

THE COST OF LOSS: SENSE OF BELONGING AND INJURED STUDENT
ATHLETES

by

COLLETTE K. TONEY

(Under the Direction of Laura A. Dean)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of injured student athletes as it relates to Strayhorn's (2018) central tenets of sense of belonging and mattering. The focus of this study was to examine how a student athlete's sense of belonging was affected once sustaining an injury. The method used to investigate this question was qualitative narrative inquiry by utilizing semi-structured interviews of six former and current NCAA student athletes. It was discovered that student athletes' sense of belonging was affected once injured due to their athletic identity, changes in team dynamics, and social support. It was concluded that injured student athletes' sense of belonging shifted once injured because injury affected their role on the team and their mattering to the program.

INDEX WORDS: student athletes, injury, belonging, mattering, coaches

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mother, Priscillia Bobb Toney. You will always be my everything. I know you're rejoicing from Heaven. I will continue to make you proud—always and forever.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Kenny McKinley and OJ Murdock were football student athletes and roommates at the University of South Carolina. During McKinley's career, he became a record-setting wide receiver at the University of South Carolina. Despite injuries affecting his collegiate career, he continued to play and break records. He was not a stranger to injuries, but continued to play through them as he had his sights set on the next level. He was drafted in 2009 by the Denver Broncos with a bright future ahead of him as a professional football player. Later that year after playing in eight games, he injured his knee and was placed on injured reserve (IR), a status that causes an individual to stop playing and participating in team activities for rehabilitation. Because IR changes contract salary immediately, McKinley reported that he was in financial strain due to debt that he incurred. He also showed signs of depression as it related to his knee injury, and it took a turn for the worse after his knee surgery (ESPN, 2010; National Football League, 2010). His teammates were unaware of how badly he was struggling with his injury as it related to pain, not playing, and a different role on the team. In September 2010, a little over a year after being drafted in the NFL, Kenny McKinley died by suicide.

OJ Murdock withstood a rocky path to earn his way in the NFL. He was suspended from his college team after a shoplifting charge (Schilken, 2012). He was able to continue at two other colleges, but his time was riddled by injury and academic issues. Not giving up on his dream and career, he ended up playing football at Fort Hays State

University where he showed his talent post-injury. His tumultuous path to the NFL did not get him a draft spot, but he was signed as an undrafted free agent by the Tennessee Titans. He made the Tennessee Titans roster, but later hurt his Achilles and was placed on injured reserve for the season. In the early morning of July 30, 2012, OJ Murdock sent texts to former coaches and family members thanking them for the support and their role in his life. After he sent these messages, he died by suicide.

It is important to note that these investigations are continuing to unfold. Family, friends, teammates, and bystanders noted that McKinley and Murdock's careers were plagued by injury-caused depression. Former teammates, families, and friends noticed something was different, but felt that it was normal considering the circumstances of injury effect. McKinley and Murdock's stories highlight how injury can affect individuals. Though family and friends reported not seeing the signs of depression from their injuries, McKinley and Murdock were experiencing isolation and stress, which are risks associated with lacking sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Though these two men were not in college when they died, the history of injury throughout their lives and in college athletics most likely affected how they coped or were discouraged with their professional injuries.

Injured college student athletes are more vulnerable to stress and depressive symptoms (Cox et al., 2017). College student athletes who have an injury that resulted in time loss from their sport had increased depressive symptoms in comparison with their peers who had not experienced injury (Cox et al., 2017). In addition to the connection between injury and depressive symptoms, in a study of over 800 sports physicians, most reported that they felt less comfortable discussing psychological responses about their

injuries with student athletes (Rao & Hong, 2016). The heart-breaking stories of Kenny McKinley and OJ Murdock, as well as disheartening conversations that I was privileged to be a part of in my time working with student athletes and injured student athletes, are the focal point of my study: exploring a sense of belonging for injured student athletes. Without a sense of belonging during injury, student athletes are at risk for disengagement, isolation, stress, and depression (Strayhorn, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

The changes that occur to an athlete's identity and role on their team from an injury can contribute to a lesser sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2018) defined sense of belonging as "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group (e.g., campus community or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers))" (p. 158). Sense of belonging is important for students because not only is it a basic need, but it also leads to positive outcomes including persistence, connection, identity development, and fostering community (Strayhorn, 2018). Without a sense of belonging, injured student athletes are at risk for low functioning, depression, anxiety, and other outcomes that could lead to negative academic, athletic, and social expression.

When student athletes are injured, they struggle to find comfort in both their new role and their athletic identity (Beamon, 2012; Brewer et al., 1993; Houle et al., 2010). They also navigate through their identity shift from being an involved student athlete to being an athlete on reserve, while their teammates work together for a common goal of participating on the field or court to win. Not only in revenue generating sports, but also in non-revenue generating sports, student athletes often voiced to me feeling isolated

from the team and not included in other activities when dealing with an injury. While student athletes are injured, how is their sense of belonging with their team and at their institution affected? The experience of an injured athlete caused me to want to pay attention and examine the effects on belonging thoroughly. As practitioners, we must explore sense of belonging for injured student athletes for the continued well-being of our students.

Purpose of Study & Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of injured student athletes as it relates to the central tenets of sense of belonging and mattering. According to the work of Strayhorn (2018), essential elements of sense of belonging are as follows:

- 1) Sense of belonging is a basic human need.
- 2) Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior.
- 3) Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance
 - a. In certain contexts
 - b. At certain times
 - c. Among certain populations
- 4) Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering.
- 5) Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging.
- 6) Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes
- 7) Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change (pp. 159-161).

The following research question guided this study: How does the experience of being injured affect a student athlete's sense of belonging? I utilized the qualitative research

method of narrative inquiry in order to gain insight on the stories and experiences of injured student athletes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry was the methodology that best suited my study because it provides the opportunities to explore the stories and lived experiences of the participants within a specific time (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study focuses on the narratives of injured student athletes through semi-structured interviews in order to gain insight on the experience and perspective of student athletes during their injury process. My paradigm for this study is social constructivism as I seek to co-create meaning with my participants as they share insight into their world of athletics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When co-constructing meaning, the participants and I collaboratively made meaning of their experiences and interpreted those experiences together. I relied on my participants' views on their experience of being injured to give readers a chance to not only connect with their stories, but also to see student athletes past their performance and focus on them as students navigating challenges and changes in their athletic identity. Athletic identity can be strong enough for a student that they solely focus on their athletic endeavors rather than their academic ones (Brewer et al., 1993; Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Student athletes often have such a sense of commitment to their sport that their identities in other areas may not develop as quickly (Brewer et al., 1993).

Significance of Study

Within the last decade, there has been a larger push from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to support injured student athletes (NCAA, 2014). The NCAA is the governing body over nearly 1,000 college and university athletic programs, representing nearly half a million student athletes (NCAA, 2020). Members of these

institutions are selected to serve on committees, which create and enforce rules and policies regarding athletics, institutional control, eligibility, conduct, play, and student athlete development (NCAA, 2019). Though the NCAA has offered resources such as piloting a support group for injured athletes and research surrounding the science of injury, there is little scholarship around how student athletes' injury experience impacts their sense of belonging at an institution (NCAA, 2014). Sense of belonging is an important concept to discuss as it relates to student athletes because a lack of sense of belonging can lead to disengagement, depression, anxiety, or isolation (Strayhorn, 2018). "... Sense of belonging is important and it takes heightened importance in contexts where individuals are inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 19). Student athletes who receive an injury are feeling some if not all of these emotions in their role change on their teams (Gould et al., 1997; Heil, 1994). With the threat of a student athlete's athletic responsibilities changing, an injury can derail a student athlete from experiencing a positive sense of belonging which would lead to lower overall well-being in college (Strayhorn, 2018).

Previous studies only account for the role of social support in supporting mental and emotional health for student athletes with injury (Barefield & McCallister, 1997; Clement & Shannon, 2011; Corbillon et al., 2008; deGroot, 2018; Lu & Hsu, 2013). There were only a few that discussed sense of belonging and student athletes (Fearon et al., 2011; Gayles et al., 2018; Walseth, 2006). There has been minimal focus on how the rehabilitation process of injury can affect a student athlete's sense of belonging. This study will be a building block in literature examining sense of belonging for injured student athletes. Furthermore, the NCAA (2014) also suggested that there is future

research needed in the area of sense of community for injured student athletes as they are often faced with temporary isolation from the team.

This study is significant because it seeks to explore the experience of a student athlete during their time of injury and how that effects their belonging to their team. Scholars (Clement & Shannon, 2011; Corbillion et al., 2008; Judge et al., 2012) have examined how social support is important in these settings, but sense of belonging cannot stand on social support alone (Strayhorn, 2018). It is vital as practitioners that we explore how this unique population deals with an injury that not only affects their athletic performance, but also their engagement with the university. If we can understand this issue by giving voice to these student athletes, we will be able to better provide support for these students so that they do not lose their connection to their campus community while dealing with an injury that could possibly isolate them from their athletic community.

Key Terms

ATC: Certified Athletic Trainer. ATCs or athletic trainers are often a part of the rehabilitation process of student athletes going through the injury process

Student athlete: A student athlete is a participant of a sport at their college or university, who pursues academic and athletic endeavors simultaneously. This student athlete could also include students who are pursuing these endeavors through partial or full scholarship. I am choosing not to use the hyphen in between as often seen because collegiate athletes report being encouraged and often pushed to spend the majority of hours being an athlete rather than a student (New, 2015). A hyphen represents being

joined or compounded, when oftentimes being a student and an athlete are competing interests.

Long term injury: A long term injury is an injury that student athletes sustain that will keep them out of competition for months or permanently.

Short term injury: A short term injury is an injury that student athletes sustain that will keep them out of competition for weeks. At times, a student athlete may be able to compete while harboring a short-term injury if receiving treatment. This could still contribute to a student athlete playing or participating through pain.

Revenue generating: Revenue-generating sports are considered to be those that are lucrative to the university through ticket sales, merchandise, and media contracts.

Generally speaking, revenue-generating sports are considered to be men's football and men's basketball programs (Gaines & Nudelman, 2017). Some institutions may have exceptions such as the women's gymnastics team at the University of Georgia.

Non-revenue generating: Generally speaking, non-revenue generating sports are teams that do not produce revenue through the spectating of their sport. This usually includes all sports outside of men's football and men's basketball programs.

NCAA: The National Collegiate Athletic Association, which is the governing and ruling body of colleges and universities sports programs that choose to participate in membership. Membership is only available to accredited four-year colleges and universities. If institutions choose to be a member of this ruling body, they must abide by the regulations, procedures, and principles as outlined by member-led committees (NCAA, 2020).

- i. *Division I:* The NCAA category for institutions which yield the largest athletic budgets and finances, which allows a greater number of scholarships to be offered to students (NCAA, n.d.). There are almost 350 colleges and universities in this category.
- ii. *Division II:* This category of institutions includes about 300 colleges and universities. In comparison with Division I institutions, these institutions do not have the same amount of media contracts, which provides less financial resources for the institution, with many student athletes receiving only partial athletic scholarships. The student body size ranges from less than 2,500 to 25,000 students, but the large majority of Division II schools have less than 8,000 students (NCAA, n.d.).
- iii. *Division III:* This category of institutions is the largest as it has the most participants in the NCAA in comparison with Division I and Division II. The students in Division III do not compete for financial reward or gain. One of the aims of Division III institutions is to show that these students are pursuing athletics for passion rather than pursuing a career in it down the road. Most of these student athletes strive to achieve academic excellence and pursue a career in other areas (NCAA, n.d.).

Coach: A head or assistant coach is any coach who is designated by the institution's athletics department to perform coaching duties and who serves in that capacity on a volunteer or paid basis (NCAA, 2019).

Sense of Belonging: Perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected,

valued by and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 28)

Conclusion

Sense of belonging benefits students by providing conditions to persist, engage, and achieve during their time in college (Strayhorn, 2018). Student athletes’ sense of belonging can be created by membership to their team (Strayhorn, 2018). However, when a student athlete is injured, there are challenges in their change of role, athletic identity, and team membership, which could all yield a low sense of belonging. Without a sense of belonging, students are at risk for disengagement, unproductivity, depression, and anxiety (Strayhorn, 2018). In the next chapter, I will review literature on involvement, belonging, student athletes, student athlete identity, and athletic injuries to provide an educational overview on the pressing topic of sense of belonging for injured student athletes.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

College sports has evolved into a revenue-generating machine, with media contracts, thousands of fans, high ticket prices, and spirit wear as a way to show allegiance to an institution. The top ten Division I programs in college athletics collectively rake in well over \$150 million dollars per year (Berkowitz et al., 2019). With college sports taking a huge role in institutional presence and community, the undergraduate experience is impacted by the focus on athletics (Sperber, 2000). Division I student athletes begin feeling that they are not students first, but athletes first as their role becomes central to sell tickets and an experience to onlookers (Sperber, 2000). These expectations cause a strain on the experience of a student athlete. In comparison with student non athletes, student athletes are more likely to report stress related to relationships, academics, and time demands (Pritchard, 2005; Stevens et al., 2013). Yet, involvement in sports can have positive effects that yield a sense of belonging for student athletes (Strayhorn, 2018). When an athlete is injured, their role on their team, athletic identity, and sense of belonging can be impacted. This chapter includes background on literature of student athletes, athletic identity, injury, and sense of belonging to frame the study on the question: How does the experience of being injured affect a student athlete's sense of belonging?

Involvement and Belonging

Being involved in co-curricular activities links to persistence and commitment to an institution (Kuh et al., 2011). Kuh et al. (2011) demonstrated the multiple factors needed to foster student success in college. In *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*, Kuh et al. also focused on the factors that are important in creating a sense of belonging for student success (2011). They pointed out that creating conditions for belonging through institutional practices would foster connections with peers and the institution, which would create a pathway to persistence and achievement (Kuh et al., 2011). The physical environment can also signal belonging or a lack thereof to a student. Students are more likely to succeed in areas where they feel valued rather than unknown. Creating conditions that matter to student success is vital to not only persistence, but the overall experience of college students. A sense of belonging is directly linked as students receive messaging from the institution, interactions, and the environment about whether they matter or belong. To continue to foster student success in college, faculty, staff, and administrators have to pay attention to whether students feel that they matter and have a sense of belonging to their community (Kuh et al., 2011).

For students, mattering and marginality can have an effect on their participation in their community. Schlossberg (1989) defined mattering as it “refers to our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else” (p. 9). She also discussed the themes of mattering including attention, importance, and appreciation; these are what make people and students feel as if they matter to their community. She defined marginality as the feeling of being unimportant, unvalued, or uncared for. Marginality can be a temporary condition as students are taking time to get used to a new community on campus or on

their teams. Each person deals with marginality differently because it takes time to feel like you belong to a group and become focal to that group (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering and marginality are integral to the experience of belonging for students. In order for students to feel as if they matter, there are factors that need to be considered for a sense of belonging.

Strayhorn (2018) defined sense of belonging as “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 28). For student athletes, this could also include the coaching staff, nutrition staff, athletic training staff, and teammates. Belonging is a need for all people as it relates to their connectedness to others and their environment. When students feel that they are valued within their campus community, they are more likely to persist (Strayhorn, 2018). Sense of belonging creates a foundation for strong and supportive relationships that a student can foster in college that can lead a student to feel committed to their college or campus.

Strayhorn’s (2018) model of sense of belonging included seven core elements of belonging. The first element explored how sense of belonging is a basic human need, which means that it is a basic necessity for college students and all people. Second, sense of belonging is motive enough to drive human behavior in that people will choose to do what it takes to feel included and valued. Third, sense of belonging takes on different importance in certain contexts, times, and among certain populations. The fourth element explained how sense of belonging is related to mattering as students must believe that someone cares about them and values their importance through appreciation or attention.

Sense of belonging is also affected by how students' social identities intersect. The intersectionality of identity and how salient certain identities are for students have an impact on belonging. The sixth element is that belonging paves the way for positive outcomes such as engagement, achievement, and well-being. Last, sense of belonging has to be fulfilled continually and changes as circumstances, contexts, and conditions change. How students feel that they belong changes over time when different events or situations occur (Strayhorn, 2018).

Without feeling a sense of belonging, students are unable to move forward in self-actualization (Maslow, 1954, as cited in Strayhorn, 2018). Sense of belonging can also drive human behavior in a positive or negative way. It can cause people to follow positive behaviors in a group setting, or more negative behaviors such as hazing, in order to feel that they belong to a group. Sense of belonging shows up differently at different times, in different contexts, and for different people. Students' identities influence feeling a sense of belonging on campus. For example, if a Black student athlete attends a Predominately White Institution (PWI), their sense of belonging could be influenced by their minoritized identity. Sense of belonging also connects to mattering because a sense of belonging makes a student feel valued and respected to their environment (Strayhorn, 2018). As belonging shows up differently for students depending on the time and context, sense of belonging is also affected by student's social identities and their intersection. Sense of belonging leads to positive outcomes such as engagement and achievement. Students who feel that they belong to their academic community are more motivated to engage academically with their peers and teachers (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Finally, sense of belonging "must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances,

conditions, and contexts” (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 39). These elements of sense of belonging provide the foundation for Strayhorn’s model.

Strayhorn (2018) also stated: “Deprivation of belonging in college prevents achievement and wellbeing, while satisfaction of college students’ sense of belonging is a key to educational success for all students” (p. 20). It is vital that we research how an injury can damage or enhance a student athlete’s sense of belonging at their institution. The issue is that there is still incomplete information about how students develop a sense of belonging. Oftentimes, scholars will research students’ actions and what they are involved in to speak to how they feel, interact, and engage, which are not exclusive of each other (Strayhorn, 2018).

Creating Conditions for Sense of Belonging

In order to create conditions for a sense of belonging, there has to be intentional work to create community and environmental conditions that signal to students that they matter (Schlossberg, 1989). Brazzell (2001) pointed out that institutions that allow students to build upon their identity and thrive often have a good system of making students feel like they belong. Some of the indicators include student centered environments, positive relationships with faculty and staff, opportunities to participate in various areas of the institution, personal value seen in the curriculum, and an emphasis on teaching (Brazzell, 2001). This type of community where students feel like they belong is not created on accident or by a small group of leaders. This type of community is built by multiple people at the institution focusing on the student experience (Brazzell, 2001).

Strayhorn (2018) pointed out that to create conditions for a sense of belonging at institutions and on campuses, administrators should observe and assess campus climate,

student experiences, and the relationships that occur on campuses. Offering students the opportunity to not only get involved, but to also explore options they are not yet aware of including, academic, emotional, and social support, create better conditions for belonging. The more the student is aware of what is occurring on their campuses and where to find that information, the more they feel like a member of the community (Strayhorn, 2018).

Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff have an important role to play in creating a sense of belonging. The academic educational experience for students is rooted in faculty participation and engagement, leaving faculty to have a large role in building community for students (Osterman, 2000). Additionally, students feel a greater sense of belonging when faculty and staff are actively engaged in the teaching and learning of the students (Cheng, 2004). The presence of collaborative partnerships across campus entities for the benefit of the students' educational experience signals that students belong to the campus community (Brazzell, 2001). Strayhorn (2018) indicated that providing students with a touch point and foundation for a relationship with faculty members and staff was a great way to foster sense of belonging. It is vital that faculty are not only supportive, but invested in the students and the student experience (Strayhorn, 2018). This can include that faculty and staff know more about the student than simply their academic success. When students feel that their faculty members care about their success as students and people, they feel a greater sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). These meaningful interactions are crucial to developing a sense of belonging for students.

Environment

The values, expectations, and attitudes of a campus environment can dictate elements of belonging to students by setting the tone of the institution (Strayhorn, 2018). To create an environment of belonging, institutions have to consider the diversity of the student body and the messaging that it sends to those students. One concept of creating an environment of belonging is to foster a student-centered environment (Brazzell, 2001). This type of environment requires the institution to be clear about its expectations and how to achieve them. Clear expectations show students a pathway that leads to success, and give the message that the institution wants its students to succeed (Brazzell, 2001). A student-centered environment provides students a chance to interact more in a community with faculty and staff as facilitators to their learning (Wright, 2011).

