EXPLORING DIVISION III ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENT-ATHLETE SENSE OF

BELONGING

by

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(Under the Direction of George Spencer)

ABSTRACT

Collegiate athletics are an important part of many institutions of higher education. While prior research exists that focuses on both the benefits for student-athletes who participate in athletics, such as the development of life skills and the costs of participating, such as higher stress and potential for campus isolation, the majority of research examines Division I athletics. Division III programs are academically driven, with an emphasis on balancing the dual role of both scholar and athlete. Furthermore, Asian American students make up a growing proportion of campus demographics and should be researched because of existing stereotypes that may deem Asian American students as successful without an in-depth examination of their lived experiences.

This qualitative study investigated the ways Division III Asian American student-athletes experience a sense of belonging on campus. More specifically, this study explored the way that student-athlete identity can foster belonging for racial minorities. Exploring the experiences of student-athletes from various NCAA Division III programs, the study collected and analyzed interviews. The interviews revealed that participation in collegiate athletics programs can

strengthen social support thus, fostering a sense of belonging for Asian American student-athletes.

INDEX WORDS: Asian Americans, college athletics, critical race theory, intercollegiate athletics, NCAA, sense of belonging, student-athlete, and theory of student involvement

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

With current events discussing the value of athletics on college and university campuses in the United States, there is importance in understanding the experiences of student-athletes with their sense of belonging. Sense of belonging refers to a students' perceived social support on campus and a feeling of connectedness to others on campus, such as faculty, staff, and peers (Strayhorn, 2018). Additionally, evidence exists for the importance of a sense of belonging and its link to student persistence (Freeman et al., 2007; Huml et al., 2020), which is defined as a student's continued enrollment at their respective institution (Tinto, 1987). However, there is a gap in the literature on the study of student-athlete sense of belonging, particularly of minority students, and especially those who identify as Asian American. There is importance in understanding the Asian American student-athlete experience of belonging on campus, as it is a subgroup of students who experience the model minority stereotype, which may negatively impact their overall college experience and achievement. The next paragraphs outline the stressors student-athletes encounter with their dual-identity, the relationship of having a sense of belonging with persistence, and the continued gap in the literature surrounding the research of racial minority subgroups in higher education.

Athletes often carry a high-profile status on their respective campuses, dedicating much of their time toward contributing to the success of their sport and team. Student-athletes often experience similar stressors as their non-athlete counterparts, but they have additional external pressures, such as those from athletic departments and team commitments, and internal

pressures, such as social stigma and a "win-at-all-costs" mentality (Watson, 2003). Student-athlete lives may be impacted by the additional levels of stress they carry with their identity as student-athlete. Student-athletes may perceive their experiences as distressing, given the multiple responsibilities these individuals balance. This dual identity may lead student-athletes to struggle with an identity crisis, trying to navigate athletic expectations with academic priorities. Dual identity as both a student and an athlete can be difficult to balance, especially if one identity may damage student-athlete self-esteem (Fearon et al., 2011).

As mentioned above, student-athletes also experience similar stressors as their non-athlete counterparts. Data from the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment suggests that a majority of college students are experiencing moderate or high distress from their academics, career, finances, and family (American College Health Association, 2020). Relational stress, through friends or family, can act as a major barrier for student well-being as well (Darling, McWey, Howard, & Olmstead, 2007). As the data suggests, students across the United States are facing a growing amount of stress, which can harm their well-being and academic success. These are all stressors that student-athletes are facing, on top of their sport-specific demands. Additionally, college stress may be exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. With some athletic programs canceling their seasons and post-season play, there may be new stressors that student-athletes must handle with the sudden change in their ability to participate in a large part of their campus identity. Emerging research suggests that student-athletes struggled with their identity when they were forced to stop participating in their sport due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Graupensperger et al., 2020).

Student sense of belonging can be a contributing factor to fostering student integration as they navigate the stress they may be experiencing. This in turn supports student persistence, as

students who are integrated into their campus will embrace membership into the campus community (E. Pascarella et al., 2016). For student-athletes, the level of their perceived sense of belonging can be a reflection of the level of integration to the general campus community. As a subgroup of the campus population, student-athletes may have additional challenges. Proponents of collegiate athletic programs recognize the significance of the strong bonds student-athletes create with their teammates and their coaching staff. As Astin (1999) shares in his theory of student involvement, the amount of student learning and personal development associated with an education program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of the student's involvement in the program itself. For student-athletes that spend a majority of their time involved in athletics, they will learn and develop more than those who are less engaged. However, this high level of commitment to a sport may come at a cost and cause student-athletes to sacrifice their ability to connect with peers outside of their athletic social circles (Chen et al., 2010; Shulman & Bowen, 2001).

Within the field of research on student sense of belonging, there is emerging that offers perspectives specifically geared toward the experiences of Asian American student-athletes. Broadly, Asian American students have to navigate the complexities of the model minority stereotype where Asian Americans are seen as hard-working, self-reliant, and docile compared to other racial minority groups and those characteristics are why Asian Americans are viewed as successful (S. J. Lee, 1994; Suyemoto et al., 2009; F. Wong & Halgin, 2006; P. Wong et al., 1998). Asian American students may feel the pressure to live up to the expectations of the model minority and sacrifice their well-being to achieve what others expect of them. Racial identity can impact Asian American student success, especially when paired with the model minority stereotype that continues to be prevalent. For a subgroup such as student-athletes, there is likely

a relationship between racial identity and athletic achievement, along with a relationship between racial identity and academic achievement in the context of student-athlete status. The need to achieve academically or athletically at the highest level may negatively contribute to a student-athlete's perceived sense of support, which in turn impacts sense of belonging.

Background on College Athletics

It is hard to imagine colleges and universities in the United States without intercollegiate athletics. College athletics first evolved organically from student effort, creating teams on their own and choosing to compete against other schools. Before today's most popular sports of football and basketball, there were regattas between Harvard and Yale in the 1850s (Smith, 2000). Regulation and oversight of collegiate athletics became a priority in the late 1800s and early 1900s due to sporting events losing control and resulting in injuries and even death (Smith, 2000). Eventually, the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States was formed in 1906 to protect the young men at the time from the dangers and abuses of athletic culture (Thelin, 1994). Initially, the group organized competition and eligibility rules for certain sports, and the current name of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was adopted in 1910 (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020c). The NCAA today is the largest governing body of collegiate athletics and works in tandem with colleges and universities to oversee that athletic programs are fair, sage, equitable, and integrated into the educational experience.

To address the differences in institutional type due to the rapid growth and interest in athletics, the NCAA created divisions in the 1970s. Division III athletic programs are the non-scholarship arm of the NCAA, aimed at providing a competitive athletic experience that is primarily focused on the academic achievement of student-athletes (National Collegiate Athletic

Association, 2018). Most of the research about collegiate athletics revolves around Division I and Division II institutions, which are programs that offer financial aid for student-athlete participation. For this study, Division I and II programs will be referred to as scholarship programs, but it is important to note that not all student-athletes in Division I or II programs receive available scholarships.

To appreciate Division III athletic programs, it is crucial to first understand the origins of the multi-division classification of the NCAA. In 1971, the membership of the NCAA was divided into three divisions for competition and legislative purposes, with the first conference formed as the New England Small College Athletic Conference (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020c; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Division III is the largest division in the NCAA, ensuring over 195,000 student-athletes in 446 institutions can further their athletic accomplishments while also earning a degree (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.-a). It is important to note other major organizations govern collegiate athletics alongside the NCAA, such as the National Associate of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA). Individual sports that are not governed by the organizations listed above are overseen by organizations such as the Inter-Collegiate Sailing Association or USA Rugby.

Institutions that fall under the NCAA Division III category feature student-athletes who receive no financial aid related to their athletic ability. Institutions that have Division III athletic programs place heightened importance on the impact of athletics on the participants instead of on spectators. The student-athlete experience is the driving force of the program. The philosophy of Division III athletics is to provide a competitive athletics environment where student-athletes can push themselves toward academic success in an integrated environment, where student-athletes

can be leaders beyond their sport (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.-b). The theme

of the division is proportion; this division seeks to achieve the appropriate balance of academics

with opportunities to pursue athletics. This provides a holistic student experience that furthers the

academic mission of an institution of higher education. Therefore, when researching student-

athlete experiences, it is important to dedicate research specifically on Division III athletes

because they are a different population from scholarship students at Division I and II levels.

Research that has been completed for Division I and II athletes may not translate to Division III

populations; it is important to research the experiences at each level of competition to ensure

research accurately reflects all student-athlete experiences, not just some.

Statement of the Problem

Collegiate athletic programs are an integral part of higher education in the United States.

Participation in collegiate sports offers students the chance to improve skills such as leadership,

responsibility, and teamwork; these skills can play an important role in student development and

student success (Denhart et al., 2010). The unique strong bonds that form as a result of being a

student-athlete and participating in collegiate athletics can foster a greater sense of belonging

within athletics, but it may also create isolation from the rest of the campus community

(Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Since a sense of belonging has a positive relationship with

persistence, this topic is worth researching to better understand how student-athletes engage with

their athletic and academic identities.

While emerging research shows a focus on a sense of belonging with student-athlete

identity, less is known about Asian American student-athletes. Much attention has been given to

athletes such as Jeremy Lin in the professional realm of athletics, and there is growing literature

that seeks to understand the experiences of Asian American student-athletes. In the 2019-2020

academic year, just 2% of the student-athlete population is identified as Asian American, across all three NCAA divisions (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020a). This percentage goes to 3% when focusing solely on Division III. While the percentage of Asian American student-athletes is small in comparison to other racial categories, this subgroup is still worthy of research due to the nuance that the model minority stereotype brings to the student experience.

Additionally, prior research suggests that Asian American students may be negatively impacted by the model minority myth in a few ways, through internalized racialism, which also impacts mental health access. Asian American students who support the positive stereotypes of being Asian experience similar psychological effects as Asian American students who endorse the negative stereotypes (Gupta et al., 2011). Also, Asian American students who do not endorse any Asian stereotypes feel they are not meeting expectations of the model minority myth and also experience psychological distress by feeling inadequate (Gupta et al., 2011; Samura, 2016).

There are also gaps for Asian American students accessing mental health services once they are on campus. Asian American students access mental health services at a lower rate and research shows that personal stigma is highest for Asian American students, and even more for male Asian American students (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Personal stigma is separate from public stigma, in that it is measuring personal attitudes about mental health treatment, instead of focusing on attitudes about the general population. High personal stigma may inhibit help-seeking behavior, like accessing mental health services on campus. This personal stigma can be related to cultural expectations of Asian American students and there are implications for both academic performance and sense of belonging. When Asian American students struggle on campus and do not feel a sense of belonging, they may not be able to graduate on time, or at all (Anderman & Freeman, 2003; Gloria & Ho, 2003; F. Wong & Halgin, 2006).

Related to Asian American students' sense of belonging is the impact campus climate has on feeling cared for and valued on campus. Dissatisfaction with the campus climate and experiences with racial discrimination is associated with a decrease in sense of belonging in Asian American students (Museus & Chang, 2009). The more students feel they do not belong on campus, the more they will isolate themselves from the campus community (Gin, 2019; Wells & Horn, 2015). Asian American students' perception of their institution significantly predicts their level of cultural congruity, defined as a student's feelings that their Asian culture fits with the overall campus culture (Wells & Horn, 2015). This has implications for the focus of this research, as environmental context plays a major role in the perceived sense of belonging for Asian American students. With the rise in anti-Asian rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic, with heightened hate crime cases in spring 2021, campus climate may have an impact on Asian American student-athlete sense of belonging.

Purpose of Study

In light of the gaps that exist in the literature surrounding the intersection of student-athlete experiences with sense of belonging and Asian American identity, the purpose of this study is to examine the experience of NCAA Division III Asian American student-athletes and how the intersections of identities create or diminish a sense of belonging to a campus community. This study is significant because it should give a new perspective on the impact of athletics on higher education. There is little research that attempts to address the intersection of athletics with Asian American identity, beyond discussing professional sports and using one high-profile athlete as the case study. Most studies focus on the NCAA Division I or II levels of competition, so this research aims to understand the experiences of non-scholarship students at the Division III level. As stated earlier in this introduction, student-athletes who are not on sport-

related financial aid have different experiences than students who receive financial aid. Division III student-athletes have a different amount of performance stress and research has shown that divisional differences exist among student-athletes. Research has shown that student-athletes in high-profile athletic programs, like those found in Division I, may have decreased sense of belonging because student-athletes may feel isolated from the rest of campus by their status (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). By this logic, Division III student-athletes should have a stronger sense of belonging because the athletic programs are not as high-profile as Division I or II institutions. This difference in sense of belonging is worth consideration and has a result, this research is being driven by the interest to examine the Division III student-athlete experience in greater detail. Furthermore, research on minority student-athlete experience is limited and primarily focused on the experience of African American student-athletes. Because 74% of Division III student-athletes are white and 26% are non-white, there is much work to be done to better understand and meet the needs of minority athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020a). The results of this study will benefit student-athletes, coaches, athletic administration, and academic advisors, who all work together to ensure student-athlete success at institutions. This study will also provide insight into the lived experience of a specific subset of the student-athlete population in higher education that has too often been overshadowed by larger athletic programs at higher-profile institutions of higher education.

Research Question

To better understand the contributions of sense of belonging on the student-athlete experience at the NCAA Division III level and to contribute to a current gap in the literature about Asian American student-athlete experiences, this study has the following research question:

1) How do Asian American NCAA Division III student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions?

Definition of Terms

To enhance clarity, the following definition of terms are used in the study:

Asian American: An American student who is of Asian descent or ancestry, including origins from East Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia (Iwamoto & Liu, 2010). For further clarity, the term Asian American includes individuals of Bangladeshi, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Lao, Malaysian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese descent (Museus & Maramba, 2010). It is important to understand the distinction between using Asian American and Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI). AAPI includes individuals with origins in East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Hawaii, Samoa, Guam, Fiji, Tonga, or the Marshall Islands. Combining Asian Americans with Pacific Islanders may eclipse the struggles that Pacific Islanders experience. For the purposes of this research, Asian American will be used, as this is the research population, with the recommendation that the umbrella term of AAPI is not used without deep reflection on what the term means, the power it gives to some subgroups, and the invisibility others experience.

Division I, II, III: The organization of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's member institutions into different divisions with division-specific regulations (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020c).

Involvement: The amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to their academic experience (Astin, 1999).

Persistence: A student's continued enrollment at their respective institution (Tinto, 1987).

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 or others on campus (Strayhorn, 2012).

Student-athlete: A student who participates in collegiate athletics while enrolled at an institution of higher education (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020a).

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This chapter highlights research related to the Asian American student experience, sense of belonging and student-athlete experience. The literature review will first highlight Asian American student experiences to shed light on findings from emergent research. Next, a review of current findings relating to student-athlete experience by race, gender, and divisional status (Division I vs. II vs. III) is included. Finally, the broad, major findings in studies of student sense of belonging, including discussions of campus influences will be included. The review will converge to address gaps in the literature.

