

“DO I BELONG, AM I CONNECTED, DO I MATTER?”: THE EXPERIENCE OF
COLLEGIATE STUDENT-ATHLETES AND WHAT IMPACTS THEIR SENSE OF
BELONGING

by

REGGIE M. SIMPKINS

(Under the Direction of Laura Dean)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of student-athletes and how they perceive their sense of belonging to their institutions. The aim of this study is to determine what impacts the sense of belonging of student-athletes based on the sense of belonging theory from Strayhorn (2019). Narrative inquiry was the qualitative method used to investigate seven male student-athletes that are in the Sun Belt Conference. These participants were asked semi-structured interview questions, and it was discovered that relationships are the most significant indicators of these student-athletes feeling that they belong, that they feel connected, and that they feel that they matter at their institution. NIL does impact sense of belonging to a certain degree but that still has to be presented by another individual and is not offered to all student-athletes. The transfer portal does not directly impact sense of belonging but merely serves as an avenue to potentially relocate to another institution if a student-athlete does not feel that sense of belonging at their current institution.

INDEX WORDS: belonging, connection, mattering, student-athletes, relationships, coaches,
narrative, transfer, NCAA, NIL

“DO I BELONG, AM I CONNECTED, DO I MATTER?”: THE EXPERIENCE OF
COLLEGIATE STUDENT-ATHLETES AND WHAT IMPACTS THEIR SENSE OF
BELONGING

by

REGGIE M. SIMPKINS

B.S., South Carolina State University, 2001

M.A., Webster University, 2004

M.P.A., Clemson University, 2013

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2024

© 2024

REGGIE M. SIMPKINS

All Rights Reserved

“DO I BELONG, AM I CONNECTED, DO I MATTER?”: THE EXPERIENCE OF
COLLEGIATE STUDENT-ATHLETES AND WHAT IMPACTS THEIR SENSE OF
BELONGING

By

REGGIE M. SIMPKINS

Major Professor: Laura A. Dean

Committee: Diane L. Cooper

Michael Fulford

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott

Vice Provost of Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School

The University of Georgia Southern University

May 2024

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my ancestors. I stand on your shoulders, and I am grateful for the opportunities that have been afforded to me. I thank you all. I will continue to strive towards greatness and make our family names live on through positivity! Jo-Nathan and Dad, this one is for you both! We Are One!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, giving honor to the Most High God, who is the head of my life! Thank you for being my heavenly father, friend and the compass that leads me each day.

Dr. Laura Dean, the chair of my dissertation committee, I sincerely thank you! You have helped me grow as a human being as you guided me through this dissertation process. You served as a counselor to me as my father passed away and lifted me up on days that you were not aware of. You started out as one of my professors but as this journey comes to an end, I now call you my friend. To Dr. Diane Cooper and Dr. Michael Fulford, thank you both for dedicating your time and energy throughout this process.

To the SAL 2023 Cohort, I am blessed that I was able to share this experience with you all. It was amazing to watch such a motivated group of young and talented professionals. I have enjoyed learning with you all, but I am even more excited to see what you all will accomplish throughout your lifetime.

To my best friend and brother Kolinski Simpkins. I could not have been provided with a better person to be in my corner for my entire life. The nights that I expressed frustration, you were that listening ear that I needed. I am thankful and blessed to call you, my brother!

To Yvette Crick that convinced me to take this journey with her in 2019, I thank you! Even though you never enrolled in the program, you were the beacon of light that I needed to jump!

Tim Johnson, Keith Watkins, John Archie Ryans, and Torrey Johnson, thank you all for being my hype men during this process! I needed it every day!

To my mother, Jacqueline Simpkins! I appreciate you for being who you are! I am so thankful for our calls and your continuous encouragement! Continue being the beautiful soul that you are!

To my daughters Isley, Ilah, and Reagan, this is for you all as well. Thank you all for your encouragement and questions about this process. You all have watched me put in the time and energy, even when that meant me putting time on hold for you all! I love you all and watching me go through this process, always remember that you can do anything no matter how old you are! To my youngest, Reagan, daddy does not have to do schoolwork every night anymore!

To my wife Crystal, thank you for being in my corner for 25 awesome years! Your support, your love, and your compassion aids in navigating this thing called life! This is another major accomplishment for us, and I am thankful that we get to share this together! Let's keep pushing to see what the Good Lord has in store for us. Let us not find bad in well doing, for at the proper time we will reap if we don't grow weary (Galatians 6:9). I love you and the best is yet to come.

To that youngest of three boys, who stuttered as a child, from a small town called Edgefield, South Carolina: you did it!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	3
Purpose of Study & Research Question	3
Theoretical Framework	4
Significance of the Study	5
Changes in the NCAA Rules.....	6
Defining Terms	8
Chapter Conclusion.....	11
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	13
History of Intercollegiate Athletics.....	13
Sense of Belonging in Higher Education.....	16
Academic Identity	23
Athletic Identity	24
Retention	25
Chapter Conclusion.....	27

3	METHODOLOGY	28
	Research Paradigm.....	28
	Theoretical Framework	30
	Research Design.....	32
	Chapter Conclusion.....	44
4	FINDINGS	46
	David.....	46
	Chris	50
	Mark	54
	John	61
	Sebastian	64
	Ryan	71
	Willis.....	79
	Emerging Themes	82
	Chapter Conclusion.....	88
5	DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	90
	Discussion	91
	Implications for Practice	96

Recommendations for Research.....	101
Limitations	103
Chapter Conclusion.....	103
REFERENCES	105
APPENDICES	116
A Recruitment Message for Academic Directors	116
B Sun Belt Athletic Conference Approval to Use Images	117
C Student-Athlete Eligibility Flyer	119
D Student-Athlete Eligibility Questionnaire.....	120
E Student-Athlete Consent Form	121
F Semi Structured Interview Questions	123
G Member Checking Email	127

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The sense of belonging for college student-athletes can be a complex concept. Being a part of an athletic team can provide a strong sense of belonging and community. Reynolds (2020) states that a connection with a group can be found with various organizations on campus and in this particular study, the focus is placed on student-athletes. Research showed that student-athletes often report more of a connection to their institutions and fellow students because of them being associated with an athletic team (J. Smith, 2019). However, being a college student-athlete also brings with it unique demands that make it difficult to fully perceive a sense of belonging. The time commitment required for academics, weightlifting, practices, games, athletic treatment sessions, and team meetings can make it difficult to participate in additional campus activities (Jones, 2020). Student-athletes, unlike many other students on campus, are challenged to put a minimum of 20 hours per week into their sport, maintain a full academic schedule, and meet the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) eligibility benchmarks (NCAA, 2021a). This could potentially lead to a feeling of isolation and disconnection from their peers who are not involved in athletics. As a college student-athlete, the pressure to perform at a high level both athletically and academically can be overwhelming for some student-athletes. This pressure can create a sense of competition and individualism within the team, rather than a sense of support and community (Brown, 2018).

Strayhorn (2019) wrote that the sense of belonging for any student is finding the connection or having the ability to attach themselves to a group on campus. Strayhorn (2019) defined sense of belonging as:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Duran et al. (2020) found that the sense of belonging can lead to students engaging and joining different groups such as Greek life, religious organizations, or other campus-related social groups. In a publication by Nunn (2021), the exploration of the sense of belonging for college students was portrayed it into three themes: academic belonging, social belonging, and campus-community belonging. Nunn (2021) described that belonging was to be established by the institution for students and that this belonging was the responsibility of the institution. Sense of belonging is very closely related to retention, which is a main topic in higher education. Tinto (1993) highlighted that social and academic integration are two principal concepts that impact student retention. Han et al. (2017) and Millea et al. (2018) stated that the most common factor that impacts retention is students feeling a lack of belonging at their respective institutions. In the current state of college athletics, retention is key because many perceive that having older athletes leads to more successful athletic programs (Tumin, 2022) and provides a better opportunity for student-athletes to progress towards graduation. The NCAA provided an additional year of eligibility based on COVID interruptions, which has resulted in a greater number of older student-athletes (many graduate or post-baccalaureate students) on college rosters now (Tumin, 2022). Although these athletes are older, many are deciding to remain at their current institution, while others are deciding to play their last year of eligibility at a new institution where the connection process begins all over again. The sense of belonging for student athletes will be the main focus of my study, examining what aids in or hinders a student-athlete developing a sense of belonging.

Statement of the Problem

Scholars have identified a variety of factors that influence student-athletes' sense of belonging while they are enrolled in college. Previous studies have shown that institutions should place a major emphasis on ensuring that students are engaged with the college experience in order to have a sense of belonging. When student-athletes feel a connection with their teammates, coaches, professors, and the institution as whole, their sense of belonging has been found to be stronger with their respective institutions (Duran et al., 2020; Gayles, 2009; Huml et al., 2020; NCAA, 2020).

Within the past five years, there have been major changes implemented by the NCAA that have provided more autonomy and control to collegiate student-athletes (NCAA, 2022). Previous studies do not account for possible changes in sense of belonging for student-athletes since the inception of these new changes within college athletics. This study is significant because it seeks to explore the experiences of student-athletes during the current era of college athletics. It is vital that individuals working in athletics try to understand the current student-athlete and their connection to the institution, their athletic program, and their life as a college student. Striving to grasp what makes the student-athlete today develop the sense of belonging with their institution is significant in order to retain the student-athlete, ensure that the student-athlete has a meaningful experience, and ultimately graduate the student is vital to college athletics today.

Purpose of Study & Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of student-athletes and how they perceive their sense of belonging to their institutions. Sense of belonging is important especially with the new landscape of college athletics where student-athletes are bombarded with talks of the transfer portal, the one-time transfer exception, an additional year of eligibility for those who were enrolled during COVID-19 in Spring 2020, and the very popular topic of compensation for the use of Name, Image, and

Likeness (NIL). For this study, I will focus on the impacts of the transfer portal and NIL on a student-athlete's sense of belonging. The following research questions will guide this study:

1. How do student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions?
2. Do student-athletes' perceptions of the transfer portal and Name, Image, and Likeness affect their sense of belonging?

This study will focus on stories told by student-athletes about their experiences on their college campuses. Identifying what aided them to develop or not develop that connection with their institution is the purpose of this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the sense of belonging theoretical framework of Terrell Strayhorn (2019). Strayhorn (2019) described a sense of belonging as a basic need of all human beings, the perception of being socially accepted/supported, and the ability to feel a connection, a feeling of being valued, or belonging to other humans. There are seven core elements that Strayhorn (2019) focused on as it relates to sense of belonging:

- (a) sense of belonging as a basic human need,
- (b) sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior,
- (c) sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, and among certain populations,
- (d) sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of mattering,
- (e) social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging,
- (f) sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes,
- (g) sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change. (pp. 29-40).

Strayhorn (2019) described that sense of belonging is closely related to the basic essential needs described by Maslow (1943) in the hierarchy of needs. This study focused on exploring how recent occurrences in college athletics have impacted the sense of belonging for student-athletes and applying that to the framework of sense of belonging by Strayhorn (2019). In this study, I focus on the seven elements of belonging to determine which are related to collegiate student-athletes. The aim is to identify the factors that affect student-athletes' sense of belonging to their institution.

Significance of the Study

During the past five years there have been some major changes that are currently impacting college athletics, and the way student-athletes navigate the experience of being a college student today. There has been earlier research conducted on collegiate student-athletes and their sense of belonging, but there is not much research that looks at sense of belonging during this current era. This topic is important because research shows that the sense of belonging is a core piece for any college student identifying or connecting with the institution (Strayhorn, 2019). This connection also helps with retaining students and building strong athletic programs that ultimately help institutions thrive (Morrison, 2023; Peddler et al., 2021). There are many factors that can influence whether a student-athlete feels connected to their institution, which ultimately can impact retention. Tinto (1987) stated that continuous enrollment at an institution of student's choice is directly connected to sense of belonging. Schlossberg et al. (1989) argued that institutions of higher education must strive to create an environment where students feel that they are cared for by the campus, students feel as if they matter to someone on the campus, and students feel that someone regards them as a living, breathing, human being. Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) stated that there is a need to develop a better understanding of the sense of belonging for college students and how it is different based on the various identities that exist with students. When students arrive on college campuses, they all have distinct differences such as being from different locations, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and political

affiliations. These various identities could have a major impact on students transitioning into the life of a college student. Strayhorn (2019) stated that students have to identify a connection that makes the student feel that they matter, or that they are a part of family or community. College athletics can provide that strong team connection that can create a sense of belonging for student-athletes. Gayles (2009) found that college student-athletes' motivation to complete their degree is increased due to their connection with a collegiate athletic team.

Students finding a connection on their college campus is a very important part of retaining students. This connection may come from involvement on campus, establishing meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, or students, or feeling that their major selection is the ideal choice for the student. College athletics is another avenue that allows students to connect with teammates, coaches, advisors, or other athletic staff members. This study will explore changes that have recently affected college athletics and examine the connection of these changes to the sense of belonging.

Changes in the NCAA Rules

As it relates to collegiate student-athletes and sense of belonging, there is some research prior to 2018. However, beginning in 2018, the NCAA (2022) implemented major changes including the transfer portal, an additional year of eligibility for athletes impacted by COVID-19, the one-time transfer rule, and use of Name, Image, and Likeness that have impacted the landscape of college athletics.

Transfer Portal

The transfer portal was created in October 2018 as a centralized database for college athletes to enter their names if they wish to transfer to another school (NCAA, 2022). Before the creation of the transfer portal, the transfer process was convoluted, where coaches had to approve to allow student-athletes to transfer. Coaches could also place stipulations on where student-athletes could transfer, and many times student-athletes were not allowed to pursue schools within the same athletic conference or rival institutions (Carroll & Kramer, 2019; NCAA, 2022).

Additional Eligibility Year for COVID-19

On March 13, 2020, the NCAA halted all remaining competitions for all sports. As a result, the NCAA granted all student-athletes enrolled at that time an additional year of athletic eligibility (NCAA, 2021b). This was done to ensure that all student-athletes were not robbed of their collegiate experience due to the COVID-19 virus. Any student taking advantage of the additional year must have been on a college roster during the spring 2020 semester, still be able to receive financial aid, and still have remaining eligibility to compete (NCAA, 2021b). This additional year to compete will end during the Spring 2025 semester.

One-Time Transfer Exception

In April 2021, the NCAA approved the one-time transfer exception. The one-time transfer exception provides the opportunity for student-athletes to transfer from a four-year institution one time during their college career and compete immediately without having to establish one year in residency at their new institution (Carroll & Kramer, 2019; NCAA, 2022). The one-time transfer rule does have stipulations, where transferring athletes have to be in good academic and athletic standing at the time of transfer (Carroll & Kramer, 2019; NCAA, 2022).

Name, Image, and Likeness

Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) was instituted in 2021, and with this ruling the NCAA now allows athletes from all sports and any division to be compensated for any use of their name, image, or likeness (Messina & Messina, 2022; NCAA, 2022). Prior to 2021, collegiate student-athletes were not allowed to be compensated for any reasons outside their tuition, meal plans, and housing. In 2021, this decision to allow student-athletes to be compensated was a result of the Alston vs. NCAA case where the Supreme Court made the ruling to allow for compensation to take place for activities outside athletic

competition, such as appearances to sign autographs, a photo appearing on a flyer for a golf tournament, or speaking engagements (NCAA v. Alston, 2021).

NIL is very new, but there are processes currently taking place to create structure. Opendorse (2024) is a company that assists institutions and student-athletes with the NIL process. Many institutions utilize resources such as Opendorse to ensure that NIL deals are documented and also so that there is an open platform for companies and organizations to identify student-athletes who may be interested in contracting an NIL deal. The NCAA (2024) is also working to streamline the NIL process and adopted a proposal to address student-athlete protections for NIL that will go into effect on August 1, 2024. This proposal provides a voluntary registration process for NIL service providers (sport agents, financial advisors, companies, etc.) that creates a database where the information of these service providers will be collected. Disclosure requirements are also a part of the proposal, which requires student-athletes to disclose any deals that are secured that are over \$600 (NCAA, 2024). Prospective student-athletes are required to disclose any deals that they have received 30 days after they are enrolled at an institution (NCAA, 2024). The NCAA will require all member institutions to report all NIL deals every two years and this will provide insight to current and future student-athletes that should aid in their decision-making process. Standardized contracts will be an initiative led by the NCAA that aims at providing extensive educational programming on the NIL process (NCAA, 2024) The goal is to create contract templates and recommendations that will aid current and future student-athletes in making educated decisions in the NIL process (NCAA, 2024).

Defining Terms

Athletic Identity: The degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993).

Alston Case: Supreme Court ruling allowing compensation for collegiate student-athletes for unrelated educational activities or services (NCAA v. Alston, 2021). These unrelated activities or services could include special appearances by athletes at community-related events, being a spokesperson

for a local business, or hosting their own athletic training camp. Name, Image, and Likeness is a result of this Supreme Court ruling.

Division I: “In this division of more than 350 schools, institutions generally have the biggest student bodies, manage the largest athletics budgets, and offer the highest number of athletic scholarships. These are typically larger or the most well-known institutions that compete in collegiate athletics” (NCAA, 2020, para. 1).

Division II: “This division of athletics is made up of nearly 300 institutions where a major emphasis is placed on the academic performance of student-athletes’ academic and athletic performance, while also focusing on community service. One of the most key factors of Division II athletics is the partial athletic scholarships that are combined with academic scholarships and/or need based grants. This model allows Division II athletic departments to operate with budgets that are similar to that of their institution” (NCAA, 2020, Division II Facts and Figures).

Division III: “Division III athletic departments are made up of over 440 institutions with nearly 200,000 student-athletes. Division III does not offer any athletic scholarships for the majority of their athletes that participate at this level, but the students typically receive some type of academic aid or need based grants” (NCAA, 2020, Our Division III Story).

Full Athletic Scholarship: This form of scholarship covers the full bill of a student-athlete. This could consist of the following but not limited to: Tuition, housing costs, books, meal plan, any academic fees, and any stipends/allowances provided for student-athletes by the institution (Debt.org, 2021; NCAA, 2022).

Institutional Review Board (IRB): Oversight committee that ensures that research involving human participants follows federal, state, and university policies and procedures (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL): Allows athletes to be compensated for the use of their name, image, and likeness (NCAA, 2020).

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA): “The NCAA is a member-led organization focused on cultivating an environment that emphasizes academics, fairness, and well-being across college sports. The NCAA acts as the governing body of more than 1100 member institutions across the country” (NCAA, 2022, Mission and Priorities Section).

NCAA Transfer Portal: An electronic program developed by the NCAA that aids and allows compliance departments to centrally manage the transferring process of student-athletes. The transfer portal allows student-athletes the opportunity to take control of the decision to transfer to another institution (NCAA, 2020). In the past, college student-athletes had to receive approval from their coach before transferring.

Non-revenue generating: Non-revenue generating sports are those that do not have major ticket sales or any ticket sales at all for athletic competitions (NCAA, 2020).

One-Time Transfer Exception: This exception allows all student-athletes who have not transferred in the past the opportunity to compete immediately after transfer once in their period of eligibility (CBSsports.com, 2021; NCAA, 2022).

Partial Athletic Scholarship: This form of scholarship covers parts or a portion of the full bill of a student-athlete. This could be granted in a dollar amount, percentage, or a specific designation (Debt.org, 2021; NCAA, 2022). An example of a dollar amount could potentially be a student-athlete receiving an \$8,000 scholarship (\$4,000 for the fall semester and \$4,000 for the spring semester). An example of a percentage scholarship might be 36% (\$10,710) of the total cost (\$29,750 annually) to attend Wish University. An example of a specific designation could be a

student-athlete receiving a scholarship for an unlimited meal plan (\$1845) and books (\$600) at Wish University.

Revenue Generating: Revenue generating sports are those that typically bring in tickets sales that can support the day-to-day operations of collegiate athletic departments. Typically, revenue generating sports will be football, men's basketball, and baseball. There are exceptions to these three sports based on each individual institution (NCAA, 2020).

Sense of Belonging: "Students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty peers)" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 3).

Walk-On Student-Athlete: A walk-on is a student-athlete who was not offered a scholarship but either tried out for the team or was invited to join the team without a scholarship associated with the opportunity to be with the team (NCAA, 2022). Ultimately the walk-on athlete is paying his or her own way for school.

Chapter Conclusion

The new NCAA changes could easily impact whether a student develops and maintains the sense of belonging with their institution. The transfer portal and NIL were released by the NCAA almost simultaneously, which could easily trigger collegiate student-athletes to enter the transfer portal in hopes of gaining some type of monetary compensation at another institution. In this study, I investigated if the transfer portal and NIL affected the experience of student-athletes and their connection or sense of belonging with their institution. Although student-athletes enrolled from 2017 to 2023 would not know what it was like to be an athlete prior to those dates, I am aiming to determine what influences the sense of belonging in the current environment of college athletics. When also looking at the new changes implemented by the NCAA, the aim was to identify what influences a student-athlete's sense of

belonging today. This study is important because there is potential to add to the general body of knowledge in the area for sense of belonging for college student-athletes moving forward. In the following chapter, I will examine literature on belonging and retention, as well as collegiate students, athletics, and student-athletes.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

College sports have historically been a part of the collegiate experience, and many athletic programs at larger institutions have advanced into major revenue-generating operations. Within college sports, there have been many stories where college athletics have served as a transformational opportunity that allows young adults to earn a college degree while being a part of a team. Alternatively, there are also other stories that show that athletic experiences may seem to be transactional, where athletes do not feel that their experience was meaningful or worthwhile. This study will explore the nature of the student-athlete experience in the current environment of collegiate athletics.

This chapter highlights previous literature related to the sense of belonging for college students and the sense of belonging for student-athletes. In the literature review, I first provided some historical information related to college athletics. Next, I reviewed what previous research has found about the sense of belonging on college campuses. Finally, I discussed the major findings that have been collected about the importance of sense of belonging with collegiate student-athletes. This review will focus on identifying gaps in the literature to address the questions: How do student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions? Do student-athletes' perceptions of the transfer portal and Name, Image, and Likeness affect their sense of belonging?

