recruited to play collegiate sports at any level.

I didn't know the requirements to actually get into college, so I wasn't able to go where I wanted to go... I did what I had to do to stay eligible to play through high school... It wasn't going to cut it for me to go straight from high school to DI. So, once I graduated, I was thinking I was going to a DI, so I was thinking of which schools I was going to accept, that was recruiting me. But as that process went on, I ended up finding out I didn't have the test score or GPA. So that's when somebody's like "You need to start looking at junior colleges," but I didn't know anything about junior colleges at all.

John ended up finding his way to a community college, but after two years of studying and playing his sport, he found himself again facing another academic setback. He was told he needed to complete an additional course as he transferred to Division I from his community college. Coming on the heels of his first experience out of high school, John feared it would be déjà vu.

It was basically the grades. Somebody looked over that, and was like, "You might need another class to be able to play right away." ...But then they was like, "Once you get on campus and do that summer, the summer class you have to do before the actual year starts--" ... So I just did that and I was fine. But it just threw for another scare, because I was like, "Not this again." Like I want to be able to just move without having to lose my stuff, or regain that stuff, and still go to wherever I'm going.

One thing that became clear throughout this study was that all of the participants faced an academic setback at some point in their career. In some cases, this setback had an easy solution that did not drastically impact the participant's future. However, in many cases, the academic setbacks themselves, actually forced the participants to attend a community college as their only option to continue playing their sport.

***Theme 3: Late Recruitment.*** Five out of seven participants found themselves entering or finishing the athletic recruiting cycle later than desired. This impacted their preparation athletically to both community college and to Division I. In some cases, they were late in the recruiting game because they were unfamiliar with how the process worked or faced academic setbacks like those previously mentioned. For some, the idea

of college was surreal, not even a realistic path until the last minute. Bradley recalled this when he remembered,

My senior year, up until that point I never really like thought about college. I always thought it was, like, far-fetched dream. You know, you see on television like all these major universities have these football games and basketball games, and all these college kids go there and attend. I always felt like it was like surreal for me.

For many of the participants, the late recruiting process was not ideal. For example, John found himself scrambling to find a community college at the last minute after learning that he would not be able to attend a Division I school due to being a non-qualifier.

Because of this academic setback, he found himself with no other options as he described his situation,

One of the coaches was like, "I think I know a junior college coach." So he called him up. And he was like, "Yeah, I need a big man," and told him who I was, and I went up and visited out there. I came back from the visit and said "I can't do it, like I don't-- it's cool." Like there was nothing to look at, it was a hole in the wall in the middle of nowhere. And, like their man said "That's your only option at this point. Because school's just getting ready to start, and if you don't go now, you're going to be sitting around here for a year.

Because of his academic setbacks and such late recruitment there were no other options, which left John committing to a school he had no desire to attend.

It wasn't where I went to multiple visits and then had a process of elimination, it was one visit, "You have to go there," and I didn't even like any of the stuff they

told me, like what I would receive coming there. It just-- it didn't feel like a fit, but I had to shape myself to fit that.

Although it was certainly not ideal for him, some of the other participants might consider John lucky because at least he had time to take a visit and see the campus he would be attending. Three participants signed scholarship offers sight-unseen, only weeks before classes began. This was the case for both Bradley and Juice. Bradley reflects on his late signing after completing a math course to finish his high school degree late in the summer.

So I just sent them my [athletics statistics] and they was like, "Whoa, that's impressive," and "I'm going to offer you a scholarship, and I'll see you in the fall." ...Just, like, pretty quick. And I signed my scholarships, like, two weeks out from when I had to leave.

Juice also signed with a coach he did not know, and for him, it took a matter of minutes to sign for his scholarship offer.

I didn't talk to the coach. I didn't know the coach, who it was. The head coach I didn't know, but this other coach that was in Hollandale that was coaching this high school team as well, I knew him, but I didn't know much about him. I just know of his name and he a good coach, and he was going to be there as his assistant. And I was like "Okay, that's fine,"... The same day that the letter was faxed over, the same day we faxed it back. In nothing but 10 minutes tops I signed it.

***Theme 4: Difficult Childhood.*** Childhood and family structure played an important role in personal preparation prior to participants' enrollment to and transfer

from a community college. Four of the participants reported having a difficult childhood. This may have meant growing up with a fractured family structure or a low-income household. Some reported using sports as an escape for them to stay out of trouble or to stay away from the difficulty they faced in their personal lives. Juice describes his family structure with a single father and sister,

When I first moved here it was only my dad, and then it would be my older sister, and my dad told me that my mom is not in my life anymore because she moved on to somebody else, so that was kind of like a little nerve-wracking as a young child, and for me to overcome that I look at my sister as a mother figure as well to me... Growing up with my dad and just my sister was pretty hard, because everything fall back on my sister to take care of everything, to cook, to clean and everything as a young kid growing up.

John recalls similar challenges as the son of a single mother. John remembers his aunt and grandmother helping when his mom was not able to.

My mom is the type, she wants it, like she's going to fight to do it on her own, and if it gets too crazy then she's just going to ask for help. So she didn't want to send us to my grandma's house every day. I'm kind of glad she did it that way because that showed me, like-- I was forced to take care of my sisters, or even my brother...it kind of taught me how to cook and how to take care of them. So, I can say that that just helped me for whenever I'm getting ready to start a family. So, all the struggles I've kind of been through, it just showed me what I have to do, when I become an adult. Like family not being around, that's not an excuse to say

"Oh, your dad isn't here, so I can't do this." You can do it, it's just going to be harder.

Similar to John, those who endured challenging family dynamics, single parent families, and low-income households generally had the attitude that they could and would succeed. All were optimistic, humble, and ready to chase their dreams and goals, and none used their challenging circumstances as an excuse to not achieve their goals. Juice shared his thoughts about this when he talked about his dad,

My dad did everything to his best of his ability, although I never get the shoes, the clothes and anything like that, but my dad always, always put his best foot forward... He always have a roof over our head, so that helped me be stronger to accept everything that-- him not having a car, him not having a good job, him not able to provide as much as he supposed to would just make me become stronger in myself to know that "Okay, there's good out there, but right now be humble to get where we need to be."

Bradly recalls similar challenges with growing up in a low-income household but remaining optimistic,

I wasn't privileged growing up. And my mom was just concerned about providing for me and my siblings. Like a place to stay and eat. So I was never really encouraged to do academically. So it was just, I don't know. I just never really thought about it. Never seemed like something I could do. And so I started getting attention from all these universities. So that really made me take interest in possibly trying to go to college.

He goes on to talk about how he used sports as an escape from the stresses of his life growing up and how he saw sport as offering opportunity,

That's why I really value sports and the impact they have on someone's life... I was out playing sports. I used that as, like, an escape and as a way to relieve stress and better myself. And yeah...it helped me get ahead too.

Juice mirrored this sentiment when he said, "[My sport] helped me get where I need to be, and by me [competing] was just like to stay out of trouble basically, and it was a good thing that I got into sports."

***Summary of Research Question 1 Themes.*** According to the seven community college transfer student-athletes in this study, the adequacy of their preparation to transfer was impacted by the emphasis of education on their lives, the academic setbacks they faced along the way, the late recruitment both out of high school and community college, and the difficult childhoods they endured. The themes, considered collectively, paint a picture of their effect on academic, athletic, and personal preparation of participants prior to transferring. Through the exploration of each Critical Risk Factor Category, it became clear that the process of preparation stems far earlier than the enrollment at the community college. It, in fact, seems to stem to circumstances, skillsets, and developments that occur in early childhood, but still make an impact on student-athlete transfers throughout their college experience.

**Research Question 2 Findings.** For the second research question, "How do community college transfer student-athletes describe their academic, athletic, and personal experiences as they relate to the transfer process?", five themes were established.

1. Participants reported academic confusion relating to the transfer process from community college to Division I.
2. Participants demonstrated a focus and commitment to compete in their sport at the Division I level.
3. Participants noted that team dynamics, both positive and negative, including interactions with teammates and coaches as well as overcoming injuries had a major impact on their athletic experiences.
4. It became clear that participants faced a number of internal hardships and overcame adversity such as loneliness, feeling lost, a fear of failure, and disappointment that dramatically impacted their transition process.
5. Almost unanimously, participants reiterated that no matter the struggles and adversity faced, they valued the experiences gained and would not want to change anything even if they could.

Many of the experiences discussed relating to the transition process straddle both the community college experience and its departure as well as the arrival and initial experiences at the Division I level. Since both the community college and Division I institution play a large role in the overall transfer process, both were included in this section.

***Theme 1: Academic Confusion and Challenges.*** Six out of seven participants reported experiencing academic confusion and challenges before, during, and after the transfer process. This may have resulted from a lack of academic support, coaches serving as academic advisors, course registration confusion, or even a lack of

understanding of NCAA requirements needed to transfer and be eligible at a Division I institution.

A lack of academic support at the community college was a challenge for five out of seven participants in this study. This may have meant there were no academic advisors or tutoring services available to them, both of which resulted in student-athletes having confusion about academic requirements and needs to successfully transfer to Division I. There were also times that even with these academic support services in place, participants reported experiencing academic confusion. Juice noted his lack of academic support while in community college,

For one, we was out there on our own. Two, our coach always stress about grades. It wasn't a mandatory thing. We didn't have tutoring. We didn't have study session. We didn't have the things to help us if we don't understand a problem or a question to help us on a quiz.

Sometimes a lack of staff to support academics meant that student-athletes did not know to take their academics seriously. This was the case for CJ,

My freshman year, I wasn't really there, academically speaking, because I thought, "Okay, I'm JUCO. Grades don't matter." But, little did I know, it *did* matter... basically, I learned everything on my own. So it was just like... either I learned from a mistake... basically, I learned everything from mistakes in my life.