Another way to create an environment to foster belonging is developing alignments across campus in various departments. When institutional goals and expectations are aligned, students are able to seek success with clear expectations and with the support and encouragement of the campus community (Brazzell, 2001). When the focus of an environment is student-centered and aligned with students in mind, a result of belonging to this type of environment is acceptance (McMillan, 1996). This acceptance is personally affirmed as the student's membership in institutional groups shows that they belong. Sense of belonging in an environment allows students to be able to feel respect and honor, and to be able to express themselves freely (Cheng, 2004). The opportunities to participate in community are active and numerous for teams, clubs, and other leadership options (Brazzell, 2001). Strayhorn (2018) demonstrated that sense of belonging takes on a significant impact where individuals feel like the outsider or

unwelcomed. In this case, sense of belonging becomes that much more important to student athletes as they feel the need to connect and belong within the athletic community as a subculture of the larger institution.

Peer Interaction

Positive peer interactions can affect belonging for students (Strayhorn, 2018). Meaningful and positive interactions can cause students to feel a sense of belonging in that space. If they bond with those who accept them and welcome them to their space, there is a greater sense of community. Sense of belonging and community can also be created when there are positive relationships formed across cultural and ethnic groups (Cheng, 2004). The connection to others on campus creates community instead of divisiveness (McMillan, 1996). Students are able to engage in diverse community through programming and activities, which allow students to converse with others of diverse backgrounds while also expressing what matters to them. As students are building a relationship with their new institution, celebrating the traditions of the institution together builds a sense of belonging (Cheng, 2004). Though peer interaction is a characteristic of sense of belonging, a student having a peer group cannot be a sole factor for sense of belonging. Students who have friends can still feel openly rejected or neglected by their school or institution (Osterman, 2000).

Factors to Consider for Sense of Belonging

There are various factors that can influence sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2018) highlighted that sense of belonging can differ depending on the contexts, time, and populations. For context, sense of belonging could affect an individual differently as they are a new member of a group. For first year students, sense of belonging can be affected

as they are transitioning into college and facing new experiences in housing, classrooms, and social circles. Another factor that can impact sense of belonging for a newcomer is how welcoming and supportive their residence hall or living space is (Johnson et al., 2007). Additionally, how smooth the transition is into the new environment, with consideration of how confident the student feels in talking with faculty, can affect the overall ease of the new challenges of collegiate life (Johnson et al., 2007). The age of college students could be a factor in sense of belonging as the students consider who they are becoming or wish to become and how the reality of the situation reflects that. An example could be sense of belonging for transfer students who are coming into an institution later in their college career or an adult learner entering college at a later age.

For specific populations, sense of belonging depends on race, gender, orientation, and socioeconomic background (Strayhorn, 2018). Women often report a higher sense of belonging than men in many contexts (Goodenow, 1993; Gopalan & Brady, 2019). However, in academic major fields where women are the minority, there is a lower sense of belonging (Rainey et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2018). Black men generally have a lower sense of belonging, and this can be even lower for men at Predominately White Institutions (Strayhorn, 2008). Sense of belonging is higher for White men overall, as well as for White men that have diverse interaction with their peers (Strayhorn, 2008). Race and gender are factors in sense of belonging, as students feel a greater feeling of belonging when there are others “like them” in their environments (Rainey et al., 2018). The overall racial climate of the institution can have a negative effect on the sense of belonging for students if the environment created by policies, procedures, faculty, staff, and students is unwelcoming (Johnson et al., 2007). Background of students is also a

factor in sense of belonging, as parents' educational backgrounds and students' own educational backgrounds can influence how they view their own membership in college (Ostrove, 2003). It is important to note that though institutions can do their share of creating opportunities for students to feel a sense of belonging, these factors need to be considered as well as the layers that are included in college students' sense of belonging.

Consequences of Sense of Belonging

When students feel a sense of community and feel that they belong to that community, they can experience positive self-esteem (Ma, 2003). They often experience positive emotions including contentment and happiness during their schooling experience (Osterman, 2000; Strayhorn, 2018). Belonging to a community can give students the confidence to continue to develop personally (Osterman, 2000). As students continue to experience belonging, it positively affects academic achievement, persistence, and retention (Strayhorn, 2018). They are more likely to cultivate meaningful, positive, and caring relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff. These support networks are more likely to give students a long-term connection to their campus and commitment to the institution. Students who feel a greater sense of belonging to their school are more likely to persist and enjoy their experience in class (Osterman, 2000).

When a student does not feel a sense of belonging, negative effects such as lack of engagement, retention, and sense of care can lead the student to do poorly academically. A lack of sense of belonging can lead a student to feel "isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 19). Sense of belonging is critical to the success of college students (O'Keeffe, 2013). Institutions have to consider the students that they are inviting into their institutions and take account of the responsibility of creating a sense of

belonging for those students (Brazzell, 2001). When institutions lack the characteristics to create conditions for sense of belonging on their campuses, students are at risk for depression, loneliness, and low social support (Hagerty & Williams, 1999). Without a sense of belonging, students feel a loss in care, respect, and personal value (Cheng, 2004). They may alienate themselves away from the institution or collegiate experience (Ma, 2003). Feeling a lack of sense of belonging leads to low academic motivation as well (Osterman, 2000). When students do not feel a sense of belonging, it makes them want to leave their institution or their education in total (Brazzell, 2001).

Sense of belonging is a need for students and can be found in many different places on campus. For student athletes, much of their sense of belonging is rooted in their involvement with their teams. As institutions are constantly dealing with the financial realities of funding their institutions, programs, and campuses, sense of belonging becomes central in conversations. Students reporting low sense of belonging could lead in the long term to a future loss of revenue and decline in the investment of higher education (O’Keeffe, 2013).

Student Athlete Identity

Sense of belonging for student athletes can be deeply rooted in their experience and role as an athlete. Student athletes often find themselves navigating their identity of a student and an athlete throughout their lives (Melendez, 2009). Over 50% of student athletes strongly identify as both a student and an athlete without feeling like they are completely one or the other (NCAA, 2013). However, more female student athletes identify as a student in college, which can be demonstrated in their high graduation rates in comparison with their male peers (NCAA, 2013). As a female student athlete at a

Division I college, the extent to which they identify as both a student and an athlete can be extremely high in comparison with their male peers. Yet, male and female student athletes in Division II and III identified feeling that their student identity was more salient than their athletic identity (NCAA, 2013). It is important to understand the background of the student, institution chosen for competition, and output to examine how they identify with their athletic identity.

According to Melendez (2009), salient athletic identity can have positive and negative effects for student athletes as they adjust year-to-year. His study centered on Division I athletes at three different institutions to examine identity foreclosure in Black student athletes. He found that positive effects of a salient athletic identity can include the development of their self-esteem and self-actualization, time management, networking, and motivation (Melendez, 2009). Some of the negative effects can include how to approach career development as related to sports and how well a student athlete could cope with injury, as well as how they perform academically (Melendez, 2009).

Athletic identity can be defined as to the degree to which individual athletes connect to their athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993). This strong athletic identity is created from their own experience in their sport, as well as the continual praise and push of the peers, teachers, parents, and coaches of athletes (Beamon, 2012). This is especially true for college student athletes as they have a higher sense of athletic identity than athletes who stopped competing in high school (Houle et al., 2010). This could be attributed to the level of competition now present in Division I college athletics as these student athletes have received scholarships to continue competing in their sport. Being an athlete becomes who they are instead of what they do and how they perform because it gives

enhanced meaning to their lives (Beamon, 2012; Houle et al., 2010). If a student athlete has a strong athletic identity, they are more unlikely to explore other identities such as their role as a student (Brewer et al., 1993). Even if a student athlete wants to explore other identities, the time needed and required of student athletes causes them to exclude other opportunities that cannot fit into their schedule (Houle et al., 2010). Murphy et al. (1996) discussed:

The belief that a narrow focus on sport is necessary for competitive success may be held by student-athletes and strongly reinforced by coaches whose job security is based on winning. As a result, sport administrators and coaches may be less likely to support external activities that would erode student-athletes' free time or distract them from a primary focus on sport. (p. 244)

As others in their sphere of influence continue centralizing their focus on the athletic identity, anything that could potentially alter the role could be detrimental to the student athlete's self-esteem and outlook (Lockhart, 2010). This could be true especially for Division I athletes as there is high visibility in Division I college sports, and their experience can feel very isolating (Archer et al., 2007).

Athletic Identity and College Choice

In addition to the academic programs offered, most student athletes choose their educational journeys and institutions based on recruitment and selection for athletic performance (Klenosky, 2001; Letawsky et al., 2003). Many athletes with aspirations for professional sports careers select their institution based on a "means-end theory," meaning how the athletic team can help them achieve their athletic goals and personal

goals past their time in college (Klenosky, 2001). In this way, student athletes are exploring the competition records, past experience, and knowledge of the coaching staff; their ability to compete right-away instead of as a substitute; how advanced athletic facilities are; and the potential for exposure on media platforms and professionally (Klenosky, 2001). Their view of their athletic identity impacts the institutions they choose to attend.

Identity and Injury

This strong connection and adherence to student athlete athletic identity could be detrimental to their development in academics or even career (Brewer et al., 1993). A student athlete who experiences a critical injury could be at risk for an identity crisis as their sense of identity is shaken by the experience of losing out on competing. Student athletes feel a loss of identity when injured (Lockhart, 2010). They perceive an injury as a life or death matter as their current view of self suddenly shifts (Lockhart, 2010).

Whether a sports retirement is due to injury or not, the loss of athletic identity can lead to depression, feelings of loss, and grief (Beamon, 2012; Grove et al., 1997). The emotional trauma and stress that occur due to injury are a response from the perceived loss of the athletic identity (Grove et al., 1997; Lockhart, 2010). Sparkes (1998) conducted a study where the participant reported feeling not only a loss in athletic identity, but a loss in control of her body. The former relationship the athlete had with her body caused her to view her pre-injury status in a glorified way (Sparkes, 1998). Due to the injury that ended the student-athlete's career, she reported feeling stress during the process of reconstructing her thoughts and of reconstructing her body.

Minoritized individuals in revenue-generating sports, men's basketball and football, experience the greatest identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012). Identity foreclosure is defined as a commitment to an identity without thoroughly exploring other identities (Melendez, 2009). Beamon's (2012) study with athletic identity and foreclosure in Black male former student athletes revealed that 75% identified that being an athlete was their most central identity. Not only did they identify with their athletic identity, but also the majority of the participants thought that those close to them and outsiders viewed them as an athlete first as well. With the high sense of athletic identity, this group could be at risk for a diminished sense of belonging if an injury occurred. Transitions in identity and athletic experience due to an injury cannot happen in isolation (Sparks, 1998). Student athletes have to learn coping mechanisms as they deal with the loss or change in identity (Grove et al., 1997; Lockhart, 2010; Sparkes, 1998). Because of the stress and emotional trauma caused due to the injury, a student athlete experiencing this in isolation could experience negative outcomes.

For Black student athletes, their identity with their athletic status is intersected with their racial identity as well (Melendez, 2009). Depending on the context of their institution, their identity can fluctuate throughout their time because of the environment. For example, if a Black student athlete is on a team at a Predominately White Institution (PWI), the context of their institution could influence how they view their athletic identity. Steinfeldt et al. (2010) found that Black student athletes that attended PWIs had a stronger sense of athletic identity. They found that because Black athletes are underrepresented at PWIs, but overrepresented in athletics, these student athletes held a strong connection to their athletic identity.

Subculture on Campus

The experience of a student athlete varies from that of student non athletes, and as a result, subcultures can form on campus (Gayles et al., 2018). Depending on the sport on campus, some student athletes can be seen as campus celebrities (Moir, 2016).

Identifying with the team not only gives student athletes a sense of community, but also a sense of belonging due to their “over-bonding” between travel, practices, competitions, and athletic meetings (Clopton & Finch, 2010). Because of athletics as a subculture prevalent on campuses, the membership with a team has positive and negative attributes for the individual. Within the subculture of athletics, there are teams that are individually based such as track and field, tennis, golf, or pistol and rifle. The group membership and concept of peers for these student athletes are not as strong as those competing in team sports (Chen et al., 2010).

Male student athletes in both individual sports and team-sports report feeling high levels of social capital in their team settings due to the trust built as a team. Women report feeling higher levels of social capital in their sport settings in comparison to men (Clopton & Finch, 2010). Yet, White student athletes perceive a greater sense of social capital than their Black student athlete peers (Clopton & Finch, 2010). This perceived social capital as it relates to their campus and local community shows positive benefits of being a member of an athletic team. For those who are involved in athletics, it can be a positive association to be related to or associated with the role of being an athlete on an institution’s athletic team (Chen et al., 2010).

However, the membership in this group could change completely due to an injury. Student athletes who may seek counseling or support during their time of injury could

face barriers due to membership in the subculture. For one, athletics can feel closed off from the rest of the institution as athletic departments often act independently (Watson, 2003). Oftentimes, athletic departments offer their student athletes services for the specific population that may be offered elsewhere on campus for the general population. For example, a Division I school may offer student athletes academic services, career resources, mental health professionals, and volunteer involvement coordinators to allow student athletes to address their needs within the context of NCAA regulations. Another issue is that due to NCAA sanctions, universities are fearful of offering many extra benefits for student athletes (Watson, 2003). If the departments receive NCAA sanctions, they could be punished with withholding of scholarships, competition play, or championships (NCAA, 2019).

Group Dynamics

As a member of an athletic team, student athletes can benefit from being a part of a team. Some of the characteristics of being a member of this exclusive team are having the same morals, values, and beliefs as many members of the team (Martin et al., 2015). Though there can be positives and negatives to this type of group, there still can be a sense of support with teammates that are going through some of the same team challenges and goals as the individual. These group dynamics often help student athletes foster interpersonal relationships through their experience on campus with their teammates even outside of the athletic realm. These “cliques” can be formed on teams through positions or events, skill level, age, and even social status. This close-knit group forms as a result of continued familiarity throughout the season and beyond. This group

dynamic can also cause student athletes to feel a greater sense of belonging at an institution (Martin et al., 2015).

Student Athletes and Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging can affect the student athlete's experience at an institution in many ways. Fearon et al. (2011) researched sense of belonging and how belonging affected burnout among 75 first year student athletes at a private institution. Lack of sense of belonging had a more significant effect on first year student athletes graduating later than burnout did. One of the findings of the study was that some student athletes did not feel like students, and therefore lacked a sense of belonging to the institution. Yet, student athletes who feel a sense of belonging throughout their athletic identity and student identity have a greater desire to want to graduate. However, sense of belonging seems to have a greater impact on persistence at an institution than academic burnout (Fearon et al., 2011).

Belonging to a sports team gives student athletes a sense of social support and community (Walseth, 2006). This support is valuable to an athlete in and outside of the sports context. Belonging to this group gave members additions to their identity construction (Walseth, 2006). Student athletes in team sports may also feel a greater sense of belonging than those in individualized sports (Walseth, 2006). Depending on how other areas of life are going for athletes, belonging to an athletic team can be a feeling of relief or escape (Walseth, 2006). In this context, belonging becomes important as athletes are battling tough circumstances through the community, support, and belonging of their group.

Gayles et al. (2018) researched sense of belonging for student athletes by examining their background and campus climate. Her definition for sense of belonging was “perceptions of how well [student athletes] fit within, and feel connected to, their college environment (Gayles et al., 2018, p. 27). From the study, they found that women, white, and student athletes competing in non-revenue generating sports had the highest sense of belonging in comparison with men, students of color, and student athletes competing in revenue generating sports (Gayles et al., 2018). Outside of athletics, the factors that could predict a student athlete’s sense of belonging were their background characteristics, academic and social experiences. Not only does the overall campus climate have an impact on the students’ sense of belonging, but also their climate on their team (Gayles et al., 2018). An implication in this study is that student athletes have to be engaged past their athletic identity in order to gain a greater sense of belonging. However, if an institution does not focus on helping students explore other identities outside of athletics, a student athlete risks losing that belonging through an injury. Injured student athletes are at a great risk of experiencing a lack of sense of belonging.

In support of creating a greater sense of belonging for student athletes, the NCAA has established the GOALS program. GOALS is an acronym for the Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in College (NCAA, 2016). This recent initiative aimed to focus on the student athlete’s experience in college athletics, academics, and social experience. There is also a focus on helping student athletes develop on campus support and well-being. As the NCAA studied how student athletes felt in these areas, student athletes reported feeling a strong sense of belonging within their team environment (NCAA, 2016). However, student athletes of color did not find

their team environments as inclusive. Student athletes also reported being a member of the team allowed them positive opportunities including teamwork, work ethic, and personal responsibility. It should also be pointed out that though the student athletes are interactive with student non athletes, the majority of respondents reported that their closest peers are their teammates (NCAA, 2016). This could also be because though the respondents reported a high sense of belonging, they discussed that they feel that peer students are less supportive of athletics.

Belonging for a student athlete includes their involvement on their team, as the act of participating in athletic involvement and membership can create conditions for sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). An injury can affect immediate standing on their athletic team as well as their membership in the team community. The risk of injury not only affects a student athlete's physical health, but also their mental and emotional health (Heil, 1994; Sheinbein, 2016). When an injury threatens a student athlete's involvement, it can affect their sense of belonging at the institution. Without a sense of belonging, the student athlete is at risk for disengagement, isolation, depression, and ultimately lack of persistence in their academic and athletic pursuits (Brazzell, 2001; Cheng, 2004; Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Strayhorn, 2018).

Injury and the Student Athlete

For student athletes, injuries are inevitable. Yet, sense of belonging in this group is a necessity for student success and persistence (Strayhorn, 2018). As stated, there are multiple conditions that can create a sense of belonging for students on campus, including community, environment, faculty and staff, and peer interaction (Brazzell, 2001; Cheng, 2004; Johnson et al., 2018; Osterman, 2000; Strayhorn, 2018). There are also other

factors that help student athletes create a sense of belonging as a member of their athletic teams (Gayles et al., 2018; NCAA, 2016; Walseth, 2006). However, experiencing an injury can cause a student athlete's immediate role to change drastically. An injury could plague a student athlete for a few games or matches, an entire season, or be career ending. The student athlete then has to participate in rehabilitation while their teammates are practicing, participating, and competing. As their role changes from an athletic participant to a bystander, their sense of belonging may be impacted.

The NCAA as the governing body has not created mandated policies or regulations as it concerns student athlete well-being in college. They list important pieces in the collegiate student athlete experience as overall educational experience, cultural diversity and gender equity, health and safety, student athlete/coach relationship, fairness, openness, and honest, and student athlete involvement (NCAA, 2019). When discussing the health and safety of student athletes, the adopted principle is "it is the responsibility of each member institution to protect the health of, and provide a safe environment for, each of its participating student-athletes" (NCAA, 2019, p. 3). The NCAA now provides resources and training to help institutions support the overall health of their student athletes (NCAA, 2016).

Prevalence of Injury

The oversight of injury by the NCAA has grown over the last couple of decades due to a rise in injuries in collegiate sport (NCAA, 2019). Concerns have grown from the public and athletic sector on how student athletes receive treatment for injuries that may plague them long after college. Kerr et al. (2015) studied the NCAA injury surveillance program through the academic years of 2009-2013. There were over one million injuries

during the time period, which averaged to over 200,000 injuries per year, with over 60% of injuries occurring during practice. Nearly 20% of all injuries reported required over a week of recovery time before returning back to practice. A sprain was the most common injury in all sports, with over 50% of sprain cases needing a week or more of recovery time. Sprains were also the leading injury that required surgery, which would increase the amount of time away from sport. They found that the injuries that occurred in competition were seemingly more severe. Men's wrestling, women's gymnastics, men's ice hockey, and football were among the highest injury rates of NCAA sports.