Asian American Student Experience

Despite the growing presence of Asian American students on college campuses in the United States, there has been relatively fewer research on Asian American student experiences (Museus & Chang, 2009; Suyemoto et al., 2009). Asian Americans are a rapidly expanding population that should be emphasized in the discourse of race within higher education. The most prevalent research within the Asian American student population addresses the model minority stereotype. The model minority stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are successful minorities "who have quietly moved to the pinnacle of success in various contexts through hard work" (F. Wong & Halgin, 2006). Since Asian American students are viewed as universally successful in education, they are a population that is often overlooked as a population in need. Additionally, the model minority stereotype presents students as homogenous and monolithic, when in reality, Asian Americans are extremely diverse. The term "Asian American" itself is

comprised of over 30 different ethnicities with differing immigration histories (Iwamoto & Liu, 2010). For example, a fifth-generation Chinese American is markedly distinct from a newly immigrated Cambodian American who has different resources and values (F. Wong & Halgin, 2006). Within the group, some Asian subpopulations hold lower rates of college degrees than other racial groups in the United States and some Asian American students are undocumented, which impacts their experience completely (Dobson, 2018; Gloria & Ho, 2003; Museus & Chang, 2009). The prevailing model minority stereotype can hide the important needs of Asian American students. Scholars who study Asian American students have suggested that Asian Americans are in an awkward position where they are not considered students of color because of the model minority stereotype and are also underserved by college campuses in terms of needed support (Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989; R. Lee & Davis, 2000; Samura, 2016).

One interview from Lee's (1994) study expresses the pressure that Asian American students feel to live up to the model minority image: "When you get bad grades, people look at you really strangely because you are sort of distorting the way they see an Asian. It makes you feel really awkward if you don't fit the stereotype." Many Asian American students feel the pressure to perform well because of parental expectations, which is counter to American philosophy that it is good to explore and pursue individual academic or personal interests (Kim, P.K. et al., 2016; F. Wong & Halgin, 2006). These students believe that they have to make decisions that reflect well on their families, whether through academic pursuits like majors or through social pursuits like dating outside racial groups. The misalignment of expectations and experiences of Asian American students results in a decreased sense of belonging on campus, and in response, students may feel compelled to remake themselves or reposition themselves (Samura, 2016).

Asian American Student Sense of Belonging

Most research on sense of belonging of students of color has focused on African American and Latinx populations but some studies have examined Asian American students' sense of belonging specifically (Gin, 2019; Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989; Samura, 2016). Of the few studies that exist, one found that Asian American students do indeed face challenges in college and the common assumptions about the universal success of Asian American students acts as a barrier to achieving a sense of belonging. Specifically, Filipino Americans face cultural challenges that can pose major impediments to their adjustment to college and sense of belonging (Museus & Maramba, 2010). In Museus and Maramba's research, 143 Filipino American students completed a survey to measure their sense of belonging and stressors. Results showed greater pressure for Filipino American students to commit cultural suicide, which in turn was associated with greater difficulty in the adjustment process, which then decreased sense of belonging on campus. Filipino American students who were able to maintain more connections to their cultural heritage had greater ease in their adjustment to the cultures of their college.

Another study found that Asian American students who have strong cultural orientations can establish themselves with the college community, thus increasing their sense of belonging (R. Lee & Davis, 2000). In Lee and Davis' research, 104 participants were recruited to complete a number of surveys aimed at measuring identity, campus connectedness, and multicultural experiences. The research focused on the experiences of students at a primarily white institution of higher education and showed that for Asian American students, ethnic identity and other group orientation were correlated with campus connectedness. Students with a high bicultural orientation, identified as students with both high ethnic identity and high other-group orientation, are best able to adapt to and develop a sense of belonging on campus (R. Lee & Davis, 2000).

Student-athlete Experience

Student-athletes have a deep commitment to their sport and the athletic department. Hey form close relationships to their athletic team and athletic coaches. In relation to sense of belonging, student-athletes often prioritize athletic commitments, which then creates a strong bond with teammates and coaching staff, but this experience may fail to create a sense of belonging for a student-athlete with the rest of campus (Bell, 2009; Chen et al., 2010). Even if student-athletes report a greater preference for their sport and related activities, the activities themselves are often isolated from the rest of campus (Huml et al., 2020; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). There exists a tension for student-athletes to attempt to be fully present for both their sport and for the campus at large.

In addition to research on student-athlete sense of belonging, there is literature that explains how the type of sport, such as an individual or team sport, can also play a significant role in student-athlete experience. In one study, individual sport athletes reported feeling closer and more connected to their coaches than team sport athletes (Rhind & Yang, 2012). Since the focus of individual sports is on developing each individual athlete and team sports focus on developing team cohesion and collective performance, the coaching context may vary significantly for student-athletes, thus differences may manifest in how coaches are expected to coach. Additionally, team sport athletes are more likely to view themselves as athletes rather than students (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). In terms of sense of belonging, individual sport athletes are more likely to participate in on-campus activities and be members of non-athletic organizations in comparison to team sport athletes (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). This research shows that individual team sport athletes have a lower athletic investment, higher academic investment, and a higher sense of belonging compared to team sport athletes.

Gender also plays a role in student-athlete sense of belonging. Limited research shows that female student-athletes are more invested and committed to succeed academically compared to male student-athletes (Beron & Piquero, 2016; Rettig & Hu, 2016). A study across all three divisions within the NCAA also showed that female student-athletes feel a greater sense of belonging on campus in comparison to male counterparts (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020b). Current literature suggested a higher overall sense of belonging for female student-athletes.

Research has also shown that student-athletes have higher levels of self-esteem and social connectedness and a lower level of depression than non-athletes (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009). Armstrong and Oomen-Early (2009) compared college student-athletes with non-athletes to see if there were differences in perceived level of social connectedness, self-esteem, and depression and to see if variables of athlete status, gender, GPA, and sleep were associated with depression symptoms. College students were surveyed using multiple reviewed scales. Results of the survey show that student-athletes had higher levels of self-esteem and social connectedness and a lower level of depression than non-athletes.

Additionally, student-athletes who feel a greater sense of belonging end up with higher graduation rates than student-athletes who are isolated (Fearon, Barnard-Brak, Robinson, & Harris 2011). These findings further support academic research that has demonstrated increased educational engagement and graduation rates for student-athletes (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Hearn et al., 2018; E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Being a student-athlete can serve as a coping mechanism in difficult times because of the sense of connection or identification with others (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003). Athletic identity may play a large part in student-athlete personal development because involvement with sport enhances leadership qualities, confidence in

attaining goals, and self-reliance (Melendez, 2006). The studies above are also congruent with prior research that states leisure (sport) is a coping strategy when it is connected to companionship, escape from daily problems, or mood enhancement (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). Existing research shows that student-athletes rely on social support during times of stress, which helps reduce burnout (DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Fearon et al., 2011). One study found that a sense of belonging was more salient than burnout in its effect on the expectation to graduate (Fearon et al., 2011). The current literature surrounding social support indicates the various levels of support an athlete has through coaches, teammates, athletic trainers, doctors, community members, fans, and academic advisors, all play a role in helping student-athletes succeed.

In addition to research that has provided a better understanding of the unique experience of student-athletes, literature has shown that student-athletes also perceive other aspects of college life as stressful. Student-athletes attend colleges and universities with the same academic, emotional, and personal goals and concerns as non-athletes (Watson, 2003). One conceptual model suggests that pre-college factors such as family background, educational experiences, and individual attributes all impact student academic measures such as grade performance and intellectual development (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Student-athletes also face similar concerns as their non-athlete counterparts about vocational decisions and fear of failure, which relate to academic achievement (Etzel, 2006). When it comes to mental health, student-athletes experience depressive symptoms at similar or higher rates than non-athletes, but athletes are often hesitant to seek help from counseling and are also reluctant to use sport psychology services (Etzel, 2006; Watson, 2003).

Student-athlete Experiences by Race

Most findings from research on student-athletes of color are focused on African American student-athletes. College athletes who receive a scholarship to play for an athletic team represent a stigmatized group on campus commonly referred to as "dumb-jocks" who are characterized as less intelligent and less motivated than non-athletes (Francique, 2018; Stone et al., 2012). African American athletes represent the largest racial minority group in the NCAA and research has shown that stereotype threat exists for African American student-athletes, in that their identity as a "scholar-athlete" caused them to perform more poorly on a test of verbal reasoning compared to their white student-athlete counterparts (Stone et al., 2012). This stereotype threat could be a source of distress for African American student-athletes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Results from collective research on African American student-athletes reveal that these athletes may be underprepared social and academically, systemic racism contributes to the negative stereotypes and that they are victim to false assumptions about their academic success and educational desires (Francique, 2018; Martin et al., 2010; Stone et al., 2012).

In addition to stereotype threat, African American student-athletes experience a recurring theme of "I had to prove I'm worthy" (Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010). African American student-athletes have a compounding effect of balancing not just the student-athlete stereotype, but their identity as African American students on campus. Student-athletes indicated that non-athletes believed athletes did not belong on campus. Additionally, Harrison, Bimper Jr., Smith, and Logan (2017) argued that African American student-athletes display a heightened athletic identity than their white peers, suggesting there exists a racial component of athletic identity development. Even if elevated levels of athletic identity link to positive affect and improved athletic performance, African American student-athlete learning is immediately

narrowed to focus exclusively on the sport, which may harm the holistic experience which includes being a scholar in the classroom. (Harrison Jr. et al., 2017).

Emerging research about the mental health needs of student-athletes of color show that 78% of minority student-athletes reported a mental health need but only 11% of those athletes reported using mental health services in the past year (Ballesteros & Tran, 2020). The predictors of mental health service use were those who experienced higher levels of stress and had upperclassman standing. A limitation of this quantitative study includes the fact that the National College Health Assessment is a health-focused survey that does not account for athlete-specific factors like sport type, years of experience, or level of competition.

It has been hard to find substantial research about Latinx, Asian, or Native American student-athletes. However, some literature shows that student-athletes of color, not just African American athletes, experience higher unmet academic needs, compounded by a struggle to convince their faculty of their earnest academic desires (Person, Benson-Quaziena, & Rogers, 2001). Other research has demonstrated that African American and Latinx athletes carry a more internalized locus of control than Caucasian student-athletes (Watson, 2016). New research suggests that Latinx student-athletes face similar stressors as their African American peers when it comes to the need to prove their worthiness, as Martin et al. (2010) shared, in addition to navigating racial remarks from other students regarding immigration and sports stereotypes (Ortega, 2019). Additionally, a qualitative study focusing on the experiences of Asian American male student-athletes highlighted the difficulty of fighting Asian stereotypes of being quiet, meek, and weak (Y. Lee, 2016).

Student-athlete Experiences by Gender

When assessing student well-being through formal assessment, researchers have found that female student-athletes perform higher in the areas of friendship and love, leaning on social support at a higher rate than their male counterparts (LaFountaine, 2009). Additionally, LaFountaine (2009), found that female student-athletes scored lower on the following metrics than their male counterparts: a sense of worth, stress management, and nutrition. Picard (1999) and LaFountaine (2009) have both discovered that female student-athletes struggle with body image and nutrition. Rice, Gwyther, Santestban-Echarri, Baron, Gorczynski, Gouttebarge, Reardon, Hitchcock, Hainline, and Purcell (2019), observed that female elite athletes, identified as professional, Olympic, and collegiate, experience higher anxiety than male counterparts.

Additionally, research has shown that female student-athletes held a significantly weaker athlete identity when compared to males (Sturm, Feltz, & Gilson 2011). Male athletes could potentially view sports as a profession, therefore strengthening their identity to their sport. However, when female student-athlete identity was made salient in the classroom setting, female student-athletes performed poorly on a test of verbal ability, due to increased fatigue of trying to combat or overcompensate for negative "jock" stereotypes (Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, Boyd, & Rullan, 2009). Kimball and Freysinger (2003) discovered similar themes of gender stereotypes negatively affecting female student-athlete experience, with specific attention to toxic masculinity. Contact sports fall under the category of "masculine activity" because an athlete uses the body to physically dominate or overpower others, which is central to the construction of masculinity in the United States. Consequently, a female athlete who participates in physically aggressive sports is stereotyped as unfeminine and having masculine characteristics (Kimball &

Freysinger, 2003). These stereotypes can negatively impact self-image, self-worth, and sense of belonging on campus.

Student-athlete Experiences by Divisional Status

There are differences in the level of competition between the three Divisions. Most research on student-athletes links to Division I or II experience. The themes of self-determination and social support emerged from both qualitative studies (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003) and quantitative studies (van Raalte & Posteher, 2019).

One study showed that student-athlete identity was balanced at both Division I and Division III levels (Sturm et al., 2011). This study showed that Division I athletes did not view themselves as more athletes than a scholar, and Division III athletes did not view themselves as more scholar than an athlete. Sturn, et al, (2011) found that scholarships did not impact a student's identity as an athlete, suggesting that the level of competition does not heighten identity when rigor is increased. However, other research has shown that approximately 60% of Division I football players reported viewing themselves more frequently as athletes than students, so the research is not conclusive (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007).

Some research exists regarding identity and belonging among non-scholarship student-athletes. Watson (2016) focused on Division III non-scholarship student-athletes and explored the relationship between perceived stress, athletic identity, and locus of control. Results showed that male student-athletes reported lesser perceptions of stress and a stronger identification with the athlete role than female student-athletes. Results also showed that the more students identified with their role as an athlete, the greater the amount of perceived stress they felt. In addition, Judge, Bell, Theodore, Simon, and Bellar (2012) reported similar findings as Watson (2016), where non-scholarship male student-athletes at the Division II level reported the least

amount of emotional and physical stress. Researchers also found non-scholarship Division II female student-athletes reported the highest amount of emotional and physical stress (Judge et al., 2012).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging, in the field of higher education, refers to a "student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling 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" (Strayhorn, 2018). Sense of belonging is relational, where each member of a group benefits from the group, and the group benefits from each member. Research over the years has emphasized that sense of belonging is a term with many meanings, but ultimately all relate to the concept of belonging, community, acceptance, and affiliation (Strayhorn, 2018; Tovar & Simon, 2010). Strayhorn (2018) argues that a sense of belonging is a basic need and motive that is sufficient enough to drive human behavior. Other research supports this claim that belonging leads to various positive emotions and serves as a critical factor in individual well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Hagerty et al., 1992). Prior research also confirms the link between student degree attainment and student ability to connect with peer groups (Astin, 1999; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Some studies demonstrate that sense of belonging is associated with various positive and productive outcomes specifically within the field of education research. Sense of belonging positively influences academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; O'Keefe, 2013). Other research shows that the absence of sense of belonging often leads to a lack of engagement in basic life activities, which in turn, impacts

academic performance and delayed development (Desi & Ryan, 2000). For students to excel at institutions, they must feel a sense of belonging, and deprivation of belonging in college prevents student achievement and optimal well-being.

Research also shows that sense of belonging takes on heightened significance in certain contexts, such as in situations where individuals may feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed (Anderman & Freeman, 2003; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Experiences such as being a racial minority at a predominantly white institution may require a higher sense of belonging to overcome challenges. Research also shows that Latino students tend to report less of a sense of belonging at predominantly white institutions than their white peers (Strayhorn, 2008). Additionally, positive and frequent interactions with diverse peers predicted Latino student sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008).