Similarly, for six of the seven participants interviewed, a community college coach also served the role of academic advisor. On one hand this is commendable, on the other, it often led to poor advisement and confusion about course registration. Harold noted

having to serve as his own advisor after realizing the coach may not be the best when it came to class selection,

I wish I would've taken better classes only because the classes the coach-- he's our advisor-- going into college he was our advisor. He didn't put us in classes that were-- he didn't look out for you. He just looked at it to make sure you were either eligible or just put you in classes to put you in classes... but once I figured out that I needed to start picking my classes on my own, my grades were pretty good. Five out of seven participants also noted confusion about course registration. As noted by Harold, sometimes they felt that they were being instructed to take classes that would be best suited to maintain their current eligibility, rather than to set them up for a successful transfer. They expressed frustration in cases where this may have been happening without their knowledge, such as with John's experience,

They told me I might not be able to graduate on time, because basically I found out through my junior college experience, they didn't give me the classes that I needed to set me up to be on time, or anything. They just threw me into classes just to get me in and out. Like it was really all about school, it was just "We want to put him in whatever he can do, to allow him to play." And I didn't know about it.

Other times, the confusion was directly associated with taking remedial coursework and not being educated that remedial classes did not count as transferrable credits. This confusion occurred with several participants, but Bradley best described his experience,

This is why a lot of kids like fail at the junior college level. And my coaches they like they kind of like hinted this to us but they didn't give us like the full like spiel

on it... So if you're a non-qualifier out of high school and you're going to any like any institution, whether it be a Division I, Division II, Division III, whatever, they're going to have you take a placement test. So if you're like a non-qualifier in high school it's very likely that you'll fail the placement test so you'll have to take remedial courses your first year or so. So a lot of students there are they go there and they have to take the remedial like reading and math or writing courses and those credits do not count towards graduation... So that already sets you behind the entire year.

Many student-athletes were unaware that remedial classes did not count or transfer, especially as math and English courses, until late in their time at the community college. This resulted in the need to take additional classes in the summer or another semester before being eligible to earn their associate's degree and transfer to a Division I school. Four of the seven participants reported having to take additional courses before transferring in to Division I, two of whom were delayed admission to a Division I institution for an entire semester while they completed additional coursework.

When it comes to the academic transition, nearly all participants cited an adjustment to class size as they entered a university setting. Some felt more prepared academically after having two years at a community college to prepare, but some also felt challenged by the new academic setting and expectations. CJ noted his feelings,

School started. Some classes was okay, but most of my classes were-- out of four classes, I probably had one okay class. But the other three ...Red flag... Got academic probation. Academic probation. I was just like, "What?" But I had a

B, a C, a C minus and a D. So I think that D really-- I kinda tightened up that spring.

He noted disappointment with moving onto academic probation during his first semester at the Division I level. He admitted that he adjusted better academically after the first semester.

***Theme 2: Focus and Commitment to Play Division I.*** Participants relayed a strong commitment and steadfast determination to achieve their goal of competing at the Division I level. Although each had their own path, there were commonalities among their experiences. Some viewed their sport as a vehicle to a better life while others found motivation from within. In several cases, their pride helped them maintain focus on their goals and persevere through adversity. Finally, all seven participants noted having great support from their families at home.

When it came to pride, Juice noted that no matter how hard things got for him, his pride helped him persevere because he had already been through hard times throughout his life.

I had too much pride. And I been through harder things than just being at a school that's helping me with my education-- free education, free time to able to [compete], to know the experience it. And I didn't-- I took advantage of that. I took advantage of that, because I was like... growing up was already hard for me. Others used their sport as a vehicle to help them reach a better life. Making it to the Division I level and earning their degree may not have been possible without their participation in sports. Bradley elaborates: "For me it was just more of a, like, a vehicle to help me rise above and get to other places. Like, I don't feel like I would be at the

university if it wasn't for sports. I don't feel like people would've helped me as much as they did [if it] wasn't for sports."

He goes on to talk about his commitment to achieving his goal of getting to Division I and how he would not let anything stop him from that goal,

What made me feel prepared? Because there, like, they put the, like, most of the responsibility upon athletes to fulfill like their part academically. Like they told us like, "All right, if you don't do this you're not going to Division I". And some people just kind of like "Ah, whatever"...But I really like I mean I really want to go to Division I, so I'm going to go to class and do well, do what's asked of me even though I hate it, so I can go to Division I.

The commitment to play at the Division I level is not uncommon among athletes. However, three participants specifically noted their own internal motivation as a major reason they were able to achieve their goal. Perhaps this was best demonstrated by CJ.

My high school coach always told me, "Everybody is not born to be a dog."

Everybody don't got that in them. That's something you can't coach. You can't coach aggressiveness. Either you got it or you don't...Where I'm from, we say "GUMP"-- G-U-M-P: Great Under Major Pressure.

For the times that internal motivation is not enough, there is also the desire to make the family at home supporting them proud. CJ talked about this as well,

I told myself, "No matter what the circumstances, I'm going to finish. I want to go school. I want to finish. Basically, I want to make something of myself." The moti-- what motivated me was seeing people go through struggles, and seeing people have to sell drugs just to feed their daughter... It was also in the back of

my mind that... “You got-- you gone this far, and you doing this much. You don’t want to disappoint the person that is really supporting you, the person that’s really there for you... So, basically, I was just like, “I’m going to do it. If I won’t do it for me, I’m going to do it for my mom.

***Theme 3: Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletic Experiences.*** Participants felt that team dynamics with teammates, coaches, and even surrounding injury were critical when it came to their overall athletic experiences. They reported that close proximity of teammates generates unity and a tight-knit team. Where there was unity, there were also experiences noting strong relationships with teammates, most often from the community college experience. Alternatively, when they arrived at the Division I level, most participants reported experiencing team cultures that were more self-centered and less unified compared to their experiences at community college. Not surprisingly, coach relationships also made an impact on overall athletic experiences. Finally, one participant faced a major injury that significantly impacted his athletic and transfer experience.

Four of seven participants reported that teammates were often in close proximity to each other throughout the majority of their days and nights while at community college. They described how this likely provided a unique environment, which allowed the team to build strong relationships based on sheer proximity to one another. Ben explained,

There was six of us that lived, that were on full [scholarship] together that we all hung out every day. That’s what was different too compared to here. Everybody lived in the same spot... So it was like I walked out, I could take 10 steps, I’m in somebody else’s; 20 steps, I’m in someone else’s... We all left our doors

unlocked. People could just walk in our house...I'd come home from class and there'd be people on my couch.

In addition to proximity, participants reported experiencing strong team unity while they competed at community college. Juice described his experience,

My team at [community college] was a brotherhood. Everything that we do, we do it as a team, we do it as a group, we do it with each other, and that's what my coach always coached us, because if I miss practice everybody get penalized for it, not just only me.

Bradly described his community college team,

We had a great team. We had great individuals on the team. But it felt like a team. It didn't feel like a collective group of individuals. Like, no one undermined the goal of the team. Like, as great as you are, Coach always, he always preached to everyone, "Look. I don't care how good you are. If you don't follow the rules, if you don't do what's asked of you, I'll replace you tomorrow.

CJ added about the unity he had with his teammates in community college,

I was surrounded by a good group of people that always supported me, no matter what; always stood behind me, right or wrong. Because my coach fought for me. They was on-- they was about to kick me out. And he fought for me every time. I got in three major incidents, where it was just like, "Man, we got to send you home." My coach fought for me. He was there every time.

And finally, Ben described his community college team,

It was really like, it's like it's everyone's cliché, but it's like a family. Like, there's still like seven or eight guys I could call right now and talk to for an hour

about the things we did for two years. Or we could call the same guys, say, “Hey, let’s all meet this weekend if we have time,” and everyone would drive and meet.

So it was like it’s honestly like a family.

For the four participants who experienced strong team unity during community college, each experienced a stark change in team culture when he arrived at the Division I level. Because they had such positive experiences with teammates in community college, they expressed frustration with Division I teammates. CJ reported his experiences,

I just think it’s a lot of athletes that it was given. They don’t have to earn their-- so they don’t really-- it’s not like they don’t care, but it’s just like, “Oh. I’m gonna have it anyway, so why I gotta do it?” ...“Why I gotta work for it?” Yeah. They not grateful. They not thankful for what they got or what they have.

Juice echoed similar frustrations,

They don’t know what bonding is, as in they don’t know... <sighs> how to put this? Everybody’s for theirself. Everybody’s not on the same mission that my old junior [athletic] team was on. And to this day, all my teammates from my junior college always call and check up.

Ben added to the difficulty of interfacing with a more entitled team culture,

They got a lot of egos. That’s the one thing I see. You see freshmen that get drafted and then they come here and they think they’re better than everybody... At the JUCO level everybody’s on, like, there’s a reason why everyone’s there. Like, again, I think JUCO guys are just as good as DI guys. Like, the people that transfer in and do perfectly fine. It’s just you get guys that are really bad with grades or they don’t like going to class or they want to go to the draft.

On the flip side, Steve had a different experience when he transferred into Division I. Steve, a NCAA qualifier who spent only one year at a community college before transferring, explained that he felt the team culture at the Division I level was more unified.

I feel really close with all my teammates, and it's just a little bit more fun.

Everybody wants to see everyone succeed, and I feel like it's more of a brotherhood here than at my previous school, and we all want to do special things together, and work every day towards that.

Finally, a factor relating to team dynamics that may often be overlooked relates to injury. Harold was injured during his sophomore year at community college. Not only did this affect his entire experience at community college as well as his transfer process, but it also impacted the team dynamics for him when he arrived at Division I. He explains,

So they're the guys that are just, it's like friends. You know what I'm saying? Which the relationship is great, but I'm not-- when I talk about it, I say I hope-- I don't say we. I'll sometimes mess up I'll say we. I'll say, "We should be"-- it's just weird when I... but it's just like I don't feel like I'm on the team because I can't help... So it's just like you say stuff weird and then you have to come back and you're like, "Oh never mind, we." ... So nobody knows what I can do [athletically], only the coaches do. So nobody really respects me in that aspect because you do gain a lot of respect if you're a competitor... These guys just think-- they don't know what they think of me.

It is clear that Harold felt it was much more challenging to integrate and feel a part of the team due to his injury.

