

2020

## Division II Football Players' Perceptions of NCAA and Finding Balance Between Athletics and Education

Morgan Laine Lehman  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Morgan Laine Lehman

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2019

Abstract

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Athletics and Education

by

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MA, University of Indianapolis, 2013

BA, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2014

BA, Meredith College, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

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February 2020

## Abstract

Mandates and regulations from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have caused extreme reforms to take effect in the NCAA's education system. However, little is known about how these reforms have impacted student-athletes participating in college athletics. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how Division II football players from public colleges and universities view their ability to balance their education and athletics to create a well-rounded college life. Astin's involvement theory was used to frame this study. Open ended questionnaire data was collected from 12 college football players, enrolled in public, Division II colleges and universities. Questionnaire responses were analyzed and interpreted using Moustakas' data analysis methods. Findings revealed participants' limited understanding of NCAA rules and a need for more clearly defined policies, participants recommended implementation of standard policies sports and divisions, and the use of visual aids to help student-athletes understand the NCAA's education rules. Findings may be used to create legislation to involve the federal government in overseeing NCAA policies to support the educational needs of student-athletes.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all student-athletes, who have earned an education while playing college sports. For dedicating yourselves to the pursuit of knowledge and athletic excellence, and for finding balance in your lives. Especially the 12 football players, whose perceptions added to the content of this study.

My passion for this study was inspired by the baseball players I spent summer 2017 with, especially my “summer brother,” Dalton Hoiles. You were instrumental to me throughout this journey—thank you for your patience and assistance through every stage of this project. Thank you for always answering all of my questions. You are amazing, “Brother,”—I can’t wait to see all your dreams come true.

To all the future student-athletes: you can do it. You can accomplish balance in your educational and athletic pursuits. I hope we all see changes in the NCAA educational policies, and that this dissertation inspires you to find balance in your educational and athletic pursuits.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Before 1973, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was divided into two factions: college and university, depending on the size of the school. In the same year, a special convention voted to have divisions in the NCAA, which allowed the member institutions to have more options (NCAA, n.d.h). Unlike Division I, which offers most of its student-athletes full scholarships for their athletic ability, Division II schools subscribe to a partial-scholarship model in which the athletic budget is a smaller portion of a college/university's larger budget, but still allows schools to be competitive in athletics (NCAA, n.d.h). Partial scholarships cover a portion of a student-athlete's tuition, but students are responsible for the remainder of their tuition. Tuition may be covered by merit-based scholarships for being a student in good standing. For the Division II student-athlete, athletics and academics have to be balanced. Division III student-athletes receive no monetary funding to play their sport while attending college (NCAA, n.d.h). Therefore, academics are prioritized over student-athletes' athletic participation.

Also known as the equivalency system, the partial-scholarship model is key to the Division II philosophy. In this model, scholarship funds are based on the sport, not on the number of students participating in the sport (NCAA, n.d.d). For instance, Division II football programs are allowed the equivalency of 36 full scholarships, whereas Division I football programs are given 85 full scholarships (NCAA, n.d.d). This gives control of scholarship funds to athletic directors, coaches, and financial aid officers. Furthermore, this allows for student-athletes to receive scholarships through other sources based on academics, work study, and so on, which indicates student-athletes at Division II colleges and universities are attending school for more than just their athletics (NCAA, n.d.d). Allocating scholarships in this manner is cost-

effective for Division II schools that do not create as much revenue as Division I institutions (NCAA, n.d.d).

In 1997, NCAA member institutions decided to keep the three division model, but also determined the divisions needed more power to govern themselves and their student-athletes. Division II participating schools decided to keep the model that was already in place for voting: one school/one vote. Additionally, member institutions put their schools' presidents in charge of the policymaking for Division II (NCAA, n.d.g). By 2005, Division II wanted to differentiate itself from Division I and Division III, so the division began a campaign to entice students who wanted a "life in the balance": student-athletes who would excel academically, athletically, and as members of their communities (NCAA, n.d.h). Over 110,000 student-athletes participate in athletic programs sponsored by Division II NCAA funding, which allows them to achieve both on and off the field (NCAA, n.d.a). There are 300 schools across 45 states and Canada ranging in student body size from 2,500 to 25,000; however, 87% of Division II schools are about 8,000 students (NCAA, n.d.a). In these schools, student-athletes make up a large percentage of the student population, which shows the importance athletics plays in the academic and college experience of students on these campuses (NCAA, n.d.a). Division II schools have created the best learning environment possible for student-athletes on their campuses by emphasizing regional competition and championships, which reduces travel and missed class time, while emphasizing the importance of campus and community involvement to create a well-rounded college experience (NCAA, n.d.a).

The Division II philosophy statement indicates the following:

Members of Division II believe that a well-conducted intercollegiate athletics program, based on sound educational principles and practices, is a proper part of the educational



mission of a university or college and that the educational well-being and academic success of the participating student-athlete is of primary concern. (NCAA, n.d.e, para. I)

Because Division II is focused on providing a balanced education for its student-athletes, including academics, civic engagement, and athletics, institutional control is essential for Division II colleges and universities; it allows the institution's president to oversee that their college/university's educational mission is met (NCAA, n.d.e).

Division II schools emphasize a life in the balance, which is how they help ensure student-athletes are productive citizens during college and beyond (NCAA, n.d.i). The life-in-balance philosophy helps Division II student-athletes flourish in four ways:

1. academics: small student-professor ratios and eligibility requirements that foster graduation at the same length of time as other members of the student body;
2. athletics: regional competitions and championships, which allow student-athletes to spend more time away from their campus community while still participating in championship series;
3. community engagement: promotes an interactive civic experience for student-athletes, as well as others in the communities, both on campus and in their cities and regions; and
4. postgraduation success: to create productive citizens in society after graduation (NCAA, n.d.e).

The life-in-balance model allows student-athletes to hold jobs and internships so students participating in Division II athletic programs will be prepared for life after graduation (NCAA, n.d.e).

Six key aspects define the distinctive nature of Division II schools and universities-- learning, service, passion, sportsmanship, resourcefulness, and balance (NCAA, n.d.i). These attributes help student-athletes develop comprehensive learning and academic development, high-level competition in athletics, and community engagement (NCAA, n.d.i). To track their goals and the progress of student-athletes, Division II schools evaluate performance in five areas: academic and life skills, athletics operations and compliance, game day and conference and

national championships, membership and positioning initiatives, and diversity and inclusion (NCAA, n.d.i). The uniqueness of the division's philosophies help Division II achieve the highest admission rate of the three divisions (70%) and assists student-athletes in graduating at a higher rate than the rest of the student body, while having many first-generation graduates (NCAA, n.d.c). Additionally, 74% of Division II student-athletes graduate within 6 years of their initial enrollment (NCAA, n.d.l).

One key aspect of Division II athletics is student-athlete advisory committees (SAACs), which encourage student-athlete involvement to help guide policymaking at the campus, conference, and national level. Participating in SAACs allows student-athletes to have their voice heard, while providing leadership opportunities for student-athletes among the division's policymakers and in the authority of the division (NCAA, n.d.k). SAACs are groups of student-athletes who share information on the student-athlete experience, which can influence the rules, regulations, and policies that could impact the student-athletes on their campus (NCAA, n.d.k). At the national level, SAACs from all three divisions meet to ensure the student-athletes' voices are received by the NCAA by listening to student-athletes' ideas on proposed NCAA legislation changes and proposals (NCAA, n.d.k.). Student-athletes are also given the opportunity to participate in various programs of NCAA student-athletes' interest, while promoting a positive image of student-athletes (NCAA, n.d.k).

Each division has its own SAAC. The Division II SAAC is comprised of 27 members: one student-athlete from each of the Division II multisport voting conferences, one student-athlete from Division II independent institutions, and two student-athletes at large (NCAA, n.d.f). Student-athletes appointed to the Division II SAAC serve on the committee for III years. The term is nonrenewable, but can be served for up to 1 year after a student-athlete's eligibility

expires (NCAA, n.d.f). Additionally, two nonvoting members of the Management Council and one member of the Presidents Council serve on the Division II SAAC (NCAA, n.d.f).