Research on student social support, which is a component of sense of belonging, shows that social interactions have been considered major positive contributors to the health of individuals by reducing stress, increasing well-being, and reducing mortality (Edwards et al., 2001). In research with college students, researchers have found a relationship between social support and well-being that suggest positive relationships and/or positive interactions within a support network reduce stress (Coccia & Darling, 2016; Edwards et al., 2001; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Reifman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1990). Research has also shown the impact of less effective social support leading to lower life satisfaction among first-generation students (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Jenkins et al., 2013; E. T. Pascarella et al., 2004). Additionally, students who have a desire to nurture their relationships tend to struggle with homesickness when they leave college for the first time (Dyson & Renk, 2006). The multitude of studies on college student social interactions

suggests that how students engage with their relationships (familial, romantic, or social) can impact their well-being and their sense of belonging.

Campus Influences on Sense of Belonging

In addition to overall findings of sense of belonging, scholars have identified several campus influences that have effects on students' sense of belonging. These campus influences are recognized as: interactions with peers and faculty, co-curricular involvement, perceptions of campus racial climate, and living on campus. Each campus influence can positively or negatively impact sense of belonging for students. Student engagement is both a function of the individual effort of each student, but also institutional practices and opportunities, so it is worthy to include a review of campus influences (Kuh et al., 2005).

Interactions with peers and faculty. Positive interactions with peers and faculty members can support students' sense of belonging by making difficult environments feel more supportive. For example, research has shown that the encouragement of fellow students, faculty, and advisors promoted student integration to the campus community (Hoffman et al., 2003; Nora et al., 1996). Adjustment to college can be less difficult with the presence of supportive peers and adult influences by way of faculty and advisor interactions.

Co-curricular involvement. Co-curricular involvement, defined as participation in clubs, organizations, and sports, can support the strengthening of sense of belonging. Students who are more involved in college tend to also feel a stronger connection with others on campus who are less involved (Strayhorn, 2018). Of particular interest is the finding that involvement in campus sport-related activities was positively correlated with a sense of belonging in college (Rettig & Hu, 2016; Strayhorn, 2018; Umbach et al., 2006). In Rettig and Hu's research, data from 2,388 NCAA Division I student-athletes who completed the National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE) were analyzed. The research shows that both low-profile and high-profile student-athletes report higher scores for enriching educational experiences, which measures interactions with diverse groups, in addition to significantly higher scores for supportive campus environment, which measures the feeling of institutional support (Rettig & Hu, 2016). When psychological needs such as a sense of belonging are satisfied, an individual's perceptions and behaviors are likely to lead to optional functioning; this explains why student involvement can have a positive influence on sense of belonging. However, results from this study also show that high-profile student-athletes in sports such as football or basketball may have lower sense of belonging than low-profile student-athletes and non-athletes because of the additional pressure to perform for fans and coaches, in addition to exposure to the media.

Other research using NSSE data compares student-athlete to non-athlete experiences. Findings from an analysis of over 53,000 students show that both male and female student-athletes report their campuses provide more academic and social support to them than non-athletes (Umbach et al., 2006). Additionally, divisional differences exist, with student-athletes competing at the Division III level reporting the highest levels of both support and satisfaction of their college experience. This suggests that student-athletes are at least as engaged overall, if not more engaged in some areas, than non-athletes, which results in greater academic and social gains in college, that contribute to a greater sense of belonging.

Campus racial climate. Perceptions of campus racial climate are influenced by student interactions with others from different racial groups. As students have more experiences with diverse peers, they may have developmental shifts that then affect sense of belonging. For Latino and African American students, perceptions of a hostile campus racial climate negatively affect sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2010). On the other hand, positive racial

climates, defined through perceptions of institutional support and group interdependence, are positively related to a sense of campus community among African American, Latino, Asian American, and Multiracial students (Chavous, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007).

In addition to research about campus climate, existing bodies of literature provide insight into the experiences of students of color at colleges and universities. While all college students perceive a certain degree of stress, as indicated in the research provided earlier, racial minorities at college and universities may encounter specific stress related to their identity within a marginalized or stigmatized group (Wei et al., 2010). Race-specific stress for college students includes interethnic struggles and within-group conflicts, such as "acting White" (Smedley et al., 1993; Wei et al., 2010). Additionally, non-White students at predominantly White institutions have increased stress related to their racial identity that can cause stress in their student experience on campus (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Torres & Solberg, 2001). Further, research indicates that racial stress has a direct negative impact on college retention among Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and African Americans (Liang et al., 2004; Neblett et al., 2006; Nora, 1987). When it comes to addressing the mental health of minority students, research shows that minority stress adds incremental variance in predicting depressive symptoms, which also supports the understanding of the negative impact of minority stress on college students (Smedley et al., 1993; Wei et al., 2010). This research suggests that minority students experience additional stressors beyond general student stress that has negative implications on both their well-being and sense of belonging.

Living on campus. The literature also highlights living on campus and its contributions toward a sense of belonging for students. Students living in residence halls reported higher levels of peer support and social integration than non-resident peers (E. T. Pascarella & Terenzini,

2005). There is a positive relationship between residence hall social interaction and students' reported sense of community (Berger, 1997). Additionally, students' perception of a residence hall as socially supportive was a significant predictor for a sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2007).

Gaps in the Literature

There is a large body of research discussing student sense of belonging, and related studies for students of color. Research has established that sense of belonging is a human need and that belonging offers a shared sense of meaning that provides security or relatedness. Additionally, a sense of belonging leads to other positive outcomes such as engagement, achievement, well-being, and persistence. A smaller body of research exists that has demonstrated that students of color see campus racial climate as a factor for fostering a sense of belonging. Less research exists in the literature about Asian American sense of belonging, but prior researchers have recommended a focus on the Asian American population because of it's growth on college campuses. This gap highlights the need for research attention on Asian American students and their sense of belonging.

Not surprisingly, the same theme emerges from literature about student-athletes. While there is a small pool of literature highlighting experiences of student-athletes of color, even fewer are dedicated to Asian American student-athletes. This study aims to fill the gaps in Asian American student experience by studying the intersection of sense of belonging and student-athlete experience.

Theoretical Framework

The research will be framed through one model and two theoretical lenses: first, through Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging, and second, through Astin's (1999) student

involvement theory for higher education. A discussion of critical race theory will draw from the foundational work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and include applications within higher education from the work of Patton (2016). Each model or theory contributes to a greater understanding of how Asian American student involvement in collegiate athletics may impact student sense of belonging. The model of sense of belonging applies to student-athlete experiences because it explains the positive relationship of sense of belonging with life outcomes such as happiness and well-being, but also with academic outcomes such as engagement, persistence, and graduation. The student involvement theory for higher education applies to student-athletes by explaining how the investment of physical and psychological energy in various experiences can shape the effectiveness of any educational policy or program. Critical race theory sets the foundation for this study focused on Asian American student-athletes, as the theory outlines how higher education in the United States has been founded and established in racism and continued functioning of higher education is linked to efforts that fuel the intersections of race, property, and oppression.

Model of Sense of Belonging

The model of sense of belonging is connected to the work on the theory of sense of community first introduced by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Sense of community is defined as "a feeling that members have belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Elements of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection are all important towards cultivating community. Within membership, sense of belonging is one of the five attributes required to aid membership development.

The model of sense of belonging expands upon the above research and is helpful to explain why a sense of belonging matters for Asian American student-athletes. Seven core elements that are central to the model exist that suggest sense of belonging: is a basic human need, is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior, takes on heightened importance in certain contexts and at certain times among certain populations, is related to, and seemingly a consequence of mattering, intersects with college students' identities, engenders other positive outcomes, and must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely change as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change (Strayhorn, 2012). Fostering a sense of belonging for marginalized populations provides benefits such as positive emotions that contribute to academic achievement, persistence, and retention. Therefore, Asian American student-athletes are a relevant population to apply the model of sense of belonging because the benefits listed are not solely for the general student population, but apply to subgroups as well.

Strayhorn's (2018) model for sense of belonging also compliments the work of Museus (2014), in his Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model. As noted earlier, sense of belonging is critical for marginalized populations and can impact college success outcomes such as development, persistence, or satisfaction. Museus' model explains how cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness have direct impact in sense of belonging. This model emphasizes that campus environments play a large role in individual student experience, including sense of belonging. Museus' model can work along Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging to help explain Asian American student-athlete experience.

The model for sense of belonging draws from Maslow's hierarchy of needs that suggests all humans have needs that are organized in a hierarchy that starts from basic physiological needs and moves up toward higher needs such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow,

1954). Humans will cycle through this process of meeting needs and if a need is unsatisfied, all other needs will be viewed as non-existent or pushed aside in search of fulfillment of the unmet need (Maslow, 1954). Strayhorn offers a model that applies Maslow's hierarchy to students' sense of belonging, sharing that once the physiological needs of students are met, students can meet other goals such as cultivating a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging serves as a determinant of student behavior and should students meet the need of belonging, they will be met with positive outcomes such as involvement, happiness, achievement, or retention (Strayhorn, 2012). Conversely, if students fail to meet their need to belong, they may experience negative outcomes like frustration, unhappiness, depression, or suicidal ideation. Appendix A provides a visual representation of Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging. Note that in the model, several social spaces and contexts are included where sense of belonging may take on heightened importance: in classrooms, in residence halls, in academic settings, and on campus at large.

Within Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging, there is an insight into the specific ways that student involvement on campus can enhance a sense of belonging. Being involved on campus, through clubs, organizations, or organized sports, helps create a sense of belonging for students by connecting like-minded people and creating a sense of mattering within the campus community (Strayhorn, 2012). Of course, there are also negative effects of student involvement on sense of belonging, which highlights the importance of context when researching students' lives concerning belonging.

Given the understanding of this model of sense of belonging, it makes sense to use this model for research with Asian American student-athletes, as there are intersections of identity that these students need to address, both racially and as a subgroup within a campus population. Student ability to satisfy needs leads to positive outcomes and their inability to meet needs leads

to negative outcomes and frustration. This model suggests that Asian American student-athletes would have a high sense of belonging when they can meet this need in various social contexts.

Student Involvement Theory

To understand Astin's student involvement theory, the term involvement must be defined. Involvement is the amount of physical and psychological energy that college students devote to the academic experience (Astin, 1999). This definition is focused what students do, as opposed to what they think or how they feel. So, the more involved a student is with their college experience, the more successful a student will be. For this theory, involvement is identified as existing in both the academic and co-curricular environments, which includes collegiate athletics.

Astin's student involvement theory has five basic claims: involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects, involvement occurs along a continuum, involvement has both quantitative (ex. hours spent studying) and qualitative (ex. active studying or daydreaming when studying) features, the amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement of the program, and finally, the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that practice to increase student involvement (Astin, 1999). The last two claims are of great importance because they provide clues for higher education practitioners to design more effective educational programs and practices.

The theory of student involvement focuses less on what educators and practitioners do and more on what the student does. The theory is interested in how motivated a student is and how much time and energy a student devotes to educational programs. Instead of a focus on resources and techniques used by educators and practitioners, this theory solely focuses on the

involvement of students. Additionally, the theory of student involvement differs from other developmental theories in that student involvement theory focuses on the "how" (behavioral mechanisms) of student development as opposed to the "what" (developmental outcomes) of student development (Astin, 1999).

Astin's (1999) theory suggests that the most precious institutional resource is student time. The extent to which students can achieve their goals is a direct function of the time and effort students devote to activities designed to produce these gains. This theory also acknowledges that the time and energy of students are finite. So, educators and practitioners are competing with other forces in student's life for a part of that finite time and energy. This means a "zero-sum" game exists, in which the time and energy that a student invests in family, friends, job, and other outside activities represents a reduction in time and energy devoted to educational development (Astin, 1999). Time as the most precious resource is a concept that resonates with student-athlete research, in that dual-identity crises result in a lack of time or ability to navigate multiple priorities of multiple identities.

The theory of student involvement also offers implications for practice in higher education. For the academic realm of faculty and administrators, this theory suggests that teaching should be less on content mastery and teaching techniques and instead, focus on student motivation and how much time they are devoting to the learning process. For co-curricular personnel, Astin notes the unique position these employees have by frequently operating on a one-to-one basis with students. This theory provides a useful framework for working with students who are less engaged or having academic difficulties, by trying to help students find a path toward involvement, whether through taking different courses, joining student organizations, or participating in various co-curricular activities. The connection between Astin's

theory and research on collegiate athletics is that participating in organized sports is a form of campus involvement. Campus involvement is connected to positive academic and social outcomes for students.

Critical Race Theory

In studies of educational inequity, foundational work by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) noted how race remained untheorized at the time, and that analyses of educational inequity must explicitly acknowledge the role of racism in education. There are three central propositions of critical race theory: race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States, United States society is based on property rights, and the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which social and school inequity can be understood (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This foundational work on critical race theory mainly emphasized K-12 educational contexts, where scholars and educators were challenged to raise questions, engage in conscientious dialogue, and produce research where critical race theory would serve as the framework to unsettle racelessness in education.

To address educational inequities in higher education, Patton (2016) offers three propositions to inform educational inequity at the postsecondary level and the embedded complexities of racism. First, the establishment of United States higher education is deeply rooted in racism, the vestiges of which are still acceptable. Second, the functioning of United States higher education is linked to imperialistic and capitalistic efforts that fuel the intersections of race, property, and oppression. Third, United States higher education institutions serve as venues through which formal knowledge production rooted in racism is generated.

Higher education is often touted as "the great equalizer" and affords life opportunities to those who work hard. The assumption that hard work alone is sufficient ignores the realities of

what it takes for marginalized groups to excel. Rather, higher education, from its beginnings, has been a primary force in persistent inequities, starting with Ivy League institutions and slavery (Patton, 2016). To this day, the fact that so many prominent leaders have graduated from institutions of higher education without being encouraged to examine the role of race or racism is reflective of how colleges fail in educating students to interact across differences for racial equity (Patton, 2016). Additionally, despite the growth and change in demographics of those attending higher education, it is still overwhelmingly white, in terms of physical representation, curriculum, campus policies, and campus spaces. All of these factors impact the students who enter higher education and experience learning through the lens of racism, whether they realize it or not.

So, when Asian American student-athletes may struggle with a sense of belonging, it should relate to the fact that students are learning, living, and operating within a system that is rooted in racism and whiteness. Additionally, the reproduction of racism often occurs unchecked, because those with the power to change institutions were also educated by the same institutions, meaning the everyday nature of race remains hidden and unaddressed; this is particularly heightened at the undergraduate level (Patton, 2016). In absence of changes within higher education to challenge racist foundations, stereotypes form and are promoted on campuses, which further isolate students of color. For example, Asian American students are treated as model minorities, a tactic rooted in exceptionalism, all Latinx students are presumed to be "illegal", and Native and Indigenous students are reduced to mascots and historic relics (Patton, 2016). Such devaluing on people of color in higher education contributes to a dominant narrative where students may end up feeling disenfranchised and such exclusion impacts student's sense of belonging and connection to campus.

It is important to note that the research proposed will focus on student-athlete experiences of one racial identity, but other identities like gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation, may all also play a role in the experience of sense of belonging. This intersection of identities is called intersectionality. Intersectionality is a lens through which researchers can understand the interconnected nature of race, class, gender, or other individual characteristics; intersectionality takes into account individual's overlapping identities and experiences to understand the complexity of the struggles they may face (Crenshaw, 1991).