***Theme 4: Adversity and Internal Hardships.*** As participants described their experiences, they often confessed to facing adversity and dealing with internal hardships. While at their community college and during the transition to a Division I institution, they dealt with feelings of loneliness and doubt, they often felt lost, they dealt with overcoming a fear of failure, and repeatedly faced feelings of disappointment. Some of these experiences occurred at the community college, but impacted the overall transfer experience as well.

Feelings of doubt through the transfer process began for some at the arrival to their community college for the first time. Bradley describes his arrival:

The bus dropped me off... and then it was like 6:00 A.M. in the morning. And then one of the assistant coaches came and picked me up... And we started, like, driving out to the school. And then the sun is starting to rise and I look to my left and I see nothing but, like, open field. And nothing for miles. Then I look to my right and see the same thing. And I look straight ahead. I'm like, "Oh, my God." Like, "Where am I?" Then we finally get to the school, like a little, it's a small town, tiny school. And then I'm like, "Where the hell am I?"

CJ echoes this doubt as he arrived to his community college as well,

Never been to [Midwest state]. Never thought about going to [Midwest state]. And then, when I got there, it was just like... like, "We going the right way? This how we get to my school? This how we get to the school?" So it was like we got there. Only thing that was in town was a Wal-Mart. And I was just like... like, "I don't think I can do this."

It is important to note that both Bradley and CJ attended rural community colleges located far away from their home states. Both also lived in urban settings prior to enrolling at their community college. Still, the seed of doubt was planted at the onset of their enrollment into college. CJ took it a step further and talked about how his sense of doubt carried over to his transfer to Division I,

Even out of junior college. I took the worst route, and I'm still not getting recruited. So I feel, "Oh, I feel like I've been overlooked." I felt like I was defeated. I felt like I wasn't good enough just to... somebody to take a chance on me. So it was just like-- but deep down inside, I knew if I can get to that level of competition, I can compete.

Sometimes the doubt bled into feeling lost and lonely. This often began at the start of the community college experience, but then turned up again as participants transferred to Division I. John experienced extreme loneliness while trying to adjust in community college,

I don't trust people, so I always kind of stay to myself... So it was just me meeting people trying to make the best of it, which was hard because where that school is located, all the kids went home on the weekends, but home was too far for me. And I wasn't they type of person "Oh, I'm going to go to your house this weekend." So, literally out of a whole school, it probably was less than 100 students there on the weekends.

He went on to explain that he felt depressed from being lonely,

I wasn't enjoying the [athletic] experience, because I wasn't being taught, it seemed like I was just going through the motions. And I don't know, I kind of got

depressed in a way, because nothing was going the way I wanted it to go. And I told my mom "Yeah, I'll do this, and go ahead and just get it over with." But once I started, it just got worse and worse.

The feelings of loneliness and doubt that many felt, translated as they transitioned to Division I as well. Many felt loneliness and isolation when arriving to community college, but then built strong relationships with teammates. However, they report feeling lonely and lost again, and in different ways at the Division I level. CJ describes how the sheer size difference impacted him,

It was just like... wow. It's like 47,000 peop-- this campus is like four times bigger than the community of [my community college]. I don't-- I mean, I knew people [at my Division I school], but I-- only person I really knew was one person that was the coach, and another athlete that brought me in, and it was just-- I didn't see him as much. And then it was just like... I felt lost.

Bradly expressed more loneliness and isolation at Division I, even though he was surrounded by more people,

I'm a lot more isolated here than I thought. If I had came like to a Division I program out of high school I think I would've really struggled with that because there like I would go to class, see my teammates, we would go like to the dining hall I'd like eat lunch...and go to practice, see all of there and then go to dinner, see all that there, then go back to the dorm to see all there. But here I can go, if I really want to, the entire day and not interact with anyone from the team.

As doubt led to loneliness, loneliness led to fear of failure. Even when they faced adversity and internal hardships, participants reported a fear of failing or not being able to

make it at the Division I level and having to return home early. Bradley noted this sentiment when he said, “I don't know if it's for everyone, but I'm really like motivated by fear... Like failure of going back home and people saying, "What happened"... I feel like that's one that really pushed me.” Juice echoed a similar mindset, “I didn't want to go off to a school and then people see me come back home for any sorts of reason.”

***Theme 5: Wouldn't Change a Thing: Value the Struggle.*** Likely the most compelling theme that came from the entire study centered on the appreciation the participants felt as they reflected on their community college experiences and transitions. Almost unanimously, even in the face of devastating adversity, hardships, and setbacks, the participants emphasized the strong feelings of gratitude for the experiences they had. In fact, all but one said they would not change a thing if they could go back and do it all again; they reportedly found great value in the struggles they overcame. They demonstrated maturity as they persevered through struggles and found that they built deep-rooted relationships with those whom they shared the struggles, namely teammates.

Initially, participants may not have enjoyed the struggle. However, as they reflected on their experiences, a fondness and sense of pride for the maturity they developed through the process evolved. In some detailed descriptions, John explained his maturity as he endured community college and the transition to Division I,

So it was just kind of a miserable experience in a way, but it kind of showed me a lot, and that brought me closer to my family because I was alone for so long. I used to call up my mom, I was like "I'm in jail," I used to call that school jail. But it just brought me closer to everybody once I actually got away from there...

I say I am thankful, but at the same time, I wish I would have been right in the first place, before all of this so I would have had-- so I could avoid it. Because it's been hell, like it hasn't been easy at all. And there's been a lot of crazy nights, nights where I said "School isn't for me, I can't do this. I should've just have just stayed at home and got a job." But I just kept pushing though it, and now I'm done, so I'm trying to finish out strong.

He summarized the entire community college and transfer experience as well,

I kind of say it's a love/hate relationship. I hate I had to go through it that way, but I love the outcome it kind of made, because it made me grow up. But being on my own and just having to-- not being babied in a way. Like I was thrown into the fire. It burned me, but it didn't kill me. It just made me know to-- just to go about things the right way, instead of trying to take shortcuts.

Juice had similar comments about his maturity through the struggles of transferring as he realized that the struggles were his decision to endure,

It mold me to be the person that I am. It-- although I was strong, physically, but mentally, it makes you be the man that you are... to work through *anything*: the hardship. And out of junior college, it was just like... "Wow. Why am I here? I don't have to go through this." My dad didn't force me here. My dad didn't say, "You have to be there."

Finally, Ben echoed similar thoughts as he reflected on the transition to community college and Division I,

You hate the rules your freshman year. You think they're stupid. And then you come back your sophomore year and you realized waking up at five thirty's really

easy, lifting for an hour's really easy. Going to an hour and a half long class was really easy. And then it's just, it really matures you, I think.

In addition to growing and maturing as individuals, participants also gained a great appreciation and gratitude for all they had after persevering through the struggles of community college. Bradly reflected on his experiences, and although he would never want to go through it again, he still found value in his process.

If you asked me, I'm like, "Man, I just hated [community college]." Because I complain every day. But, I mean, now I reflect on it, like, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the people I met. I wouldn't want to go back there. Nor would I want to go to junior college ever again, but I enjoyed everyone I met, I enjoyed my teammates. Because I got to build close relationships with my professors, like, smaller classroom settings, and they helped mentor me in a way.

Harold echoed with similar thoughts,

I look back at it and I appreciate it. I was thinking about that this morning actually too. I appreciate the process I've been through. It helped me be who I am now. Mentally, I'm stronger... but looking back on that experience, I'd say it was definitely a learning experience that helped me.

Juice probably summed it up best with his explanation,

And I enjoy every opportunity. Every opportunity that I made, I never regret it. I never did. Although it was hard and tough, I look at it as in a positive thing, to say, "One day, when I get older, this what I went through. This what I did, and this what all the accomplishment that I came out of with."

He went on to say,

Coming from nothing to something, now, it's just a wonderful feeling. It's like...I appreciate it more. It's like I work hard to [be] where I'm at. But although I'm not settled, although I'm-- there's much more out there to work towards, it's like... it's better...I wish I had experienced the whole four years...Two is not enough... because I never experienced anything in junior college but the hard life.

It was not uncommon for the participants to reflect and admire the deep bonds they created with peers and coaches as they made their ways through these struggles. Many of the participants remain closer to their teammates who were alongside them than anyone else. Bradley explained,

I still talk to my teammates now. And I probably haven't seen some of them in two years and I still text them all the time. Like, we got really close because I guess, like, I wasn't the only one who didn't like the coach. No one really liked the coach there, the head coach. So that caused us to really come together, you know, and help one another.

CJ reiterated similar thoughts,

It was plenty of people from my junior college I still talk to, to this day... I have a... I'm going to say a better relationship with those people than I have on the team now, but it's kind of-- I can call them family, because they was there when I didn't have nothing. They was there when my mama couldn't even send me money to wash clothes. Like I was saying, they was there when I ain't have food. Those are the people that came.

***Summary of Research Question 2 Themes.*** According to the participants of this study, experiences relating the transfer process from community college to Division I

were impacted by academic, athletic, and personal factors. These included academic confusion and challenges, focus and commitment to play at the Division I level, team dynamics and their impact on athletics experiences, adversity and internal hardships, and the value of the struggle. Although the participants faced confusion, adversity, and struggles, they remained committed to the ultimate goal of competing at the Division I level. It is clear that academic, athletic, and personal factors impacted their transfer process, but they described great intrinsic motivation and extrinsic support that helped them to effectively navigate the transfer process.

**Research Question 3 Findings.** For the third research question, “From the community college transfer student-athlete’s perspective, what academic, athletic, and personal supports are needed for a successful transfer process?”, four themes emerged.

1. Participants reported a desire for increased academic clarity as well as a desire to focus on academic improvement.
2. Participants reported that early recruitment significantly benefits transfer student-athletes with planning and navigating a smoother transfer process.
3. Participants noted that strong relationships with coaches, teammates, as well as other staff including advisors and professors assist with creating a successful transfer experience.
4. Some participants noted that increased focus on time management skills as well as allowing time to settle from the transition helped them effectively transition into the Division I setting.