Over 30% of injury in athletes occurs due to overuse (Cody, 2012). Overuse injury can refer to using the same muscle group or movement for long periods of time as can be seen in practices or training. It is important to note that the prevalence of injury in collegiate athletes depends on the physicality of the sports, with sports with more contact having a higher prevalence of injury. With practices happening more than competitions, student athletes are constantly at risk for injury.

Injury Responses

When an injury occurs for a student athlete, they can have a variety of emotional reactions including anger, frustrations, isolation, sadness, disengagement, and sleep pattern disturbance (Putukian, 2019). These issues can manifest into anxiety or depression, which affects the student athlete's performance across other environments including academics and social integration (NCAA, 2019). Though students deal with injury and its effects in different ways, there are realities that student athletes encounter through the process. A main focus in athletic literature related to the effects and impact of student athlete injury is Kübler-Ross's (1969) scholarship, *On Death and Dying*. This

grief loss process is often central in literature around student athlete injury as the student deals with their own grief process (Bennett et al., 2016; Gould et al., 1997; Harris, 2003; Taylor, 2014; Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998). The seriousness of this effect on the emotional, psychological, and physical nature of an injury is similar to the grief process.

Kübler-Ross (1969) defined the grief process as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In the denial stage, patients are in shock and not accepting of the news. Patients show anger in a way that expresses that it is not fair. Anger can turn into other negative emotions such as resentment and rage. Bargaining is the emotion that somehow, someday, the patient can turn the news around in order to try again or be able to change the event. Depression is a part of the cycle where disconnection to others can occur. Lastly, acceptance is the final stage of the grief cycle where the patient comes to terms with the event and prepares themselves for the process of it. Heil (1994) based a description of the athlete injury process on the framework of a grief process.

Heil (1994) discussed the use of this model when researching athlete injury. He argued that though the Kübler-Ross (1969) model was a good foundation of dealing with injury, he developed additions to the model for athlete injury. Based off Kübler-Ross's work, Heil (1994) researched the emotional experience of loss, the work and process of recovery, and the use of denial as a defense mechanism. Instead of expressing the feelings in stages, he found that it was a cycle that could repeat itself during the process of rehabilitation. He also added the elements of an injury to include increased distress and determined coping strategies (Heil, 1994). Heil's model has seven stages that are not intended to be experienced in a linear way: preinjury, immediate post injury, treatment decisions and implementation, early postoperative/rehabilitation, late

postoperative/rehabilitation, specificity, and return to play. Preinjury is the period before the injury occurs. Immediate post injury is the period right after the injury occurs, and a variety of emotional responses happen as a result to the injury including fear or anxiety. Treatment decisions and implementation is the stage where an athlete copes with the injury, but a surgery or medical procedure could affect emotional response. Early postoperative/rehabilitation is where an athlete could feel helplessness with their injury. Late postoperative/rehabilitation is the stage of recovery and routine rehabilitation. Emotional responses could range from low motivation as the rehabilitation process causes the athlete to feel alienated and isolated from their team. Specificity includes success at rehabilitation, which could yield a positive emotional response or fear of failure when returning to play. The last stage is return to play where the athlete enters back into the sport environment. The athlete could express denial about how the injury affected the body or how they are coping with changes in their body. Heil's (1994) affective cycle of injury provided athletic trainers and professionals more insight into rehabilitation process of an injury.

Psychological Response

As pointed out by Kübler-Ross (1969) and Heil (1994), student athletes often experience a psychological shock and denial of their injury. The beginning stage of an injury causes student athlete to avoid it, underestimate the time that they will need to recover, and ignore the long-term consequences (Shuer & Dietrich, 1997). After experiencing an injury, student athletes may question what they could have done differently to have avoided this injury (Gould et al., 1997). There is a sense of loss of what could have been during the season that may have now all come to an end. These

psychological concerns have the student athlete focusing on the loss not only of participation, but of their personal goals. Other psychological effects are depression, anxiety, and lack of focus or concentration (Appaneal et al., 2009; Etzel, 2006; Granito Jr., 2001; Harris, 2003).

Gould et al. (1997) interviewed high-performing athletes who dealt with serious injury during their season. The problems discussed in this study were how the athletes viewed stress from the injury and how the process of being injured was upsetting and frustrating. The scholars focused on the psychological concerns of the athletes as they expressed questioning their future in the sport, loss of competition and preparation time to compete, losing their spot on the team, fear of re-injury, and re-entering completion (Gould et al., 1997). The participants in the study also focused on social concerns that could hint at sense of belonging. For example, the participants reported low support from coaches, teammates, and trainers. Yet, one of the implications for practice that the scholars mentioned is for future scholarship to examine more about how social support affects the sport environment as it relates to injury.

Sheinbein (2016) defined how depressive symptoms can be based in how long the student athlete will be injured and how long it will take to return to competition. These depressive symptoms can also leave the student athlete feeling absent from the team and socially isolated from other (Sheinbein, 2016). If the student athlete had prior mental health challenges, the psychological effect could be even greater post-injury. Psychological distress during the injury process could prolong recovery (Sheinbein, 2016).

Athletes also report experiencing social comparison with other athletes in the same sport or position (Gould et al., 1997). The social comparison comes from believing that the athlete was better than another athlete before injury, or fearing student non athletes losing their starting position on the team or losing in a competition with an athlete that they previously won against (Gould et al., 1997). These types of psychological concerns can weigh on a student athlete during their injury process and can lead to more stress during that time.

Emotional Response

Pre-injury, student athletes often have a difficult time expressing emotional problems or the need for emotional support (Bauman, 2016; Pinkerton et al., 1989). There is a mental toughness of their athletic identity that inhibits them from relying on mental health services or emotional support. This can be an obstacle post-injury as research shows that injured student athletes will encounter emotional responses related to injury (Etzel, 2006). Heil (1994) stated that an athlete's experience with injury will be a cyclical rather than linear process of emotions. The immediate post injury experience is where a student athlete could be the most vulnerable due to denial of how long their injury healing process could take or the anxiety surrounding the unknown of the experience (Heil, 1994). Athletes may feel a sense of isolation through this process if they are not close to home or where they find comfort during a time of discomfort. As they continued navigating the process, student athletes in one study felt a negative emotional response to teammates and coaches who continued to reframe their situation in a positive light without listening support (NCAA, 2014). Injured student athletes found

comfort and normalization in the ability to express negative emotions related to their injury to other injured student athletes (NCAA, 2014).

A professional football athlete, Kenny McKinley died by suicide during a season he had to sit out because of an injury (ESPN, 2010). Coaches and teammates were shocked by the sudden loss of McKinley. They reported that the experience of injury weighed a lot on him emotionally as he was navigating how to continue on without the release of football (ESPN, 2010). Though this incident cannot be completely rooted in his injury, McKinley shared with others the emotional toll and strain of being injured. The risks factors for dying by suicide increases when athletes are faced with an injury that requires surgery, replacement by team, loss of previous athletic skill, or a long rehabilitation process (Smith & Milliner, 1994). The emotional response to an injury can take a toll on the student athlete that others around do not immediately recognize. However, time-loss injury puts student athletes at risk for high level emotional responses.

Physical Response

Kerr et al. (2015) studied the NCAA injury surveillance program through the academic years of 2004-2013. Nearly 20% of all injuries reported required over a week of recovery time before returning back to practice. As an injury in athletics is considered a physical one, the loss of routine activity can cause a concern for the student athlete. The adjustment of resting due to injury can make the student athlete feel inactive or less active than their teammates (Gould et al., 1997). Depending on the type of injury, there is pain associated immediately (Granito Jr., 2001). The body may have to go through surgery and then rely on painkillers to get through rehabilitation, daily activity, and other athletically related events (Granito Jr., 2001). Depending on the injury, the student athlete

may have to adjust to differences in daily life including walking, opening a door, typing or writing (Granito Jr., 2001). As the daily changes become a hassle, injured student athletes often feel frustrated.

Fear of Re-injury

While a student athlete is dealing with an injury, many deal with anxieties and worry over reinjuring themselves (Sheinbein, 2016). They worry that their body may not perform at the ability level it did before the injury and thus affect their chances and future in their sport (Sheinbein, 2016). The fear of re-injury is a feeling that can linger in a student athlete's mind throughout the recovery process and after (Gould et al., 1997). This overriding fear can affect an athlete's return to their sport as they doubt their ability. The fear of re-injury can affect the process of injury and the rehabilitation process. These feelings and thoughts around the inevitable end of rehabilitation can cause an athlete to be stressed before reentry into their sport. Towards the end of the recovery process, athletes report not feeling emotionally ready to compete again (Gould et al., 1997). The doubts and nervousness that pervade an athlete during the injury recovery process can cause them to stall their return back to the sport (Gould et al., 1997).

An Integrated Model

Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) designed an integrated model of response to sport injury. The responses to sport injury for an athlete include multiple psychological and sociological factors, including personal and situational factors. Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) created this model for sports professionals to better understand the response to a sports injury. A response to a sport injury will differ depending on the athlete's personality, history of stressors, demographics, sport, and environment (Wiese-Bjornstal

et al., 1998). Though athletes have emotional, psychological, and physical responses to their injuries, this model included keeping the athlete's personal and situational factors as a focus to their response to injury. This comprehensive model serves as a foundation for my interview protocol portion of my methodology, which I will discuss in chapter 3.

The emotional, psychological, and mental effects of an injury on a student athlete can cause them to feel many emotions throughout their process. As a student athlete, the demands are intense from their sport and their academic eligibility. When something drastic changes their athletic experience, it can affect them in their academic coursework as well. The injury experience can feel isolating as their immediate status on the team is questioned. This experience could impact their sense of belonging at their institution, which would threaten not only their persistence, but emotional health.

Social Support During Injury

According to Shumaker and Brownell (1984), social support can be defined as “an exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient” (p. 11). Scholars have used this definition to understand social support and athletics. Social support is beneficial to help student athletes dealing with injury (Barefield & McCallister, 1997; Corbillon et al., 2008; Judge et al., 2012).

Pines et al. (1981) established six frameworks of social support that professionals need in order to curb burnout. Their study was focused on comparison between men and women and their mental exhaustion and burnout towards their work, environment, and self. Richman et al. (1993) expanded on the framework of social support when they designed a model that is readily used in athletic research on social support and injured

student athletes. The frameworks are listening support, emotional support, emotional challenge, reality confirmation, task appreciation, task challenge, tangible assistance, and personal assistance (Richman et al., 1993). Listening support is the feeling of the person expressing themselves that the other person is listening without adding advice or judging them. Emotional support means the person feels cared for, comforted, and supported. Emotional challenge is that person feels challenged, yet supported in the construction of their values, attitudes, and feelings. Reality confirmation is that the person feels confirmed in their reality that is happening. Task appreciation is when the person feels appreciated for the efforts and expression they give. Task challenge is when the person feels challenged, yet supported, in obstacles that stretch or grow the person. It should be noted task appreciation and task challenge are mostly given by athletic trainers and coaches (Barefield & McAllister, 1997). Tangible assistance is support that comes from tangible resources such as financial support or gifts. Finally, personal assistance is the support that comes from providing services such as errands for the one who needs supported (Richman et al., 1993). When social support is there for an injured student athlete, there is less stress during the rehabilitation process (Petrie et al., 2014). Social support can be such a significant factor that student athletes who have a good foundation of social support actually miss fewer days due to their injury than those who do not have good social support (Petrie et al., 2014).

Student athletes often find this support from their family and friends during their injury (deGroot et al., 2018; Lu & Hsu, 2013; Rosenfeld et al., 1989; Yang et al., 2010). Yang et al. (2010) conducted a study where student athletes cited that all social support in their lives remained consistent with their family and friends through their injury, but the

athletic trainer's support in an injured athlete's life grew the most. Athletic trainers become a big part of social support for injured student athletes for many different reasons, including the time spent in rehabilitation with the student athlete.

Athletic Trainers

Athletic trainers provide a great deal of social support to injured student athletes (Barefield & McClallister, 1997). One of the main reasons is the amount of time an injured student athlete spends with an athletic trainer (Bennett et al., 2016; Clement & Shannon, 2011). They provide listening support, which is important to the injured student athlete. They also provide task appreciation as they guide the injured student athlete through the rehabilitation exercises (Barefield & McCallister, 1997). Student athletes report feeling more supported by their athletic trainers than their coaches or assistant coaches (Clement & Shannon, 2011; Gray, 2019). Injured student athletes begin to build honesty and trust in their relationship with the athletic trainer as the trainer sees more of their vulnerable side (Bennett et al., 2016; Clement & Shannon, 2011). Athletic trainers are crucial at the beginning of the injury as student athletes are going through the rehabilitation process (Corbillion et al., 2008).

Coaches

From the studies on social support, student athletes have provided a wide range of perspectives on the role of coaches in the injury process. Gearity (2012) explored how student athletes felt that their coaches were uncaring and unfair during their injury process. Student athletes felt disposable as they were no longer in the position to help the team win, and therefore received little attention or care from their coaches. They expressed feeling pushed aside as the coaches focused on healthier team members.

Student athletes also reported coaches are not as aware as they should be about the hardships that occur during the injury process (deGroot et al., 2018). Social support from coaches also depended on if the student athlete was an active participant or starter for the team (Corbillion et al., 2008). If the student athlete was critical to success, they felt more task challenge support as the coaches were eager to get them back into the field of play.

Teammates

Injured student athletes discussed how teammates have a role in providing emotional support throughout the rehabilitation process (Clement & Shannon, 2011). Some student athletes felt that their teammates were more available for social support than their coaches (Corbillion et al., 2008). Yet, some student athletes reported feeling that their teammates had “moved on” as they go from focusing on the teammate’s injury to continue on with competing. Injured student athletes also have to deal with the adjustment and reality of a teammate replacing them in competition (Wrisberg & Fisher, 2005). Over time, teammates may forget that social support is necessary for the student athlete just as much as was needed at the beginning (deGroot et al., 2018).

To continue feeling a level of support from being a part of the team, injured student athletes often take on other roles within the team as an intern, manager, or volunteer (deGroot et al., 2018). Though role changes such as these may allow student athletes to feel a part of the team, the reduced role can also make them feel disconnected from the team (deGroot et al., 2018). This disconnection can also stem from the student athlete’s age (Granito Jr., 2001). For example, if the injury occurs in the latter part of their career, the experience can be seen as devastating to their athletic identity as their role changes. If the injury happens within the first year or early on in their career, student

athletes consider the role change temporary, and one that they can overcome. Many times, the athletic trainer is a facilitator to get the student athlete back connected with the team so they are able to remain “in the loop” (Wrisberg & Fisher, 2005).

Conclusion

Strayhorn (2018) defined a sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (p. 28). Through the review of literature, creating conditions for sense of belonging includes peer interactions, faculty and staff, and environment (Brazzell, 2001; Cheng, 2004; Johnson et al., 2018; Osterman, 2000; Strayhorn, 2018). An injured student athlete is at risk for experiencing low sense of belonging as related to the immediate changes in their athletic role, changes in their interactions, and athletic identity (Beamon, 2012; Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997; Houle et al., 2010, Melendez, 2009). Though athletes may experience support from their friends, family, and sometimes teammates and coaches during injury (e.g. Clement & Shannon, 2011; Corbillion et al., 2008; deGroot et al., 2018; Wrisberg & Fisher, 2005), support alone is not enough to foster sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Through the review of literature related to sense of belonging and student athletes, my methodology presented in the next chapter will explain my approach to seek understanding on how being injured effects sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study was the research question: How does the experience of being injured affect a student athlete's sense of belonging? This chapter provides a detailed description of research paradigm, methodology, and research design that I used to explore this research question.

Research Paradigm

As I sought to learn more about the experience of injured student athletes, I leaned on their view of the various items we discuss in order to co-construct knowledge about their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The storytelling of the participant was crucial as I was not solely an observer, but an interactive instrument in the process (Hoffman, 1991). As the student athletes chose to share their storied experiences, using theoretical and literature-based questions, asking follow up questions, and checking for understanding, allowed me to co-construct knowledge and meaning with the student athletes. The constructivist paradigm requires the researcher to take note of “both relatively social aspects of experience and relatively individual aspects” (Hoffman, 1991, p. 102). The constructivist paradigm provided the framework for me to focus on the experience of injured student athletes by exploring the individual experiences of it.

For the purposes of this study, I utilized a social constructivist paradigm. A social constructivist paradigm can be defined as “seek[ing] understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings

directed toward certain objects or things” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). This paradigm allowed multiple meanings to emerge from the data instead of a narrow or strict interpretation. This meaning making was built on the interactions of me as the researcher with the participants by learning about their background, context of being a student athlete in the 21st century, personal interpretations of the athletic experience, and specifics surrounding being injured during their time with the team. Because some of the ways that the participants viewed current experience within their upbringing, it was important to use an interactive approach to learn detailed information about their experience (Hoffman, 1991).

Ontology

Within the constructivist framework, the nature of reality relies in multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ponterotto, 2005). Because reality is subjective in nature and influenced by various factors of the participants (environment, background, experience), the meaning of those realities is co-constructed with the researcher (Ponterotto, 2005). As themes emerged out of the constructivist paradigm approach, the focus was not to create a single story, but a platform where the various realities are valued and shared with readers. These multiple realities are formed through the researcher and participants’ lived experiences and interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Epistemology

The focus of epistemology was rooted in the relationship between me as the researcher and the participants. Our interaction caused meaning of experiences to be mutually constructed (Ponterotto, 2005) There was a co-construction of reality as we were both learning from each other’s individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

From our interactions, an aim is that after the experience of researching and exploring the various concepts around injured student athletes, both the researcher and participant would be changed in some way from the interaction (Ponterotto, 2005).

Axiology

As the researcher, I was the main instrument involved in collecting data from the participant. My values, biases, and lived experience cannot be separated from the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). The values of the researcher and the participants are revealed throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through my experience working in athletics and my family background in athletics, my values could be construed as caring, understanding, and familiar with the role of athletics. However, I still functioned as an outsider depending on the participant's perspective because I did not have being a college athlete or former college athlete in common with the participants. Therefore, throughout this process, I recorded my subjectivity and positionality through journaling as various events, discussions, and ideas bring them about. This way, I was able to keep track and balance how my values and background affect the lens of research.

Using the social constructivist research paradigm was vital to understand the experience of the injured student athlete and how it affected their sense of belonging on their team and at their institution. At the root of the social constructivist paradigm is the need to hear, listen, and understand a story of a participant from behind the lens as the main research instrument.

Theoretical Framework

Sense of belonging as outlined by Strayhorn (2018) is the foundation for this study and served as its theoretical framework. Strayhorn (2018) outlines sense of belonging with seven key elements:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need.
2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior.
3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance
 - a. In certain contexts
 - b. At certain times
 - c. Among certain populations
4. Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering.
5. Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging.
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change (Strayhorn, 2018, pp. 159-161).

Sense of belonging is a basic human need and so applies to all students regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or other demographic factors. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, certain times, and among certain populations. Certain contexts could include a student athlete joining a new team through transferring from another college or transitioning from high school to college. Certain times include what year the student athlete is and how their idea of belonging could change from their freshman year to their senior year. The phrase “among certain populations” took on important contexts in this research. Certain populations include

those who are of marginalized identities who could feel ostracized before inclusion or can still feel that in the early stages of inclusion. An example of certain populations in the context of belonging could be student athletes who are in the racial majority of their institution, but the racial minority of their team.

By using the sense of belonging framework as outlined by Strayhorn (2018), I explored the research question: How does the experience of being injured affect a student athlete's sense of belonging? The research design has to fit the question that I aimed to explore (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because I explored the experience of injured student athletes and their sense of belonging, I used narrative inquiry to hear their stories.

Research Design

The topic of sense of belonging has been explored through qualitative and quantitative methods (Strayhorn, 2008, 2012, 2018). However, I primarily utilized qualitative methods to explore the experience of injured student athletes and how it impacted their sense of belonging at the institution and with their athletic community. Using qualitative research as the basis for my design allowed me to focus on the stories of my participants and their perspectives on their journey throughout the injury process.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research gives the researcher the ability to situate themselves in the personal experience of participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). I utilized qualitative research to situate myself in the experience of an injured student athlete. A main focus of qualitative research approach is to look at an experience with a wide view in order for participants' individual experiences to enlighten the research questions.