Using the model of sense of belonging, student involvement theory, and critical race theory as the frameworks for this research, there is a solid foundation to build upon to discover the experiences of Asian American student-athletes and their sense of belonging. Operating through critical race theory ensures that this subgroup of students' voices is elevated and shared with the dominant culture in higher education. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of how each of the three models or theories influences aspects of the research question presented.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework Influence on Research Question
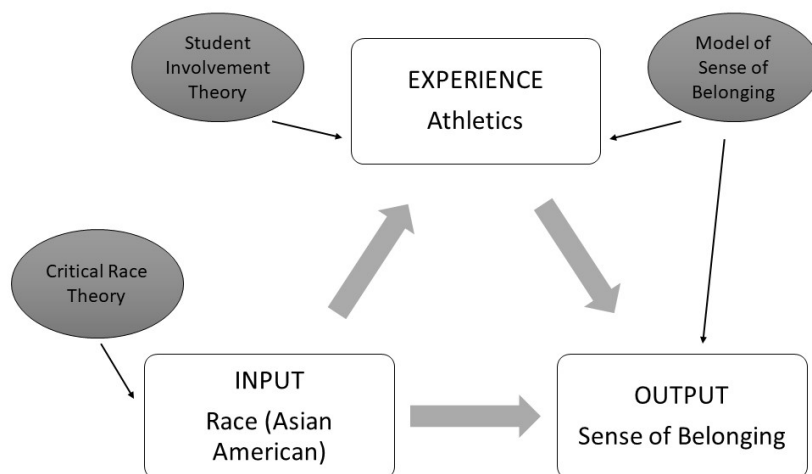
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

In this section, I outline details of my research design, including my approaches to interview and participant selection, the processes of data collection and analysis, and the limitations of the study. I conclude with a subjectivity statement, outlining my positionality in further detail and describing the investment I have in this research. The research question for this study asked: how do Asian American NCAA Division III student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions?

The chosen methodological approach is a basic qualitative research design. While this is the most general category for qualitative approaches, it is most commonly used in applied fields like education and its primary purpose is to understand how others make sense of their lives and experiences (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015). Basic qualitative research design is used by researchers to uncover the participant's experiences, the meaning a participant ascribes to the experiences, or a process (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015). This aligns nicely with the aims of this research because this study aims to better understand the specific experience of student-athletes. Additionally, this approach is undergirded by the interpretivist paradigm, which aligns with my positionality as a researcher.

Participant Selection

The sample size for this research is 10 NCAA Division III Asian American student-athletes. This decision was made based upon the recommendation that the more widely distributed a particular experience or domain of knowledge, the fewer participants are required (Guest et al., 2006). Collegiate athletics is a highly researched topic and while there are limitations on research within subsets of collegiate athletics, the broader topic at hand is well-known. Some literature recommends a sample size of 12, while others recommend greater or fewer. This research study arrived at 10 participants with themes that were generated until new insight was no longer provided. Therefore, the concept of saturation may apply to this research. Saturation comes from the idea that a researcher stops collecting data when new data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I also share the concept of "theoretical sufficiency" here, as introduced by Marshall and Rossman (2016), which recognizes that researchers can never know everything. My research continued until I reached theoretical sufficiency.

Similar to a coach selecting specific players to serve as starters before a competitive game, this research includes a careful selection of participants. The selection criteria includes Asian American students who are enrolled at any NCAA Division III institution, who are active members of a Varsity sport, and who are willing to participate in an in-depth interview on their experience as a student-athlete. Asian American identity is self-identified. Active is defined as on the roster of any given team and listed in NCAA records for eligibility. Enrolled is defined as taking a full-time student credit load at their given college or university. I recruited participants using a number of strategies. First, I relied on my network of Athletic Directors and Head Coaches to share my template email with their athletic programs on campus. The template email

outlined the purpose of my study, the participants I am seeking, and a brief overview of the

interview process. Please see Appendix B for a copy of the participant recruitment email

template. I aimed for half of my sample to be female student-athletes, but ended up with 80%

female student-athletes. Additionally, access to student-athletes directly was possible by utilizing

my network of alumni student-athletes. I asked alumni to reach out to current players, using my

template email. My last strategy was to employ snowball sampling, where I asked participants to

assist me with recruiting more participants using my email template. A combination of the three

strategies above led to my ability to interview 10 individuals.

To help me visualize the extent to which the participants I have selected contribute to the

dimensions I have identified as important, I employed a strategy of creating a matrix with

columns for sport and gender of each student-athlete and rows of participants by code names

(Galletta, 2013). The student-athletes who were interviewed participated in a range of sports,

including soccer, tennis, swimming, track, and baseball. 8 of the 10 participants were female and

two were male. Additionally, students identified as Korean American, Filipino American,

Vietnamese American, Chinese American, or mixed race. Please refer to Appendix C for a

detailed table of research participant demographics.

Institutional Selection

Participant selection informed the institutions selected in the study. From the 10

participants, there was a slight geographic range of institutions included in the research. All 10

institutions are private colleges or universities. Seven institutions were located in the southeast,

two in the midwest, and one in the northeast. The size of the institutions involved ranged from

1,800 to 7,000 students enrolled. Attempts to contact athletic directors and athletic-related

personnel at Division III institutions on the west coast did not result in any participants opting to participate, so there is geographic density on the east coast.

Data Collection

Data collection was completed by utilizing individual 60-minute, semi-structured interviews held over the Zoom platform. Zoom was used to host the interviews and audio record the interviews because of COVID-19 related limitations to holding in-person interviews. Semi-structured interviews utilize open-ended questions that allow participants to freely voice their experiences and minimize the influence of the researcher's attitudes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were employed because they allow for a systematic and iterative gathering of data that provides rich information but also supports efficient data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Successful interviews depend upon the creation of trust and the collective willingness to engage in deep discussion. Interviewing student-athletes individually allows for a safe space to share without fear of judgment from others. Student-athletes may be less inclined to share truthfully if they were in a focus group setting or a group interview setting.

An important concept to consider when conducting individual interviews is the concept of rapport. The success of qualitative studies can depend on the interpersonal skills of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Building trust, maintaining good relations, respecting norms of reciprocity, and considering ethical issues with sensitivity are all key to a successful qualitative study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Listening is often considered the most important skill in interviewing (Seidman, 2013). In order to converse openly and honestly with my participants, I was an active listener, and I did not try to fill in silences with my own voice. Additionally, I did not offer my own opinions or show off my athletic knowledge as a way to

connect with my participants. Because capturing participant voice is the primary focus of my research, I will spend time practicing being a thoughtful listener before beginning interviews to ensure that I allow maximum engagement from my participants during interviews. As a researcher, I must become comfortable with silence during interviews to avoid interrupting a participant's thought process or altering their engagement.

Each participant was asked a set of questions that I had written, but we were also able to explore tangents and other conversations as they arose. During my time with each participant, I was able to have free-flowing conversations and quite a number of stories were shared as a result of the semi-structured interviews. The interviews with the student-athletes explored daily routine as student-athletes, student-athlete identity, racial identity, student support, sense of pride in attending their institution, and favorite college memories.

Data Analysis

The data for this study consists of transcribed interviews with student-athlete participants and researcher reflection memos. I used the Zoom transcription service to generate rough drafts of each interview transcript. After each interview, the Zoom software generated an audio recording and transcript of the interview. I downloaded and saved each interview in my research files on a computer, external hard drive, and cloud service for safekeeping. Once the rough draft of each transcript was completed, I reviewed the script and edited the transcript for errors and removed any identifying information such as participant names and institutional names. To maximize the utility of data collected, I analyzed each interview while simultaneously collecting data, as opposed to waiting until all data collection has been completed for processing. The reason for concurrent analysis and collection is because researchers have shared this method allows for "illuminating" findings (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, to further protect the

identity of each participant, I created pseudonyms for each student. The participants were also given the option to request a summary of findings, should they be interested in learning about the results of the collective interviews.

Qualitative data analysis will be completed using the MAXQDA software. Qualitative research scholars have noted that in recent years, some themes of "digital storytelling" have emerged: using the Internet to gather data, using software packages that support transcription and analysis of data, and adopting Internet ethnography (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For this research, I acknowledge that I will be using a software package that will support my analysis of interview transcripts. Technology will continue to evolve as qualitative researchers continue to go into the field in the coming years and MAXQDA is the software that currently meets the needs of this research.

I captured my reflection of the analysis process via dated memos during and after each interview to document my first impressions of the responses shared. Analytic memos are often first draft self-reports that attempt to synthesize data into higher-level meanings (Miles et al., 2020). These notes were a reflection on each interview recorded and included participant expressions, comments for future interviews, possible themes, and other comments of interest from the participants, including their actions, reactions, and interactions. My intention behind taking reflective notes with each interview was that reflection will allow me to be better prepared for future interviews. Additionally, the notes will provide helpful information when I uncovered collective themes from the entire set of data. Memos also contributed to the development and revision of the coding system (Miles et al., 2020). For all the reasons above, analytic memos were a key component of the research process.

Additionally, each interview was transcribed and coded as soon as possible. The rationale for coding included using codes as a prompt or trigger for further reflection on data meaning and allowed me to condense a large amount of data into smaller, analyzable units (Miles et al., 2020). This research employed two major stages of coding; in the first cycle of coding, I used a combination of inductive and deductive coding so that I can best capture the data and give flexibility to my analysis. In the first cycle of coding, I implemented In Vivo coding, emotion coding, and provisional coding. In Vivo coding is beneficial because it uses words or phrases directly from the participant's language as the codes (Miles et al., 2020). It is important for me as a researcher to honor the participant's voice and practicing In Vivo coding gives me the ability to pull directly from a participant's words instead of adding a layer of researcher interpretation. To complement In Vivo coding, I plan to apply emotion coding to label emotions recalled by participants. Emotion coding is appropriate for studies that explore intra- and interpersonal experiences and provides insight into a participant's perspectives and worldviews (Miles et al., 2020). This coding method directly relates to my study that aims to understand a student-athletes lived experience and should supplement In Vivo coding well. Finally, provisional coding was applied where a list of codes informed by my theoretical framework and literature will help guide coding. This method is useful for studies that build upon existing research and my data contributes to existing studies on the student-athlete experience and with student sense of belonging. In the second cycle of coding, I grouped initial codes into categories via pattern coding. Pattern coding is useful because it condenses large amounts of data further into smaller units and enables researchers to find summarizers (Miles et al., 2020). Once categories were developed from pattern coding, themes emerged from multiple rounds of coding. I engaged in sub-coding to add greater detail and nuance to the more general categories. Data analysis was

iterative and I had repeated back-and-forth movement between raw data, codes, and themes to ensure the conclusions were reasonable. Appendix D lists the coding process from the beginning codes to the final codes. Below, I address the methods I employed to enhance the quality of this qualitative research.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the researcher is "the instrument" and it is not enough for researchers to merely state that they are reliable with the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To enhance credibility, I utilized peer debriefing and triangulation. Peer debriefing is the process of discussing findings with critical others to ensure that analyses are grounded in data and triangulation refers to using multiple sources of data in a study or multiple theories in the same study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, I have implemented theory triangulation and through using multiple theories, I will be able to look at this research topic from different perspectives and different lenses. These methods will increase the credibility of the research. Transferability was enhanced through the use of thick descriptions to show that findings have applicability in other contexts. Thick description refers to the detailed account of an experience or phenomenon where the researcher makes explicit the patterns of relationships and places them in context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The descriptions plan to show and tell the story of the data instead of telling it alone. Quotations and descriptions of context were used to provide thick description and invite readers to better understand the meaning behind the findings presented. Additionally, confirmability was enhanced through the use of reflexivity, which is a critical self-reflection that seeks to understand the researcher's relationship to both the study and its participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I took time during and after data collection and data

analysis to reflect on the research process via journaling, which helped me reflect and ensured that findings were shaped by the participants and not researcher bias or motivation.

Limitations

Because of the methods employed, there will likely be unexplored arenas in student-athlete sense of belonging that this research will not address. This research included 10 interviews with Asian American student-athletes at the Division III level, but there may be perspectives that were not captured. As mentioned in the literature review, the Asian American student population is diverse and heterogeneous, so findings must not generalize Asian American students as a whole, rather, findings will illuminate specific lived experiences of student-athletes. As mentioned earlier, this research did not include experiences from Pacific Islanders, so findings should not be generalized to that population either. Additionally, there may be geographical differences that are unaccounted for because the institutions of the student-athletes selected were all based in the Midwest or East Coast. Perspectives from institutions on the West Coast were not present, which could offer greater insight into the lives of Asian American student-athletes.

Subjectivity/Positionality Statement

As a student affairs administrator with direct oversight of athletics at my current institution, a private, 2-year college with a Division III athletic program, I understand that my research area of focus is related directly to my professional background. Not only is working with collegiate student-athletes part of my responsibility, but I am curious about this athletic experience at the Division III level, where students do not receive scholarships. My own educational experience was spent attending a Division I and Research I university. I know the

heavy athletic culture I experienced as an undergraduate and graduate student may not closely mirror the experiences of students across other athletic divisions. Additionally, I was a student-athlete at the secondary level, running track and cross country in high school. While I did not run in college, this experience may bias my understanding of current student-athlete experiences. This subjectivity may impact my work with participants because student-athletes may know I work in the field and may tailor their responses to what they think I want to hear, instead of how they are feeling. This would operate as a limitation for research. However, there may also be a potential benefit of being a former athlete and attending an institution that values athletics. Participants may find me more trustworthy or relatable because of my past experiences.

In addition to professional and personal experiences with student-athletes, as a woman of color, I am also particularly interested in differences in student-athlete experiences by race. I know that my identity as an Asian American woman will not prohibit me from seeking objective information from participants of other identities, but that my identity may impact how I understand findings from the data collected. A potential limitation of this subjectivity could be potential discomfort by participants who may see a difference or similarity in identity as threatening. However, there may also be benefits in researching this field with my identities. Less research exists that highlights the experiences of minority student-athletes, and even fewer on Asian American student-athletes. My presence may help some students feel more comfortable and open to sharing their authentic experiences as a student-athlete.

I operate under the interpretivist paradigm, where individuals construct their realities and reality is subjective. I believe that reality is complex and that any observation can have multiple interpretations. This may be beneficial for the research topic chosen because through dialogue, I can approach a participant's truth and understanding of their world.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Reflecting upon the theoretical frameworks that guide this research, with Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging, Astin's student involvement theory for higher education, and Ladson-Billings' work on critical race theory, the content from the participant interviews both aligned and challenged each of the three frameworks. The findings presented here are from 10 Asian American student athletes, attending Division III programs across the United States, including schools from the Southeast, Northeast, and Midwest.

This chapter tells the stories of these student-athletes and uses their experiences to reveal the intersection between student-athlete and racial identity on student sense of belonging at their respective institutions. Additionally, these interviews aim to shed light on the research question:

- How do Asian American NCAA Division III student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions?

Several themes emerged from reading the transcripts and coding each interview. The major themes are grouped into two sections, the first set of themes fall under the category of "collegiate athletic environment" and include seeing teammates as family, addressing coaches as mentors, recognition of the Division III experience as helpful, mental health concerns, and the impact of COVID-19. The second set of themes fall under the category of "experiences with racial identity" and include navigating a dual-identity on campus, challenging racial stereotypes, and

feelings of indifference. The semi-structured interviews allow student-athletes to share stories, often resulting in rich and illuminating quotes that will be shared in this chapter to highlight Asian American student-athlete experiences as they relate to understanding sense of belonging. The interviews provided informative quotes and themes that suggest that Asian American student-athletes can have a heightened sense of belonging to their institutions by engaging in collegiate athletics because it provides a close-knit environment for student-athletes to bond and form powerful relationships with each other. The findings align with both the model of sense of belonging and the student involvement theory because students who are positively engaged in a co-curricular experience may be more strongly connected to their institutions than those who are negatively engaged, or not engaged at all (Astin, 1999; Strayhorn, 2018).