Several participants struggled to easily identify areas of support that were most beneficial in their transfer process. In some cases, they considered their own experiences, and in

some cases they provided recommendations based on the experiences they witnessed from others.

***Theme 1: Academic Clarity and Improvement.*** As previously discussed, six out of seven participants recalled their experiences with academic confusion about the NCAA requirements needed to transfer, course registration, and from having insufficient academic support. Because of these aforementioned experiences, some participants reported a need for increased academic clarity. This was evidenced earlier in the Academic Confusion section, but was also reiterated again when Steve explained, “Sometimes I wasn’t fully educated on... certain requirements at my junior college to move on to a four-year. I was in question, for awhile, of hours and credits and all that...I think the school could’ve maybe assisted me a little bit better.”

In addition to the need for academic clarity, participants also described their internal desire and need for continued academic improvement. Although this may not illustrate itself in an external support, it does suggest that a need for internal support and focus from within is necessary for successful transition as well. Bradley talked about his improvement through the community college experience and his transition to Division I as well, “I mean I feel like I was ready athletically out of high school. I wasn’t there academically, but I feel like I’m there academically now.” John also talked about his improvement and how much he developed through the process. He explained that his progress came through the realization that succeeding at the highest level took a lot more work than he initially thought,

My goals definitively were to try to do maybe one or two years, depending on the way I played in college and then try to see if I could enter the draft. But me,

having to experience the JUCO experience and then transferring to a DI school, it showed me that even back then that I wasn't ready. I mean, just going the route I did ...it really made me grow up, and see that you really have to do the work. You can't just do stuff to get by, and then hope for the best, because it's not going to come out in your favor.

He went on to explain further,

I'd say a successful transfer process is you knowing that you're going into something better, but learning from what you just experienced. Instead of going through something, not learning anything, expecting to move on and do great at that, it's gonna catch up to you. So learn from where you are now, and grow into whatever's next.

CJ also expanded on his inner focus on continued academic improvement, “You will never be satisfied with just, oh, getting that C. You gonna want a B the next time. You’ll never be satisfied with getting a 2.9. You’ll want a 3.0, 3.1. That’s how you push yourself to greater levels.”

***Theme 2: Early Recruitment.*** In the case of recruitment, two participants experienced an early recruiting process to their Division I institution. Harold and Steve were both committed to their school early enough to have conversations with coaches and academic staff at the Division I institution to determine if any course adjustments or additional credits were needed for a smooth and immediate transfer process. In this case, athletics meets academics, as recruitment stems from the athletic side, but doing so early was reported to enable a less stressful transition. Steve explained that by committing early, he was able to find out from academic staff at the Division I level that he needed to

take three additional courses before enrolling at the university. The early commitment allowed him to line up a plan and timeframe that allowed him to avoid any delays in enrollment. Harold also recommended early recruitment as it allowed him entire semesters to complete necessary coursework so that he finished all requirements without needing to take extra classes.

Yeah, as an athlete you just need a 2.5 or higher. I think I just knew that just from knowing that, 2.5 or higher, and then just really have your General-ED degree and then, depending on what school you were going to go to, they would say "This class can count as a credit here" or "it can't count as a credit here." That's another reason why I committed here pretty early. I had two semesters pretty much, the spring and the summer, to figure out, okay, which ones-- and I got lucky that all my credits transferred, so I just was good.

***Theme 3: Strong Relationships.*** Six out of seven participants reported strong feelings that maintaining, building, and sustaining relationships, both old and new, may have been the most helpful form of support through the transition process. In some cases the relationships from their community college experiences were helpful in setting an example as well as supporting them through the transfer process and beyond. For example, Ben maintains a close relationship with his community college coach, "I could call him right now and have an hour-long conversation with him too. Still close. Yeah. They keep up with me all the time. Text me. I text him."

At the same time, participants suggest that building new relationships with key support areas is critical in experiencing a successful transfer process. Harold talked about how important it is to feel welcomed by those around him, "Coming in and everything

goes smoothly. Coming in, teammates, camaraderie, playing good, just feeling welcome, feeling like you're not feeling out of place. I feel like that's how you'd feel." On a similar note, Steve explained that feeling comfortable was important, and that developing the key relationships is what allows the settling process to occur, "Coming into the new [university] being comfortable, and creating a good relationship with the academic advisors, coaches, players; earning the respect of everybody; and just working hard with being a student athlete."

Additionally, participants explained their feelings of continued strong connection with other community college transfers. They talked about how they felt instantly connected with their peers who had also experienced community college. Bradley explained, "We all have this shared like connection to one another just because...we can relate to each other what we have to go through to get to this point." Steve echoed a similar experience, "Those are my best friends on the team...I don't know. I think just because we've been around the same culture... Every other junior-college guy went to get their AA, but... I don't know. I knew them somewhat, all of them, so... I think that helped, too."

Taking it a step further, CJ explained that he felt that peer-to-peer support was even stronger in assisting community college transfers with successful transitions than any support from staff and administration. He suggested that a laid back mentor system that connected returning community college transfers with incoming community college transfers may be a great way to organically provide the support they need most.

Administration can help, but it's not as helpful as being around a group of people that's been in that situation... I would say a mentor. A mentor type thing... Yeah,

basically just bring them together and just get them to see familiar faces all the time, that they can open up and talk to. Maybe their friends got friends. And that's just getting them comfortable with a small group.

***Theme 4: It Takes Time and Time Management.*** It is no secret that time management is an important skill to be a successful college student and student-athlete. Participants reported an understanding of the need to manage their time efficiently, but often found it to be a struggle compared to their community college experiences. Campus is bigger, classes are harder, athletic expectations are higher, and in some cases the urban setting offers more distractions. All of these things compete for their time and energy. Participants also suggested that, in some cases, the greatest support in a successful transition is understanding that feeling settled takes time. CJ summarized his thoughts about needing to implement strong time management skills,

[I] easily get distracted. So, my opinion is: you gotta be in tune, basically with yourself, in tune with your coaches, in tune with your classmates, in tune with your professors, always staying on top of your work. It ain't no time for.. BS, basically... Balancing school, athletics. And that's basically your life, because at that time, I really-- it's different from junior college. Junior college, I was staying on campus. Class was right there. Besides that, I come back to my room, go here; I find something to get into. But being a successful transfer and being that person that everybody wants to look up to and say, "Yo, you did it," it's basically being in tune to what you doing. There's no time to play around.

Steve had similar thoughts and noted that, despite what he described as a successful transition, he felt more challenged academically at the Division I level,

At a junior college, it's... I'd say the classes are a little bit easier, like with less homework and... I guess, less-- maybe a little bit less responsibilities. And here, it's... more of like an everyday... mixing the school with athletics. It's a little bit more challenging, but I was able to make that transition pretty well.

To assist with his organization, time management, and to ease his mind, Harold recommended that transfers come to campus early to understand the layout of campus and know where classes and important campus buildings are located,

Making it smoother for me, I guess, is my approach was I came in the summer and I was here early. I went and checked the campus out. I got a feel for everything, where my classes were, so I didn't feel overwhelmed ...the best way you could do it, see where all your stuff is so you're just not overwhelmed that first week, day.

In summation, CJ may have captured it best when he explained that no matter what supports are in place or available to community college transfers, there is not a replacement for understanding that feeling settled and adjusted takes time. For him, it took an entire academic year to feel comfortable.

It took me a whole year. It took me a whole year, I ain't gonna lie... Last year, that fall semester? It was an eye-opener. Then I had the tourney on the spring, but it was different, because I wasn't competing for [my community college] no more. I had a different uniform on, and the meets were different, and I was scared, 'cause these all DI meets, and I'm never compete at a DI meet. Now I'm very settled in what I'm doing, but I'm trying to exhale as I go.

*Summary of Research Question 3 Themes.* According to the participants of this study, academic, athletic, and personal supports needed for a successful transfer process included a need for academic clarity and improvement, early recruitment, strong relationships, as well as time to settle and time management. Participants felt strongest about the importance of peer-to-peer support, specifically in building relationships with other community college transfer student-athletes at their Division I institution. Lastly, developing and implementing strong organizational and time management skills was critical in addition to allowing time for the actual transition process to take place.

**Overarching Theme Findings – Sacrifice Yields Luxury: Community College versus Division I.** Throughout the coding and synthesizing process, as themes emerged, it became clear that there were several subcategories that were discussed by multiple participants, but did not directly link to a specific research question. These subcategories were placed in the miscellaneous list initially before it became clear that they were linked as a larger, overarching theme that revealed the differences between community college and Division I. With the noted differences came a strong mention of sacrifice versus luxury. The subcategories to the 14<sup>th</sup> overarching theme comparing community college to Division I are: Smaller versus Bigger, Barrier versus Opportunity, Stepping Stone versus Final Destination, and Struggle versus Ease.

***Smaller versus Bigger.*** One of the more tangible subcategories to come forward was the stark difference in size between the community college and the Division I university setting. Several participants in this study noted this as a concern they had during the transition. Most notable, was the focus on the class size difference and how

that might impact their confidence and abilities in the classroom. CJ explained the challenge with balancing his confidence and anxiety as it relates to the size differences,

I was saying, “I got this,” but at the same time, I knew it was going to be rough.

Because I know the transition is-- it was different... I was-- my first semester

here, I was in a class with over 250 people...I mean, it was rough. On [my

community college] campus, it was roughly 500 people on campus, all athletes...

It is clear that the size difference most affected CJ as it related to classes. However, size was not the only difference between the community college and Division I that was noted by the participants.

***Barrier versus Opportunity.*** In many cases, the participants discussed their time at the community college with fond memories, but often described the challenges that existed academically, athletically, and personally compared to their experiences at the Division I level. These challenges were best described as barriers versus opportunities. Juice recalled more as he noted his thoughts about the barriers relating to academics,

And the amount of opportunity here... we didn't have it in a junior college. We didn't have tutors. We didn't have somebody sit down with you and go over,

“This what you need to, this what you need, this what you have to be done with.”