This causes the researchers to seek to understand the multiple views and perspectives of participants. I utilized qualitative research because I aimed to interact with injured student athletes in order to discover “how they think, how they interact, what kinds of agreements or norms are present, and how these dimensions come together holistically to describe the group” (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 36). This method gave me the best insight into the group and experience of injured student athletes.

The main qualitative research method I used for this study was narrative inquiry by the means of semi-structured interviews rooted in Strayhorn’s sense of belonging and other literature researched on student athletes. Narrative inquiry allowed space for participants to tell their stories of their experiences with injury and sense of belonging. Interviews serve to have the researcher ask guided questions and create enough space for participants to give their input on their experience. Narrative inquiry through semi structured interviews paved a path for intimate storytelling by the participants to describe how injured student athletes experience a sense of belonging.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was the most effective research design for me to explore the experience of injured student athletes because I focused on the particular experience of these student athletes as narrated by them (Chase, 2005). I strived to hear the stories of injured student athletes and their experiences with sense of belonging. Using the constructivist paradigm of co-constructing knowledge required me to spend time understanding and participating in the participants’ worldviews, which was done by spending time understanding lived experiences and stories of student athletes (Ponterotto, 2005). Rooting my research design in narrative inquiry allowed my participants to tell

stories of their experience, while I was able to retell and analyze those stories through data collection and analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Chase (2005) discussed using narrative inquiry as a qualitative approach with five analytic lenses. First, narrative inquiry allows participants to express their emotions and feelings of a past experience by meaning making with the researcher. Second, narrative inquiry provides a space for verbal action. “When researchers treat narrative as actively creative in this way, they emphasize the narrator’s voice(s)” (p. 657). Through this active experience, as the researcher, I was able to focus on the voices of the participants as I listened to their experience as they told their stories. Third, narrative researchers cannot only situate the stories within the narrator’s circumstances, but also connect across narratives the similarities and differences. Each student athlete had their own story on how injury affected them, but similar themes were pulled out as well as differences in their stories. Fourth, narratives can change based on the context of setting and audience. Because of this, narrative inquiry becomes a “joint production of the narrator and listener” as they tell their stories (p. 657). Finally, it was up to me as the researcher to develop my own voice through the research while I assisted in analyzing, constructing, and presenting participant voices and realities (Chase, 2005).

Because I researched the experience of injured student athletes and their sense of belonging in that journey, it was important for me to focus on the participants’ lived experience of it. Their storytelling is essential in conveying how their injuries impacted their sense of belonging. One of the drawbacks of narratives inquiry is that as the researcher and participants’ voice become one, I had to be careful to make sure my voice was not the most dominant in the storytelling. In order to prevent this, I utilized member

checking with the participants to ensure that their stories and meaning were being told in the way they expressed and intended it.

Recruitment Plan

I recruited from a population rather than a specific institution. To recruit these student athletes for my study, I sent information through my professional networks. I used the National Association of Athletic Academic Advisors (N4A). N4A is a subgroup of the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics that has over 15,000 members of athletic administrators and 1,700 institutions (NACDA, 2020). I emailed the listserv to provide a brief introduction of my study. The email (Appendix A) briefly explained the study and provided my contact information for potential participants to reach me if they are interested in being a part of the study.

I also utilized the Multicultural Excellence in College Athletics GroupMe. This community GroupMe is for athletic staff of color across the nation (Microsoft Corporation, 2020). There were over 400 members in this GroupMe that included academic staff members, administrators, conference employees, coaches, and trainers. This GroupMe membership reached a wide range of athletes at different institutional types and regions across the nation. I asked these members to also share the study demographic questionnaire with student athletes who fit the criteria by sending them a modified version of Appendix A, which outlines eligibility for the student including that the participant is a current or former (within the last five years) student athlete who sustained a time-loss injury that required rehabilitation on campus. I provided my contact information for those who have participants in mind or student athletes who want to participate. From there, I sent those potential participants a more detailed questionnaire

that will be discussed in the participant section. After utilizing these methods for two weeks, I assessed the number of potential participants that fit the criteria of the study.

Participants

For the purposes of this study, I sought to recruit participants who are current student athletes or who were student athletes from 2014-2019. Eligibility for participants is outlined in more detail in the questionnaire (Appendix B) that I used to evaluate eligibility of potential participants. I tried to capture student athletes who experienced an athletic-related injury and went through the rehabilitation process on campus. Because I researched sense of belonging, it was vital that I examined that experience with the participant by researching their time spent on campus and with their athletic and campus community during their injury instead of rehabbing away from campus as would have been done during the pandemic. If a student was injured in fall 2019, there were only a couple of months before the COVID-19 pandemic that a student athlete would have participated in on-campus rehabilitation. Therefore, I was interested in working with participants who experienced their injury during or before summer 2019. I also asked for student athletes who participated in the last five years to get a more recent perspective on the student athlete experience through injury. In addition to those stipulations, former student athletes removed from their team or school within the last five years are eligible to participate in the study. After eight potential participants contacted me to indicate that they were interested in participating in my study, I provided them with a questionnaire by email (Appendix B) to determine if they are eligible for the study. Six of the potential participants followed up to be a part of the study. The questionnaire included

demographic and institutional questions, and questions related to their specific injury. All participants happened to be current or former NCAA student athletes.

For the purpose of the study, the participants selected were Penelope, an African-American woman athlete, Raylene, an African-American woman athlete, Isaac, an African-American male athlete, Sloan, a White woman athlete, Lionel, a White male athlete, and Myles, an African-American male athlete.

Sampling Plan

For the purposes of narrative inquiry, fewer participants allow for the researcher to focus in on their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Daiute, 2013). I interviewed six participants in order to give intentional time to their stories. I utilized a sampling plan that includes critical-case sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Because I sent out an initial questionnaire to see if a student athlete qualifies as a participant for the study, I chose the most critical cases out of that information. One of the questions on the questionnaire asked the student athlete to describe their injury. It was important for me to choose time-loss injuries rather than injuries that students competed with. Though my focus was on time-loss injuries, I created a group of participants from various sports and institutional types to explore the experience of injury and sense of belonging.

Data Collection

Before I began data collection, participants received a consent form that they reviewed for understanding before proceeding with the interview (Appendix C). I sent the consent form before the interview and asked participants at the beginning of the recorded interview if they read the form and understood it. This way, I had their consent on the recorded interview. Because of the constant uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and

the need to ensure safety for both my participants and me, I used synchronous video interviews or phone interviews. I collected data through a semi structured interview format (Appendix D). A semi structured interview allowed me to ask predetermined questions, but also gave room to ask questions as the conversation with each participant changes (Longhurst, 2003). I was able to use the same outline of questions for other participants to create consistency in the research interview process (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). When using a semi structured interview format, I was able to investigate behaviors, opinions, emotions, and experiences of the participants in a conversational manner (Longhurst, 2003). I designed the questions in order for discussion to occur and storytelling to take place. In order to remain respectful and sensitive to the experience, my interview questions were rooted not only in Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging framework, but also in the information found in research about how students athletes cope with their athletic identity and their injury as explained in Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) model on athlete injury and response.

Semi-structured interviews, though guided, allowed an openness for the participants to speak about their experiences and for me to include and add prompting questions when necessary. Injury and the student athlete experience is an emotional journey, so my questions were respectful and culturally sensitive to the experience (Rabionet, 2011).

For the interview, I recorded the Zoom call in order to go back and transcribe the interview. I recorded the interview so that when I reviewed the content, I could take notes and journal about emotions, facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues that a recorder may not pick up (Rabionet, 2011).

I also provided and embedded context of the stories before the interviews into data collection to provide a backdrop for the narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This included providing more information about the participants' team success, athletic conference, season outcome, and history of the program. This gives the reader more insight into the environment in which the athlete had participated. In order to do this, I looked into the NCAA descriptions of the athletic division and conference, as well as the team's victories and defeats. I did research before the interview, confirmed it with the participant during the interview, and incorporated this information within the narratives. This information was not based on opinion, but factual information of how the team performed during the participant's time at the institution. I believe that this gave more insight to situate myself in the participant's story and experience.

Data Analysis

I transcribed each interview after conducting them through a transcriber company. I checked for accuracy by looking over the transcript along with the recording. Then, I utilized the coding method of Saldaña (2013) for my qualitative data. Saldaña (2013) suggested that exploring lived experiences would include certain coding processes including emotion and value coding. For the first cycle of coding, I used both in vivo and emotion coding. Applying two coding methods for the first cycle of data allowed me to take a deeper look into the data (Saldaña, 2013). I used in vivo coding because it helped invoke my methodology of narrative inquiry as it focused on the participants' language and sole description of their experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Saldaña, 2013). I extracted the phrases, quotes, and descriptions that the participants used as the basis of the codes. Coding with the participants' actual words highlighted what was significant to

them through their personal experience of injury in college athletics. I thoroughly reviewed each line of the transcript for in vivo coding.

After coding with in vivo coding, I used emotion coding for the first cycle of analysis as well. Emotion coding was an effective method to understand the feelings of the participants on their emotional journey through their experience with injury (Saldaña, 2013). I utilized emotion coding by not only using what the participant said in the interview, but the emotions they showed when expressing their experience. To do emotion coding well, I took notes throughout the interview and focused on the participants' emotions when reviewing the recordings of the interview. Emotion coding connected to my methodology of narrative inquiry because it explored the emotional reactions and recall of the experience.

After the first round of coding, I had data that was coded in the participants' language for in vivo coding, as well as coded for their emotions experienced throughout the interview. For my second cycle of coding, I collapsed the data broken down by the participants' language in in vivo coding and emotion coding. I then used that data for the second cycle of coding, in which I utilized focused coding, which follows in vivo coding because of the nature of categorizing responses (Saldaña, 2013). I used focused coding to develop categories of the data collected. Then I created sub-categories of participant response codes by determining which categories were the most salient across interviews and how subcategories are significant to the themes that emerge. By using a tree diagram for these coding methods (hierarchical diagramming with main topics and subtopics), I visualized how the data is connected and interwoven throughout the interview transcripts.

The categories and sub-categories I created were expressed through a researcher memo for me to explore my thinking process throughout the second cycle of coding.

My third cycle of coding consisted of connecting the themes that emerged from the data through the categorical information to answer my research question. I reviewed the relationships of the organized categories of codes and the themes that emerged to determine how they relate to the research question of how being injured affects sense of belonging of injured student athletes.

Creating the narrative to share these stories begins at the point of the participants' participation in the beginning of the research process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Their experience with their injury and how it related to their sense of belonging were the focal point of the findings. I wrote in a way to invite readers to learn about the student athletes' experiences by structuring the narrative in such a way for readers to explore their story through scene and plot (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I created the scene of the narrative by first including a participant profile. Then I introduced the environment of their particular team and institution to create a clearer picture for the reader. Finally, I included the context of the scene, included the team's challenges, past wins, or upcoming events at the time the student was on the team. This included a participant being injured before the playoffs or championship competition. All of these features contributed to creating the scene for the narrative. I then created the plot of the narrative of the participants' stories by including the significance of certain moments shared, value felt by the student athlete, and experiences of belonging. Thoughts and ideas shared during our time together allowed me to retell the plot of their experience that reconstructs the meaning of their experience within the belonging context.

Trustworthiness

In order to use data triangulation, I provided participants an opportunity for member checking (Appendix E). Data triangulation is “a validation approach using multiple investigators, methods, data sources, and/or theoretical perspectives in the search for convergence of results” (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 298). For triangulation, I used member checking after three cycles of coding and analysis because I wanted the participants to confirm the accuracy of not just their words, but my analysis of them. Member checking allowed participants to verify their meaning and contribution to the research (Carlson, 2010). It is important as the researcher to not only verify the transcript, but the analysis of the transcript to verify if the meaning making of the data is what the participant intended and expressed.

Positionality & Reflexivity

My experience, perspectives, and identities affected me as the instrument of qualitative research that understood, analyzed, and presented findings. As the instrument for this research, it was important that I reflected on the frames that created my perspective. I am a Black, Christian woman who identifies as cisgender and heterosexual. I grew up in a Southern suburban area. Living in the South allowed me to see vast discrepancies in wealth as well as educational opportunities.

My father, who played professional basketball and earned a great living, was able to afford to move us to an area with plentiful educational opportunities, and his focus was on the education that my siblings and I were to attain. His time in the NBA earned him a world championship and an All-Star appearance. My brother also played collegiate basketball and earned his bachelor's degree. Growing up in a household where academic

ability was just as important as athletic expression, my career in both was not a far step from familial values.

My career in education and athletics allowed me to see the preparation gap of some student-athletes from the academic preparation of the average student at the universities. My few years of experience in a learning specialist role has given me the privilege to work one-on-one with students who struggle with learning, documented learning disabilities, or academic preparation concerns. All of these pieces inform who I am and how I approached research as an instrument. My experience and upbringing in athletics has allowed me “insider” information on how the power dynamics, politics, and organization connect together in college athletics. However, I also experience outsider dynamics as I was not a former student athlete, so I had to provide the space, autonomy, and respect as student athletes share their experiences, whether those experiences are something that I am familiar with or not. The space is for their narratives.

I wanted to assure that my voice did not overpower participants. Therefore, I continually checked with participants throughout the interview to make sure that I was hearing what they were expressing. Another strategy I used was based on Bourke’s (2014) reflective model of examining my positionality in regards to each participant. This reflective model required me to continually journal throughout the research process of how I showed up as an insider or outsider with my participants as discussed earlier. A journal allowed me to record in real time. By utilizing these strategies, I aimed to make positionality a process rather than an initial statement.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the methodology that I used for this study. I explained the theoretical framework of Strayhorn (2018) that served as the basis of my study. I then discussed how I recruited participants, collected data, and coded data for analysis. At the end of the chapter, I explained the strategies that I used to explore my positionality in order to ensure the reflective nature of a qualitative study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to explore, through narrative inquiry, how the experience of being injured affects a student athlete's sense of belonging. This chapter contains the narratives of the six participants and the themes that emerged from their interviews. Each participant shared their experience as a student athlete in their respective sports and described their challenges with injuries, sense of belonging with their team, and social support through injury rehabilitation. These narratives give insight into how being an injured student athlete affected their time in college and beyond.

Penelope

“And obviously, when I got hurt, I can honestly say I was lost. I was really lost... I know for a fact I was at the lowest part of my life.”

Penelope, a track student athlete from a Division I program, grew up in the northeastern United States and wanted to attend an institution that offered a different experience. Penelope began participating in track and field when she was in fifth grade. Though she was recruited in college to long jump, she did not have the opportunities in her public high school to showcase her talents based on what the facilities offered. However, her coaches had a large part in getting her the exposure necessary for colleges to gain interest in her athletic abilities. One of Penelope's coaches, a former Olympian, helped her train effectively to prepare for college competition. Her coaches would help

her compete at track meets held at larger universities to get the exposure necessary for recruiting.

When deciding where she wanted to attend college, her family wanted her to branch out beyond her comfort zone in the Northeast. Penelope focused on which college would give her the best opportunity for track and field. She contemplated between two universities. In the end, she chose Taylor College because of the scholarship money that they were offering and the opportunity for her to run track. Plus, she was comforted by the fact that though she was going to a new college in an unfamiliar place, there was extended family nearby.

Entering college, Penelope could not see her life without track: “Honestly, I feel it was my identity.” Even with her athletic opportunities and scholarship consideration, she had hesitated on selecting the school based on one of her recruiting visits. One of the members of the team warned her about joining the team, citing the behaviors and attitudes of the teammates. At the time, she thought the stories to be outlandish and unbelievable. Yet, Penelope would soon experience the truth of her teammate’s warning.

Penelope’s teammates created a toxic environment even prior to her injury. It was a struggle for her to connect with the women on the team. Her teammates were known to get into physical altercations with each other or other women on campus. One of the situations ended with one teammate hospitalized and the other admitted into a psychiatric ward. It was a must to have tough skin on the team. There were multiple cliques, envy, and competition that fueled rivalries within the team. Her teammates did not always welcome new talent. She described it as, “If you come in here, you’re better than me, I’m going to knock you out and I’m going to get that spot.” This toxic environment caused

little opportunity for her to develop long lasting relationships. It was hard for her to trust her teammates during her first year. It was not until the team continued to bring in new athletes that Penelope started creating good, working relationships with teammates.

During her junior year of competing, Penelope's knee began bothering her. The track at her university was cement on top of the track material, an unhelpful, hard turf when struggling with knee pain. Penelope pointed out irritation, soreness, and pain to the athletic staff. She intuitively knew something was not right. However, they all encouraged her that she would be fine; they gave her a cortisone shot and she got right back to competing. Her knee pain continued to get worse until later in her junior year, when she injured her knee at a track meet. "April 16, 2016... still remember it," Penelope painfully recalled. She attempted a long jump. Running full speed before hitting her mark and hurling her body in the air to the sand pit, her knee completely blew out, and she barely made it into the pit. An emergency ambulance was dispatched and she was rushed to the hospital.

Upon a devastating injury, her mom was fortunately at the meet that day to accompany her to the hospital. Penelope was in excruciating pain as the doctors notified her that surgery had to be performed as soon as possible for fear of further damage to her knee. The surgery was an intensive three hours. The doctors had to fix the side of her knee as the kneecap popped off and her patella was ripped off. Her injury was so severe that her mom never left; she took time off work and stayed with Penelope throughout her injury as her full-time caregiver. The pain was so intense that her mom had to assist her with everyday actions such as getting out the bed, sitting on the toilet, and getting into the shower. Penelope could barely move on her own and did not leave her room unless she

had to attend class. Her academics declined during that time. She was on pain medicine longer than expected, which affected her ability to focus on her studies. She ended her semester with a 1.9 GPA. “It was just bad, but I held on.” Her grades took a hit, but Penelope insisted on getting through.

Things changed somewhat for Penelope and her teammates after she got injured. Some of the teammates assisted her and her mom, when they were able to, at her off-campus apartment. However, when they found out that she was leaving upon graduation to continue her track and field eligibility elsewhere, they distanced themselves from her. Her coaches, however, were a different story. They supported her throughout her rehabilitation by still providing for her education the summer after her injury. They could have replaced her and used her scholarship for someone else, but instead they continued supporting her so that she could finish up her credits that summer.

Throughout the strenuous and painful rehabilitation process, she ran into another obstacle that summer. Her knee got stuck and was unable to move as it should have after a few weeks. She had to participate in ten different medical sessions where she would lay on her back and they would hold her down and try to force her leg back into place. “It was the nastiest, panifulest thing of my life. Yes, it was very traumatizing. I will say that, very,” Penelope described.

She continued to struggle with this injury throughout the year, through her last semester at the university. She continued to feel like something was not quite right and like she was not making the progress that she thought she should. Penelope shared her concerns with the trainers, but she felt “They just wanted me to get out the door because they didn’t want to pay for any more of my surgeries.” Upon graduation, she went to

another doctor who diagnosed that she had torn her ACL. She was astonished. After dozens of trainer and doctor visits, this was the first time anyone had identified this aspect of her injury. After this, she had an ACL surgery in 2016. She called her trainer numerous times after leaving the university to find out why he did not identify her injury. The trainer never returned her calls.

Penelope planned to have her third surgery on this injury at the end of 2020, pending COVID protocols. This injury has been a longstanding issue since leaving the program and continues to affect her. Reflecting on it, she said, “I feel like these athletes don’t understand the long-term effects that come on.”

In retrospect, Penelope realized that the university was not a supportive place for Black students. Though her team was diverse, the campus was not an affirmative place for Black students. She explained, “There’s nothing up there. There are no hairstylists. There are barely any Black products... To me, it’s just not meant for us to be there.” She felt that she was in the middle of nowhere with little support from those around her. She said, “I was in denial and everything that my host told me was true.” Looking back, Penelope would have attended her second-choice school if she could do it all over again. All of these feelings contributed to why she wanted to leave the university to pursue graduate studies elsewhere.