Collegiate Athletic Environment

First, the focus will turn towards the collegiate athletic environment's impact on Asian American student-athlete sense of belonging. Explorations of support, the uniqueness of being Division III, mental health, and impacts of a pandemic will illuminate the participants' experience of sense of belonging. There are, at times, contradictory experiences, which supports the understanding that identity is complex and what is true for one person may be false for another. Two defining themes that align with theoretical frameworks and prior research about sense of belonging include student-athletes seeing their teammates as family members and recognizing their coaches act as life mentors. Looking back to the research question, sense of belonging for Asian American student-athletes and intimately tied to the interactions students have with their peers and with potential mentors. These relationships amplify a sense of belonging because of the closeness and connection the student-athletes feel with their teammates, coaches, and the team. Next, the benefit of being a Division III student-athlete is addressed. As

addressed earlier, student-athletes in Division III programs may have less high-pressure performance demands and fewer external stressors than Division I or II student-athletes (Sturm et al., 2011; van Raalte & Posteher, 2019). Fewer demands lead to a greater sense of belonging because Division III student-athletes feel they are better able to balance their responsibilities and also commit to activities outside their sport. Another theme of supporting mental health concerns is important and relates to creating a sense of belonging because student-athletes who feel institutional support are less likely to leave their institutions when they are struggling (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; O'Keefe, 2013). Next, context is important for any research and these interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, so a theme emerged about the impacts of COVID-19 on athletic experience. Student-athletes have both positive and negative impacts as a result of being a student-athlete during the pandemic. This theme is important and relates to the research question, because there are implications for future practice to ensure student-athletes stay connected, even when their traditional programs are impacted by unexpected global events like a pandemic. These themes emerged as a way to explain the experiences of sense of belonging across social settings and within the institution, which contribute to the research question for this study.

Teammates as Family

One of the more consistent themes revealed during participant interviews was that participation in collegiate athletics was a vehicle for making friends and that those friendships led to high levels of support both during and outside of athletic activities. The bonds that participants made with their teammates acted as a strong network of support to navigate the stressors of assimilating to college. Many participants reflected on their experience being part of

a team and compared it to being a family. Nora recognized that her friendships with her teammates were unique:

> It was really fun because I got to bond. I got to meet a whole different group of people and just rely on a whole other group of people that I didn't have before. It felt really nice to have other friends that I probably wouldn't interact with otherwise. I felt like I was a part of something big. It was great. I felt like, wow, this is a special team.

Simu also shared that his friendships with his teammates was something special:

> I think student athletes tend to cling together, especially across different sports socially, which is a big factor. I think it's a great stress reliever. … Beyond that, I think the connections and friendships you make in sports, being that it's so intense, are much stronger than you might find elsewhere, at least that's my opinion. It helped me build a community and make more connections with people easily.

Simu acknowledged the experience of being a student-athlete as "intense" but also recognized that the intensity has led to strong bonds with his teammates, which strengthens his identity as an athlete. He also acknowledges the important of mutual respect within his team:

> Especially when you get to the collegiate level, there's a certain sense of respect that's warranted by your teammates. I think having that community of student athletes, there's like a big sense of mutual respect and that's a big contributor to that sense of belonging. Yes, I think it's definitely very important that you find a community like that where you have mutual respect and can find that.

Simu attributes his positive experience at his institution to the closeness of his teammates and the mutual respect that is shared across the team, even utilizing the phrase "sense of belonging" in his response. Nora and Simu's responses illuminate the importance of social support in fostering

a sense of belonging for student-athletes, which provides an answer to the research question presented in this study, as social support is a component of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). The stronger social support a student has, the more likely a student will feel connection to their institution.

Some participants shared that upperclassmen would give advice on courses, professors, or offer advice on how to save money on books. Others shared how their teammates supported them through times of stress on campus. Gabby shared her relationship with her teammates:

I love my teammates and they became my first friends in college. I am not a very outgoing person, so it was just nice to have a group of people that I knew that I would have a connection with right away coming in as a freshman. They have just been my consistent friends, I guess I would say, throughout college. I appreciated that.

Similarly, Olivia reflected on her teammates and shared:

It's just having an automatic set of friends who obviously you don't have to be best friends with, but we ended up becoming extremely close and we have like our sport in common, which just makes it all of them more easier. Just having the older teammates, you honestly just become part of a family immediately and you have so many more resources, which makes it really easy.

Not only do teammates serve as a source of social support, but as Olivia reflected, teammates also assist academically by sharing resources and connecting younger athletes with more information. This aligns with creating a stronger sense of belonging, as students who are more connected and aware of resources tend to have a stronger tie to their institution (Johnson et al., 2007). Further in Olivia's interview, she shared more details about the level of support she receives from her friends on her team:

Basically, just when I tell them a problem, they actually listen. You can basically sense

when people are being genuine or not. You can see that they genuinely care, put their

own things aside and just sit and listen to you. They help you, they text you, they reach

out to you. They're just constantly supporting you. I feel like that's really important to be

able to know that they care for you and that they want to help you out.

Jack also shared a statement about how he felt about being part of a team, "it's like a feeling of

someone else has always got your back. When you make mistakes or the plan doesn't go as well

as planned, there's always a person that can help you." A lot of value is placed on teammates as a

constant and strong source of support for student-athletes. Additionally, participants realize the

lasting impact of these relationships, well beyond college years as well. Marie noted this in her

interview and shared:

It's like having a whole other family. I'm still very close to all of the soccer people, and it

even allowed me to connect to the guys team, so I have friends there. And soccer alumni

too and I'll get to come back to this amazing network that I'm very grateful to have.

Another interesting finding is the recognition that it can be easy to get caught up in the

team mentality, where participants might get lost in their sport and unintentionally isolate

themselves from the rest of campus. For example, Diane, a swimmer, shared the advice her

brother gave her about being part of the swim team at her institution:

I would say that I've definitely met a lot of people that I'm not sure I would have really

become close to without swimming. … I would say that because of the way that you

swim, and then after you're going to go eat after you're going to do work whether it's

intentional or not, you just do spend a lot of time with them coming to school. My older

brother who goes to a small liberal arts college was also like, "Hey, I know you're coming

in. I know you're going to be on the swim team, but do not do the 'swim team thing' where you only talk to people on the swim team." I was like, "Okay, weird. Whatever, I'll remember that," but I really did remember that.

This recognition of the benefits of having teammates but also the potential isolation from the rest of campus is important when considering sense of belonging.

Another perspective comes from Emily, a track runner, who reflected on the fact that she did not feel close to her team, even though they spent a lot of time together:

My whole first semester, I practiced with the same five girls and even all the time I spent with them, I wasn't really that close just because they were in the same background, which is different from me, and we just think differently. They were fine, but they just weren't people that I would confide in or find support in the same way that I would my friends. I think I was fortunate enough to be placed in a smaller dorm. My dorm only had 10 people on a floor, so that's where all of my really, really close friends came from.

Even though Emily admittedly spent a lot of time with her teammates, she ultimately did not become close to them because of differences in background. Later in the interview, Emily shared that her teammates were primarily white and she did not have much in common with them. This finding reflects the struggles articulated in Critical Race Theory, where institutions of higher education are rooted in traditionally white-centered practices, which marginalize other student populations and may isolate those students, which would decrease their sense of belonging (Patton, 2016). Emily did not find a connection with her teammates, nor did she feel her institution cared about her racial identity, going as far to say, "I would say [institution] doesn't really focus their attention on a sense of belonging as it pertains to race."

Coach as Mentor

In addition to referencing teammates as major sources of support, many participants reflected on the role of their coach as a mentor. Coaches spend just as much time with their players as the players spend with each other, not just when coaching, but when traveling, dining, relaxing, and more. Coaching is not just about coaching the sport, it often turns into life coaching for the student-athletes as well. Coaches end up mentoring student-athletes in the process of coaching and Anne shared the following about her coach:

> I felt really respected a lot. My coach reminded me, "You are a leader on campus. You represent our school. You represent our team and you guys should hold that to the highest regard. You should hold that to yourselves." I really felt like being on the tennis team, I'd already said, helped me manage my time, but also taught me a lot about what it's like to be working on a team and how to encourage my teammates. I think also helped me get mentally stronger and of course, helped me keep myself physically in shape.

As Anne shared, her coach not only encouraged her to be her best athletically, but also emphasized student leadership. These mentorship roles are not written into coaching job descriptions, but it is clear that coaches have a great impact on student-athlete experience. When coaches serve as mentors, they act as another source of support that increases performance, athletically and academically and these findings relate to the existing research around the benefits of strong coaching (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; LaFountaine, 2009). Additionally, Anne shared that her coach checked in on her frequently when she was doing virtual learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic forcing an environment of distance learning, "Also during this COVID year, [coach] called me several times and asked me, 'Hey, how are you doing? How's your family?' She always asks me, 'Has school been okay? How've you been?'" This

demonstrates her coach's commitment to caring for her players, even beyond athletic interactions. Gabby also reflected on her relationship with her assistant coach:

> Our coaching staff is great too. I felt very comfortable with the assistant coach. She supported me so much throughout my years here at [institution], and I just really appreciated it, and I was able to open up to her many times. It was also nice to have that too, just somebody to talk to about, not only school, but soccer as well, and about anxieties and worries. She was just very good, I just felt very comfortable with her. I appreciated that, because I feel if you bottle up feelings for too long, you just explode, which is something that I typically do.

Gabby later shared in her interview that it was helpful to have an adult to confide in and to think through stressful situations that occurred outside of her experience as a soccer player. Simu shared a similar statement regarding leaning on coaches for support, "There are definitely certain coaches that I can go to with any problems and they are very helpful. I think reaching out or finding your coaches or superiors that you can connect with would be good for feeling supported."

Additionally, the sentiment of teams acting like families extends into the coaching staff as well. Olivia shared that being part of a team positively impacted her experience as a student at her institution because of the support:

> That's also why I wanted to play a sport in college, was not just because I love the sport, which obviously I do, but also just to have that team-family feeling. Because I'm part of a big family, it's like all I've known growing up. I've always been part of a big team, having a coach become your parent as well in season. That's been a big help for me.

Olivia's reflections indicate that she views her coach in a parental role, someone who will look out for her and share words of wisdom or support. She stated that having a close team bond was critical to her enjoyment of college.

In addition to general feelings of support, some participants noted that their coach made them feel welcome because of extra attention to understanding and embracing different racial backgrounds. Nora expressed excitement when her coach took her team out to an Asian restaurant instead of a steakhouse:

> It was so fun because we got to do a lot of things that were more Asian centered. For example, my coach would take us to hibachi for dinner and that was fun because we never did that before. We went to a steak place my freshman year. That change was nice.

While most reflections were positive in manner, there were a few statements shared that demonstrate the negative impact of poor coaching. Marie shared an experience she had early on in her soccer career at her institution:

> It's just all kind of further complicated because I am mixed, so sometimes people think I am white or they think I am Asian and they don't know what I am. I don't mind when people ask what I identify as because I am like- sometimes you are curious. But my coach asked me one day in open and the delivery was weird and they weren't quite sure what identities I held and it wasn't done nicely.

Coaches have immense power to impact student-athlete experience and unfortunately, Marie did not have a good start with her coach. Later in her interview, she shared that she got over that encounter with her coach by leaning on her teammates for support and to reflect on what happened. This finding emphasizes the important of having a strong, yet positive, coaching experience. Simply being a coach is not enough to impact sense of belonging for student-

athletes; students must feel supported in an authentic way in order to feel positively about their experience as a student-athlete. This finding relates to the research question because it gives an example of a potentially harmful way that sense of belonging can be reduced with poor coaching relationships.

Division III Status

Many participants shared their experience as Division III student-athlete as enjoyable and contributed to creating social networks on campus and offering academic and life support. Jenny shared the following sentiment about being a Division III athlete:

> I would say that because I was able to play competitively for the school, but also, in a lower division, it created that space for me to have it all. Especially because I did go to a smaller school, it allowed me to do other things. I was able to make friends in all different groups.

Gabby also reflected on the positive impact being part of a Division III team:

> Although it's a DIII school, and I'm sure all the divisions are helpful in supporting schools, but my coach specifically, he is always so supportive. If there's school or if I had an exam and it was a practice night or something, he was very supportive in that sense. It is very structured and I think that's good, especially all the stuff that goes on in daily life for students, in general. It was good to just know that there's time for me to have fun because that was my little escape from school and studying. It was nice to be able to do that with being a DIII athlete.

Gabby identified coaching support that was strong in her Division III program that helped her have a balanced college experience. Both Jenny and Gabby shared that being part of a Division III program was helpful, both socially and academically. Jenny found flexibility to socialize and

Gabby found more support to balance athletics with academics. These findings align with what is predicted in the student involvement theory, where campus involvement is connected to positive outcomes, both academic and social, for students (Astin, 1999).

Both Diane and Olivia also reflected on the difference in rigor between Division I and Division III programs. Diane shared the following about why she chose to be a Division III athlete:

I'm not sure I would've been able to do a DI program, particularly given just how rigorous it is, the way that money is usually tied up in it, things like that. Because it's DIII, we have shorter seasons. Then also because my brother also goes to a smaller liberal arts college. He doesn't do a sport, but that influenced me as well.

Olivia shared similar beliefs about being a Division III athlete, "I always knew that I wanted to probably do DIII soccer, if anything, because academics comes first for me, definitely. I didn't want sports to feel like a job and to be really intense like at a DI school." Diane and Olivia both recognized that being at a college athlete at a Division III program would be a better fit. They noted that the decision was what they felt was best for the college experience they wanted to have. These findings support the concepts introduced in the student involvement theory, where there are tradeoffs that students must make in order to decide what they commit their time to (Astin, 1999). In this case, being a Division I student-athlete would have been too much of a commitment in time that would not outweigh the benefits of being a student-athlete, whereas Division III programs provide Olivia and Diane with the appropriate balance of benefits and costs, in terms of time.

Another perspective that Emily shared explored the struggles of being a Division III program in an institution that seems to dismiss athletics:

> Athletics are not [instituion's] priority given that we are a very academically oriented school. Our athletes are very much *student*-athletes. Athletics are a side thing and we are like DIII so it's not the same type of seriousness taken in here. The general student body doesn't really hear much about sports either, so it's just something that's around, but nobody hears about it really.

Emily's reflection addressed the difference between Division I and Division III programs in a way that may isolate student-athletes. She shared that student-athletes weren't highly visible, nor did she feel the institution prioritized athletics in any sense.

It is also important to note that while the student-athlete reflections were primarily positive, many student-athletes also shared that being a student-athlete at any division was harder than being a non-athlete. Jack shared:

> I believe being an athlete requires a lot of time management skills and that you have to be very organized with timing and definitely have more commitment than other students. It also takes a lot of prioritizing. You also have to sacrifice a lot of other opportunities.