Similarly, Bradly discussed the opportunities, both personal and athletic,

A lot more resources, a lot more like privileges. Not having to take a bus to meets is great. Having to fly, I get a chance to fly everywhere is nice...I mean we used to work out in the shed. That was our weight room and then we had like two trainers and like the entire trainer [area] must've been like double the size of your office.

Harold explained further about the barriers that became opportunities, especially relating to athletics and used strength and conditioning as an example,

At a junior college we don't have the facilities and stuff. We didn't work out as a team once. Never lifted a weight at my junior college...So going from that to lifting weights with people that know how you should lift weights-- I lifted weights, but it probably wasn't the correct way.

CJ also noted the opportunity he saw immediately when he first visited the Division I campus,

[I] fell in love with the campus. I just fell in love. I was just like, "What?" At that time, being a good athlete was no doubt in my mind. I had a facility; I can practice; I can live. It was just so much that I can do to get better that I didn't have in junior college.

It was clear as the participants explained their experiences that they did not feel as though they had all they needed or desired while in community college. However, because of experiencing these perceived barriers, their appreciation, excitement, and gratitude for the opportunities they found at the Division I level was that much greater.

***Stepping Stone versus Final Destination.*** Another subtheme that became apparent with participants in this study was the outcome that attending community college had always been viewed as a stepping stone versus a final destination. In most cases, they were attending a community college because something had happened, either academically, athletically, or personally, that required them to enroll at a community college as a means to ultimately attend and compete for a Division I university. In six out of seven cases, this was a situation where the student-athletes were attending community

college out of obligation rather than desire. John explained his feelings after learning that he was a non-qualifier and could not attend a Division I school on athletic scholarship immediately out of high school,

Yeah, and I didn't know anything about junior college, so it was just kind of like a slap in the face in a way because it wasn't going to be something I chose. It was going to be something "Oh, you have to go here, to go to where you want to go next."

Even during the interview, it was easy to feel the sting that still lived in him because of this. CJ described it this way, "Basically, [community college] was a holding cell for athletes that didn't have the grades to go to DI. Some had the grades; they just chose the JUCO route." More than one participant referenced the community college experience by comparing it to "jail" or a "holding cell". These descriptions demonstrated the strong feelings that community college was merely an obligatory stepping-stone to get to their final destination. Although it was not their desired route, many participants found opportunity amidst their disappointment and were grateful to have an alternative to get them to Division I. Bradley described this,

I was really excited. I mean, before then I had only left the state like twice, I think. So I was really excited to be out of state and be away from home and having opportunity. I mean, like, wanted to go Division I out of high school and not having that come true, and then learning about junior college and just figuring out, like, there's another opportunity out there.

***Struggle versus Ease.*** A final subtheme that emerged from the differences between community college and Division I was the Struggle versus Ease. Every

participant expressed at least once during his interview that being at a community college in many ways was a struggle, but Division I offers ease. It is important to note that no participant expressed feelings that Division I was easy, but more so that they were provided all they needed to be successful, which made the experience feel easier compared to the struggle they endured at the community college level. John noted this when he described the differences,

I'd say it's better, because it's easier and you have more. You don't really-- junior colleges aren't known for those wealthy schools, or big fan bases or anything like that. It's just, basically just flat-out school. Even if it is sports programs there, it's nothing really to it. It's just basically get in and get out.

Similarly, Juice explained how the struggle often felt like isolation and a lack of support compared to what he experienced after he transferred to Division I,

Everything that I went through in junior college was just like... on my own. If I went in the wrong route, that would be on my own. I can't get mad at nobody else, because *I* choose to go that way. So when I transitioned in here, I was just like, "Same thing. Get on your grades. Keep your grades." And... that's what I did.

He went on further as he pointed out his confidence to endure any further struggle because of his ability to overcome the struggle in community college,

I never settle for less. I always strive to be the best, or strive to accomplish what I need to. I'm not that smart, but I will work hard to get where I need to be. And when I was coming in, I never had any doubts, as in, "Oh, it's going to be hard.

What's the difference?" Because I already came from something that was already hard, so how hard here could be?

Through these subthemes, it became clear that the participants collectively experienced similar challenges and breakthroughs as they navigated through community college to arrive at the Division I level.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four provided a detailed review of the sampling selection and process, the data collection, data analysis, as well as the research study findings. A total of 14 themes emerged from the study providing answers to the three research questions. Explanation for each theme was provided along with correlating examples including direct quotes from participant interviews.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to gain greater understanding of the experiences of community college transfer student-athletes. As a phenomenological case study, the research aimed to describe the academic, athletic, and personal impacts associated with student-athletes' preparation and transition process as they transferred from a community college to a Division I university. Additionally, this study aimed to collect participant suggestions regarding necessary support to assist in a successful transfer process.

Chapter Five reviews the research findings and themes presented in this study and examine how it relates to existing literature. This chapter also discusses how the emerged themes related to the aforementioned Critical Risk Factor Categories as well as how the themes related to each other. Additionally, the implications for this study, researcher reflections, and a conclusion are discussed.

#### **Research Questions and Themes**

To review, the three guiding research questions for this study were:

1. What are community college transfer student-athletes' perceptions about the adequacy of their academic, athletic, and personal preparation prior to transferring?
2. How do community college transfer student-athletes describe their academic, athletic, and personal experiences as they relate to the transfer process?
3. From the community college transfer student-athlete's perspective, what academic, athletic, and personal supports are needed for a successful transfer process?

Upon the completion of data collection and analysis, a total of 13 themes emerged that answered the study's research questions. An additional 14<sup>th</sup> theme also emerged that did not directly relate to a specific research question, but rather served as an overarching theme that described the differences between community college and Division I as experienced by the participants. The 14 themes that emerged from this study were:

1. Emphasis on Education
2. Academic Setbacks
3. Late Recruitment
4. Difficult Childhood
5. Academic Confusion and Challenges
6. Focus and Commitment to Play Division I
7. Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletic Experiences
8. Adversity and Hardships
9. Wouldn't Change a Thing: Value the Struggle
10. Academic Clarity and Improvement
11. Early Recruitment
12. Strong Relationships
13. It Takes Time and Time Management
14. Sacrifice Yields Luxury: Community College vs. Division I

### **Research Findings: Comparison to the Current Related Literature**

As previously mentioned, the existing literature on the specific population of community college transfer student-athletes was limited. Therefore, it was necessary to compare the finding in this study to the literature and subgroups outside the specific

population of community college transfer student-athletes. A brief review of the general landscape for community college students and for the NCAA as it relates to the participants in the study is discussed first.

In a review describing currently enrolled community college students, the American Association of Community Colleges (2015) indicated that 36% of its students were first-generation. Additionally, it was suggested that these students often come to college with a disadvantage because the parents are not able to support and assist with navigating through college in the same manner as those who have experienced it first-hand (Everett, 2015). At least four participants in this study were first-generation college students, in some cases, alongside their siblings. Those that reported this, also reported experiencing challenges and greater confusion in relation to navigating and understanding what to expect when it came to college. However, those in this study who faced this disadvantage, remained focused on completing their degree.

It was reported in the literature that only 46 percent of community college students who set out to earn a certificate or degree were successful in this endeavor (Dembicki, 2012). Furthermore, the odds were worse for low SES and minority students to achieve similar goals (Dembicki, 2012). Most participants in this study were minorities or came from low-income households, but six out of seven participants earned their associate's degrees. Of those six, only one was not a minority student. It is important to note that all but one of these students was a non-qualifier, thus requiring that they earn an associate's degree before being permitted to participate and earn athletic scholarship at a Division I institution. In the cases of the participants in this study, all were committed to achieving their goal of competing in their sport at the Division I level, and they felt that

this commitment assisted them to focus and complete their associate's degrees as a necessary step to achieve that goal.

Included in this study were seven total participants, all of whom were male, and competed in the sports of baseball, men's basketball, and men's track and field. Five of the seven participants reported that they were NCAA non-qualifiers out of high school, meaning they were forced to attend a community and earn their associate's degrees before being permitted to earn athletic scholarship and compete at the Division I level. Additionally, four participants competed in the high-profile sports of baseball and men's basketball. In the past decade, the NCAA has placed added focus and academic emphasis on these two sports specifically when they recognized dips in Academic Progress Rates (APR) (Hosick, 2007). The APR was defined in detail earlier in this study. Specifically, the sports of baseball and men's basketball were identified as the sports with the worst APR scores, but the highest quantity of transfer student-athletes, most of whom came from community college institutions (Hosick, 2007). Based on the pool of potential participants considered for this study, the sports of baseball and men's basketball fielded two of the teams with the highest number of community college transfer student-athletes, demonstrating alignment with this notion. However, all four of the participants from these two sports reported strong plans, some of which already have timelines, for graduating with their degrees. Some of these student-athletes may have had more successful academic transitions as a result of the NCAA's legislation change in 2013, which increased the minimum GPA from a 2.0 to a 2.5 for community college transfer student-athletes (Crabtree, 2013). It is possible that this increase in GPA requirements demanded a greater focus on academic success while enrolled in community college,

which may have yielded a more academically prepared transfer student-athlete than those from previous years.

Four themes from this study seemed to support the outcomes of David Horton's 2009 study on community college student-athletes. Horton's research focused on the academic and athletic perceptions of current community college student-athletes. He identified three themes: the community college difference, academic commitment, and shared responsibility (Horton, 2009). These themes mirrored identified themes from this study. First, the community college difference theme described having welcoming interactions with faculty and staff, similar to this study's theme of *Strong Relationships*. Second, the academic commitment theme represented a focus on academics alongside athletics, which supported this study's themes of *Emphasis on Education* as well as *Focus and Commitment to Play Division I*. Finally, the shared responsibility theme described by Horton to represent institutional support for athletics and academics supported this study's theme of *Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletics Experience*. The common themes that emerged from these two studies further validate the similar experiences and perceptions shared by community college student-athletes.

**Relationship Between the Literature and the Research Questions.** It is necessary to draw specific connections between existing literature and the emerged themes from this study as they related to each research question. Collectively, the research questions considered perceptions, experiences, and suggestions around the three Critical Risk Factor Categories of academics, athletics, and personal.