She continued her education at another institution and pursued a graduate degree in sports. “I love sports. That’s all I know. So why not try to go back in what I know? And I’m comfortable in it. I could talk about it.” With track and field being a large part of her identity, a career in sports seemed fitting. Penelope wants athletes to think about whether they could see themselves at a school apart from their participation in their sport.

She asserted, "... I try to tell the athlete, just kind of look at your resources. I feel like, if you can be at a school that has certain resources like mental health. I stress mental health because I know what I went through and I would've love to have somebody to talk to during my time that I was going through my injury." She is now still in graduate school and battling with the ongoing effects of her injury. With upcoming surgeries, she hopes that her body responds well so that she can get back to a sense of normalcy.

Raylene

"I took my athletic ability very seriously."

Raylene, a track student athlete from a highly competitive Power 5 Division I program, shared her experiences as a member of that team before transferring to a smaller Division program in the same state. Growing up, her athletic interest was influenced by her family. Raylene described her family as full of athletes, participating in a multitude of sports. She was a competitive gymnast, but out of curiosity tried track and her natural talented ability shined through. Talking about her high school track and field experience, her eyes lit up as she described her positive memories. Her club track team was like a family for her, close knit, and focused on the athletes. She wanted to find a similar experience in college.

As she looked for a collegiate track and field program, she considered the campus environment and the opportunity to further her academic pursuits. Being from a state with notoriously cold weather, she wanted to attend a school that had warmer weather. In colder weather, training cannot be as consistent, so she wanted to pursue a school with warmer weather so she could have consistent track training year-round. She was also looking for a place where she felt a sense of home. This included both the people that

would be in contact with her day to day and family members in the state. Raylene was also looking for a place that offered her intended major in athletic training. She ended up choosing a school in the southeastern United States that had what she was looking for.

Raylene chose this institution in part because it offered strong preparation for her career. Raylene discussed the legacy, coaching, and support that came from this particular program and how that helped other runners continue on professionally past their collegiate experience. She would be able to continue working with her college coach when pursuing a professional career, a program that many other colleges did not offer. The coaching support was important, as was Raylene's outlook on the team.

Her experience with her collegiate team was supportive. "Everyone has a role on the team, whether you're scoring, whether you're cheering... Everybody plays a part." It was important for Raylene to be supportive of her teammates even before her injury. She understood that though track and field can be considered an individual sport, the team aspect was vital to the encouragement of those individuals. Beyond being supportive of her teammates, however, she considered only a few of them to be a part of her social circle, preferring to be a homebody when she wasn't at practice or at work. Raylene enjoyed what time she had alone in her residence hall between balancing her athletic and part-time job obligations. When she was injured, the way she spent her time changed drastically.

Raylene was leading warm ups during a practice shortly after Thanksgiving break. A teammate arrived to practice late and was attempting to rush through the required warm up to catch up to the rest of the group. Through this careless rushing, she was not looking and ran into Raylene, causing her to sprain her ankle. This injury happened at a

crucial time, two weeks before the track and field athletes were doing a wellness test for the upcoming season. As a result of the sprained ankle, Raylene had to spend early mornings every morning before classes in medical treatment in addition to biking during practice and receiving treatment after practice. Given her progress, her trainer recommended that she take the wellness check. She would need to take the running part of the test carefully, but could participate. With anti-inflammatory medicines, she was able to complete the testing, but afterward, Raylene intuitively knew her ankle was not where she wanted it to be. She explained, “It was still hurting, but it wasn’t nearly where I couldn’t, it was manageable. I knew how to kind of work around how it was hurting and stuff. So then, I stayed a little longer rather than going home for Christmas, just so I can kind of make up for the week, week and a half just to get my body back in shape before season.”

With the season looming, Raylene had to sacrifice spending time with her family that Christmas break in order to prepare. Though disappointed to miss the holidays with her family, Raylene considered it necessary to feel strong enough to go into the indoor season in January. After Christmas break, the team was rigorously preparing for their upcoming meet in January. Though Raylene was used to getting her ankle taped from the Thanksgiving injury, this was the first day that the trainers said that she did not need to get it taped. They encouraged her that everything was fine and healed, and that there was no need to tape her ankle. The trainers also let her know that though some swelling would occur without the reliance on the tape, everything was fine. During warmups, the coach rushed the athletes through their routine so that they could attend the team meeting. Rushing again and getting through the drills, Raylene felt her ankle bend again. She

stated despondently, “It happened so fast. I nearly thought it was broken or something... It swelled up really big and the trainer is like, ‘We’re going to have to take you over to the other training room and get x-rays immediately.’”

Thankfully, Raylene’s ankle was not broken. However, she still felt that there was something wrong with it because the swelling refused to go down. The coaches’ attention was now focused on getting her healthy for the conference meet at the end of February. Yet, Raylene was not interested in being ready to run for the conference meet since she had missed so much of the indoor season already. “Now, that’ll be my whole indoor season gone. So, I don’t really see a point in rushing to get ready,” she explained. She was concerned because if you participate in a meet after the halfway point of a season, you cannot redshirt the season, and she felt strongly about preserving as much of her eligibility as she could. She resented that her coaches were rushing her to get back. She decided to meet with her coach to discuss the issue:

He was basically saying that he didn’t have the money to bring me back next year. That’s why he essentially made me graduate in the summer. So that was based on him. He wasn’t trying to give me the red shirt because he didn’t want to feel obligated to bring me back for a full year. Because I already had an outdoor redshirt.

At this point, Raylene was in an ankle boot outside of practice and was concerned about her future in the program. She had her eyes on participating in the outdoor season, but wanted to figure out what was going on with her ankle as she was in significant pain.

Her role on her team changed from supportive, active teammate to solely support. She found that this cheerleader type attitude did not go over well with all of her

teammates. She described her teammates' reactions, "Well, you're not even competing right now. So, how can you tell me like what to do or fix? Like, you're not even like doing this workout." Raylene was upset by these reactions because she felt that she was supporting her teammates with encouragement and motivation. Raylene, discouraged, said, "When they found out I was in the boot, they just focused on themselves." She still wanted to pour into her teammates during their season, even though she felt that they gave up on her. Raylene said, "So I made it my mission to change the narrative... Just because you aren't doing well doesn't mean you can't support your teammates or just because somebody had a bad meet doesn't mean that you just stop supporting them." She believed that she played a part in the team's culture slowly changing into one that was more supportive. The cliques seemed to break down and others began focusing on supporting each other. She said, "I wasn't in a position to score or make a difference out there on the track, but I was able to make a difference within the team." Her attitude during her injury pushed her to embrace her role change and support her teammates to the point that she felt that it began changing how her teammates supported each other.

She also did not get much support from her head coach during this time, but she did receive that support from the assistant coach. She felt that the head coach was focusing more on the athletes who could score at the meets (active track athletes). She found a sense of belonging with some of her friends on campus, former track athletes, and a Christian fellowship group on campus after attending a college athlete retreat with other athletes who were also in season. She spoke highly about the Christian organization that she was in during this time of her injury. "They were all just very supportive and helpful. They're like, 'oh, you don't have to drive to [FCA], we'll come pick you up.'"

She also mentioned finding camaraderie with other student athletes in her academic department. She specifically mentioned a staff member who would help her with her feelings and emotions. Raylene described his methods: “He would help me break things down like, what on this list of things can you control? He would calm me down and keep me motivated.” Due to her inability to practice fully with her teammates, she took it upon herself to fill up her schedule with academic support to stay on track during that time.

Raylene asked her coach if after the indoor season was over, she could meet with a specialist to determine an action plan to heal her ankle, but this process turned into a frustrating tug-of-war. She was irritated by the back and forth between the trainer and the coach to schedule an appointment with a specialist and the administrative work of her redshirting the indoor season. She was so adamant about being seen by a specialist that she offered to take the pressure off the athletic staff and to drive herself to the appointments since the specialist was not in town. Yet, the coaches insisted that they would be responsible for the process. Frustrated with their slow pace, Raylene felt resentful that she was once again waiting on the coaching staff. Once she was able to secure an appointment, the specialist opened her eyes up to more concerns. The coaches and athletic medical staff had encouraged her that the procedure for her ankle would keep her out for two weeks at the most. However, the specialist stated that if Raylene planned to run any time soon, a surgery as soon as possible would be her best option. In the midst of participating in a graduate transfer so that she could have a year of eligibility elsewhere, she knew that surgery was the best option.

She attended another university in the state to continue her track pursuits. This was the only way to salvage a year of eligibility, continue running, and to work towards

her goals of running professionally. Raylene wished to do her surgery rehabilitation at her previous school (less than 2 hours away) since the staff there was more familiar with her injury. However, due to NCAA regulations, she had to do rehabilitation at her new school, one with considerably less resources than her previous one. She ended up pursuing rehabilitation at a private office that she and her family paid for so that she could compete in the upcoming indoor season.

Reflecting on her experiences, Raylene wished people knew how important it is to check up on the athlete while they are in injury recovery. “I guess paying attention to emotions and different habits that they may have during the time of return to play is very big.” She continued to reflect on her time at her university:

Be aware of the athlete’s mindset going into competition and just being able to sit them down and evaluate their expectations as well as yours so that you can best help the athlete avoid any loss of interest due to the lack of performance or just the mental and emotional aspect of not performing to the ability that they want to, coming back from injury.

Raylene is now a graduate transfer to her new institution. She was able to get back on the track earlier in early 2020 before COVID-19 halted athletic events. She is still pursuing a professional career in track.

Isaac

“You know, me and football always had a funny relationship. I never really thought about college. I just kind of played football.”

Isaac was a football student athlete at a Division I program in the southeastern United States. The institution was in a rural area in a town that centered its focus on the

college. Historically, this program has been known for succeeding in upsetting notable football teams. He earned a full-academic scholarship to be a part of this team, but his role shifted from teammate to coach when he sustained a season-ending injury to his vertebrae.

Growing up, Isaac had an interesting relationship with football. He started playing football when he was five years old; he said that there was a time that he only understood teamwork and being a part of a collective rather than individuality. Despite that long history, however, he was not planning to play football in college. He was interested in art and design and planned to study fashion, and he wanted to focus on those areas in high school in hopes of being competitive for college scholarships. However, the only high school in his area that offered that focus had been shut down. Disappointed, Isaac had to reconsider his path to college. He decided that football was the next best opportunity to continue his education. “So, I was good at football, so I was like, I’ll just keep doing that,” he shrugged indifferently. His parents decided that he would attend another high school with a better football program to get more exposure for scholarship opportunities. He did not directly mention having had any football goals, other than to attend a university in the Southeastern Conference. “I just wanted to get more offers, more looks.” Though football was not necessarily Isaac’s goal post-college, he wanted multiple options to choose from before deciding on a school. During his senior year, many programs were looking at recruiting Isaac to join their team. However, he sustained a knee injury during his senior football season. All interested programs stopped pursuing him, but one—the program that he ended up joining.

Isaac's mom was impressed by the loyalty of the program, sustaining their interest through Isaac's injury. She encouraged him to stick with the program that stuck with him when all others turned their backs. Looking back, he wondered whether he might have made a different decision at the time: "... If a bigger school had offered, I probably would have switched maybe, but my mom was kind of in my ear too like, hey, they stuck with you through your injury." His mom was a large influence in his choice of school.

Isaac desired to use his football time at the university to achieve professional goals. He thought about staying a part of the game of football, but at the same time he felt that he wanted to run away from it. During Isaac's time in the program, his social circle was completely made up of his teammates; not only did he spend time with them in practice, but he lived with them as well. His entire collegiate experience was shaped by his athletic participation. However, his experience changed significantly during an away game.

Isaac detailed his injury:

During the field, the player is stretching to the right, your left. And then I hit the guy and then my teammate comes out of nowhere and knocks me in the back of my head. And so, then I get very dizzy and a headache and then I lose control of my neck. And so, from there, I kind of run off the field with a broken neck... I couldn't feel my neck.

He laughed when he explained that his coach was cussing him out because the coach could not figure out why Isaac was holding his neck and heading off the field to the sideline. When he was finally able to express to the coach that he couldn't lift his neck, the team doctors called the medical staff. They carried him off in a stretcher and

into the locker room. He did not want to be rushed to the local hospital and declined the opportunity when the doctors presented it to him. He wanted to wait until he got to someplace closer to his own campus. “Seeing that I’d be closer to home, just because I was in pain, but I could manage for what it’s worth.” Dealing with the pain was worth it to Isaac in order to get back to a familiar place to deal with this potentially career ending injury. So instead of rushing him to the hospital, they put a neck brace on him and allowed him to travel back with his team by plane. They rushed him to the hospital once they arrived back to campus. After returning to campus, the doctors gave him a heartbreaking diagnosis: He would be never be able to play the game of football again. Isaac had to figure out what life would look like outside of his identity as a football player.

He felt indifferent, yet disappointed with his role changing with the team from player to bystander due to his inability to practice and participate. “Sometimes I would go in and sometimes I just wouldn’t go. I actually have a picture of me in the weight room, like coaching the kid up. It was like 50/50.” He had to rely on his teammates to take him back and forth. “But for the most part, I just kind of stayed to myself.” It was difficult for him to navigate and move around campus due to having to wear a halo. Isaac described the halo:

So, the halo is this crazy machinery that was invented by man. It’s basically where you get drilled four holes. You get two in the front of your skull and then two in the back and you have to be awake for it. But your head is numb but you’re basically awake. You have to be awake. And then they strap on this, what I used to call, my Chinchilla coat and then it’s like

this plastic thing and it itches like f*ck. And then it straps around you.

And then it's literally drilled in your head.

Isaac had to keep the halo on for over six months. He ran into trouble during rehabilitation because it popped out of his head. Instead of getting it adjusted, he opted for a different brace. "I think they asked me and I said, no, take this d*mn thing off please." Dealing with the injury was enough for Isaac, and the contraptions that he had to wear during rehabilitation that limited his movements were not making anything better.

Though Isaac's teammates were still his main social circle, it was difficult for him to be around them in the football environment:

It was cool. My teammates came and checked on me from time to time. It was cool. I guess it was more so over like a me thing and I just didn't want to really be there anymore... I just didn't want to be around the facility like that.

He had internal struggles surrounding himself with the sport that had been a large part of his life previously but had just ended. "If it's over, it's over type of thing, I guess. And I just struggled being there sometimes." As he talked about this, he looked off into the distance and explained that he had been the "next guy up" in his position, and it was supposed to have been a good year for him. The way that Isaac's career ended shifted his perspective on how much he wanted to be around football:

And it's just like, you couldn't really explain it, but watching it was just interesting. So, I think I just tried to balance out, like I knew my limits of health when it comes to seeing that all the time and then, better off just being by myself.

His support system during this difficult time consisted of his position coach and his family. When I asked Isaac who his support system consisted of, he lovingly described: “My mom, my mom, and my mom... she went from coming like every d*mn other weekend to once a month. But for the most part, I didn’t really want to talk to people about it, to be honest.” He leaned on his mom during this time period and felt safe to express himself with her.

He vacillated between sadness and relief. “No, I was really tired of football, really tired of playing football. And so, I really think that was my only way out, needless to say breaking my neck was the only way out of football.”

Without the focus on football, Isaac decided to take this opportunity to explore other majors that he would not have had a chance to explore with a heavy schedule of football. He enjoyed entrepreneurship, but changed his major multiple times and took this opportunity to explore. He also ended up finding an opportunity for belonging by joining a fraternity during that time. His fraternity was made up of his former teammates, but he found a different sense of community by having another thing in common with them that did not include football. He ended up finding a job near campus as well. Isaac expressed that he finally had the time to get plugged into college like never before.

When discussing what he wished others knew about injured student athletes, he was blunt:

The experience is between the most realist and honest, most depressing individual. Like that’s probably where the person is the most honest with themselves... Because at that time everything seems doomed, that’s where

you're at the most honest you can be with everything, with yourself, with sport, with your friends, your family, and just really honest.

Isaac continues to work with student athletes in an academic capacity. His experience with injury in football has allowed him to not only be a support for student athletes, but also a voice for student athletes in conversations that they are not a part of.

Sloan

“My biggest fear came true.”

Sloan was a student athlete as part of the cheerleading program at a Division I program. As a child, she fell in love with cheerleading from the competitions that she saw on television. Her mom brought her to a Pop Warner practice, a spirit squad program. A spirit squad is a cheerleading team that focuses on cheers, chants, stunts, and tumbling related to the gameday and fan experience. Sloan laughed, “I went to a Pop Warner practice and I was like, ‘This is not what I want to do, Mom. This is not what I saw on TV. This is not for me whatsoever.’” What Sloan saw on television were competitive cheerleading teams. These teams execute high level tumbling, stunting, and dance skills when compared to spirit squads. “I absolutely fell in love with the competition side of [cheerleading]. That’s what started it all. I think that being said, because I was a competitive cheerleader, being able to compete at the highest level meant everything.” Sloan’s goal was to achieve a high level in her sport. For cheerleading, the highest level of competition one can be involved in is college, outside of a spot on the Team USA national team. Sloan identified that cheerleading impacted who she is today. “The skills that cheerleading taught me was something that I know that I am where I am because of

the sport as well. Being able to get to the highest level with that was just unreal.” Her achievement is one that she cherishes fondly. To get to this point of competition truly meant a lot for her, a dream come true. This dream started when she was just 8 years old.

She started with competition cheerleading at a gym in her town. When she got to middle school, she continued with all-star cheerleading, but also became involved with the school’s cheerleading team: “I’m a person who likes to be involved and I like to be connected to my school.” Her attraction to the school’s team allowed her to experience belonging within that community. In high school, her additional involvement in All-Stars kept Sloan pretty busy. They traveled all across the nation to compete in various competitions. Her dedication to the sport increased with the momentum. “In the summer, I would train all summer long, different tumbling classes, stuff like that, just to keep improving my skills... It was pretty much year-round.”

Her commitment paid off as she considered where to attend college to cheer. She wanted a D1 experience with a large football program. Her family played an important role in her school choice. Sloan grew up going to University of Carrolton games as her family held season tickets. Though she would have loved to attend University of Carrolton, at that time they had eliminated the competition cheerleading program. However, that did not completely rule out her desire to be a part of that program. She also considered Grand Rising College, a school closer to home that had a competitive cheerleading program. Sloan made a deposit with both schools to be able to try out for both teams. She went back and forth deciding between a school that had connections to her family and childhood, and one where she could live out her cheerleading competition

dreams. The decision finally came to a head when both programs held their cheerleading tryouts on the same day. She finally decided what was more important to her: competing.

Not having a huge part of her competitive identity continuing on in college was a dealbreaker for Sloan. Since Carrolton had cut the competition program, she decided to attend Grand Rising College. “To be able to excel in my area of the sport and at the end of the day, that was more important to me, the competition side.” She chose a school in the Northeast that fit both her academic and athletic goals. She also considered her family and her independence when selecting the school. Sloan explained, “I’m a big family person and I think that I have a pretty independent style... [Grand Rising] allowed the balance of being far enough away from home, but they could still come on the weekend and watch.”

Sloan’s college cheerleading team was a solid foundation that allowed her connections to explore other interests and opportunities as it related to her future career. Sloan’s experience as a cheerleader was much more than being a part of a team family; it included affection for the institution as a whole. She explained:

That feeling of being able to wear that logo on your chest and go out and represent not just me, not just my team, but the other athletes at Grand Rising, the university as a whole, my professor and my friends who weren’t athletes, all of them, they all play a part and that’s what that logo represents. And to be able to wear that on your chest and know that when you’re out there performing, it’s for something so much greater than just that one moment.

Throughout her time as a cheerleader, Sloan had always struggled with tumbling because of her mental blocks, which slowed down her progress to earn a spot on more competitive teams across the nation. “It was just a big mental game,” Sloan said, “I overthought it a ton way more than I should. As a risk averse person, I did not like tumbling because it was a huge risk with it.”