Every July, the Division II SAAC meets with the NCAA's Division II Management Council to discuss potential NCAA legislation and any other issues that are matters of concern in the organization (NCAA, n.d.k). Representatives are accountable for gathering feedback from their campus and conferences, and then reporting the information back to the governing Division II body. These liaisons also share information with their own campuses and conferences (NCAA, n.d.f). Division II SAACs participate in talks on subjects such as Title IX, educational issues, increasing campus and conference SAACs, relationships among student-athletes and campus faculty, and ways to improve championships (NCAA, n.d.f). At all three levels, the SAACs are essential in making sure student-athletes' voices are represented and necessary policy changes are made at the division level. Disseminating this study to leaders of campus, national, and divisional SAACs may influence future educational mandates of the NCAA. Additionally, findings may be disseminated to special interest groups such as The Drake Group which lobby to create a more conducive environment for student-athletes' educational needs.

### **Problem Statement**

In recent years, news reports have indicated incidents of academic cheating in Division I NCAA athletic programs (Hughes & Shank, 2008; Smith & Willingham, 2015). Sack (2008) suggested the reason these scandals exist is the NCAA and colleges/universities are more concerned with marketing the schools for their athletics rather than their academics, which is a change from previous decades (Sperber, 1990, 2000). Scandals have changed the educational landscape of the NCAA's mandates and regulations and have caused extreme reforms to take effect in the NCAA's education system (Oriad, 2012). Little is known about how these reforms

impact student-athletes. More information needs to be known about how NCAA mandates impact student-athletes participating in college athletics.

More than 460,000 student-athletes participate in NCAA sports (NCAA, n.d.a). The NCAA (n.d.b) reported that 80% of student-athletes will earn their bachelor's degree and 35% will obtain a postgraduate degree. The NCAA (n.d.b) claimed "to truly benefit from college, student-athletes have to succeed in more places than on the field. The NCAA provides opportunities to learn, compete and grow" (para. I). Meyer (2005) argued that when new reforms are introduced to NCAA mandates, the organization has the best intentions, but those who spend every day with the student-athletes, such as coaches or Athletic Directors, do not always follow through with those intentions. Busby (2011) and Ginder (2015) posited that the NCAA needs to do more to ensure knowledge-based content in regard to student-athletes while they are participating in college athletic programs. The NCAA's focus is on Division I student-athletes. Future mandates and reforms need to target every student-athlete across all divisions. Every student-athlete is important and should have the chance to receive a quality education while playing athletics, not only those whose college athletic programs make the NCAA money.

Public universities participating in Division II football programs are state run and funded. However, schools' athletic programs receive funding from the NCAA, and the athletes participating in those programs must adhere to NCAA guidelines, which seems to be a disconnect from publicly funded, state-run schools. The NCAA has not been a state actor since the 1988 Supreme Court decision *NCAA v. Tarkanian*, so the organization does not have to answer to any government authority (Despain, 2015). Since the Supreme Court decision, the United States government has tried to reform the NCAA in an effort to guarantee due process for student-athletes, but without any success (Despain, 2015). Although states have tried to pass

laws to protect student-athletes from the NCAA's governing body, the U.S. court system has rebuffed these efforts (Despain, 2015).

In recent years, some individuals have argued that the NCAA has violated students' rights and have called for reform. Although suggested bills and legislative actions from government representatives have prodded the NCAA to initiate reforms, no government action has been taken to ensure a student-athletes' bill of rights. Since 2013, several bills have been introduced in the U.S. Congress to amend The Higher Education Act of 1965 (HR 2903 and HR 3545) to protect student-athletes' rights and allow for due process outside of the NCAA (Despain, 2015). Both of these bills are reported as having died in committees and will not progress further (Despain, 2015).

The introduction of the bills suggests the Department of Education (DOE) is a solution for the NCAA's educational reform needs. The DOE's role in the U.S. government is to be involved in investigations, enforcement, publicity, and other activities to improve the educational quality of U.S. students (Despain, 2015). Despain (2015) suggested that the DOE could easily make room for student-athlete bills to reinforce the DOE's role in NCAA regulations, which would resolve controversy with "clarity and force" (p. 1318). Conversely, if Congress is guarded against the involvement of the DOE in NCAA policies and procedures, Despain (2015) stated that "the Secretary [of Education] has the attention of the President, media outlets, and the American people to impact social policy" (pp. 1318-1319) and can use the influence of the position to make educational issues known. If nothing else, federal attention may cause the NCAA to initiate the self-reform student-athletes need and deserve.

### **Purpose of Study**

Scrutiny of NCAA programs has been a prominent focus of sports news in recent years due to several scandals involving participating athletic programs. These scandals have been focused on cheating in violation of NCAA rules and regulations and academics. In 2010, University of North Carolina (UNC) student-athletes were found to have been participating in paper classes in which student-athletes only had to turn in one paper for an entire semester, and that paper was often heavily edited by an academic tutor (Barrett, 2014). Although the NCAA concluded there was no academic fraud committed by UNC, the organization's governing body ruled changes must be made. Some of these changes higher standards of governance, better support programs for student-athletes, restructuring of athletic departments, classroom audits, oversight of courses, and employees who were sent to make sure classes were being held (Dudash, 2014; Gleeson, 2014).

Since the UNC scandal, the NCAA has devoted commercials to enforcing a positive public image of the importance of education in participating athletic programs. One of these new initiatives is called Opportunity, which details the new ways the organization is putting more emphasis on academics. Changes include raising the requirements for incoming freshmen, placing a focus on increasing graduation rates, and ensuring grades are correlated with participation in championships and revenue the schools receive (NCAA, n.d.j). However, the organization still overlooks Division II and III student-athletes. Division II and Division III student-athletes must adhere to the same NCAA standards for ethics and conduct as Division I student-athletes, so the academic needs of Division II and Division III student-athletes should be addressed in the same manner as those from Division I schools. This study focused on Division

II student-athletes to explore their academic needs and to provide recommendations for the NCAA to fulfill those needs.

According to Gallup, Inc. (n.d.), students who participate in NCAA athletic programs have slightly higher graduation rates than nonathletes. The study also indicated that athletes are more likely to succeed in areas of life such as purpose, social, community, and physical well-being (Gallup, Inc., n.d.). Furthermore, student-athletes are working full-time or part-time at their desired level 82% of the time, compared to 78% for nonathletes (Gallup, Inc., n.d.). The study indicated that student-athletes are more likely to be better off than nonathletes in four of the five categories of well-being: purpose, social, community, and physical (Gallup, Inc., n.d.). Additionally, the NCAA (2014) stated that football players have a strong sense of community.

As the debate surrounding college athletics continues, the NCAA's responsibility is to increase its efforts to guarantee that student-athletes receive a proper education while playing college athletics. Doing so will not only impact the student-athletes' lives for the better, but will also influence the communities in which former student-athletes live. This will make former student-athletes more likely to create social change because they will feel connected to where they live and will want to engage civically in their communities. Former student-athletes giving back to their communities will help create a positive cycle for students and their colleges. The colleges and community taxpayers will provide student-athletes with an education while giving them the chance to play sports, and the student-athletes will strengthen those communities through civic engagement after graduation. This study focused on ensuring that student-athletes receive the best education possible because all stakeholders will be positively impacted.

## **Background**

The need for a greater focus on education was expressed by Busby (2011), and Ginder (2015) stated the reasons an improved education should be a qualification to participate in competitive college sports. Smith and Willingham (2015) described what the UNC academic scandal meant to college sports and what the future holds as a result of the repercussions resulting from the scandal. Hughes and Shank (2008) described how the NCAA scandals have changed the public opinion of the organization. There are many challenges to making changes in a large organization such as the NCAA (Oriad, 2012). Each school has its own subculture which influences how academics are approached in connection with athletics (Rubin & Moses, 2017). This could explain how to make future changes that cover all student athletic programs. Rankin et al. (2016) studied how student-athletes balance athletics and academics and found that a large number of student-athletes successfully balance their education and athletics. There are ways to ensure Division II student-athletes graduate, which will help school officials in recruiting and retaining this population of college students (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). Student-athletes' success is tied to their academics and athletics (Beron & Piquero, 2016), which indicates a need for balance between athletics and academics.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study was Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. Student involvement in cocurricular activities was found to positively correlate with student retention and academics (Kuh and Pike, 2005). In the case of Division II college football players, research may show how student involvement can ensure both athletic and academic success for student-athletes. Romzek, LeRoux, and Blackmar (2012) demonstrated that collective norms and specific behaviors foster informal accountability for a shared outcome for student-athletes.