Gabby also reflected on the differences between being an athlete and a non-athlete at her institution:

> I don't want to assume things or anything about non-student-athletes, but I just feel there's more fluidity, I guess, in their schedules. I'm sure some people might block off time and such, like we do, but maybe student-athletes have less fluidity in their time, than non-student-athletes, I guess.

Nora had a similar response to Gabby, when addressing the concept of time as a student-athlete:

> I was so busy. I don't think I was stressed because I liked playing tennis and I really got my mind off things, but the schedule was so busy, especially when it was fall season,

because that was girls' season. I feel like people who don't play sports have more free time, but the thing is, I got to manage my time better. I knew things were urgent all the time and I set aside time for myself too.

Jack, Gabby, and Nora, further demonstrate the student involvement theory in action, by stating that time is a precious resource to all of them and that being a student-athlete means needing to make sacrifices at times, to enjoy their co-curricular activities.

Addressing Mental Health

An important theme that came up from conversations about teammates and coaches was the ability to actively address mental health concerns as a student-athlete. Having a supportive network of teammates and coaches present in these Asian American student-athlete's lives was critical to their ultimate success at their institution. As reported earlier, Asian American students access mental health resources much less than other students (Ballesteros & Tran, 2020). Building in a network of support to encourage addressing mental health needs among Asian American student-athletes helps close this gap in mental health service access. Jenny shares her teammate's role in getting to therapy, "[Teammate] and I have been through a lot. We signed up for counseling services together. We were like, 'Okay, time to go. Let's go schedule some appointments.'" Without the support of her teammate, Jenny may have delayed accessing mental health services on her campus. Gabby shared similar sentiments about speaking to her assistant coach, "Being able to open up to her was really helpful in not only my experience, but mental health as well. When it comes to soccer and school, sometimes it got to be a lot. It was not all easy. There were times I got super stressed, and it was just nice to be able to talk to someone."

Impacts of COVID-19

By nature of conducting research primarily in the spring and summer of 2021, this meant that many participants were directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic that unfolded during both the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years. Even though this topic was not a formal research question, the theme of the impact of COVID-19 came up in some interviews. After reviewing transcripts, COVID-19 had both a positive and negative impact on student-athlete experience and sense of belonging. Olivia shared that being part of a team positively impacted her year on-campus:

> I feel very fortunate to be a student-athlete at my school. I feel like gives me a lot of opportunities and especially going into the school year with COVID. I was extremely lucky to have a set group of friends because, really, we could only hang out with a max of probably six to eight people in a group on campus. There's like six girls in my recruiting class. So we went in, we automatically became best friends. I know talking to my other friends from home or people who I became friends with later at my school, they said that it was really difficult to make friends.

Olivia's reflection on having a group of friends to rely on during an adaptive year during COVID-19 helped her enjoy her school year more. She felt more at home with her team because they were all experiencing the school year together, even with limitations.

Gabby addressed the impact of being Asian American while going to school during a pandemic that has increased hate crimes against Asians around the world:

> I don't know if this is something, just because with COVID, there's a lot of violence against Asians. There have been more conversations, I guess, about how we feel as Asians in America when we see that there are so many people who are getting beat up

and spit on and all those unfortunate things. It makes me so sad. I guess it came up a little

bit more this past year because of COVID and all this hate towards Asian Americans that

happened. I didn't really notice anything prior to that really. I did notice that this past year

has been a lot of people asking, like, "How are you doing? How do you feel about this?"

I'm like, "Well, I don't feel very good." I don't know how to answer that.

Gabby is aware of how her identity may have invited more conversations around hate crimes and

violence against Asians because of the pandemic, but also indicated that she didn't really notice

much conversation about her identity before.

The findings from the students above highlight the importance of addressing COVID-19

in any future recommendations for practice. Because the pandemic shifted to online learning,

many students were physically separated from their teams, or could only interact in a much

smaller setting. These findings show that even in different learning environments, students

fostered a sense of connect with others by shifting how they interact with each other, and by

leaning on each other during tough times, all of which supports the research surrounding the

benefits of having a sense of belonging during times of stress (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009;

Strayhorn, 2010)

Experiences with Racial Identity

Next, this section will address the themes that include experiences with racial identity.

Student-athletes have recognized the difficulty, at times, of navigating a dual-identity on campus,

with some student-athletes addressing their struggles, which may negatively impact their sense

of belonging. As the research question aims to explore how Asian American student-athletes

experience their sense of belonging, it is critical to examine both the benefits of being a student-

athlete and the potential struggles of carrying a dual-identity. Excerpts will be shared from

students who feel a sense of pride in challenging stereotypes about Asian Americans who are also student-athletes, and others share indifference about their racial identity. Important in this analysis is the understanding that Critical Race Theory may play a role in why some students feel a sense of pride, while others are indifferent or unaware of their identity playing a role in their collegiate experiences. Institutions that forego addressing the needs of all students and instead continue to operate under their primarily white lens will fail to meet the needs of students of color and in turn, sense of belonging for those students will decrease (Patton, 2016).

Dual-identity

Upon rereading transcripts and regrouping codes, a major theme about the struggles of belonging with a dual-identity emerged. Jenny shared that she has been working on self-acceptance and trying to understand what the feeling of belonging should be for her:

Feeling like I belong has always been a struggle, I would say. It's still something I'm working on. Because there's a difference between belonging to a group and believing that you belong to a group. I think as much as people have tried to tell me that I do belong, I've always had a hard time believing that that was true. I don't quite know what it means for me to belong yet, but I've gotten past the point where I don't feel like I don't belong. I know that I belong, but I just don't necessarily know how it feels to truly 100% believe that. … I'm like, "Oh, I do belong on this team," whether or not I 100% feel like it.

Jenny shared that her sessions with a therapist have helped her navigate what it means to belong. She also shared in her interview that she has spent her entire life trying to navigate multiple identities:

I was bouncing these two identities where, like, "Oh, this is how I have to act around my church friends and this is how I have to act around my school friends." It wasn't like a

change of morality, like, "Oh, I need to act more religious around my church friends," it was more of a, "I need to hide aspects of my identity that identify with the other." At school, I wouldn't bring my Korean food to school, even if it was my favorite. I wouldn't really talk about like my family or my grandparents, anything that really had to do with me being Korean. It was school and social life, that was it. Then at church, I would talk about school, but not about friends. I would just talk about like, "Oh, these are my grades. Oh, my grandparents are doing this." It was very separate, like myself, it was very like-- I don't know. The best way to describe it is like a half-blended smoothie where you can still pick apart some other fruits, but it's like getting mixed together.

Jenny's analogy about being a smoothie highlights the struggles Asian American students have when trying to express their full identity. Marie also shared that she felt out of place at times, because she wasn't sure where she belonged as a student:

I wouldn't say my identities go again each other, but at [institution] I sometimes feel out of place, especially within athletics, because of my diverse background. I feel like I don't fit people's expectations of me and I don't fit into a box.

Jenny and Marie's deep reflections about what it means to belong highlight how complex sense of belonging can be for Asian American students. Their dual-identity has caused stress in the past and brought on feelings of being "out of place". The findings support research that states that when left unchecked, uncertainties around racial identity can decrease sense of belonging for Asian American students, if they don't have the space or recourse to tackle their internal struggles (R. Lee & Davis, 2000).

Diane offered insight into a student-athlete organization dedicated to athletes of color:

[Club name] just includes any non-white student-athlete that can be a part of it. They talk about the intersections of race, specifically within college sports, given that generally, athletics is a pretty white-dominated community. I've gone to a couple meetings, but personally, sometimes I feel as though it's got a bit of a- it caters a little bit to being part of a white community. Instead of saying, "Oh, this is our community, and it's not white." It's just like being a part of a community instead of creating that community from within ourselves, which I think is interesting.

Diane reflected that she was disappointed in the student-athletes of color organization because instead of focusing on differences and talking about intersections of identities, it felt like the group's main focus was simply being "not white" as opposed to being actively proud of various student-athlete's racial identities. On the other hand, Simu offered a suggestion to increase Asian American student-athlete engagement on campus:

I think it'd be cool to have an Asian-American Athlete Association or something like that. I don't know how the logistics of that would work. I guess that would be a pretty effective way of helping freshmen and helping newcomers assimilate into this student athlete community specifically.

While Simu shared he has had an overall positive experience as an Asian American student-athlete, he also feels more structure through an organization would help student-athletes feel more welcome and supported on campus. Both Diane and Simu's comments emphasize the importance of not just creating spaces for student-athletes of color to connect with each other, but about the importance of intentional follow through for such organizations to be successful. These findings are important because the student-athlete reflections support the implications for future practice suggested by prior research; Asian American students must have spaces on

campuses to engage with each other and create meaningful shared experiences centered around racial identity (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Samura, 2016).

Jack also shared a comment about how personality can play a role in whether Asian American students can adapt and feel connected to their institutions:

I do believe confidence is a big part to feeling connected and I think a lot of Asians don't feel belonging on campus. Confidence is also part of the personality, but I feel like if you're an outgoing person, that is easier for you to feel belonging because you will reach out to people more and it would be easier to build your social connections. Maybe more ways to connect Asian students with each other would be helpful.

Jack's reflection further amplifies the importance of creating space for Asian American students to connect with each other. In all of these statements, there is a desire for social connection and meaning-making and that is a key component to feeling a strong sense of belonging (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009; DeFreese & Smith, 2014).

Another finding from Diane illustrates the role of race in athletics:

I think that with being a student athlete, I can see how some Asian athletes might choose to not go to those events from Asian affinity groups. Not choose, but not prioritize going to these events. I think part of being an athlete is like hanging out and being cool and honestly, athlete culture is pretty based in white culture. Also being part of that athlete culture means being away from other groups, and that could mean being away from Asian affinity groups in order to fit in more athletically.

This finding from Diane's interview highlights an element in Critical Race Theory, where the experiences of white individuals are privileged over people of color in many areas of life, including education (Patton, 2016). For Diane to express that she notices the dominant culture

does not engage with other cultures suggests that Asian American student-athletes may downplay one identity in order to be accepted in another part of their identity.

Additionally, Diane shares this observation from her athletic program:

Since being on the team I've never had a non-white captain, and that goes for the men's team as well. I've only been there, I guess, three years at this point but still. Because of that, like living in the community and how you interact with it, and who's leading that community, it's just hard to fully engage and feel as though you belong when people will just have very dissimilar experiences than you, and then will just not be able to understand those experiences.

Diane later shares that her other teammates don't seem to notice the lack of diversity at the team captain level, even though the team has other Asian American student-athletes on it. She shares there isn't much reflection by others, but that she cannot ignore the fact that she hasn't seen an athlete of color become a captain in her time at her institution. Diane's observation of the lack of diversity on the swimming teams aligns with the fifth tenet of Critical Race Theory, which stems from the idea of color-blindness, which is a mechanism that allows people to ignore potentially racist policies or practices that perpetuate social inequity (Patton, 2016). This finding contributes to the idea that nobody questions the policies in place to determine team captain status, or that the athletic department as a whole has not noticed a lack of representation by non-white athletes. Without critical reflection on policies, nothing will change and student-athletes of color will continue to be excluded from potential team captain roles.

By participating in Division III athletic programs, the participants were afforded the opportunity to engage with activities outside their sport, because their schedules could offer this opportunity at times. Often, student-athletes would choose to engage with cultural student

organizations, so they could connect with others based on shared life experiences. Simu shared that he was happy to be a member of a cultural group on campus, in addition to being a baseball player:

> I'm a member of the South Asian Student Association at my school and we have several events that are really fun. You get to meet a lot of people and celebrate your culture, which I think is a source of comfort for students to connect with their roots and the culture that they found themselves growing up in. I think it's really an important part of my identity as a student and yes, very happy that I'm able to engage with it in college, in addition to being an athlete.

Anne shared a similar sentiment to Simu, in terms of connecting with other students across campus by stating, "I feel like I belong not only to my tennis team, but to my church community, and to a lot of other student organizations and clubs I was a part of." She later shares that her church community is predominantly Asian American as well and that she enjoys spending time with those who have had similar childhood experiences. These findings are important because they show that given the opportunity, Asian American student-athletes will further engage in opportunities to connect with others of the same racial background, to feel connected to another group of people on campus. This contributes to feelings of mattering, which contributes to sense of belonging as well. Diane also shared that she felt Asian affinity spaces were a great way to connect with others outside of athletics:

> I feel like a great space to connect is Asian affinity or Asian groups; I think it's really fun to go and just talk about the way that you lived at home and people can totally relate. Honestly, I think relatability is just really important even though it sucks that other non-Asian people simply will not have those experiences. Being able to find people that do,

and being able to talk about it, being able to share food and culture and laughing and

having a good time without having to think about those differences is really great. I really

think like the best space to do that is with those Asian clubs or affinity groups that a lot of

schools have.

These reflections amplify the need for Asian American students to find community, both within

their athletic programs and outside, especially in spaces where culture can be shared. The

findings reflect previous research about campus racial climate, where the more interactions

students of color have with each other, the more connected they are to their campus (Chavous,

2005).

Challenging Stereotypes or Indifference

Another theme that emerged, specifically in conversations about the intersection of racial

and athletic identity, was the importance or pride in challenging stereotypes through their

personal representation as an Asian American student-athlete. Marie expressed pride in being

able to be an Asian American student-athlete, indicating there aren't many Asian American

professional athletes, let alone college athletes:

There are stereotypes out there. I mean, there aren't very many Asian athletes out there.

In my experience there are stereotypes like, "Oh you are really smart and all you do is

study." I felt like Asian Americans aren't supposed to achieve athletic accolades and, I

mean, I love that I was an Asian American student-athlete, because I kind of broke that

stereotype and I kind of showed people like we can do anything.

Marie also shared in her interview that she felt "abnormal" that she was both "a jock" and "a

nerd" because she plays soccer but is also on the pre-medicine track. Emily shared a similar

sentiment about being the sole Asian American student-athlete on her team:

I feel I'm different from the Asian demographic here because, one, the sport that I do, there's not a lot of Asian women in the sport. I just don't see a lot of myself in that, so I feel like I'm out here solo representing. I mean, even on our campus most of the Asian-Americans, or just the Asian student demographic, they are on the tennis team or don't do sports. They're in academic clubs.

Jack expressed a similar sense of pride being both Asian American and a student-athlete at his institution:

Definitely, in my culture, sports are not a big commitment growing up. Luckily, my parents are very supportive. I did get opportunities to participate in sports as a kid, but I do feel like I'm more on a minority side in terms of playing sports. It is a very unique experience and I love every second of it.

Later in Jack's interview, he shared his thoughts on professional representation of Asian athletes as well, which differed from Marie's statement, but still brought out a sense of pride:

I think we are on a good trend, and we are doing well in terms of diversity in the sports community. That has a lot to do with having a lot of professional Asian athletes in the past 10 years that have done a lot for this [Asian] community. I like feeling like I am represented in the professional athlete world.

Simu shared a similar sense of pride with being Asian and a student-athlete:

I think it's very unique. I'm very proud of it. Growing up, especially in [state] where there isn't as expansive of an Asian community. I was one of the few people in my friend circle or among my Asian friends that played a sport. It was definitely something that was pretty interesting to bring up in conversations at get togethers and stuff like that amongst the community there. Then coming into college, especially at a school like [institution],

where everyone comes from-- not everyone, but a lot of people come from many diverse backgrounds. There definitely wasn't too much of a challenge to fit into the culture of the team but it's still something that I'm proud of.

