

January 2013

Backboards and Browsers: A Qualitative Examination of the Experiences of Division I Student-Athletes in Online Courses

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Backboards and Browsers: A Qualitative Examination of the Experiences of Division I
Student-Athletes in Online Courses

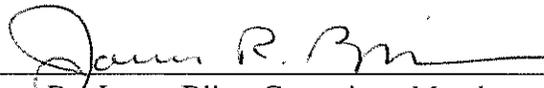
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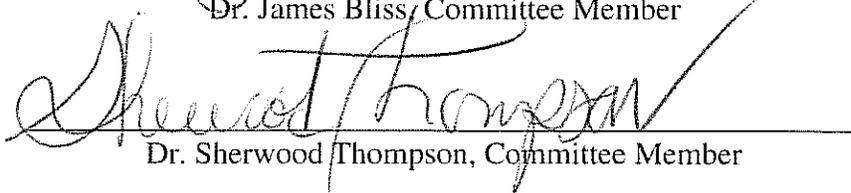
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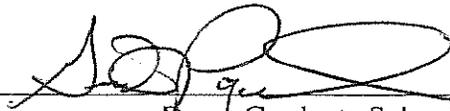
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Backboards and Browsers: A Qualitative Examination of Division I Student-Athlete
Experiences in Online Learning Environments

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May, 2013

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the Athletic Academic Advisors. Few may truly understand the struggle, but many will reap the reward.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my family for everything they have done for me. It is because of them that I am reaching this unforgettable milestone. To my Dad, for always being there to support me and believe in what I can accomplish. Sharing this process with you has been my favorite part of the experience. To my Mom, for always listening when I needed it and for providing a steady, carnivorous diet. For all the years of your thankless support I say, thank you and I love you!

Secondly, I would like to thank my committee for patiently guiding me through this process. Dr. Charles Hausman, I thank you for all the time you have spent correcting my misguided notions, answering my endless questions, and shaping me from an ignorant graduate student to a fledgling researcher. To Dr. Brody Ruyhley, you have looked out for me for close to a decade; from my dietary considerations to my academic renaissance. You're a great mentor and an amazing friend. I can never thank you enough. Dr. James Bliss and Dr. Sherwood Thompson, you took one of the scariest endeavors of my life and gave me the confidence to proceed courageously. Thank you both for your time and support!

Finally, I owe a heartfelt thank you to my coworkers, Dr. Randy Kennedy, Jenn Skinner, Natasha Criss, and Mark Fusiak. I do not know how you put up with my antics, but there is a special place in Heaven for all of you.

Abstract

This research explored the experiences of student-athletes in online education. Interviews were conducted with scholarship student-athletes enrolled at a Bowl Championship Series level, Division I institution. Participants had completed at least one online course while actively participating in their sport. A conceptual framework was developed to describe the experiences of student-athletes in online education from course selection through completion, describing the nature of course work, perceived challenges and advantages, and the influence of athletics. The resulting themes included: flexibility, the student-athlete affect, use of technology, time management, and lack of interaction.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has grown into a cultural and financial phenomenon in America. The NCAA hosts 88 championships in over 23 sports. Throughout its three divisions, the NCAA includes more than 400,000 student-athletes enrolled at over 1,000 institutions (NCAA, 2011c). Colleges and universities can no longer afford to ignore the benefits of a highly visible intercollegiate athletic program. The media attention gained from intercollegiate athletics has become an important source of revenue, helped increase enrollment, and can help improve the overall image of the school (Watt & Moore, 2011). Revenue generated by the NCAA in 2011 was \$757 million (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The influx of revenue has resulted in increased visibility and pressure win, which has led the NCAA to focus much of its attention on ensuring and reporting the retention and graduation of student-athletes.

Eligibility for classification as a Division I institution is based on minimum standards put forth by the NCAA. Division I programs must sponsor a minimum of 14 sports, at least seven of which must be women's sports. Two of the sports offered by the school must be team sports. The NCAA also mandates the number of competitions against other Division I schools and financial aid to be offered (NCAA, 2011b). Schools that meet Division I qualifications make a significant investment in intercollegiate athletics and enjoy significant notoriety. They are subjected, however, to the various directives of the NCAA, such as academic eligibility requirements.

Under NCAA regulations, athletic departments provide academic support centers to ensure the academic achievement, successful graduation of their student athletes, and continued eligibility and return on their scholarship investment. College athletics is a business in which athletic scholarships serve as investments, leading to revenue via ticket sales, television deals, and other sources (Dohrmann, 2011). Academic support centers protect the investment made by the institution by helping to ensure eligibility of the student-athlete. This, in turn, affords the student-athlete the opportunity to achieve success in their sport while generating revenue for the university. Academic support centers hire advisors, mentors, tutors and other staff to work with athletes, analyze their scholastic aptitude, learning abilities, and non-cognitive traits to optimize the chance of student-athletes' academic success.

Online courses, now commonplace in colleges and universities (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2011), have become a desirable option for students who have obligations limiting their attendance in face-to-face classes. Online courses can take three distinct forms: synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). For the purposes of this study, "online courses" will be defined as synchronous or asynchronous web-based courses. Synchronous and asynchronous courses are notable for their lack of in-person class meetings. Class attendance often conflicts with travel for away games, media appearances, and medical treatments, which are required for the student-athlete to retain their scholarship. The use of online courses to fulfill a full-time course load can alleviate schedule conflicts created by participation in varsity athletics.

Online courses require different sets of learning skills than traditional courses. Students in online courses are expected to begin the course with a baseline of

technological skills. If students are unfamiliar with hardware use or basic software and Internet programs, their struggles in online courses will begin before they even attempt to understand the course material. These courses require a high level of motivation from the student, who must log-on and complete assignments without structured class time or face-to-face reminders from a professor about upcoming assignments. Superior time management skills are required to log-on regularly and complete assignments in a timely manner. Without classroom meetings, students must demonstrate the ability to read and understand course materials on their own.

Student-athletes attend college under unique circumstances that require frequent travel, regularly scheduled practice time, mandatory workouts, and expected participation in community engagements. These obligations can make online courses a good option for athletes. It is important, however, for advisors to carefully evaluate candidate suitability for online courses. Even one failed course can result in a loss of eligibility and thousands of dollars wasted in scholarship money. These elevated stakes add pressure to appropriately evaluate a student-athlete's likelihood of success in online courses. For the purposes of this study, the term "student-athlete" will be defined as men and women enrolled full-time at an NCAA affiliated college or university and participate in intercollegiate athletics.

Statement of the Problem

This study sought to examine the experiences of student-athletes in online courses. The need for a careful examination of this phenomenon was threefold: First, the experiences and academic expectations facing varsity, intercollegiate student-athletes are

very specific and unique. Second, online courses are an expanding educational methodology that utilizes different techniques than traditional classroom courses, and require a distinctive skill-set for academic success. Third, the consequences of academic failure for student-athletes make it imperative that thoughtful consideration is made before enrolling in an online course.

Student-athletes are held to the same academic expectations as their non-athlete peers while being subjected to the additional demands of participating in intercollegiate athletics. These additional demands can create significant challenges for young students (Chertrand & Lent, 1987; Howard-Hamilton & Watt, 2001; Jolly, 2008; Watt & Moore, 2001). Student-athletes can face as many as 40 hours of sport related activity per week (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011), which includes practice, competition, travel, midweek games, team meetings, training table, community service events, and media obligations (Jordan & Denson, 1990).

The consequence of the athletic expectations placed upon student-athletes is less time available for academic pursuits and a strain on the student ideation. Opportunities for study and completion of course assignments must fit in between classes and athletic activities. Student-athletes must also consider fatigue when planning study times (Kreb, 2008). The strain of conditioning, intense practices, and extensive travelling takes a toll on the student-athlete's ability to effectively study.

The Prevalence of Online Courses

Online courses have become a popular tool for colleges and universities to boost enrollment by offering flexibility to students with busy schedules. Enrollment in online

courses has shown remarkable growth in the last 15 years. In Fall of 2011, 6.7 million students, or nearly a third of all students enrolled in higher education (32%), were enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This figure represents an increase in 570,000 students from the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2013). That figure followed up an increase of 560,000 students enrolled in online courses from the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In 2001, 89% of four-year institutions offered distance education programs (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, & Liu, 2006). The growing trend of online education does not appear to be going away in the near future, as 65.5% of academic leaders consider online programs to be crucial to the online strategy of their institution (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Academic Success in Online Education

Online courses offer great flexibility due to the accessibility and ability of students to work at their own pace. This flexibility can make the courses very attractive to students with busy schedules, such as adult learners and student-athletes. The differences in format between online courses and traditional classroom courses place an emphasis on different skill sets. Academic success in online courses is more reliant on independent learning skills, effective time management, self-regulation, and strong internal locus of control than traditional classroom counterparts (Balduf, 2009; Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Diaz, 2000; Driscoll, 2002; Kerr, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2006; Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007). Students lacking these necessary skills have a significantly higher likelihood of failure in online courses.

The Significance of Online Courses for Student-Athletes

Online courses are an attractive option for student-athletes to alleviate some of the pressure of their busy athletic schedule. They can save time spent commuting to class, cut down on missed classes due to travel, and accommodate inconsistencies in their schedule due to competition. The advantages presented by online courses can be outweighed by the potential for failure if student-athletes do not possess the skills necessary to be successful in the online methodology.

NCAA student-athletes are held to certain academic benchmarks in order to be eligible to compete. Scholarship athletes receive financial aid primarily based on their ability to participate in competition. If their academic performance puts them below NCAA minimum academic standards, they are likely to lose their athletic scholarship. For many student-athletes, a scholarship is the sole means for being able to afford to go to college; therefore, their eligibility to compete has a significant impact on their status as a student.

It is of vital importance that both student-athletes and their Academic Advisors are very thoughtful and aware of the potential risks involved when deciding to enroll in an online course. Advisors and student-athletes must closely examine academic abilities and honestly evaluate a student's level of academic independence. Little research has been published examining the perceived difficulties of student-athletes in online courses and the efficacy of the institutional supports designed to assist them.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to address the experiences of student-athletes in online education. A growing body of literature exists addressing the unique impact of online education, as well as the experiences and academic success factors for student-athletes. As each area of interest becomes more prolific in American culture, the literature will expand accordingly. Minimal work has been done, however, to address the experiences of student-athletes in online education. Available empirical information to inform student-athletes who may consider enrolling in online courses was lacking. This study aimed to aid professionals in advising and working with student-athletes, educators tasked with teaching student-athletes in an online environment, and student-athletes considering online education.

Using the grounded theory approach, this study specifically concentrated on student perceptions of the advantages and difficulties associated with taking a course in this medium. Of particular interest was the extent to which they related to the use of technology, the student's attention to the class, or ability for the course work. The study also described unique educational factors experienced by the student-athletes as they pertain to their status as an athlete.

The perceived efficacy of institutional support provided by athletic academic centers was a topic examined in this dissertation. Student-athletes were asked about the variety of interventions offered, as well as the nature in which they were implemented, and perceived benefit. Ideas for potential improvements to the academic support of student-athletes enrolled in online courses were solicited.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the experiences of student-athletes enrolled in online courses?

RQ2: What issues related to online coursework affected the academic success of student-athletes?

RQ2a: How does the interpretation of materials via electronic delivery system affect academic success?

RQ2b: How does the freedom from structured class time, necessary time management, or other motivational issues affect academic success?

RQ2c: How are the student-athletes' experiences affected by other issues specific to the online course?

RQ3: How was the course experience affected by the students' status as an athlete?

RQ4: In retrospect, how do student-athletes feel the academic support center staff could better prepare them for success in online education?

Specifically, student-athletes were asked to describe what aspects of the experience were difficult or disengaging. The factors explored were personal (i.e. relating to their status as a student-athlete) and pedagogical (i.e. relating to the style of the course).

Previous research has analyzed the challenges facing student-athletes in traditional college classes (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Pascarella, Edison, Hagedorn, Nora, & Terenzini, 1996; Ryan, 1989; Sellers, 1989, 1992; Shulman & Bowen, 2001), as well as the unique challenges that online courses present to the general student population (Kerr, Ryneson, & Kerr, 2006; Morkes & Nielson, 1997; Oliver, Omari, & Herrington, 1998; Ward & Newlunds, 1998), but there is little research connecting the two areas of interest.

Significance of Study

Student-athletes have an extraordinary amount of pressure placed upon them to succeed academically. Their financial aid is contingent on the ability to compete in athletic competition. The NCAA, who has placed a premium on academic competence, sets the terms of athletic eligibility. For many student-athletes, college would not be an option without financial aid.

Athletic Academic Advisors are charged with making appropriate recommendations and providing effective interventions to ensure student-athlete academic success. Advisors define student-athlete academic success by the satisfactory passing of each course, contributing to remaining athletically eligible (Kreb, 2008). To provide assistance of value, advisors must be aware of potential struggles student-athletes may face.

This study intended to provide insight into the student-athlete experience in online courses by providing firsthand accounts and information, focusing on student-athletes who have enrolled in at least one online course. These experiences provided insight into the challenges faced in that course medium. This will serve to expand the body of literature in a field that has received relatively little attention from the research community.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Online Education

Proliferation of Online Education

Online education has experienced remarkable growth and implementation in American colleges and universities over the past 15 years. In the 2000-2001 academic year, 2,876,000 students were enrolled in college-level distance education courses (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). At that time, enrollment in web-based courses was increasing at a rate of 33% per year (Pethokoukis, 2002). That trend persisted over the following decade as 6.7 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in Fall 2011; a number that represents 32% of all students enrolled in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2013). This growth represented an increase of only 9.3% from the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2013). While the 9.7% increase represents the lowest rate since 2002, it outpaced the 1% increase in general enrollment in higher education. More than three quarters of University Presidents report that their institutions offer online courses (Pew Research Center, 2011). In 2011, 89% of four-year public institutions offered online courses while 60% of four-year private institutions featured online courses (Pew Research Center, 2011). It does not appear the implementation of online courses is slowing. The percentage of institutions reporting that “online learning is crucial to the long-term strategy of my institution” reached an all-time high in 2012 of 69.1% (Allen & Seamen, 2013, p.16).

Implementation of online courses presents a host of issues that must be addressed. Teachers experience a change in workload, in which their classes may include double to triple the number of students and, by extension, more hours necessitated per week than are required in classroom courses. Teachers also must make decisions regarding whether to use a student led model in which students lead discussions and organize meetings to discuss material given by the teacher, or whether to use a teacher led model in which the teacher leads discussions in chat rooms or on message boards and takes a more hands on approach (Kennedy, 2000).

In deciding the methodology for course offerings, faculty must consider the learning outcomes achieved. It is reported that less than one-third of professors accept the value and legitimacy of online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2011). This statistic has remained significantly consistent through the years. Opinions can vary largely, though, based upon the type of institution being surveyed.

Administrators must decide if an expansive distance learning approach is appropriate for their institution, factoring the school's mission, core values, financial situation, and growth plan (Kennedy, 2000). Administrators have increasingly accepted online courses as they achieve comparable learning objectives to traditional courses. In 2011, 67% of academic leaders reported online courses to be the same or superior to their face-to-face counterparts, up from 57% in 2003 (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Overall, administrators believe that online courses offer the same benefits of traditional courses, with online courses boasting a great advantage in flexibility of schedule and face-to-face courses fostering superior faculty-student interaction (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Confidence in the academic validity of online education expressed by university administrators was significantly higher than that of the general public. While over half of College Presidents believe that online courses offer equal value to courses offered in the classroom, only 29% of the general public holds the same opinion (Pew Research Center, 2011). While skepticism of the validity of online education is considerable, it is also acknowledged that respondents may not have personal experience in online courses.

Students must decide which style offers the most benefit. Students often report basing this decision on convenience, being too busy for in-class courses, as well as technological acumen and accessibility to technology (Kennedy, 2000). In 2011, nearly two thirds of respondents perceived student satisfaction as being the same for online courses compared to face-to-face courses. 4% found online courses to be superior while only 1.3% of respondents preferred face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Online Course Methodology

The most outstanding characteristic, common to all online courses, is the physical separation between student and teacher. The definition of online education has long been established as courses that take place in an environment in which the student is separated from the teacher and learning is done autonomously, with communication taking place via print, electronic, or other non-human medium (Moore, 1973). The face-to-face social interaction between teacher and learner is the notable element of classroom courses missing from Internet-based courses.

Variations in the implementation of online courses are plentiful. Students can work as individuals or in groups, discussions can be private or class-wide and they can be

synchronous in a chat room, asynchronous utilizing message boards or face-to-face via webcam. Distance education takes three distinct forms, defined by their delivery methods. The level of autonomy required and the nature of interactions between teacher and student delineate asynchronous courses, synchronous courses, and hybrid courses. The differences in delivery method have ramifications for the way students must learn course materials and the academic skills required for academic success. The following paragraphs will discuss.

Asynchronous. The format most commonly referred to as an “online course” can be specifically described as an “asynchronous Internet-based course” (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). This model does not require the teacher and students to be online and communicating at the same time. Teachers can post class material, which can include assignments, quizzes, and tests to a site, accessible to students at any time and are independent of time zone (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006). The material is available across the World Wide Web and students can work at their own pace in this format. Class discussions can be moderated by the professor using message boards, which do not require participants to be logged in at the same time. When designed correctly, asynchronous courses foster a student-centered learning environment that utilizes the Internet’s potential for interactivity. This course format can also accommodate a variety of learning styles when developed properly (Simonson et al., 2006). The model also promotes technological proficiency, which can enhance a student’s opportunities for employment upon graduation.

Asynchronous web courses are not without their drawbacks. Instructors can face the difficulty of formatting course material to be compatible with the student-centered online learning environment (Simonson et al., 2006). Additionally, the development of well-designed online courses can require time and resources not available to instructors (Hillstock, 2005), with the possibility of little training or technical assistance available to instructors or students to ensure effective utilization of the available technology (Simonson et al., 2006). In some instances, the topics being covered do not lend themselves to being taught asynchronously (Simonson et al., 2006), as asynchronous web courses place the onus on the student to be responsible for their coursework and material comprehension (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). This format has a tendency to place an emphasis on the technology used to host the course work rather than the course content (Clark, 1983, 1984). They also expose students to a host of distractions that are not a part of traditional classroom courses.