Athletic programs have an informal system of rewards and punishment which emphasize desirable behaviors, and there are challenges to the system of informal accountability that need to be taken into account (Romzek et al., 2012). An examination of the outcomes of these studies, along with the survey and questionnaire responses in this study, may be used to assist NCAA policymakers in ensuring the best regulations and policies for student-athletes in all three divisions.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players regarding NCAA education mandates?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players regarding their ability to balance athletic and educational success?

The central research questions of this study focused on understanding student-athletes' academic needs and ensuring students know their rights and responsibilities related to their academic success. To answer the research questions, NCAA academic rules and regulations were studied regarding all student-athletes. The study's findings will be sent to the schools' SAACs and may be considered at NCAA conventions and conferences, where rules and regulations are discussed and voted on. Findings may indicate what policymakers should focus on to help student-athletes find balance between athletics and academics.

Additionally, a report of the final study will be shared with The Drake Group.. Since 1999, The Drake Group (n.d.a) has worked to end corruption in intercollegiate athletics. According to The Drake Group (n.d.b), the organization's mission is to "defend academic integrity in higher education from the corrosive aspects of commercialized college sports" (para. 1). The vision of the group is to create a positive and nurturing environment for student-athletes,

both intellectually and personally, while seeking distinction and professional reliability from those educating those student-athletes (Drake Group, n.d.b). The group's goals include colleges/universities disclosing educational information about the student-athletes at their institutions, lobbying for reforms to make sure student-athletes receive a quality education, supporting and protecting faculty whose jobs and livelihood are threatened when they defend academic standards at their institutions, creating open discussions on higher education athletics, and working with other groups at a local and national level who have similar goals and missions as The Drake Group (Drake Group, n.d.b). If the information in this study is placed in the hands of The Drake Group, they could use the ideas of student-athletes to help lobby congress and shape future educational legislation, which will help future student-athletes.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a qualitative approach to explore what Division II football players know about their educational rights as student-athletes, their perceptions of the educational opportunities provided to them, their potential postgraduation career options, and how their sports participation impacts their education. Football players in Division II schools were sent surveys containing questions regarding the study's topics. The responses were used to formulate suggestions for how the NCAA and the federal government can adopt policies that will enhance the educational quality for student-athletes to receive the best education possible while they participate in college athletics. Factors such as gender, race, and age were not considered in this study because the focus of the study was student-athletes' perceptions and opinions of their educational experience while playing college athletics.

### **Definitions**

*Lived experiences*: The encounters of an individual that include but are not limited to social relationships, personal feelings or observations, emotional growth, cultural adjustments, and educational experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

*Public*: Colleges and universities that receive most of their funding from state or national governments.

*Revenue sport*: A sport that generates monetary funds for the school through sponsors, alumni, and other supporters.

*Student-athlete*: A participant in an organized competitive sport sponsored by the college or university in which he or she is enrolled.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are uncontrollable but contributing factors to the quality of a study's trustworthiness (Moustakas, 1994). The first assumption was student-athletes at Division II colleges/universities struggle to balance their lives as students and athletes. The second assumption was student-athletes do not utilize the resources their school or the NCAA provides for them. The final assumption was that student-athletes are more interested in their athletic experience than their college/life experience while enrolled in their institution.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The purpose of this study was to explore the purposively selected participants' shared lived experiences of college life while playing athletics. Specific attention was given to those experiences as they related to NCAA education policies. Findings may improve the understanding of how to create better reforms in the NCAA mandates for future student-athletes. Although the NCAA has policies intended to make sure student-athletes receive a quality

education while playing sports, much of the research on the topic pertains to how these policies impact Division I players. For this reason, the current study focused on Division II student-athletes.

Other delimitations were football players at public universities. I focused on football players from public universities for these reasons: First, football is a revenue sport, which creates more pressure on student-athletes to perform well. Second, football programs generally have a larger roster, which creates the potential for a larger participant pool. Third, public universities are government funded. I explored the perceptions of Division II football players from public colleges/universities to support the reformation of NCAA education policies to ensure student-athletes from all divisions and all sports receive a quality education while in college.

Furthermore, I discussed how findings could be taken to national, conference, and divisional levels, so that student-athletes' perspectives were heard at every level

To gain an understanding of the phenomenon Division II football players at public colleges and universities from around the United States were surveyed. The number of Division II football players from public colleges/universities is approximately 5,000 annually. To establish trustworthiness in the study, I used a purposively selected group of Division II football players from conferences around the United States. I recruited students from various regions of the United States to increase the credibility of the findings. The involvement of this group of purposively selected participants was important to have transferability of the study's results to further assist the NCAA in drafting and executing policy reform at the national level. Because of their participation in Division II sport, their knowledge may help their perspectives be understood by their peers at every level of the NCAA.

One purpose of the study was to have the research participants' voices heard as part of the policymaking process. Student-athletes may be the best advocates for future reforms because they know how the policies influence student-athletes. I used the theory of involvement to interpret the student-athletes' responses to the surveys addressing their academic and athletic experiences while playing college football. Findings may be used to promote high-quality relationships between players and other collegiate stakeholders. Moreover, findings may impact future student-athletes and those no longer playing.

### **Limitations**

Because it was not possible to control all of the factors of the study, there were limitations to the findings. Although these limitations were beyond my control, it is necessary to acknowledge them. Therefore, there may be compelling limitations to the study's transferability to other sports. However, having student-athletes' perspectives heard and understood is hopefully a catalyst for other student-athletes to voice their opinions, no matter their division or sport. Although the goal of this phenomenological study was to obtain understanding of the shared lived experiences of purposively selected Division II football players attending public institutions, there remains the possibility that the study's findings may not be acknowledged by the NCAA, Division II, or other stakeholders addressed in the study. The study may have additional limitations due to researcher bias, sample size, dependability, and transferability.

### **Researcher Bias**

An additional limitation that could have impacted the study's outcome was researcher bias. Research bias arises from the researcher's interpretive framework or "basic set of beliefs that guides action" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 31). In this study, researcher bias was acknowledged based on my longtime support for college athletics and my experiences working

with student-athletes. I have supported the need for creating reformed policies and for including those policies in NCAA manuals. Bracketing my potential researcher bias was crucial to the study. To bracket my bias, I maintained a reflective journal to help me remain mindful of how bias may influence the study.

### **Sampling Size**

Currently in the NCAA, there are approximately 118,000 Division II student-athletes. About 17,000 of those athletes play football (NCAA, n.d.c) About half of Division II colleges and universities are public, narrowing the possible participant pool to approximately 8,000 (NCAA, n.d.c). I assumed that a large sample of potential participants would allow for an accurate representation of the population. In a phenomenological study, a smaller participant pool is appropriate (Moustakas, 1994). A sample from five colleges/universities was acceptable for this study to provide rich, in-depth data that may serve to advise effective education policy for the NCAA governing board.

### **Dependability and Transferability**

Qualitative studies may have difficulty achieving dependability due to the researcher's approach, focus, intent, and experience (Bazeley, 2012). A reader's ability to relate to a study's participants' lived experiences is known as transferability (Tracy, 2010). Dependability and transferability may be limited by the sample size. The ratio of a small, purposively selected sample group and the total number of Division II student-athletes was quite small, which was a prominent limitation of this study. For this study, dependability and transferability may be achieved because the participants' peers and the audience may be more accepting of the results because of the participants' involvement in college athletics.