One day at a winter practice at the beginning of the semester, the team was preparing for competition and Sloan was practicing her tumbling skills. At the beginning of practice, working on getting over her mental block, she did a back handspring tuck with a spot. “Everyone was really proud of me. I was feeling good,” she remembered. At the end of the practice, the team often did a “tough circle.” The team would form two circles, an inner and an outer circle. The inner circle was for easier tumbling skills and the outer circle was for more advanced tumbling skills. Sloan walked her way to the inner circle, where she was the most comfortable, but her teammates and coach encouraged her to go to the outer circle and perform the skill she was working on at the beginning of practice. When she stepped into the outer circle, she got ready to perform her skill. She was anxious and nervous about throwing the skill, and she did not have her feet planted on the ground well enough to perform the skill correctly. Attempting to begin a back flip, Sloan dove backwards and landed on her head. She completely blacked out at that moment, losing all sensation in her body.

The coach frantically called the ambulance and she went straight to the hospital. She was diagnosed with a severe concussion. She recalled the doctors telling her “You got lucky” and “it could've been way worse,” but their comments did not help her with

her mental block once she returned to cheer. Her mental blocks got much worse. Another unexpected side effect of Sloan's concussion was depression. Her voice dropped:

You see commercials about depression and stuff like that and you want to be happy, but you can't control it. Sometimes it's hard to actually understand what that means until you feel it... something inside of me just took over.

School was a struggle for Sloan for the rest of that spring semester as well. Her headaches from her concussion caused her to miss a significant amount of class. Academics were always important to Sloan, so when she had to withdraw from a course due to the number of absences, she felt like a failure.

Another consequence from her injury was that her social circle changed a bit as well, as she could not go out and do the things other college students were doing because of her concussion. She said that she became "Sloan with the concussion." People began constantly checking in what she could and could not do because of her concussion. Though she appreciated the consideration, she felt like that became the focal point of her experience with everyone. "I never really thought about that with injuries before. It was just having that as a part of my identity was not something that I wanted and now all of sudden, it was a huge part of my identity."

Her role completely changed on the team from being an active member to being solely a supporter. She wanted to be there for her team in any way that she was able to. She was counting stunts aloud for them, cheering them on, and cheering alongside her teammates from the stands. Her coach and her teammates played a large role in her feeling like she still belonged with the team. Her coach even wanted to bring her to the

national competition whether or not Sloan could fully perform. Her teammates also were really supportive during this semester, continuing to include her as a member of the team and remaining supportive throughout her continued struggles with mental blocks.

Her roommate at that time was a large source of support for her as well. With overwhelming gratitude and tears, Sloan said:

I tell her all the time that I'm so grateful for her because she dealt with a lot of the ugly and didn't fully see the good because when I was the happiest was when I was at practice but that was two hours a day and everything else in between was oftentimes very rough. She didn't get to see the happy [Sloan] in practice.

Sloan described her roommate as patient, kind, supportive, encouraging, and positive, a person she will be forever grateful for because of how well she supported her throughout that time.

Her trainer was another source of support for Sloan during that time. "I think some days, I just needed to sit there and cry or just vent and let it out and she was really great about that."

Sloan was disappointed about losing her spot to compete that year at the national competition as a freshman, but when one of her teammates who was performing as a mascot ended up getting the flu, Sloan stepped in as the mascot. "The entire routine, I think I was crying tears of joy." She was so elated to be part of the team and competition in some way, even though it was not directly competing on the mat. "I never would have thought I'd be that happy to be a mascot, but it was incredible."

A couple of years later, Sloan still struggled through her mental blocks when it came to tumbling. At that point, only half of her teammates were familiar with her journey through her injury. She struggled with proving herself to herself and her teammates. She continued her time with her team and fought through her injuries. She sustained another concussion during that time, and was worried if she should even continue on the cheerleading team. Upset, she and her family wondered, “Do we keep going? Do we stop?” The concussion had become a part of Sloan; her family was concerned with the well-being of their daughter and whether she should even continue competing.

The second concussion was very hard on Sloan. “The day I went through class and didn’t have a headache, I could cry tears of joy,” she explained. Although she was still on the cheerleading team, she couldn’t participate actively for months, so she couldn’t demonstrate her connection to the school that way anymore. Instead, she used her academics to keep her motivated and connected with the school. This is where she identified her love for sport management. Sloan said when thinking back to her academic struggles and newly found love for sport management, “Now, it’s trying to figure out a new thing that was going to make me happy or finding a way to smile in these days when I was dealing with the depression and the anger...” She spoke highly of the professor who taught that course: “She was incredible. Just the way she spoke, the way she talked. I left every class feeling motivated. She’s part of the reason I went into sports.” Sloan found a place in this academic course during her injury struggle, and it led her on the path to who she is today.

The second concussion alarmed her doctors. They alerted Sloan that if she had one more, she would be done competing in cheerleading. She appreciated their support and care during that time, but she decided to keep participating. “I was not going to give into fear so I didn’t,” she explained. She continued competing throughout her time in college. Fortunately, she did not sustain another injury throughout her time there.

Looking back, Sloan was able to identify why her injury was so tough for her:

What was really hard for me is being part of the cheer team was part of my identity and unfortunately, I valued it I’ll say more than I probably should have in terms of my self-worth. I felt that was so much of who I was that if I didn’t decide to take a step back for my health, what if people didn’t want to be my friend now, what if people don’t find me as fun or as cool.

Her friends and her teammates helped her realize that she was much more than just a cheerleader, but their friend. Sloan wishes that other people understood the mental toll an injury takes on a student athlete. She explained the questioning and doubt that clouds the mind after the injury, “What could I have done differently?” She wishes that the outside community could realize how tough it is to be injured in the limelight.

I think that’s the part that people forget is that we are still just the young versions of ourselves that had a huge dream and then to get there and lose it, it’s devastating... they don’t see the tears at night. They don’t see the phone calls and what could I have done.

Sloan continues to work with student athletes in an academic capacity. Her relatable experience has allowed her to be a support for student athletes.

Lionel

“... to see the light at the end of the tunnel, I think can be a challenge.”

Lionel grew up playing baseball. It had been a large part of his identity since he watched his older brother pick up a baseball bat himself. “I think I really took after him and so whatever he did, I ended up doing.” His brother was his role model, so Lionel followed in his footsteps of participating in baseball. From a young age, he played travel baseball, which took up the majority of his free time. Reminiscing, Lionel says, “When I think back to my childhood, almost 100% of my childhood was playing baseball. It really shaped who I am, my values, and everything.” As he got older, he was excited to be able to play at Division I fields across the country, with college scouts and coaches watching every move. In high school, after spending years competing against other baseball players his age, Lionel understood that the major leagues were probably too far of a shot for him, but he enjoyed the sport and wanted to continue playing it at the highest level he was able to attain. His future in baseball was not the only thing that was important to him. Lionel’s academic ability attracted Ivy League schools’ attention.

It was Lionel’s dream to play Division I baseball and end up at a prestigious university. Though the Ivy League desired his academic ability, his athletic ability did not match what they were looking for. “I wasn’t quite good enough in the Ivy Leagues. Those kind of cooled off as well and [Bishop College] was kind of my only option, ironically,” Lionel smiled. Lionel’s older brother went to Bishop College, so he understood what the program was about. Though it may not have been as academically rigorous as some of the Ivy Leagues, Bishop College was an academically sound school

with a great baseball team. He reached his dream of being able to play Division I baseball and joined the Bishop program.

His brother had just graduated a year before he joined Bishop Baseball. Lionel was already familiar with the team since he often attended the games and hung out with his brother and his teammates. “I went to [Bishop] without those nerves or that anxiety of, ‘Oh, I don’t know anyone here’... I felt like I already had that friend group into it because I already knew the upperclassmen.” In addition to already knowing the upperclassmen coming into Bishop, Lionel’s best friend that he grew up playing baseball with went to Bishop as well. They lived across the hall from each other. The transition to Bishop was a seamless one for Lionel. His familiarity with his team along with arriving with his best friend gave him an automatic family upon joining Bishop.

Playing baseball, Lionel was not a stranger to injury. In high school, he missed some of his season because he had to have elbow surgery. Throughout his time at Bishop, he sustained three different injuries, with two of them requiring surgeries. First, he tore his meniscus his sophomore year, but did not have to have invasive surgery. He was able to walk shortly after the injury and was out for only about a month. Though the surgical procedures were not intensive, he still felt the effects of being separated from his team during that time. Their team had an Adopt-A-Kid program that all of his teammates and coaches were involved in. They held a fitness challenge in honor of the young child that everyone was excited about and participated in. When thinking back to that time, Lionel sadly said, “I just remember being like, ‘wow, I feel like I should be competing with you guys right now and having fun and doing all this stuff’ and I just couldn’t.” Lionel felt disconnected from the team as he watched from the sidelines.

His sophomore year was instrumental for him because he was trying to earn a name for himself, beyond the shadow of his brother. For the first time since high school, Lionel had to consider how this injury would affect his spot on the team and in the lineup. He was set back, but encouraged that he did not have to miss too much practice, and pushed forward through his sophomore season.

During his junior year, he sustained a thumb injury that turned out to be the most intense surgery yet. Lionel explained:

You wouldn't think much of a thumb, but when it comes to baseball, so it was an avulsion fracture. So, it tore my ligament basically where my bone attaches to the ligament. The ligament snapped and then it took a bone with it. It was not a fun injury, so to speak.

He had a difficult time in school while dealing with this injury. He was not given any accommodations for writing and struggled to type with one hand. He felt miserable with academics because he wanted to do well and was struggling to with his injury. Fortunately, he was back and healthy for that spring season. In a spin of events, Lionel's thumb injury had afforded him the ability to work on other skills. In disbelief he said, "I kid you not... my swing was the best that it felt in my college career." He had to work hard to gain his spot, but he earned it.

The next year, Lionel got struck in his face with a baseball, broke his nose, and suffered a concussion. This was the first time that Lionel had sustained an injury during the season. He was not able to go to class for two weeks and again struggled academically because he had to rely on those around him for notes and content.

Lionel solemnly professed, “To be honest with you, that was actually the one that made me feel the most outcast, so to speak, or kind of removed from the team.” He couldn’t travel with the team and could not spend extended time with his teammates because of the noise and movement that could add pain from the concussion. He missed out on some team trips to amazing baseball fields against some of the top teams in the nation. Disappointed, Lionel focused on joining his team midway through the season.

In the excitement to come back to his team and join them during the season, Lionel was okayed to join his team on the road in an away game. He was excited to be back with the team once more, but anxious about his healing from his injury. He spoke in disbelief when thinking back to that away game:

I even remember being like, “I feel like I’m kind of almost rushing this to get back,” because I remember my first at bat, I saw three fast balls and I was like, ‘Ah, I didn’t really see any pitch.’ I don’t think I was technically ‘cleared.’

Though his trainers cleared him physically, he did not feel cleared to play emotionally. His uncertainty and discomfort rejoining the team before feeling ready alerted his sense that he needed more time to heal. “That felt like a pretty big setback to me.”

After this injury, he took more of a coaching role with his teammates. Right around the same time Lionel was finding his place in this new role, his team received a new coach. There was a little rough patch between the coach and Lionel because the coach did not have the previous experience and knowledge with Lionel and his family as the departing coach did. He said, “So when you’re injured and you’re not playing, there’s

nothing you can do to impress your coaches.” Though he was not able to impress his coach on the field, Lionel began focusing on the contributions he could control.

During this time of uncertainty, his support system was centered on his family, athletic staff, and coaches. He praised the treatment, rehab, and moral support that the training staff showed. He felt somewhat supported by his coaches. He said, “I felt like they supported me for sure, but I wasn’t able to really do much for them in terms of what I could do on the field.” The biggest source of support at that time was definitely his brother. Since his brother was familiar with the coaches, system, and process, Lionel was able to ask him how to handle or approach certain situations. Having a family member who already experienced some of the same challenges helped Lionel to cope and deal with his difficulties with injury.

Looking back on this whole experience, Lionel felt confident about belonging to his team. “I always felt super part of the team. I never had any concerns, questions, anything like that in terms of did I feel like I belonged or anything like that.” Though he felt some experiences of disconnection from his team throughout his injuries, he still never felt like he did not belong with them. Lionel wished more people understood how injuries can add more onto the plate of a student athlete. Not only do student athletes have athletic commitments and academic commitments, but those who are injured have another layer added onto an already stressful situation. He mentioned that injured student athletes still have to attend practice, tutoring, and other commitments. “Adding an injury to the mix just complicates things that much more.” Lionel now works with student athletes, including the baseball team. His experience and understanding of the difficulties surrounding student athlete life have allowed him to connect well with students.

Myles

“It was a dream that I never wrote down on paper,” Myles voiced when discussing what playing football meant to him. Myles, a former professional football player, looked back at the college career that helped him land a spot in his dream.

Before joining a collegiate team, Myles enjoyed the time on his football teams and the brotherhood that came with it from middle school to high school. However, as he continued to progress in the sport, his experience began to change. “... the fun started to go away the more we grew in the levels of football.” Myles was intensely aware of the changing pressures of playing football and that it would continue to change as he progressed. When deciding where he wanted to continue his football dreams, his family was a large factor in his decision. “I didn’t want to be far away from my mom,” he said. He continued, “I mainly thought about where I can play football and it’s sad to say, education was the last on my list... I wanted to go to college to play football.” Myles’s family was important to his decision, but the promise of football was the most integral part in his decision making in choosing a college. He wanted the closest people in his life, mainly his mom, to be able to attend his football games. Schools that were outside of a three-hour radius were out of the question for him.

Myles chose a state school, only an hour away from where he grew up. He was elated that not only his mom, but also his former coaches and friends, would be just a short drive away. His college team felt like a second home for him. “I feel like home was here I built some of my relationships that I will remember for life... the bond and the relationship I built with my teammates will last forever.” Myles’ teammates were the center of his social circle. With football obligations starting as early as 7 AM, classes on

campus, practice, and tutoring, teammates spent a great deal of time around each other. He laughingly stated, “After 8 PM as college kids, we don’t go home and go straight to bed... I’m hanging out with my teammates all day and night pretty much.” The bond he shared with teammates fostered sense of belonging during his time in college.

For the first couple of years, Myles enjoyed building camaraderie with his teammates and building the football program. His junior year, he injured his ankle. His voice got deep, “But in college, once you have certain injuries, you just go and get treatment for the injuries and then after the treatment, you go back onto the practice field and your injuries are really small in that kind of world.” He never missed a game due to his injury or wore any medical devices to work through the pain. Though he never had surgery for his ankle, he felt that the injury followed him for the rest of his career. He continued the season playing through pain as the team was on a championship run. He lasted through the pain game after game with persistence and encouragement from his coaches “... Coaches also try to get you to fight through and push through because we’re on scholarship.” Myles felt that minor injuries were no reason to miss any practices or games. He fought through to stay on the field and continue in his spot that he earned in the lineup. After performing a record-breaking season, Myles’s team ended up in the College Football National Championship. After a heartbreaking loss in the championship game, Myles set his mind forward on his last season, his senior season, to bring his team back to the championship.

In his quest to lead his team, he injured his groin during summer training camp before the season even began. However, the medical staff did not value it as a major injury. Myles played throughout the season, eager to get his team back to avenge last

year's loss. His team ended back in the conference championship, a necessary game to win to earn a spot in the College Football Playoffs. With one win away from achieving set goals, Myles played in the conference game through tremendous pain. During the game, Myles reinjured in his groin. Heartbroken, he left the game and never returned.

The next morning, Myles went to get an x-ray and an MRI. He went and talked to his trainers shortly after these procedures, but they encouraged him that he was still able to play. Myles knew his body, felt the pain, and knew he was not ready. With doubt and a lack of trust in the system, he went to go get a second opinion. Once the second opinion came in that he needed to have surgery in order to continue pursuing his football goals, he returned to campus and told his coaches he would not be participating in the bowl game. Upset, Myles explained, "It didn't matter if we won or lost because we weren't in the championship. So, I decided to sit out and I felt like the coaches and the athletic trainers were upset with me for making that decision for my future." Myles had to make a decision that would impact his future in professional football. However, his heart was still with his college team. "I was trying to do everything in my power to continue to play, but my body wasn't allowing me." During the time leading up to the bowl game, Myles did not practice or play, but was still with the team.

His role changed throughout the short time between the conference championship and the bowl game. He would help the younger players who were stepping into his spot by encouraging them from the sidelines. He explained, "I had to coach the guys and I would still communicate to my coaches and with team, but my role switched over from player to coach." He continued to explain that many guys who get injured, especially that late in the season, oftentimes choose to not continue with the team if they were entering

the draft post-season. Though Myles was leaving his team to enter into the NFL draft, his bond and brotherhood caused him to want to stay with his team through his last moments there. He focused on how he could help his teammates get better, even though he was not participating right next to them. “I felt like I belonged to the team, but as a coach, not a football player and they accepted it because they knew I couldn’t play.”

Though his month dealing with his injury was difficult, his position coach and family were among his biggest sources of support. Their support helped Myles as his mind was still on football, but his body wouldn’t allow him to play. With pain in his eyes, he stated, “I’m glad that I had this support system that I did have to keep me motivated and staying positive and keep pushing. It was tough, though.”

From that point, Myles focused on saying goodbye to his college career and focusing on the draft. However, receiving surgery so late in the season hurt his draft stock dramatically. Due to healing from his injury, he was not able to perform for scouts or coaches in the draft. It took eight months for him to completely heal, and the draft fell on month four. Waiting to deal with his injury ended up hurting Myles in the long run. Though he was able to earn a spot on an NFL team, battling with the injury continued during professional career.

Looking back, he reflected:

As an injured student athlete, you still are a student. You still are an athlete, a part of the team. They don’t just kick you off of the team once you get injured, but once you get injured, now they really focus more on the school and academic phase. Whereas if you’re not injured, they really push you to be at practice and physically play... but I think it should be

the other way around even if you are a player, they should push you to be scholar and then to be an athlete.

Myles' experience allowed him to see past his identity as an athlete and understand how important it was to develop holistically.

Emerging Themes

The themes that emerged from the narratives of Penelope, Raylene, Isaac, Sloan, Lionel and Myles were athletic identity, belonging with the team, and social support. These themes relate to the research questions: How does being injured affect sense of belonging for student athletes? Athletic identity affected how student athletes chose their colleges and athletic teams. Belonging with the team explored how students felt or lacked sense of belonging within their team environment. Social support helped the participants experience value, mattering, and belonging while dealing with distance from their team through injury. I will explore the commonalities and similarities of these themes that emerged from the participants' narratives and discuss them in depth in chapter five as they relate to the literature.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity emerged as a strong theme throughout the narratives. It played a large role in how student athletes dealt with their injury. Many participants described their sport as their entire identity. Having a strong athletic identity affected where the participants chose to go to college. Every participant chose their college based on the athletic team that they would be a part of. For example, Sloan chose a college where she could continue her athletic identity of being a competitive cheerleader. When she was deciding between becoming a non-competitive cheerleader at her family's favorite

college or a competitive cheerleader at the college of her choice, she did not want to give up on her competitive athletic identity. Continuing to pursue her athletic goals were more important and made a difference in the school Sloan chose. Athletic identity of participants weighed heavily on their college choices. Having a strong sense of athletic identity also affected how participants responded to injury.

Participants who identified their sport as a large part of their identity struggled through rehabilitation and connection back with their team. For Penelope, Raylene, Sloan, Lionel, and Myles, losing a large part of their identity affected their sense of belonging. They were no longer as involved with their teammates who were practicing and competing. They watched from the sidelines as their team continued on without them. Being injured changed the participants' athletic identity because a large part of their identity was being an active athlete, and that changed once injured. Losing this part of their identity caused them to feel distant from their team and eager to work through their injuries. Losing this part of their identity caused some participants to rush through their rehabilitation process. Though Lionel was cleared to return and eager to be back traveling and competing with his teammates, he stood at the baseball home plate feeling unprepared and uncomfortable with his return in the moment. Athletic identity also affected how the participants persisted throughout their injury. Penelope, Raylene and Myles continued to seek rehabilitation and physical therapy assistance outside of their college team environment. The time, money, and energy to explore these options showed how invested these participants were in healing properly in order to continue competing. Having a strong athletic identity was instrumental for where participants chose to attend college. Their athletic identity also affected how they responded to their injury and

persisted through their rehabilitation. Those with stronger athletic identities were eager to return to competing.