Synchronous. Synchronous courses offer many of the same features of asynchronous but require teachers and students be online and communicating at the same time, thus removing the flexible accessibility dimension (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). Teachers can utilize chat rooms and video technology to moderate real time discussion with students. Synchronous methodology provides direct, real time instructor feedback that helps in the understanding of course material (Davidson-Shivers, Tanner, & Muilenburg, 2000). The synchronous format functions more like a traditional course than asynchronous alternatives.

One of the stated benefits of in-class courses is the personal interaction and the sense of community created. Even in online courses, a sense of community benefits student learning and persistence (Knupfer, Gram, & Larsen, 1997). In online forums, any amount of moderation can facilitate a sense of community, support and camaraderie (Winograd, 2000). Each of these elements is effective in boosting student retention (Knupfer, Gram, & Larsen, 1997; Winograd, 2000).

Hybrid Courses. Hybrid-courses are defined as courses that employ regular classroom meetings to supplement the course work that is offered online (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). Typically, if a course spends less than half of the scheduled class time in a traditional, face-to-face forum, it can be considered a hybrid (Leh, 2002). The combination of asynchronous and synchronous methods, or online and in-class methods in this context, provides students with the ability to access course materials from anywhere that has access to the Internet, as well as a forum for direct instruction and a chance to have their questions answered. The weakness is the reduced flexibility that is associated with required class meetings.

Success Factors of Online Courses. It has been consistently shown that online courses have the potential to be as effective as traditional courses in learning outcomes (Bernard et al., 2004; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Factors in the delivery of online courses, such as instructor efficacy, the nature of course materials, and the utilization of orientations, have been shown to have an effect on academic success. The variety of online methodologies brings inherent advantages and disadvantages for learners. It is

clear that the disadvantages associated with online courses can be negated by the effectiveness of the instructor and the selection of course materials (McFarland & Hamilton, 2006). More than anything else, pedagogical factors have been shown to influence student success in online courses (Bernard et al., 2004; Clark, 1983, 1984; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006).

Instructor efficacy. While there is no face-to-face instruction time with professors in non-hybrid online courses, there are a number of factors that make for effective online instructors. Quality and speed of communication, such as replying to emails or message boards, clear and consistent class announcements and reminders, and reliably updating and distributing grade information are all associated with student success. Instructors must be comfortable with their role as a facilitator, which is manifested in expressing clear and comprehensive expectations. Students must know what is expected of them in discussion boards, assignments, quizzes, and tests (McFarland & Hamilton, 2006).

Course Materials. The lack of face-to-face instructional time amplifies the effect that the selection of course materials has on student success in online courses. Due to the fact that students must do much of their learning independently, the selection of clear, easily understood course material is critical. Difficult readings can be made accessible through class discussion or presentation slides from the instructor to garner an increase in student learning outcomes. E-textbooks are a delivery method that was shown to increase student success.

Orientation. It has been previously shown that orientation for traditional courses create a sense of connection and commitment to the course (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). The effects of orientation for online courses are even more powerful than in traditional classes because they can be the one time in the semester that a sense of connection can be fostered (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). Advancements in technology have made online orientations a more viable option, considering video conferencing has made the need for in-person orientation meetings obsolete.

Characteristics of Successful Online Learners

There are inherent differences between in-class courses and online courses, which require different sets of skills for academic success. Beyond the medium itself, there are differences in the type of course materials that can be disseminated, the method of grading, the way students receive instructions and course information, and the assessment of learning, just to name a few. Schrum (1995) pointed out that in-class courses cannot simply be turned into online courses. She asserted that the course design must match the educational needs and learning styles of the students. Conversely, it can be stated that, since courses are designed with no prior knowledge of the individual needs of the students who will enroll, the educational needs and learning style of the students must match the design of the course.

As with more traditional courses, proficiency in reading and writing is paramount in online learning (Kerr, Ryneson, & Kerr, 2006). However, it has been sufficiently documented that reading and writing online differs from the reading and writing in traditional courses (Kerr, Ryneson, & Kerr, 2006; Morkes & Nielson, 1997; Oliver,

Omari, & Herrington, 1998; Ward & Newlunds, 1998). Online learners must be able to read for comprehension and write with clarity to overcome the inability to interact face-to-face with the professor. These students forfeit the opportunity for verbal explanation.

The skills needed to succeed in online education can be acquired and honed over time. As with other learned skills, the more they are practiced, the more proficient one becomes. Therefore, students who have experience in online courses are more likely to experience success (Ehrman, 1990; Eisenberg & Dowsett, 1990; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). This is a dynamic factor in that, the more online courses a student has taken; the more likely they are to succeed. It takes time to develop the time management and independence necessary to succeed in this style of class.

Characteristics such as attending class regularly, being internally motivated, self-disciplined, having a particular interest and comfort level with technology, being self-directed, and strong goal setting skills are important contributors to student achievement in online courses (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Kerr, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2006). Students who identify as sequential learners have been found to experience a higher rate of success in online courses than learners who prefer a global learning style (Doherty & Maddux, 2002). These characteristics make up the characteristic themes that are discussed most often in the literature.

Independent Learning. One of the most consistent, useful, and frequent characteristics of successful online learners discussed in the literature is independent learning (Diaz, 2000; Driscoll, 2002; Kerr, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2006). Independent learning is truly an amalgamation of an individual's ability to manage their time, balance

multiple tasks, set goals, and regulate their motivation, self-discipline, and responsibility (Kerr, Ryneerson, & Kerr, 2006). Students who are strong independent learners experience success in online education more often than those with a deficit (Diaz, 2000; Kerr, Ryneerson, & Kerr, 2006).

Independent learning has been identified in the literature as early as the 1970s, when Knowles (1970) based his strategies for adult learners on Roger's (1969) self-direction concept. Later writings cite autonomy as a crucial element of independent learning (Garrison, 2003; Moore, 1973, 1993, 2003), with autonomy being defined as "the degree of control the learner has over preparation, execution, and evaluation of his or her learning" (Garrison, 2003, p.162). A more recent study has gone on to associate high independent learning scores with self-esteem and Internet self-efficacy, which facilitate performance in online courses (Kerr, Ryneerson, & Kerr, 2006).

Self-Regulation. A critical theme in educational discourse is students taking ownership of their own education. Educators and policy makers have touted the importance of assuming personal responsibility for one's own education for centuries (Zimmerman, 1990). It was a former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare who suggested that the goal of education is to shift the burden of pursuing an education to the individual (Gardner, 1963). Inherent in assuming responsibility for one's own education is the prioritization of education and the motivation to achieve academic success. More specifically, self-regulated learners plan, organize and self-monitor effectively (Ghatala, 1986; Pintrich & de Groot, 1990; Pressley, Borkowski, & Schneider, 1987).

In online courses, the most significant trait in explaining student success was found to be self-regulation (Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007). Defined by Zimmerman (2000) as self-generated actions, thoughts, and feelings which are planned and adapted to the attainment of personal goals, self-regulation was more significant than demographic variables (including age, gender, and educational level) and motivational beliefs (which included goal orientation, self-efficacy, and test anxiety) in predicting success in online courses (Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007).

There are three components to self-regulation in learners: behavioral strategies, self-response regarding the effectiveness of educational processes, and self-perceptions of academic accomplishments (Zimmerman, 1990). The development of these skills is integral to academic performance in classroom courses, but they are at a premium in online courses, which require independent, self-driven learning (Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007). The components of self-regulation are trainable and can be improved, however it is important to emphasize all three skills (Zimmerman, 1990).

It stands to reason that self-regulation is a primary factor for success in online education. Self-regulation concerns the individual's ability to persist in academic endeavors, block out distractions, maintain cognitive engagement, and control effort on academic tasks (Pintrich & de Groot, 1990). Without the teacher-directed environment of an in-class course, students are required to complete assignments and learn course material in a self-directed setting. The skills outlined by Pintrich and deGroot (1990) play a critical role in the satisfactory completion of coursework, as exemplified by self-regulations demonstrated correlation to academic performance.

Time Management. Time management is one of the most often cited components of academic success (Balduf, 2009; Britton & Tesser, 1991, George et al., 2008; Lahmers & Zulauf, 2001; Ries et al., 1995). Identified as being able to pace their studies and allowing adequate time to work on assignments and study for exams, time management is a learned skill that can be a challenge, especially for students in their first and second years of college (Balduf, 2009). Time management has often been studied in the context of other variables such as self-monitoring, self-judgment and alertness (Britton & Tesser, 1991). Balduf's (2009) findings mirrored those of Ries et al. (1995) in linking poor time management skills to underachievement among college students. When it is studied as an isolated variable, time management skills positively correlate with Grade Point Average (GPA) among college students (Britton & Tesser, 1991; George, et al., 2008; Lahmers & Zulauf, 2001). College GPA more strongly correlates with time management skills than it does with SAT scores (George, et al., 2008). Students are aware of the importance of proper time management skills, and still face difficulty. Of undergraduate students surveyed, 67% reported that their greatest personal need was to more effectively manage their time. (Weissberg, Berensten, Cote, Cravey, & Heath, 1982)

Students reported that increased freedom and a less structured schedule resulted in academic procrastination and misuse of time (Balduf, 2009). The misuse of time is a commonly discussed problem for first-year college students. Time, being a finite resource, must be managed. Time management, among other study skills, have been shown to improve with age as they are developed and practiced over time (Lammers, Onwuegbuzie, & Slate, 2001). The highly structured schedule of high school does little

to develop time management skills, unless teachers or parents emphasize them. In college, students experience more free time during the day, which can lead students to putting off schoolwork until the evening and using that free time to eat or sleep (Balduf, 2009). The proper development of time management skills are crucial for students, especially for those like student-athletes whose schedules include little excess free time (Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010). Procrastination is a habit leading to inadequate time allowed for homework and studying, exemplified by “cramming” and missed assignments.

Intercollegiate Athletics and Academics

Background

Athletic competition has been a part of the higher education community in America for nearly 200 years. Ivy League schools competed in football and rugby matches regularly in the 1820s and regattas starting in 1952 (Crowley, 2006; Falla, 1981; Zimbalist, 1999). As early as the 18th century, the Rugby School of England combined athletics and the pursuit of higher education (Fall, 1981; Ridpath, 2002; Zimbalist, 1999).

The NCAA was born of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS) in 1910. The IAAUS originally convened in 1906 following a series of conferences commissioned by President Theodore Roosevelt. These conferences, including influential athletics leaders, were a response to the public perception that football had become too violent (Crowley, 2006; Falla 1981; Krebs, 2008; Zimbalist, 1999). The mission of the initial meeting was to discuss issues regarding violence in

sport; however, issues related to academics were discussed at length (Crowley, 2006; Ridpath, 2002). The association put forth the expectation that athletes and their universities would act in an ethical manner and maintain the purpose and dignity of higher education (Crowley, 2006).

The NCAA hosted its first championship in 1921 at the National Collegiate Track and Field Championship. At the time, the NCAA was in place merely to create a baseline of rules (Crowley, 2006). In time, more championships were held, more members joined the association, and more rules committees were formed. It became quickly apparent that a full-time leader was necessary. In 1951, Walter Byers was named the NCAA's first Executive Director. In the following decades, interest in intercollegiate athletics boomed, and the relationship between athletics and academics grew more complex (Crowley, 2006).

NCAA Academic Reform

The ideal model of intercollegiate athletics is to provide a meaningful extracurricular activity for students as they pursue a college degree. The concept has fallen short of reality virtually since the inception of intercollegiate competition. In one of the earliest American collegiate athletic competitions, competitive ambition overtook the ideal of sportsmanship as Harvard employed the services of an athlete who was not a student in an effort to gain an advantage over their rival Yale (Smith, 2000). The pressure to win has increased over time as college athletics has captured the country's time, attention, and money. The ideal of a student-first model of collegiate athletics has slowly evolved into an athlete-first ideation. Notions of students-athletes forgoing the

opportunity to earn a college degree to pursue a professional athletic career has become commonplace.

As early as the mid 1940's, the NCAA realized that rules were necessary to realize their ideal of intercollegiate athletics and keep it intact. The NCAA implemented their first set of regulations governing the actions of its member institutions, which were known as the "Principles for the Conduct of Intercollegiate Athletics," or more commonly referred to as the "Sanity Code" for its mission to return sanity to college sports (Zimbalist, 1999, p.10). Since its initial set of regulations, the NCAA introduced a number of influential rulings aimed at reforming college athletics. Most notably were Proposition 48, Proposition 42, and Proposition 16, which all articulated stipulations regarding student-athletes' eligibility to participate in sports and receive financial aid (Watts & Moore, 2011).

In the modern era of college athletics, the NCAA has placed an emphasis on a student-first model of intercollegiate athletics, which has pushed issues of academic progress and academic integrity to the forefront of public consciousness (Dilley-Knoles, Burnett, & Peak, 2010). Instances of unethical conduct by university staff and student-athletes, as well as academic under-performance, have cast intercollegiate athletics in a negative light (Meyer, 2005). In an effort to address these issues, the NCAA developed stringent continuing eligibility requirements as well as unique metrics for quantifying student-athlete academic progress and graduation rate. These measures were intended to provide academic accountability for coaches and institutions.

In 2003, the NCAA designed two metrics in an effort to better quantify and monitor the academic progress of student-athletes. The Academic Progress Rate (APR)

and the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) were intended to be accurate reflections of student-athlete academic performance. These metrics were developed in response to the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) that was implemented by the federal government in 1990 (LaForge & Hodge, 2011).

Graduation Success Rate. The NCAA began tracking graduation rates of its member institutions across all divisions in 1983 (Watts & Moore, 2001). Since first measured, graduation rates for student-athletes have been steadily improving. By 1998, the graduation rate for student-athletes had surpassed the graduation rate for non-student-athletes (Zimbalist, 1999). The implementation of these metrics enabled the NCAA to break down and analyze the data by gender, race, and sport and determine which populations struggle the most (Watts & Moore, 2001).

GSR was tailored specifically for student-athletes with the intention of eliminating the unique disadvantages student-athletes face that are inherent in FGR. Under FGR, student-athletes who leave school early to pursue a lucrative career in professional athletics are the equivalent of a student who fails out of school (LaForge & Hodge, 2011). GSR is calculated using a six-year window, similar to FGR, to monitor successful degree completion. Programs do not incur penalties for student-athletes who transfer or enroll mid-year and graduate, nor are they penalized for student-athletes who leave school in good academic standing (LaForge & Hodge, 2011).

Academic Progress Rate. Both FGR and GSR are only measured at the end of a six-year window. The NCAA recognized a need for more continuous tracking and

employed APR in 2003. APR is based on the premise that retention and continuing eligibility are critical components to graduation. The metric emphasizes eligibility and retention, as well as quantifies for recruits which programs are likely to retain student-athletes through their graduation (Lucas & Lovaglia, 2005). Each member of a cohort is awarded a point for retention and remaining eligible. APR scores are a percentage of the total number of points awarded out of the total number of possible points and are based on a scale of 1,000 (LaForge, Hodge, 2011).

At the time of implementation, an APR score below 925 resulted in sanctions by the NCAA. A score of 925 can be projected to represent a 50% graduation rate (NCAA, 2005). The NCAA approved an increase in the number to 930 in 2011 (NCAA, 2012). Penalties for achieving a score below 930 range from loss of scholarships, ineligibility from postseason play, and NCAA membership restrictions depending on the egregiousness and the persistence of the violation (NCAA, 2005). The results of the stringent requirements have been felt by elite Division I programs. The 2010-2011 men's basketball national champions, the University of Connecticut, were stripped of their chance to defend their national championship the following year, and faced a reduction of scholarships due to a sub-930 APR score (Carey, 2011).

Continuing Eligibility Requirements. Once a student-athlete enrolls in college, there are academic standards set by the NCAA one must meet in order to remain eligible to practice and compete. These rules are intended to ensure that student-athletes make timely progress toward their degree and provide timely input on their academic

advancement. The standards continue to evolve as a larger data set is collected and the efficacy of the requirements is evaluated.

To remain eligible to practice and compete, student-athletes must be enrolled in at least 12 credit hours each semester, earn a minimum of six credits each semester, earn a minimum of 18 credits each year, meet specified percentage of degree applicable credits each year, and maintain a minimum grade point average based on university standards (NCAA, 2011a). In addition, football student-athletes must successfully complete nine credits to maintain eligibility (Rice, 2011). If a student-athlete does not satisfactorily meet all eligibility requirements, they may not practice or compete with their team, they lose their APR eligibility point, and are subject to a loss of scholarship.

Table 2.1 NCAA Continuing Eligibility Requirements			
<i>Entering Second Year</i>	<i>Entering Third Year</i>	<i>Entering Fourth Year</i>	<i>Entering Fifth Year</i>
Earn six credits per semester	Earn six credits per semester	Earn six credits per semester	Earn six credits per semester
<i>Football only:</i> Earn nine credits in Fall semester	<i>Football only:</i> Earn nine credits in Fall semester	<i>Football only:</i> Earn nine credits in Fall semester	<i>Football only:</i> Earn nine credits in Fall semester
Earn 18 degree applicable credits in Fall/Winter/Spring	Earn 18 degree applicable credits in Fall/Winter/Spring	Earn 18 degree applicable credits in Fall/Winter/Spring	Earn 18 degree applicable credits in Fall/Winter/Spring
Complete 24 degree applicable hours	Complete 40% of credits required for degree	Complete 60% of credits required for degree	Complete 80% of credits required for degree
GPA: 80% of institutional requirement for graduation	GPA: 90% of institutional requirement for graduation	GPA: 90% of institutional requirement for graduation	GPA: 90% of institutional requirement for graduation

Athletic Academic Support

For student-athletes, the consequences of academic failure could be a loss of athletic eligibility, loss of scholarship, or both. Research consistently shows that the challenges facing student-athletes and the skill set they will be expected to possess can prove too great for student-athletes to succeed without assistance (Ervin, Saunders, Gillis, & Hogrebe, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Petrie & Russell, 1995; Young & Sowa, 1992). It is clear that the academic investment made by coaches and internal stakeholders must be significant to overcome the commercialism and notoriety facing student-athletes. The budgets for athletic academic support centers have nearly doubled since 1997, averaging over \$1 million at the 35 largest programs in the country (Wolverton, 2008). The stakes for student-athletes are high enough for both the student-athlete and the institution that schools devote entire student services offices specifically to the academic support of student-athletes (Keim & Strickland, 2004). Beginning in 1991, it became mandatory for Division I institutions to provide academic counseling and tutorial services for varsity athletes (Meyer, 2005). Athletic academic centers have since evolved and, in their current iteration, are charged with providing student-athletes with education in the areas of study skills, time management, testing strategies, short-term and long-term academic goals, academic attitude and motivation (Nichols & Levy, 2009).