### **Implications for Social Change**

For many individuals, sport is a source of recreation and entertainment, especially if the individual spectates or has minimal involvement in the sports world. For others, such as college athletes, sport is an integral part of their quality of life. Education is also a vital part of social life because it provides students with skills to earn a living after they complete their schooling. Studies have shown that high school football players will save hundreds of thousands of dollars in college costs by obtaining a scholarship to play football while in college (Haskell, 2012; Jonker, Elferink Gemser, & Visscher, 2009; Petitpas, Cornelius, VanRaalte & Jones, 2005). The University of North Carolina Fayetteville, a Division II college, reported students with a college degree are more likely to be employed than those who have obtained only a high school diploma (Fayetteville State University, 2018). Furthermore, college graduates are more likely to be community minded and more likely to vote (Fayetteville State University, 2018). College graduates not only positively impact the society they live in, they also strengthen the economy through revenue and jobs (Fayetteville State University, 2018). Therefore, it is important for student-athletes to receive a college education and graduate with a college degree to positively impact the communities in which they live. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Division II football players attending public institutions to create a summary of suggested reforms that the NCAA could make to their educational mandates so that student-athletes will remain in college for the duration of their studies, graduate, and be contributing members of the society in which they live.

### **Summary**

The chapter included an overview of NCAA and the history of Division II. Chapter 1 presented the purpose of the study, which was to explore the perceptions of NCAA Division II

football players regarding the influence of the NCAA's educational mandates on their success in athletics and academics, and to help future organizational reforms regarding education policy.

Astin's theory of involvement was introduced as the framework for this study. Chapter 1 also included the delimitations and limitations of the study. In Chapter 2, I provide a thorough review of the literature related to the study topic.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Since the inception of the NCAA, there has been a debate about the role that athletics plays in academics. When the NCAA began, scholarships were guaranteed for 4 years so that even if students did not play the sport they came to campus to play, or they got injured during play, their scholarship was honored until their graduation date (Sack, 2008). Scholarships were intended to keep students in college. In recent years, NCAA basketball programs have implemented a system of one and done, and collegiate football programs are a training grounds for the NFL (Sack, 2008). In the public's opinion, the direction of college sports is the NCAA's way of using colleges to promote the organization's agenda under the guise of putting education first (Sack, 2008). In recent reports the NCAA confirmed that the organization was investigating at least 20 member institutions for academic integrity concerns within their athletic departments and universities (Wolverton, 2014).

For this reason, the NCAA has emphasized the importance of being a student, not only an athlete, indicating the education of an athlete comes before athletics. Studies have shown this is not always the case. In fact, the NCAA did not define how the organization saw academic fraud in its handbook until 2016, even though there were issues of academic integrity long before that (Adamek, 2017). According to the NCAA (n.d.a), student-athletes graduate from college at higher rates than their nonathlete counterparts. Furthermore, the organization has made stricter requirements for freshman athletes entering the collegiate sports world. Sack (2008) suggested these scandals exist, unlike when the NCAA was founded in the 1960s, because the NCAA and the colleges/universities today place more emphasis on receiving money from big-time sports than student-athletes' education and well-being (Sperber, 1990, 2000). Adamek (2017) added that the Department of Education and the NCAA, which has historically issued minor

punishments regarding academic integrity issues, should pay closer attention to the education of student-athletes participating in revenue sports.

After recent public scandals and public outcry, the NCAA decided to place more emphasis on student-athletes' education, reducing time spent playing athletics, travel time, and time spent out of the classroom. Nevertheless, groups such as The Drake Group believe that the NCAA is not doing enough. Traschler and Cotrufo (2017) argued that the NCAA should amend the 20-hour rule to include all athletic activity. Doing so would free up hours of time the student-athletes could use to pursue extracurricular interests. Additionally, the NCAA could work with conferences and divisions to create more student-friendly events (Traschler & Cotrufo, 2017). By reducing the time, energy, and focus student-athletes spend on athletic activities, schools and the NCAA could allow students to have a more complete and satisfying college experience. Changing the time mandates in NCAA policies would also reduce the need for academic support systems to ensure student-athletes' eligibility is met (Traschler & Cotrufo, 2017).

There is little known about how these reforms to the educational mandates have affected student-athletes. This study was conducted to explore how the NCAA's current educational rules and regulations impact student-athletes in their own words. Furthermore, the student-athletes were asked what changes can be made to NCAA policies to help college athletes receive a better education. Reformed policies are used to track the progress and success of student-athletes. Progress toward degree (PTD) and success tracking have resulted in student-athletes' educational goals leading toward the short-term, not life after college athletics. This perpetuates the idea athletics take precedence over academics, and the reforms are not doing the student-athletes justice educationally (Haslerig, 2017).

More research is needed to understand how the NCAA's reforms impact student-athletes, including whether they are academically or athletically motivated; these impacts need to be understood from the student-athletes' perspective, not from the NCAA. Freeman, Harrison, and Wicks (2007) saw value in observing current students' perceptions because those insights afforded the NCAA the opportunity for problems and worries to be addressed quickly to reduce attrition. The current study contributed to the literature by SAACs and nongovernmental groups such as The Drake Group with student-athletes' perspectives on reforms, which can then be taken to the NCAA or policymakers. The findings may assist policymakers in creating impactful organization and government reforms to NCAA rules and regulations.

According to the NCAA (2018), the organization places importance on student-athletes' well-being on the field, in the classroom, and in their personal lives. The NCAA states their mission is students first, athletes second (NCAA, 2018). For almost as long as the NCAA has existed, scholars have researched, documented, and analyzed the relationship between higher education and the NCAA, including the connection between academics and athletics (Terrell, 2012). However, in recent years, scandals and fraud have plagued NCAA-participating schools, and have led to questions regarding the organization's emphasis on academics over athletics (Cox, 2016). Adamek (2017) showed that most (56.2%) academic fraud cases found in the NCAA were discovered in revenue sports, particularly men's basketball and football. Cox (2016) argued that student-athletes deserve a quality education that will help them begin a career and advance in that career to positively contribute to the society in which they live after they have graduated.

In 2004, the NCAA instituted a series of academic reforms designed to help student-athletes achieve higher graduation rates (Avery, Cadman, & Cassar, 2016; Cole, 2016).

However, research showed that these reforms had adverse effects, and have caused student-athletes to choose easier majors, which is known as clustering (Castle, Ammon, & Myers, 2014). Since the implementation of these academic reforms, student-athletes' academic progress rates (APR) and graduation rates have increased exponentially; however, scholars indicated the reported rates do not adequately influence a student-athlete's preparedness for a life and career after college (Avery et al., 2016).

Davis and Hairston (2013) suggested some student-athletes were athletically successful, but not academically. Cooper (2016) suggested that student-athletes are recruited to attend their college/university because of their athletics, not academics, and their academics are guided by the institution. Student-athletes must meet progress toward degree (PTD) requirements and other academic standards set forth by the NCAA and their institution to remain academically eligible (Haslerig, 2017). Punishment for being ineligible include a reduction in scholarship funds, or schools and individuals may lose federal funding (Avery et al., 2016).

A study on the impact of the NCAA's educational reforms and mandates on Division II football players has the potential to provide insight about student-athletes' perspectives on these policies and how changes can be made to improve the education quality of all student-athletes. Huml (2018) suggested that Division II athletic departments should explore different avenues for providing student-athletes with nonathletic opportunities to explore life during their college experience. Being well educated is a goal of the Division II's mantra "life in balance," which promotes balance in academics and athletics so that student-athletes can be successful on and off the field (NCAA, n.d.i). Knowing how these policies impact student-athletes will provide the NCAA with better opportunities to aid a student-athlete's success in athletics and academics (Cooper, 2016). The purpose of the current study was to gain a better understanding of student-

athletes' perspectives and life experiences of the NCAA educational system. Chapter 2 includes the literature search strategy, theoretical framework, an extensive review of key concepts related to the problem, and a summary.