History of Intercollegiate Athletics

Intercollegiate athletics in the United States can be dated back to the mid-19th century as Yale and Harvard competed in rowing on the Winnepesaukee River in 1852 (Lewis, 1970; R. Smith, 1990). This rowing competition was an effort to build team spirit and pride by the students for both institutions (R. Smith, 1990). Since this first competition, college athletics still continues to serve as gratifying events enjoyed by students, alumni, community members, and those with no affiliation to the institutions of higher learning (R. Smith, 2010). College athletics has developed into a major part of the higher

education experience and an entity that could potentially bring in a great deal of revenue. Lewis (1970) stated that collegiate athletics created a space for many institutions of higher education to become more recognized outside of what was once an isolated academic world. Silverthorne (2013) explained that when a school has a significant increase in success or a major victory on the national stage in football, there is potential for admissions applications to increase exponentially. Today, many institutions across the United States have gone as far as to claim their athletic departments as the “front porch” of their colleges and universities (Bowen & Shuman, 2001; Mitchell, 2018; Silverthorne, 2013). It was identified early on that college students needed something that they could connect to that would enhance school pride, and this most certainly started what we know today as intercollegiate athletics (Strayhorn, 2019). This connection could come from joining a club or organization, having positive experiences with university faculty or staff, or being a legacy student where a family member attended the institution previously (Strayhorn, 2019). Ultimately, that opportunity to compete and receive an education also offers the chance to be a part of a team. Being a part of team can provide the connection or sense of belonging to the university for many student-athletes (Strayhorn, 2019).

The Modern-Day NCAA

Today, the National Collegiate Athletic Association serves as the governing body of over 400,000 student-athletes nationwide. In 1973, the NCAA created three divisions: Division I, Division II, and Division III (NCAA, 2016). Division I is made up of 350 schools, over 6700 athletic teams and 187,000 students (NCAA, 2021d). Division I institutions will usually have budgets that are larger than institutions in Division II or III (Bass et al., 2015). This difference in budgets based on the division is directly related to television deals, interest by fans, community members, and key stakeholders to the Division I institutions (Bass et al., 2015). Division I institutions are more well-known athletic institutions that are typically featured on television. Division I institutions provide more full athletic scholarships than Division II and III institutions (NCAA, 2021d). Division II is made up of 310 schools

and 119,000 student-athletes. Division II institutions award partial scholarships to student-athletes and operate on much smaller budgets than Division I institutions (Bass et al., 2015). Division III is made up of 438 schools and 195,000 students (NCAA, 2021d). Division III institutions do not provide athletic scholarships at all, and their student-athletes are typically fully engaged into the campus community (Bass et al., 2015). Love and Rush (2021) found that Division III student-athletes are very consistent in their academic ability when compared to non-student athletes. At the division III level student-athletes are typically accepted to an institution first for their academic ability and second for their athletic ability. Understanding the different NCAA divisions provides knowledge of how institutions operate based on them being Division I, II, or III.

The NCAA has adopted some changes that have taken place over the past six years that have altered college athletics as we have known it in the past. Before 2018, student-athletes could be offered a full scholarship, partial scholarship, or a walk-on opportunity, and those athletes had a small voice in their athletic experience. As a result of college athletes pressing the NCAA to reconsider the way student-athletes were treated, the NCAA made some changes that provided more power to student-athletes (NCAA, 2022). Prior to 2018, athletes were not allowed to transfer without receiving permission from their head coach (NCAA, 2022). The head coach could place strict stipulations on where they could transfer, and student-athletes could be denied the opportunity to leave their institution without having to sit out a year of competition (NCAA, 2022). In 2018, the NCAA implemented the transfer portal, which is a centralized database for collegiate student-athletes to enter their names and declare themselves as an available candidate to transfer (Carroll & Kramer, 2019; NCAA, 2022). Student-athletes now do not have to converse with their coaches about transferring but only need to notify their NCAA compliance office on their respective campuses, and they are placed in the transfer portal within two business days (NCAA, 2022.). Student-athletes no longer need permission from their

coaches or institution to begin the transfer process (Carroll & Kramer, 2019; NCAA, 2022). In 2021, the NCAA approved the process (one-time transfer exception) of allowing college athletes to transfer to another school and have the ability to compete immediately if they met certain academic requirements (Carroll & Kramer, 2019; NCAA, 2022). Prior to the one-time transfer exception, students would have to sit out one full year before being allowed to compete athletically at their new institution (Carroll & Kramer, 2019; Cobb, 2021; NCAA, 2022).

Student-athletes were previously not allowed to be compensated for the use of their name, image, or likeness (NIL). In 2019, the NCAA approved a rule allowing student-athletes to be compensated for the use of their NIL (NCAA, 2022). This rule went into effect in 2021 and allows collegiate student-athletes to earn money from endorsements, sponsorships, and other NIL opportunities (NCAA, 2022). Prior to the inception of NIL, college student-athletes were not allowed to receive any compensation for personal appearances, autographs, endorsement of businesses, or any other activities.

College athletics has evolved over the years, and that evolution is currently impacting Division I, II, and III institutions in multiple ways. Student-athletes are now allowed to enter the transfer portal without consulting coaches. NIL now allows athletes to receive compensation where this was not possible prior to 2019. Also, COVID-19 impacted the entire world in so many ways and college athletics was not immune from the effects of this virus. COVID-19 extended the number of years that college athletes could compete if they were enrolled in 2020. The remnants of COVID-19 in college athletics will not be completely resolved until 2025 when all student-athletes should have exhausted their additional year at that time (NCAA, 2022). These changes have created an interesting landscape for institutions whose athletic programs are governed by the NCAA.

Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

The sense of belonging has been identified as a basic need for survival of human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). Other theorists went on to infer that sense of belonging is

very important for individuals being able to remain motivated and also being able to successfully navigate spaces such as workplaces and academic settings (Eccles et al., 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Baumeister and Leary (1995) stated that the desire for a sense of belonging shows that humans yearn for the opportunity to engage and interact with other humans, and this creates a feeling that they are associated with something larger than themselves. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) posited that mattering is a human being feeling respected, wanted, and appreciated by others. The lack of attachment or belonging could potentially cause problems with one's health and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The importance of sense of belonging increases when individuals begin entering, exploring, and navigating areas that may seem to be unfamiliar or different, which can cause students to feel alienated, unwanted, or marginalized (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Strayhorn, 2019). The sense of belonging for college students is their perception of how they fit into the college setting as it relates to them feeling connected or disconnected with the institution (Gayles et al., 2018). This connection or disconnection can have a major impact on the college experience for students. O'Keefe (2013) stated that a sense of belonging for college students has been recognized as a major element in ensuring that students are retained at their institution. Research has shown that college students who have a greater sense of belonging with their institution typically will have more academic self-confidence, greater motivation for their academics, and higher achievement in their academics (Freeman et al., 2007; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011). When looking at the sense of belonging, many studies have focused on the entire campus while others have chosen to streamline their research and examine students in more specific groups such as by race, economic status, and sexual orientation (Freeman et al., 2007; Gayles et al., 2018). Across the specific groups, results still show that the sense of belonging is a psychological need for human beings (Strayhorn, 2019). As a basic psychological need, the sense of belonging impacts how individuals think, their behavior, how they

perform academically, and their mental health (Freeman et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2019). Freeman et al. (2007) and Kuh et al. (2011) found that the sense of belonging for college students was closely related to whether the professors cared about their instruction and also students being accepted within their social environments. College students in general are seeking some type of connection that will move them towards feeling accepted on their college campus. When a sense of belonging is not present, it could lead an individual to leave their school or abandon the pursuit of a college degree altogether (Freeman et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2019).

Kuh et al. (2011) also pointed out that the responsibility of faculty and staff is recognizing whether students are experiencing that sense of belonging that makes them feel welcomed and that they matter on their college campuses. According to Schlossberg (1989), mattering simply involves an individual feeling that they are important to others around them. Schlossberg (1989) stated that when individuals are treated marginally or depreciated, they tend to feel that they are not valued in that community. Hoover et al. (2022) stated that when institutions fail to make a connection with students during the admissions process, the stages following enrollment become very difficult. Hoover et al. (2022) went on to show how institutions that are taking belonging and student connection as a priority are identifying creative ways to make that connection with students. Institutions must find programs such as effective summer bridge programs whose main purpose is to allow students to be acclimated with campus when all students are not on campus. These summer bridge programs can create a space for a very large campus to feel small, and therefore assist students who potentially could have been overwhelmed by the size of an institution (Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn's (2019) research did show that summer bridge programs do aid in college students establishing a sense of belonging. The college experience can no longer be a transactional process where higher education administrators feel that once students arrive on campus they will just remain until graduation. Gayles et al. (2018) concluded that

there are many factors that lead to students feeling a sense of belonging and those could be any of the following: participation in living-learning communities, service activities, athletic programs, Greek life, student organizations, social interaction, and faculty-student partnerships. Being intentional when hiring employees on college campuses by finding individuals whose beliefs and mindsets relate to students from various backgrounds can aid in developing a culture of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Mandernach (2015) focused on the sense of belonging in relation to student engagement and posited that cognitive engagement, behavioral involvement, and perceptually investing in activities can increase student satisfaction. Huml et al. (2020) suggested that institutions of higher education have to purposefully provide engaging activities for students to create peer networks.

When institutions are intentional about creating opportunities for students to find their connection or belonging, there can be useful outcomes. Having positive feelings about one's institution can aid students in feeling happiness and satisfaction about their higher education experience (Ma, 2003; Osterman, 2000; Strayhorn, 2019). This connection with the institution can enhance the student's ability to develop personally and also improve their academic performance and retention (Osterman, 2000; Strayhorn, 2019). This sense of belonging could improve the students' feeling about their institution, which could lead to an extended connection to the institution even after graduation (Toney, 2021).

When institutions fail to place emphasis on creating opportunities for students to find a connection with the institution, there can be some unwanted outcomes. With enrollment, retention, and graduation being so important, there has to be a conscious effort to provide spaces where students feel supported, feel culturally accepted, and feel that they belong at their institution. When students do not feel that sense of support, their academic performance can be impacted negatively (Toney, 2021). Colleges and universities must know their audience (student body) to ensure that they are providing opportunities that are specific to the demographics of the enrollment. When there is not a sense of

belonging for a student, it can lead to a student feeling as if they are alone, not recognized, or forgotten (Cheng, 2004; Strayhorn, 2019). Ultimately, the failure to provide opportunities to create a sense of belonging for college students will increase chances for students to disengage, perform poorly academically, and not return to their institution (Brazzell, 2001; Osterman, 2000).

When examining sense of belonging, institutions must look at the whole student. Hoover et al. (2022) encouraged higher education administrators to consider students who may be homeless, students who struggle with mental health issues, students who struggle to cover the rising costs of higher education, and first-generation students. Higher education administrators have to purposely develop meaningful relationships with college students and provide opportunities for mentorship as well (Felton & Lambert, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). College administrators have to understand that a sense of belonging is fluid and will change based on what is occurring in a student's life. Strayhorn (2019) noted that "sense of belonging changes with situation, circumstances, and time" (p. 57). Students who develop a sense of belonging in a club, organization, or summer bridge program during their freshmen year may have different needs and situations after their first year. In order to create opportunities that can foster the development of connection and belonging, there has to be a conscious, intentional effort to make students feel welcomed, and this effort has to be a collective effort across campus.

Sense of Belonging for Student-Athletes

Student-athletes, like other college students, can identify many factors that can cause them to find a connection or disconnect with their institution. Most collegiate student-athletes arrive on campus with an understanding that they will be part of a team. The time that collegiate student-athletes spend competing, traveling, and often living together aids many student-athletes in connecting with their teammates (Clopton & Finch, 2010). Interacting with teammates provides an environment where student-athletes feel valued, welcomed, and a connection (Toney, 2021). Being a part of a team creates

an environment where students share some of the same positive or negative experiences, and the shared experiences can help create a sense of belonging (Martin et al., 2015). There are several factors that can contribute to this connection for student-athletes, such as relationship with coaches, athletic staff (e.g., trainers, athletic advisors, strength coaches), professors, location of the school, involvement with the community, and selection of their major (Gayles et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2019).

Developing a connection with campus outside a student-athlete's sport is very important to them developing a sense of belonging. Research has shown that student-athletes value being supported by campus, being able to serve as an ambassador in the community, and also being encouraged to participate in other on-campus groups and activities (Slaten et al., 2020). According to Gayles et al. (2018), athletic administrators on college campuses should place a great deal of emphasis on the sense of belonging for student-athletes to ensure that their experiences are valued. The sense of belonging for college student-athletes is essential because it impacts retention and academic success (Gayles et al., 2018, Huml et al., 2020). Student-athletes with higher grade point averages, those who completed internships, and those who were involved in classroom activities seemed to have a higher sense of belonging (Gayles et al., 2018). This shows that there has to be more emphasis placed on student-athlete development outside of athletics.

Huml et al. (2020) discovered that as athletes increase their athletic involvement, their sense of belonging to their institution decreases. There are a number of factors that can have an influence on student-athletes identifying their sense of belonging. When looking at those factors, the research conducted by Huml et al. (2020) highlighted that student-athletes who participated in individual sports tended to have a higher sense of belonging with campus versus student-athletes who participated in team sports. Many athletes felt that having good working relationships with coaches and teammates increases the sense of belonging on their campuses (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Huml et al., 2020; NCAA, 2020).

Research also has shown that a student-athlete's connection is closely related to their relationships or interactions with faculty and their engagement with the campus community; these all played a major role in student-athlete's sense of belonging with their respective institutions (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Huml et al., 2020). Even though student-athletes are part of a team, that alone is not enough to allow them to develop a sense of belonging to their institution. Huml et al. (2020) discovered that transfer student-athletes were less likely to develop a sense of belonging with the college campus compared to student-athletes who started and continued their education at their initial institution of enrollment. Cooper and Newton (2021) argued that student-athletes who felt culturally accepted at their institution did identify a connection with their institution.

With sense of belonging, there are some other demographics like race and gender that researchers have made discoveries about as well. Gayles et al. (2018) discovered that females, white student-athletes, and athletes who participated in nonrevenue sports (sports that generally do not require a fee to serve as a spectator of the sport) described a higher sense of belonging than males, Black or underrepresented student-athletes, and revenue sports (sports that require a fee to serve as a spectator) student-athletes. Gayles et al. (2018) further discovered that those Black or underrepresented student-athletes and student-athletes who clearly identified themselves more as an *athlete* versus a *student* had a difficult time with finding that sense of belonging at their institution. An NCAA (2020) research study found that slightly over 50% of male athletes felt that students on their respective campuses showed them support.

Strayhorn (2019) stated that the sense of belonging provides the opportunity for students to be successful during their college career. Being connected with a team can aid student-athletes in having a sense of belonging while in college (Strayhorn, 2019). When the sense of belonging is absent for students, there is an increased chance of students lacking academic productivity and becoming removed

or disengaged from their academic experience, and this could ultimately impact retention and graduation (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1993). Just like the academic side of campus, athletic departments have to be intentional with identifying meaningful ways to connect with their student-athletes as well.

Creating an Environment for Sense of Belonging

Previous research has shown that college administrators, faculty, and staff have to be intentional at creating a welcoming environment that makes students feel that they matter and belong (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). Hoover et al. (2022) report pointed out innovative ways that some institutions across the country are aiding students in feeling that sense of belonging. During the admissions process, some institutions have simplified the number of forms incoming students have to complete during orientation by leveraging technology (Desthuis-Francis, 2021; Hoover et al., 2022), and also some institutions allow students to use interactive computer applications that enable communication with other students and campus employees in a virtual platform. This form of interaction allows students to communicate in a way that they are comfortable or familiar with, and this can make their initial experience with their institution more meaningful. Many students today may feel more comfortable interacting virtually, and if this can aid in the student connecting with the institution, then this way of communicating needs to be added (Desthuis-Francis, 2021). Hoover et al. (2022) mentioned that initially making the admissions process user-friendly and convenient can help a student with finding connection with an institution. If the admissions process is difficult and cumbersome, this could create some resentment from the student towards the institution very early in the process of becoming a student. Campuses are now acknowledging that creating an environment for sense of belonging goes far beyond ensuring that students connect with a campus organization or an extracurricular activity.

Academic Identity

Bowman and Felix (2017) defined academic identity as the level in which a person identifies with their role as a student, which leads to them being connected to their institution and determined to

achieve at a high level academically. Eicher et al. (2021) posited that students become academically integrated with their institution and become committed to their academics when they feel supported by faculty and staff. Student-athletes who have a strong academic identity have been found to be in majors of their choosing, which is something that is meaningful to the student-athlete (Lu et al., 2018). When student-athletes are not strong academically or transfer to another institution, they are sometimes limited to certain majors that they can pursue because they have to meet certain NCAA eligibility requirements. Student-athletes who are forced into majors that they are not interested in tend to identify more as athletes and less as students (Lu et al., 2018).

When looking at academic identity, gender can play a role in how student-athletes identify as well. Some researchers have suggested that female athletes identify more closely as a student first than their male counterparts (Harrison et al., 2009; Sturm et al., 2011). Love and Rufer (2021) discussed how males tend to experience a decline in their academic identity around the ages of 10-12 especially if the male participates in sports. If a student-athlete is to find that connection and sense of belonging with their institution, being able to develop and maintain their academic identity is very important for the growth of the student-athlete.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity is defined as the level at which a person identifies with their role as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). Jones and McEwen (2000) posited that human beings have several identities that are shaped through life experiences and that some of those identities become more salient because the person may spend more time participating in certain activities or social groups. Student-athletes are more likely to have a higher level of athletic identity based on how they perform athletically, and when a greater emphasis is placed on athletics, there is less emphasis placed on academics (Love & Rufer, 2021). These same students who place a greater emphasis on athletic identity tend to delay investing in the career development process, which leads to difficulty in transitioning into their life after sport (Love

& Rufer, 2021). Some athletes decide which college to attend based on the strength of the athletic identity for themselves and of the institution (Toney, 2021). There has been research conducted that shows a difference in athletic identity based on whether a student-athlete competes on Division I, II, or III level. Rankin et al. (2011) found that Division I athletes identified more with their athletic identity while Division III student-athletes identified more with their academic identity. Rankin et al. (2011) inferred that there is an opportunity to place a great deal of emphasis on both the student identity and athletic identity when student-athletes were not overly engulfed in their athletic role. Love and Rufer (2021) found that transitioning from the life of a collegiate athlete can be difficult for those who have identified more as an athlete. Love and Rufer (2021) also found that college student-athletes who were actively involved in planning their lives after their athletic eligibility was completed were more successful with transitioning out of their role as a student-athlete.

Athletic identity is the way that an individual sees themselves as an athlete. Student-athletes will often place more emphasis on their athletic role over their academic responsibilities. This can cause a delay in progressing within their degree, career development, and preparation for life after graduation. There has to be a balance in focusing on athletics and academics for college student-athletes. The emphasis on both athletics and academics can lead to students being retained, which can ultimately contribute to developing a strong program culture.

Retention

When examining retention and sense of belonging, research unveiled that as sense of belonging increases, college retention and academic progression increase as well (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2009; Tinto, 2012). The most well-known reason for students not being retained is the lack of sense of belonging or connection at their institutions (Han et al., 2017). The inability to retain and graduate students decreases university resources, decreases meeting educational objectives, and reflects the institution's weaknesses related to educating and meeting the needs of students (Reynolds &

Weaver, 2020). Tinto (2012) expressed that retention begins as early as the recruitment process, extends into the orientation process, and is really manifested during the first year when students make the transition to college. Research has shown that if students connect with their institution and the community, the chances of them being retained increases (Eicher et al., 2021; Han et al., 2017; Manwell, 2018). With college enrollment projected to decline across the country due to the demographic cliff, many university CEOs are placing a great deal of emphasis on retention as well as enrollment (Boeckenstedt, 2022). In higher education it is easier to retain a student than it is to recruit a new student, according to Dr. Kyle Marrero, the current president of Georgia Southern University (K. Marrero, personal communication, February 8, 2023).

There are varying factors that can impact retention of collegiate student-athletes. Crom et al. (2009) stated that when looking at retaining athletes it takes more than offering young people an athletic scholarship. Retention of college student-athletes has been shown to be very closely related to a team's athletic success (Berg et al., 2021; Glaser, 2020). Student-athletes who experience success in their sport can develop a sense of belonging that is greater than themselves (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Berg et al., 2021; Glaser, 2020). Collegiate athletics can also increase student engagement on campus, and this engagement can be for the entire student body (Hickman & Meyer, 2017). This engagement can increase the likelihood that students are retained and graduate from their institution (Hickman & Meyer, 2017).

There has to be an intentional effort by athletic administrators to ensure that support is in place to retain student athletes. Warner (2016) suggested that when college athletic administrators encourage social support for the student-athletes, this shows a compelling investment in the well-being of the student-athletes. Berg and Warner (2019) stated that the promotion of social support has been found to impact the welfare of the student-athletes and aids in retaining student-athletes. Social support plays a

major role in the retention of student-athletes as it contributes to relieving stress and aiding in student-athletes developing a sense of belonging with their institutions (Berg et al., 2021; De Groot et al., 2018).

Chapter Conclusion

With the ever-changing environment of college athletics and the pressure to have successful athletic programs, administrators will have to invest time and energy into retaining and graduating student-athletes. Research has shown that retention can lead to more successful athletic programs, so it be beneficial to keep student-athletes at their institutions for their four to five years usually taken for college students to graduate. College athletics has the ability to assist students in their transition to college life by aiding them in connecting with the campus community, creating opportunities to develop a sense of belonging, and providing support from fellow students, faculty, and staff (McElveen & Ibele, 2019).

In order to retain student-athletes, there has to be a connection with the institution. This connection can be found in factors such as relationships with coaches, playing time, or pursuing a major that is interesting to the student-athlete. Retention is a buzz topic that most institutions in the United States will have listed in their strategic plan to ensure that they are recruiting, retaining, and graduating students. After reviewing the literature related to sense of belonging and student-athletes, the next chapter will show the methodology that was used in this study in order to gather meaning on how student-athletes develop their sense of belonging at their institution and what affects their sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology and theoretical framework for this study. I will cover the research paradigm, research design, recruitment plan, data collection, and data analysis. The final portion of this chapter covers positionality and trustworthiness. The focus of this study is the research questions: How do student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions? Do student-athletes' perceptions of the transfer portal and Name, Image, and Likeness affect their sense of belonging? This study focuses on stories told by student-athletes about their experiences on their college campuses.