Athletic academic support centers employ the services of athletic academic counselors who oversee the scholarly pursuits of intercollegiate athletes. While it is sometimes thought that athletic academic counselors serve as “eligibility brokers” (Meyer, 2005, p. 15), their mission is to ensure the academic integrity of the institution and uphold the welfare of the student-athlete. Athletic academic counselors act more as

educators, providing guidance and strategies to help the student-athletes they serve succeed in the classroom. In an effort to provide holistic support, athletic academic counselors serve to bridge the gap between all stakeholders in student-athletes' careers; professors, coaches, parents, and the students. Counselors participate in all areas of the student-athlete's academic career from recruitment to graduation (Meyer, 2005).

The most effective models of athletic academic support centers provide eligibility monitoring as well as advisement of course selection and degree progress, evaluation of skill deficiencies, study hall, tutorial services, and personal and career counseling (Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1996; Figler & Figler, 1984). Recommended institutional support interventions offered to student-athletes include orientations, workshops, mentoring, advising and registration sessions, academic progress reports, study hall, and tutoring sessions (Gunn & Eddy, 1989). Academic support centers are designed for holistic counseling rather than strictly academic advising. The triad model for student-athlete advising, proposed by Stier (1992) includes tactics and strategies designed to assist student-athletes in their academic, athletic, and social development.

The most commonly implemented institutional support interventions are tutoring and mentoring programs (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1996). Tutoring sessions consist of weekly one-on-one or group sessions with student-athletes and tutors that have been screened and trained and have proven to be proficient in specific content areas. Student-athletes either request or are recommended for tutoring to provide supplementary instruction (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). The primary purpose of mentoring sessions is to provide individual assistance in the areas of time management, study skills, and organization. Student-athletes deemed at-risk, on

academic probation, or in jeopardy of not meeting NCAA eligibility standards are ideal candidates for mentoring programs (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). Student-athletes typically submit their course syllabi to their mentor at the beginning of the semester. Assignments, quizzes, and tests are reviewed, and a study schedule is implemented. The mentor meets with their students on a regular basis to summarize academic results and evaluate progress (Meacham, 2000).

Academic counselors must be constantly cognizant of their student-athletes' NCAA eligibility as they provide academic counseling. Academic support staffs are ultimately responsible for working with their institution's compliance office and certifying officer to determine each student-athlete's eligibility in accordance with the NCAA's continuing eligibility requirements (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). Support staff work closely with academic departments, the university registrar's office, and their institution's compliance office to ensure that student athletes are enrolled in the proper courses to maintain satisfactory progress towards degree, maintain full-time status, and can meet yearly and semester credit minimums as mandated by the NCAA. Academic support centers also maintain communication with faculty throughout the semester, commonly employing progress reports to monitor the academic progress of each student-athlete (Denson, 1996). Once the student-athlete signs a Buckley Amendment release form, counselors can disseminate information regarding the student-athlete's academic progress to relevant stakeholders, such as coaches, sport administrators, and parents to provide a holistic support system (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001).

Academic centers realize the gravity of the penalties facing student-athletes who fail academically and have begun to produce research about the effect of academic interventions of student-athlete graduation rates (Hollis, 2001).

The Student-Athlete

Student-Athletes in Higher Education

The term student-athlete was adopted in 1950 in an effort to designate participants in intercollegiate athletics as students and not university employees (Crowley, 2006). The term has come under scrutiny from those suspicious of the academic intentions of both the student-athlete and the institution (Crowley, 2006; Ridpath, 2002).

As student-athletes become a widely recognized and accepted segment of the student body, the research on this population has continued to grow. Their notoriety has brought attention to the fact that student-athletes achieve academic success at a much lower rate than their non-athlete classmates (Eitzen, 2009). The athletic and academic communities have sought to learn about why student-athletes underachieve, as a whole. Researchers have completed a notable amount of research on demographic, precollege, and social factors, in attempts to isolate the factors that have the greatest impact on student-athlete academic success (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Pascarella, Edison, Hagedorn, Nora, & Terenzini, 1996; Ryan, 1989; Sellers, 1989, 1992; Shulman & Bowen, 2001).

Misconceptions and Prejudices Regarding Student-Athletes. The stereotype of the “dumb jock” is well entrenched in popular opinion. Be it laziness, apathy, or sheer lack of intelligence, the popular opinion of athletes generally does not include a high regard for their scholastic aptitude. Critics often reject the notion that the time demands placed on student-athletes has a negative effect on their academic performance. Hood, Craig, and Ferguson (1992) studied the effect of a part-time job on students and found that the number of hours dedicated to work had no impact on the academic performance of the participants.

The notion that the time demand placed upon student-athletes by athletics is an isolated issue is a fallacy. The issues related to their demanding schedule create many of the problems. These issues include fatigue, potential for life altering injury, limited access to educational resources due to travel, and restricted study time (Adler & Adler, 1985). These concerns have been shown to cause many student-athletes to give up and stop caring about academics.

Public perception is that student-athletes have access to unlimited resources within the athletic department, receive aid from boosters within the community, and enjoy a favorable standing in the community, including their professors (Kreb, 2008). The opposite may, in fact, be true (Clark & Parette, 2002). It has been shown that faculty often hold prejudicial opinions of student-athletes and regard students who have no association to athletics more favorably (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995). Student-athletes were not only regarded less positively than non-student-athletes, faculty members expressed feelings of anger and disdain in situations in which student-athletes were granted privileges or extra services.

Dual Roles. Varsity student-athletes are tasked with maintaining the rigors of two highly demanding roles: full-time student at an institution of higher learning and elite athlete in a highly competitive environment. Adler and Adler (1991) discuss roles as being the activities individuals are most likely to pursue based upon their self-identity and status. Student athletes are expected to put in the necessary work involved with being an elite status, while maintaining their identity as a scholar. Failure to maintain these dual roles could result in the loss of their scholarship or potential ineligibility.

Student-athletes bear the same academic expectations as non-student-athletes, including class and lab attendance, all outside requirements (e.g. psychology experiments, cultural events, field trips, etc.), studying as needed, and the successful completion of tests and exams. It is not uncommon for students to take five or more years to complete the requirements to earn a degree (Kreb, 2008). Student-athletes have the added burden of a time commitment to their athletic careers, which oftentimes is paying for their academic career. When academic demands conflict with athletic demands, it can create an atmosphere of stress that can affect personal and psychological well-being, as well as threaten the student's athletic eligibility, which can greatly impact future career options (Eitzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1996; Kreb, 2008; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982).

Individuals identify themselves in certain roles and must assign certain priority to each. Role engulfment occurs when an extraordinary amount of time is devoted to one role and the individual is detached from other identities (Adler & Adler, 1991). Student-athletes face the challenge of resisting the inevitable role engulfment they face, caused by schedules dominated by athletics. Scholarship athletes are the most at risk for experiencing role engulfment due to a sense of duty or employment to the university

(Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982). The emphasis placed upon their athletic identity is exacerbated by the social status derived from athletics and the belief that they will have a lucrative professional career (Oates, 1979).

Demands on Student-Athletes. It is important to first understand the unique conditions in which student-athletes are expected to function. Student-athletes face the same expectations as the general student population in regards to the social and academic aspects of college (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). They must adjust to the same issues as other students such as being away from home for the first time, increased importance on self-discipline, and developing and acclimating to new social groups (Jordan & Denson, 1990). Student-athletes are subjected to the additional demands of participating in intercollegiate athletics, which can create significant challenges for young students (Chertrand & Lent, 1987; Howard-Hamilton & Watt, 2001; Jolly, 2008; Watt & Moore, 2001).

Among the demands placed upon student-athletes is the balancing of athletic and academic ideations and planning for life after their athletic career is over (Chertrand & Lent, 1987). The pressure placed on student-athletes to stay eligible also has a detrimental effect on the commitment to academic success (Lance, 2004). Whereas the general student population answers to family and friends when they do not succeed academically, student-athletes must answer to the NCAA, their coaches, their teammates, and oftentimes the media as to why they are not eligible (Watt & Moore, 2001).

Demands on the time of student-athletes are among the most prevalent challenges that student-athletes face. Jordan and Denson (1990) called the schedules of student-

athletes inflexible and demanding, allowing little room for personal activities. In addition to their academic schedule, student-athletes are expected to attend practice, competitions, travel, midweek games, team meetings, training table, community service events, and media obligations. Whereas non-student-athletes have the liberty to choose their own schedule, including when to study, what classes to take, when and where to work out (Lanning, 1982), student-athletes often have their schedules created for them by coaches or administrators (Martens & Lee, 1998). Student-athletes are often expected to participate in over 40 hours of sport-related activities per week (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The result is a schedule that leaves significantly less time for academic pursuits than the general student population.

Despite the diminished availability for academic pursuits, particularly when student-athletes are in-season, findings have shown that increased athletic activity has a positive impact on academic performance. Foltz found that student-athletes experience greater academic success when they are in-season as opposed to being out-of-season, using GPA as the quantifier of academic success (1992). This phenomenon can be attributed to an emphasis being placed on the productive use of the little available time when student-athletes are in-season. Student-athletes are sensitive to how little time they have to devote to academics, and they utilize that time productively. When out-of-season, student-athletes are less likely to use free time for academics due to the perceived abundance of time to get their work done.

The unique culture student-athletes experience while in college has resulted in the notion that it would be most appropriate for them to be categorized as non-traditional students (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992). The culture and experiences of student-

athletes serve to isolate them from the general student population (Sowa & Gressard, 1983). Their distinctive educational circumstances certainly merit consideration and university services, as do the circumstances of other non-traditional groups such as veterans and adult learners. These special considerations can induce indignation from the university community. Students and faculty have been found to have negative stereotypes about student-athletes which put them at a distinct disadvantage in facing the social and academic challenges of college (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1989, 1991).

Challenges Unique to Student-Athletes. It is well documented that student-athletes face a set of challenges unique to their population (Adler & Adler, 1991; Etzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1996; Gaston, 2003; Kreb, 2008). They face the stress of athletic demands and unique lifestyles as well as the typical developmental challenges faced by the general student population. Student-athletes can benefit from services designed to address the special concerns confronting them. These services seek to help student-athletes adjust to demands of competition, cope with learning disabilities, and respond to negative stereotypes (Etzel, Ferrante, Pinkney, 1996).

Academic Preparedness. A prevailing theme in the literature is the importance of student-athletes being academically well prepared prior for their initial semester of enrollment. Beginning college equipped with the skills necessary for success is taken for granted by the time students graduate from high school and are accepted into an institution of higher education. A number of studies have refuted this notion, however,

asserting that a significant number of student-athletes arrive on campus without the necessary skills to succeed (Eitzen, 1987; Ferrey, 2009; Foltz, 1992).

It is common to find that student-athletes enrolled in college classes read below their grade level. In a 1983 study, it was found that 26 out of 28 football players studied read at a 10th grade level (Foltz, 1992). Upon investigating the academic integrity allegations at Florida State University, it was revealed that many of the football players involved were illiterate (Ferrey, 2009). It is clearly problematic for students to enroll in college courses without the appropriate skill set, particularly with an emphasis being placed on students to be college and career ready. When students arrive underprepared for the rigors of collegiate academics, they are particularly susceptible to fall behind.

Academic Success Factors. The majority of research regarding student-athlete academic success attempts to ascribe success to individual characteristics. Many models for student-athlete academic success focus on pre-college characteristics as indicators of future achievement (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). In their own way, each of the factors identified in these studies play a part in the college experience of student-athletes. Among cognitive factors that predict college academic success, GPA and SAT scores are commonly identified in the literature as being significant (Comeaux, 2005; Hood, Craig, & Ferguson, 1992; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1985). In their model, Comeaux and Harrison combine the pre-college characteristics with initial enrollment factors and continuing factors that contribute to academic success, as well as their correlations with each other (2011).

The correlation of non-cognitive factors with the academic success of student-athletes is a common theme in the literature. Among these factors, race and gender have been found to significantly impact scholastic performance. Eitzen (1987) found that male athletes are less prepared for college than their non-athlete counterparts, while females compare very similarly. Male athletes have also been found to under-perform academically when compared to their female counterparts (Burnett, Peak, & Dilley-Knowles, 2010). Eitzen (1987) also asserted that African-American student-athletes do not perform as well academically compared to their Caucasian colleagues.

Self-ideation plays a crucial role in the academic success of student-athletes (Watts & Moore, 2001). Whether the student-athletes identify themselves more as a student or as an athlete dictates where they will focus the majority of their attention. The reinforcement they get from their environment helps determine this ideation and can foster an identity as both a student and an athlete. Many student-athletes see themselves primarily as an athlete and not a student. This self-ideation can lead to the student-athlete being negligent toward their academics (Hinkle, 1994; Parmer 1994). The “dumb jock” stereotype that is pervasive in the media and popular opinion can also lead to ideations that are detrimental to academic success (O’Bryant, 1993).

Environmental factors of higher education have been found to be a significant contributor to the academic success of student-athletes. Quality interaction with faculty was an environmental factor identified as being integral to academic achievement among student-athletes (Comeaux, 2005). Diverse interactions between student-athletes and professors create an environment conducive to learning. Engaging in the classroom, meeting to discuss course material outside of the classroom, and interacting in social

settings such as at sporting events, all create a sense of community and make the student more comfortable in the academic environment (Comeaux, 2005).

Quality interactions with individuals who are not student-athletes can be difficult to foster. Student-athletes often find themselves isolated from the rest of the student population (Lanning and Toye, 1993). A number of factors can contribute to this phenomenon, including schedule, being more comfortable around those who understand their unique college experience, and the sheer quantity of time they spend around other athletes in the training room, study hall, weight room, etc. (Martens and Lee, 1998). This isolation can present itself in student-athletes enrolling in the same classes at the same times and segregating themselves from the non-athlete population. This limits the opportunities to create meaningful interactions with other populations (Sparent, 1988). This segregation compounds the athlete ideation due to being functionally, psychologically, and physically separated from non-athletes (Nishimoto, 1997). As the athlete ideation becomes more prominent, student-athletes have been shown to become negligent of their academic responsibilities, avoid responsibility for their own actions, and ignore important learning and developmental tasks (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Pascarella, Truckenmiller, Nora, Terenzini, Edison, & Hagedorn, 1999).

The model developed by Comeaux and Harrison (2011) is a comprehensive, in-depth framework for describing the educational experience of student-athletes (see figure 2.1). Rather than selecting an individual segment of a student's career, the researchers describe the broader process and how factors affect academic success. Four aspects of student-athlete life are identified in this model: pre-college characteristics, initial commitments, social systems, and commitments (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

In the pre-college phase, three factors are identified: family background, educational experiences and preparation, and individual attributes. Family background encompasses parents' socio-economic background, the educational background of the parents, and the level of parental support. Among educational experiences and preparation, high school GPA was identified by the authors as being the most closely related to college success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Individual characteristics were identified as non-cognitive variables such as sport, gender, race/ethnicity, and academic motivation. The factors identified in the pre-college phase are reflective of significant variables recognized in previous studies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sellers, 1992; Sellers, Kupermine, & Wadell, 1991; White & Sedlacek, 1986).

In the "initial commitments" (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, p. 240) phase, the authors recognize interests of a student-athlete are divided. Identifying how a student-athlete self-ideates is important to gauge how committed they are to academics as opposed to their sport. This addresses those who attend school as a means to further their athletic career. Goal assessment is an important part of this phase as a means of identifying what the student is working toward and how specific their plans are.

A well-developed social system is crucial for the academic persistence of all students (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). Social integration takes the form of the interactions that student-athletes have with groups and individuals within the campus community not associated with their team. Membership in campus groups and interactions with classmates in social settings positively impacts learning and communication skills (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Specifically, interactions with other

students who were not their teammates made the most difference in a student-athlete's self-concept (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009).

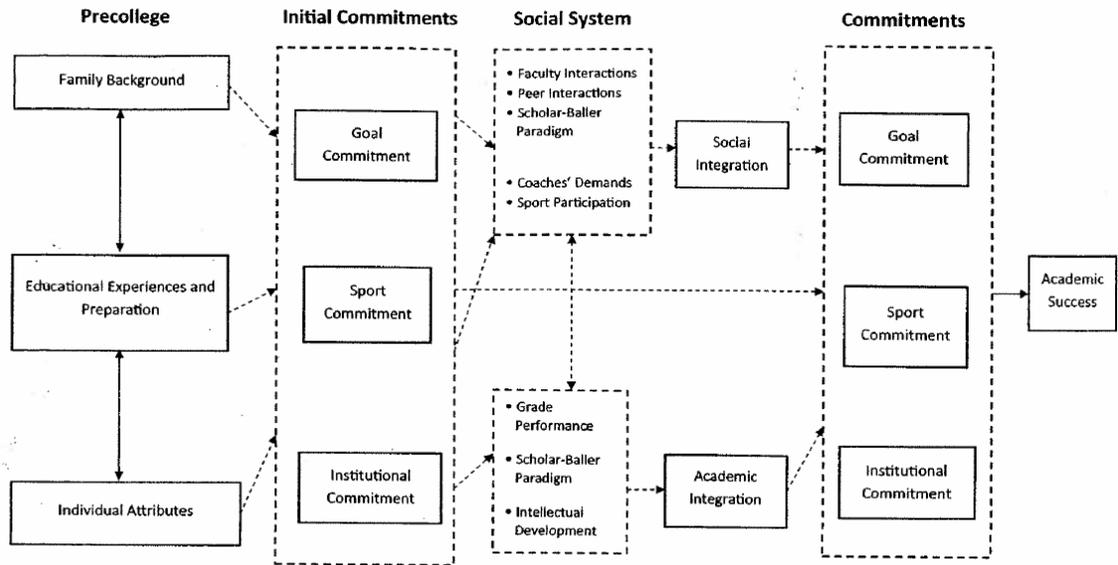


Figure 2.1 Comeaux & Harrison's model for student-athlete academic success

Source: Comeaux, E. & Harrison, K.C. (2011). A conceptual model of academic success for student-athletes. *Educational Researcher*, 40(5), 235-245.