For NCAA member institutions, their academic reputation is as powerful as their athletic reputation. Won and Chelladurai (2016) defined *academic reputation* as “academic excellence of institutions in which athletic departments are housed” (p. 5). Academic reputation and standing have been the basis for classification of universities. It is not uncommon for public universities to measure the academic reputation of different schools because of the difficulty it takes to be accepted into them. Universities are classified by their academic reputation (Won & Chelladurai, 2016). Won and Chelladurai (2016) found no relationship between a school's academic performance and their athletic reputation. Indeed, schools' athletic reputation was scarcely affected when colleges were sanctioned for academic misconduct (Kelley, Sobroff, Katayam, Pfeiffer, & Longoria, 2018). This suggests no causal relationship between academics and athletics. However, the combination of athletic and academic reputations increases resources for the university, such as funding (Won & Chelladurai, 2016). Refining and promoting an athletic and academic reputation is often dependent on how stakeholders see the university, and this can take many years to accomplish (Won & Chelladurai, 2016). Zimbalist (2017) theorized that intercollegiate athletics must choose which direction to travel in the future. Either intercollegiate sports will become commercialized and more like the lesser known professional leagues, or they will reiterate the longstanding traditions and beliefs of college sports as a secondary activity to a student's academic endeavors.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search spanned 5 years (2013-2018); however, the literature review contains materials from beyond that period with significant relevance to this study and the theoretical framework. Key words included but were not limited to *college athletics, NCAA and education, Division II or DII, football, student-athlete, and NCAA educational reform*. I accessed several policy and education databases through Walden University's library. This research highlighted key issues relating to the study. Articles in journals such as *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport* and *Contemporary Legal Issues in College Sports* were particularly important during the research stage of this study. Furthermore, a thorough search of multidisciplinary databases and Google Scholar contributed to the background information and literature for this study. The information collected provided substantial insight on NCAA academic mandates and reforms, as well as student-athletes' experiences in the current system. Key words included *NCAA student-athletes and self or public images or perceptions or attitudes or beliefs*. These key words combined with the aforementioned terms yielded substantial resources for this literature review.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, which is also known as student involvement, or simply involvement. Astin's theory allowed me to examine different perspectives and life experiences from stakeholders related to the NCAA's educational policies and reforms. Particular attention was paid to the student-athletes' perspectives and experiences. Involvement is a multidisciplinary approach to higher education that includes principles of psychology, sociology, and classic learning. Astin (1984) intended to create a more effective learning environment and promote more satisfaction in a student's college experience.

Student involvement is defined as the amount of physical and mental exertion that students dedicate to their academic experience (Astin, 1984).

Student involvement suggests that students involved in campus activities (i.e. student government associations, resident life, and athletics) are more likely to find satisfaction in college life, and therefore graduate from college (Astin, 1984). However, Astin (1984) pointed out that participation often isolates student-athletes from their peer groups, particularly because they spend hours traveling, practicing, playing, and living in special facilities. Isolation from other students and the student experience can be lessened when student-athletes participate in study groups, which would not otherwise be available to them if they did not participate in athletics. Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2006) furthered this idea when they postulated that a key to student graduation rates was the combination of academics and extracurricular activities. Students who graduate from college add more educated people to the general population. Furthermore, Division II emphasizes the importance of community involvement; if student-athletes stay in school, they will be more connected in the community which they live. This will cause the public to view the student-athletes and the colleges positively, which could promote more public funding.

One of Astin's (1984) main points was that the amount a student learned and developed in college directly correlated with the quality and quantity of that student's involvement in their program of study. Before Astin, Pace (1982) suggested that students must take the initiative if they want to succeed in college, which the theory of involvement extends in more detail; both theorists concluded that what students put into their college experience will be what they get out of it. Both Pace and Astin argued that students play a critical role in their educational experience. However, Astin suggested that leadership plays a role in ensuring any policies or practices that

administrators create and implement are directly related to the effectiveness of that policy. Doing so, will create more student involvement, being a catalyst to student learning and development, which will create a better educational program. Student involvement is active and participation geared (Astin1984). It is evident if educators and administrators want to impact student-athletes' educational experiences, they need to find ways through policies and programs to interest those students. This is not just the coaches' responsibility, or the school boards, but the NCAA's Board of Directors as well. Kelley et al. (2018) noted coaches can have a substantial impact on student-athletes' academics, but that the teams' responses to NCAA reforms can also impact the teams' win-loss percentage on the field. Clearly, collegiate sports and academics are complex and intertwined.

One way in which Astin (1984) believed students would be more involved, and therefore, have a better college experience, relied on those educating them. The involvement theory suggested administrators be cognoscente of how students spend their time. Student time is the most valuable resource on any college campus (Astin, 1984). Therefore, administrators must be aware the policies they make for the school have a great impact on student time. The amount of time a student spends doing other activities (i.e. intercollegiate sports), their involvement is focused more on those activities than their educational development (Astin, 1984). This could be detrimental, and cause students to drop out, if they are already struggling and need remediation. Policy makers, at all levels, need to listen and understand what the student-athletes have to say, and take their perspectives into account when creating and reforming policies. Doing so will help retain students, ensure their involvement, and lead to productive members of society.

Astin (1984) added students who participate in extracurricular activities are more likely to stay in school, and participating in sports has a positive impact on retention. Students, who are



academically and athletically involved, related to their college environment, and were more satisfied in all areas of college life (Astin, 1984). The two areas of involvement are closely related. This includes the tendency to be isolated from peers because students are studying, or in the case of athletes practicing, travelling, or playing (Astin, 1984). However, involvement theory emphasizes the key to student satisfaction is their interaction with faculty because that aspect of the college experience most strongly correlates with student involvement, and makes students want to be a part of the campus community. It can be concluded that coaches, advisors etc. can help student-athletes by interacting with them, and keeping them satisfied in college life, while they attend.

In the years after, Astin (1984) developed his theory, other researchers and theorists found the theory to be a comprehensive way to test student engagement in their college experience. Gayles and Hu (2009) found student-athletes interacted with other students, who were not their teammates, but the findings did not say if those interactions were with other athletes or non-athletes. The study concluded that student-athletes, like their nonathlete counterparts were positively and significantly impacted by their engagement in educationally meaningful activities. Gayles and Hu (2009) suggested student-athletes need to engage in academic pursuits and should be encouraged to do so by the school's faculty and staff. This would help reduce the public, administrators, and nonathletes' perception athletes are a subculture on their college campuses (Gayles & Hu, 2009). Ivanova and Moretti (2018) concurred with Astin's (1984) original idea student involvement occurs on a continuum—at different depth and breadth for different students. Unlike Astin the researchers argued student time is a limited campus resource (Ivanova & Moretti, 2018). Ivanova and Moretti (2018) seconded Astin's (1984) idea student involvement equals student success.

Milem and Berger (1997) suggested multiple types of involvement can alter a student's perception of their college experience. This is especially true of the support given by their peers and institution. If a student sees their institution and peers as a positive support system, they are less likely to leave that system. Milem and Berger also noted if students were engaged earlier in their college career, and faculty was part of that engagement, the students were more determined to stay in school and graduate. Evidently, students will be more likely to graduate if they are involved in many facets of college life. For student-athletes, this is not just the sport they participate in, but their academic and social pursuits as well.

While the NCAA has made changes in recent years intended to integrate athletes into academics, and thus, the college population as a whole, athletes are still viewed differently by many. It can be concluded these reforms were implemented and did not work the way which they were intended to. My study will bring awareness of student-athletes perspectives to the NCAA, other stakeholders, and could create initiative for policy change that will make a vast improvement to the educational experiences of student-athletes, which will enhance their college experience entirely. Comeaux (2015b) stated it is important to discuss the concerns and direction of the NCAA's reforms. The research questions were given to Division II football players (student-athletes) to receive a better understanding of their perceptions of the college experience. Those perceptions can guide future reforms to education policies in the NCAA. The research and survey questions were asked based off considerable insight from current and former student-athletes of all sports. Understanding the lived experiences of student-athletes guided this research, which developed suggestions to create a better educational framework for all NCAA student-athletes in the future.