Research Paradigm

As stated by Creswell and Poth (2018), the focus of exploratory research examines and understands how the individual participants experience the process. In this study my aim was to learn about the actual experiences of current student-athletes in an effort to determine what contributes to these participants' sense of belonging. This was done by utilizing the narrative inquiry approach which allowed the participants to provide their own view of the questions that we discussed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When gathering the stories of the participants, I used a series of questions to gather information about their experiences. Their responses allowed me to develop a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants of this study.

For this research study, a social constructivist paradigm was used. The social constructivist paradigm is a natural approach that allows information and perspectives to be presented organically (Nursekilliam, 2011). The social constructivist paradigm provides an opportunity for various connotations to be presented from the results of the study. It focuses on identifying the meaning of the intricacies connected through historical and social interconnections with the lives of the participants

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). A social constructivist paradigm focuses on the individual's interpretation of their own experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and this allows me (the researcher) to identify if there are any themes with the collection of responses from all participants. It is very important that I allow the stories of each participant to come to life by learning about who they are as individuals, how they perceive themselves as a student, and how they perceive themselves as a collegiate student-athlete, and then identifying what aided or hindered each participant with finding a connection or sense of belonging with their institution.

Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology

Ontology refers to the beliefs about reality and the determination if there is any truth to be discovered (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When looking through the constructivist framework lenses, the identity of reality depends on various realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher co-constructs the meaning of the lived experiences, the background, or environment of those participants (Ponterotto, 2005) and then merges the identified themes to show the various realities of the group. Ontology looks at experiences to determine how humans understand realities and acquire knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ponterotto, 2005). In this study, I determined the themes that appeared through the social constructivist approach from the responses of the participants.

Epistemology aims to identify the relationship between the researcher and the participants. The results of the study provide first-hand knowledge of the experiences of student-athletes, and this information should change the researcher and the participants (Ponterotto, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that as a co-constructive connection takes place, the researcher and the interviewee should learn from each other's experiences. In this study, I learned from talking with the participants about the sense of belonging for student-athletes today.

Axiology studies values, and in this research my personal lived experiences cannot be dissected from the process (Pronterotto, 2005). In this study I had to be sure that I did not allow my personal values to interfere with the research. I also had to be sure that the values of the participants were honored throughout the research process. With the social constructivist research paradigm, the researcher has to be sure to respect, honor, listen, and acknowledge the lived experiences of each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I made sure that I was mindful to not allow my past experience of working in college athletics to get in the way of allowing the research to develop organically.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is sense of belonging by Terrell Strayhorn (2019). Strayhorn defined sense of belonging as, “Students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 3). Strayhorn (2019) suggested that a sense of belonging is a basic need for all human beings to identify that connection that motivates behavior in life. Strayhorn (2019) focused on the educational emphasis on belongingness which highlights students identifying their sense of belonging on college campuses as a collective effort by various entities (peer interactions, faculty engagement with students, and campus climate).

Strayhorn (2019) explained that depending on what a student is going through during their college experience, various occurrences will take place that will move them to operate in a similar process described by Maslow (1954) in the hierarchy of needs. Strayhorn (2019) connects a students’ sense of belonging to that of a human’s need for food to survive. Strayhorn went on to explain that the sense of belonging is a continual process due to college students navigating through various spaces,

contexts, and situations during the process. A sense of belonging for a college student is presented to students from the initial start of the college process until graduation.

The theoretical framework of the sense of belonging by Strayhorn (2019) was used to examine the recent changes in college athletics that could create new spaces and contexts for college athletes. The interview questions asked of participants focused on the seven core elements presented by Strayhorn (2019):

- (a) sense of belonging as a basic human need
- (b) sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior,
- (c) sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, and among certain populations,
- (d) sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of mattering,
- (e) social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging,
- (f) sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes,
- (g) sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change (pp. 29-40).

Strayhorn's (2019) model suggests that college students' basic functions focus on physiological needs such as air, water, food, shelter, sleep, sex. Second, college students seek safety and security, and this comes in physical forms, emotional, financial, and food. College students then work their way toward love and belongingness, where they are seeking care, support, mattering, and friends. They finally work their way towards esteem (respect, confidence) and then self-actualization which includes creativity, innovation, and morality (Strayhorn, 2019), which are similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

This study allowed athletes to provide insight on their personal experiences in college athletics to show any factors that potentially made them find or not find a sense of belonging with their institution. The interview questions for this study aimed to identify if the participants perceived that their experience as a collegiate athlete made them sense that they belonged and/or were accepted by others within their athletic program.

Research Design

There have been both qualitative and quantitative research studies conducted on the sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). When looking at the current layout of college athletics in the United States, I focused on the qualitative methods so that an exploration of the student-athletes' personal experiences can take place. Hearing about these experiences aided in answering the research questions: How do student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions? Do student-athletes' perceptions of the transfer portal and Name, Image, and Likeness affect their sense of belonging? This study focused on stories told by student-athletes about their experiences on their college campuses.

Qualitative Approach

Creswell and Baez (2020) defined qualitative research as the method by which the researcher gathers information on how the participants think, how they see the world, and how they describe their own personal experiences. The qualitative approach allowed me to gather information from current students about their sense of belonging to their current institutions. Johnson and Christensen (2019) wrote that the qualitative approach provides an opportunity for the researcher to immerse him or herself in the lived experiences provided by the participants. In this study, I used narrative inquiry to go deeper into determining what contributes to student-athletes' sense of belonging. Since the qualitative approach allows for the participants to provide reports on their own personal experiences, the aim was to gather information on what pushes student-athletes closer to finding a connection with their institution. Each

interview was guided by narrative inquiry to gain a better understanding of the experiences of student-athletes.

A qualitative approach is useful when trying to determine how people experience certain events, a group of events, or a condition (Agee, 2009). Qualitative research allows researchers to dive into issues that are not easily explained through quantitative research. Qualitative research creates an opportunity to gather organic and rich findings by interviewing participants about their personal experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). Qualitative research allows the opportunity to capture the experiences of individuals that have lived through certain phenomena and are able to tell and retell their stories (Agee, 2009). Johnson and Christensen (2019) explained that the qualitative research approach provides the opportunity for the researcher to gain a better understanding of reasons, causes, or motivating factors of why individuals feel a certain way about their personal experiences. In this particular study, I used a qualitative approach because I wanted to be able to interact with current or recent collegiate student-athletes to determine what helps them to make a connection or find a sense of belonging with their institution.

Narrative Inquiry

For this study, the research design I used to examine what affects student-athlete's sense of belonging was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is the ideal qualitative research method for this study because it allowed me to ask a pre-determined set of open questions to encourage the participants to tell the stories of how they perceive their own experiences. Narrative inquiry starts and finishes with acknowledging and respecting the everyday lives of human beings (Clandinin, 2023). Narrative inquiry was used in an effort to allow current student athletes to talk about their individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in relation to their sense of belonging. Narrative inquiry fits this study because it focuses on the way individuals experience the world and allows participants to describe their personal

experiences with a specific phenomenon (Chase, 2005; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For my particular study, I wanted to allow student-athletes to narrate their own encounters on their college campuses that are leading or that have led to them having or lacking a sense of belonging. I then analyzed those stories of life experiences and reported the findings (Creswell, 2013) to have a better understanding of what affects a student-athlete's sense of belonging.

The narrative research methodology that is known today as narrative inquiry was introduced by Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin in 1990 (Clandinin, 2023). Narrative inquiry provides a platform where I can take the lived and living experiences of student-athletes to see how those experiences shape their connection to their institution. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) defined narrative inquiry as: “the process of knowing or realizing an encounter. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interactions with a person's social environment.” (p. 20). Narrative inquiry explores and respects the common lived experiences of individuals (Clandinin, 2023). The lived experiences can be those encountered over a course of time, those encountered through cultural exposure, those experienced while a part of the institution in which they are affiliated, or those found through an exploration of their social environment (Clandinin, 2023). This study was a collaborative effort between me and the research participants to determine what affects the sense of belonging for student-athletes. Narrative inquiry also allows the opportunity for the researcher to verify the experiences of the participants by retelling these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were used to allow me to ask a consistent set of questions for all participants and then allow them the opportunity to tell their story.

As a qualitative approach, narrative inquiry has analytic lenses as described by Chase (2005). First, meaning making with the researcher takes place as participants tell their stories and then work to understand their actions and the actions of others (Chase, 2005). Second, “narrative researchers view

narratives as verbal action-doing or accomplishing something” (Chase, 2005, p. 567). This verbal narrative by the participants can have many results and these results can provide confirmation, information, an explanation, or a revelation about a specific subject (Chase, 2005). In whatever result is discovered from the narrative, it must be the voice of the participants (Chase, 2005). Third, when engaging in narrative research, a connection must be made between different narratives to identify common themes among the various participants (Chase, 2005). In my research I allowed each participant to tell their own story and then identified common themes or noticeable differences from the responses of all participants. Fourth, in narrative research, the responses of participants can vary based on when and where the interactions between the participant and the interviewer take place (Chase, 2005). Chase (2005) went on to describe this interaction between the participant and the interviewer as a collaboration between the two as the participants reveal their experiences/stories. Finally, in narrative research, the researcher has to find the ideal way to present the findings of the study. The researcher will normally present their findings in first person which does allow for the researcher to develop their own narrative voice in the process (Chase, 2005).

Setting and Participants

In this study, participants were selected from four institutions within the Sun Belt Athletic Conference. The Sun Belt Athletic Conference has been in existence since 1976 and is made up of fourteen member institutions across ten states (Sun Belt, 2023). “The Sun Belt sponsors 20 NCAA sports and more than 6,700 student-athletes” (Sunbeltsports.org, 2023, About section, para. 9). The Sun Belt Athletic Conference is made up of the following 14 institutions: Appalachian State University, Arkansas State University, Coastal Carolina University, Georgia Southern University, Georgia State University, University of Louisiana-Lafayette, University of Louisiana Monroe, University of South Alabama, Texas State University, Troy University, University of Southern Mississippi, Old Dominion

University, Marshall University, and James Madison University. The Sun Belt Athletic Conference is considered a Group of Five athletic conference. The Group of Five is made up of the athletic conferences that consist of the American Athletic Conference, Conference-USA, the Mid-American Athletic Conference, the Mountain West Athletic Conference, and the Sun Belt Athletic Conference. The Power Five, with which many people are more familiar, is made up of five athletic conferences that are consistently the highest revenue-generating athletic conferences in the country, and those are the Atlantic Coast Conference, The Big Ten, The Big Twelve, The Pacific 12 (Pac-12) Athletic Conference, and the Southeastern Conference.

When looking at factors that can influence sense of belonging, such as financial incentives and other benefits that are currently being offered by most Power Five institutions, it felt more realistic to select the Sun Belt Conference to conduct this study where many of those financial incentives and benefits are limited or not offered because of limited budgets. For this study I focused mainly on how the transfer portal and NIL have impacted the student-athletes' sense of belonging at the four Sun Belt Conference institutions. I looked at male athletes from baseball, basketball, and football because these are sports that are impacted by the transfer portal and NIL. Utilizing the Sun Belt Athletic Conference rather than a single institution was intended to increase the anonymity of the participants. Initially for this study I was going to include students from Georgia Southern University since I worked in athletics at this institution for eight years. After careful consideration it was determined that using Georgia Southern was not the best decision due to my working relationships with the student-athletes. I decided to select four institutions within the conference to make the study more manageable and to help keep the students anonymous in my findings. The Sun Belt Athletic Conference did provide approval to use the conference images in my recruitment materials and documentation is provided in Appendix B. Participants were recruited from Appalachian State University, Coastal Carolina University, Georgia

State University, and University of South Alabama. These four institutions were selected because they all have been very active when taking students from the transfer portal. I have contacts at each of these institutions who were able to assist with getting information about my study out to their student-athletes who are members of the baseball, football, and men's basketball teams.

Participant Criteria

The following criteria were selected to determine individuals who could participate in this study: 1) the participant had to be identified and be verified as a NCAA Division I athlete by being listed on the rosters that were publicly available on the athletic website of the institution, 2) the participant was a current student-athlete at one of the listed Sun Belt Athletic Conference institutions (Appalachian State University, Coastal Carolina University, Georgia State University, and University of South Alabama), 3) the participant must have been enrolled for at least one year between Fall 2017 and Fall 2023, and 4) the participant was a male student-athlete who competed in baseball, basketball, or football. These three sports were selected because they make up the three sports with the most athletes who have used the transfer portal (NCAA Applications Transfer Portal, Athletics Staff Access Only, 10/13/2023).

Only students that are currently enrolled at a Sun Belt institution were allowed to participate in the study. I looked at this particular time period because this is when the new NCAA changes occurred in college athletics with the transfer portal and NIL. This particular time period also allowed for a more recent perspective on sense of belonging from participants. Although the participants for this study would not have any experience with navigating a NCAA college prior to 2017, and so could not comment on the difference, they would have experience as collegiate student-athletes during this current time period when these momentous changes are affecting college athletics.

Recruitment Plan

Recruitment of participants took place once approval was received from the University of Georgia IRB. To recruit the participants, I contacted all individuals that oversee the selected student-athlete academic support service centers (Appalachian State University, Coastal Carolina University, Georgia State University, and University of South Alabama) to aid in getting the information out to students; this information is publicly available. I shared a description of my study which highlighted the criteria for athletes that I was seeking (described above) and also my contact information for those that were interested (see Appendix A). I also attached a recruitment flyer (Appendix C) that these individuals could share with the student-athletes that was more inviting to the college students. I confirmed eligibility by requiring all respondents to complete a Google form to ensure that they were in fact eligible for the study. Interested individuals accessed the Google form by scanning a QR code on the flyer they were able to contact me directly indicating their interest in participating in the study. The responses of participants started off slow, so after 20 days I sent reminder emails to my campus contacts and was able to get a better response. There were some timing challenges that caused delays such as final exams, the semester ending, some athletes starting their season and others concluding their season, but the prospective participants did eventually start responding. As an incentive, each participant who completed the interview received a \$50 VISA gift card for their participation. When checking with the Office of NCAA Compliance at Georgia Southern University, it was confirmed that this was permissible by the rules and regulations of the NCAA to provide athletes with a \$50 gift card for their participation. All participants decided that they did not wish to review their own transcript so at that point I was able to move forward with their original transcript.

Sampling Plan

In order to focus on the stories provided by participants, it is not necessary to have a large participant pool (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Emphasis was placed on a smaller sample that allowed for a

more in-depth study of the group (Kim, 2016). A random sampling approach is not the appropriate approach for this study, so with this qualitative research I looked for a more streamlined sample (Jones et al., 2022). In this study, I conducted a purposive sampling approach since the specific type of participants needed to meet certain criteria (Jones et al., 2022). Once I received interest from prospective participants, I provided an Eligibility Questionnaire (Appendix D) to ensure that the potential participants met the criteria that allowed them to take part in the study. If there was a huge response from interested participants, I would select individuals with the most time on a college campus in hopes that these students would be able to provide a more in-depth description of their collegiate experience. This would have been done because student-athletes who have been enrolled longer could have hopefully provided more insight into their sense of belonging based on their experience on a college campus. There was not a large response, so I was able to include seven individuals in this study. In this study there was representation from football, baseball, and basketball. By ensuring that the representation was from different sports and different institutions, I was able to gather information that provides an overview and understanding of what the Sun Belt conference looks like in relation to sense of belonging and not just an individual institution.

I notified the individuals that were selected for the study by email (Appendix F) and text, and at that time provided an option for them to select their interview time. This notification contained the consent form that they were able to read over prior to the interview, then prior to starting the interviews I had them verbally state that they understood and agreed to participate (Appendix E). I notified individuals that were not selected for the interview and thanked them for their participation. There were two individuals that did not complete the questionnaire completely, so I did not move those two participants onto the interview process.

Table 1*Overview of Participants*

Name	Sport	Transfer	NIL Deal
John	Football	Yes	Yes
Sebastian	Baseball	Yes	Yes
Ryan	Football	No	Yes
Mark	Baseball	Yes	Yes
Willis	Basketball	No	No
David	Football	No	Yes
Chris	Baseball	Yes	Yes

As shown in Table 1, of the seven participants, there were three who played baseball, three who played football, and one that played basketball. Four of the participants had transferred, and all but one had an NIL deal of some sort.

Data Collection

In this study I had each participant provide verbal consent to ensure that they understood the interview process (Appendix E). I conducted video interviews through Zoom with each of the seven participants, and the average time for each interview was 45 minutes. I used Zoom to transcribe all participant interviews. The recorded session allowed me to go back and review all content and take notes on all those being interviewed during the process. This review examined body language, emotional responses, and other cues (non-verbal and verbal) that could be identified during the interview.

Interview Protocol

During the interviews I asked the participants the same set of preselected questions, which is considered a semi-structured format. Jacobs and Ferguson (2012) suggested asking all open-ended questions, starting with the basic questions, and being sure to frame the questions properly to get the best possible response. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated that in a semi-structured interview, the process is guided by a list of open-ended questions. Those open-ended questions were tailored to issues that the researcher is aiming to explore (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interviews started out with the intent to determine how the students made the decision to select their institution. I allowed participants to elaborate on areas they felt were important or where additional context was needed (Longhurst, 2009). There were benefits when utilizing the semi-structured format in that it allowed participants to freely speak about their experiences and created space for the researcher to ask follow-up questions as well (Longhurst, 2009).

I then moved to identify their perception of connection with the campus and the campus community. I asked questions that focused on the participants' sense of belonging as an athlete and what factors contributed to them developing or not developing a connection with their institution as a student-athlete. Finally, I asked questions regarding recent changes to the NCAA (NIL and the transfer portal) to determine if these factors contributed or took away from the participants having a sense of belonging as a collegiate student-athlete. This structure allowed participants to provide an overview that covered their development of belonging as a student, and as a student-athlete, and identified any factors that contributed or took away from their experience.

During the interviewing process, I asked questions in a way that encouraged the participants to answer the question such as "Tell me about..." (Jacobs & Ferguson, 2012). During the interviewing process, I also made sure that I was using prompts that emerged from the literature (Jacobs & Ferguson, 2012). For example, when asking "Tell me about your experience being a collegiate student-athlete?", I

divided questions into categories (academic identity, athletic identity, basic human need, drives human behavior, heightened importance, and consequence of mattering) to remind me of key concepts that were discovered in the research (Anderman et al., 2004; Bowman & Felix, 2017; Brewer et al., 1993; Cooper & Newton, 2021; Eicher et al., 2021; Gayles et al., 2018; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hoover et al., 2022).

When selecting interview questions (Appendix F), the topic should be of interest to the researcher, and the researcher needs to be sure that they remain on script with the interview questions to ensure there is a consistent process with all interview participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2023; Ferguson & Jacobs, 2012). This is not saying that the researcher cannot ask follow-up or clarifying questions, but the same questions were presented to all such participants. I was intentional in ensuring that the interviews did not go too long by keeping the timeframe within 40—60 minutes. I offered the transcript to each participant so that they could review the information collected to ensure that it is exactly what was said during their interview. The participants were all provided three days to review the transcript and if they selected to not respond I informed them that I would move forward with their original transcript. Only one student-athlete requested to review the transcript and responded that he approved the document within a 2-hour period. All others felt comfortable with the interview process and declined the opportunity to review the transcript.

Data Analysis

In order to transcribe the interviews of each participant, I used the transcription option provided by Zoom. In order to review if the transcriptions are accurate, I reviewed the recorded interviews, compared the interviews to what is transcribed by Zoom, and then allowed each participant to review the transcript for accuracy. I initially analyzed the data by reading each transcription by each line to see how each participant describes their experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2023) as a student-athlete. It is ideal to allow the responses from the participants to be examined and then identify themes of what is

discovered based on the questions that are presented to each participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2023). I took the information that is gathered from the participants, compile the responses of the participants, and then review to determine if there are any patterns or commonalities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2023).

When looking at the transcripts from each participant, I used Saldaña's (2021) coding method to analyze my qualitative data. Saldaña (2021) encouraged looking at the experiences of participants, and the researcher could pull various coding results. I utilized in vivo coding due to this method being ideal for an interview and also a novice qualitative researcher (Saldaña, 2021). I used in vivo coding to take a deeper dive into the participants' responses. In vivo is defined as verbatim coding, and it is where the exact words or short phrases used by participants are compiled to show understanding of the participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Once I identified the codes from each participant, I focused on the overarching themes and highlighted the most common areas of all participants. I then aligned the findings with Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging framework. This is where I looked to see if any of the themes presented a connection with the seven elements described by Strayhorn (2019) in his sense of belonging model. With in vivo coding, I identified any salient factors or themes that attributed to the sense of belonging for the participating student-athletes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a major part of conducting a qualitative study to ensure there is credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Stahl & King, 2020). I wanted to make sure that this research was credible and what was listed in the transcripts is what the participants intended. There was an opportunity for each participant to review their transcription so that they could ensure that the responses were accurate compared to what they provided during the interview process.

Credibility

Stahl and King (2020) stated that credibility is how congruent the information a researcher finds is with reality. In this study, member checking was used to allow participants to review or to provide clarification of the responses that they provided during their interview (Juarez, 2021; Stahl & King, 2020).

Transferability

Transferability allowed understanding if the findings were applicable to similar contexts or individuals. This qualitative research is applicable enough to allow others to learn and extend the research that took place in this study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “It is, in summary, not the naturalist’s task to provide an index of transferability, it is his or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgements possible on the part of potential appliers.” (p. 316). To allow for transferability in this study, participants, and the findings, were described in detail. The aim was to show how the findings could be applicable to collegiate athletic departments across the country, regardless of the athletic conference affiliation.

Confirmability

This verifies that the results and findings of the study are based on the responses of the participants and not the researcher. In this study, I provided explanations of the coding process and then finally ensured that a thorough explanation is included about the results of the study.

Subjectivity/Positionality Statement

When acknowledging my personal interests for wanting to better understand the sense of belonging for student-athletes and what affects it, there were several areas that attracted me to this topic. I have worked on a college campus for 19 years, with 16 of those being in athletics. While working in athletics I have had the opportunity to work with some amazing student-athletes from various racial, ethnic, geographic, academic, and athletic backgrounds.