Student-Athletes in Online Courses

Background

The pressure to succeed academically can be exacerbated by the atypical college career experienced by student-athletes. With demands on time, busy practice schedules, frequent travel, high risk of life-altering injury, and increased notoriety, student-athletes can most accurately be thought of as non-traditional students (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston,

1992). It can become difficult for student-athletes to navigate the traditional four-year degree plan due to class conflicts with practice and competition, the limited number of credits student-athletes can handle while in-season, and the limited options for taking condensed summer courses (Hutchison, 2004). Demands placed upon student-athletes can make online courses an attractive mode of learning, as it is for other non-traditional groups such as military personnel, international students, and adult learners finishing their degree. Online course options allow student-athletes to exercise complex time-management allocations to their academic, athletic, and personal demands while retaining the full-spectrum of benefits from the college/university experience – but only where they and the options provided to them are well matched for their individual success goals.

Online Education for High School Student-Athletes

The belief that online education can be advantageous for student-athletes has taken hold at the high school level (Fowler, 2004; Rundle, 2004). Over 400 students are enrolled at University of Miami Online High School (UMOHS), with 65% of the enrollment being student-athletes (Fowler, 2004). Online education has become a popular choice for athletes who spend much of the year training and traveling for tournaments (Rundle, 2004). In particular, this design has become popular with tennis players who spend great amounts of time travelling to tournaments (Fowler, 2004). The director of UMOHS has estimated between a quarter and one-half of all high-level tennis players are not enrolled in traditional schools (Kreb, 2008; Rundle, 2004).

Perceived Advantages of Online Courses

Flexibility. The flexibility in time and location provided by online courses was the primary advantage cited by student-athletes in a series of focus groups (Kreb, 2008). These courses were perceived as a way to relieve the pressure placed upon student-athletes by their hectic schedules. In Kreb's (2008) study, one student-athlete was quoted as saying that attending class, "takes 30 minutes to get ready, 20 minutes to get there, 20 minutes to get back, one hour and 15 minutes [in class]. Meanwhile, [online], you sleep in, do your 45 minute reading, finish, and take your quiz" (p.96). A common theme in Kreb's study was that the minor time-allotments associated with attending classroom courses added up to put a major strain on an already busy schedule. Among those cited were the commute time, finding a parking space or waiting for a bus, walking between classes, and preparing and packing notebooks and textbooks to take to class (Kreb, 2008).

Convenience. The convenience of taking online courses was highlighted by many student-athletes surveyed (Kreb, 2008). The ability to self-pace coursework was appealing (Kreb, 2008; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, Zvacek, 2006). With coursework available at all times and from anywhere in the world, student-athletes could decide on optimal studying times, factoring in their athletic schedule, their other academic commitments, and the effect of fatigue on their academic efficacy (Kreb, 2008; Simonson et al., 2006; Zhang, Zhao, Zhou, & Nunamaker, 2004). The ability to monitor course activity at all times was a convenience factor that appealed to student-athletes. They

appreciated the ability to check on discussion board and grade updates 24-hours a day (Kreb, 2008).

Perceived Ownership. The self-directed nature of online courses contributes to a reported sense of ownership over the course material, assignments, and academic outcomes for students. (Kreb, 2008) The ability to self-pace and dictate the allotment of class time gives students a sense of personal responsibility over the course material. In Kreb's (2008) study, it was been reported that,

I feel a sense of control, or a sense of ownership. It is like 'this is my class, I know what I have to do, I know I have to learn it; if I fail the quiz, it is not just because the professor didn't give me the notes, it is because I did not read it.'

(p.100)

Perceived Disadvantages of Online Courses

Lack of Structure. Much of the consternation surrounding online courses is due to the set-up of individual classes. The same freedom and flexibility that is perceived as advantageous can also lead to confusion and frustration. A commonly reported challenge is keeping up with course work (Kreb, 2008). Student-athletes must deal with issues of procrastination, lack of set due dates, and a lack of quality communication with professors and classmates. Student-athletes reported that in some instances, professors seemed disorganized and did not communicate well which led to confusion about assignment expectations and deadlines (Kreb, 2008).

Reduced Accountability. The nature of online courses creates a sense of isolation for students. The lack of personal interaction with professors and classmates creates a certain sense of anonymity. Rarely do students in online courses receive praise for a job well done or scorn for missed or poorly completed assignments. This lack of accountability is challenging for student-athletes who are accustomed to continuous feedback regarding their performance (Kreb, 2008). Student-athletes report relying on having someone they see every day checking on them and reminding them what they have coming up. The lack of verbal reminders of upcoming assignments and tests from professors, like they would receive in traditional classroom courses, is challenging for students (Kreb, 2008).

Technological Barriers. Access to the Internet and dealing with broken computers are among the most common complaints from student-athletes regarding online education (Kreb, 2008). Particularly when traveling, it can be difficult for student-athletes to rely on Internet access. While spending long hours travelling on busses or airplanes, it is often impossible to access necessary course materials located on the Internet. Even in hotels, student-athletes have reported lack of available Internet connection or a fee associated with Wi-Fi access. This factor makes it impossible to meet course deadlines, particularly over the course of long road trips that can last several days or weeks. Especially troubling is the inability of the student to communicate these difficulties with the professor due to their inability to access their email account (Kreb, 2008).

Athletic Administrators' Perceptions of Online Learning

Athletic administrators realize the necessity of utilizing online course offerings to accommodate their student-athletes' time commitments. For example, Sacred Heart University's Associate Athletic Director, Lucy Cox, is aware of the benefit online education provide for her student-athletes. She also realized the need to carefully consider the propriety of the course format for each student. Self-discipline is the primary characteristic that she cites as the benchmark for whether an online course is the right fit for a student (Hutchison, 2004). "Online courses are not an easy fix for student-athletes who may need to pick up an easy three credits. For starters, online courses require students to manage their time well enough to fulfill course requirements" (Hutchison, 2004, p.16). Even with careful consideration and advising, Cox asserts that the academic success rate in online courses for student-athletes at Sacred Heart is 90%.

Chapter Three: Methods

This study addressed factors that face student-athletes enrolled in an online course. The primary research questions driving this research examined the experiences of a diverse population of Division I student-athletes, as they pertained to:

1. Protocol and reasons for enrolling in online courses
2. Method and frequency of communication with the professor
3. The nature of assigned classwork
4. The implementation and efficacy of institutional support interventions

To answer the research questions, one-on-one interviews were conducted with key informants. A sample of Division I student-athletes (n=10) were selected to participate. Interview sessions addressed the academic experiences of the participants, how they were affected by their status as a scholarship athlete, their decision to enroll in an online course, their experiences in online education, the interventions offered by their institution, and their perceived efficacy. Observation sessions were conducted to detail the way in which student-athletes work in an online environment. These sessions were conducted in the student-athletes typical study environment under normal conditions.

Rationale for Selecting Qualitative Method

Qualitative research is a useful tool for examining complex social phenomena. It can be helpful in describing and analyzing cultural events, individual and communal processes, efficacy of institutional or governmental programs, or critiques of social orders (Saldana, 2011). The goal of this study was to describe the experiences of Division I student-athletes in online education. This research focused on the convergence of two widespread phenomena in American culture, intercollegiate athletics and online education, and was subject to notable complexity. A qualitative approach was logical in describing the interplay of these two subjects and the effect they have on the educational experiences of student-athletes. A desired result of the study was to provide insight for students, coaches, Athletic Academic Advisors, and athletic administrators into the experiences of student-athletes in online education so that they might make better informed decisions regarding their own education or the education of those they work with. As Marshall and Rossman (2010) stated, qualitative research can be pragmatic and grounded in the lived experiences of people, which are the foundations of this study. Specifically, a grounded theory approach was logical for this study, as conceptual models and hypotheses were developed from the resulting data as opposed to prior theories.

Data Sources

Key informant interviews were the source of all data collected. Eligible participants were identified based upon their status as scholarship Division I student-athletes, and those who volunteered to participate provided narrative accounts of their experiences in online education. Data was collected from ten participants via one-on-one

interviews. Interviews took place separately from their athletic department's facilities in an effort to ensure the participants' anonymity and comfort. Data analysis was performed concurrently to data collection to identify prevalent themes and allow for their saturation.

Participant Selection

Participants in this study were scholarship student-athletes at a Division I institution. These students have been enrolled and completed at least one online course. The population was restricted to student-athletes currently eligible for NCAA competition at the time of their participation. Student-athletes at Division I institutions are allowed four seasons of competition within five years of their initial full time enrollment at a college or university (NCAA, 2011a). Using those criteria, eligible participants were identified by their Athletic Academic Counselors. Participants were then selected via convenience sampling. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and the sample size, convenience sampling was employed as to not stratify the sample to let themes develop organically in the data.

Once identified, participants were contacted via email briefly explaining the nature of the study, including the purpose and participation commitments. It was explained that there would be no negative consequences if they chose not to participate and neither their Athletic Academic Counselor nor their coaches would be notified of their decision. A response was requested to indicate whether or not they would be willing to participate. If they responded in the affirmative a follow up email was sent to schedule a one-hour interview block.

The potential for bias among the participants and the researcher was avoided, wherever possible. To avoid perceived pressure to participate, potential participants were contacted via the researcher's personal email and no mention was made of his affiliation with the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics. 15 student-athletes who were eligible for participation in this study were contacted. In order to avoid selection bias, the first 10 potential participants to respond in the affirmative were selected. Participants were informed at the outset of each interview that their anonymity will be the utmost priority of the project and their responses were not to be shared with anyone affiliated with their university. The notion that the researcher may have been looking for particular answers or the possibility of negative consequences due to their participation was rejected.

Sample Description and Selection Procedures

A total of 15 student-athletes were identified as eligible for participation in this study and contacted. Of those individuals, the first 10 to accept the invitation to participate were selected. Additionally, participants were to be enrolled full time in an undergraduate degree program at the time of participation, per NCAA continuing eligibility requirements. Participants were required to have completed at least one online course. Selection for this study was also contingent on the student-athlete having received athletic scholarship, their eligibility for NCAA competition.

Their Athletic Academic Advisors, who helped ensure that the student-athletes met the selection criteria, identified potential participants. Student-athletes were informed of the nature of the study and what would be expected of them as a participant prior to the solicitation of their acceptance/declination. Potential participants were made

aware that their decision to participate or to decline would in no way affect their standing with their athletic or academic departments. Students received no incentive for participating, nor did they incur any repercussions for declining to participate.

Demographic Representation

Table 4.1 Sport		
		Frequency
	Field Hockey	1
	Women's Lacrosse	1
	Volleyball	1
	Gymnastics	1
	Men's Lacrosse	1
	Men's Basketball	5
	Total	10

Table 4.2 Year in School		
		Frequency
	Sophomore	3
	Junior	3
	Senior	4
	Total	10

Table 4.3 Sex		
		Frequency
	Male	6
	Female	4
	Total	10

Table 4.4 Number of Online Courses		
		Frequency
	1	5
	2	4
	3	1
	Total	10

Table 4.5 Sex, GPA (Online)		
Sex	Mean	n
Male	3.17	6
Female	3.34	4
Total	3.24	10

Table 4.6 Sport, GPA (Online)		
Sport	Mean	n
Field Hockey	3.35	1
Women's Lacrosse	4.00	1
Volleyball	3.00	1
Gymnastics	3.00	1
Men's Lacrosse	4.00	1
Men's Basketball	3.00	5
Total	3.24	10

Table 4.7 Year in School, GPA (Online)		
Year in School	Mean	n
Sophomore	3.67	3
Junior	3.00	3
Senior	3.09	4
Total	3.24	10

Table 4.8 GPA (Cumulative), GPA (Online)		
Cumulative GPA	Mean	n
2.092	3.00	1
2.200	3.50	2
2.354	4.00	1
2.500	3.00	1
2.643	3.00	1
2.985	3.00	1
3.000	3.35	1
3.079	4.00	1
3.280	2.00	1
Total	3.24	10

Table 4.9 GPA (Traditional), GPA (Online)		
GPA (Traditional)	Mean	n
1.750	4.00	1
2.000	3.00	1
2.024	3.00	1
2.153	3.00	1
2.289	4.00	1
2.666	3.00	1
2.930	3.35	1
2.984	3.00	1
3.000	4.00	1
3.260	2.00	1
Total	3.24	10

Table 4.10 Number of Online Courses, GPA (Online)		
Num. of Online Courses	Mean	n
1	3.60	5
2	2.84	4
3	3.00	1
Total	3.24	10

Researcher's Role

The researcher was the sole investigator in this study. He had four years of experience working in academic support for Division I student-athletes. His experience included advising student-athletes and providing mentoring through their enrollment in online courses. Additionally, the researcher has been enrolled in online courses as a student. The researcher acknowledged the potential for bias presented by this experience and took steps to minimize it. Specifically, an objective discussion plan was established prior to interviews with participants. Discussion plans included open-ended questions that were scrutinized to avoid the potential for bias. Additionally, a written statement of subjectivity prior to data collection and data analysis was utilized to help the researcher identify pre-existing beliefs about the topic (Appendix E).

The researcher used Glesne's (1999) Researcher As Learner model of approaching the study. By approaching the research as a "curious student who comes to learn from and with research participants" (Glesne, 1999, p. 41) the researcher can shed his or her role as an expert and become more ready to accept themes apparent in the data. Employing this method necessitated open communication with participants and ready acceptance of their experiences.

Data Collection

Interviewing is noted in the literature as one of the primary sources of qualitative evidence (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 1999; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Interviews were the primary source of data for this study. The data was collected in the course of a series of face-to-face interviews, which were scheduled for one-hour periods. Upon receiving the

permission of the participant, interview sessions were recorded using a digital audio recorder, with the content transcribed at a later date. All notes and records were kept either in a locked filing cabinet or in a password protected file. Identifying indicators were removed from all session notes and all identification and demographic information were kept in a file separate from session notes and records.

Interview Design

There are three general types of interviews as described by Patton (2002): the informal interview, the interview guide or topical approach, and the standardized interview. Interviews for this study utilized the interview guide model. This approach was selected due to its flexibility. Semi-structured interview questions and topics are prepared, with participants being given ample freedom to lead the topics of discussion.

Interviews were scheduled with participants and the author came prepared with topics to be addressed and a semi-structured series of questions. Interview questions were carefully designed to be open ended and were not exhaustive, with the intention of allowing participants the freedom to guide conversation to some extent. Follow up questions were asked based upon responses from participants, in order to clarify ideas or explore them in more depth.

A period of one hour was allotted for interview sessions. Sessions took place at a site separate from athletic facilities in order to ensure the anonymity of participants and to put them at ease. At the outset of interview sessions, informed consent was obtained and participants were assured that their anonymity was the top priority to the researcher. They were told that their responses would not be shared with their Athletic Academic

Advisors, coaches, instructors, or any athletic or academic administrators. A digital recorder was used to record sessions with the permission of the participants. Notes were also taken by hand during the interviews.

Grounded Theory Approach

Qualitative research helps to develop a better understanding of complex phenomena through the description, contextualization, and analysis of lived experiences. Grounded Theory can help to describe these experiences with particular attention being paid to describing the experience from the participant's perspective, why they believe it happened, and what it meant to them (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Further, Grounded Theory intends to move beyond the narratives and descriptions and develop a unified explanation or conceptual framework of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

The purpose of the conceptual framework is to develop a structural understanding of a phenomenon or concept. In the case of this study, the researcher sought to better understand the experiences of student-athletes in online courses, from enrollment to completion, and the contributing factors to their academic success or failure. A series of one-on-one interviews were conducted with open coding being performed throughout the process. A central phenomenon was identified and prevalent themes were identified. As a conceptual framework emerged, newly acquired data was constantly compared and assessed for compatibility. Causal conditions, strategies, intervening conditions, and consequences were identified and a coding paradigm was developed that arranged themes according to their relation to the central phenomenon.

Data Analysis

Consistent with the grounded theory data analysis procedures described by Creswell (2013), three phases of coding were utilized. Open, axial, and selective coding methods were used to identify themes, build a story, and develop a set of theoretical propositions from the data. Nvivo coding software was utilized to assist the researcher in carrying out data analysis.

During the data collection process, open coding was used to developed broad categories. Interview transcripts were examined during the ongoing coding phase and a comprehensive set of themes was developed, grounded in the text of the transcripts. The researched aimed to saturate categories to the extent that, as new data was collected, it did not develop new categories.

Once a comprehensive series of categories were developed, the data was coded and a central phenomenon was identified through a process described by Creswell (2013). Axial coding was used to categorize themes in relation to the central phenomenon. Causal conditions were identified and strategies for addressing the phenomenon were examined. This information was used to create a figure, or a coding paradigm, outlining the phenomenon.

Finally, categories were interrelated within the coding paradigm in the selective coding phase. A diagram was developed to better understand the theoretical propositions of the study. This diagram intended to facilitate an easily understood model of the conditions associated with the central phenomenon.

Field Data Recording and Notations

During the interview process, field notes were taken to augment the audio recording being made. The notations were primarily used to highlight answers of interest and remind the interviewer of material to follow-up with as the interview progresses. During the observations, the researcher took detailed notes describing the content of each session as well as the setting and the researcher's impressions.

Generalizability

Qualitative research has been regarded as having limited generalizability due to its specific and limited scope (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). While it is useful in describing events and phenomena, the data resulting from qualitative research can have limited applicability. This quality can be exacerbated when the study is exploratory in nature.