Hendricks and Johnson (2016) argued student involvement should be both student and institution driven. To further this idea, those participating in college athletics should be engaged by policies created by the NCAA, who they are accountable to. Institutions must provide their athletes proper support, academic advising, and interactive on and off campus learning opportunities (Hendricks and Johnson, 2016) School programs should center on students, inspire personal growth, campus involvement, and leadership skills development (Hendricks and Johnson, 2016). Students are responsible for their educational experiences. Involvement requires them to actively participate in educational activities (Hendricks and Johnson, 2016). Learning is not passive, and the student-athlete should not be either. With their demanding and complex schedules, student-athletes often struggle to find enough time to investigate their academic interests, which isolates them from others, and can negatively impact their college experiences, and a lack of personal time may impact a student-athlete's persistence and retention (Hendricks and Johnson, 2016).

### **Literature Related to Key Concepts**

When looking at topics of social importance, researchers apply both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, at times combining the two to create mixed-methods studies. Previous studies on student-athletes' experience include quantitative surveys and questionnaires, or qualitative inquiries, such as interviews. to discover more information about a college athletes experience while in college. Kamasoko and Pemberton (2013) employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, using surveys and semi-structured interviews to investigate student-athletes' perceptions on student engagement, collegiate quality of life, wellbeing, and intentions to persist. Lockhart, Black, & Vincent (2010) administered the Worth Test to college athletes to determine how participating in athletics impacts a student-athlete's self-worth. Traynowicz, Harrison,

McPherson-Botts, Bukstein, & Lawrence (2016) engaged quantitative methods to discover Division I football players' perspectives on their self-progress and their career goals while playing football during their college education.

Navarro's (2015) showed athletes who focus on their athletics over academics struggle to choose a major, which would help them, further their careers. Gencer and Öztürk (2018) used questionnaires to investigate the relationship between goal orientation and motivation. Student-athletes were goal-oriented and focused on skill-development, skill learning, mastering the task and hard work, rather than focusing on the skills they already have. Sanderson, DeRousie, & Guistwite, (2017) used quantitative measurements to observe a student's participation in recreation in relation to their academic success, using measures such as GPA, course credits, and persistence to graduation. Bailey and Bhattacharyya (2017) believed little proof existed indicating athletes underperform their nonathlete peers, studies should be performed athlete-to-athlete to determine the impact athletics has on academics.

Researchers and theorists have suggested reasons why the current educational system of the NCAA needs to be reformed, and what can be done to put those changes in place. Despain (2015) suggested the Department of Education (DOE) be a part of the educational reform process of the NCAA. The Department of Education's role is to oversee the education of every student in America, so it seems fitting that the government body would oversee what happens in the NCAA, since the organization does make policies impacting the education of students (Despain, 2015). Although the DOE would have no jurisdiction in schools that do not receive federal aid because the NCAA is a non-governmental organization, the DOE would still have some voice over the happenings in NCAA policies (Despain, 2015). Groups, such as The Drake Group and The Knight Commission, which are interested in academic integrity, have lobbied for

government involvement in NCAA's procedures. The NCAA has remained its own governing body.

### **Stereotype Threat in Student-Athletes**

The stereotype that athletes are unintelligent has existed almost as long as sport itself has (Wininger & White, 2008). Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) suggested student-athletes were one of the college subcultures most prone to prejudices on college campuses. However, many students feel college athletics is an expected part of college life (Finch and Clopton, 2017). Feltz, Hwang, Schneider & Skogsberg (2013) reported the "dumb jock" stereotype portrays student-athletes as academically lower than their peers. This stereotype contributes to the thought athletes only come to college to play sports, and discounts those who are in attendance to achieve a quality education (Feltz et al., 2013). Student-athletes have more complex lives than most are willing to recognize. They are responsible for conditioning, practice, classes, studying, working, playing their sport, and having a typical college life (Hodes, James, Martin, & Miliner, 2016). Expectations play a significant role in academic achievement (Wininger and White, 2008). Often student-athletes ascribe to the idea they are not as intelligent as the other students they attend college with, so the negative stereotypes they experience become a self-fulfilling prophecy; student-athletes often participate in self-handicapping behaviors when they believe what others think about them (Wininger and White, 2008). Not only do student-athletes underperform their peers, they also have lower academic aspirations (Jameson, Diehl, & Danso, 2007). It is important to note the rest of a student body is more willing to help another student if they participate in athletics (Wininger and White, 2008). Papanikolaou, Nikolaidis, Patsiaouras, & Alexopoulos (2003) believed student-athletes experience stress and poor coping strategies that lead them to defeat themselves (self-fulfilling prophecy) because of their visibility on campus,

and the pressure of performing well in their sport. The ways student-athletes cope with the athletic stigma is not helpful or fruitful—most of them accept the stereotype, and try to hide the fact they are athletes (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita & Jensen, 2007). No student, no matter their identity, should have to hide that identity from others.

Yopyk and Prentice (2005) found students who identified as athletes had lower self-esteem and often performed lower than their peers, who had no athletic identification. This was particularly true of football, basketball, and hockey, sports known as “revenue” sports (Jameson et al., 2007). A student’s effort and achievement are influenced by the social-identity phenomenon, and when a student felt their identity was viewed negatively by others, their academics suffered (Dee, 2014). There is an academic stigma associated with being a student-athlete, which can explain why student-athletes underperform (Dee, 2014). It’s an unhealthy cycle; low task performance affirms the idea that the athletes are unintelligent (Yopyk and Prentice, 2005). Dee (2014) argued achievement gaps occur in an environment in which negative academic stereotypes are present. Furthermore, the stigma of being an athlete on college campuses is a reason many student-athletes underperform.

Student-athletes perceive the evidence of the “dumb jock” stereotype on college campuses across the country. Wininger and White (2008) showed student-athletes were evenly divided on how they felt others on campus wanted them to perform well on; 47%- athletics, 53%- academics. These figures indicate student-athletes feel pressure to perform well in the classroom and in the arena. Feltz et al. (2013) reported that 1/3 of student-athletes believe they are perceived negatively by their professors. However, the negative feelings of the professors do not contribute to a student-athlete’s self-fulfilling prophecy (Wininger and White, 2008). Student-athletes also believe that their peers thought those who played athletics had lower

academic expectations in their classes (Feltz et al., 2013). Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) found nonathletes disbelieve if a student-athlete receives an A in their coursework, and nonathlete peers feel student-athletes have lower academic standards than they do (Wininger and White, 2008). Furthermore, nonathletes have a low tolerance for the accommodations student-athletes may receive because of their athletic participation (Engstrom and Sedlacek, 1991). Even among student-athletes stereotypes exist. For instance, female athletes do not believe male athletes take their education as seriously, while males perceived females prioritized their education (Rubin & Moses, 2017). Bailey and Bhattacharyya (2017) found female athletes did perform better than their male counterparts.

Reports were not all negative, though. Parsons (2013) found a vast-majority of student-athletes asked perceived professors saw them positively or neutrally. This finding reaffirmed an earlier study conducted by Simons et al. (2007), which reported student-athletes generally indicated feeling others were mostly neutral or positive towards them, with most of the negativity coming from their peers. How faculty members communicate with student-athletes can impact what student-athletes hear, believe about their potential, and the magnitude they can be encouraged to reach academic learning objectives (Raunig & Coggins, 2018). Student-athletes had positive academic habits and felt successful; however, those same student-athletes indicated some professors made negative comments, and student-athletes had issues asking for accommodations for their athletic participation from those professors (Raunig & Coggins, 2018). Some student-athletes recalled their professors making positive comments about athletes. These comments included such statements as athletes were hard working, they did a good job balancing their academic and athletic lives, and athletes were good for the school's reputation (Parsons, 2013). Raunig and Coggins (2018) cited many professors (as well as coaches) noted student-

athletes had higher GPAs than their non-athlete peers. Rettig and Hu (2016) argued student-athletes are not falling behind their peers, who do not play athletics.

A majority of the student-athletes, who participated in the Parson (2013) study, did not receive special treatment because they were athletes, and the overall GPA of student-athletes was comparable to those of their non-athlete peers. Parsons (2013) reported student-athletes had high levels of academic interest, nearly always disclosed their athletic status, the faculty where they attended were generally positive, and treated all students equally, and they were not counseled to take easier courses by advisers. A large percentage of student-athletes were refused or given a hard time when they asked their professors for accommodations (Simons et al., 2007). The only thing the student-athletes didn't feel the professors altered was a higher or lower grade (Simons et al., 2007).