As a result of my experiences, I am compassionate about student-athletes and their sense of belonging. Given the fact that there are roughly 5,500 Division I student-athletes (NCAA, 2022) in the Sun Belt Conference, I am interested in better understanding what affects and contributes to these students developing a sense of belonging to their institution. There are many opinions on what could possibly make a student-athlete separate from an institution, but there is also room to identify and provide findings on what makes current student-athletes remain at their institution. With my experience working in athletics and three different Division I institutions, I made sure that I did not overlook valuable information because of me thinking that I knew or understood the positions of the student-athletes who were interviewed. In my research, I made sure that I allowed the stories of those being interviewed to organically develop and not rely on my personal experiences.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I described methodology of this study. Narrative inquiry is the methodological approach that was used to gather the stories of identified participants from the Sun Belt Conference. The data from the Zoom interviews were analyzed and compiled, and then common themes were highlighted. Those themes are presented in the next chapter to include responses from the participants to show whether and how their experience as a student-athlete helped them shape and develop a sense of belonging. In the next chapter I provided a synopsis of each participant's story that allowed readers to understand more about their experience as a student-athlete (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I provided an overview of the participants, their institution, and how each participant connected or felt that they mattered at their institution that will allow readers to know more about each participant (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I then showed if there were any common themes that exist based off the stories of the participants.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this study, I used narrative inquiry to examine the sense of belonging for student-athletes at institutions in the Sun Belt Conference. In this chapter, the stories of seven male athletes will be summarized and the common themes that appear will be highlighted. In this study three of the participants played baseball, three played football, and one played basketball. Four of the participants had transferred, and six of the seven participants had received an NIL deal of some sort. In these summaries, participants provided their outlook about their experience at their institution and how they felt a sense of belonging within their sports. Each participant also shared how the transfer portal and name, image, and likeness impacted their sense of belonging as well.

David

“When I first arrived, I don’t think my coach knew my name for an entire year.”

David, a football athlete at a Division I institution, is a native of the southern United States, where football is a popular sport throughout the entire region. David had the opportunity to play for a very successful high school program where they won three state championships. David wanted to attend a college that had a winning culture and a family environment. When deciding where he would attend college, he allowed his parents and high school coaches to be involved in the decision-making process. He ultimately chose his institution because of the opportunity to receive a scholarship, the family environment of the team, and the ability for his family to be able to drive to see him compete or visit him during the off season. “The ability to win was very important in my decision on where I would attend college”. David stated that he is a very competitive individual, so the winning tradition of this program aided in him making his decision. David came from a large family, so playing for a team that felt like a family was also very important to him. He felt that the coaching staff recruited good people to be part of their program and he could sense that during the recruiting process. To him it was evident that

he made the right decision because he had developed some lifelong friendships during his time at his institution. These relationships will go beyond his four to five years, but he discerns these are men that will be a part of his life far beyond his college experience.

The coaching staff is now very supportive, but that was not the case when he first arrived at his institution. The previous coaching staff struggled to cultivate relationships with the team members, and this made it hard for David to develop a connection. The assistant coach for his position was not a very encouraging person, and that can make it difficult for any athlete to enjoy their experience. “When I first arrived, I didn’t think my coach knew my name for an entire year. I think his name was Coach Wallace and that was tough going to practice every day, and it felt like you were invisible to the guy that controlled my playing time.” This was very hard to endure as a freshmen student-athlete and easy to see that it bothered David. David seemed to want to forget his coach’s name to somehow make the coach seem unrecognized just as he had. “That coaching staff transitioned out and we were able to get some coaches that believed in the players.” He described this current coaching staff as different in that they place a great deal of interest in creating an environment where relationships can be organically established. David has been able to develop a relationship with his strength and conditioning coach as well and he really values this connection.

When initially arriving on campus, David struggled academically. As many freshmen do, he had problems with handling the freedom of managing his own schedule. He did receive academic support provided by the athletic department but the transition from high school to college was challenging. David’s academic advisor helped him get on track and eventually turn his academics around. The demands of being a college athlete can be very exhausting, in addition to responsibility for academic requirements. The importance of academics became important to David, and he ensured that he put in the work to be successful. Earning a college degree was essential to him as he understood that the

football journey would come to an end at some point. While majoring in finance with a minor in risk management, he has been able to develop meaningful relationships with his professors which makes his academic journey enjoyable. He is mindful of being a student-athlete and tries to set an example for other athletes. Showing professors that there are athletes that take their academics seriously is important for David.

After feeling that he belonged, he felt a strong connection with his institution. His team now is similar to a family and their brotherhood allows them to persevere through the tough parts of being a student-athlete. Knowing that he has a group of men with a common goal and who have his best interest in mind provides a sense of security and confidence that makes his experience as a student-athlete so much better. Being able to ask questions about academics, football, or car problems, he has comfort knowing his teammates will support him regardless of the situation. The sense that he belongs at his institution is important to his success, and he detects that it is definitely essential for his success as a collegiate student-athlete. “I sense that feeling that I belong with this program is very important to my success as a student-athlete”.

During his time in college, the transfer portal has negatively impacted David. This is a change that was established by the NCAA to allow students to freely transfer without being scrutinized or retaliated against by their coaches, but it has worked differently for David. While working hard this year, David was hoping to get more playing time, but there were three transfers brought in who played the same position that he did. Those transfers were from larger athletic conferences and were allowed to play immediately. “I mean, I worked hard and made sure that I did everything that I was asked to by the coaching staff. I was redshirted and in the off season I had a different mindset and worked my tail off...and then that summer these three transfers come in and they are getting all the reps at practice.” These transfers did impact David’s playing time but, in the end, made David better at his position. David

has been able to establish a relationship with these new players, but it was very difficult at first when he put in so much work to be a part of a Division I athletic program and another person is brought in and starts immediately. As a player, the transfer portal is not ideal for David because there is no stability, and the grass is not always greener on the other side, or in his situation it is not greener on his current side. David explained,

If I enter the (transfer) portal then it is frowned upon as if I am not “all in” but in return these transfer guys come in and get bumped up the depth chart before putting any work in for our institution. I have stayed and endured the process, and this is where I don’t agree with the portal.

The transfer portal creates instability and creates a quitting mentality for those who are not willing to work hard and endure the process of earning their spot within the team. David believes in finishing what he starts and the only way that he would enter the transfer portal to leave his current institution would be if the coaches informed him that he would never have an opportunity to play. He has not entered the portal because his experience with the current coaching staff has been positive. The overall culture of the institution and the athletic department has helped David make the decision to remain at his institution.

The Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) opportunities provided to student-athletes at David’s institution are limited compared to the NIL deals offered at Power Five institutions. NIL has not affected him in a major way, but he has witnessed teammates enter the transfer portal in hopes of getting lucrative NIL deals. Entering the transfer portal to secure major NIL deals has worked for very few teammates, and other teammates have found themselves stuck with no place to go. If individuals pursue being a collegiate student-athlete to chase money, then the likelihood that they will remain at that institution is very slim. He has been fortunate to receive some smaller NIL deals but for him, there has

not been a great deal of interest in chasing multiple deals. If offered a major NIL deal David would consider the opportunity, but it would have to be very significant for him.

David understands that college football is the business of the student-athletes and the coaches, if one on either side is not performing then they can be replaced immediately. David does not only identify himself as a student-athlete but as a degree seeking student, a son, and more importantly to him, a child of God. This helps David focus on his main goal of earning a college degree while doing what he loves and that is playing football.

When discussing what he would like to share with future collegiate student-athletes that could help them develop a sense of belonging:

Try and get connected with people outside of athletics. It is so easy to get drained when you are around the same people every single day. We only get one week off in the summer and then we are back to begin preparation for the next season. It seems like we are there 24/7 so being connected outside of athletics is crucial to your well-being. When looking at the transfer portal, we have to remember that the grass is not always greener on the other side. Do not enter the transfer portal if you are on the fence, but make sure that you are certain that transferring is the decision that you are wanting to make. If NIL is important to you and is your main priority, then you will always be persuaded to consider leaving one institution for the next. I know people personally that have transferred for the money and if that is what makes you happy then go for it. I would strongly recommend considering all factors such as the importance of being close to family, being involved in a winning program, and being a part of a culture that fits you. Those three things are my main reasons for coming to my school.

David is still a student at his institution with one more year of athletic eligibility and will remain there to complete what he initially started as 18-year-old freshmen. David continues to attend his church and has ambitions of having an amazing final season as a collegiate student-athlete.

Chris

“There is not a place on campus that I feel uncomfortable.”

Chris is a baseball student-athlete in his senior year. He grew up in the southeastern United States. He always aspired to play baseball in college and really wanted the opportunity to play on the Power Five level. Chris began playing baseball when he was six years old, and it was during middle school when his parents and coaches noticed that there was something different about his athletic ability. Like many other baseball players, he played on various travel baseball teams to try to grow in the sport and also to gain exposure. Chris always had both parents supporting him athletically and academically, and they both have been instrumental in his development into who he is today.

Chris was able to accomplish one of his dreams as he was signed to play baseball at a Power Five institution. Chris did not see any playing time during his freshmen year and then COVID-19 occurred. Chris consulted with his parents and his high school coach and made the decision to transfer from the Power Five Institution to a Group of Five. He relied heavily on his parents and high school coaches in the decisions to attend both institutions. Looking in the transfer portal was overwhelming for Chris. “When I looked in the transfer portal, there were so many schools, and I did not know where to start.” Chris decided on his transfer location under the guidance of his parents, and his decision was based on his ability to get on the field, earn a good degree, and also be somewhere close to his hometown.

I was lucky to have my parents in my corner because not all student-athletes that go in the portal have people in the ear with their best interest in mind. Deciding to come here has been the best decision that I have made as a student-athlete.

Chris and his parents also reached back to his high school coach for his advice and assistance as well in his decision to transfer to his current institution.

After transferring, Chris' experience as a student-athlete transformed where he was now a relevant member of the team, and he felt a connection with his teammates and the coaching staff. "My teammates are like my brothers and my coaches treat me like a living, breathing, human being." Chris also felt a connection outside sports and spoke about his professors within his major and his academic advisor having a huge impact on him feeling as if he made the right decision. When I asked Chris about his experience as an athlete, he described: "It has been great! Being able to play baseball in college and earn a scholarship has been great! All the people that I have around me to make sure that I can be the best that I can be is a wonderful experience. I really do appreciate all the help!" The connection with his team has also been enhanced by his most memorable experience as a collegiate student-athlete.

The team going to regionals two years ago and earning the highest GPA in the history of baseball at our institution has to be my most memorable moment. This showed that we could play the game but handle our business in the classroom at the same time, and that is important to me.

The feeling of mattering or belonging at the institution was critical for Chris during his time in college. "It is very important because I feel that I do a lot for this school, but in return the school does a lot for me." Having a supportive coaching staff and teammates plays a major role in him detecting that he matters and belongs to his current institution.

There is not a place on campus that I feel uncomfortable. I feel that I can go to the offices of my coaches, athletic administrators, my academic advisors, and professors, and they all would invite me in with open arms. Now that has a lot to do with how I carry myself, but it says a lot about them willing to pour into us every day.

His relationships with teammates, coaches, faculty, and staff drive him to do what's right each day.

People are always watching, I have to be mindful of what I put on social media, where I go, and what I do every day. I don't want to disappoint my coach. The culture that my coach created gives me all the confidence in the world.

His teammates believing in him makes him appreciate being a student-athlete. "My relationship and support with my teammates make feel as if I can do anything on the field!"

The transfer portal has impacted him during his time in college. "The (transfer) portal allowed me to enter and find a place where I could call home." At his previous institution the sense of being connected or that he belonged was not present. "Not having to sit for year like in the past allows me and other athletes the opportunity to contribute immediately to our sport." He saw the transfer portal as a good addition to college athletics as it provides options for student-athletes if they land at a place that does not fit their needs. He has witnessed where the portal has not worked for all athletes but believes that is why there should be consultation with people that have your best interest in mind. He explained the resentment initially before entering the portal, "I was nervous at first of getting stuck in the portal like many athletes do." He trusted in his social support group which was made up of his parents and former coaches and it turned out to be a great decision for him.

When looking at NIL and how that impacted him feeling that he belonged, Chris explained, "I was offered two NIL deals and that made me feel appreciated and that people were paying attention to my hard work." Although NIL is not offered to all players, Chris did state that the players on his team felt very positive about the possibility of earning additional funds by being a member of the baseball team. "People think that athletes are provided a ton of money but that is not the case. My scholarship covers my school, housing, and meals. NIL provides some additional funds that allow me to eat out from

time to time.” At his institution, his NIL deals were not made up of life-changing amounts of money but amounts that allowed him to have some extra dollars to spend at his discretion.

Chris worked hard in high school and was able to live his lifelong dream of playing for a Power Five institution. He realized that this was not the best for him, and he found his current institution had proven to be the best choice for him. When asked what he would tell future collegiate athletes about belonging, the transfer portal, and NIL, he said:

Future college athletes need to first understand that this is a business. You are given a scholarship and some NIL deal, but there is an expectation that comes with that. Find a place where you can grow as a student and an athlete. When deciding on a school, get to know your coaches and make sure they have your best interest in mind. Get to know people outside of your sport so that you can benefit from the full experience of being a college athlete. If you commit to a school and you think that you may need to transfer, please look at everything and consult with some trustworthy people before going in. NIL is a great addition, but you have to make sure that you are chasing the right thing. If NIL funds are what you are mainly looking for then make sure you are prepared for that. There is still nothing wrong with earning a degree and being a college baseball player. Remember to enjoy this small period of time because it goes fast.

Mark

“I carry myself in a respectful and positive way because I don’t want to shed a negative image on the team”.

Mark is from the northern Great Lakes Region of the United States and grew up loving baseball. He was raised in a family that lived and breathed baseball. Mark worked hard academically and athletically through high school and did have the opportunity to get a scholarship to a Power Five institution in the southeastern part of the United States. This was important to Mark because he wanted to be able to train, practice, and play in warmer weather than he grew up in and his initial school choice

was perfect for him. This school was well known academically and had a rich athletic history in multiple sports. “I liked the notoriety! Like attending an institution that was known across the country first for academics but then the strong athletic history.” Mark just knew that he would play at this institution and then be drafted to play professionally but things changed. “I tore my UCL which is like the ACL for baseball players and at that time the coaches informed me that it was in my best interest to transfer if I wanted to play.” At the time that this happened to Mark, the NCAA had not enacted the One Time Transfer rule which allows athletes to compete immediately when they transfer to another institution. Due to this, he decided to go the junior college (JUCO) route and was able to land a spot at one of the top JUCOs in the country.

When making these decisions of where he would attend both collegiate institutions, he received guidance from his parents, siblings, and a personal advisor. His decision to attend his current institution was made based on the relationships developed with his current coaching staff. My family and I really liked the fact that the coaching staff was faith oriented and that was important to us. I was able to openly speak to the coaches about my faith, me developing as a man, and this made me feel at home.

He was provided with a very good offer, and he and his family determined that this was where he needed to complete his academic and athletic journey.

Mark showed excitement when explaining how his experience as a student-athlete has been a great opportunity for him. “It has always been a dream of mine to play baseball on the college level and to get a good degree.” He also explained how being a part of the baseball team has impacted him in a positive way academically. The accountability associated with being a student-athlete for Mark at his current institution helped him with being successful academically, which was something that he had not

experienced at his previous institution. At his first institution, the team spent a large amount of their spare time partying and drinking, and Mark spoke about how it impacted their performance on the field.

We would drink every night and then wondered why our performance on the field was subpar.

When I transferred to my current institution, we spent more time studying, working on our game, and doing things that would help us in being productive in the classroom and on the field. We still party, but we know when to turn it on and turn it off. I found a beautiful girlfriend that I spend a large amount of time with as well.

Relationships at Mark's institution was developed with other student-athletes outside his sport and also students that are not athletes. There also is a great relationship with faculty and staff on his campus as well. "My professors are very personable, I know everyone in my classes, and I really like that the class sizes are very small." This experience is very different from his initial Power Five institution where he felt that no one really knew each other outside of his teammates. "The hype behind attending a well-known, Power Five school felt good at first, but I felt like a number in the large classes. I did not know anyone which made it hard academically and athletically." After class Mark normally arrives at the field around 1:00pm to begin the pre-work to prepare for practice. The morale is very high on the team, so the majority of the team arrives early because of the culture that has been created by the coaches and the players.

The connection at his institution extended to more than just with his teammates and his coaches; he also felt connected to the athletic director at his institution.

Our AD [athletic director] and coaching staff wants every athlete to feel that they can talk to anyone at any time." There was a very open-door policy by the athletic director and the feeling that he [athletic director] really cares about all athletes. (...) The AD cares about every sport and

every athlete. Staff members are encouraged to ask all athletes how they are doing and how their day is going. That means a lot to me and other athletes.

Having a relationship with the athletic director creates a positive feeling for him as a student-athlete.

When I first stepped foot on campus, the athletic director knew who I was and that surprised the heck out of me. Not only do I have a relationship with the athletic director, but I also have a relationship with the custodial staff for the athletic facilities. This place is special because you can feel and see the investments of the student-athletes.

The feeling of being recognized as a human being and not just an athlete has really resonated with Mark at his current institution. This connection with teammates, coaches, athletic staff, and administrators has definitely been very different but welcoming for him in his transition from his first institution.

When continuing the conversation on feeling connected, he revealed that during his first months at his current institution he did not feel that he fit in with the team. During his end of the year meetings with his coaches, he revealed how he felt, and the coaches responded by getting the senior members of the team to be intentional about connecting with the team moving forward. "I was surprised that they not only heard me, but they listened to what I said about my feelings." This response by the coaches and the senior leaders allowed for team bonding to begin early, and by the time they started spring practice there was a strong connection among the team. This connection was not something that he was accustomed to at his previous institution. Mark spoke about how the athletes there have a sense of entitlement and were expecting to be provided golf cart rides to class. "At my initial institution, my teammates and I thought that we knew each other but there really was not a true bond." Mark talked about baseball; the spring semester typically brings the team together because they are in season. They play 4-5 games per week,

traveling to various cities, and they spend a lot of time with their team. He senses that the rigor of being in season creates a major opportunity for team members to bond and connect.

The connection or belonging as a student-athlete does impact the way that he acts daily, and this changed a lot as Mark has grown older. “I stated earlier that I had a sense of entitlement at my first institution and overall, it was not a good environment for me.” After transferring to his current institution, he was surrounded by a positive coaching staff and teammates. “I carry myself in a respectful and positive way because I don’t want to shed a negative image on the team.” Upholding a positive image is so important, and this is embraced by all team members.

There was a situation with his former roommate that did not make him feel connected. Mark elaborated on how his roommate played a major role in him not feeling connected with the team. They both played the same position and Mark felt that his roommate felt threatened because he was a guy coming from a storied Power Five program and a successful JUCO.

This guy just did not like me, and it appeared that he was threatened by me because we played the same position. He would make threatening comments about physically hurting me and also forcefully suggested that I tell the coaches that he was the better player.

This made Mark very uncomfortable, and it impacted his belonging and connection in a major way, it also shows how some athletes struggle with these negative relationships with other athletes of the same position. After careful consideration he did have a discussion with his coaches, and they handled the situation immediately.

This new addition of the transfer portal to NCAA athletics has impacted him personally.

The transfer portal has been awesome! But you still have to do your homework. The [transfer] portal is good especially with the one-time transfer exception. I think it will help a lot of students

have options if their first institution is not a good option for them. Athletes are not forced to go to junior college like I had to.

He shared that the transfer portal allows younger athletes to assess their institution after the first year and then make the determination if it is the best fit for them.

Sometimes it takes a year to figure out if you made the right decision and the transfer portal allows student-athletes to make the decision if they want to remain after the first year. Also, you may not get the SEC offer out of high school, but the transfer portal allows you to go to a school in the Sun Belt and work your tail off eventually get that big offer.

With NIL, he had mixed feelings about this new addition to college athletics. “We are still trying to figure NIL out so right now I can get a free meal if I post about certain restaurants. That does help some. I am fortunate to have family that support me, but I know many athletes that don’t receive the same support.” He expressed that student-athletes should have the opportunity to have a job, but with athletic and academic obligations, that can be difficult. “It gets a bit sticky when you have individuals at some schools being offered \$2,000,000 dollars from someone they don’t know, asking them to promote this random item.” For Mark, he has his own pitch that he presents to local businesses to see if they are interested in considering a small NIL deal if he posts about their restaurant. “I have a small deal that helps me pay rent and I feel that NIL is a benefit to all athletes that can receive it because even a smaller amount helps.” It is evident that NIL has created some opportunities, but there are some challenges that Mark has perceived. “Lower mid majors [colleges] are becoming like junior colleges for larger athletic programs, and they have the NIL funds to lure athletes away from the smaller schools.” The hype behind NIL and it potentially luring him away from his current institution brought an interesting yet well-thought-out response. “I love my current institution and I mean I love everything about it, but I am not a dummy. If someone offered me a million dollars to play for them, I’m getting the hell out of here!” He

did preface that this choice to leave would take place with consultation from his support system and with a great deal of research.

Mark has been involved in baseball since he was five years old and has excelled on multiple levels. He had a successful high school career, initially enrolled at notable Power Five institution, transferred to a junior college, and now is finishing his college career at a Group of Five institution that has turned out to be one of the best decisions for him. When inquired about what advice he would provide for future collegiate student-athletes about belonging, the transfer portal, and NIL, he responded:

Talk to as many people as you can when trying to make your decision. Talk to people away from the coaches and it may be a good idea to reach out to a former player that recently graduated to get their perspective if you can. Ask questions to see what their experience is like or was like. A lot of coaches talk the talk so try talking to at least 8-10 people that have been a part of that coach's program. The transfer portal is a very big pond with a lot of small and big fish in that system. Don't go into the portal trying to see if something might fall in your lap. Do your research, identify what teams need and what teams are looking for. The portal seems to be cool to many college athletes, but a lot of players go into that system and don't find the next destination. Really evaluate how good or bad your current situation is and consult with those that you trust. I don't ever feel that these decisions should be made by yourself. I know a lot of guys that attended my institution, and they were saying they were going to Arkansas, Ole Miss, and other Power Five institutions and now they are home and were never selected by another school. You have to remember that there are likely 300-400 athletes in the portal that play the same position as you. If you are being mistreated and clearly not getting what you need from your institution as a student-athlete, then by all means enter the portal. I have made a lot of decisions

in college that were just not well-thought-out and because I was acting off emotions as a result of a bad practice or because I was pissed at one of my coaches. If you are angry about something athletic related, take a day or two and evaluate the situation, and then if you still feel the same way then explore your option. If not, take a look at your current situation, how close you are to graduation, and your relationship with your teammates, and professors, and make your decision from there. We only have four to five years to do what we love, so when considering leaving for whatever reason may be, just make sure that you think everything through.