**Research Question 1.** The first research question focused on the preparation of community college transfer student-athletes prior to transferring. Four themes emerged

from the data to answer this question, two of which were supported in the existing literature. The first theme that connected to existing literature was *Emphasis on Education*. This theme represented a focus and commitment to education in any or all phases leading up to the participants' transfer experiences. This may have included academics during high school as well as during community college, which often carried into the Division I experiences. Sometimes participants placed an emphasis on education due to their own or their family's values, and other times there was an intense focus on education to meet academic requirements needed to achieve their goal of successfully transferring to Division I. In the literature, a 2002 study at Palomar College revealed that student-athletes earned more associate's degrees than their non-athlete peers (Palomar College, 2002). Although this study did not have a non-athlete peer group for comparison, the research was supported in this study as six out of seven student-athletes completed their associate's degree, thus demonstrating a majority of participants exhibiting successful academic achievement. Additionally, a 2015 study focusing on black male community college student-athletes found that most were completing their degrees despite any low levels of college readiness (Horton, 2015). This finding was also supported in this study, as four out of the six participants who completed their associate's degree were black males, all of whom felt academically underprepared for college.

The second theme associated with Research Question 1 was that of *Difficult Childhood*. This theme represented participant reports of struggles or challenges while growing up. These included low-income and/or single parent households, fractured families, as well as family dynamic and/or social challenges. Several participants reported that their childhood circumstances often caused them great stress and in many

cases, they looked to their sport both as an escape from this stress as well as a means to get them to a better life. These findings align with the thoughts of Tinto and Deil-Amen, who suggested that in addition to academics and social assimilation, a student's background actually impacts a student's ability to persist toward graduation in a greater capacity than on-campus dynamics (Deil-Amen, 2011).

**Research Question 2.** The second research question focused on participant experiences as they related to the actual transfer process. This may have included experiences from community college as well as at the Division I level, as both environments had impacts on the transfer process as a whole. Five themes emerged to answer this question, three of which were supported by the existing literature. The first theme was *Focus and Commitment to Play Division I*. This theme represented the participants' strong determination to achieve their goal of playing their sport at the highest collegiate level. This meant persevering beyond all possible setbacks, delays, challenges, and doubts. All participants were focused on doing whatever was needed to achieve their goal of competing at the Division I level. One previous study revealed that community college students who focused on achieving a degree that was higher than the associate's degree were 15% more likely fulfill their academic goals than those who had no aspirations of a higher degree (Bailey, Leinbach & Jenkins, 2006). In this study, all seven participants were focused on achieving a bachelor's degree in conjunction with their desire to compete at the Division I level. Six out of seven participants actually completed their associate's degree en route to transferring to Division I. Additionally, Harper (2009, 2015) found that many black male student-athletes have a strong desire to compete in their sport at the Division I level and this desire often encourages their

determination to succeed. Four of the seven participants in this study were black males, all of whom reported strong desires to compete at the Division I level. All four participants also felt that this desire helped them stay focused and persevere when they faced challenges.

The second theme from Research Question 2 that was reinforced in the literature was *Adversity and Internal Hardships*. This theme represented the numerous challenges faced by participants including self-doubt, depression, and loneliness. These internal hardships were often a result of dealing with stressors and pressure associated with academic and athletic requirements to achieve success while in community college and Division I. It also may have related to personal struggles with adapting to new surroundings, cultures, teammates, and coaches. Laanan (2001) suggested that key factors for a successful transition to a university are psychological and emotional development and environment and climate. Participants often reported doubt in their decision-making and ability to succeed once they arrived at their new destinations. Five participants also reported feeling alone at times before, during, or after their transition to both the community college and the university. Additionally, external factors such as family situations at home as well as sports-related injury challenged participants psychologically and emotionally through their collegiate experiences.

The third theme in this study that was corroborated by existing literature was *Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletics Experience*. This theme represented participant reports about both united and disjointed team experiences, some of which occurred during community college, while others occurred at Division I. Five out of seven participants reported that a strong and tight-knit team dynamic helped them overcome

adversity or feel more comfortable in their surroundings. They reported deep bonds with the teammates who were part of a strongly unified team. Some participants even reported that a strong team dynamic helped them perform better in the classroom, due to a team focus and joint support for success in all areas. Townley et. al. (2013) echoed this idea when they reported that transfer students who experience a strong sense of community often achieve greater overall success. Additionally, Horton (2015) proposed that participation in athletics actually helped student-athletes achieve success in the classroom, rather than divert them from their studies. Both a strong sense of community and participation in athletics were reported by participants in this study to assist them in persevering toward their goals. When participants reported experiencing a sense of community, they also reported greater success academically, athletically, and personally. At least two participants made stronger rebounds after making mistakes or poor decisions in situations where the team dynamic was strong.

***Research Question 3.*** The third research question focused on suggestions for the support needed for a successful transfer process. Four themes emerged to answer this research question, two of which were supported in the current literature. The first theme was *Academic Clarity and Improvement*. This theme represented participants desiring greater academic support, primarily at the high school and community college levels to assist them with early education on academic requirements for eligibility to compete at Division I. Additionally, participants noted that they often improved academically after facing setbacks, and this experience helped them achieve academic success in the future. The participants' sentiments in this study were echoed in Horton's research, which also suggested that academic support services as well as career development and financial

education were all important services and programming to provide for student-athletes, specifically those who come from low SES backgrounds.

The second theme that was supported within the existing literature was *Strong Relationships*. This theme represents the participants' feelings that a strong network of key relationships was critical for them to successfully transfer. Six out of seven participants implied that key relationships were an important factor in helping them successfully transition. Key relationships included teammates, coaches, academic advisors, or faculty. The suggestion that strong relationships are essential for successful transfer was also proposed by Astin in his theory of involvement, which suggested that students become involved on campus, and build relationships with other students and faculty (1984). Additionally, after a study completed by Townsend (1995), it was reported that community college student transfers conveyed the need to be "self-reliant", suggesting that a strong network of relationships, especially those with peers, may be more important to transitioning than support services offered academically.

***Critical Risk Factor Categories & Theme Comparisons.*** After discussing the findings relating directly to the research questions from this study, it is beneficial to consider the 13 initial themes as they related directly to the Critical Risk Factor Categories. To do this, it is necessary to compare the emerged themes and the Critical Risk Factor Categories (Table 7) with the previously identified Critical Risk Factor Categories and Risk Factor Subtopics (Table 8) found in the tables below.

Table 7

*Critical Risk Factor Categories and Themes*

Critical Risk Factor Category	Theme
Academics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Emphasis on Education</li> <li>2. Academic Setbacks</li> <li>3. Academic Confusion and Challenges</li> <li>4. Academic Clarity and Improvement</li> </ol>
Athletics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Focus and Commitment to Play Division I</li> <li>2. Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletics Experience</li> <li>3. Late Recruitment</li> <li>4. Early Recruitment</li> </ol>
Personal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Difficult Childhood</li> <li>2. Adversity and Internal Hardships</li> <li>3. Wouldn't Change a Thing: Value the Struggle</li> <li>4. Strong Relationships</li> <li>5. It Takes Time and Time Management</li> </ol>

Table 8

*Critical Risk Factor Categories and Subtopics*

Critical Risk Factor Category	Risk Factor Subtopics
Academics	Background (GPA, Qualifier Status), Academic Achievement, Campus Environment/Climate, Role in Life/Identity, Effort
Athletics	Team Environment/Climate, Sport Profile, Role in Life/Identity, Perceived Success
Personal	Social, Emotional, Psychological, Personal History (family, finance, homesick, health)

In review, the Critical Risk Factor Categories for this study were developed through a combination of Tinto's, Laanan's, and the NCAA's GRO Assessment research. Tinto (1987) proposed that campus involvement both in the classroom and socially assisted with persisting toward graduation. Furthermore, Laanan (2001) suggested that factors involving environment and climate in addition to psychological factors were important for students as they transition. Finally, the NCAA's extensive research focusing

specifically on student-athletes developed the GRO assessment, which offered five key risk factors to consider for student-athletes’ successful persistence to graduation: “Academic background/achievement”, “Role of academics”, “Transfer status”, “Personal history”, and “Sport related issues” (Graduation Risk Overview User Guide, 2013, p. 1).

When reviewing the previously established Critical Risk Factor Categories and Risk Factor Subtopics and comparing them to the themes that emerged in this study, the alignment is remarkable. The Risk Factor Subtopics and Themes are linked to demonstrate similarity as shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9

*Critical Risk Factor Subtopics and Theme Comparisons*

Category	Risk Factor Subtopics	Themes
Academics	Academic Achievement	1. Academic Setbacks
	Campus Environment/Climate	2. Academic Confusion and Challenges 3. Academic Clarity and Improvement
	Role in Life/Identity	4. Emphasis on Education
Athletics	Team Environment/Climate	5. Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletics Experiences
Personal	Social	6. Strong Relationships
	Emotional, Psychological	7. Adversity and Internal Hardships 8. Wouldn't Change a Thing: Value the Struggle
	Personal History	9. Difficult Childhood

Each category, Academics, Athletics, or Personal, has one or more previously identified risk factor subtopics that directly align with a theme from this study.

The first Academics risk factor subtopic was Academic Achievement, which aligns with the identified theme entitled *Academic Setbacks*. This implied that academic setbacks were reported by participants in this study as having a greater impact on their experience than academic achievements. Campus Environment/Climate had two

connecting themes including *Academic Confusion and Challenges* as well as *Academic Clarity and Improvement*. This connection implied that, for participants in this study, the campus environment during the transfer process was confusing, thus they suggested providing academic clarity to address this risk factor. The final academic risk factor subtopic that correlated with a theme was the Role in Life/Identity. The corresponding theme was *Emphasis on Education* implying that for many participants in this study, academics played a strong role in their lives and identities.