Parsons (2013) found only 12% of student-athletes reported negative perceptions from others. Because this study was performed at a Division II college, this statistic indicates Division II professors and peers may be less likely to participate in the stereotype threat (Parsons, 2013). Student-athletes felt it was easy for others to identify them on their campus, and this led them to avoid identifying themselves as athletes in class (Parsons, 2013). Negative comments were still heard. Several student-athletes indicated hearing negative comments about sports in class (Simons et al., 2007). Hearing and feeling negativity with something that athletes consider a large part of their identity may cause low self-esteem, and may also be a catalyst for lower performance and the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Reducing the impact of the stereotype makes it less relevant to the performance situation (tests, projects, etc.), and increases a student-athlete's performance in those areas (Jameson et al., 2007). Jameson et al. (2007) suggested college coaches and athletic departments create



mentoring programs, which older student-athletes help younger student-athletes navigate their way through college without succumbing to the negativity of stereotype. The older athletes would have positive feelings about themselves, which would help them combat the negativity they face. Engstrom and Sedlacek (1991) believed student-athletes should be educated about the “isms” they will face while participating in athletics and attending college and those same student-athletes needed to become part of the college community. Simons, Derek, & Covington (1999) emphasized a student-athlete should not have easier academic challenges because of their status as student-athletes. This would only perpetuate the problem.

### **Football**

The sports under the most public scrutiny are those considered revenue sports; sports which earn a substantial amount of money for schools and the NCAA. Many in the public believe because the student-athletes that play in these sports help their university and the NCAA create a large amount of monetary funding; those athletes should be rewarded in some way. While many people believe the reward should be the payment of college athletes, others believe paying athletes would not resolve the current predicament the NCAA faces, especially regarding academics in intercollegiate athletics. Rankin et al. (2016) reported that student-athletes, who participated in featured sports identified more easily with their athletic identity than their academic identity.

Finch and Clopton (2017) stated student-athletes feel athletics are important in recognizing, creating distinction, and a desire for the ideal college experience. Furthermore, students felt that a school’s level of athletic success and notoriety positively influenced unknowns’ view of the academic stature of their university. Studies have shown that having a successful football program impacts the entire campus community, not just the football players.

Jones (2015) reported when a football program receives notoriety, the school often receives more state appropriations. It has been shown that when a football program has a successful football campaign, the grades of nonathletes are lowered. This is especially true of males (Hernandez-Julian & Rotthoff, 2014). Hernandez-Julian and Rotthoff (2014) argued the growth of college athletics may explain the academic achievement gap between males and females in recent years (Hernandez-Julian & Rotthoff, 2014). Other studies have indicated females were more responsive to a successful football season than their male counterparts (Hernandez-Julian & Rotthoff, 2014). In addition to responsiveness, there is a significant relationship between successful sports programs and student retention. Sport may serve as a distraction away from studies for the entire student body (Hickman & Meyer, 2017). Additional research needs to be performed to more clearly define the results of these findings.

Hernandez-Julian and Rotthoff (2014) noted there are several factors which may influence student responses to a successful football campaign, such as female enrollment, the history of the football program, selectivity and urbanity, and how closely the student body follows the team. For instance, a Division I team, such as Penn State will be followed more closely, whether the team is successful or struggles, than a Division II school like Shippensburg, because the program is storied and has an already established following. Smith (2009) argued football programs with longer and more established football programs, traditions, and cultures have students with better academic credentials during their first college year. It is important to note lowered academics were only found in the Fall Quarter, which corresponds with the majority of the football season, but negative academics impact the entire school year (Hernandez-Julian & Rotthoff, 2014). Schools which divide their school year into semesters,

instead of quarters, had longer lasting negative academic results following a successful football season (Hernandez-Julian & Rotthoff, 2014)..

Even though a successful football season may have negative impacts on individual students' grades, the overall academic success of the university is seen positively (Hernandez-Julian & Rotthoff, 2014). Smith (2009) noted high schoolers are more likely to apply to colleges if they have big-time Bowl or Championship football programs. Furthermore, if a football program is doing well, more students will apply to attend that school (Hernandez-Julian & Rotthoff, 2014). Anderson (2017) noted a winning football program increases alumni donations, applicants, and in-state students enhance the school's academic reputation and the number of in-state students in attendance. More applications reduce acceptance rates but raise the average SAT scores of incoming students (Anderson, 2017). The increase in applications may be attributed to the media coverage the school receives because of their success in football (Smith, 2009). Having more students apply will allow the schools to become more selective in their admissions, and administrators can choose students with higher academic accolades (Hernandez-Julian & Rotthoff, 2014; Smith, 2009).

Mulholland, Tomic, & Sholander (2014) posited administrators from other colleges view schools with successful football programs in higher regards, thus increasing their rankings in higher education. This explains why schools will put money into football programs, even if they lose money, because the program will bring in financial benefits, as well as other benefits to the college community. The school profits even if the football team is losing (Lifschitz, Sauder, & Stevens, 2014). There are many benefits for the entire student population if the administration supports the success of the athletic programs at their school (Hickman & Meyer, 2017). For the institutions, it is a win-win situation.

Football is used as a status symbol on college campuses around the country because higher education has a status culture unique to colleges and universities (Lifschitz et al., 2014). To put it simply, “football is both a game and a status competition” (Lifschitz et al., 2014, p. 216). This explains how rivalries occur. People are more willing to watch two teams similar to one another in some way—i.e. state, size, academic reputation because the similarity makes the public feel like there is always something on the line between the two teams (Lifschitz et al., 2014). Affiliations to specific football conferences, which are determined by a school’s academic reputation and other organizational measurements, factor into status in higher education (Lifschitz et al., 2014). The NCAA assigns schools to conferences based on their alleged academic status (Lifschitz et al., 2014).

Rettig and Hu (2016) believed being an athlete who plays football—a high-profile sport—has created a subculture among athletes, and advisors, coaches, faculty, and other staff should be mindful to create educational programs specific to the needs of that subculture. Coaches reported the higher drive and motivation of high-level athletes transfers to the classroom (Bailey & Bhattacharyya, 2017). Cremin and Anderson (2018) found individuals with higher levels of commitment, specifically to academics, reported more time spent in academics and a lower time commitment to athletics. Football players are seen as having a higher drive, and oftentimes, a higher commitment to their sport. These findings indicate they would have more success in academics as well.

Cultural status exists in many forms on college campuses. Schools with noticeable cultural portrayals, such as their national ranking, can impact how the prestigious the public and other schools see the school (Lifschitz et al., 2014). It is known about how extracurricular activities impact the standing and reputation of colleges and universities (Lifschitz et al., 2014).

Lifschitz et al. (2014) argued most research only looks at how academics affect university status, but the subject is much more complex than just academics. Conferences with high visibility schools, such as the Big 10 and Pac 12, are so because of their academics as well as their athletics. In recent years many conferences and divisions have shuffled or realigned, which changes the dynamics of intercollegiate sports (Lifschitz et al., 2014).

### **National Collegiate Athletic Association**

Once the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAUUS), the National Collegiate Athletic Association is a non-governmental organization, established in 1910 to govern over athletic competition at the collegiate level (Kane, 2015; Terrell, 2012). When Theodore Roosevelt was the President of the United States, he was concerned with the number of fatal injuries occurring during the participation of collegiate athletics, so he summoned a group of White House representatives to investigate college sports (Goodyear, 2016; Horton, DeGroot, & Curstis, 2015; Sanderson and Siegfried, 2017). By creating this group, Roosevelt wanted establish rules that would reduce the amount of fatal injuries and violence that occurred during college football games (Horton et al., 2015; Sanderson and Siegfried, 2017).

Roosevelt, along with 62 delegates from colleges around the United States, established the IAAUS (Sanderson and Siegfried, 2017). IAAUS formed a committee to implement rules and guidelines such as limiting players' eligibility to four years (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2017). Because the Supreme Court determined the NCAA is a private actor, the organization is not bound by the same rules and regulations federal agencies must abide, too (Goodyear, 2016). Recently suggestions have been made for federal government involvement in NCAA dealings (Ginder, 2015). Zimbalist (2017) stated there is a lot of ambiguity trying to get the government involved in NCAA policy reform because so much of the government's involvement would be

dependent on judges' perspectives. Congress needs to get involved to clarify what the courts cannot, and therefore, protect the rights and needs of the student-athletes (Zimbalist, 2017).