John

“It is needed! You feel better when you are connected with your teammates, coaches, and professors.”

John, a football athlete, is from the southeastern United States where football was an important part of community growing up. John started his college career at a Division II institution in Tennessee because he did not get many offers right out of high school. John had a very successful career at the Division II institution where he earned All-American honors after his sophomore year and was voted First Team All-Conference two years in a row. John was red-shirted his freshmen year but graduated and was granted the opportunity to utilize the transfer portal to play his two remaining seasons at a Division I institution in the Sun Belt Conference. John made his decision to attend the Division II institution with his parents, but when deciding where he would transfer to finish his last two years of college football, his girlfriend was the deciding factor. “It was important that she [girlfriend] liked the new location as well because we have been together for five years and she was coming with me.” John expressed that he had three offers from Power Five institutions but decided on his current institution based on his ability to play and also the institution having the master’s program that he was interested in.

John’s experience at his most recent institution as a student-athlete was positive. “It has been great! The town and the campus love their student-athletes. We have resources here that shows the appreciation for what we do as student-athletes.” With John coming from Division II and moving up to

Division I he was able to provide a comparison to both institutions. “At my first institution we had one academic advisor for all student-athletes, whereas here we have three advisors that work solely with football which makes it easy to communicate with them and get the assistance that we need.” He was not speaking negatively about his first institution; he was just focusing on the major differences in both experiences from an academic standpoint.

John does feel a connection to his current institution, and he elaborated on the importance of this connection. “I feel that it is very important to feel connected to your institution because it helps when you are playing for group that you feel has a vested interest in your wellbeing.” He also spoke about times when he may not feel the connection at his current institution, and this primarily came from teammates playing the same position as him. “You may not feel that connection with some of the players in your position group because they are fighting to get playing time and they see you as a threat.” This could cause challenges because these are teammates that he attends position meetings with, and they workout, practice, and play together.

The connection and feeling that he belonged to his current institution was very important to him, and it impacted how he carried himself each day. “It definitely makes me mindful of how I carry myself and also what I put on social media. As collegiate student-athletes, we are held to a high standard, and we have to remember that at all times.” John talked about how when he first started out as a college student, he did not always think this way. “Now it took me some time to get to this point. Eighteen-year-old John did not care, but 23-year-old John does take a lot into consideration now.” John spoke about when he felt that he belonged the most; he talked about situations when he and his teammates accomplished something great.

At my first institution we went 0-40 my first three years and then during my last year there, we won the conference championship. That was huge to do that as a team and we had been defeated so many times.

John talked about the expectation to win by the institution, fans, and the community.

At my current institution, when we win, we feel very connected to this community and on campus. After seven games, we had only won 3 games, but we went on to win our division within the conference. Let's just say that at the seven-game mark, the fans, and the community were not as friendly as they are when we are winning football games.

John provided insight that showed the connection and belonging does come easier when the program is winning, and this is for the team, the university, and the community.

The feeling of belonging and connection with this institution is very important to be successful as a Division I student-athlete based on the response from John. "It is needed! You feel better when you are connected with your teammates, coaches, and professors." The head coach, teammates, and academic staff in particular are the individuals who made him feel connected the most at his institution. Those that did not make him feel connected primarily were the others that played the same position. "The guys that can make the experience tough are the guys in your position group because we are always fighting for playing time." John felt that this did create competitiveness, but it was really hard to connect with the guys in his position room. "It also did not help that I was a hungry guy that moved up from Division II and now I was getting more reps." John learned to do his work both in the classroom and on the field, and he found players in other position groups that he could connect with.

John shared his experience with the transfer portal, and he spoke positively about the new addition for NCAA student-athletes. "The transfer portal gave me the opportunity to begin my college career on the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) level, work hard, and then work my way into

larger Division I level school.” At his initial institution out of high school, John took notice of the limited resources that they had as an smaller division I football program.

I entered the transfer portal mainly because I had graduated, and I put myself in a position where I had options. We had accomplished a lot at my first institution, and I had earned my degree. I wanted to now earn a master’s degree and that intrigued me, and I wanted to play at place where football was important.

With NIL, it did not impact John significantly because he was not interested in supporting or promoting various brands that were not important to him. “I was not willing to jump out there with any company just to earn a dollar.” John’s institution does have a system in place that allows athletes to receive NIL deals, but John is careful about what he connects himself with. “I receive some funds from our athletic department but if I was going to secure a deal with a company with my personal NIL deal it would have to be a company that lined up with my values.” John was thankful for the opportunity to move up, so leaving to pursue a lucrative NIL was not something that was of interest of him.

John had a successful career as a student-athlete in high school, on the Division II level, and now in his current experience as well. John aspired to play on the Power Five level, but that did not happen. He still worked hard and was able to secure a place in a strong Group of Five institution. John shared his insights on belonging, the transfer portal, and NIL for future collegiate student-athletes:

Get out and talk to people and get to know people other than athletes. For future collegiate athletes, make sure that you have done your homework before you enter the transfer portal.

When an athlete enters the portal and transfers to another institution, they typically get less snaps than they received at their previous institution. Also remember that 40% of the student-athletes that go into the transfer portal never land a new home. Do your research on the transfer portal and the NIL deals.

Sebastian

“Connecting with teammates and coaches has played a major role in how I feel about being a student-athlete every day.”

Sebastian grew up in the southeastern region of the United States where he began playing baseball when he was seven years old. Sebastian received many accolades in high school but did not receive any major offers from Division I institutions to play baseball. The decision to attend a JUCO in his home state seemed to be his best route because it presented the opportunity for him to develop more as a baseball player, and this allowed him to play immediately out of high school. When making this decision, being closer to home helped steer Sebastian to this particular JUCO. It was located in a small college town that was the location of Power Five institution that received all the attention for college sports in that area and a large portion of the state.

Sebastian had a successful career at his JUCO after playing three seasons, with one of those seasons being abbreviated due to COVID-19. Only one Division I offer was extended as Sebastian ended his JUCO playing career and that offer came from his current institution. Sebastian felt that he should have received more offers but was thankful for the opportunity to continue playing baseball. “I decided to attend my current institution because I felt that this was the best opportunity to play baseball on the next level. The coaches were building the program, and we (the team) had a chance to do something amazing.” Sebastian’s parents also aided in the decision to attend his current institution. “My parents and I communicated a lot about this process. We were able to have three very important Zoom meetings with the coaches and we were able to talk about everything.” Sebastian shared that the transparency from the coaches put him and his parents at ease and made the decision to attend his current school simple.

Sebastian spoke about his experience as a student-athlete, and he provided positive feedback. “It’s been great moving on to Division I level. I’m really grateful for having all the resources provided

to student-athletes.” He thought when he made the decision to attend the Division I institution it would be different, but there were some major differences that he did not consider. The comparison of resources to his JUCO was a huge difference for Sebastian:

At my current institution, one of the biggest differences is nutrition. At my JUCO I tried to gain weight, but it was tough because there was not enough time in the day and the resources were not there. Now we get shakes after workouts, we have a room filled with snacks, and we have access to PB&J sandwiches. This helps when you are leaving a workout and have class because there is not a lot of time to grab food at times. The facilities are a big difference as well because we have a whole indoor batting cage, and the pitchers have a new pitching lab. We have a lot of machines, different tools, and bats with different weights. This provides us an opportunity to continue to get better even when the weather is not working in our favor.

The academic experience worked in Sebastian’s favor, and he alluded to his JUCO preparing him for the academic rigor of his current institution. “My JUCO was a feeder school for the major Power Five institution in town. There were professors that taught at both institutions and the courses were tough.” Many students who are accepted to the Power Five institution attended the JUCO that Sebastian attended and then transferred to the Power Five school after their first year. Since he transferred, he was limited to what he could major in because he had to select something that accepted the three years of JUCO credits he accumulated before arriving at his current institution. “I had to declare communications as my major because it accepted a lot of my courses, but my JUCO really prepared me because the courses here are not as difficult.” Having access to tutors through the athletic academic center has helped him a lot as well. Sebastian is required to complete four hours of study hall each week and this has helped him tremendously. “It is good to have this designated time to study and I

take advantage of this time each week.” His attitude towards his academics has helped him succeed as a communications major.

Sebastian does feel that he has a sense of belonging to his current institution. “My head coach and the coaching staff all do a great job at making sure that we [players] feel valued as a person and not just for how we produce on the field.” He felt that many programs place importance on team members by production on the field, but this is not the feeling at his institution.

I feel that all the guys on our team get the same attention as the best player on the team. The coaches are very intentional in ensuring that everyone feels like they are a part of the team. Our coaches are open to providing individual workouts for any player that asks for help. It does not matter if it is the number one guy or the last walk-on on the bench. Our coaches help us to be the best that we can be in baseball but more so as men. With our team everyone is a valuable part of the program, and our coaches instill in us that together we can win a championship. Everybody is important to this program, and no one is considered an afterthought!

There are expectations from the coaching staff, and at this institution that expectation is clearly expressed to all athletes throughout the athletic department. Being a student-athlete does impact the way that Sebastian acts each day:

All college students go out and have fun from time to time, but as baseball players we have to remember that we are always representing the team, our school, our families, and ourselves.

When we want to go out and support the football or basketball teams, there is a certain standard that we have, and we have to conduct ourselves in a certain way. In this town everyone knows who you are and what you do, so you have to be careful because you don’t want to be the guy to shed a negative image on the baseball program or the university. In this town good behavior or

bad behavior will get back to our coach so you have to always think about how you conduct yourself.

He went on to speak on his feeling connected at his current institution, and he lit up when explaining:

I would say when we are in season and we are traveling together, that is a special time for us. We are 40 deep on a bus, traveling to different cities, we have so much fun. That is time for us to showcase what we have been working on all year. When we get off the bus everyone is dressed alike, and you feel that comradery and the brotherhood. When I feel the least connected is when I am away from my brothers like now during winter break. There are four of my teammates from my home state and we try to connect during the break, but it is so special when we are all together during the actual baseball season. Even during winter break someone will post something crazy on the group chat and that will get everyone fired up. This month being away from teammates is a tough time and I am ready to get back for the spring semester.

Sebastian felt that belonging or feeling connected was needed to be successful as a student-athlete.

It is 100% need to be successful as a Division I athlete. Connecting with teammates and coaches has played a major role in how I feel about being a student-athlete every day. If you don't love your team which is like your brothers, it can be very hard to win once we get on the field. There has to be a connection with the entire group. It is a really big thing when you are enjoying this short ride of being college athletes, we are having fun, and when we win together that makes it even better. I'm going to look back 5, 10, 15, 20 years from now and these guys are still going to be a part of my life. They will be in or at my wedding and that is just how connected I feel to this

group. It will be those times on the buses, us winning a big game that we will remember, not the stat boxes, and I am grateful for this group that I get to share this experience with.

When looking at the individuals who have made him feel connected or that he belongs to his baseball program, his head coach was first to be mentioned. “My head coach doesn’t play favorites and does not treat any players different and that means a lot to me.” He went on to say that his head coach treats the team members based on how each player carries themselves. “My coach likes me now, but I think we will become closer after I graduate. It is that way because he cares about me as a man and not just a baseball player.” When asking about individuals who have not made Sebastian feel connected or that he belonged, he shared an interesting response. “There was one of our teammates that was just was not a great guy. He was good a player but brought so much disconnection to our team.” He went on to state that he made the decision to ignore the situation because the negative player only had one season remaining.

Sebastian provided his insight on the impact of the transfer portal. “I support the transfer portal because it gave me the opportunity to get where I am now.” Not only did he feel that it helped him, but it benefited many of his teammates as well. “Our program had been bad, but the transfer portal allowed us the opportunity to get a lot of good players from some well-known schools, and we were good last year.” Had it not been for the new transfer process those players would not have been able to compete immediately, so that makes him very fond of the transfer portal. Sebastian did state that he felt that coaches need to do a better job a evaluating talent in the portal. “I think there is a lot of good talent across the country, but you have to have eye for talent and know what you are looking for. You can get talented athletes without paying top dollar for them.”

NIL is not guaranteed for all student-athletes, but Sebastian has been able to receive some smaller deals. “Yes, I actually have 2 NIL deals, but these are not major.” He has managed to secure his

deals based on things that he likes and that are in line with what is important to him. “So, one is a local burger joint, and they specialize in grass fed beef with quality, fresh ingredients. What I put in my body is important to me and this is why I have a deal with this restaurant.” The other NIL deal was a juice bar in town that provided free products if Sebastian posted about the establishment on social media. The athletic department creates opportunities for student-athletes to identify potential NIL deals by hosting an event where various businesses from the community are allowed to showcase their products or services. The athletic department also uses an app that highlights companies and organizations that are interested in providing NIL deals for student-athletes. He met the owner of the juice bar at the event hosted by their athletic department. “Just like the burger joint, the juice bar provided products that have healthy and fresh ingredients. It is easy to support this company because I believe in their products.” He did speak about teammates that were accepting any and all deals just to try to get additional money.

I think it is important to have deals that are meaningful to the athlete as an individual. You can easily get caught up in chasing a dollar but at the end of the day I feel it should be something that is important to the individual.

NIL does not provide Sebastian with a significant amount of money, but he does see major benefit. “It’s not a ton of money but it does make my life easier. These deals allow me to save money on products that I would purchase anyway.” Sebastian did state that NIL has allowed him to feel appreciated at his current institution and he loves his decision to play baseball at this institution. Sebastian did provide some insight on if NIL could potentially lure him away from his current institution.

I am in a really good situation right now. It would have to be some insane money to make me leave. There are guys that are getting major deals but for me, my education and happiness means the most to me.

Overall, Sebastian’s experience at his current institution has turned out to be one of the best decisions that he has ever made. “I love it here at this institution. The school is amazing, and the scenery is second to none.” When sharing information with future college student-athletes about the feeling of belonging, the transfer portal, and NIL, Sebastian shared the following information:

Go where you are valued as a person and not just as an athlete. If you are only going to be valued based on how you perform, then it is really risky. If you are a 5-star athlete, with the potential of getting drafted in the first round, you don’t have to be concerned about being valued as a person. But for the majority of athletes, the reality is that you are not going in the first round so you have look deeper than just the sport. You should definitely go where you are going to be valued simply as a person and not how you perform in your sport. With the transfer portal, make sure that you don’t get ahead of yourself because the grass is not greener on the other side. You are going to see videos on social media about athletic programs that will make you say, Wow! That place will look cool, but every place has its own set of problems. Be grateful for what you have and the opportunities that you have in front of you. Make sure that you have people that you trust to help you make those decisions. Ask questions and ask a lot of questions during the recruiting process. With NIL, if you get the opportunity to get a deal, get the most out of it because you deserve it. We provide a lot of publicity and notoriety for these schools, and we should be compensated. You have to remember that this is an opportunity to get an education, play our sport, and then make some money. It should remain in that order.

Ryan

“I do feel like it is needed because if you know you are not connected to a program you are not going to give your all into that program.”

Ryan is from the southeastern region of the United States, and he is a member of the football team at his current institution. In high school, Ryan played both offense and defense and was recruited

by various schools to play different positions. He decided to attend his college because he felt that this was the only school that really wanted him. When arriving at college Ryan decided to go with the offensive side of the ball because he really liked catching touchdowns and creating plays for himself. There were two other major reasons that he selected his school of choice. “Another thing that really pulled me to my current institution is that I had an older brother that was already a student there and my twin brother had committed to play there as well.” Ryan felt that it would be an epic experience to attend the same college and play football with his brothers. “The football program at my college is relatively new and we don’t have a long football history. This is a growing school and I also wanted to be a part of something that was growing.” For Ryan attending an institution where his family could attend games was very important to him as well. He had witnessed his older brother have a good experience, and it was important to him that his parents did not have to split time attending games for his siblings.

My mom and dad played a major part in my decision to attend my college. It’s different when you have someone in the stands that you know are your blood relatives and them being able to attend every single game was important!

Ryan did not want his family having to get on a plane to watch him play, so being in close proximity to his hometown was important.

When reflecting on his experience as a student, Ryan shared how his time at his current institution has been for him. “It’s actually been hectic of course because you have to make sure that your grades are right, and you are working hard trying to get a position on the field.” As a collegiate student-athlete you have to submit assignments and your days are just so busy. “You have to make sure that outside of everything with athletics you have to make sure that you submit homework, quizzes, presentations, and anything else that is required for academics.” Ryan shared how balancing the demands of being a student-athlete is very tough for him. “Initially the process is hard because you are

trying to learn what it takes to be a student-athlete on the college level.” After his first year the process became easier, and now he feels that he is prepared to handle the demands of being a student and an athlete on the collegiate level.

Ryan expressed the difficulties that he had coming in during COVID-19. “I came in during my freshmen year and had a normal schedule with in-person classes. When we returned in the spring of my freshmen year COVID-19 hit and then all my classes shifted to online courses.” Ryan struggled with the all-online component due to COVID-19, but now that he is in his upper-level courses, things did get better because now he is taking classes with the same people. “It is good getting to know people in your program and you begin to be comfortable voicing your opinion in your classes and over time academics just seemed to become easier.” He went on to explain how being in a program with people in the same academic program helps in the academic process. Ryan has grown to love his institution, and he likes the fact that everything on campus is within walking distance.

During his time at his institution, the football program has become a relevant program in the conference, and they were excited about the possibility of winning the first bowl game in school history this year. When Ryan first arrived at his institution, the school was in the process of building a new stadium on-campus. The football program had played their games at a stadium away from campus since 2009, and now Ryan and his teammates would be able to play the inaugural game in the new stadium.

We have been a part of a lot of new things with this football program. My first year we played in the old stadium downtown and there we did not have much support from fans and it felt very disconnected from campus. Then the following year we got to play in a brand-new stadium and that was special because we had the opportunity to experience the first tackle, the first catch, the first touchdown, all in this new facility. The fans bought into what we were doing, and it really feels like a football program now. The coaches are engaged, we are having success, and this just

feels like the place that I need to be. We have an indoor practice facility now; we have a new student athlete wellness and academic center, and it just makes you feel appreciated. The people that came before us did not have all of this and I am just excited to know that we are standing on their shoulders, but I hope that we are making them proud at the same time.

When he first arrived at his current institution, the transfer portal was just starting, and it was not very popular for him and his teammates. “When I came, I knew that I was invested in this institution. I learned the fight song and did everything that students are supposed to do to connect with the school.” He selected his school so that he could immerse himself in the entire culture of the university. “I came to create memories; I am not here to make money!” This became an opportunity that would set him up for his next step in life. If he continued to work hard in the classroom and on the field, the other incentives as a result of this process would come later. “I’m here to work hard to get me to another place. I am investing in myself, and this university is investing into me, so I am not looking at the next college move for me.” Being a student-athlete impacts the way he carries himself daily. Students who are not collegiate athletes can focus on their academics, but for him, he has to focus on both academics and athletics. “I have two avenues that can get me to a better place and that is academics and athletics. The thing about me is that I want to see if I can succeed in both of these areas.” He is dedicated to his institution, and this all stemmed from the support and opportunities he and the other student-athletes at his institution have received.

The time that he has felt most connected with his institution has changed his outlook at his institution. There was a former player who died tragically before Ryan arrived at his institution, and the head coach still acknowledges the life of this player by allowing a player who has worked hard and proven themselves to wear the former player’s number during a game. Ryan was selected to wear this

number for a game, and this was when he felt the most connected to his institution. This was the first time that he felt that all of his hard work had finally paid off.

Our coach feels like the person that wears this jersey sets the tone or the standard for what the team should look like. I was the first person to receive this award and I was honored that I received this recognition. They put me on the scoreboard during the game and posted it on our team's social media outlets. That really made me feel like I belonged, and I had made a connection with this football program.

Ryan felt the least connected with the previous coaching staff during his sophomore year.

“We did not have any fans coming to the games, we were not winning, and the team camaraderie was awful.” He felt that he was not being recognized by his coaches and he felt that football was irrelevant at that time.

The coaching staff was just going through the motions. They knew they had to do their job, but the problem was that they were not connecting with the team. They did not try to build relationships with any of the players and it showed on the field. I was just going through the motions of going to practice, doing my schoolwork, trying to stay safe from COVID-19, and our team gave about 40% on the field because that was what the coaches were giving us. This year was the worst of my college career.

For Ryan, the feeling of being connected or belonging is important to being a student-athlete. “I do feel like it is needed because if you know you are not connected to a program you are not going to give your all into that program.” Ryan emphasized that it is very important to be happy where you are and that comes by feeling appreciated and connected at the institution of your choice.

Ryan's greatest experience being a student-athlete that also contributed to him feeling connected did not come immediately. “I did not get on the field much my first two years and I was questioning if I

would ever be a relevant player.” Starting on the bottom of the depth chart was tough for Ryan since he had been a major contributor during his high school career.

I had to build my way up in the depth chart. I was working hard and finally got my chance to start my junior year. I had the chance to start in my first game that year and I started having some success. That season we went to our first ever bowl game and I had my first major game of my college career. Getting on the bowl game MVP list for my performance was a major accomplishment and I felt that this was when I made myself known as a player in college football. After the game I became a leading receiver on the team and that felt really good.