Emily recognized that her sport of track did not have much diversity, whereas other teams may stereotypically have more Asian American student-athletes. Jenny offered this statement about playing tennis, "It's another balancing act for me too because I play a traditionally Asian sport, or one that's stereotypically filled with Asian people." Olivia also shared this statement:

I don't think that much of my race as an athlete, but I think it's cool. For soccer, I know there are more Asian females and males who play the sport. I feel like it's normal in that aspect, but I do know that I think of other sports, I'm like, "There's like no Asians who play that sport." For soccer, I feel like it's pretty normal and I've just been used to it because I've played the sport my whole entire life.

Nora also shared that her team was predominantly Asian for one of the years she played tennis:

Actually, sophomore year, our entire team was almost all Asian. It was really funny and shocking at first because I was like, "Wow, I've never experienced this in my life." Then it was so fun because we got to do a lot of things that were more Asian centered. …
We had just so many commonalities. It was great. I actually really liked that team and we were so close because of our shared experiences and similar culture.

For some Asian American students, they are hyperaware of their racial identity and how that impacts their student-athlete experience. And others, upon reflection, express positive emotions about their identity.

Participants also shared that representation was not only a source of pride, but that being an Asian American student-athlete provided an opportunity to showcase or educate about their

culture with non-Asian student-athletes. Simu shared an example of when he had to explain his dietary preferences:

> For example, like as a freshman, you come in and there's opening team barbecues and stuff like that. Like for a certain event they had burgers and I can't eat burgers because I don't eat beef. That was a little awkward, but I definitely don't think it came from a bad place. I think there was just, oh, understanding my like traditions and culture and religion and stuff like that and just introducing that to them, just like I did in high school. Once the guys got to know me, they understood my dietary preferences.

Nora also reflected on how she appreciated sharing her culture with people who are different from her as well, "I think I already appreciated my identity as a Korean American and Asian American woman, but I think I appreciate it more when I meet new people." Jack also shared enjoyment in teaching other people about his culture:

> I believe my culture and my background gives me a chance to have more things to show other people. For example, when it comes to food and culture, I have something to share. Some of the stories that I have told people about growing up, they've never heard of, so it's nice to share. I like to talk about my culture, the festivals that we celebrate or the celebrations that we do.

Findings from Simu, Nora, and Jack's findings emphasize the importance of using culture as a way to connect with others, whether other people are from the same culture or not. There is value in cultural education and these student-athletes had positive experiences showcasing their culture to teammates and others who were not the same race as them. This educational process creates a sense of connection to peers, which strengthens their sense of pride as a person, but also as an athlete at an institution where cultural exchanges are encouraged.

In addition to observing a sense of pride through analysis of transcripts, there is another perspective that other participants shared, which is one of indifference on the impact of race on their identity as a student-athlete. Gabby reflected on a question about her identity as an Asian American student-athlete for awhile before sharing:

When you say, 'what does it mean to be an Asian American student-athlete', it's the same as being an athlete, I guess. I just don't really find a difference in that. Where you've got to work hard. You have to make sacrifices in your social life, your time, and you have to work well as a teammate. That's what I guess it means, but it's the same as just saying, "What does it mean to be like any other ethnicity athlete?" It's just like what it means to an athlete in general, in my personal opinion.

Gabby had not considered her racial identity to be a distinguishing characteristic of her experience as a student-athlete. Similarly, Anne reflected that there may be biases around her racial identity, but she expressed no strong feelings about it, "It's nothing bad, I've never felt [other players have] seen me, because I'm Asian American, lower in any sense but I know that because of the way that I look, possibly they could." Anne recognizes her racial identity may lead to stereotyping about her athletic ability, but has not experienced anything to distinguish her status as Asian American in a positive or negative light.

Summary

This chapter included the findings of 10 semi-structured interviews with Asian American Division III student-athletes. In summary, the main themes that emerged from participant interviews were centered around two larger concepts, one, collegiate athletic environment, and the other, experiences with racial identity. The first concept, addressing the collegiate athletic environment, identifies the ways student-athletes interpret their experiences as athletes on

campus. For many Asian American student-athletes, there is a strong sense of connection among teammates and coaching staff, that contributes to strong feelings of belonging on a team and to an institution. In addition to social connections, student-athletes reflected that their sport has helped them feel supported through times of crisis or hardship. These findings align with the model of sense of belonging, because when students meet the need for belonging, they will also be met with positive outcomes such as involvement and happiness (Strayhorn, 2012). Participants also shared the impact of being part of a team during COVID-19, with some citing feeling closer to their teammates during the pandemic and others feeling disconnected. These reflections have implications for practice as the pandemic may change the way institutions of higher education need to function in order to provide students with the appropriate support.

The second concept, experiences with racial identity, identifies the ways Asian American students see an interaction of their athletic identity with their racial identity at their respective institutions. Many students shared a sense of pride in representing their racial identity because so few Asian Americans participate in sports. Students felt like trailblazers that were paving the way for future Asian American student-athletes and enjoyed the feeling of bringing diversity to a team. Other student-athletes shared they were indifferent to the intersection of their race and athletic identities, citing they don't often think about their race in their interactions as a student-athlete.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of Asian American student-athletes in relation to their sense of belonging. Using semi-structured interviews of 10 student-athletes across Division III institutions in the United States, the study examined how student-athletes understood their sense of belonging on campus. This chapter provides a summary of the statement of the problem, and the purpose of the study. Next, this chapter presents a discussion of the findings of the study, explores implications for practice, recommends future research that will further the conversation about Asian American student-athletes, and addresses study limitations.

Summary of the Problem

Sense of belonging is important for college students because students who feel they belong to their college community often experience positive outcomes such as engagement and student development. Additionally, for students of color, isolation can occur when students are not connected with others on campus, or when they do not feel they matter to others around them. As expressed earlier, students of color face additional stressors on campus from their white counterparts. It is therefore important to research the experiences of Asian American students and understand the various ways in which participating in a college sport can contribute to their overall sense of belonging.

Emerging research exists that focuses on sense of belonging in relation to student-athlete status, but little knowledge exists about the experiences of Asian American student-athletes. This population, while seemingly small in the context of the greater NCAA student-athlete

population, is deserving of research attention because Asian American students fall victim to the model minority stereotype, where there is the belief that Asian Americans work hard and do not struggle or experience hardship like other racial groups. Unfortunately, research shows there are gaps in Asian American students accessing mental health services on college campuses and that the personal stigma is highest for Asian American students (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Therefore, research that showcases the experiences of Asian American student-athletes will provide insight into how institutions can be more supportive of this population of students and foster positive outcomes like sense of belonging, but also academic success and persistence.

Summary of Purpose of Study

To address the gaps in the literature exploring the intersection of student-athlete experience and racial identity, this study examines the experience of Asian American student-athletes at the Division III level. The study is interested in finding out how the intersections of identities create or diminish a sense of belonging to a campus community. Particular attention is given to the Division III experience because past research has shown that lower-profile programs produce a higher sense of belonging because there is less pressure to perform and more ability to engage in activities outside of sport (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007).

Again, to better understand the intersection of identities as it relates to student-athlete sense of belonging, this study asked:

1) How do Asian American NCAA Division III student-athletes experience a sense of belonging at their institutions?

To ensure the experiences of student-athletes were most appropriately captured, semi-structured interviews provided the capacity for participants to share their thoughts freely. This approach provided an opportunity to research the complex experiences of Asian American

student-athletes in relation to their understanding of their sense of belonging. Next, this chapter will focus on a discussion of the findings presented in the previous chapter. Following, there is a discussion on implications for practice as well as suggestions for future directions in research. Finally, research study limitations are addressed. In what ways to Asian American student-athletes experience a sense of belonging? This study reveals that student-athletes focus on strong interpersonal relationships, a sense of pride in racial representation, and the acknowledgment of the benefits of the Division III structure in contributing to their ability to connect with campus.

Discussion

Sense of belonging for Asian American student-athletes was strongest when there was high group cohesion coupled with supportive leadership among the coaching staff. It is the environmental factors within athletic programs and on college campuses that contributed most to an overall sense of belonging for Asian American student-athletes.

Teammates as Family

There is clear evidence from this research that social support is one of the greatest benefits of being part of a collegiate athletic team. Many participants bonded with their teammates in intimate ways and described team cohesion as a family. These teams spend a lot of time together, traveling, eating, practicing, and competing. As the model for sense of belonging suggests, the positive impacts of belonging also lead to positive outcomes such as engagement, achievement, and persistence (Strayhorn, 2012). Student-athletes shared how older teammates helped them with advice and resources to be academically successful and how the strong bond of the team led to positive feelings of accomplishment.

One of the more dominant themes from the study was treating teammates as family, and operating under similar models as a "traditional" family would, with upperclassmen serving as

big brothers or big sisters, guiding their younger siblings. This relationship strengthens the connections student-athletes have with each other, which then strengthens a student-athlete's sense of pride in attending their institution. Participants consistently identified their teammates as the first people to lean on in times of stress or difficulty. The team is an affirming space where everyone feels supported and that leads to strong social bonds. Being part of an athletic team where peer support is readily available, coupled with validation of a shared, and intense, experience, had strengthened sense of belonging among participants.

Under the context of Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging, it is understood that community is defined as "a feeling that members have belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Additionally, sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, such as when students experience stress during participation in collegiate athletics and need others for support. It is clear that the findings from this study affirm that participation in collegiate athletics may build a sense of community and student-athletes have an understanding that each member of a team matters to others. Or, as Simu put it, teams have "mutual respect" for each other. Social support needs to help individuals feel cared about, thought of, or like they belong and teammate bonds meet these needs for belonging.

Coach as Mentor

Along similar lines as the theme that emerged from teammates, is the idea that coaches serve as mentors for student-athletes. Across many interviews, participants shared experiences of when they struggled and looked toward a coach for guidance, support, or validation in their journey. Coaches must be able to assist student-athletes with academic, social, or life struggles if

they want the students to continue to compete. Student-athletes expressed gratitude for their coach's abilities to foster a fun and competitive environment, while also caring for each athlete as one of their own children.

Coaches not only serve as content experts in their sport, but they end up serving as life coaches for their student-athletes. As a result of this elevated role for coaches, they have the ability to impact Asian American student-athlete sense of belonging. As participants have shared, head coaches and assistant coaches have both contributed positively to student-athlete experience and ultimately, their sense of belonging on campus. As prior research has suggested, athletic experiences can positively impact sense of belonging for students, and this research supports the statement that co-curricular activities such as sports can enhance belonging on campus (Rettig & Hu, 2016; Strayhorn, 2018; Umbach et al., 2006).

Just as teammate bonding contributes to a greater sense of belonging for Asian American student-athletes, strong coach mentors have the same ability to enhance a student's experience. There are certain situations where leaning on teammates is great, but there are also other situations where student-athletes will seek guidance from trusted adults like coaches or trainers. Being able to be present for athletes in times of stress or uncertainty enhances student-athlete connections to the team, which then increases sense of belonging. Additionally, experiences of alienation will cause dissonance and the subjective experience of feeling out of place will raise doubts about one's capabilities. Recall Marie's experience with her coach, who asked a strangely worded question about her racial identity. That pivotal moment could have derailed her ability to succeed as an athlete, as a student, and as a human. Thankfully, Marie had other sources of support and other role models to turn to, but her reflection serves as an example of the potential for harm when belonging is threatened by alienation. As the researcher, I was struck with the

depth of the negative interactions, especially given the contemporary focus of creating college campuses that are inclusive and celebrate diversity. To have these types of microaggressions on college campuses between students and mentors in the 21st century is disappointing. This finding also illuminates the importance of this type of research, in order to continue to share the experiences of student-athletes of color.

Division III Status

Students shared their preference for being a student-athlete at the Division III level because that allowed student-athletes the ability to pursue other interests outside of sports. For example, Jenny shared that her social network was more varied as a result of being able to make friends from across campus. Research has shown that social networks contribute to feelings of acceptance and increased feelings of affiliation to a group or institution (Hoffman et al., 2003). By being in a Division III program, participants were able to strengthen their sense of belonging because they had a greater connection to others, both within and beyond their sports teams.

The findings support the student involvement theory in that time serves as the most precious resource for students, and every decision to engage in activities hinges upon the pros and cons of making such a choice. The findings show that student-athletes acknowledge that they have limited time to do everything they want to do, but that being an athlete has more benefits than harmful outcomes. As predicted by Astin's student involvement theory, the amount of personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement of the program, and the more supportive a Division III program is, the more involved the student-athletes will be.

Addressing Mental Health

An important finding of this research is the fact that participation on an athletic team has led Asian American student-athletes to seek more mental health resources or support. As a population that underutilizes mental health resources to support student well-being, this is a key finding that will have implications for practice, which will be discussed further in this chapter. Jenny shared explicitly that her teammate was one of the reasons she sought out therapy from the campus counseling department.

Another component of sense of belonging is that it is sufficient enough to drive human behavior (Strayhorn, 2018). Sense of belonging "is a basic human need, as fundamental as air, water, shelter, sleep, and food" and for some student-athletes, if they feel they belong, they will commit to behavior that allows them to continue to stay at their institution. Both Jenny and Gabby's reflections on recognizing the need to seek support when dealing with mental health or wellness concerns highlight the importance of this issue.

COVID-19 Impacts

While not a central component to the research study, it cannot be ignored that this research took place during a pandemic. Therefore, many students reflected on how their seasons were potentially different, depending on their team's ability to practice and compete. Additionally, students reflected on how the rise in Asian hate crimes occurred and how that encouraged both self-reflection and reflection with others about being Asian American. As prior research has confirmed, campus climate has a role in sense of belonging, with both positive and negative impacts, depending on the level of connection Asian American students have to their overall campus environment (Museus & Chang, 2009; Wells & Horn, 2015)

As mentioned earlier with Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging, experiences of alienation or social isolation can cause harm for students. With the rise in anti-Asian rhetoric amidst a pandemic, there is potential for Asian American students to feel like they don't belong. However, participants of this study affirm the importance of participating in athletic programs as a way to remain grounded and connected to campus. Emily's experiences of racial isolation on her team serve as a cautionary tale, for her sense of belonging was essentially diminished on her team, so she sought support outside of athletics.

Challenging Stereotypes or Indifference

Some participants reflected on their ability to shatter common stereotypes that Asians cannot be athletic. Marie felt like she was a trailblazer, being both an athlete and a pre-med student. Emily also felt like she was the solo representation on her team for her race. Other participants like Gabby and Anne, have not reflected on their racial identity in relation to their athletic identity. They did not seem to think there was a difference in experience for students of different races. This could be due to the fact that Gabby and Anne shared there wasn't much Asian representation in their athletic departments. As Critical Race Theory suggests, higher education is still operating under a predominantly white paradigm, where white thought dominates and permeates through campus (Patton, 2016). Perhaps Gabby and Anne never had the space to reflect upon their intersections of identity, nor did their institutions encourage or see the need for this type of reflection.

As the researcher, I was surprised at how some students had not thought about the intersections of their racial identity in conjunction with their other identities. Research has shown that identity formation can play a critical part in student development and student belonging, yet there are still students who did not reflect on their identities in a way that produced critical

reflection on their experience. For every student who has a positive reflection on their racial identity, others have had no reflection, such as Gabby and Anne. There are implications for practice for this surprising finding, which will be addressed in the implications for practice section.