The only Athletics risk factor subtopic previously identified that paralleled a theme from this study was that of Team Environment/Climate. This risk factor corresponded with the theme *Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletic Experiences*. This demonstrated that the participants in this study mirrored the idea that the team environment and culture mattered when it came to their experiences as well as their reported successes.

The first Personal risk factor subtopic was Social, which corresponded with the emerged theme of *Strong Relationships*. When it came to social risk factors, the participants in this study reported better experiences and greater success with transitioning when strong relationships were developed early in the process. Two themes matched the next risk factor subtopic entitled Emotional and Psychological. Those themes include *Adversity and Internal Hardships* and *Wouldn't Change a Thing: Value the Struggle*. Both of these themes directly related to emotional and psychological aspects of college, transferring, and finding success as a student-athlete. Overcoming adversity and hardships was a common necessity reported in some fashion by every participant in this study. Similarly, although many reported periods of struggle, all but one participant

also noted that they would not want to change anything about their process or their past. The final risk factor subtopic was Personal History and aligned with the theme entitled *Difficult Childhood*. Four of the participants in this study experienced challenging upbringings in their personal history, which may have consisted of challenges such as single parent or low-income households.

**Theme Relationships: Problems and Recommendations**

There were cases in this study where emerged themes revealed challenges while other themes provided recommendations directly relating to some identified problematic themes. For example, there were themes from Research Questions 1 and 2 that represented challenges within participant experiences. Then, there were three emerged themes within Research Question 3 that directly addressed the problematic themes that emerged in relation to the first and second research questions. This is significant to note because the third research question was focused on determining participant suggestions about what supports are needed to experience a successful transfer. In summary, of the 14 emerged themes from this study, three provided recommendations that directly addressed challenges that emerged as themes in other areas of the study. Table 10 below summarizes the problematic and recommendation theme relationships from this study.

Table 10

*Theme Relationships: Problems and Recommendations*

Problematic Theme	Recommendation Theme
Academic Setbacks	Academic Clarity
Academic Confusion and Challenges	
Late Recruitment	Early Recruitment
Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletic Experience	Strong Relationships

The first theme-to-theme connection pulled together related academic themes. Two academic themes that emerged were *Academic Setbacks* and *Academic Confusion and Challenges*, both of which described academic hardships and misunderstandings as experienced by the participants. The corresponding theme that emerged and addressed these challenges was *Academic Clarity and Improvement*, which described the participants' desire to obtain clear understanding of academic requirements needed for NCAA eligibility at all levels. The second theme-to-theme connection linked two themes related to athletics. The first problematic theme that emerged was *Late Recruitment*. This represented participant reports of experiencing a late athletic recruitment, which often presented other academic and personal challenges that impacted their experiences. The corresponding theme that addressed this was *Early Recruitment*, which was suggested by participants as an important ingredient to assist in a successful transfer process. Finally, the third theme-to-theme connection linked two personal themes. The first theme was *Team Dynamics Greatly Impact Athletic Experiences*, which described participant perceptions that team culture was determined by coaches and teammates and made significant impacts on their overall experiences. In direct relation to this, the theme of *Strong Relationships* was suggested by participants as a key ingredient needed to experience a successful transfer process. This theme described key relationships, not only with coaches and teammates, but also with academic advisors and faculty. The natural connections among themes that emerged from this study assist in demonstrating strength within the study's findings.

## **Research Implications & Future Research**

The findings from this study added valuable insight from the community college transfer student-athletes' perspectives to the existing literature. The emergence of 14 themes provided answers to three research questions. These themes expanded on existing research and provided much needed data on an important subpopulation of college students. Further, the data collected provided a necessary qualitative approach to allow insight into the perceptions, experiences, challenges and successes as they occurred through the eyes of student-athletes living through the transfer process. There are several implications from this study that are important for both researchers and practitioners interested in this population of student-athletes.

First, community college transfer student-athletes would benefit from greater academic clarity and support. It appears that academic confusion exists at some point within many experiences through the transfer process. For some, the need for further academic clarity may even begin in high school. The clarity should aim to better educate students and parents about academic criteria and requirements needed for both college admissions as well as NCAA Division I eligibility. Furthermore, this clarity and education should be provided in the early stages, especially for first-generation and high-risk students. Additionally, while in community college, student-athletes need additional academic support. Sufficient support may mean the addition of staff (rather than coaches) who function as academic advisors for student-athletes and who also understand Division I requirements. Support may also require greater access to tutoring services.

A second implication was the acknowledgement that the timing of recruitment has an impact on both initial and transfer enrollment for community college student-athletes.

It is a realistic challenge that many first-generation or high-risk students may not be involved in the college athletic recruiting process early enough to allow them ample time to prepare academically, athletically, and personally. In many cases, recruitment comes late as a second effort to find somewhere to participate in their sport at the collegiate level after learning that they do not meet NCAA Division I eligibility requirements. For those who experience a late recruitment, their experience often begins with stress, doubt, fear, and discomfort as they launch their college careers in a place that is foreign and/or second rate to them. If they were able to get into the recruiting process earlier, the likelihood of them learning the process and needed requirements to achieve their goals is greater. Similarly, some community college transfer student-athletes experience a late recruitment a second time as they look to transfer into a Division I program. Sometimes late recruitment at this stage is due to scholarship goals, injury, academic setbacks, and even athletic performance. Still, the student-athletes from this study who reported earlier recruitment also reported smoother transition processes.

The third implication from this study was the concept that personal characteristics such as experiencing a difficult childhood, the ability to overcome adversity, or the ability to build strong relationships has an impact on a community college student-athlete's transfer process. In fact, based on findings from the participants in this study, relationships may even have the most critical impact on a successful transition. Key relationships include teammates, coaches, academic advisors, and faculty. For participants in this study, it was peer-to-peer relationships that often made the most difference in their transfer experiences. If they were able to develop deep bonds with teammates both at community college and at Division I universities, they reported feeling

more comfortable and settled. Additionally, especially at the community college level, it is often word of mouth from these peer relationships that assists student-athletes in navigating the college landscape.

The final implication from this study was the need for strong time management skills as well as appropriate expectations on transition time. It is critical for community college transfer student-athletes to have developed strong time management skills during community college to assist with a smooth transition to Division I. With increased time demands, especially surrounding more rigorous academic courses and athletic demands, student-athletes who understand how to effectively manage their time throughout the day may report easier and smoother transitions. Additionally, those transfers who have a realistic expectation and understanding that a successful transfer will take time to settle in and feel comfortable are likely to report a better transfer experience. For some, this may require the passing of a month or two, for others an entire semester, and for others an entire year. Each transfer has differing backgrounds, experiences, circumstances, and needs that impact the amount of time required to feel settled. It is important for the transfer that the people in key roles surrounding transfers maintain awareness and offer support as they transition.

**Future Research.** This study added to the existing research surrounding community college transfer student-athletes. It investigated questions about adequate preparation to transfer, the experiences during the transfer process, as well as recommendations for the support needed for a successful transfer process. Each of these questions was explored through the lenses of three Critical Risk Factor Categories of Academics, Athletics, and Personal. As previously noted, the specific population of

community college transfer student-athletes is in need of additional research in all areas. However, this study has identified several specific areas where future research is critical.

The first area in need of additional research is in providing academic clarity. Student-athletes who lacked academic clarity, knowledge, and education about college and NCAA requirements reported greater frustration and challenges through the overall process of initial enrollment as well as transferring. Additional research would be beneficial in this area to better understand what kind of clarity, knowledge, or education would be most useful. Additionally, in what timeframe would this clarity make the most sense? Finally, research to determine the best means to allow the students to absorb and grasp significant understanding of the requirements would be helpful to ensure the information can be effectively relayed.

A second area where additional research is critical lies in the desire for earlier recruitment. Each recruiting process is different and many sports have differing NCAA regulations on recruiting timeframes. However, learning more about ideal timing as it relates to athletics and recruiting, academics and recruiting, as well as personal and recruiting would help generate understanding of the impacts late recruiting has on the overall process for transfers. A subtopic for research on recruitment could also focus on regional location of community colleges. Do student-athletes who are ultimately recruited to rural campuses have different experiences that impact their transfer success than those who are recruited to urban campuses?

A third area requiring extensive research relates to the desire for strong relationships. This study suggested key relationships with teammates, coaches, academic advisors, and faculty as critical factors for successful transitions. With this being one of

the most emphasized recommendations to aid in the transfer process, it is important that further research is completed. Which relationships are most important and how and when should they form? What differences exist in relationships for differing sports, teams, or genders? Could proactive programming be created to help transfer student-athletes build these relationships more quickly?

A final area in need of further research surrounds the necessity for strong time management skills. Additional research is needed to determine the most important aspects of time management skill building as it relates to transferring. When is the best time to teach these skill sets? How and who is best to teach them? How do we assess effective time management skills upon entrance?

### **Research Study Reflection**

As I reflect on the journey through this research process, I am reminded of the many emotions I experienced: excitement, doubt, awe, empathy, respect, pride, determination, and gratitude. I first felt excitement at the start of this process. I was excited about getting to the final stage and about taking on the daunting task of completing a dissertation. It was not long before my excitement turned into doubt as I became unsure if I could navigate and complete this study while also balancing other life demands and obligations. Then I completed the first three chapters and received IRB approval to begin collecting data. It was during this time that I felt intense awe, empathy, respect, and pride. As I recruited participants, I was struck by their eagerness to be included in my research. Then, as I began interviewing the participants, I found myself in awe of their stories. I had known some participants for over a year and never knew about some of the things they had experienced. As they opened up about their challenges,

frustrations, and setbacks, I felt empathy, respect, and pride for all they had overcome. Even in the direst circumstances, each participant maintained optimism. Their determination gave me energy and fueled me in return. Finally, as I neared the end of this journey, I felt great gratitude. I felt gratitude for my own challenges along the way, but mostly for the opportunity to learn about the experiences of seven extraordinary community college transfer student-athletes. Hearing their stories has forever changed me.