As a result of being exploratory, this study utilized a sample of 10 participants. Its intention was to identify prevalent themes and begin to address a gap in the literature. It would be difficult to generalize the results due to the relatively small sample size. Generalizability was also affected by the limited online course offerings at this institution. Online courses were rarely offered in the Fall and Spring semesters at this university, which is atypical. All of the courses addressed in this study were completed in either the Summer or Winter semesters. Data resulting from this study does not apply to student-athletes enrolling in online courses during the Fall or Spring semesters, who would face different challenges due to increased competition and travel as well as a full academic courseload.

Ethical and Logistical Considerations

As is the case with any research study, there was the inherent potential for ethical issues to occur. The researcher ensured that every feasible precaution was taken to minimize the potential occurrence of any ethical concerns. The potential for harm to the participant was minimized as much as possible and the protection of anonymity was of primary concern.

All data was stored in either a password protected computer file or in a locked filing cabinet. The participants were informed of the details of this study and asked to sign an informed consent form, following an acknowledgement of understanding. The participants were welcomed to discontinue involvement with the study at any point, should they feel uncomfortable or that they were being put at risk.

Chapter Four: Results

Background of Study

Institutional Data

This exploratory study was performed at a Division I, Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institution. The FBS is a subdivision of Division I schools within the NCAA. The FBS represents the top tier of college athletics and includes 120 member institutions (NCAA, 2010). The university has an undergraduate enrollment of over 25,000 students. The university offers more than 90 undergraduate majors throughout 10 colleges.

Execution of Study

Ten varsity student-athletes were interviewed in the course of this research. After obtaining institutional permission to contact students, eligible student-athletes were identified by Athletic Academic Counselors. Individuals were contacted via the researcher's personal email. The first student-athletes to respond were selected to participate, as to not stratify the demographics.

Participants in the study skewed older, as 70% were upperclassmen. 40% of participants were in their senior year. There was nearly an even distribution between males and females (60% male, 40% female). The vast majority of participants participated in sports that compete in the Winter (60%), while the rest were evenly distributed between Fall and Spring sports (20% each). Half of the participants had

completed only one online course, while 40% of participants had completed two online courses. 10% of participants had completed three online courses.

The average GPA in online courses among participants was a 3.24. Females outperformed males in online courses with a 3.34 GPA. In comparison males earned a 3.17 GPA. There were no notable trends in online GPA when broken down by sport, year in school, or cumulative GPA. Online GPAs when broken down by sports ranged from 3.0 to 4.0.

Participants in the study described the comprehensive online education experience. Beginning with course selection, student-athletes described the enrollment process, format of course materials, learning outcomes, and the impact of athletics on online education. Participants described the benefits and disadvantages of online courses and ways in which they could be better supported academically.

The Online Classroom Experience

The sentiments expressed by student-athletes were consistent in regards to the online classroom experience. The process, from enrollment to completion, described by participants shared many common themes. Several participants expressed that, despite the variations in format, the approach students take to online courses is very similar. One participant remarked,

I pretty much took the same approach to all the online classes I've taken. Before I started the class I asked a teammate who had taken online classes and she told me how to get through it. I think most people do it the same way.

Despite the shared sentiments regarding the experience in online courses, there was notable academic heterogeneity within the sample. Participants in the study

represented an array of academic approaches, from generally apathetic to conscientious and meticulous. While one participant responded, “I definitely came to school to play volleyball... School was tough. I’m not a big school person; I’m not like going back to school after this.” Another said, “I enjoy school. I would definitely say I see myself as a student first.” The cumulative GPA within the sample ranged from a 2.092 to a 3.280. It could be stated that there is no one “type” of student-athlete in this sample who predominately enrolls in online courses.

Overall, students had a positive experience. Online courses proved to be a welcomed alternative to the requirements and scheduling restrictions of classroom courses. One student-athlete noted, “that’s why I take [online classes], so that I can do them when I want and not have to be on someone else’s time to do it.” The flexibility of being able to complete course work wherever and whenever the student desires was consistently touted by participants.

Course Offerings

The opportunities to take online courses at this university were limited due to the traditional nature of the institution. The number of online courses offered during the Fall and Spring semesters were extremely limited. Students were forced to rely on classroom courses during those semesters, even if they preferred online methodology. None of the participants had been enrolled in online courses in the Fall or Spring semesters.

During the Winter and Summer semesters, online course offerings were more robust. The number and variety of online courses offered increased dramatically from the Fall and Spring semesters. Classes exclusively offered as classroom courses in the Fall

and Spring semesters were only offered as online courses in the Winter and Summer. In the case of one student-athlete who needed a course as a pre-requisite for their major, “it was only given online. During the regular year, like Fall and Spring it's given in the classroom but summer and Winter it's online.” Every online course included in this study was completed during either the Winter or the Summer semester.

While one student enrolled in a pre-requisite for their major, the majority of online courses taken were either general education credits or electives. Within those two categories, the classes selected tended to be in the same disciplines. Of 16 total online courses surveyed, five were Health courses and four were African American Studies courses. There is merit to the notion that the prevalence of these disciplines can be correlated to the overlap of interest shared by students who have dedicated so much of their lives to athletic pursuits. Another notion, however, is that teammates tend to share evaluations with each other and subsequently enroll in similar classes. “One of my friends took this class; he said it wasn't bad at all. And I needed an elective so I figured I'd try out and I actually liked it.”

One student-athlete in this study reported taking an online course from another college to earn necessary credits. The student-athlete described the circumstances that led to looking to a community college to earn credits:

I got a D in my Psych class and it was my third time taking it so I needed to find a way where... I needed to pass it, like there was no other way. And [my Academic Advisor] had talked about [a colleague] who found a class for [another student-athlete], and he felt it was a good class to take and I was going to succeed in it.

In this instance, the ability to take an online course from another college and transfer the

credit back to the student-athlete's home institution helped the student-athlete progress in their major.

Reasons for Enrolling

Among participants in this study, there were two predominant categories of motivating factors for enrolling in online courses: the necessity of earning credits in the Winter or Summer sessions and the desire to raise GPA in order to meet admission standards for their desired major or for eligibility purposes.

I really just took this course to get my GPA up to give myself a better chance at getting into the business school. My advisor said that my GPA was too low and I needed to raise it before I could get in. I've taken a summer class before because I needed elective credits for eligibility, but this one was just for GPA.

Of the two, the need to raise one's GPA most often led directly to enrolling in online courses due to the common notion that online courses yield high grades. The necessity to earn credits resulted in students enrolling in Winter and Summer courses. Of the Winter and Summer courses offered, participants in this study found online courses to be a desirable option.

There were a number of factors that led student-athletes to require earning credits in Winter and Summer semesters. The most common were the necessity of meeting required NCAA eligibility standards, to take pre-requisite courses for their major, and the opportunity to take courses that conflict with practice or competition in the Fall or Spring semesters. The NCAA has set minimum standards for credits earned throughout the academic year. Failure to meet those minimums results in a loss of athletic eligibility and the potential for the reduction or cancellation of athletic scholarship.

My advisor pretty much just told me I had to take a class in the summer. I think it was because I didn't have 24 or 25 credits, whichever I needed for eligibility. Pretty much she just told me that if I didn't get these 3 credits I wouldn't be able to play in the Fall.

At this institution, Winter and Summer semesters are offered, which is helpful for student-athletes who are at-risk to not meet the NCAA's minimum academic progress. In those semesters, online courses are prevalent.

Winter and Summer semesters were utilized as an opportunity to earn pre-requisite credits for major requirements to be taken in the following semester. For students required by their major to complete certain requirements or meet specific benchmarks, Winter and Summer sessions can be required to progress at the necessary pace.

I had to take [Economics I] in the winter because I couldn't take it in the Fall because it conflicted with our practice block. I knew going into the Fall semester that I would have to take it in the winter and I pretty much just got myself mentally prepared for it. I knew it wasn't going to be easy but it was just something I had to do so I could be in [Economics II] in the Spring. It was a ton of studying but I got through it with a decent grade.

In the event that student-athletes fail these courses or cannot enroll due to conflicts with practice or competition, they are subject to departmental dismissal. In those semesters, online courses are available and often preferred.

Student-athletes often face conflicts between required courses and their practice or competition schedules. In cases where student-athletes are required to take classes that conflict with their athletic obligations, Winter and Summer courses become necessary to make timely progress in their degree. The online courses offered in those semesters often appeal to student-athletes because Fall and Spring semesters are tightly scheduled and strictly regimented. The online methodology also serves as useful options to alleviate

scheduling conflicts for student-athletes who compete or have mandatory practices/workouts in the intersessions.

A significant number of student-athletes are required to be on campus during the Winter and Summer sessions for competition or workouts. Participants in this study who found themselves required to be on campus during the intersession for athletic obligations reasoned that if they had to be on campus, they would use the time to get ahead academically. This led to the search for a class they found most appealing. In these instances, online courses came recommended either by teammates or Academic Advisors. For some who had taken online courses previously, the scheduling flexibility and the comfort with course format made online course preferable to in-class courses.

I knew that after morning practice I would be exhausted and would have no motivation to make it to the classroom. I much rather go do class work in my apartment where I can chill and take it easy and get ready for the next workout.

Student-athletes have extensive athletic obligations, even in the Winter and Summer semesters. These obligations were outline by one student-athlete,

It stinks for our team personally, like on Monday, Wednesday, Friday we can't have any classes before noon and then Tuesdays and Thursdays we have to have a block between 12:30 and 4:30. And with Winter classes, they meet like two hours a day every day of the week. There's not a single class I could take with that practice schedule.

For these students, the flexibility of schedule offered by online courses is a necessity. On mornings without early workouts, the flexible schedule allowed for some needed relaxation:

I could do it whenever I wanted to, I didn't have to get up at nine o'clock in the morning and sit through class that I didn't want, I could lay in bed and listen to the podcast. That was probably the biggest advantage, not having to like be in a classroom and I could do it any time of the day that I wanted to.

The convenience of online education saves more than the time spent sitting in the classroom. Alleviating the logistical burden of attending class is among the most valued features of online courses. For student-athletes who live off campus or for those who are staying with family during the Winter or Summer sessions, online courses save on the time and money spent commuting to school.

I didn't have to worry about travel; I didn't have to worry about physically being late. I didn't have to worry about food, bathroom, water, attire; any sort of societal norms could have been ignored. So it left me to focus purely on my work.

Online courses save students the time walking between classes, time spent waiting for the next class to start, and wasted time due to professors cancelling class.

One of the nice things is, if there is two hours of work to be done, it takes two hours. I don't have to spend 20 minutes driving to campus, 10 minutes walking to class, 10 minutes waiting for the professor to begin, 10 minutes walking back to my car and the awkward 40 minute break between classes where I don't have time to go home but I don't have time to do something useful like workout or walk all the way over to [study hall] or something. I mean, that's what, like, over an hour I'm saving right there.

For student-athletes fortunate enough to avoid athletic obligations during the Winter and Summer terms, the ability to complete online courses from anywhere offered students a rare opportunity to be at home with family or travel on vacation.

But yeah, I prefer to be home and even being able to go on vacation if I could... Like my parents are going to Florida for a week and I couldn't go because of my classes. With the online classes I've taken, though, I was able to go with them. As long as you have the Internet you're golden. And I had my laptop with me wherever I would go. I was sitting in the airport doing class discussions.

As student-athletes, time at home with family comes at a premium due to an athletic schedule that runs almost year round. Student-athletes are often required to miss vacations and school holidays to stay on campus and compete and train. "Yeah, I don't

know when the last time I got to go home for Thanksgiving was. I live [across the country] and I just can't fly home for Thanksgiving and then fly back for practice the next day." The benefit of spending time with family and friends restored the motivation to succeed in school and "recharged the battery" of some student-athletes.

Selecting an Online Course

The onset of online courses is such a new phenomenon; many students do not enroll in their first online course until college. This can make the course selection process intimidating for inexperienced students. When selecting an online course, students consider what subjects they could most easily teach themselves, the amount of classwork typically required in that discipline, and what academic disciplines they are most strong in. Taking all of these considerations into account while weighing the risk of failure can be stressful for many student-athletes. One student-athlete described the process as

... really nerve-wracking. I've got my Academic Advisor telling me how much I need these credits. Then I have my friends telling me how much they liked this online class, but I had never taken one before. I was pretty nervous going into it.

For student-athletes who stress about selecting an online course in which they will be successful, relying on word of mouth is often the answer. Before classes begin student-athletes have a sense of the format of the course, how much work is involved, the type of instructional material that is taught, and the professor's instructional methods. For student-athletes who have a finite amount of time available outside of practice and competition, knowing in advance how much work a class will entail is important. "I also asked around for other online courses that weren't going to be too hard and that's why

I'm taking the online course that I'm taking.”

The most common source for information regarding online courses is teammates. Information is shared among teammates about all aspects of college life, including “the best places to eat, what dorms were the best to live in, the best places to study, what professors to take. When I first got to campus my teammates taught me everything about being in college.” Information about online courses is included in the exchange of information. “I had heard from older guys on the team what the class was like. I knew that like, not that it would be a joke class, but it also wouldn't be that much work.”

Academic Advisors are another valuable source of information regarding online courses. Advisors share information about classes that they have seen other student-athletes complete and can better inform the selection process.

My Academic Advisors, once we narrowed it down to the fact that I was taking an online class, showed me a list of all the classes that I was eligible to take and from there we narrowed it down to ones I was interested in and ones that she had good reviews of from other athletes. And from there we ended up with the one I chose.

In some instances, Advisors are more hands-on than others. “I didn't pick, it, [my advisor] picked it. But she got the okay from me; I liked the idea of not getting up and going to class, kind of doing it on my own time.”

The information received from teammates and Academic Advisors can help student-athletes learn about courses they would not have otherwise known about. Particularly when students are in need of elective credits and can take any course that the university offers, the search can lead to classes the student-athletes would not have sought out without advice from others.

[I had just heard about it from] older teammates. Because at first I was going to sign up for it and then my mom was like, "Medical Terminology?" and said no, because they were worried about my grades at that point. And then last Winter I was like, "I'm taking it. I've heard from everyone that it's pretty simple," so I signed up for it, and it was... I mean if you're going to be a nurse or doctor, that's a very important class; obviously you need to know medical terminology. I'm a COMM major so obviously I don't need to know that, but I got an A.

In some instances, course syllabi are available online for students to preview before enrolling in the course. This is helpful in the selection of online courses because students know exactly what is expected of them.

I was able to go on [course selection site] and they had a link to the syllabus for certain courses. When I was picking between a class for my major and an elective, I looked at what the class for my major was like. It just seemed like more work than I could get done if I was going to get a job. I decided to go with the elective where things were due less often.

Student-athletes who are in-season during the Winter session have the opportunity to decide if the amount of course work will be feasible with their athletic schedule. Students who know that they do not do well in online tests can avoid classes in which all of the points come from quizzes and tests.

Course Format

Online courses at this institution follow a relatively homogenous course format. Student-athlete reported two distinct variations in the way courses were outlined and paced. The instructional methods varied by class, but used similar technological tools. The differences in format presented unique challenges, but none were reported as being insurmountable.

The most common format for online courses was a self-directed model that allowed the student to progress at their pace. Course work included a series of lessons

and assignments, typically papers, quizzes, and tests, with no set due date. As long as the assignments were completed by the end of the semester, they were considered on time and counted for credit. “We had all the assignments at the beginning of the semester,” noted one student-athlete, “it probably would have taken too long to sit down and do all the work in one day, but I guess someone could if they wanted.”

It was common in this format for lessons to be pre-requisites for taking quizzes and tests. In order to add structure and ensure that students are exposed to the course material, professors are able to lock assignments and make them available only when lessons (presented in video or podcast format) are complete. While the intention of this requirement was to simulate mandatory class sessions, students found ways to minimize the time spent attending to course work.

They made you watch the video of the lecture before you could take the quizzes so I would just open the video and turn the sound off and do other stuff on my computer until it was over... The quizzes were easy enough and they were open book that I didn't really need to pay attention to the videos to do well.

The alternative to the self-paced course was a format that was driven by deadlines. The deadline directed courses relied on assignments being due on specified days and times to ensure sufficient progress is being made. Assignments in this format would typically include discussion board posts, problem sets, papers, quizzes, and tests. This format more closely simulated a classroom experience by providing structure and requiring students to complete work at an even pace throughout the semester.

Deadline driven courses allowed students to develop a routine as they completed course work. They would remember that assignments were due every week on a certain day and at a certain time.

It was easy for me to remember what was due and when because every day after practice I knew I would have to go in to study hall and do a problem set. I knew that at the end of every week I had a test. That helped get into a rhythm and made it harder to put stuff off to the last minute.

Communication with Professors

The amount of communication student-athletes received from the professors of their online courses varied by professor. The typical amount of communication ranged from weekly or bi-weekly messages to virtually no communication. Student-athletes reported that, while it was rare for professors to send messages regularly, they made it clear that they were available if the students needed to reach out to them for any reason. Student-athletes reported prompt replies from their professors in instances in which they needed assistance.

Messages from professors were either relayed in emails or via announcements on the course's homepage. Several student-athletes reported that they were able to link course announcements to their emails so that they would get a direct message whenever the professor posted something. While the frequency with which professors reached out to students varied, the purpose of their messages was consistent. "Yeah, she e-mailed us a lot about what was due that week and what was expected to happen and our progress in the course and stuff like that." It was commonly reported that professors would help pace students by reminding them how far they should be in the course. "There would always be reminders and just pace setters."

Messages and reminders were one way that professors outlined the course and expressed expectations. The more common tool for communicating expectations to students was the course syllabus. Student-athletes consistently responded that the

syllabus was the most useful tool in understanding the course format and what would be expected of them. One student-athlete stated, "Each class they gave a syllabus so that was posted online and you could print off or refer to it by logging in." Course syllabi were typically well organized and clearly outlined what students could expect throughout the semester.

The syllabus made it very clear, always. The syllabus took the approach that everyone in there it was their first online class and that this is how things would be going, these are the tools that you need. Like you'd need a computer, you'd need access to the Internet... Like you wouldn't need Flash Player or Adobe or something like that.

Professors made it clear to students that if they needed assistance in the course of the semester, they would make themselves available. Student-athletes reported that their professors were very helpful in clearing up any confusion and in helping solve any problems. "In the Medical Terminology class I had to communicate with the professor a few times because I couldn't get the program to work at first and then towards the end I got like this grade that wasn't correct." Reaching out to the professor was also helpful when student-athletes knew in advance that they may not be able to complete assignments due to lack of Internet access.