Dual-Identity

Diane, Marie, and Jenny shared their struggles with holding both Asian American and student-athlete identities on campus. Diane shared an institutional practice that attempts to unite student-athletes of color, but the attempts fail to bring about true community among athletes of color. The group her institution created focused too heavily on being "not white" instead of celebrating the diversity that exists in the group. Patton's elements of Critical Race Theory come into play here, in that even in a minority-focused environment, the dominant ideologies are discussed, as opposed to centering the discussion around the intersectionality of racial identities. This serves as a missed opportunity for Diane's institution and a lesson for others.

Marie and Jenny shared difficulties with figuring out where they belong and how they fit in on campus. Jenny also expressed difficulty in believing she belongs, when others tell her she does. Even though both expressed positive experiences with their teammates, coaches, and athletic experience, they both still struggled with the intersectionality of identities. The findings intersect with Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging because belonging is interlocked with mattering. Students must feel they matter, wherever they are. Asian American student-athletes must feel like a valued member of the community and this must be satisfied on a continual basis in order to belong.

Implications for Practice

Sense of belonging for Asian American student-athletes is critical to their success in college. Since Asian American student-athletes have unique intersections of identity, experience negative encounters about their racial identity, and greatly value their athletic experience, it is vital for athletic professionals and administrative leaders to understand how unique the Asian American student-athlete experience is, and what interventions they can put into place to support athlete sense of belonging. The findings are useful for higher education practitioners, including athletic professionals and administrative leaders. As supported by Strayhorn's (2018) model of sense of belonging, there is a positive relationship between involvement in college activities and students' sense of belonging. Further, Strayhorn's (2018) model explains that not only do students benefit in terms of sense of belonging when they engage with peers in activities but that socializing with faculty or staff mentors outside the classroom can also contribute to a sense of belonging. It is the combination of the findings from this research study and the theoretical framework that the implications for practice are presented below.

Athletic Professionals

The team of athletic professionals that work directly with student-athletes includes athletic administration, coaches, assistant coaches, trainers, and academic advisors. Since the research highlighted responses that included coaches and assistant coaches, these recommendations will be tailored to that population. Participants shared that positive experiences with their coaches strengthened their connection to the team and campus. For example, when Nora shared that her coach took the team out to eat hibachi more often because there were more Asian student-athletes on the team, it showed Nora that her coach genuinely cared about learning from her players and meeting their needs, even if the need was familiar food. Participants also

shared that coaches and assistant coaches can be parental figures that they could turn to for both athletic and life advice. Gabby shared that her bond with her assistant coach helped her in times of stress. Olivia shared that she viewed her coach as another parent and her team as her family. Coaches should keep in mind that the greatest impact on students' journey in belonging seems to occur through participation in athletics and the social bonds that are formed. Creating an inviting environment on and off the field of play is critical for coaches to positively impact student-athlete sense of belonging. Asian American student-athletes have expressed great pride in being able to educate their teammates and share pieces of their culture as they become more comfortable with their team. Coaches should encourage cross-cultural education among teammates and create an environment where differences are not only observed but enthusiastically appreciated. Nora's example of when her coach noticed that there were many Asian student-athletes and opted to take the team out to dinner at an Asian restaurant instead of a steakhouse is a simple, yet effective way to encourage an entire team to embrace difference.

To further emphasize this implication for practice, it is imperative that coaching staff authentically engage with their student-athletes because students don't simply have a want to belong, they have a need to connect with others and a need to feel that they matter on campus. Aligning the findings of this study with Strayhorn's (2018) model of sense of belonging, there is great value for students to invest energy towards campus activities that give students a sense of support and add value to their existence on campus. Sense of belonging contributes to other positive outcomes such as engagement, achievement, well-being, and functioning, so athletic professionals have a heightened role in curating an athletic experience that promotes belonging among Asian American student-athletes.

On the other hand, negative experiences can harm Asian American student-athlete sense of belonging as well. Marie shared an unfortunate encounter with her coach early on in the program where her coach questioned her racial identity in a public space and made Marie feel uncomfortable. These types of negative encounters may lower sense of belonging for Asian American student-athletes and coaching staff need to approach all students with an open mind and from a place of inclusion, not exclusion.

It is worth mentioning that one participant, Diane, shared that her athletic program attempted to create space for athletes of color to connect with each other and reflect on their identities. However, Diane's reflection of the students of color group was negative, because the experience seemed to focus too heavily on being "not white" as opposed to celebrating unique identities. Therefore, it is recommended that athletic administrators create spaces within their athletic programs for athletes of color to meet each other and share their experiences, but only if the space celebrates and embraces racial diversity, instead of framing the group around lack of whiteness. Athletic administrators must be willing to put in the work to acknowledge the lived experiences of all of their student-athletes, not just the majority group. The findings reflect the need for formal, intentional programs that foster a sense of learning and connection among student-athletes of color.

Administrative Leaders

Student affairs professionals and administrative leaders in diversity, equity, and inclusion departments must be part of the conversation to support Asian American student-athlete sense of belonging. The participants often shared separate experiences of integrating with peers who were similar in racial identity, but not in the context of athletics. For example, some students attended meetings for clubs that aligned with their racial identity, but it was always separate from

athletics. It is recommended that administrative leaders collaborate with athletic departments to provide programming that is specifically tailored to Asian American student-athletes. These leaders can help educate athletic staff on best practices when working with athletes of color and offer additional resources to support this subpopulation of student-athletes. This in turn would provide Asian American student-athletes with more resources and tangible support, which would then increase their sense of belonging and strengthen their affinity to their institution.

Student affairs professionals should accept the challenge of tackling collegiate athletics and embrace the opportunity to engage with this population. While many campuses have a deep divide between athletics and the rest of campus, Division III institutions have a real opportunity to be the leaders in providing quality programming and opportunities to dialogue among Asian American students.

Additionally, the findings highlight the need for more administrative leader presence within athletics, in a meaningful way. Participants readily praised their teammates, their coaching staff, and their friends as the reason they feel they belong. However, no students mentioned administrative leadership to improve their experience and belonging. Perhaps students are unaware of the abilities of "the administration" to foster a sense of belonging, but this highlights an opportunity for administrative leaders. Leaders should take some risks and acknowledge that Asian American student-athletes may have a different lived experience from other students and encourage constant dialogue to understand the perspectives of these students, in order to contribute to creating a sense of belonging. With the surprising finding that some Asian American student-athletes don't reflect on their racial identity in meaningful ways, there is an important opportunity for administrative leaders to intentionally create spaces for students of color to reflect on their identity and how it relates to student sense of belonging.

Broadly, administrative leaders must focus on heightening efforts to increase sense of belonging on campuses, not just to increase retention, but to assist students in reaching self-actualization, which leads to greater fulfillment and contributions to the college community. When students are adjusted socially, they will also adjust academically, so intentional efforts to foster meaning-making, particularly among Asian American student-athletes, will be worthwhile.

Future Research

This study explored the experiences of Asian American student-athletes at NCAA Division III programs. Additional research should focus on the type of sport, to see if a team or individual sport plays a role in sense of belonging. Participants from this study played a wide variety of sports. Team sports, such as soccer and tennis, may create a stronger sense of belonging than individually-focused sports like running, swimming, or golf. Additionally, there were no west coast Division III institutions in this study. Geographic diversity may be useful in the future, to see if there are differences in experience across geographic regions. For example, more institutions in California have a higher percentage of Asian students than in other regions of the country.

Another avenue for future research should include the Pacific Islander population. While 2% of NCAA student-athletes across all three divisions identify as Asian American, there are likely stories that are lost about the nuanced experiences of Pacific Islander student-athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020a). In order to truly showcase experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander student-athletes, future directions should include Pacific Islander student-athletes to ensure their voices are not hidden in research and instead, are amplified as unique and valid.

In addition to researching the impact of the type of sport on sense of belonging and including Pacific Islanders in the research population, future research should include a focus on gender as a factor in sense of belonging. While the majority of participants identified as women in this study, it would be useful to study specific gender differences. Prior research suggests different levels of engagement, belonging, and affiliation for men and women, so further research could bring up themes that connect sense of belonging to gender. Gender likely informs how student-athletes experience a sense of belonging and some details were not explored in this study. There are still questions about the impact of gender and future research would be useful in this area.

<div align="center">**Limitations**</div>

There are limitations to this study that must be addressed. The first limitation of this study was the fact that research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to safety measures, all interviews were conducted over the Zoom platform instead of in person. While trust and rapport were built virtually, technology can act as a barrier between researcher and participants. This limitation may have affected the study because all non-verbal communication and emotions were conveyed through a computer screen as opposed to in person. There may have been missed opportunities to dive deeper into a response because of the technological barrier.

Second, the exclusive use of semi-structured interviews may have limited the richness of the study's data. While interviewing, it was apparent that observation of team interaction would have been beneficial in understanding the strong bonds that were expressed via interview. Observing the relationships in action would enrich the data and further contextualize the narrative around teammate and coach bonding.

Next, while the exploration of gender was not in the scope of this study, there were remarks by women who were interviewed that would illuminate future research. Research within athletics already tends to lean more towards the research of high-profile men's teams, so I believe it would be worth centering future research on women's teams to see what themes emerge. Gender may also be a component of student-athlete sense of belonging and those experiences deserve attention as well. Additionally, the sample was not evenly split between males and females, so responses may have not been fully representative of the Asian American student-athlete experience.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study is important because it confirms what prior research and theoretical frameworks suggest. Student-athletes who participate in athletic programs where there is a supportive environment among teammates and coaching staff have a heightened sense of belonging. Additionally, Asian American student-athletes are proud of their identities and sometimes struggle with identifying where they belong with their dual identities on campus. Even with the challenges of COVID-19, student-athletes were able to form connections with others, offer support to each other, and develop a sense of belonging. However, it is important to note that some participants of this study shared examples of alienation or disengagement with their campus community, which highlights the importance of such research. Additionally, the Division III status affords these student-athletes the ability to engage outside their sport, which isn't often possible at other divisional levels. Oftentimes, students choose to engage in cultural student organizations, which increases connection and thus, belonging.

Asian American student-athletes are a small but worthy population for research. The findings of this study should be a stepping stone for future research and discussion. If Asian

American student-athletes feel like they belong, they are more likely to grow on campus and connect with others, as opposed to feeling isolated or retreating. This research supports the framework provided through the model of sense of belonging, student involvement theory, and critical race theory by offering findings that highlight the importance of social connections and a supportive campus environment on Asian American student-athlete sense of belonging.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Model of Sense of Belonging
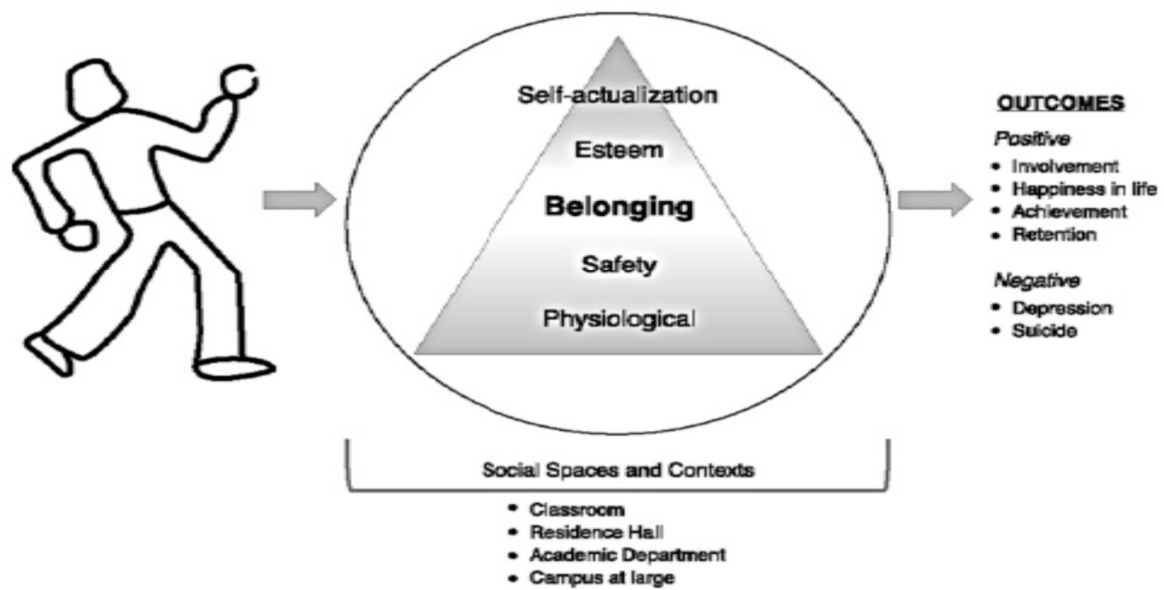
Note. From Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). College Students' Sense of Belonging (1st ed.). Routledge.

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Email Template

Understanding DIII Asian American Student-athletes and Their Sense of Belonging

Potential Participant:

My name is Amanda Yu-Nguyen, and I am currently working on a dissertation for my doctoral program in Higher Education Management under the guidance of Dr. George Spencer at the University of Georgia. My dissertation topic focuses on understanding the experiences of DIII Asian American student-athletes and their sense of belonging on college campuses. I hope that through this research, I gain insight in to how colleges can better support Asian American students. I am recruiting DIII Asian American student-athletes who are currently enrolled full-time at their institution and are active on their team roster.

My study consists of one interview session lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Participation in this research project is completely voluntary and all interviews will be kept confidential.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns you may have about this study.

Thanks in advance for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Amanda Yu-Nguyen

Appendix C

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race	Institution Geography	Sport	Gender
Emily	Vietnamese-American	Southeast	Track and Field	Woman
Marie	Mixed-race/Chinese-American	Southeast	Soccer	Woman
Anne	Korean-American	Southeast	Tennis	Woman
Jenny	Korean-American	Southeast	Tennis	Woman
Gabby	Filipina-American	Midwest	Soccer	Woman
Diane	Vietnamese-American	Northeast	Swimming/Water Polo	Woman
Olivia	Korean-American	Southeast	Soccer	Woman
Nora	Korean-American	Southeast	Tennis	Woman
Jack	Chinese-American	Southeast	Tennis	Man
Simu	Indian-American	Midwest	Baseball	Man

Appendix D

Coding Process

First List of Codes	Second Cycle of Codes	Final Set With Sub-codes
Family (Pre-college, during college) Interpersonal Relationships (Friends, Coaches, Family, Athletic Staff, Resident Assistants) Social Support (High, Low, Lacking) Challenges (Negative Interaction, Mental Health) Broad Struggles (Fitting In, Belonging) Athletic Status (Flexibility, Division III, Less Athletic Pressure, Balance) Athletic Identity Racial Identity Interaction of Athletic and Racial Identity Struggles with Identity (Fitting In) Campus Environment	Family – Teammates Family – Coaches Division III Status Challenges – Mental Health Challenges – Covid Struggles – Identity Struggles – Campus Indifference Dual-identity	Collegiate Athletic Environment • Teammates as family • Coach as mentor • Division III status • Mental health • Impacts of COVID-19 Experiences with Racial Identity • Dual-identity • Challenging stereotypes or indifference