As I completed the data analysis for this study, I can remember having a critical moment when I realized that some of the emerged themes from this study actually directly connected to “problematic” themes that also emerged from the study. I felt invigorated as I realized the theme of *Academic Confusion*, which represented challenges described by participants, actually connected directly to the “solution” theme of *Academic Clarity and Improvement*. I could not have planned for “solution” themes to supply organic responses to “problematic” themes. Although overwhelming, at that moment the entire process of planning a study and completing it from start to finish became worth it.

Of course, through any process, reflection provides opportunity for improvement. As I completed the study, I thought about changes I might make if I could do it again or if I had no boundaries. If I could, I would expand to more participants, representing additional sports. I would also include female student-athletes in the study. If I could add more student-athletes, I would be interested in interviewing a sample who recently transferred no more than the semester before, as well as a sample who transferred more than a year before for comparison. I am curious to find out if time elapsing since transfer

as well as time for reflection and a full season of competition completed has any impact on the perceptions reported by participants. Finally, I would also want to learn additional and more detailed information about participants who faced academic setbacks, challenges, and confusion. Perhaps a second study on those participants where in-depth academic histories and experiences were studied would be beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Five discussed the research findings and themes that emerged from this study and related them back to existing literature. It also compared themes from this study to the previously identified Critical Risk Factor Categories before completing an analysis of problematic and recommendation theme relationships. Implications and future research were also discussed in addition to my personal reflection on my dissertation journey.

Community college transfer student-athletes continue to face challenges that differ from their non-transfer and non-athlete peers. This unique population has been known to house many high-risk student-athletes who may not persist toward graduation. For this population to successfully navigate the recent increased academic regulations, we must provide the appropriate academic, athletic, and personal support. They are demonstrating their resilience and determination to play at the highest level of college sports as well as earning their degrees. It is a critical time for this industry to develop the appropriate education and support to provide community college student-athletes with the necessary guidance for a smooth and successful transfer process.

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## APPENDIX A

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM



#### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study**

**Pro # 00024958**

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You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called:

*Community College Student-Athletes' Perspectives on the Transfer Process to a Four-Year Institution*

The person who is in charge of this research study is Jodie Heinicka Libadisos. This person is called the Principal Investigator. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Donald Dellow and Dr. William Young.

The research will be conducted at the [REDACTED] Athletic Center.

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#### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences and perceptions of community college transfer student-athletes. Specifically to learn about their experiences and perceptions relating to academics, athletics, and personal aspects of the transfer process.

#### **Why are you being asked to take part?**

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are a community college transfer student-athlete.

### **Study Procedures:**

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Complete a brief background document, meet with the researcher for a one-on-one interview about your community college and transfer process, and meet with the researcher and other participants for a focus group session to answer follow up questions after all one-on-one interviews are completed.
- You may be asked questions relating to your experiences and perceptions at your community college, through the transfer process, and how you are feeling since arriving at the university.
- To complete participation in this study you will be asked to participate in the completion of a brief background document, an interview session lasting about one hour, a focus group lasting about one hour, and a review of the interview and study outcomes for accuracy.
- The research for this study will take place during the spring 2016 semester and will occur at the [REDACTED] Athletics Center.
- Interview and focus group sessions will be audio recorded at your discretion. This allows for accuracy during analysis and reporting. Audio recordings will be submitted to a private transcription service to be converted into text form. Participants names will be changed to pseudonyms for the study and will not be included in the audio or text versions. All recordings will be kept for a minimum of five years after the final report of this study and will be permanently deleted from a USB device after that time.

### **Total Number of Participants**

About 4-8 individuals will take part in this study at [REDACTED].

### **Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

You do not have to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

### **Benefits**

The potential benefits of participating in this research study include:

- The possibility to learn through reflection on your past experiences at a community college and through the transfer process as well as the possibility to learn from other's experiences.

**Risks or Discomfort**

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

**Compensation**

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

**Costs**

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

**Conflict of Interest Statement**

I work in close proximity to student-athletes and select coaches in my current role. I also serve as a student-athlete affairs advocate for all student-athletes on all teams. The students participating in this study will all be doing so on a completely voluntary basis. Additionally, research for this study is focused primarily on the transfer process, which occurred prior to student-athletes arriving to USF.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, and all other research staff.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study, and individuals who provide oversight to ensure that we are doing the study in the right way.
- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research.
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

A federal law called Title IX protects your right to be free from sexual discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. USF's Title IX policy requires certain USF employees to report sexual harassment or sexual violence against any USF employee, student or group, but does not require researchers to report sexual harassment or sexual violence when they learn about it as part of conducting an IRB-approved study.

If, as part of this study, you tell us about any sexual harassment or sexual violence that has happened to you, including rape or sexual assault, we are not required to report it to the University. If you have questions about Title IX or USF's Title IX policy, please call USF's Office of Diversity, Inclusion & Equal Opportunity at (813) 974-4373.

**You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, call Jodie Heinicka Libadisos at [REDACTED].

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638.

**Consent to Take Part in this Research Study**

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

**Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

**APPENDIX B**

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION PORTFOLIO**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Year in School:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sport:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:**     Male     Female

**Marital Status:**     Married     Unmarried

**Do you have any children currently in your care?**     Yes     No

**How do you classify yourself?**

- Arab
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Black
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic
- Indigenous or Aboriginal
- Latino
- Multiracial
- Would rather not say
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Were you a NCAA Qualifier out of High School?**

- Yes                       No

**Did you receive your Associate Degree from your Community College?**

- Yes                       No

**Are you on athletic scholarship?**

- Yes                       No

**How would you describe your financial resources?**

- Low                       Moderate/Acceptable                       Abundant

**Please list the community college(s) you attended:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Please list notable sport/athletic accolades in college:**

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (Creswell, 2013)

Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Position of Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Offer general greeting and thank participant for agreeing to be a part of the study.

Briefly review purpose of research and why participant was selected to be included in the research.

Review consent form and ensure participant understands his/her role in the study.

Briefly review primary research questions.

#### **Interview Questions:**

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Please tell me a little about yourself and your journey from high school to today.

What does your family structure look like? How supported do you feel by your family?

How do you feel about your athletic ability and athletic goals?

How do you feel about your academic status while enrolled at your community college?

Tell me about your recruiting process and how you chose your community college.

Tell me about your team culture at your community college. In what ways did your team culture help or hinder your preparation for transfer?

Tell me about the academic support structure at your community college. In what ways did this academic support help or hinder your preparation to transfer?

How do you feel about your overall community college experience?

Tell me about how prepared you felt BEFORE you arrived to campus. Now that you've been here awhile, tell me about how prepared you think you were when you arrived.

Tell me how you felt during the recruiting process from community college to this university and how you ultimately made your decision.

What were your experiences with the transfer process?

Describe what you think is a successful transfer process. Do you think your transfer process was successful?

Tell me about your team culture at this university. How do you feel as a member of that culture? In what ways has your team culture helped or hindered your transfer process?

How does being a student-athlete at this university feel different from being a student-athlete your community college?

Tell me about your biggest accomplishment so far in your collegiate experience? How does this make you feel?

If you could go back, how would you change your college experience to this point?

When did you feel most settled during the transition process? What helped you feel settled?

In what ways could your community college and this university have better assisted you to improve your transfer process?

Tell me about your goals when you leave this university? Do you see yourself graduating before you leave? How will you feel in that moment?

---

Close out the interview. Thank the participant again. Remind participant about follow up to review draft of research and interviews for accuracy as well as focus group session.

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**Observation Notes:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time Written: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **APPENDIX D**

### **FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Please tell me about the academic challenges and successes that impacted your transfer to a Division I institution?
2. Please tell me about the athletic challenges and successes that impacted your transfer to a Division I institution?
3. Please tell me about the personal challenges and successes that impacted your transfer to a Division I institution?
4. What area (academic, athletic, personal) had the greatest impact on your PREPARATION TO TRANSFER to a Division I institution? Why?
5. What area (academic, athletic, personal) had the greatest impact on your OVERALL TRANSFER PROCESS to a Division I institution? Why?
6. In your opinion, what area of support (academic, athletic, personal) is most likely to aid in a SUCCESSFUL TRANSFER EXPERIENCE to a Division I institution? Why?

## APPENDIX E

### INITIAL EMAIL TO REQUEST PARTICIPATION IN STUDY

February 1, 2016

Dear [REDACTED],

You are receiving this email to request your participation in a research study. My name is Jodie Heinicka Libadisos and I am a doctoral student at the University of South Florida. **I am completing research about community college transfer student-athletes for my dissertation to complete my degree.**

The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences and perceptions of community college transfer student-athletes. Specifically, to learn about your experiences and perceptions relating to academics, athletics, and personal aspects of the transfer process.

Each participant in this study will be asked to participate in the completion of a brief background document, an interview session lasting about one hour, a focus group lasting about one hour, and a review of the interview and study outcomes for accuracy. You may be asked questions relating to your experiences and perceptions at your community college, through the transfer process, and how you are feeling since arriving at the university.

All research will be completed during the spring 2016 semester and will take place in the Athletics Center.

**If you are interested in participating in this study, please notify me via email, phone, text, or in person by Friday, February 12th. At that time, I will make arrangements with you to explain the study further and to complete a consent form before moving forward.**

This study has been approved by the University of South Florida's Internal Review Board and can be referenced as study Pro#24958.

Thank you for your interest!

Sincerely,

Jodie Heinicka Libadisos

Email: [REDACTED]

Cell Phone: [REDACTED]

## APPENDIX F

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4795  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX(813)974-7091

January 26, 2016

Jodie Libadisos  
L-CACHE - Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career & Higher Education  
4202 E. Fowler Avenue  
ATH 100  
Tampa, FL 33620

**RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#: Pro00024958

Title: Community College Student-Athletes' Perspectives on the Transfer Process to a Four-Year Institution

**Study Approval Period: 1/25/2016 to 1/25/2017**

Dear Ms. Libadisos:

On 1/25/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Libadisos IRB Study Protocol Pro00024958Version #1.docx](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[Libadisos Consent Form Pro24958 Version #1 1.23.16.docx.pdf](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review

research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John A. Schinka, Ph.D." in a cursive style.

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board