We had to respond to someone's post on the discussion board by midnight every Friday. Well you couldn't respond to someone's post until people started posting and most people didn't post anything till about noon on Friday. When I would be at my parents' house I would have to let the professor know I might not be able to respond in time because I didn't have Internet access out there (they live in the country). She was always cool with it and would let me do it the next day when I could get some place that had Internet.

Professors were understanding of technological issues and were willing to work with student-athletes to find solutions to problems as they arose as long as the student reached out to the professor.

Academic Support

Every student-athlete reported having academic support made available to him or her by the Athletic Department. The most commonly reported academic support systems were tutoring services, Academic Advisors, and study hall. These support services were reportedly very helpful when they were utilized. In online courses, however, student-athletes rarely utilized the academic support systems available to them. The most commonly used support during completion of online courses was the student-athlete's Academic Advisor.

Academic support services were rarely used by student-athletes for online education because they felt they were capable of understanding and completing the course material on their own.

So I had no need for tutors or study hall or anything like that, which would have been available to me. I'm not exactly sure. I've never heard of anyone having a summer tutor, but I know they are available. But yeah, it was perfect because if worst came to worst I could have sat in academic support with a tutor and my Academic Advisor and gone through a class or gone through an assignment.

They were comforted knowing that if it became necessary they could receive support services, but that scenario rarely presented itself. The only academic support used by participants in this study for their online courses was the Academic Advisor. In those instances, the Advisor served to create a structured environment for the student-athletes. Student-athletes would receive reminders about what was due and when and they would

be required to report to their Advisor when assignments had been completed. “[My advisor] would check in with me and make sure I had finished my work for the day. Sometimes I would get emails or texts from her saying ‘don’t forget that this is due tomorrow’ or something like that.” Only three out of the 10 participants reported utilizing their Academic Advisor in that way. The seven that did not utilize these services felt that they were capable of completing the course without assistance.

Academic Advisors were much more active in helping student-athletes select and enroll in online courses. Student-athletes said that they could rely on the support of their Advisors in seeking out courses that they would be successful in. Much of the information that Advisors reportedly relied on came from past student-athletes who had taken the courses or from word of mouth from other Advisors.

When we were picking out my class, [my advisor] said that some of her other students had taken this one and had done well in it. She told me it was one that I would have to work in, but that the material wasn’t too hard to understand.

Learning Outcomes

The majority of participants in this study reported diminished learning outcomes when compared to in-class courses. This outcome was reportedly more directly related to the shortened duration of the Winter and Summer sessions than it was to the format of the course. The Winter and Summer semester last three and six weeks respectively, as opposed to 16 weeks in the Fall and Spring semesters. Student-athletes also noted that learning outcomes were affected by the fact that the content of the courses was often unrelated to the students’ areas of interest.

Although the shortened semesters had the most dramatic effect on the learning outcomes of the online courses surveyed, there were methodological factors that had an impact. The lack of direct contact with students resulted in student-athletes finding ways to skim course material and only address materials that would be included on tests and in assignments.

I kind of just did the readings and kind of skimmed through to find what I needed to put in my paper, rather than reading the whole thing. Just kind of finding what I needed to finish the assignment. If I was in a regular class you have to show up and listen to everything the teacher is covering instead of just picking the things you need to include in assignments.

Student-athletes also addressed the notion that hearing a professor lecturing was more helpful in retaining course material than reading the text or listening to a podcast.

Characteristics of Successful Online Students

Participants in this study pointed out that online courses emphasize certain skills that may not be as critical for success in classroom courses. “The way the classes are set up, like if you’re not a good writer or if you aren’t good with staying on top of things, you’re not going to do good in these classes.” Without the ability to communicate in person, writing skills are a premium in online education. The motivation and discipline were cited as critical to success in online courses, as it can be easy to ignore communication from professors and allow deadlines to expire. As one student-athlete put it, “My class in the summer was pretty easy to ignore. You don’t have any other classes going on and if you don’t make the effort to log in and check on it, stuff can pile up and you can miss deadlines.”

Discipline was among the most frequently cited characteristics by participants in

this study. “Having discipline is huge, knowing when to sit down, get things done, to not procrastinate and stuff like that... I think that's one of the biggest things.” Student-athletes talked about the difficulty creating time to address classwork and asserted that with in-class courses, class sessions allow students to begin working on assignments that, in turn, increases the students’ willingness to schedule time to complete course work. It takes a certain discipline and maturity, particularly in the Winter and Summer sessions when the student may not be enrolled in any other classes, to regularly schedule time to address their school work.

The lack of in-person communication puts an emphasis on clear and technically sound writing. Without the opportunity to speak with a professor or verbally express ideas in class discussions, students must represent themselves solely through their writing. “I feel like that’s the majority of what online classes are. Like, being able to fluently write down your ideas in essays and paragraphs and stuff. That’s why I’ve steered clear of them since my last one.” If students are unable to articulate their thoughts through their writing, it may be reflected in their grade. If they are unable to express to the professor when they need points of clarification or ask appropriate questions, students will not get the help they need to understand course material.

Summary

Despite considerable heterogeneity of online courses, participants in this study described similar experiences. Due to the limited online course offerings in the Fall and Spring semesters, every course described in this study was taken during the Winter or Summer semesters. Student-athletes enrolled in these courses as a way of supplementing

their coursework, either for GPA purposes, as pre-requisites for their major courses, or to meet NCAA eligibility standards. When selecting online courses, participants sought advice from teammates and Academic Advisors. Having an understanding of the nature of coursework and expectations of the professor prior to enrollment were important to student-athletes.

Participants described substantial similarities in the format of online courses offered by this institution; however the frequency and nature of communication with instructors varied considerably. Interaction with instructors influenced the way student-athletes approached course material. At a minimum, instructors made it understood that they were available to be contacted if students required assistance.

Despite effective communication with instructors and the availability of academic support, participants reported diminished learning outcomes. This outcome may have had more to do with the courses being completed during abbreviated semesters rather than the online course format. Participants did not recommend online enrollment for courses crucial to major progression. When selected appropriately, though, online courses offered a number of benefits including flexibility, access to technology, and the negation of several burdens associated with being a student-athlete.

Online Courses: The Positive

Flexibility

The most commonly reported benefit of online courses was the flexibility of schedule resulting from not having required class sessions. Student-athletes not only

enjoyed being able to complete course work around their own schedule, but they were able to avoid lengthy and expensive commutes to campus, had the flexibility to travel on vacation while completing course work, could get a job without worrying about taking time off to be in class, and could relax and recover from long workouts while completing course work at home.

Having the opportunity to visit family and go on vacations is valuable to student-athletes who are required to miss holidays and time off due to their athletic obligations. The ability to complete course work while at home with family or while travelling was the sole reason that several participants chose the online format. “I knew that we had a family vacation to Florida over Winter [semester] so there was no way I could be in a classroom. If I couldn’t have taken an online course, I wouldn’t have done a class at all.” For one international student-athlete, the online course helped to cure a case of homesickness.

I hadn’t been home to see my family in over a year. Between the 10-hour flight and competing throughout the school year, and going through the world cup games in the summer, I just haven’t had the chance to go home. It was starting to get to me, so if I hadn’t been able to take this online class and go home, I don’t know what I would have done.

Opportunities for student-athletes to work and make money are rare. Their athletic obligations during the Fall and Spring semesters preclude them from being able to get a job. If student-athletes are required to take a class during the Winter or Summer semesters, they lose out on the opportunity to make money to pay for things like rent, groceries, and school supplies.

I had to take a class last summer, so I didn’t think I was going to be able to work. I was freaking out because I wasn’t going to be able to pay for my apartment or

my scooter or anything. My advisor finally told me about this one online class and I was like ready to give her a big hug.

Online education allows students to complete assignments around their work schedule.

“I would just go to the library after I got off work and get everything done. If I knew I had a discussion board post due at a certain time or whatever, I would just get that done before I went in to work that day or the night before.”

For some, the flexibility to complete assignments from anywhere allowed for recovery time after long workouts.

I loved that after practice I can just go home and lay in bed while I work on my stuff. I mean, after practice I know I'm not going to feel like going and sitting in a class, so I could go eat or something and just take my computer with me and knock it out.

In some instances, something as small as an extra few hours in bed was enough to make online courses the preferable choice.

If I was in the other version of this course I would have had to get up at 7:30 to be in a classroom by 8:00. With my online class I didn't have practice until 10:00 so I would get up and work on school stuff in bed for an hour or two hours before practice... That was enough to make me want to pick the online one.

Some teams had multiple workouts a day and there was not a block of free time during the day to accommodate a class.

We had practice from 9:00 to 11:00 and then a shoot at like 1:00 and then another practice at 5:00. In Winter, classes are like three hours at a time. There would have been no way that I could fit a three hour class in my schedule.

Several student-athletes noted the little ways that online education saved time and energy.

I didn't have to spend time finding clothes to wear or brushing my hair or thinking about what I was going to look like. I never thought about how much time all that stuff takes up until I didn't have to do it.

For some, the savings on gas from not commuting made the difference.

My truck like drinks gas, so when I was at home over the summer, if I had to drive to campus every day I would have been out like \$300. My parents live like 30 or 40 minutes from [campus] so driving an hour every day wasn't an option. I'm a college student, I don't have \$300 to spend.

Student-Athlete Effect

There were very few instances in which participants reported that their work in online courses was affected by their status as a student-athlete. This was primarily due to the courses being completed during the Winter and Summer semesters when there is little competition and travel. The inherent anonymity of online education was repeatedly cited as a beneficial feature of the courses. Student-athletes inevitably experience a high profile within their respective communities and all the related benefits and stigmas. A commonly held belief is that professors do not like athletes, and they are harsher in their grading.

I've had a lot of teachers who, as soon I walk into class they recognize me as a basketball player, and I know they think I'm a slacker. You can just tell, like when I turn something in and it's on time and good, like they're surprised about that.

In some instances, professors did not make an effort to hide their beliefs about student-athletes.

I had one professor who actually put in his syllabus that late papers would not be accepted because of travel for games. He went on this whole rant about how athletes shouldn't get away with things just because we play a sport. It was really embarrassing.

They also recognize the phenomenon among classmates.

It makes me really self-conscious when you walk into class and you can tell people notice you and look at you. I'll sit down and hear people whispering behind me, and it's like they think I can't hear them. Especially in-season, like if

I have a bad game the night before or if we lose a game we're supposed to win, I don't even want to go to class sometimes because I know people are going to look at me and be thinking about it.

The ability to complete course work in a private environment and being able to communicate indirectly via discussion boards and email made student-athletes feel more willing to communicate with professors and classmates consistently. "I mean, all they see is my name. Unless they are going through and Googling everyone in their class, they probably won't know I'm a basketball player." This also made student-athletes feel more confident that their work was being judged on its merit and not the professor's beliefs about student-athletes.

GPA Boost

Student-athletes often see online courses as "GPA boosters." This title can be a misnomer, however, and give the impression that all online courses are easy or that they are less rigorous than other courses. Particularly when student-athletes enroll in online courses as electives and have the freedom to select any discipline they choose, they are able to be more strategic in their course selection and pick a course in which they are more likely to be successful.

I just needed another elective, and I had to get an A or a B in it, so I was asked around and found out some classes that other people had taken and liked. I finally found a Health class that just made you write a bunch of papers, which I'm good at, so I figured it would be good... There are some classes I would never take online. [A teammate] ended up taking Econ online, and didn't do well. I could never take a math course online. I'm not good at math, I would fail that one for sure.

The data collected in the study supported the student-athletes' claims. The mean GPA of participants in online courses was a 3.235, while in traditional courses they earned a 2.506.

Use of Technology

Technology has become such an integral part of daily life for some student-athletes the opportunity to interact with technology rather than teachers and classmates is considered an advantage. Participants in the study also pointed out that students find ways to use technology to aid in the completion of course work.

All the quizzes and tests we took were open book and open notes. The textbook was online, so when I would take the quizzes one of my friends showed me that I could use the 'Control' and 'F' keys to search for whatever I needed. Especially when the quizzes were about like definitions or whatever, I could hit 'control F' and type in the word I'm looking for and it finds the definition. It made the quizzes and tests super easy.

The ability to use the Internet as a resource, including search engines such as Google, is a benefit that students do not ignore.

Student-athletes noted that the course software used in their online courses was the same software used in traditional courses to check grades, disseminate course documents, and submit written assignments online. Upon enrolling in online courses student-athletes were comfortable with the technology. In some cases, student-athletes are more comfortable using the instructional technology utilized by online courses than they are with traditional instructional techniques.

I would pick listening to a podcast or making those online flash cards any day rather than go in and listen to some professor talk for three hours. I can't sit for that long and pay attention. I'll just start to zone out after a while. When I play

these podcasts and I get hungry or have to go to the bathroom or whatever, I don't have to think about it. I just pause the program, do what I need to do, and go back and pick up where I left off.

Online Courses: The Negative

Lack of Interaction

Although some felt they had been conditioned by technology to prefer indirect interaction, most student-athletes felt that the lack of in-person communication was a drawback of online courses. Students-athletes miss out on valuable connections with professors and classmates, which they felt is beneficial. The lack of interaction also led to a lack of accountability that student-athletes feel when they have to see professors in person.

Despite the majority of participants being in favor of the flexibility of not being required to go to class sessions, they recognized that the lack of in-person communication with professors was a drawback. The ability to get to know the professor and build a relationship ultimately can be used to the students' benefit in instances when the student may need extra help with course material or may need to ask for exceptions to class policy.

When you're in a class and get to know the professor, it is way easier to get help. Like, if we're turning in a paper, I really like being able to ask my professor to look over it and get their feedback. Also, when I need a favor from them, like if I need an extension on an assignment or whatever, I feel like it's easier when you've gotten to know a professor and they like you. I remember this one time I got a paper back and I really needed a B but I got a 79.5. I went in and asked if she could round it up and she said she knew how hard I worked on it and she would let me rewrite it. I resubmitted it, and she ended up giving me the B I needed.

Other student-athletes spoke of how they appreciate the option of utilizing professors' office hours to get extra help with course material.

A significant number of online courses utilize message boards to encourage discussion among classmates. Discussion boards are used to simulate class discussions that would take place in traditional courses. Student-athletes remarked that discussion boards do not replace the camaraderie that is created by attending class with classmates.

There's something to be said for going and sitting in a class. You talk and get to know the people around you, which is helpful. Like, if there is a test or assignment or something, you can get a study group together or ask questions about how they are doing [the assignment].

At the least, student-athletes enjoyed getting to know people that they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to meet. That is part of the collegiate experience that participants in this study appreciated.

In online courses, the sense of accountability that student-athletes felt in traditional courses was lacking. Participants noticed that when they had to face their professors after missing a deadline or skipping a class, the sense of guilt made them less likely to repeat that behavior.

When I would go into class without a paper or if I hadn't done the reading for that class, I would feel so guilty. Like, I couldn't even look [the professor] in the eye. I know I would make sure I had done the work for the next class.

One student-athlete pointed out that without the threat of in-class "pop quizzes" she was less like to do all of the reading, preferring instead to skim for what would be on the quizzes and tests.

Time Management

The ability to effectively manage time and efficiently complete class work was referenced quite a bit by participants in this study as being a challenge in all college courses, regardless of format. Online courses taken by these student-athletes presented time management challenges, in part because they were taken in Winter and Summer semesters in which they were not taking any other classes.

It was easy to forget about the class because I wasn't in any other classes. Sometimes I would have to remind myself that I was still in school because I didn't have to go to class and I didn't see a teacher to remind me when things were due.

It was easy for them to get involved with their athletic pursuits and their social engagements and overlook work for their online course. "Luckily, I had gotten a call from [my Academic Advisor] asking me if I had finished the assignments. If she hadn't done that, I probably wouldn't have remembered in time."

In courses without a deadline driven format, it was stated that course work easily accumulated and students sometimes underestimated how long they would take to complete.

I had probably eight quizzes left to do in the last week of class. I wasn't really worried because I didn't think they would take that long. When I actually sat down to do them, it was taking me like an hour to an hour and a half to finish each one. I got really worried that I wasn't going to have time to finish them all. I ended up working for like 10 hours in two days to get everything done on time.

Without the time management techniques the students typically employed in the Fall and Spring semesters, time management proved to be a challenge for student-athletes in online courses. They reported that they used assignment books and calendars significantly less in their online courses than they did in traditional classes. They also

reported checking in with their Academic Advisors less often during those semesters than they did during Fall and Spring semesters.

We didn't really have study hall hours because it wasn't a regular semester, so I wouldn't really go up and see [my Advisor]. If I needed to I could have, but mostly I just would go home after our morning practice, get some food, and log-in to the site. Like, it really wasn't that hard to keep up with stuff because as soon as you log-in you would see what stuff you had coming up.

Access to Course Software

One of the minor inconveniences described consistently by student-athletes was the process of accessing course software. There was often a lag between enrolling in the course and being able to access the software for the course. In instances in which student-athletes enrolled in the classes after the start of the semester, they reported missing deadlines for assignments because they were unable to log in to the websites in a timely manner.

It probably took me like a week before I could actually log-in and see my stuff. [My Advisor] had me email the professor and make sure I wasn't missing nothing, but he told me I was ok. I think I had to make up like 2 quizzes and write an introduction of myself, but he told me I could just turn those in as soon as I could. It was kind of a pain, but no big deal.

In these instances, student-athletes stated that professors were helpful in resolving the issues. None were penalized for turning in the work late.

Chapter 5: Summary and Recommendations

Student-athletes face an extraordinarily rigorous schedule inherent in their status as an athlete. The obligation of practices, workouts, competition, team travel, media obligations, and medical treatments all contribute to the stressful schedules that student-athletes endure. These commitments are in addition to the minimum full-time course load that student-athletes are required to take in order to compete. They are expected to successfully meet the same academic requirements as students not participating in intercollegiate athletics. While each person faces his or her own issues, the student-athlete lifestyle is well documented and thoroughly rigid. To add further stress to the academic scenario facing student-athletes, the NCAA governs the minimum academic standards that student-athletes must meet in order to compete in their sport. If these standards are not met, student-athletes face ineligibility and the possibility of the loss of athletic scholarship.