His position coach really helped him establish this connection. “He is the first coach that I can actually have been able to talk to, and these conversations go far beyond football.” He felt comfortable talking to his coach about anything that was going on in his life and he believed that he would not be judged. This relationship with his coach made him feel that in any situation, he had an ally that would aid him in navigating those situations properly. “Our entire coaching staff are able to relate to us more than the last coaching staff. The previous coaches just showed up did their job, we had practice, and they went home.” The previous coaching staff had an old-school coaching style that was not family oriented. “The previous staff treated this just like a business and if you were playing good, they rocked with you but if you were developing or not playing well, they really did not communicate with you.” The current coaching staff has been very intentional on creating meaningful relationships that allow the players to feel that the coaches care about them. Ryan has also made a connection with his academic advisor in the athletic department. “When you have someone that cares about your grades and your future, that makes you feel good!” Ryan seems to be in a really good place with the current coaching and support staff at his institution that is making his experience meaningful.

Ryan’s experience with the transfer portal and NIL did impact him as a student-athlete:

NIL has been very beneficial for me because it puts more money in my pocket. I can use NIL with things that I like to get extra money, and I think that is a great addition for college student-athletes. Your scholarship covers your tuition, housing, and food, but since we are student-athletes, we don't have time to get a job to make extra money to get things outside of what our scholarship covers. This allows me to market myself to companies and organizations and it has also made me become more socially aware. I have to be mindful of who I am connecting myself to because not all NIL deals are good.

For him, the transfer portal can be seen as a process to bring others in to challenge him to get better or find another place if he needed to.

With the transfer portal, they [coaches] can bring someone else in that could potentially make me work harder and possibly get better but also if my situation here took a wrong turn and I needed to leave, the portal allows that avenue as well.

For him some players try to use the portal as leverage and test the waters to see if their current team will try to keep them.

I've seen players get stuck in the transfer portal though and they never land at a new school. You have to do your research. If no one comes knocking on your door once you enter the transfer portal, then you may have to do what players did before the transfer portal existed and that is drop down and play on the FCS, Division II, or Division III level. Now if you don't get a good offer out of high school and have to go the JUCO or Division II route, the transfer portal allows you to go to those levels, showcase yourself, and then try to land at a Division I program after your freshmen or sophomore year. I think some people now are just skipping JUCO and going Division II and then trying to move up to a higher division.

Ryan shared his thoughts about potentially entering the portal. “The transfer portal is always a thought when you can possibly move up to play in a bigger conference.” The potential to land a major NIL deal has crossed his mind but what has kept him at his Group of Five institution is interesting.

There are a lot of schools that didn’t choose me when I was coming out of high school, so I’m kind of like why would I give those teams an opportunity to get me now and they did not want me back then? (...) NIL and the transfer portal show there is not a lot of loyalty anymore, but I feel like if you were in college before those two items became the main focus of college athletics, you have that loyalty with your school. Then on top of that, I kind of like being the big fish in a little pond. I get a lot of snaps and I am a contributor on my team. Would that happen if I moved up? As it relates to NIL, it does make you feel good to get a deal where I could potentially be the face of this company that pays me to represent them. There are teams that are gaining the attention of athletes with their higher cost of attendance allowances, major NIL deals, and the team collectives, but at the end of the day you have to make decisions that are right for you. I have two years remaining and I will graduate before I would ever consider going to another institution. I would have to finish what I started.

The transfer portal gives student-athletes the opportunity to find a place that fits them if their current situation is not working for them. When providing advice to future collegiate student-athletes on belonging, the transfer portal, and NIL, Ryan provided the following information:

Don’t always focus on all the pretty, shiny things that colleges are going to show you. They are going to show you all the good things during your visit. The way things are now they will present the collectives, NILs, and the money that you could potentially receive through cost of attendance and the other methods that they have now. You have to look at the location, talk to the people, and really try and identify what are the negatives before you commit. I would highly

recommend you to really examine the institution that you are considering and ask yourself if you would attend that school if you were not an athlete. Would you attend this institution if all the bells and whistles of being an athlete were not on the table? The transfer portal allows you the option to move up to a higher level if you are that guy in your sport. For the transfer portal and NIL, you have to do your research. Don't jump in the portal if you don't have a plan and have not done your research. A lot of people go in the portal and never make it out. When you look at certain players, they have transferred multiple times and that makes it tough to find the sense of belonging to a program and institution. I would not recommend coming into your freshmen year just trying to get money, but if you need extra money then make sure that you do your research and try to align yourself with companies that are respected in the community. Remember that being a student-athlete is more than going to class and playing your sport. This is a time to meet lifelong friends that you will build relationships that have been established because of a bond and loyalty to each other.

Ryan has remained at his current institution and has two more years of athletic eligibility moving forward. Ryan will graduate in the upcoming year and is excited about his future at his current institution.

Willis

“My experience has been great! My coaches, the professors, the athletic administrators, and support staff have been good to me!”

Willis is from the southern region of the United States and made the decision to remain in-state to play basketball. Willis made his decision mainly so that the location would be close to his family which would allow them to be able to watch him compete during the season and they could drive and not have to fly to support him. He was also looking for a place that made him feel at home. His mom and his Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) coach played a major role in his decision to attend his institution

and their approval was very important because he respected them a lot. Overall, Willis feels that his experience has been great at his institution. He enrolled as a freshman and has remained at his institution. “My experience has been great! My coaches, the professors, the athletic administrators, and support staff have been good to me!” His experience has been what he expected from out of his college career.

I knew that I was going to struggle a little my first year. My mom was a bit overprotective of me all through my elementary, middle, and high school years. So, I was expecting to fall off some when I arrived at college. My freshman year was tough adjusting and I expected that. The main reason why I struggled is because I spent more time hanging out, meeting people, and attending parties here and there. That was my plan because I wanted to have some fun and experience college life but when I rolled into year two, I buckled down and did it the right way. I learned a lot in my first year and I have grown.

Willis provided insight on how exactly his experience has been being a student at his institution. “I have been able to connect with students from so many places, and that has been the amazing part of this process.” He went on to talk about how his professors have been helpful when he missed classes due to athletic travel. Willis pursued a major that was very intense and that required his presence each day. Establishing a relationship with professors that would create time to make sure that he was caught up on missed assignments has been very important in his success academically. “My professors have been top-notch and have made me really enjoy and become passionate about my major!” Willis has been able to apply what he has learned in the classroom to help him create opportunities on campus and in the community to apply his classroom knowledge.

When examining his experience as an athlete, Willis has struggled with injuries, but the overall process has been positive for him. “The athletic administration has been really supportive over the years.

Basketball has been rough due to injuries, but I still feel that I made the best decision to attend school here.” He has been very supportive of the athletic department and his team even though he has not been able to contribute much to his sport. “I go to practice, and I work my tail off so that the team can be their best version when they compete.” Willis has competed as a student-athlete at the college level and although that has been limited, he feels that he has still been an inspiration to those around him and has found inspirations from those same people.

Willis does feel that he has established a strong connection and feels that he belongs to his current institution. This did not happen initially as a freshman, and he had to learn how to navigate the college scene. “I did not feel connected when I first arrived because the older players were really hard on me.” This made him feel that he was inadequate as a basketball player, but he quickly learned that these were attempts to identify if he could handle being a Division I basketball player. Willis established relationships with his teammates and then his situation changed, and he really began to enjoy it. These relationships were created by working hard and showing that he could put in the work. Once he felt that he belonged, and now connected with his teammates, he realized the importance of these relationships. “I feel that it is very important that I feel connected to my institution and my team because it helps when you are playing for a group that you feel has a vest interest in me.” When being recruited for college, his first coach made him feel connected the most. His connection with his head coach, teammates, and other athletic staff members has helped in feeling that his decision to attend his institution was worth it all. “He made me special at a time when I was trying to figure out how to be a good college player. He made me work really hard and that is what I needed.” Willis feels that being a part of a team where the players feel like they are brothers is important when they are working towards a common goal. This connection is important in the way that he carries himself each day. “I am mindful that people are watching me every day. People love you for what you do but they are always looking for an opportunity to tear you

down.” This guides the way that he approaches life each day and has allowed him to learn a lot as he prepares to enter life after graduation.

The transfer portal and NIL have not impacted Willis due to him suffering several injuries during his college career. “The transfer portal and NIL has really not impacted me because I have always been a role player.” He felt that those opportunities came to athletes that were really good.

I have never been a player that other teams were seeking out. My injuries played a major role in me not being a player that was attractive to other teams and after a while I shifted my focus to more than my athletic ability. I have been able to major in a program that allows me to do things other than my sport. I am majoring in something that I am passionate about and this is more important than the portal or an NIL deal. I have really never thought about any of those things because this has been the perfect place for me.

If he had a successful athletic career and a major school showed interest, he would have considered it. He has not been fortunate enough to get any NIL deals and he expressed that he really has not pursued any. “Our athletic department has created opportunities for student-athletes to find NIL deals but that is just not something I am interested in.” Willis loves his institution and is focused on finishing what he started as a freshman.

Willis has enjoyed his career at his institution and recently graduated with the degree that he initially wanted out of college. When providing insight to future collegiate student-athletes he provided the following advice:

Do your research because the grass is not always greener on the other side. Get out and talk to people and get to know people other than athletes. Don’t forget why you selected your institution in the first place and sometimes when it is a struggle you have to work through it. I worked through my struggles, and I am still here.

Willis will play his last season this year and has the opportunity to complete some postgraduate courses to better prepare him as he enters the world of work.

Emerging Themes

For David, Chris, Mark, John, Sebastian, Ryan, and Willis, there were three main themes that emerged. The themes that emerged from open-ended responses from participants were the importance of meaningful relationships, how NIL did have an impact on their sense of belonging, and that the transfer portal, although provided an avenue to potentially find another institution that was more fitting, was not directly related to these student-athletes having a sense of belonging with their athletic program and institution. These themes address the research questions: How do student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions? Do student-athletes' perceptions of the transfer portal and Name, Image, and Likeness affect their sense of belonging? Belonging and relationships were emphasized by all participants. These relationships were revealed through different individuals, but the commonality is that the participants all were seeking those important relationships that aided them in finding their connection and sense of belonging with their institutions. Through the narratives of the participants, their relationships impacted the ways that these student-athletes selected their institution, felt a connection with the academic side of their institution, carried themselves each day, and felt that their belonging was important to be successful athletically and academically. NIL and belonging explores how these student-athletes felt that their sense of belonging was impacted. The transfer portal and belonging shows that the portal provides an alternative if the student-athletes perceived that their current institution and situation did not provide a sense of belonging. I explored the common themes identified from the narrative responses of the participants.

Belonging and Relationships

Belonging and relationships emerged as a theme from all the narratives of the participants. Each participant in this study mentioned several individuals that had an impact on their lives in relation to

their feeling that they belonged to or had a connection with their athletic program. Belonging through relationships also provided common key individuals that have made an impact on the participants feeling they belonged or felt a connection with their athletic programs. The narrative responses from all participants in relation to their feeling connected or that they belonged as an athlete were very important in how they perceived their college experience. When looking deeper into the relationships that impacted their belonging, there were subcategories that presented a connection by the following: family, head coach, assistant coaches, teammates, athletic staff, and faculty.

Family

Family led the decisions of college choice for all seven participants in this study. There were other factors that were present for participants when deciding where they would attend, but their relationships with their family members was the leading theme that merged in this area. For example, Willis selected where he would attend college because he wanted his mother and grandmother to be able to attend his basketball competitions. His family is a very important social support system that he wanted to have access to when needed, and attending his institution allowed him to be able to remain physically connected to his family. John expressed how his family played a major role in his decision to attend his first institution, but his girlfriend and family collectively aided him in deciding where he would transfer. David, Willis, Chris, Ryan, and Sebastian all decided where they would attend college based on the close proximity of their family. They all expressed the importance of having their family close to their institutions; it made them more at ease knowing that if they needed them, they could get to each other in a relatively short period of time.

Head Coach

Participants discussed the heightened importance they felt when they had a relationship with their head coach. Ryan, Willis, Chris, John, Mark, and Sebastian all expressed that connecting with their

head coach impacted their sense of belonging. For example, Chris talked about how his head coach acknowledged him for a team award, which opened the door for him to develop a very high level of respect for his head coach. Chris felt as if he was contributing to the team, but this was the first time that he felt that his hard work had been noticed. Sebastian talked about his head coach recognizing him not only as a player but showing compassion about him as a young man. This made a difference in how Sebastian felt about his role as a player and a human being at his institution. Mark shared a story where he was having an issue with a teammate, and he felt the need to speak with his head coach. Mark's head coach listened and addressed the issue but also followed up with Mark to provide support and encouragement that helped the team move forward. Willis shared how his head coach pushed him hard to be better and that he was appreciative of this energy from his coach. In the narratives from the participants who expressed the connection to their head coach, there was a consistent appreciation of being visible to the head coach as a player but more so as a human being.

Assistant Coaches

Assistant coaches emerged as a consistent theme for creating the sense of belonging for Mark, Ryan, Willis, Chris, Sebastian, and John. Depending on the role of lead coach for a team, it may be hard for one person to connect to the entire team. The participants were able to share their narratives on how having an open relationship with the assistant coaches helped them navigate their college experiences. Having the ability to talk about topics outside their sport was very important as it made the participants feel that they were being seen for more than their athletic ability. Ryan provided an example where he expressed how his assistant coach for his specific position was the first coach that he felt he could talk to about anything. Ryan felt that his relationship with this assistant coach would extend far beyond his college career. Based on the responses from participants, they felt that their assistant coaches were able to connect on a personal level that allowed them to feel that they had a connection with their program.

Teammates

Teammates also emerged as a common theme for all seven participants during the interviews. All participants spoke about how their bond and brotherhood with their teammates made the process of being a Division I student-athlete bearable during tough times. All seven of the participants talked about how they lived close to their teammates, practiced with them, ate meals together, studied together, played video games together, and competed together as well. This series of interactions showed the participants that it brought them closer together. They spent large amounts of time together and were working towards a common goal of being successful in their sport, which made the experience meaningful to them. When they accomplished a huge victory or a successful season, they all reflected on how this brought them closer together.

Athletic Staff

Athletic staff emerged as a common theme as well, and all seven participants expressed athletic staff as making them feel a connection to their institution and athletic program. Four of the participants acknowledged their athletic academic advisors as having a major impact on their experience as a student-athlete. For example, John shared that even though he was pursuing a master's degree, his academic advisor not only provided support academically but also served as a listening ear to talk about his personal life. At his previous institution there was one academic advisor for all student-athletes, and now at his current institution he has four academic advisors that were designated just for the football team. Having someone to help navigate the college experience was very important to the participants, but knowing that the relationship extended further over course-related matters really made them connect with these staff members. Three of the participants mentioned the importance of their relationship with their strength and conditioning coach. These athletes said that the amount of time they spent with the strength and conditioning coach allowed them a safe space to talk about their sport and personal matters.

They all felt comfortable sharing with these strength coaches, which aided them in feeling that they belonged to the team and in adapting to the college athletic environment.

Faculty

Faculty emerged as a theme from five of the seven participants. Chris, Willis, Mark, David, and John shared how their relationship with professors made their college experience positive. They acknowledged that there were stories of faculty that did not engage or show a connection to athletes, but these five participants had a different story. Willis shared that once developed a relationship with his professors, the academic part became an easier process. His professors were not just giving him grades, but when he felt that his professors cared it increased his care factor for his academic responsibilities. There were similar stories on how five of the participants actually could serve as advocates for other student-athletes and were able to share their personal testimonies with other teammates on how they succeeded academically.

NIL as a Source of Belonging

NIL as a source of belonging was a common theme for Chris, Mark, John, Sebastian, and Ryan. For all these participants, receiving their small but needed NIL deals made them feel that they were seen, valued, and appreciated for their connection with their teams. They all mentioned that although their deals were not life changing, to know that someone was paying attention to their contributions made them feel more connected with their programs.

Sebastian's two NIL deals provided him the opportunity to have access to items that he consumed regularly, but with the NIL deal, that was money that he could use for other things now. He also went on to say that his scholarship covers meals, housing, and his tuition, but he does not have time to find additional ways to make money. The NIL deals have helped him in this situation. Chris's NIL deals also made him feel appreciated and that he made the right decision to select his institution. When asked if a

significant NIL deal would make them consider leaving their current institution, they all expressed that they would entertain the opportunity. They all provided similar caveats that they would do their research to make sure that they would be able to make educated decisions. The participants all seemed to be grounded in not chasing a NIL deal without discussing it with their support systems. All participants that expressed the appreciation of NIL deals are returning for the upcoming season with their sport.

The Transfer Portal has Little Impact on Belonging

The transfer portal emerged as a common theme for five of the participants. Of the five, four had transferred to their current institution and felt that the portal (transfer) provided them with the option to make a shift to put them in a better position where they felt a connection with their team or felt that they could contribute athletically. The other participant had not utilized the transfer portal but was appreciative because it provided him with options if there was a coaching change or his ability to play at his current institution was not possible. Ryan expressed that the transfer portal is very beneficial for freshman as they can try their institution out for the first year and if it does not work, they can look at the portal. All participants provided advice for future collegiate student-athletes to do their research before entering the portal. Similar stories were shared regarding former teammates not doing their research, entering the transfer portal, and never finding a new institution. Overall, the transfer portal was positively accepted with the understanding that there has to be emphasis placed on making an educated decision. It was identified for some who committed to their institution right out of high school as a freshman, the transfer portal added stress due to the coaches providing priority over players that had arrived a freshmen. Although this was not a common theme for the majority of the participants, it does need to be noted that the transfer portal was viewed in a negative way for selected their initial institution only to be placed behind an individual that was selected from the transfer portal.

Chapter Conclusion

David, Chris, Mark, John, Sebastian, Ryan, and Willis provided their stories on their experiences as collegiate student-athletes. They provided insight on how they felt connected or how they belonged to their institutions. All the participants had a strong connection with their personal relationships in making their decision about where they would attend college. The narratives of these participants reflected that meaningful relationships with people important to them provide a strong sense of belonging and makes the experience of being a Division I student-athlete a great experience. Their family members, assistant coaches, teammates, athletic staff, and professors play a role in them feeling connected as well. Most of the participants appreciate the additions of NIL and the transfer portal, but they are not naïve to the implications of both. They spoke on how doing research on opportunities with NIL and the transfer portal falls in the hands of each individual student-athlete. In Chapter Five, I will expand on the themes identified above.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When conducting this narrative inquiry study, the purpose was to examine the sense of belonging for student-athletes in the current environment of college athletics. The research questions for this study were: How do student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions? Do student-athletes' perceptions of the transfer portal and Name, Image, and Likeness affect their sense of belonging? The aim was to identify what influences their sense of belonging to their institution. The narrative inquiry study included current male student-athletes in revenue-generating sports in the Sun Belt Conference who attend Georgia State University, Appalachian State University, University of South Alabama, and Coastal Carolina University. Through narrative inquiry, the individual experiences of seven student-athletes were documented, and then I was able to identify common themes that emerged from these personal stories.

In the previous four chapters of this study, I presented an overview of the rationale for the study, a review of pertinent literature, the research design and methodology, and findings for this study. In this chapter, I will discuss and explain the findings in relation to literature on sense of belonging. I will also share implications for practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

There has been a major emphasis placed on the transfer portal and Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL), and the focus was to determine the influence of these additions on the sense of belonging. In this study, the major theme related to the importance of relationships with key individuals and others reflected the way student-athletes in the Sun Belt Conference feel that they are appreciated as a holistic individual. This helps student-athletes feel connected, feel that they matter, and feel that they belong.

Discussion

The discussion of findings in this study will show how the narratives of the participants are related to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, particularly the theoretical framework. Strayhorn (2019) defined sense of belonging as:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

College student-athletes are impacted by the demands of very busy schedules that consist of workouts, practice, class, competitions, and their social lives. Within the demanding schedules, these student-athletes have many factors that contribute to them feeling that they belong or that they feel connected to their athletic programs and institutions. Strayhorn (2019) wrote that the lack of belonging for college students can negatively impact success or achievement, while the presence of belonging can have a positive impact on the experience and academic success of college students. There is research on the sense of belonging for student-athletes, but there is very little research on the impact of the transfer portal and NIL and how these factors impact the sense of belonging for student-athletes. Understanding what impacts student-athletes belonging, and also if the transfer portal and NIL leads to an increased or decreased sense of belonging for student-athletes, is critical for future student-athletes trying to identify the institution for them to compete and earn a degree. This is also critical for athletic programs as they try to identify the right student-athletes to bring into their programs moving forward. By understanding how student-athletes feel connected or that they belong to their institution and athletic program, they must develop strategies to enhance the experience of student-athletes.

Interpretation of Findings

In this study, relationships along with feeling appreciated for their efforts stood out as the most important factors in belonging for the seven Sun Belt Conference participants. There were different

variations of feeling connected or that they belonged by the participants in this study. The major themes will be discussed in the sections to follow.

Relationship is the Constant in Feeling a Sense of Belonging

Those significant relationships with these student-athletes that compete in the Sun Belt Conference were with their coaches, athletic staff, faculty, and their parents. The participants all saw an increased sense of belonging when those key relationships acknowledged the importance of them as students, as athletes, and young men in general. Strayhorn's (2019) fifth element in his sense of belonging model addressed how those salient relationships could have a major impact on the belonging of college students, and the same occurred for the participants in this study. Sense of belonging is based on relationships and how the students feel that they are connected to others at their institutions (Bentrim & Henning, 2022; Strayhorn, 2019). These participants all identified as student-athletes, but at the end of the day they wanted to know that those in key positions at their institutions, those that they spent the most time with, cared for them more than just for their athletic ability.

There are bonds and connections created among teammates as a result of them working towards common goals together, practicing and competing with each other (Clopton & Finch, 2010). The ability to have good relationships with team members is so important when feeling connected with an athletic program and institution. In Strayhorn's (2019) model, love and belongingness shows where individuals feel that they are cared about, supported, they matter, and they have friends. This feeling of *belonging as a team* led to positive experiences for the participants in this study which increased their sense of belonging. Meaningful relationships with teammates will boost and increase the connection and belonging among those student-athletes (Cooper & Newton, 2021).