Belonging with the Team

Belonging with team was a theme that emerged for participants. Most participants discussed how they interacted with their teammates as a positive, welcoming, and warm experience. Raylene, Isaac, Sloan, Lionel, and Myles experienced a sense of belonging with their teammates or college environment. Sloan experienced a sense of belonging at her college and with her teammates. She expressed how much she valued her college community and being able to represent them was something she honored. Myles and Lionel described their teammates as a tight-knit family. Whether with their teammates or with their college choice, many participants experienced a sense of belonging that made them feel connected. This sense of belonging changed once the student athlete sustain an injury.

Isolation after Injury

Participants discussed feeling isolated after their injuries. Because they were no longer participating in their sport, they voiced feeling distant and disconnected from their team. This sense of isolation emerged as participants discussed feeling not as much a part of the team unit as they were before. Though participants continued to have relationships with teammates, the distance that the participants felt with their teammates occurred in relation to belonging with team as a whole. Penelope felt siloed after her injury, only attending class and going to her room. She felt distant from her team during that time. Raylene and Sloan discussed feeling misunderstood by their teammates during their injury. They felt that their advice was not taken seriously as they were on the sidelines.

Isaac often found himself avoiding football facilities because he did not really want to be a part of it anymore after injury. Lionel had to watch his team from the sidelines and hated not feeling apart of the experience. Myles felt isolated as a teammate, but decided to embrace the role as a player-coach. The distance and isolation the participants felt after injury affected how their role changed.

Role Change

Participants experienced role change once they were injured. Instead of being able to participate next to their teammates, they took on new roles as coaches, encouragers, and bystanders. The role change allowed participants to still be involved with their team. Penelope found her role changing from an active participant to a non-active athlete. She was away from her team during her injury and ended up leaving upon the end of the season. Raylene found herself in a more encouraging and supportive role as a teammate instead of an active participant in track and field. She valued being able to give other teammates that encouragement and advice throughout their season. Isaac was also able to embrace his role as an encouragement and coach to other student athletes on the team. He even laughed as he discussed valuing a picture that showed him coaching another teammate in the weight room. Sloan took her role as cheerleader to the next level as she continually engaged in “mat talk.” Mat talk is a phrase for the energetic, persistent encouragement to give another cheerleader teammate the confidence to perform. She was adamant about showing her teammates this encouragement and reveled in it. Lionel changed his role throughout his injuries because he not only wanted to support his teammates, but he also wanted to show his coaches his dedication to the team’s success, no matter if he was actively a part of it or not. Myles, who sustained an injury late in his

senior year, still invested in changing his role to act as a coach to the younger guys on the football team behind him. The role changes were a result of their injury. All participants had to adjust to what the new role change was whether as a supportive coach or a bystander.

Pressures

Participants felt pressures from their coaches, athletic trainers, and teammates. Coaching pressures throughout the participants' injuries emerged as a theme throughout the narratives: pressure to return to competition or pressure to exit the program. Penelope and Raylene had at least a season of eligibility left. However, as coaches wanted to bring in new incoming athletes, Raylene and Penelope felt pressured by them to exit the program to free up scholarship money for uninjured incoming athletes who could compete. Myles especially expressed feeling pressured from coaches to return to play through his injuries. Many participants felt pressure from coaches to return back to competition maybe earlier than they were prepared to do.

Many participants also expressed feeling pressure from their athletic trainers to return from their injury sooner than they felt ready to. Penelope, Raylene, and Myles felt confused and frustrated from what they felt were misdiagnoses of their injuries. Their experience with their athletic trainers made them feel pressure to get a second opinion on their injuries for fear of reentering into competition too quickly.

Pressures from teammates to return from injury were also present. Sloan battled mental blocks after injury going into her junior year, and her new teammates were not familiar or did not understand the depth of her injury. She felt pressure from them to return to compete before she was ready. The pressures from coaches, athletic trainers, and

teammates caused participants to feel overwhelmed and distrustful during their rehabilitation. Battling with their injuries and pressures, the participants turned to their support system for constant encouragement during a trying time.

Social Support

A theme that emerged from the narratives was the positive social support that participants received from their families, assistant coaches, and outside organizations. Throughout the difficulties of their injuries, all participants were supported by their friends and family. Each participant spoke emotionally and fondly of the friends and family that supported them throughout their rough time of being injured. Social support had a huge impact on how participants felt throughout their rehabilitation. Their support systems provided encouragement, support, and assistance to the student athlete throughout that time to keep them feeling valued. Penelope and Isaac's moms chose to stay with them often throughout the first few months of them being injured. They each expressed how much their mom meant to them throughout that time and even identified them as the main foundation of their support system. Lionel's main support system during the injury process was his brother, who understood the baseball team's dynamics as a former teammate. Families were a large part of participants' social support system.

Beyond family members, participants found social support through groups outside of their team. Raylene and Isaac sought out connection and social support with these groups and experienced a sense of belonging there. Raylene also experienced support from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes group on campus. Isaac joined a fraternity. The students who were a part of these communities helped them feel valued and engaged in a purpose outside of their sports.

Apart from the support of friends and families, participants experienced a great deal of support from their assistant coaches. Assistant coaches often work closely with a particular group of student athletes and build closer bonds with them than a head coach might. Myles, Raylene, and Sloan all mentioned how the support from their assistant coaches helped them deal with the struggles of being injured. The main source of social support for participants was by far their family members. However, participants also felt support in outside organizations and from their assistant coaches. These support systems helped participants by providing encouragement, quality time, assistance, and listening support as they worked through their injury.

Conclusion

Penelope, Raylene, Isaac, Sloan, Lionel, and Myles shared their stories of how being injured impacted their sense of belonging. Their narratives explored how being injured affects a student athlete's sense of belonging. With many participants having a strong athletic identity, they struggled with being disconnected from their sport and their team. Their dynamics with the team changed as they experienced not being valued as an active participant. Their role changes affected their sense of belonging as they had to figure out their value in the new role. They felt isolated after their injury. Pressures from athletic staff and teammates caused participants to feel that their long-term health mattered little. However, the social support provided by family, teammates, and coaches helped the participants feel a sense of belonging through their rehabilitation of their injuries. The themes that emerged from the narratives - athletic identity, belonging with the team, pressures, and social support - are expanded on in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this narrative study was to look into the experiences of injured student athletes. The research question for this study was: How does being injured affect sense of belonging for a student athlete? Through narrative inquiry, the participants shared their stories of their injury and how it affected their belonging. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of the study, implications for practice for professionals in this area, and future research beyond this study that will help to contribute to the scholarship of student athletics.

Discussion

Sense of belonging for student athletes in this study changed throughout their experience of being injured. Sense of belonging was affected by the participants' athletic identity, dynamics with the team, and social support they received from others. Strayhorn (2018) identified seven elements of belonging that described how belonging, a human need, is affected by context, identity, and circumstance. Participants with salient athletic identities felt disconnected from their teams and themselves as they were not able to participate with their team. Strayhorn's (2018) fifth element describes how salient identities and intersectionality affect belonging. As participants identified strongly with their athletic ability, their sense of belonging was affected when that ability was interrupted by injury. Their injuries also affected how they experienced belonging with their team, causing them to feel isolated after their injury, go through role changes, and

receive pressures from athletic trainers, coaches, and teammates. As the changes in team dynamics affected feeling valued or mattering to the team as whole, their sense of belonging was affected. As Strayhorn (2018) outlined, the fourth element of sense of belonging demonstrates how students are affected by how they feel valued or cared about. An injury that changes team dynamics caused participants to question feeling valued or cared about. The social support that surrounded the student athletes during this time demonstrated how the need for belonging was supported by their family, coaches, and student organizations. These support systems allowed participants to focus on their well-being during that time. Being injured affected the participants' belonging. Yet, their athletic identity affected how they not only chose their college team, but also how they responded to injury.

Athletic Identity

Athletic identity drove the decision of college choice for Penelope, Raylene, Sloan, Lionel, and Myles. Each participant discussed other supporting factors when choosing a college, but the main source of selection stemmed from their athletic identity and connection with their individual sports. As seen in Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging model, intersectionality and salient identities have effects on belonging. Choosing a college based on their athletic identity was a key factor for the foundation of their belonging. For one, athletic identity is a large part of how student athletes choose which college they want to attend (Klenosky, 2001). With sense of belonging being connected with salient identities, identifying strongly with an athletic identity can lead a student athlete to choose a college where they can continue progressing in that identity.

For Penelope, the school that allowed her to explore her athletic ventures and offered her a scholarship to showcase her talents ended up being the school where she would attend. Raylene used her athletic identity to choose a college that had a program that had the elements that allowed athletes to prepare for a professional future. Athletic identity was a major influence on their college choice. Penelope, Raylene, Sloan, Lionel, and Myles specifically chose their colleges to continue growing in their athletic identity.

Athletic identity also affected how participants dealt with their injury. Once losing their ability to participate, participants felt as if their identity was affected too. There seemed to be a shift in mattering from the recruiting pedestal to the experience of being a body that is valued only when able to perform. When injury occurs, student athletes can feel a loss in their athletic identity (Lockhart, 2010). Since their injury caused their sense of belonging and connectedness to be affected, how participants responded to their injury to regain the ability to participate was affected by their athletic identities. Participants that identified strongly with their athletic participation were eager to return back to their sport through extra rehabilitation, time, outside medical appointments, and money. The loss of their athletic identity was enough for them to sacrifice holidays to spend extra time healing with athletic trainers. Their athletic identity was shaken by injury. As Strayhorn (2018) described belonging changing overtime and within in different contexts or conditions. Their injury especially dictates a situation where their belonging was affected. As the participants struggled with the change in their athletic identity, inevitable changes with the inability to perform affected how they felt they belonged with the team as well.

Belonging with the Team

Most of the participants bonded with their teammates and experienced a sense of belonging with their team as a subculture to the university. Isaac, Sloan, Lionel, and Myles described their social circle filled with their teammates. The bonds that they felt with their teammates were driven by the vast amount of time that they spent together through practice, competition, and travel. The participants were working together with their team to also achieve team goals. With the amount of time that student athletes spend together in between competition, practice, and athlete training treatment, they can experience a vast amount of bonding (Clopton & Finch, 2010). For example, Myles felt that he had to lead his team as a senior on the football field and back into championship competition. Being a part of the team and working towards mutual goals cause athletes to feel a greater sense of belonging (Martin et al., 2015). The bonding with teammates was a social venture as well as an athletic one. Most participants experienced these positive team dynamics. Strayhorn's (2018) model explored the positive impacts of belonging which leads to positive outcomes including overall well-being, engagement, achievement, and persistence. The team dynamics that the participants experienced allowed them to feel valued to their team, which yielded positive effects of belonging. However, sustaining an injury affected those team dynamics by causing isolation, role change, and pressures.

Isolation after Injury

All of the participants experienced isolation or distance from their teammates when dealing with their injury. Though teammates may have been encouraging and supportive, participants still felt distant from their team unit. With the sudden change in

their athletic identity, participants felt distant from their previous role within the team. Penelope, who was already struggling within the team environment, felt that once she was injured and pursuing graduate studies elsewhere, the team support vanished. Raylene, Isaac, Sloan, Lionel and Myles all experienced a feeling of isolation from the team. Though many were still at practice with their teammates, they felt distant as they were not participating, but watching from the sidelines. A feeling of isolation is a frequent response to injury in athletics (Putukian, 2019; Shenbein, 2016). Sloan and Isaac pointed out that these feelings of isolation led to depression. Isolation often manifests into depression in injured student athletes (NCAA, 2019). Injuries can leave student athletes feeling isolated from the team dynamic they once enjoyed. This isolation affected their sense of belonging. As their isolation caused participants to contemplate if they mattered to their team anymore, their sense of belonging was affected (Strayhorn, 2018). Though they were still a part of the team, injured student athletes are often away from practice, play, and participation. This experience caused them to feel distant from their team. Once injured, student athletes took on a new role within their team.

Role Change

All of the participants experienced a role change because of their injury. Because they were not able to compete alongside their teammates, a role change occurred as participants focused more on encouraging and coaching their teammates. However, a role change also caused a participant to become a bystander. Most participants embraced role change within their team in order to stay connected. As Strayhorn (2018) highlighted that belonging was motive enough to drive human behavior, participants adjusted to their new roles in order to experience some type of belonging with their team. When they were not

able to contribute actively with their athletic abilities, they embraced their new role and continued supporting their teammates. Through their injuries these student athletes still found a way to continue that connection through role change within the team (DeGroot et al., 2018). Welcoming the role change emulates what belonging to the team and the athletic environment means to these students. For Penelope, she felt isolated from her team during her injury. Her role changed from an active participant to a bystander. Raylene, Isaac, Sloan, Lionel and Myles specifically took on a supportive and encouraging role, helping teammates who were still competing reach another level. While they were rehabbing their injury, they each took on another role within the team, one of coaching and supporting their teammates. Isaac mentioned coaching up his teammates in the weight room when he felt emotionally well enough to be around them. Raylene was excited for her teammates that were having breakout seasons and wanted to continue supporting them. Myles took on a coaching role less than a month after injury to help his teammates earn a bowl game victory. Lionel's role changed for a while to a coach. Through head coaching and assistant coach changes, Lionel made it intentional to show his new coaches that though he was injured, he still was valuable to the team through his role change. Sloan was supportive of her teammates amidst losing a spot that she earned to compete on the competition cheerleading team. She continually encouraged her teammates who were able to compete throughout the season though she was not able to compete alongside them.

Belonging is a basic human need and one that changes with circumstances (Strayhorn, 2018). As the circumstances changed for the participants once injured,

belonging was affected. Taking on a role change helped them find a way to continue to stay connected and support their teammates throughout the season.

Pressures

The participants experienced pressure by their coaches, athletic trainers, and teammates to participate before they felt ready. Participants felt as if their long-term health did not matter to them. Instead, they felt undervalued by their coaches, athletic trainers, and teammates as the pressures to rush through rehabilitation and return to participation were not at the best interest of the student athletes. Coaches may rush student athletes through their rehabilitation to participate in order to continue contributing to the team's success. Gearity (2012) and DeGroot et al. (2018) pointed out how coaches may not respond as well to injured student athletes because they are focused on healthy, active student athletes. Corbillion et al. (2008) discussed that those student athletes that were integral to the team's success affected the support of the student athletes. However, student athletes come to a crossroad where they have to listen to their bodies and their long-term athletic goals rather than the pressures of the coaches and the team. The pressures from the coaches related to their injury caused participants to question how much they mattered to the coaches as person beyond their athletic ability. Mattering is an element of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). As the participants struggled to feel valued while their coaches were rushing them to participation, their belonging was continually affected.

Penelope and Raylene felt pressured by their coaches and athletic trainers to participate before they were ready. They both were not willing to and felt pushed to leave the program in order to have a scholarship freed for an incoming athlete. Myles, who

already was playing through pain and injury, would no longer compete after injuring his groin. He felt that the coaches and trainers were still rushing to get him back for the bowl game. The pressures behind athletic competition and victories weigh on the coaches and can affect how they handle a student athlete's injury.

Participants also expressed feeling pressured from athletic trainers. Penelope had a strained relationship with her team's athletic trainer. She felt that the trainer was dishonest with her throughout her process about her ACL. After Penelope left the university, she attempted to reach out the trainer but the trainer was not accepting her calls. Myles felt frustrated with the athletic trainers throughout his groin injury. When he was injured in one of his last games of the season, he felt that his trainers encouraged him to play in the bowl game that was a few weeks away. Looking forward to his professional career, he and his family decided to seek a second opinion that ended up with him having surgery. When he was injured in one of his last games of the season, he felt that his trainers encouraged him to play in the bowl game that was a few weeks away. Relationships with trainers in previous studies were more positive during their injury rehabilitation than the findings in my study suggest (Bennett et al., 2016; Clement & Shannon, 2011; Gray, 2019).

Only Sloan reported feeling connected with her athletic trainer and medical staff throughout her injury process. Her trainers were willing to continue to advocate for her continuing to rest and take time even though she could have been cleared through routine medical procedures. Athletic trainers can often see the vulnerable side of the student athlete when dealing with their injury (Bennett et al., 2016; Clement & Shannon, 2011).

Her relationship with athletic trainers pointed out how some athletic trainers can show social support throughout the time with the student athlete.

Though Sloan felt supported by her athletic trainers, other participants felt that their well-being was not at the forefront of decision-making from their coaches or athletic trainers surrounding their injury. As belonging needs to be continually satisfied as circumstances and context changes (Strayhorn, 2018), student athletes need to still be valued throughout their injury rehabilitation. Rushing a student athlete back to participation to help the team's goals or coaches' goals does not give student athletes a sense of belonging, but a sense of valuing less to their coaches and trainers. Feeling that they matter little to their athletic trainers and coaches contributes to injured student athlete's sense of belonging.

Social Support

Social support can be defined as “an exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient” (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p. 11). Social support is focused on supporting the student athlete for their overall wellbeing. For these participants, such support mainly stemmed from their families and friends. Penelope's mom and Isaac's mom also took off time from work to assist them with their injury. Lionel's brother was a huge source of support for him during his injury. Not only because he was familiar with the baseball program, but he was a role model for his life. These findings were consistent with Yang et al. (2010) who found that social support within student athletes' families remained consistent during injury.

Outside of their family, student athletes found a sense of belonging in other areas as well. Raylene got connected with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes group on campus. She was able to explore another area of her identity and find connections through it. Isaac ended up joining a fraternity on campus. Though the fraternity members were mostly his teammates, he was able to find a sense of belonging outside of sport and through the values and mission of his fraternity.

Though student athletes build connection with their teammates and coaches, it is important to recognize that their sense of belonging with their families and friends remains strong and especially apparent throughout challenges. Social support is crucial for a student athlete dealing with injury (Barefield & McCallister, 1997; Corbillon et al., 2008; Judge et al., 2012). Participants spoke to how their social support system consisted of their families, certain coaches, and outside groups.

Though social support was important for participants to deal with the challenges of their injury, it is not enough alone for student athletes to feel a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). The social support surrounding the student athletes assisted them while they were feeling a lack of belonging from their teams and from the changes in their athletic identity. Social support matters because though it is not sufficient enough to garner sense of belonging in college, it helps student athletes deal with tough transitions such as an injury. The participants' families and outside organizations allowed them to see that they still mattered and were valued by others. However, though they were a support system, this did not replace the loss of belonging they were experiencing with their injury.

Discussion Summary

The sense of belonging of the participants of the study was affected in multiple ways by their injury. They struggled with experiencing loss related to their athletic identity. Their team dynamics changed from one of extreme closeness in most cases to isolation during injury, changing roles, and feeling pressures from their coaches and trainers to rush back to athletic participation. The social support provided to the student athletes during this time helped them through challenges, but was not enough for students to experience a great sense of belonging with their team. As we know that student athletes' sense of belonging is affected by injury, there are implications for practice that can be put into place to better assist student athletes through this transition.

Implications for Practice

The sense of belonging of student athletes changes once injured. A positive sense of belonging yields engagement, achievement, and overall well-being (Strayhorn, 2018). Since injured student athletes experience isolation, pressure, and role change once injured, it is vital for athletic professionals to understand how students are impacted and what interventions they can put into place to support the student athlete's belonging.