Online education is viewed as a way for student-athletes to alleviate some of the burden on their time. Online courses provide a flexible, personalized, on-demand learning environment. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of student-athletes in online education and gain insight into whether student-athletes find the courses to be valuable. Understanding the online academic experiences of student-athletes can help inform stakeholders as they counsel student-athletes who may consider enrolling in those courses. Specifically, Academic Advisors, professors, coaches, and athletic administrators can offer informed counsel when discussing the benefits and risks

of the online format. The data collected in this study can also inform instructors and support staff in planning online courses and supporting students throughout their enrollment.

A series of interviews were completed with the intention to: 1) explore the experiences of student-athletes in online courses, 2) determine what factors affected the academic success of student-athletes in online courses, 3) determine to what extent their status as scholarship student-athletes affected their academic success in online education, and 4) determine what effect academic support services had on the academic success of student-athletes in online courses.

Conceptual Framework

Through the data collection and analysis performed in this study, a comprehensive theory was developed addressing the phenomenon of student-athletes enrolling in online courses. Three pillars were identified as the most often identified components affecting academic success in online courses. Pillar One addressed the process by which student-athletes selected the online courses in which they would enroll. This process was critical as courses varied greatly in format, content delivery, and rigor. The strategic selection of online courses based upon the purpose for enrolling, information gathered from teammates and Academic Advisors, and the total time available to dedicate to course work can help student-athletes maximize their likelihood for academic success.

The strategic selection of online courses led into the Central Phenomenon described in the study, which was enrollment in online courses. Upon enrolling in courses, student-athletes would begin the process of familiarizing themselves with the

technology, the format of the course, and the instructional tools. Routines developed for addressing coursework, and student-athletes became accustomed to communicating with their professor.

Upon enrolling in online courses and becoming accustomed to the requirements of the course, student-athletes cited the alleviation of athletic burden, or Pillar Two, as critical to their success in online courses. Online courses provided a level of freedom from being identified as student-athletes and the associated stigma. Student-athletes were also afforded the opportunity to fit classwork into their busy practice and workout schedules. Student-athletes who were not in their competitive season noted that online courses allowed them to pursue employment opportunities or enjoy vacationing with family while enrolled in courses.

Pillar Three was the learning outcomes associated with online courses. Participants consistently reported diminished learning outcomes in online courses. While participants in the study attributed this effect to the compressed semesters, evidence would suggest that dedication to the course material and efforts to use technology to minimize rigor also contributed to diminished outcomes. In some cases, participants admitted having minimal interest in the subject matter of online courses, with primary motivation being derived from the need for academic credits or GPA. Without a dedication and interest in the subject matter, it is not surprising that student-athletes did not maximize potential learning outcomes. Participants shared ways in which they could use the technology to bypass requirements and minimize effort. Using the “Control-F” feature on open-book assessments to skip to definitions was one way that students could skip reading and minimize effort and learning outcomes. When recorded lectures were

required to be viewed prior to accessing assessments, students reported playing the recording and turning the sound off while doing other work. Students found ways to minimize time spent on-task, which contributed to diminished learning outcomes.

Student-athletes had to critically assess the need to effectively learn course material and their dedication to the subject matter. If it was material that would be utilized in future courses, participants recommended enrolling in traditional courses during regular semesters.

Pillar One: Strategic Course Selection

Student-athletes enrolling in online courses have a specific and essential purpose informing their decision. The online courses offered at this university primarily take place during the Winter and Summer semesters. These sessions are considered voluntary by the institution and the NCAA, meaning that student-athletes may not be penalized for their decision to not enroll in classes during those semesters. For student-athletes who forego their Winter or Summer holidays, the necessity for academic credits or GPA points in order to comply with minimum NCAA eligibility standards is frequently the motivation for enrolling. The necessity to complete a pre-requisite course in order to advance within their major is occasionally the reason for enrolling in the Winter and Summer semesters. Some student-athletes simply wish to get extra academic credits so that they may advance toward graduation. Whatever the motivation for enrolling, the consequences for failing to successfully complete these courses can be severe.

The rigor and frequency of course work in online courses can vary drastically. Online courses can also employ any number of different instructional techniques and

assessment tools. Enrolling in a course without any prior knowledge of what format the course will take can be risky, particularly when the stakes for academic success are high.

Relying on trustworthy sources for information regarding the format of online courses is a technique that student-athletes utilize to ensure that they are enrolling in a course compatible with their learning style. Student-athletes can also gauge how time-consuming courses may be and make decisions about the appropriate semesters to enroll, taking athletic obligations into consideration. Teammates are one of the primary sources for this type of information. Student-athletes describe a nearly constant free flow of information regarding the nature and rigor of all courses, not strictly online formats. Academic Advisors are also utilized in this way, however student-athletes feel that they will receive more frank assessments from teammates. This information is used to inform the course selection process.

Student-athletes often seek out electives or General Education courses to take in an online format rather than classes needed to complete major requirements. Major courses were reported as generally more rigorous and time consuming, making traditional classes the preferable format for those requirements. Student-athletes also considered the information in those classes too valuable to be taken during the Winter or Summer sessions, when compressed timelines could negate learning outcomes. General Education classes and electives offered more diversity in the academic disciplines that student-athlete could choose from. Student-athletes could pick a discipline in which they felt more capable to take in an online format. Having a certain comfort level within that discipline helped student-athletes feel more competent in an independent learning forum. For example, a student-athlete who struggles in math would avoid taking Calculus or

Trigonometry in an online format, opting for a discipline in which they feel more competent.

Central Phenomenon: Enrolling In An Online Course

The central phenomenon examined in this study was the enrollment of student-athletes in online courses. Enrollment in an online course was the result of the recognition of the necessity or desire to earn academic credits or GPA points in the Winter or Summer sessions (the primary semesters in which online courses were offered.) Student-athletes would engage in an informal screening process to select a desirable course. Once selected, student-athletes would enroll in the course and begin familiarizing themselves with course software and format. A routine for completing course work would be developed to aid in time management. Instructors and Academic Advisors could also be relied upon to provide additional reminders and pace setters to aid student-athletes in their time management.

Course software was shown to vary somewhat from class to class, however this did not impact the likelihood of academic success. A prior mastery of similar course technologies as a result of their use in classroom courses provided student-athletes with the fundamental skills to quickly learn to navigate each class site. The institution also utilized similar host software in traditional courses for students to check grades and submit assignments, which improved the technological abilities of student-athletes enrolling in online courses.

As student-athletes familiarized themselves with the nature and frequency of course assignments, they developed a routine for attending to their work. A schedule

would develop which aided student-athletes in their ability to manage upcoming assignments. Planning strategies that student-athletes reported using during full-time semesters were utilized less in Winter and Summer sessions, as they had fewer obligations to track. Consistent routines enabled student-athletes to remember to address their academic obligations in settings that were atypical for the completion of class work.

Additional structure was added to online courses when instructors and Academic Advisors would provide reminders about upcoming assignments and deadlines. Particularly in the Winter and Summer sessions, without being enrolled in additional courses, student-athletes reported the potential to neglect online course work. The additional structure helped to negate the potential to forget to complete course work.

Pillar Two: Alleviation of Athletic Burden

The obligations associated with varsity athletics are remarkable. Student-athletes do not only face a rigorous schedule, however. Athletics maintains a certain mystique within the American culture; athletes are elevated to celebrity status and competitions captivate the masses. Student-athletes are public figures who are expected to meet the academic requirements of the general student populations while remaining figures of much public scrutiny. Professors and classmates know of these student-athletes the moment that they step into a classroom. “I actually had one professor tell me on the first day of class that she had Googled me before the start of class. She knew all about me before I stepped foot in that room. How is that fair?” asked one student-athlete. All of the stereotypes associated with student-athletes are immediately attributed to the student, whether fairly or unfairly.

Online courses served to alleviate some of the burden that student-athletes felt could be attributed to their notoriety. Certain anonymity was associated with being a student in an online setting. In some cases, professors only had student ID numbers associated with coursework. This factor made student-athletes believe that grades earned were the result of the merit of their work rather than the bias of the professor. The anonymity experienced in online courses also cut down on bias from classmates. It increased the student-athlete's likelihood of attending to course work after a poor performance in a competition due to not being required to face classmates in-person.

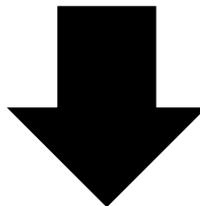
The opportunity to take the time to get a job or travel on vacation or to see family is a luxury student-athletes consider rare. Their athletic obligations require them to be on campus the majority of the calendar year. When they are required to take courses in the Winter or Summer semesters, they lose out on a valuable opportunity to do these things. The lack of opportunity to work and make money to pay for living expenses was repeatedly cited as one of the primary burdens of being a student-athlete, particularly for student-athletes who were on less than full scholarships. Online courses afforded these student-athletes the opportunity to gain employment or travel, based on the flexibility of class schedules and the ability to complete coursework from anywhere.

After practices and competitions, student-athletes reported a lack of energy. The grueling athletic schedule student-athletes face during non-full-time semester would leave them physically exhausted. Student-athletes appreciated the option online education afforded them to complete class work from home while resting.

Pillar Three: Learning Outcomes vs. Academic Credits

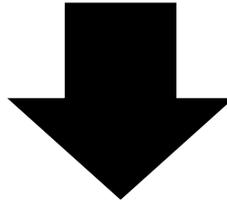
Student-athletes reported diminished learning outcomes in online courses. While the result was attributed more often to the shortened academic semester than the online course methodology, student-athletes were resolute in their assessment of online courses. This result made student-athlete carefully consider their desired outcomes prior to enrolling in future online courses. If student-athletes required academic credits or GPA points, they felt more comfortable with the diminished learning outcomes they could expect in online courses. If student-athletes were enrolling in a specific course for their major or to gain certain outcomes for future employment, they would choose the traditional course format.

Pillar 1: Strategic Course Selection
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• General Education courses or Electives preferable to Major courses for online format. Greater selection of academic disciplines and less emphasis on learning outcomes.• Teammates and Academic Advisors are effective sources of information regarding format and rigor of online courses.• Student-athletes can strategically assess the rigor and time necessary for successful completion of online courses.



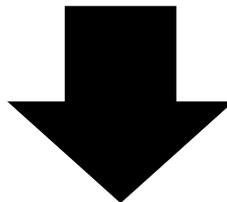
Central Phenomenon: Enrolling in an Online Course

- Student-athlete recognizes need to earn credits/GPA in the Winter or Summer semester, as online courses are rarely offered in Fall/Spring.
- Enroll in course and become familiar with course software and format.
- Develop routine for attending to course work.
- Rely on Professor or Academic Advisor for assistance when necessary and reminders of upcoming work.



Pillar 2: Alleviation of Athletic Burden

- Minimize potential bias or stigma from professors and classmates due to athletic status.
- Allow flexibility to get a job, take a vacation, see family (options not typically available due to athletic obligations)
- Ability to complete work between practices and workouts
- Flexibility to complete work from home and rest after rigorous workouts



Pillar 3: Learning Outcomes vs. Academic Credits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due in part to compressed academic timeline, learning outcomes were diminished. • If course material is critical for future classes or employment opportunities, traditional courses recommended. • When student-athletes need credits/GPA online courses can be preferable.

Figure 5.1 Conceptual Framework of Online Education for Student-Athletes

Summary of Research Questions

Summary of Research Question 1: What are the experiences of student-athletes enrolled in online courses?

Overall, student-athletes had positive experiences in online courses. Every participant in this study stated that they would recommend online courses to other student-athletes. The need to be strategic in the selection of online courses was emphasized, but in general student-athletes enjoyed the flexibility afforded by online education and the relative anonymity inherent in the methodology. Student-athletes in this study experienced academic success in online courses, as the mean GPA in these courses was a 3.235 and no participants failed.

A prevalent theme throughout the study was how busy student-athletes are throughout the year. The balance between academic and athletic obligations can be difficult for student-athletes, particularly considering that they are also college students

striving for a “normal” social life. The flexibility offered by online courses allowed student-athletes to regain some of the “normalcy” in their college experience that they reported missing. Specifically in non-full-time terms, when student-athletes are only enrolled in online courses, they are able to get a job to earn money for living expenses, they can travel, and they can see family. These are opportunities that would be unavailable for most student-athletes if they enrolled in traditional courses.

Student-athletes overwhelmingly cited the relative anonymity inherent in online courses as one of their primary benefits. They reported a perceived stigma from professors and classmates that negatively impacted their experiences in traditional courses. Participants were comforted by the likelihood that instructors and classmates likely were not aware of their status as student-athletes and confident that they were not subject to bias in grading.

The academic support available to student-athletes was reportedly sufficient, although sparsely utilized. None of the participants in this study utilized available tutoring services for assistance in online coursework. Participants in this study appreciated the availability of these resources, however they felt that the coursework did not necessitate their use. The only academic support utilized was the Academic Advisor, and in each instance, this support was not voluntary on the part of the student-athlete. Academic Advisors took it upon themselves to check in with student-athletes and give reminders or pace setters.

Summary of Research Question 2: What issues related to online coursework affected the academic success of student-athletes?

- a. *How does the interpretation of materials via electronic delivery system affect academic success?*

The instructional methods described in this study did not prove to have any adverse effects upon the experiences of student-athletes in online courses. The diversity of instructional materials was appreciated by participants. Diverse material increased effectiveness and likelihood that student-athletes would review course materials. Learning outcomes were reportedly impacted more by the compressed timeline of the courses and the nature of assessment tools than by instructional delivery.

- b. *How does the freedom from structured class time, necessary time management, or other motivational issues affect academic success?*

The lack of structure inherent in online courses was cited as having a significant impact upon the experiences of student-athletes in online courses. While it did not ultimately negatively affect the participants' ability to pass the courses, it was a factor that had to be accounted for and addressed. The development of a routine was crucial to the timely management of coursework. A specified routine served to impose structure into the experience and provided a dependable timeline for attending to course work. Participants reported that communication from instructors and Academic Advisors aided time management and added structure to the experience. Professors and Academic Advisors reached out with reminders and pace setters to help ensure the timely progression through course work.

The primary challenge was reported the ease with which participants were able to forget about their online courses while not enrolled in any other classes. It became easy for student-athletes to neglect their course work without any other academic obligations. Participants reported getting caught up in athletic or social activities and having a tendency to forget that there were academic obligations to attend to. A specified routine and reminders from instructors and Academic Advisors served to remind participants that there was schoolwork to be done.

c. How are the student-athletes' experiences affected by other issues specific to the online course?

Student-athletes repeatedly cited the freedom from the stigma of being a student-athlete as one of the most beneficial elements of online courses. This freedom led participants to believe that their work was being evaluated based upon its merit and not any preconceived beliefs held by the instructor. In some cases, this notion resulted in student-athletes being more attentive to coursework and devoting more time and effort into developing thoughtful material because of the belief that it would be subject to more impartial scrutiny.

Summary of Research Question 3: How was the course experience affected by the students' status as an athlete?

Participants did not believe that their experiences in online courses were negatively affected by their status as student-athletes. Due to the courses being completed in the Winter and Summer semesters, which were not full-time semesters at this university, student-athletes were not subject to the rigors of a full course load

(minimum of 12 credits) and athletic obligations while completing online coursework. The fact that their experiences in online courses were minimally affected by their status as student-athletes was reportedly one of the most beneficial features of online education. Student-athletes were not subject to the same stigmas and biases from professors and classmates that they were in traditional courses.

Summary of Research Question 4: In retrospect, how do the student-athletes perceive that the academic support center staff could better prepare students for success in online education?

Participants in this study reported having good support systems put in place by their academic support center. The center offered computer labs, study hall, tutorial services, and Academic Advisors to aid student-athletes in their course work. While student-athletes described the benefits of utilizing these services throughout their academic careers, the services were used sparsely for work in online courses. Participants did not believe that the course work in these courses necessitated extensive use of the academic support program.

Convenience vs. Easy

There was a natural tension throughout the study between the convenience offered by online courses and the idea that they are easy. In this case, the term easy is defined as the least amount of time and effort required to earn the highest possible grade in the course. While they often cited the convenience of online education, participants occasionally used the label to describe ways that they would use technology to circumvent academic rigor. The data collected suggests that when taken for elective

purposes or when academic credits or GPA were needed, student-athletes opted for the easiest available courses. Student-athletes were rarely concerned with an interest in the subject matter or the potential learning outcomes.

Questions remain about how students use their elective credits and the motivation behind course selection. For student-athletes, it would seem that when given the choice, elective credits are seen as a way to earn credits and boost GPA, sometimes for eligibility purposes. Academic rigor and desired learning outcomes are less relevant in those instances.

Further study addressing attitudes toward elective credits and motivation factors behind course selection is necessary. A comparison between student-athletes and the general student population would also be useful.

Academic Integrity

A theme that was brought up by participants was the unclear definition of academic integrity issues in online education. While it was not the focus of this study, expressed practices in completing course work that were questionable, though were not explicitly outlawed. A popular practice was using the “Control-F” feature in online texts to skip directly to words or phrases. When utilized during open-book quizzes and tests, the need for a true understanding of course material was abandoned in favor of skipping directly to the answers. Student-athletes also reported playing required lectures and videos with the sound off while attending to other work. This practice allowed students to complete requirements to unlock quizzes and tests while bypassing time spent on course content.

Instructors can eliminate many questionable behaviors simply by addressing them in syllabi or in assessment instructions. In none of the instances described were these practices addressed as illegal by instructors. Participants said that they knew the practices were questionable but that they were careful in examining course materials for a statement outlawing them and would not have acted if they had been addressed.

Sadly, this necessitates that instructors are attuned to the potential for questionable behavior from students. Instructors must be creative in foreseeing potential offending practices and must spend time talking with students to get a better idea of how students may take advantage of ambiguous rules. The data presented here belies a “grey area” in online education where academic integrity is concerned.

Academic integrity is a theme that certainly warrants further study. Ethical considerations associated with online education and technology are plenty. Including more key informants, including instructors, academic administrators, and technology designers can be helpful in addressing the issue.