The importance of developing meaningful relationships in this study was not solely the responsibility of the head coach, but these seven student-athletes from the Sun Belt Conference wanted

more. The relationships for the participants in this study were sought from various spaces on their campuses. It is expected that student-athletes would want a personal relationship with their coaches, but it was discovered by this group of participants that they wanted and needed more. As stated earlier, Strayhorn (2019) expressed that “sense of belonging changes with situation, circumstances, and time” (p. 57). Where student-athletes may identify more with their sport initially, a shift can take place where they find an identity within the academic area of study as well. The relationship with faculty members cannot be forgotten or underestimated, as these participants in this study spoke highly of meaningful relationships with faculty. The literature supports the number of participants who expressed the importance of faculty engagement when feeling connected or that they belonged to their institution. Previous research shows that student-athletes’ connection with their faculty and other individuals on their college campuses has a great deal to do with their sense of belonging (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Felton & Lambert, 2020; Huml et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). This is key because developing belonging is not just the responsibility of the coaches and athletic staff members; the participants that compete in the Sun Belt Conference also felt strongly about relationships with their faculty and how that improves their belonging. Nunn (2021) described that academic belonging is an important part of students making a connection with their institution, and this study confirms that for these participants.

The study also identified a connection with the athletic staff who went beyond their listed job duties but ultimately showed compassion for the holistic student, which aided in making the participants feel that they belonged. The relationships with the athletic staff members mentioned played a major part in these student-athletes feeling they mattered and that they belonged. Strayhorn (2019) shared in this particular element that sense of belonging is not about just being present but about feeling accepted and connecting with your surroundings while being your own true self. This study further proves the importance of relationships with key individuals outside the coaching staff.

Finally, with relationships, the family of the student-athletes in this study proved to be important in their college process. Clandinin's (2023) research respects those personal and lived experiences with family and the impact that family has on individuals. While helping with the decision-making process of where they will attend, family members also create a level of comfort for these Sun Belt participants by being able to see them compete in their sport. With sense of belong being a basic human need (Strayhorn, 2019), the families of these participants were likely the first connection with a group. Even though student-athletes are young adults, the importance of family cannot be dismissed because there is still significance in maintaining those relationships. The ways sense of belonging is described in this study by participants, the element of Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging model, basic human need and driving human behavior, and Nunn's (2021) three elements of belonging, can be identified in these narratives. The results of this study are aligned with literature in that relationships are key to feeling that one belongs and feels connected to their institution. Relationships are primary to student-athletes and impact the decisions of what they are going to do.

Feeling Appreciated is Critical

While there is literature on the sense of belonging for college students and student-athletes, there is limited research on the impact of NIL on student-athletes' sense of belonging. The research that exists on NIL focuses on student-athletes' comfort level with the concept and also how this new system has tilted the playing field of college sports (Fullerton et al., 2023). Five participants in this study reported that they benefited from NIL, which made them feel appreciated and that they belonged to their institutions within the Sun Belt Conference. These five participants all compete in the Sun Belt Conference which is considered a Group of Five athletic conference. The participants in this study mentioned that they have been fortunate enough to land small NIL deals, which made them feel that they were appreciated. On this level in the Sun Belt Conference, the participants were not chasing the large

NIL deals like other student-athletes in the Power Five athletic conferences. The Power Five are athletic environments or institutions that tend to get the most publicity and mega media deals, and typically overshadow the Group of Five institutions athletically and financially. However, student-athletes at the Group of Five institutions think highly of their athletic experience as well. Even though the NIL deals are not as large as some individuals on the Power Five level, the student-athletes in this study proved that these deals are important to them. Sense of belonging has to be a continuous feeling (Strayhorn, 2019), and NIL is a way for student-athletes in the Sun Belt conference to feel that they matter, and they belong. The participants in this study were aware of their athletic ability and the slim chances to play their sport professionally. They were also mindful that they enjoyed being able to play the sport that they love at the college level. A small deal with a local sandwich shop that allows a student-athlete to get two free sandwiches makes that connection and sense of belonging much stronger for these student-athletes. The participants for this study enjoy playing their sport, they value meaningful relationships, and if they get a small NIL deal, that makes their experience better.

The Transfer Portal is Not About Belonging

This study proved that the transfer portal is not connected to belonging but does provide an avenue for student-athletes to potentially transfer if their experience is not going well. Strayhorn (2019) did preface that individuals working in higher education have to be mindful that a student can feel a sense of belonging at one point, but that will not ensure that same student will feel that way at a later time. Although the participants saw the transfer portal as a positive addition to college athletics, they all mentioned that student-athletes have to do their research. This could be used as a resource, but from the narratives of the participants they all recounted situations where they saw teammates enter the transfer portal and never find another institution. One participant expressed how if he ever considered entering the transfer portal, he would graduate from his current institution first to mainly finish what he started,

but then understand that him having his degree would add to his opportunities to go elsewhere. When reviewing the narratives of the participants about the transfer portal, they all felt good about having the option to transfer without having to sit out for a year before competing. With the sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2019) described how this has to be provided on a continual basis and could take a shift when there are changes for the student involved. This shift could come with a coaching change, a new recruiting class, or many other reasons. Although seen as a positive addition to college athletics, in this study, the transfer portal is not a direct reflection of belonging. The transfer portal is an avenue that can allow student-athletes to transfer to another institution in hopes of finding that belonging if they are not experiencing it at their current institution.

Implications for Practice

A sense of belonging for student-athletes is very important for their success. Strayhorn's (2019) model of sense of belonging functions to foundationally satisfy the physiological (food, water, shelter) needs of college students. As these needs are met, it creates an opportunity for those college students to become more connected with their institution, academics, and extracurricular activities. As a part of the model, belonging is the core of this study and was reflected in the relationships of family, coaches, teammates, athletic staff, and faculty. It is important for athletic administrators and coaches to understand the importance of developing lasting and meaningful relationships with the student-athletes at their institutions.

Athletic administrators consist of athletic directors, deputy athletic directors, senior women administrators, and sport supervisors. There has to be an emphasis placed on student-athlete development to ensure that athletes are prepared for life after graduation. There has to be more emphasis placed on creating an environment that cultivates belonging and mattering for student-athletes during their time on college campuses. I also conducted a non-scientific survey of six colleagues who hold athletic administrator positions at Division I institutions currently, and they all stated that they do not

administer any sense of belonging assessments for their student-athletes. This could be because it is not important to them, or they really do not want to know how their student-athletes feel about their experience at their institution. With the changing landscape of college athletics, athletic administrators across the country have to be intentional about investigating the sense of belonging for their athletes. It is ideal to assess the sense of belonging of student-athletes at least every other year to ensure that the temperature of the department is captured. Athletic administrators need to know what is on the minds of their student-athletes to aid in strategic planning and how the day-to-day operations of an athletic department can proceed moving forward. How else would a department know how their student-athletes feel about their experience if the questions about belonging were not being asked?

With the new influences of the NIL and the transfer portal, knowing how student-athletes feel about their experience is very important to forecast how to deal with those student-athletes moving forward. Athletic administrators must be mindful of the impact that NIL deals have even in the Group of Five and continue to provide avenues to allow student-athletes to receive opportunities. This does not mean that providing large NIL deals for student-athletes at the Group of Five level is necessary. A small deal with a local sandwich shop proved to be effective for the participants in this study. For student-athletes in the Sun Belt conference, those small deals aid in them having that connection with their athletic program and campus community.

Athletic administrators have to ensure that they are consciously looking for more than a coach during the hiring process. They must know if the person being hired to lead a program has the ability to develop meaningful relationships with the team members. Athletic administrators need to find athletic staff who are good at their craft, but who are good at developing relationships with student-athletes as well. The findings of this study show that relationships matter, and the relationships between coaches/athletic staff and student-athletes is the most important piece of feeling a sense of belonging

with an institution. Athletic administrators have to search for the best coaches for the sport, but also coaches who are willing to invest in student-athletes outside their sports.

The participants in this study provided insight on the importance of faculty helping them feel that they belonged. Athletic administrators and faculty have to work together to ensure that they are collectively creating opportunities for student-athletes to feel that they matter, that they are connected, and that they belong. Faculty have to be mindful that not all student-athletes are attending college just for their sport, but there are many athletes that are looking for that connection academically as well. Faculty and athletic administrators must collaborate to provide chances for student-athletes to see academics and athletics working together for the betterment of all student-athletes. This collaboration can lead to developing a stronger sense of belonging within their sport and within the classroom. Athletic administrators need to be intentional about including faculty in the recruiting process, athletic competitions, award ceremonies, and other events where student-athletes can see their faculty present to support their athletic pursuits. This is another example of providing a holistic environment for student-athletes that can lead to them feeling connected and that they belong.

In this study, all participants shared stories of the importance of having a relationship with their head coach and their assistant coaches. College coaches start building relationships during the recruiting process with student-athletes and this should continue once they (student-athletes) arrive at the institution. Coaches ensuring that they provide time for their athletes to check on their well-being is so important. The participants expressed that they want to be recognized for their athletic ability, but they also want to be acknowledged for their personal life as well. Spending time on the personal well-being of student-athletes is just as or even more important than creating an excellent game plan for the next competition. Coaches being intentional about the well-being of student-athletes can come through

scheduled individual meetings, team or position outings, or personal phone calls to check in with student-athletes.

This responsibility cannot fall solely on the head coach, but assistant coaches have to assist in being in tune with the dynamics of the team among the players. Individual and team meetings are important to ensure that expectations and accountability remain at the forefront of the program. Developing relationships that allow for open and honest conversations about challenges and opportunities to be received positively. Remember that college students can be some of the best providers of insight into the athletic program because they actually live it each day. Are there any programs provided by athletic departments that educate student-athletes on dealing with team dynamics and identifying the appropriate steps to address negative relationships? There could be systems in place that could examine the relationships of teammates and the procedures in place by coaches to ensure that there are intentional checks and balances to identify and rectify any such situations.

Coaches must continue to create avenues for student-athletes to openly express their feelings about their personal experiences as student-athletes. These avenues should strike a balance between personal, academic, and athletic experiences with an emphasis on developing open and honest conversations about expectations, actions, and behaviors. Even creating an avenue for student-athletes to discuss their thoughts about entering the transfer portal would be ideal for both the athletic program and the student-athletes. Student-athletes can now enter the transfer portal and compete immediately if they find a home at another institution. The same energy shown during the recruiting process should continue after enrollment to ensure that student-athletes feel that they are still appreciated, feel connected, and belong after arriving at their institution. Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging has to be a continuous feeling, and this is what student-athletes have to feel throughout their entire time at their institution of choice.

Athletic staff members are often the individuals with whom student-athletes develop their strongest relationships during their college careers. The participants in this study mentioned academic advisors and strength coaches as the two most significant positions outside of their coaches that had an impact on their sense of belonging. Student-athletes need to connect with athletic staff beyond their athletic ability or experiences. When conversation ventures into subjects regarding academics, future plans, family, and other personal topics, it makes the student-athlete feel that they are being wholly recognized as human beings, not just an athlete. Athletic staff can create a space where student-athletes feel they are appreciated and connected to the athletic department. Academic advisors can provide information on campus and community resources that can assist student-athletes in connecting with meaningful programs outside of athletics. These conversations can allow student-athletes to grow and find other resources or organizations that can provide an additional affiliation while in college. Strength coaches spend a great deal of time with student-athletes as well and being able to listen, exchange dialogue, and provide guidance will prove to be beneficial to the program. These relationships with staff members can enhance the overall camaraderie of the program and create a sense of being embraced by the coaching staff and athletic administration.

Implications Summary

Student-athletes are looking to find a sense of belonging at their institutions of choice. When reviewing the implications of this study, there are some key suggestions that can aid in student-athletes having a connection or a sense of belonging with their team and institution. Remembering that although they are considered young adults, student-athletes still need meaningful relationships to help them navigate their college experience. NIL, along with the transfer portal, will be a part of college athletics moving forward and athletic administrators should have strategic plans in process to help student-athletes make the proper decisions. Ensuring that coaches, athletic staff, and faculty understand their roles and how cultivating relationships enhances belonging can have a positive impact on those student-

athletes. Having realistic and honest conversations regarding these topics will provide healthy environments to ensure that student-athletes are making educated decisions about their futures.

Recommendations for Research

This study provided insight into the sense of belonging for student-athletes in the Sun Belt Conference. Future research could explore the sense of belonging for male students participating in non-revenue generating sports. Future research should also take a detailed look at female sports and how those student-athletes feel connected or that they belong, as well as their position on NIL. The Sun Belt is one of the Group of Five athletic conferences that are considered mid-major institutions. Schools within the Group of Five typically do not have lucrative television deals and have limited athletic budgets compared to Power Five institutions. Future research should take a look at the sense of belonging for student-athletes at Power Five institutions that compete in revenue generating sports. Understanding how these student-athletes feel a sense of belonging with the dynamics of relationships would prove beneficial for future student-athletes. Examining the correlation of sense of belonging and NIL deals at the Power Five level, where deals may be larger, could provide some interesting findings on whether sense of belonging exists on that level of college athletics with the lucrative NIL deals that are offered to those student-athletes. Although the transfer portal was not found to be significant for the Sun Belt participants of this study, it would be interesting to know if the transfer portal would impact the sense of belonging for student-athletes in Power Five conferences, where there are more significant NIL deals. Further research should also look at the sense of belonging for non-revenue sports and female sports at Power Five institutions in relation to sense of belonging. Identifying what impacts these students' sense of belonging would provide information for college athletics nationally to determine what exists or what is needed to make the experience of non-revenue generating and female sports more meaningful. The importance of studying sense of belonging for non-revenue generating and female

student-athletes would give an opportunity to see if their experiences are similar or different to those student-athletes that compete in sports with the most exposure such as football, men's basketball, and baseball.

With the importance of relationships with coaches and athletic staff described in this study, future research could examine the significance of coaches presenting their ability to develop meaningful relationships with their team members. Coaches are normally hired based on the wins versus losses in their sport, but rarely is there a great deal of emphasis placed on the ability of coaches to be able to develop team camaraderie and foster sense of belonging. The participants in this study all expressed a strong connection with a coach or athletic staff member that made their experience better because of the relationship. Looking at coaches who develop relationships consistently compared to those who do not could aid in identifying the difference between the two. Are athletic programs where student-athletes have a strong sense of belonging more successful than those programs where students do not? During the recruiting process coaches are very involved with student-athletes and their parents, but is this practice maintained after the student enrolls at the institution?

Future research could also do a deeper dive to determine how NIL impacts the sense of belonging for student-athletes. In this study, five participants expressed how their small NIL deals made them feel that they were appreciated and that their hard work was being noticed. Future research could dive more into NIL for non-revenue generating sports and female sports. Are those student-athletes receiving NIL deals and if so, how does that make them feel? On another level, future research could examine the impact of NIL deals on the Power Five level where there are more lucrative deals being presented to student-athletes.

While qualitative research was the best form of research for this particular study, quantitative research could provide an opportunity to engage more student-athletes. For example, if there was an

effort to conduct a study on all Sun Belt student athletes, the quantitative approach would be ideal to cover such a large group of participants. Another recommendation would look at the impact of social media. Many of the participants in this study mentioned that they are mindful of what they post on social media due to not wanting to shed a negative light on the team or athletic department. Future research could examine the impact of student-athletes and their interaction with social media.

The participants in this study all shared stories that expressed receiving support from their parents or guardians in their decision making as student-athletes. Future research should look at the impact that parents have on the decision-making process of collegiate student-athletes in regard to NIL, transfer portal, and the sense of belonging. Examining if a student-athlete coming from a two-parent household, a single parent household, foster care, adopted parents, or raised by extended family members, affect the way that they react to NIL, the transfer portal, or sense of belonging would be an area for future research.

Limitations

While this study is an important addition to the narrow research on Sun Belt student-athletes and their sense of belonging, there are some limitations to think about. A limitation of this study is that all interviews were done virtually because it was the most convenient manner to interview student-athletes from the four Sun Belt institutions. If these interviews were face-to-face, there may have been opportunities to identify significant body language or emotions that could be better identified in person. It also has to be considered that the lived experiences of these participants took place after the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the participants were either in high school or in college during the COVID-19 pandemic so how this affected how they have experienced their lives as college students is unknown.

Chapter Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify what helped student-athletes to develop a sense of belonging or connection with their institution. In this study, meaningful relationships proved to be the

most important factor impacting the sense of belonging for student-athletes in the Sun Belt Conference. NIL was significant for these participants, but they were not looking for major deals. These student-athletes felt appreciated by their small NIL deals with a local vendor in their communities. The thought of receiving a deal made them feel that they mattered and that their hard work was being recognized. It was also determined that the transfer portal does not directly impact the sense of belonging for student-athletes. The transfer portal was viewed positively as the avenue to leave an institution if things were not going well and still have the ability to compete immediately. Athletic administrators, coaches, and athletic staff members have to dig deeper than their job descriptions and take time to get to know their student-athletes. In this study, student-athletes felt that being viewed as more than just athletes help them find their connection and grow as young adults while attending college. Athletic administrators, coaches, and athletic staff have to remember that student-athletes want to know that they belong, they feel connected, and they matter to their institution and their athletics program.

College athletics is a microcosm of higher education and student affairs overall, which opens up an opportunity for a larger conversation about a sense of belonging for all students. Although there is work to be done, college athletic programs are beginning to focus on creating programs and services that can enhance a sense of belonging for their student-athletes. This work cannot be done by athletics alone; faculty, student affairs professionals, and college administrators also have to be intentional about creating spaces where students can develop relationships and meaningful connections on campus. This study showed the power of relationships for student-athletes, but these relationships should be provided for the entire student body on college campuses.

REFERENCES

- Agee, J. (2009). Developing qualitative research questions: A reflective process. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4), 431-447.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390902736512>.
- Anderman, L., & Freeman, T. (2004). Student's sense of belonging in school. In M. L. Maehr & P. R. Pintrich (Eds.), *Advances in motivation and achievement: Motivating students, improving schools: The legacy of Carol Midgley* (vol 13; pp. 27-63). Elsevier.
- Bass, J. R., Schaeperkoetter, C. C., & Bunds, K. S. (2015). *The "front porch": Examining the increasing interconnection of university and athletic department funding*. Jossey-Bass.
- Baumeister, R., & Leary, M. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>.
- Bentrim, E., & Henning, G. (Eds.). (2022). *The impact of a sense of belonging in college: Implications of student persistence, retention, and success*. Stylus.
- Berg, B., & Warner, S. (2019). Advancing college athlete development via social support. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 12, 87-113.
- Berg, B., Warner, S., Walsh, D., & Wells, J. (2021). NCAA athlete development and retention: Administrators' perspectives. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 14, 694-716.
- Boeckenstedt, J. (2022, March 22). Will your college survive the demographic cliff? National trends are interesting-but enrolling students is a local challenge. *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/will-your-college-survive-the-demographic-cliff>
- Bowman, N., & Felix, V. (2017). It's who I am: Student identity centrality and college student success. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 54(3), 235-247.
- Brazzell, J. C. (2001). A sense of belonging. *About Campus*, 5(6), 31-32.

- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 24, 237-254.
- Brown, L. (2018). The role of belonging in the success of college student-athletes. *Journal of College Athletics*, 9(2), 34-45.
- Carroll, M., & Kramer, E. (2019). NCAA Transfer Rules: The struggle for power in college athletics. *Journal of NCAA Compliance*, Sep/Oct2019, 5-12.
- Cheng, D. X. (2004). Students' sense of campus community: What it means and what to do about it. *NASPA Journal*, 41(2), 216-234.
- Clandinin, D. J. (2023). *Engaging in narrative inquiry* (2nd ed.). Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. (1998). Asking questions about telling stories. In C. A. Kridel (Ed.), *Writing educational biography: Explorations in qualitative research* (pp. 245-254). Routledge.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Clopton, A. W., & Finch, B. L. (2010). Are college students bowling alone? Examining the contribution of team identification to the social capital of college students. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 33(4), 377-402.
- Cobb, D. (2021, April 28). NCAA board of directors ratifies one-time transfer legislation allowing athletes immediate eligibility. <https://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/ncaa-board-of-directors-ratifies-one-time-transfer-legislation-allowing-athletes-immediate-eligibility/>
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.
- Cooper, J., & Newton, A. (2021). Black female college athletes' sense of belonging at a historically Black College and University (HBCU). *The Journal of Negro Education*, 90(1), 71-83.

- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J., & Baez, J. (2020). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. Sage Publications.
- Debt.org (2021, December 16). *Athletic scholarships for college students*.
<https://www.debt.org/students/athletic-scholarships/>
- De Groot, A., Weaver, A., Brown, S., & Hall, E. (2018). Social support provided to injured student-athletes. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, *11*, 168-188.
- Desthuis-Francis, L. (2021). Make new social connections on campus in “Expand your World.” *Campus Groups*. <https://blog.campusgroups.com/campusgroups/2021/8/26/expand-your-world-make-new-social-connections-on-campus>
- Eccles, J., Midgley, C. Wigfield, A. Buchanan, C., Reuman, D. Flanagan, C., & Iver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents’ experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist*, *48*(2), 90-101.
- Eicher, A., Johnson, J., & Benjamin, J. (2021). The effects of demographic and athletic variables on the retention of international student-athletes. *International Journal of Business in Sports, Tourism & Hospitality Management*, *2*(2), 71-98.
https://www.gaics.org/userdata/upload/file/JBSM2021_2-004.pdf
- Felten, P., & Lambert, L. (2020). *Relationship-rich education: How human connections drive success in college*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., & Jensen, J. M. (2007). Sense of belonging in college freshmen at the classroom and campus levels. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *75*, 203-220.

- Dick, R., Fullerton, S., McCall, M., & Wade, R. (2023). The perceived impact on the new rules regarding name, image, and likeness (NIL) in intercollegiate sports. *Association of Marketing Theory and Practice Proceedings 2023*.
- Gayles, J. (2009). The student-athlete experience. *New Directions for Institutional Research* 2009(144), 33-41.
- Gayles, J., Crandall, R., & Morin, S. (2018). Student-athletes' sense of belonging: Background characteristics, student involvement, and campus climate. *The International Journal of Sport and Society*, 9(1), 23-38. <http://doi.org/10.18848/2152-7857/CGP/v09i01/23-38>
- Glaeser, G. (2020, February 27). Retention rates vary widely among varsity teams at Gettysburg College. *The Gettysburgian*. <https://gettysburgian.com/2020/02/retention-rates-vary-widely-among-varsity-teams-at-gettysburg-college/>
- Hamrick, F. A., Evans, N. J., & Schuh, J. H. (2002). *Foundation of student affairs practice: How philosophy, theory, and research strengthen educational outcomes*. Wiley.
- Han, C., Farruggia, S., & Moss, T. (2017). Effects of academic mindsets on college students' achievement and retention. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(8), 1119-1134. <http://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0089>
- Hickman, A. & Meyer, A. (2017). Does athletic success influence persistence at higher education institutions? New evidence using panel data. *Contemporary Economic Policy*, 35(4), 658-676. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/coep.12208>
- Hoffman, M., Richmond, J., Morrow, J., & Salomone, K. (2002). Investigating sense of belonging in the first-year college students. *Journal of College Retention: Research Theory, and Practice*, 4(3), 223-56.