Athletic Staff

Athletic staff surrounding a student athlete includes academic advisors, athletic trainers, and administrators. Since athletic identity played a strong role in how participants chose their colleges, athletic staff can continue to help them grow in their athletic identity. Additionally, being committed to the student athlete entails being committed to them as a student, athlete, and person. Holistic development should be a continual goal as student athletes enter into the program. Contributing to a student

athlete's holistic development will continue to help them grow as changes occur in their athletic identity throughout their time in the program. Therefore, athletic staff should make an effort to plug students in on campus outside of their athletic identity as a sole focus on athletic identity can be a detriment to the student athlete (Brewer et al., 1993; Lockhart, 2010). Student athletes may have not explored their other identities as much as their athletic one. Personal development in other areas of their identities would give them an opportunity to engage with themselves in depth. Participants felt lost once there were changes in their athletic identity. Feeling isolated from their team, they questioned if they mattered or were valued by others. Engaging with student athletes, even before injury occurs, not only allows the athletic staff to have a holistic view of their athletes, but it also gives the athletes a chance to explore their other identities. The participants enjoyed growing in their athletic identity, but once it changed, they were lost. Allowing student athletes to connect with themselves and with the campus in ways other than athletics can cause a better response to injury and role change. This includes bridging connections between current student athletes and campus partners through their interests, hobbies, areas of studies, or other identities.

Within their athletic community, there are often student activities or organizations geared towards leadership, justice, or community service. It is important for student athletes to get connected beyond sports so that they are able to experience a sense of belonging in other areas outside of athletics. Raylene joined the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Isaac chose to join a fraternity. An emerging theme was how strongly athletic identity played a role in their college choices. Once injured, the student athlete finds themselves grappling with the change. Athletic staff should focus student athletes

with opportunities within their athletic community as well. This would include initiatives such as programming, educational activities, or bridge programs to engage, explore, and connect with other identities within the athletic community but outside of their athletic identity, which would be crucial for their personal development and response to trauma such as injuries. Though these opportunities would reflect their athletic identity given the environment, allowing student athletes to use talents outside of their athletic ability to advocate for student athletes in leadership positions and partnerships on campus or serving their community as a youth mentor could be opportunities for them to explore their strengths of their other identities in a community that they are familiar with.

Another implication for athletic staff is listening support. Participants struggled to feel that their trainers were listening to their concerns. Penelope and Raylene did not receive accurate information concerning their injury which led to miscommunication and mismanagement of their injuries that outside medical staff had to figure out. As a student athlete is surrounded by many athletic staff during their days, including academic advisors, trainers, and other administrators, all should take a role in listening and paying attention to the struggles and concerns of injured student athletes. The participants specifically described conversations with their athletic trainers and academic advisors. They did not mention discussing their injury with other athletic administrators. However, these administrators still play a large role in the student athlete's experience. Because they were missing from the conversation, athletic administrators may not be as actively involved or present with the student athletes. Developing the communication with the student athletes and connecting those conversations in collaboration with other staff will allow athletic staff to have a full picture of what the injured student athlete is feeling.

Listening support will also help a student athlete feel valued, which will positively affect their belonging.

Coaches

Student athletes become connected with their team and coaches through recruiting, practicing, spending time in the facility, socializing with their team, off-season workouts, and competition. When a student athlete is injured, their sense of belonging shifts as they feel disconnected from their athletic identity and their team. What this means for the coaches is that they should have check-in meetings with their injured student athletes focused on listening support, including not only the student athlete's injury, but also how they are responding to their injury. Participants noted that they felt pushed aside as the coaches focused on non-injured athletes. These meetings would allow the coach and athlete to remain connected during the injury process. These meetings should not focus on how quickly the student athlete is able to return to play, but how they are coping through the process. For athletes such as Isaac who sustained a career ending injury, one-on-one meetings with the coaches could focus on connecting the student athlete to mental health services, former athletes who could relate to the issue, or other support systems. These meetings are especially important as student athletes may not be willing to be vulnerable with the coaches throughout their injury because of the power differential present. In order approach the conversations with acknowledgement to the power difference, coaches should set the environment by using a neutral site familiar to both the student and coach to allow the student athlete to feel more comfortable to express their true experience. It is also important for coaches to rely on athletic staff for

information regarding the student athlete so they are aware of what the student is experiencing before facilitating these meetings.

Also, depending on the injury, student athletes may experience a role change. Coaches should embrace the student athlete as they figure out how to support their teammates and the team's mission. They should include student athletes in these conversations by praising the encouragement they show to the team, relatable advice they give, and any other coaching support the student athlete provides. Not only will this help the student athlete adjust to their new role, this will also show other student athletes how they belong and matter beyond strictly athletic performance. Injured athletes will feel that they still matter to the team regardless of their injury. This will also reflect the tone the coach sets with the team and reflects a culture of inclusiveness, no matter the athlete's physical ability. These actions will show how a coach values their athletes past their athletic identity and performance and encourage their current players and prospective athletes.

Finally, if a student athlete is transferring and already injured, coaches should have clear, consistent communication with the student athletes and their family detailing what resources are available to them to continue rehabilitation of their injury. Coaches should continue receiving education from the NCAA and campus mental health services to build on their skills to work with student athletes going through a difficult transition such as injury. Their expertise is often focused on the sport they coach, so gaining knowledge and understanding of how not only to support their students athletically, but also holistically, is crucial to the development of their students and athletic program.

Teammates

Sustaining an injury is a difficult transition, from being separated from the team to thinking beyond a future with athletics. Teammates should work to encourage injured student athletes in their role change. Though the teammate who is injured may not be participating, their view from the sidelines allows them to see an overall picture of performance, similar to what the coaches observe. Teammates should embrace feedback, advice, and encouragement from injured student athletes who are working to stay connected with the team. Providing encouraging support and camaraderie during their rehabilitation can allow injured student athletes to feel supported throughout their healing. In order to help teammates understand their role in supporting injured student athletes, there should be an effort to bring in former athletes to speak to this experience and highlight the role of their teammates. Many sport programs include speaker series on various topics to educate the team on a matter. Utilizing a standing program and bringing in a former injured student athlete would allow the team to hear how their support is necessary and needed to help injured student athletes through their process.

Support Systems

The constant theme of the participants was how supported they felt by their families. Families close to student athletes play an ongoing special role in their lives, particularly in the face of injury. All participants mentioned at least one family member who was essential to dealing with the struggles of injury. Specifically, Penelope and Isaac discussed how special their moms were throughout that time, even moving in with them for awhile to take care of them. Being suddenly injured and having a large part of their identity shifted leaves the student athlete in an especially vulnerable position. Injured

student athletes are more likely to share these intimate struggles with those closest to them—their family. This specific support system should pay close attention to the listening support that they can provide their student athletes. This listening support gives the student athlete encouragement throughout their process. Family should also take the time to communicate what their student athlete feels comfortable sharing with athletic staff and coaches surrounding the athlete. Family has the closest look into their challenges and struggles of this time and are a key factor in rehabilitation.

Other support systems listed outside of family included academic staff, assistant coaches, and outside student groups. These systems of support help the student athlete deal with the reality of their injury. The support systems of student organizations allowed the student athletes to feel supported in areas outside of athletics. It helped develop other areas of their personal identity. Raylene and Isaac specifically noted such groups as support systems during their injury. It is important to note that student athletes may find these support systems outside of the strictly athletic environment. Professionals outside of athletics can assist these student athletes in creating those support systems across campus.

Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals should seek to collaborate with athletic professionals on campus. The care of student athletes is the responsibility of the institution, regardless of their athletic status. Student affairs personnel are experts in college students. This creates an opportunity for student affairs professionals to initiate collaboration with athletic professionals in order to support athletic professionals in working with their student athletes in a holistic way. Such collaboration would lead to well-rounded, well-researched programming that would greatly benefit the student athlete. Instead of relying

on separate services for athletes, the collaboration lead by student affairs would assist student athletes in getting more connected on campus outside of the separate services provided through athletics. Student affairs professionals can help to educate athletic staff about resources, opportunities available elsewhere on campus, and advantages to student athletes in order for the athletes make use of the resources. Student athletes having more points of connection would create more stability in their experience. By working together, student affairs professionals and athletic staff can build solid services for student athletes by also being cognizant of their schedules, which are largely framed around athletic commitments that can make it difficult to engage in other areas of campus. The collaboration with athletics is vital, as the expertise of student affairs professionals focuses on the growth and development of the student. Initiating this collaboration is important for student affairs professionals because when done successfully, connecting to a wider range of services can reduce anxiety in student athletes by providing them increased support and equilibrium in their college experience.

Implications Summary

Student athletes do not envision that they will be injured during their time in college. Being injured causes a shift in sense of belonging, leaving the student athlete disconnected. The implications for athletic staff, coaches, and social support systems should not be taken lightly as they play a large role on how the student athlete will respond to their injury. Student athletes are tasked with making very adult decisions about their health that could impact their current and future careers, but are not always given the information necessary to make informed decisions. It is vital that injured student athletes are treated with honesty, respect, and agency to make decisions

surrounding their injury. These implications, including providing opportunities to explore their identities outside of athletics with the assistance and expertise of student affairs professionals, listening support, access to mental health services, and communication and collaboration with all close to the student athlete, will help to build a net of support to encourage the sense of belonging of injured student athletes.

Recommendations for Research

This study shed light on the injured student athlete experience by exploring their athletic identity, team dynamics, and social support. Future research should take a detailed look at how career ending injuries affect student athletes' sense of belonging. In this study, Isaac was the only participant who could not return to their sport, and many participants felt pressured by athletic trainers and coaches to recover quickly and perform. Further research also needs to be done to explore the experience of athletes in the starting lineup who have experienced injury and are working to rehabilitate. This is important because coaches may feel more pressured to have a starting athlete active as they only get a set number of scholarships to give per year. The amount of pressure that these student athletes may feel to continue to work through their injury or how they experience belonging should be studied. As this study focused on the belonging of injured student athletes, special attention on the specific pressures that these student athletes face could reveal connections to other concerns such as mental health, conflict between athletes and coaches, transferring to other programs, or injury problems post-college.

There are still questions surrounding the pressure to perform, the salience of athletic identity, and how that identity affects the pressure to work through their injury.

Additionally, studies could focus on student athletes who have a promising post-college athletic career and their willingness to return after an injury. When Myles was injured late in the season, he turned his sights on preparing for a professional football career. In revenue-generating sports, some athletes may decline to participate in post-season play for fear of injury and focusing their attention for their professional futures. For athletes with good prospects of playing professionally, how does being injured affect their desire to return to collegiate play? Understanding how these injuries can cause a student athlete to withdraw from collegiate participation completely to focus on their future in the sport may highlight connections between athletic identity, belonging, and the desire for career establishment and stability.

Another recommendation for further study would be to focus on injured student athletes who transfer to continue eligibility. From the findings of my study, there was a disconnect between injury treatment and transferring that caused those athletes to be confused and frustrated from their rehabilitation process. How does the news of transferring or leaving the program affect the type of service they get to their injuries? As the student athlete is in process of leaving the program, what is the role of the institution, defined by the NCAA, in providing medical support during that process? How can athletic programs educate student athletes of this process to ensure realistic expectations? Injured student athletes are already dealing with feelings of mattering little to their team and not valued by coaches and staff, so they are particularly vulnerable to the effects of confusion and frustration at this point.

Finally, coaches and athletic trainers should be studied on how they handle student athlete injury. Findings showed that participants felt mishandled and misled by

coaches and athletic trainers to return to play before feeling ready. They often turned to a second opinion because they were not trusting of the initial opinion. Studies focusing on the pressures, rationale, and motivation of encouraging a student athlete to work through their injury rather than taking time for proper rehabilitation should be explored. As college athletics are growing in revenue, there could be pressures to maintain a winning record for fear of coaches and trainers of losing their jobs. Depending on the division of college or university, sport, and conference, they may handle student athlete injury very differently. Also, considering that some students felt pressured to come back from their injury due to where the team was in competition, that should be a consideration for future research as well. Myles worked through injuries throughout his senior season because his team was on path for another championship run. As this study focused on narratives, a future quantitative study could discover how prevalent it is for injured student athletes in playoff contention or championship play to participate through the pains of injury. These pressures could be widespread across sports and could demonstrate the how sacrificing student athletes' bodies for a victory could cause them to feel undervalued.

College athletic success is based on coaching, recruiting, and performing. It would be vital to study how the coaches' outlook on injuries and their student athletes affect which players they push to participate in athletic competition. How they decide to push certain athletes through their injuries would affect how student athletes perceive their self-value and worth to the program. Actions like these would affect prospective athletes who are choosing a program to commit to, and their families who want to help their student athletes choose the best place to continue growing in their development. It could be helpful for students and families wavering between options to identify programs

where coaches do not push their student athletes to rush back from injury, but give them time to fully heal in rehabilitation.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were held over the Zoom platform. This was a limitation because technology as a medium provided another barrier between me as the researcher and the participants. This may have affected the study because there were no in person interviews, leaving emotion coding to be done by re-watching mannerisms through the recorded interview rather than real time analysis. Another limitation was that I had a previous standing relationship with three of the participants. One participant was a former student athlete that I had the privilege to work with previously. Two other participants were colleagues of mine. There could be an unevenness in what was shared in interviews due to the previous relationships. They may have been more candid as they were comfortable to share their experience. Future researchers should consider these limitations when replicating or building from this study.

Conclusion

In this study, *Cost of Loss: Sense of Belonging and Injured Student Athletes*, findings show the experience of an injured athlete alters their sense of belonging on their teams and on campus. What was once comfortable and routine to a student athlete becomes distant, from practice to rehabilitation to not being able to attend class comfortably. These changes cause an injured student athlete to lose connections. This study amplifies the voices of those student athletes who may have felt pushed aside or ignored by those in the athletic arena. No one anticipates an injury, but it is the

responsibility of all connected to the student athlete to continue providing that support for a student athlete through their time at the university. Whether that injury is a few weeks, months, or permanent, the adjustment that a student athlete has to make within their college experience is tough. As athletic staff, it is our role to prepare ourselves to support injured student athletes through their difficult transition. Belonging, feeling valued, and mattering are a human need. Sense of belonging for injured student athletes is affected when they are hurt and through their recuperation. How we support, encourage, listen, and discuss with these athletes during their difficult transition is integral to their belonging, persistence, and overall well-being in college.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Message to Listservs and Group-Me

Hello!

I am Collette Toney, a learning specialist at the Ohio State University and a current doctoral student at the University of Georgia. I am conducting dissertation research about the experience of injured student athletes and sense of belonging. The eligibility for participants in this study is:

- Current student athlete or 1-5 years removed (athlete during 2014- 2019)
- Sustained a time-loss injury that required rehabilitation on campus
- Division I, II, or III

If you have student athletes who qualify for this study, please forward this questionnaire to them. The questionnaire is to gather information to verify eligibility for the participants for the study. If you have any questions, please contact me by email ctoney22@uga.edu or phone (770) 527-1974.

Thank you!

APPENDIX B

Participant Eligibility Questionnaire

Hello! I am Collette Toney, an athletic advisor at Ohio State University and a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. Thank you for contacting me concerning your participation in my study on sense of belonging and injured student athletes. Because I am in the process of selecting participants, please answer the items in this questionnaire so that I am able to evaluate which potential participants best fit the focus of the study. I will be in contact with you within two weeks. Thank you!

Name:

Sex:

Institution:

Athletic Team:

Scholarship/Partial Scholarship/Non-Scholarship:

Current Student (Y/N):

If not a current student, year of graduation:

- If you did not graduate, please indicate month and year of leaving the institution:

When did you get injured?

Did the injury occur in season or out of season?

Please describe your injury/injuries during your time on your athletic team:

Contact Information (please provide phone or email):

If you qualify for this study, I will contact you about next steps in the research process, which will include a 45-75 minute interview about your experience with your injury and sense of belonging at your institution.

APPENDIX C

Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “The Cost of Loss: Sense of Belonging and the Injured Student Athlete”. I will describe this study in more depth to you and answer any questions you may have after reading through the consent form. This study is being led by Collette Toney, a doctoral candidate in the Student Affairs Leadership Ed.D. program in the College of Education at the University of Georgia. The Faculty Advisor for this study is Dr. Laura Dean at the University of Georgia.

What the study is about

The purpose of this research is to learn how the impact of being injured can affect the sense of belonging for a student athlete during their time at their institution. From participants sharing their stories, the purpose is to provide scholars a deeper understanding of their experience.

What I will ask you to do

After completing the eligibility questionnaire and choosing participants, I will ask you to participate in a virtual interview lasting between 45-75 minutes. I will also ask you to look over the transcription from your interview and the preliminary analysis to confirm accuracy.

Risks and discomforts

- **Possible risks or discomfort could include emotional risks (e.g., feelings of sadness or anxiety) when discussing your injury.**

Benefits

A possible indirect benefit could be reflecting on the experience as a student athlete and throughout the injury process that may lead to a better understanding of oneself. The expected benefits to society and social knowledge is that the information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future to understand more about the experience of injured student athletes in their time at the institution.

Compensation for participation

Participants will not receive compensation for their participation because of the NCAA guidelines listed in the 2019-2020 manual, guideline 11. 1. 1.

Audio/Video Recording

Audio and/or video recording devices will be used in order for transcription to be utilized. Upon the completion of research, the recordings be destroyed.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security

I will protect participant privacy and/or confidentiality by:

- De-identifying data
 - This will include de-identifying data with individual identifiers, or keep identifying information separate from research data (e.g. signed consent forms kept separate from the survey data and the two will not be connected)
- I will keep this information in a password protected file on my personal drive

- I will be the only one who has access to this information

Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though [I am] taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through e-mail could be read by a third party.

Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology being used. I cannot guarantee against interception of data sent via the internet by third parties.

Sharing De-identified Data Collected in this Research

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. I will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these measures, I cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

Taking part is voluntary

Your involvement is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions/procedures that may make you feel uncomfortable, with no penalty, and no effect on academic standing, record, or relationship with the university or other organization or service that may be involved with the research. The interview protocol is semi-structured with questions focusing on the experience of being injured, on your team, and as a student athlete. You can choose not to participate if you are uncomfortable with conditions.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Collette Toney, a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at ctoney22@uga.com or at 770-527-1974. This study has been approved by the UGA Institutional Review Board. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

Again, please keep this letter for your records.

APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Thank you for taking time to share your experiences with me today. This interview should last between 30-60 minutes. As a reminder, you agreed to the informed consent form to discuss your experience with injury as well as consenting to recording this information. If you need to pause the interview for any reason, please let me know.

Interview Questions

- What has it meant to you to play _____ (sport)?
 - How has it been being a part of these teams pre-college?
- What things did you consider as you thought about where you would go to college?
 - What was it like when you decided and announced your decision?
 - What part did your sport play in that decision?
 - What part did family, friends, or coaches play in the decision?
 - Why did you select _____ (school)?
- What are/were your athletic goals? (Trying to figure out a sense of athletic identity)
 - How important is/was your sport to who you are?
- What do/did you get by being a part of your team?
 - Is there a story or example that illustrates that?
 - Are your teammates part of your social circle?

- How much time do you spend with your teammates outside of practice?
- Can you tell me the story of your injury?
 - When did it occur? In season or out of season?
 - How did it feel to be injured?
 - What was it like to be injured?
 - How long were you out from fully participating?
 - Have you been injured before? What was that like?
 - How would you describe your coping skills?
- Throughout your injury rehabilitation, what was your relationship like with your team?
 - How did your role change on your team?
 - What were some of the examples that let you know it had changed?
 - What was your interaction with your coaches during this process?
 - What was your interaction with your teammates during this process?
- Describe your support system during your injury rehabilitation?
- What changed for you academically through your injury process?
- What changed for you athletically through your injury process?
- Looking back on the experience, how did your sense of belonging to your team change after injury?
- What is something you wish people could understand about the experience of injured student athletes?

APPENDIX E

Member Checking Email

Dear _____,

Thank you again for giving me your time to chat about your experience as a student athlete and with injury. Attached you will find both your interview transcript and my analysis of the themes found throughout the interview. As you review the attachments, please assist me in the following:

- Highlight any factual corrections or items that put you at risk
- Any inaccuracies in the meaning making of the analysis portion

Please contact me if you would like to discuss this more. If not, please send corrections or comments by _____. If I do not hear from you by that time, I will proceed with the information attached.

Thank you again for spending time with me discussing your experience. Please let me know if you have further questions.

Collette Toney