Implications for Practice

The conceptual framework of this study suggests that online education is not a negative tool for student-athletes to utilize. Evidence from this study suggests that student-athletes appreciate the many benefits of online courses and the GPA data showed that they were able to achieve success. Student-athletes should not be limited from considering online courses if they find the medium appealing. In many ways online education provides opportunities that athletics take away, such as the opportunity to spend time with family, to travel, to have a flexible schedule, and to seek employment

and earn money. Alternatively, students-athletes should not be pushed into taking online courses if they are hesitant. Academic Advisors can be useful in taking an active role in educating student-athletes about the unique factors inherent in online education and should encourage students to find out as much as possible about specific courses as possible.

Athletic Academic Advisors can help student-athletes make an informed decision when choosing to enroll in online courses. They should be very clear about the function of the course; is it required for their major, to raise their GPA for eligibility or major purposes, or to earn elective credits to make progress toward graduation or eligibility. Having a clear understanding of the purpose of enrolling in the course accompanies an accurate understanding of how much flexibility there is in course selection. Student-athletes must understand if they will be required to take a specific course or if they can choose from multiple course offerings.

Academic Advisors can also seek information about the format of particular online courses. When students are pondering the decision to enroll in an online course format, an understanding of the exact nature of course material is helpful. Students can then make a more informed decision regarding whether the course material suits their learning style, the amount of time must be dedicated to the course and the amount of time they will have available, and the likelihood that they will require academic support or monitoring.

Instructors contribute to student success in online education primarily through clarity of communication. Evidence from this study suggests student-athletes benefit from clearly stated expectations regarding schedules, assignment expectations, and

academic integrity definitions. Academic issues stemming from the independent learning and time management inherent in online education were diminished with a good understanding of course expectations.

Online courses can benefit from the thoughtful scrutiny of learning assessments. Instructors must be strategic and creative in the delivery of course material and their assessments with the ultimate goal of maximizing learning outcomes in mind.

Limitations of the Study

This study was affected by several limitations. The most remarkable limitation was the sparse online course offerings at the featured institution. Other limitations included the factors that potentially affected the data collection process and the lack of diversity within the sample.

Limited Course Offerings

The limited number of online courses offered by the feature institution impacted the study. There were extremely few online courses offered in the Fall and Spring semesters, which are full-time semesters at this institution. They are the semesters in which students complete the majority of their course work, with 12 credits constituting minimum full time enrollment. These are also the semesters in which the majority of athletic teams compete. Of the 19 varsity teams fielded at this university, only four compete during the Winter session. None of the 19 teams competed during the Summer semester.

Online courses featured a more robust offering during the Winter and Summer semesters. The majority of winter classes existing at the institution were offered online and a significant number were online during the Summer session. Every online course taken by participants in this study was completed during the Winter and Summer semesters. Further studies may choose to examine the effect of enrolling in online courses during full-time semesters. It will be interesting to find out what affect being enrolled in a full course load, as well as being in-season would have on the online experience of student-athletes.

Factors Affecting the Interview Process

The author of this study was in a uniquely challenging position at the beginning of the data collection process. Due to his status as an Athletic Academic Counselor, the potential for bias throughout the data collection process was significant. While the bias, either from the author's prior experiences with student-athletes and online courses or from the participants' experience with the author in a professional setting, could not be entirely eliminated, the author attempted to limit bias as much as possible.

Beginning with the recruitment of participants, the potential for student-athletes to be influenced by the author's Academic Counselor status was a concern. This was addressed through the use of the author's personal email account rather than his professional email account to contact potential participants. In the recruitment process the author did not reference his employment at the featured institution.

At the outset of every interview, the participant was reminded that their anonymity was the primary priority of the author. They were told that data collected

through the process would not be shared with Academic Advisors, coaches, parents, professors, or athletic administrators. Despite the thorough explanation, participants occasionally displayed what appeared to be hesitancy to be forthright with information. The potential for the withholding of information due to the author's position within the athletic department was certainly a limitation.

Diversity of Sampling

The data collection phase of this study spanned November, December, and January; a timeframe that represents the conclusion of the Fall and the Winter semesters. Convenience sampling was utilized to limit the stratification of the sample. Participants were selected for this study based upon the order in which they responded to recruitment material in an effort to allow themes to develop naturally and not as a result of selective sampling.

During the conclusion of the Fall semester, when student-athletes from every team were enrolled in classes on campus, a more diverse array of student-athletes volunteered to participate. A total of five sports were represented by the participants surveyed during the Fall semester. In the Winter semester, the majority of student-athletes are either not enrolled in classes or they enroll in online courses away from campus. Only four teams were in competition during the Winter semester, requiring all of the members of those sports to be on campus. The student-athletes who participated during the Winter semester represented a single team which was competing during that semester. The lack of diversity among participants in this study and the relatively low sample size resulted in data that may be difficult to generalize to all student-athletes.

Recommendations for Future Research

Though few problems were encountered during this exploratory study, several elements can be included in future studies to make the data more comprehensive and applicable to the student-athlete population as a whole. Specifically, future studies can include a larger sample size including a greater number of sports represented, the inclusion of more key informants, expanding the study to include more institutions, and the pursuit of themes regarding academic integrity.

Larger Sample Size

This study, as an exploratory study, was limited in scope to include interviews with 10 student-athletes. The result is data that is representative only of a select group of student-athletes at institutions similar to this featured university. The study only examined the experiences of student-athletes at an Atlantic Coast Conference school, representing six sports, which were on athletic scholarship and had completed at least one online course. Future studies could include non-scholarship student-athletes or could focus on Division II or Division III institutions.

A greater sample size would allow researchers to generalize data to a larger student-athlete population. This research represented an exploratory study within a discipline that has yet to receive much attention. Further studies with larger sample sizes will serve to grow the literature addressing the experiences of student-athletes in online courses.

Include More Key Informants

The perspective of the student-athlete was the only viewpoint represented in this study. As an exploratory study, the author sought to gain insight into the fundamental experiences of the participants in this phenomenon. Future studies could seek out the perspective of other stakeholders in the process. Professors, Academic Advisors, and coaches would all have valuable insight into the comprehensive understating of student-athletes enrolling in online courses. Professors who have taught online courses would be particularly useful in gaining understanding into the format of online courses, the use of instructional technology, and the challenges of working with student-athletes in online courses. Academic Advisors would offer great insight into the enrollment process and the considerations of supporting student-athletes in their online courses. Coaches would be interesting for their perspective on the high stakes of NCAA academic eligibility and their thoughts on student-athletes being enrolled in online courses.

Inclusion of More Institutions

The inclusion of more institutions in future studies would allow for data to be generalized to a wider population. This study took place at a single Division I institution competing in the Atlantic Coast Conference, offering online courses primarily in the Winter and Summer semesters. The data collected for this study can only be generalized to intuitions that fit a similar profile.

Pursue Academic Integrity Theme

A theme that is worthy of further examination is the ambiguity of what constitutes a breach of academic integrity in online courses. Student-athletes in this study stated that all quizzes and tests were open book. Several mentioned that the use of Google and similar search engines to look up vocabulary terms and concepts while completing course work is a common practice among students in online courses. The use of the 'Control F' function to search computer-based documents for terms and phrases was also described. When asked if the professor in the syllabus or in any course announcements addressed the use of the functions, each student-athlete responded that they had not been addressed. Participants responded that all assessments were open note and open book and the use of all available resources was allowed. Further studies could address this phenomenon and attempt to diagnose how widespread this practice is, while seeking to account for the perspectives of professors and administrators.

Conclusion

This study serves as a step in better understanding the implications of student-athletes enrolling in online courses. As online courses grow as an integral component of higher education and the academic experiences of student-athletes continue to be scrutinized, it is crucial to understand the effect of their interaction. Online education can be a valuable resource to help negate the challenges of participation in intercollegiate athletics, if utilized thoughtfully and strategically. The time demands associated with athletics can be offset by the flexibility afforded by online education.

Student-athletes and those charged with their advisement must be thoughtful when selecting online courses. The purposes for enrolling in online courses, the desired learning outcomes, and the nature of the course must be considered. Institutional academic support can be helpful in offsetting the challenges specific to online courses, however when strategically selected, student-athletes can be successful with a minimum of support.

Online education can be thought of as an educational tool. When used appropriately, it has the potential to be beneficial in the education of student-athletes. Thoughtful consideration must be given to the suitable utilization of online education. Further research is needed to address the most effective implementation of online education and how it's potential benefits can be maximized.

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APPENDIX A:
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your experience thus far as a student-athlete?
2. How do you think your status as an athlete has affected your academic career?
3. Why did you choose to take an online class?
4. What role did your Academic Advisor play in your decision to enroll in an online course?
5. Can you describe for me the format of the online course?
6. Tell me about your experience in the course?
7. What benefits did you experience taking a class online?
8. What difficulties did you experience taking a class online?
9. How proficient were you at using technology prior to taking this course?
10. How was your experience influenced by the technology used to deliver course material?
11. How motivated were you to pass this course? What was your primary source of motivation?
12. What other influences affected your success in this course?
13. How was your experience in this course different from your experiences in classroom courses?
14. Do you feel that your status as a student-athlete affected your success in this course? If so, please describe that influence or how did you keep it from affecting you class performance?
15. What support programs were offered by the University of Maryland to help you pass this course? Did you use them? How did they influence your achievement in this course?
16. What support programs would you suggest would help improve student-athlete success in online courses?
17. Is there anything that we missed or anything else that you would like to add?

APPENDIX B:

Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Backboard & Browsers: A Qualitative Examination of the Experiences of Division I Student-Athletes in Online Classes

Why am I being asked to participate in this research?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the experiences of student-athletes in online classes. You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are a scholarship Division I student-athlete who has completed an online course. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 10 people to do so.

Who is doing the study?

The person in charge of this study is Jonathan Healy at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is being guided in this research by Dr. Charles Hausman, Eastern Kentucky University.

What is the purpose of the study?

By doing this study, we hope to learn about the factors related to your enrollment in an online course, including: why you chose to enroll in an online course, what instructional methods were used by the professor of the course, how much communication you received from the professor, and what kind of support you received from your institution while enrolled in the course. You will also be asked general questions about your academic experience as a student-athlete.

Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?

The research procedures will be conducted at the University of Maryland, College Park. You will need to come to the Comcast Center at least one but no more than three times during the study. Each of those visits will take about one hour. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is approximately one to three hours over the next six months.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in a one hour interview as a part of this study. You may be asked to participate in follow up interviews, which will total no more than three. In these interviews you will be asked a series of questions related to your experiences as a student-athlete in online classes.

The data collected in these interviews will be used as a part of a research study being performed as a requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education. In total, approximately 10 people will be included in this study.

The study will take place over the next six months. If you agree to take part in the study, a time and setting will be arranged for the interview. If any follow up interviews are required you will be contacted by the researcher within the six month period and arrangements will be agreed upon accordingly.

What are the possible risks and discomforts?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

You may, however, experience a previously unknown risk or side effect.

Will I benefit from taking part in this study?

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

Do I have to take part in this study?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

If I don't take part in this study, are there other choices?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except to not take part in the study.

What will it cost me to participate?

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Will I receive any payment or rewards for taking part in the study?

You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study.

Who will see the information I give?

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from the information you give, and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key.

Can my taking part in the study end early?

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to participate. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to end your participation in the study. They may do this if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

What happens if I get hurt or sick during the study?

If you believe you are hurt or if you get sick because of something that is done during the study, you should call Jonathan Healy at (703)915-7382 immediately. It is important for you to understand that Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. That cost will be your responsibility. Also, Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study.

Usually, medical costs that result from research-related harm cannot be included as regular medical costs. Therefore, the costs related to your child’s care and treatment because of something that is done during the study will be your responsibility. You should ask your insurer if you have any questions about your insurer’s willingness to pay under these circumstances.

What if I have questions?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Jonathan Healy at jphealy@umd.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the Division of Sponsored Programs at Eastern Kentucky University at 859-622-3636. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

What else do I need to know?

This study is being completed through Eastern Kentucky University’s School of Education in cooperation with the University of Maryland, College Park’s Department of Intercollegiate Athletics.

You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your condition or influence your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

I have thoroughly read this document, understand its contents, have been given an opportunity to have my questions answered, and agree to participate in this research project.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person taking part in the study

Name of person providing information to subject

APPENDIX C:
Recruitment Material

Recruitment Material

Dear _____,

I am pleased to invite you to participate in a research study examining the experiences of Division I student-athletes in online courses. You have been identified as being eligible to participate by virtue of your status as a scholarship varsity student-athlete at the University of Maryland, College Park, and your completion of an online course.

How do I sign up? Please contact Jonathan Healy at xxxxxxx@xxx.edu or (xxx)xxx-xxxx to accept or decline your invitation to participate in this study. If you accept, you will be contacted to arrange a date and time for the initial interview.

What is involved in participation in this study? By agreeing to participate in this study, you are agreeing to take part in a one-on-one interview that will last approximately one hour. Questions will relate to your experiences as a student-athlete and your participation in an online class. You may also be asked to participate in no more than 2 follow up interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour each.

Will anyone know that I participated in this study? Your privacy and anonymity is of the utmost importance in this process. Neither your coaches nor your Athletic Academic Counselor will be notified of your decision to participate or not without your permission. Your name will not be used at any point in study and will be excluded from any interview transcripts. In the case that you are noted in the text, you will be given the pseudonym "Student-Athlete #__".

Who will see the information I provide? The interview transcripts will only be made available to the primary investigator, Jonathan Healy, and members of his advisory committee. These transcripts will not include your name or any identifying information.

Do I have to participate in this study? Participation in this project is absolutely voluntary! If you choose not to participate there will be no negative consequences. Your decision will not be shared with your coaches or Athletic Academic Counselor without your permission.

Thank you so much for taking the time to consider being a part of this project! It promises to be a fantastic experience for everyone involved and your participation will be GREATLY appreciated. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at xxxxxxx@xxx.edu or (xxx)xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Healy

APPENDIX D:
Institutional Review Board Approval

Graduate Education and Research
Division of Sponsored Programs
Institutional Review Board



Jones 414, Coates CPO 20
521 Lancaster Avenue
Richmond, Kentucky 40475-3102
(859) 622-3636; Fax (859) 622-6610
<http://www.sponsoredprograms.eku.edu>

NOTICE OF IRB APPROVAL

Protocol Number: 13-071

Institutional Review Board IRB00002836, DHHS FWA00003332

Review Type: Full Expedited

Approval Type: New Extension of Time Revision Continuing Review

Principal Investigator: **Jonathan Healy**

Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Charles Hausman**

Project Title: **Backboards & Browsers: A Qualitative Examination of the Experiences of Division I Student-Athletes in Online Classes**

Approval Date: **November 24, 2012**

Expiration Date: 04/01/2013

Approved by: **Dr. Diana Porter, IRB Member**

This document confirms that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved the above referenced research project as outlined in the application submitted for IRB review with an immediate effective date.

Principal Investigator Responsibilities: It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to ensure that all investigators and staff associated with this study meet the training requirements for conducting research involving human subjects, follow the approved protocol, use only the approved forms, keep appropriate research records, and comply with applicable University policies and state and federal regulations.

Consent Forms: All subjects must receive a copy of the consent form as approved with the ECU IRB approval stamp. Copies of the signed consent forms must be kept on file unless a waiver has been granted by the IRB.

Adverse Events: Any adverse or unexpected events that occur in conjunction with this study must be reported to the IRB within ten calendar days of the occurrence.

Research Records: Accurate and detailed research records must be maintained for a minimum of three years following the completion of the research and are subject to audit.

Changes to Approved Research Protocol: If changes to the approved research protocol become necessary, a description of those changes must be submitted for IRB review and approval prior to implementation. Some changes may be approved by expedited review while others may require full IRB review. Changes include, but are not limited to, those involving study personnel, consent forms, subjects, and procedures.

Annual IRB Continuing Review: This approval is valid through the expiration date noted above and is subject to continuing IRB review on an annual basis for as long as the study is active. It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to submit the annual continuing review request and

receive approval prior to the anniversary date of the approval. Continuing reviews may be used to continue a project for up to three years from the original approval date, after which time a new application must be filed for IRB review and approval.

Final Report: Within 30 days from the expiration of the project, a final report must be filed with the IRB. A copy of the research results or an abstract from a resulting publication or presentation must be attached. If copies of significant new findings are provided to the research subjects, a copy must be also be provided to the IRB with the final report.

Other Provisions of Approval, if applicable:

Please contact Sponsored Programs at 859-622-3636 or send email to tiffany.hamblin@eku.edu or lisa.royalty@eku.edu with questions about this approval or reporting requirements.

APPENDIX E:
Statement of Subjectivity

Statement of Subjectivity

Due to my professional experience as an Athletic Academic Advisor, it is impossible to be completely objective in the data collection analysis process of this dissertation. I understand, however, that it is crucial for me to identify my biases and limit their effect. I will carefully analyze interview questions to ensure that the process is not subject to my previous experiences and notions.

I have been an Athletic Academic Advisor for nearly five years. In that time I have worked with a variety of sports at a variety of institutions. I have worked at a “mid-major” institution and a larger BCS school. I have worked with more “at-risk” sports such as Football and I have worked with sports with a greater history of academic success, such as Women’s Gymnastics, and Field Hockey. I have worked with numerous student-athletes in online courses and I have advised student-athlete considering enrolling in an online format.

I have also enrolled in online courses as a student. My experiences in online courses were in graduate online education. I did not take any online courses as an undergraduate student. I am aware that my perception of online courses is affected by my experiences as a student.

In my personal and professional experiences, online courses require more independence than their in-class counterparts. Students must have better time management skills in order to effectively keep up with coursework without regular reminders from in-class meetings. There is a greater quantity of assignments to ensure comprehension and make up for missed class time, such as discussion board posts, short

essays, and quizzes. Online courses also require a greater amount of reading and writing, so students must be strong in those areas.

I believe that online courses are useful in alleviating the tremendously busy schedules that student-athletes face. Lessening the commitments that student-athletes face in a typical week can benefit both their academic performance as well as their athletic performance. Student-athletes can complete coursework at their own pace and based upon their own schedule, which can help with focus.