- Hoover, E., Lu, A., Supiano, B., & Mangan, K. (2022). *Reimagining the student experience: How college can help students connect, belong, and engage*. The Chronicle of Higher Education.
- Huml, M., Gellock, J., & Lecrom, C. (2020). College athletics and the influence of academic and athletic investment on sense of belonging. *Journal of Amateur Sport*, 6(2), 43-72.
- Jacob, S. & Ferguson, S. (2012). Writing interview protocols and conducting interviews: Tips for students new to the field of qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report 2012*, 17(6), 1-10.
<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/jacob.pdf>
- Jaurez, L. (2021). *(RE)-Describing belonging: A narrative inquiry of minoritized students and their sense of belonging while attending a Predominately White Institution during COVID-19*. (Publication No. 28841652) [Doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University]. Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Johnson, R., & Christensen, L. (2019). *Educational research. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches* (7th ed.). Sage.
- Jones, K. (2020). Balancing the demands of college athletics and academic success. *The Student Athlete*, 15(1), 12-17.
- Jones, S., & McEwen, M. (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(4), 405-414.
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2022). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues* (2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Kim, J. (2015). *Understanding narrative inquiry: The crafting and analysis of stories as research*. Sage Publications.

- Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), 26-41.
<https://doi.10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26>
- Lewis, G. (1970). The beginning of organized collegiate sport. *American Quarterly*, 22(2), 222-229.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2711645>
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Longhurst, R. (2009). Interviews: In-depth, semi-structured. *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (1st ed), 580-584.
- Love, S., & Rufer, L. (2021). Am I a student or an athlete? An examination of motivation and identity in DIII student-athletes. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 14, 67-94.
- Lu, L., Heinse, K., & Soderstrom, S. (2018). Playing multiple positions: Student-athlete's identity salience and conflict. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 11, 214-241.
- Ma, X. (2003). Sense of belonging to school: Can schools make a difference? *The Journal of Educational Research*, 96(6), 340-349.
- Mandernach, B. J. (2015). Assessment of student engagement in higher education: A synthesis of literature and assessment tools. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 12, 1-14.
- Manwell, A. (2018). *International Hispanic intercollegiate student-athletes in NCAA Division I: A qualitative exploration of culture in academic, athletic, and social experiences*. [Unpublished master's thesis]. Ball State University.
- Martin, L. J., Wilson, J., Evans, M. B., & Spink, K. S. (2015). Cliques in sport: Perceptions of intercollegiate athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, 29(1), 82-95.

- Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. Harper and Row.
- McElveen, M., & Ibele, K. (2019). Retention and academic success of first-year student-athletes and intramural sports participants. *Recreation Sports Journal*, 43(1), 5-11.
- Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2009). *Qualitative research. A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass
- Mertens, D. (2021). *Research and evaluation in educational and psychology* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Messina, F., & Messina, M. (2022). A primer on the income tax consequences of the NCAA's name, image, and likeness (NIL) earning for college athletes. *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 4(2), Article 5.
- Millea, M., Wills, R., Elder, A., & Molina, D. (2018). What matters in college student success? Determinants of college retention and graduation rates. *Education*, 138(4), 309-322.
<https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/prin/ed/2018/art00003>
- Mitchell, T. (2018, April 30). Higher education must clean out its “front porch.” *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/04/25/higher-education-must-clean-out-its-front-porch/>
- Morrison, N. (2023, May 5). Give students a sense of belonging and they are less likely to drop out, study finds. *Forbes*. www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorrison/2023/05/04/give-students-a-sense-of-belonging-and-they-are-less-likely-to-drop-out-study-finds/?sh=173de42045bb
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *Minority Serving Institutions: America's underutilized resource for strengthening the STEM workforce*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25257>

National Collegiate Athletic Association v. Alston et al. 20 U.S. 512 (2021).

https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/20pdf/20-512_gfbh.pdf

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). (2022). *Estimated probability in competing in professional athletics.*

https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/research/pro_beyond/2020RES_ProbabilityBeyondHSFigureMethod.pdf

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). (2021a). *17.1.7.1 daily and weekly hour limitations - playing season.* NCAA 2021-2022 Division I manual.

<https://web3.ncaa.org/lstdbi/reports/getReport/90008>

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). (2021b). *Facts about NCAA sports.*

https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/compliance/recruiting/NCAA_RecruitingFactSheet.pdf

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). (2021c). *Student-athletes: Get involved in the process.* <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/7/9/get-involved-in-the-process.aspx>

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Research. (2020). *Goals study: Understanding the student-athlete experience.*

https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/research/goals/2020AWRES_GOALS2020con.pdf

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). (2021d). *Our three divisions.*

https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/about/ncaa/101/NCAA101_Our3Divisions.pdf

National Collegiate Athletic Association (2022). *Our Division I members.*

<https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/5/11/our-division-i-members.aspx>

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). (2024). [Convention Governance Update. Division I council approves NIL disclosure and transparency rules.](#)

<https://www.ncaa.org/news/2024/1/10/media-center-division-i-council-approves-nil-disclosure-and-transparency-rules.aspx>

- Nguyen, T. H., & Nguyen, B. M. D. (2012). Is the “first generation student” term useful for understanding inequality? The role of intersectionality in illuminating the implications of an accepted-yet challenged-term. *Review of Research in Education, 42*, 146-176.
- Nunn, L. M. (2021). *College belonging: How first-year and first-generation students navigate campus life*. Rutgers University Press.
- O’Keefe, P. (2013). A sense of belonging: Improving student retention. *College Student Journal, 47*, 605-613.
- Hear our story (n.d.). Opendorse.com, March 27, 2024. <https://opendorse.com/about/>
- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students’ need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research, 70*(3), 323-367.
- Pedler, L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. (2021). A sense of belonging at university: Student retention, motivation, and enjoyment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 46*(3), 397-408.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844>
- Rankin, S., Merson, D., Sorgen, C., McHale, I., Loya, K., & Oseguera, L. (2011). *Student-athlete climate study (SACS) final report*. Center for Study of Higher Education.
- Reynolds, J., & Weaver, R. (2020). Social work ethics and intercollegiate student-athlete retention. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, 17*(1), 26-34.
- Rosenberg, M., & McCollough, B. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance and mental health among adolescents. *Research in Community Mental Health, 2*, 163-182.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

- Schlossberg, N. K., Lynch, A. Q., & Chickering, A. W. (1989). *Improving higher education environments for adults: Responsive programs and services from entry to departure*. Jossey-Bass.
- Slaten, C., Ferguson, J., Hughes, H., & Scalise, D. (2020). Some people treat you like an alien: Understanding the female athlete experience of belonging on campus. *The Educational Development Psychologist*, 37, 11-19. doi:10.1017/edp.2020.5
- Silverthorne, S. (2013, April 29). The Flutie effect: How athletic success boosts college applications. Forbes leadership strategy. *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hbsworkingknowledge/2013/04/29/the-flutie-effect-how-athletic-success-boosts-college-applications/?sh=4c5ce4266e96>
- Smith, J. (2019). Building community among college student-athletes. *The Athletic Director*, 23(3), 56-66
- Smith, R. A. (1990). *Sports and freedom: The rise of big-time college athletics*. Oxford University Press.
- Smith, R. A. (2010). *Pay for play: A history of big-time college athletic reform*. University of Illinois Press.
- Stahl, N., & King, J. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44(1), 26-28.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging. A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2023). Analyzing the short-term impact of a brief web-based intervention on first-year students' sense of belonging at an HBCU: A quasi-experimental study. *Innovative Higher Education*, 48, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09559-5>

Sun Belt Conference. (2023). *About the Sun Belt Conference*.

https://www.sunbeltsports.org/sports/2021/7/20/GENERAL_0720215820.aspx

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures for student attrition*. University of Chicago Press.

Toney, C. (2021). *The cost of loss: Sense of belonging and injured student-athletes* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia]. University of Georgia Digital Archive.

<https://esploro.lib.uga.edu/esploro/outputs/doctoral/THE-COST-OF-LOSS-SENSE-OF/9949375243802959>

Tumin, R. (2022, April 2). Are the super seniors the secret to NCAA tournament success? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/02/sports/ncaabasketball/super-seniors-college-basketball.html>

Warner, S. (2016). Sport and sense of community theory. In G. B. Cunningham, J. Fink, & A. Doherty (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of theory in sport management* (pp. 189-198). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.25035/jade.04.02.05>

Watt, S. K., & Moore, J. L. (2001). Who are student-athletes? *New Directions for Student Services* 2001, 93, 7-18.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Message for Academic Directors

Dear Academic Directors,

I am Reggie Simpkins, Associate Vice President of Student Success at Georgia Southern University and a current doctoral student conducting research through the University of Georgia. I am conducting a qualitative study that focuses on identifying the sense of belonging for athletes at selected institutions in the Sun Belt Conference; my study has been approved by the UGA IRB. In this study the hope is to gather information on how student-athletes develop a sense of belonging for their institution in the current college athletic landscape to help athletic departments, particularly in the Sun Belt conference. I need your assistance in sharing this information with any student athletes that meet the following criteria:

- Participants must identify and be verified as a NCAA Division I athlete.
- The participant must be a current student-athlete at one of these Sun Belt Conference institutions: Appalachian State University, Coastal Carolina University, Georgia State University, or South Alabama University.
- The participant must be a male athlete who competes in baseball, basketball, or football.
- The current student-athlete must be currently enrolled and have been enrolled for at least one year between Fall 2017 and Fall 2023.

I am looking for students who are interested in sharing their lived experiences during a 60-minute interview via Zoom. I do have systems in place to ensure that all participants remain anonymous. Please share this information (flyer is attached) with your student-athletes and allow them the opportunity to self-identify by contacting me directly at reggie@uga.edu or 912-515-0009 I am looking forward to having all identified participants by XXXXXXXX, X 2023. Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated and thank you all in advance for your help.

Reggie M. Simpkins

APPENDIX B

Sun Belt Athletic Conference Approval to Use Images

From: Reggie M Simpkins <Reggie.Simpkins@uga.edu>
Sent: Thursday, August 17, 2023 2:47 PM
To: Maura Smith <smith@sunbeltsports.org>
Subject: University of Georgia-Doctorate Research Study



IRONSCALES couldn't recognize this email as this is the first time you received an email from this sender Reggie.Simpkins@uga.edu

Maura, listed below is my request to conduct research on student-athletes in the Sun Belt Athletic Conference.

My name is Reggie Simpkins, Associate Vice President of Student Success for Retention, Progression, and Graduation at Georgia Southern University. I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education in Student Affairs Leadership program at the University of Georgia under the leadership of Dr. Laura Dean. I am conducting my research on the sense of belonging for current or recent student-athletes and what impacts it. I will be narrowing my research to athletes that are or were enrolled at a Sun Belt Athletic Conference Institution from Fall 2017 to Spring 2023. There has been research conducted on the sense of belonging for student-athletes but there is not much research on this topic since the inception of NIL, the transfer portal, the one-time transfer exception, and the additional year granted due to COVID-19. There are suggestions on why people think student-athletes are leaving their institutions, but I also want to determine what students select to remain at their Sun Belt Institutions.

I wanted to share the attached flyer with all SAAC directors and Directors of Academics at all Sun Belt Institutions, but I did want to run that by the conference office first.

-Reggie Simpkins-
912-515-6903

From: Reggie M Simpkins <Reggie.Simpkins@uga.edu>
Sent: Friday, August 18, 2023 11:15 AM
To: Maura Smith <smith@sunbeltsports.org>
Subject: Re: University of Georgia-Doctorate Research Study

Attached is the updated flyer!

From: Maura Smith <smith@sunbeltsports.org>
Sent: Friday, August 18, 2023 7:47 AM
To: Reggie M Simpkins <Reggie.Simpkins@uga.edu>
Subject: RE: University of Georgia-Doctorate Research Study

[EXTERNAL SENDER - PROCEED CAUTIOUSLY]

Hi Reggie,

The Sun Belt Conference is supportive of your efforts.

As far as the flyer, Communications has asked that you replace the medallions with the old logo with something with the new Sun Belt logo.

Otherwise, all good. Best of luck to you!

8/18/23, 11:34 PM

RE: University of Georgia-Doctorate Research Study - Reggie M Simpkins - Outlook

RE: University of Georgia-Doctorate Research Study

Maura Smith <smith@sunbeltsports.org>
 Fri 8/18/2023 11:32 AM
 To: Reggie M Simpkins <Reggie.Simpkins@uga.edu>
 [EXTERNAL SENDER - PROCEED CAUTIOUSLY]

All good – thanks!!



Maura Smith | Associate Commissioner, Governance & Compliance
 Superdome | 1500 Sugar Bowl Drive, New Orleans, LA 70112
smith@sunbeltsports.org | Cell: 804.869.4678



SUN BELT CONFERENCE | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [YouTube](#) | [LinkedIn](#)

APPENDIX C

Student-Athlete Eligibility Flyer

Student-Athletes Needed

A doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia is conducting research and looking for current or former student-athletes to share about their experience while in college.




WHO DO WE NEED?

- Current NCAA Division I student-athletes
- Have been enrolled for one or more years
- Enrolled in college between Fall 2017 and Fall 2023
- Must be a male athlete competing in baseball, basketball, or football
- Student-Athletes at Sun Belt institutions
- Complete a 45-60 minute virtual interview

WHY PARTICIPATE?

- Improve experience for current and future athletes
- Provide insight that could aid coaches and administrators
- Study has the approval of UGA's IRB

**FINANCIAL COMPENSATION
PROVIDED FOR PARTICIPATION**



SCAN ME



For More Information Contact:
Reggie Simpkins
912-515-6903
rms98322@uga.edu

APPENDIX E

Student-Athlete Consent Form

University of Georgia Consent Form

Researcher's Statement

My name is Reggie Simpkins, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Student-Affairs Leadership Program at the University of Georgia. This is a consent form outlining your participation in the study and asking for your understanding and agreement about your experience as a collegiate student-athlete. Dr. Laura Dean (University of Georgia) is my faculty advisor for this study.

Why Study Student-Athletes' Experiences?

The purpose of this study is to learn what factors contribute to or subtract from a student-athletes experience at their institutions. At the end of the study, the intention is to provide information that adds valuable insight to future student-athletes, current athletes, coaches, athletic administrators, and parents on the experiences of collegiate student-athletes. The main focus of this study is to identify your feeling of belonging as an athlete, and as a student, with the campus and the campus community. You have been invited to this study because you are current student-athlete (baseball, men's basketball, or football team) at Appalachian State University, Coastal Carolina University, Georgia State University, or University of South Alabama.

What Participants are Asked to Do

You are being asked to participate in a voluntary virtual interview that will last 40-60 minutes. At any point in this study, you can refuse to answer any questions without consequences of any kind. Once the interview is completed, I will share a transcript of your interview to ensure that all information that I have collected is accurate. You also have permission to withdraw your data from this study within two weeks of the completion of the interview.

Risks and Discomforts

Participation in this research study has little potential risk associated. Possible risks or discomforts for participation in this study could include emotional risks when discussing your experience as a collegiate student-athlete. This could include reliving past experiences that you share about your time as a student-athlete that maybe were not the best experiences. Some of those negative or difficult experiences may be uncomfortable, but you do not have to answer any questions that you prefer not to.

Key Information

- You voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- You have been notified that all information will be treated confidentially during this study and your identification will not be used in the results of this study.
- You will remain anonymous in any report related to this study: Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and institutions.
- Audio/video recording will be used in order to gather and transcribe responses from all participants. Upon completion of the research, the audio/video recording will be destroyed.
- You will be provided with the transcription of your interview to review to ensure that your responses were transcribed accurately.
- You have been notified and you agree to this interview being recorded through Zoom.

- You understand that the transcript of your interview will be retained for one year after the completion of the dissertation. This allows me, the researcher to review for degree completion purposes, and once everything is complete all transcripts will be destroyed.

Compensation

Participants will receive a \$50 gift card for their participation at the conclusion of the study. Payment will be delivered through Visa gift card within 10 business days of you reviewing the transcript and returning that document. If you do not communicate within this time period I will assume that no changes to the transcript need to take place. I will move forward with completing the study, and you will still receive the \$50 gift card.

Research Data from this Study May be Shared

Data from this study may be shared with other researchers but will be de-identified so that your identity will not be revealed. Any personal information that may link to your identity will be removed before this information is shared with any other researchers. In order to do that you will be given another name and I will not reveal the actual institution that you attend.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should contact Reggie M. Simpkins who is lead researcher and a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. I can be contacted at reggie.simpkins@uga.edu or 912-515-6903. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Georgia. If you have any complaints or questions in relation to your rights as a part of the research study, you can contact IRB at 706-542-3199 or IRB@uga.edu.

Please keep this letter for your records.

APPENDIX F

Semi Structured Interview Questions

Setting: All interviews for this study will take place by Zoom and I will select a private quiet area with a neutral wall in the background. I will be sure to arrive early enough for every session to get my space situated so that I have a bottle of water and a notebook and pen. I will have a notebook and pen just to take notes of any pertinent moments or times where there are body language indications that may not be easily captured in the recording.

Preparation: When the participant joins the Zoom session, I will introduce myself, and establish rapport by starting small talk. I will then notify the participant that I will be reading an introduction to my interview that will be consistent for all participants of the study. Once I am notified that they are ready I will begin recording, and then read the introduction to my interview.

Interview:

Good _____ (Time of Day). I do appreciate you taking the time to share your story with me today. This interview will last 40-60 minutes and this session will be recorded. Am I ok to record this session? By providing verbal consent, do you agree to discuss your experiences as a collegiate student-athlete during this session today? This is a reminder that this session will be recorded and if you need to pause or stop this interview for any reason, please notify me (Reggie Simpkins) at any time. Only I will have access to your interview recording and the transcript of your recording. The recording and transcript will be stored in a secure location. I will keep your identity confidential in my findings of this study and will use a pseudonym to identify you in my findings. I will not use names for each institution as well to further increase the anonymity of the participants. At this time, can you provide me with the false name that you would like for me to use in my when referring to your interview? _____. Also, if you mention the identity of other individuals during your interview, I will alter the names to ensure that they remain anonymous as well. Do I have permission to record and continue with this interview?

Interview Questions

To start off, can you walk me through how you decided where you would attend college? (academic and athletic identity)

-What was most important to you in your decision-making? (academic and athletic identity)

-Did anyone help you with this process?

Talk to me about how your experience has been so far as a student and an athlete? (athletic identity)

-Has your experience been what you expected? If not, how has it been different?

-What's it like to be a student here? To be an athlete here?

Tell me about your life on your campus. What does a typical day look like for you? (academic and athletic identity)

-Where do you spend most of your time when you're not in class?

-Who do you spend most of your time with?

As we move forward, we will discuss your sense of belonging while at your institution. When speaking of belonging, we will also allow the interchanging of the word connection or mattering to mean the same as belonging.

Explain how you feel connected the most to your institution? (Basic Human Need)

-If you don't feel a connection can you tell me why you feel that way?

How does your connection as a student-athlete impact the way that you act daily?

Can you explain when you feel or have felt this connection the most at your institution? (Heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, or among certain populations)

-Can you talk about when you feel or have felt the least connected at your institution?

-Can you explain if you think this feeling of belonging is needed for you to be successful? (Basic Human Need)

Tell me about your greatest experience of being a college student-athlete and how did that made you feel? (Drives Behavior)

What has it been like being able or not able to participate in other activities? What have been the benefits? If you were not able to do you feel that you missed anything?

Can you talk to me about any people specifically (you do not have to provide names) that have made you feel that connection or belonging? (Seemingly a consequence of mattering)

Tell me about anyone in particular that did not make you feel that connection or that you did not belong? (Seemingly a consequence of mattering)

As we move forward, we will discuss your experience in relation to the transfer portal and Name, Image, and Likeness. These are two new additions to college athletics dating back to 2018 and we are looking to see if or how these have impacted collegiate athletics within the Sun Belt Athletic Conference.

-Tell me how the transfer portal and NIL has impacted you as a student athlete? (Heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, or among certain populations)

-Share with me on how the transfer portal makes you feel as an athlete?

-Can you share with me if there are any circumstances that might have led you to enter the transfer portal? (Heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, or among certain populations)

-How much has your feelings about your institution impact your decision to enter (or not enter) the transfer portal and in what way(s)? (Drives Behavior)

-Share with me how NIL makes you feel as an athlete? (Drives Behavior)

-Have you been fortunate to receive any NIL deals and if so, how has that impacted you as a student-athlete?

-How has NIL impacted your feelings about your institution and your decision to remain there as a student-athlete? (Seemingly a consequence of mattering)

-Let's talk about being offered an NIL deal. Do you feel that NIL could cause you to consider leaving your current institution? Tell me why or why not.

-Is there anything else that you would like to add that may help me in understanding your experience as a student-athlete?

- Is there anything else that you would like to add that may help me in understanding how you felt connected to your institution?

Is there anything else that you would like to add that may help me in understanding how the transfer portal or NIL has affected you?

-If you could provide any advice to future collegiate athletes that could help them with developing a connection as a college student-athlete, what would that be? What about the transfer portal or NIL?

APPENDIX G

Member Checking Email

Dear _____,

I appreciate you for sharing your experiences of being a student-athlete and your sense of belonging. I have attached the transcript from your interview, and I would like for you to review this transcript and assist me with the following:

- Identify any corrections or items that may put you or your identity at risk.
- Identify any parts of your interview that may need to be amended.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at any time. If not, please send any corrections or comments by (Date)_____. If I do not receive a response by that time, I will move forward with the information that was collected from you and I will send you your \$50 VISA gift card at that time.

Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated, and please contact me if you have any additional questions.

Reggie M. Simpkins