The principles of the NCAA are based on equality, fairness, and competition within member institutions (Cooper, Davis & Dougherty, 2017). To be a member institution, a college/university must have an athletic program governed by the NCAA (Cooper, Davis & Dougherty, 2017). The governing body of the NCAA, including the president, create rules and regulations which they intended for the member institutions to abide to. These rules and regulations are intended to create a better athletic experience for students, who also played sports (Davis & Hairston, 2013; Haslerig, 2017). Meetings are held to improve the student-athletes' educational experience while they are attending college. In 1991 university presidents obtained a supervisory role within the NCAA due to concerns integrity issues were occurring among student-athletes (Chandler, 2014).

Before this presidents were in charge of enforcing the NCAA policies to create a favorable environment for college athletics; however, presidents were not able to maintain order during competition sports, and the NCAA took control over the policy enforcement (Goodyear, 2016). The NCAA being in control led to an increase in revenue, and the college/university presidents took notice, came together, and became part of the governing body of the NCAA (Goodyear, 2016). The presidents wanted athletic directors to be in charge of athletics because they wanted to ensure that the academic integrity of their institutions was upheld (Chandler, 2014). The NCAA continues to grow in population of student-athletes and member institutions, so it is crucial those governing the NCAA make decisions with integrity (Cooper et al., 2017). A specific academic policies committee has membership of two university chancellors/presidents, an athletic faculty representative, one athletic director, one senior woman administrator, and a

conference administrator, and has the responsibility to review the organization's academic policies (Chrabaszcz, 2014).

The NCAA is a group of legislative bodies and an executive committee that oversees the organization. The executive committee is led by an 11-member board of governors and President Mark Emmert (Goodyear, 2016). Member representatives help create proposals of policies and determine what policies are put in place. The legislation and policies that become effective are intended to further higher education and create a better and progressing academic experience for student-athletes (NCAA, 2018). Collegiate sports were intended to reflect a part of the higher education experience that was higher education (Gayles, 2015; Goodyear, 2016). After a time period of focusing on enforcing rules, the mission of the NCAA became the complete development—both academically and athletically—of student-athletes (Snyder, 2015). The NCAA believes the wellbeing of all student-athletes is significant on the field, in the classroom, and in life (NCAA, 2018). It is important for student-athletes to benefit from both academic and athletic experiences while they are in college (Kane, 2015). Ensuring this happens is necessary for the NCAA, school presidents, athletic directors, and other key stakeholders. Kelley et al. (2018) rationalized it is not difficult for NCAA member institutions to appear compliant while actually committing acts of academic fraud.

The NCAA has set up the governance structures to include conferences, member institutions, and student-athletes, who all play a major role in the organization (NCAA, 2018). In the beginning, 95 members managed college athletics (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2017). Presently, the NCAA has 1,123 member institutions, 1,000 being active members, and 346 Division I college or university member schools (Kane, 2015; NCAA, 2018). This number is frequently growing and changing. In 1973, the separation of college athletics into Divisions began (Gerlach,

2017; Gould, Wong, & Weitz, 2014; Haslerig, 2017; Sanderson and Siegfried, 2017; Tellez, 2017;). A school's placement in a division is determined by the NCAA based on the college/university's ability to provide for a student-athlete while they are in school (Haslerig, 2017; Kane, 2015). While Division I and II athletic programs provide scholarships for their athletes, Division II programs cannot provide as many full scholarships as Division I schools, which is why Division II student-athletes are on partial scholarship. The distinct difference in scholarship funds is why there is a significant difference in the level of competition between Division I and II programs (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2017). Division III schools do not provide any athletic scholarships to their athletes (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2017). In combination Division II and III universities do not provide as much financial support to their student-athletes as Division I (Kane, 2015).

The public is weary of the NCAA's mission. The perception the organization was not fully committed to its stated mission was the catalyst to academic reforms that began in May 2004 and have continued until recently (Davis & Hairston, 2013). While most of the research that exists on NCAA academic integrity focuses on the higher level conferences (Big 10, Big 12, ACC, SEC, etc.), little is known about the academic issues of lower conferences in Division I athletics, and even less about Division II and Division III participating member schools (Wyatt, 2016). Goodson (2015) and Kirby (2017) asserted there is no qualitative data existing on the topic to provide clear answers to questions such as why athletes choose their majors in these overlooked conferences and divisions. Qualitative studies, like the one I conducted, will provide awareness from student-athletes to provide their lived experiences to help promote future change in NCAA academic reforms.



## **Academic Reforms**

Because of public concern over academic issues, the NCAA applied policies which were intended to protect student-athletes and uphold the NCAA's mission (Hazelbaker, 2015; McCarty, 2014). While the NCAA claims it does not monitor the academic activities of its member institutions, the purposes of academic reform was to guarantee athletes were obtaining a quality education while playing sports in college (Traschler & Cotrufo, 2017). The Collegiate Model of Athletics began to rebrand in 2003 under the leadership of former NCAA President, Myles Brand (Southall, 2014). The focus began being on student-athletes' academic success and post-college life accomplishments. The model's purpose was to show the public the NCAA was ensuring that student-athletes were part of their campus communities, not just athletically, but academically as well (Southall, 2014). The NCAA responded to public skepticism of the organization by focusing apparent importance on athletics over academics by sanctioning the first series of academic reform initiatives (Davis & Hairston, 2013).

Hosick and Sproull (2012) argued student-athletes, who are a part of intercollegiate athletics, are what makes the NCAA what it is, and where it going in the future. Among the divisions and conferences, issues and concerns permeate the success of student-athletes. Cooper et al. (2017) suggested the biggest concerns pertain to student-athletes' academic performance and educational experience. For these reasons, researchers have suggested an outside body begin governing intercollegiate athletics (Cooper et. al, 2017). Some changes have already taken place. In 1990, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) signed into effect the Student Right to Know Act (SRTKA), which required universities to publically report graduation rates (Huml, Hancock, & Bergman, 2014). The NCAFA complied with the government's mandates and made student-athletes' graduation rates public knowledge (Southall, 2014). The Federal Government uses the

Federal Graduation Rate (FGR), a method for calculating graduation rate, and also measures the success of colleges and universities (Chrabaszc, 2014). Law states universities must report their FGR for all students, especially if they receive any kind of federal funding (Avery et al., 2016; Chrabaszc, 2014). Because most college athletes fall into this category, schools must publish their graduation rates.

Colleges and universities must send an annual report to the DOE detailing the graduation rates of scholarship athletes classified by type of sport, race, ethnicity, and gender (Chrabaszc, 2014). The federal government employs a metric of a 6-year cohort for schools that use federal aid, meaning that students should graduate within six years of when they first entered college (Avery et al., 2016; Chrabaszc, 2014). The percentage is calculated for full time freshmen who graduate within six years and stay at the same institution (Chrabaszc, 2014; Goodson, 2015; Kelly, 2012; Southall, 2014). Students who attend part-time or transfer are not included in these numbers, which skews the data. The FGR adds pressure to student-athletes because they are only eligible to compete for four years, and only receive athletic funding for that same time frame (Goodson, 2015). If a student-athlete graduates after the six year mark, withdraws from the institution, or transfers, the student cannot be counted as a graduating student from the institution where they began their college career (Chrabaszc, 2014). While the FGR is a measure to compare student-athletes to non-athlete student body, it is not an accurate measure because it excludes part of the population (Southall, 2014).

The NCAA has their own version of the FGR, the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) (Avery et al., 2016; Gayles, 2015; Wolverton, 2014). The NCAA justifies its use of the GSR because the organization argues the FGR does not account for the subtleties of being a student-athlete and does not provide an accurate representation of the actuality of student-athlete

graduation rates (Chrabaszc, 2014). The NCAA's GSR measures graduation rates in a six-year period (Chrabaszc, 2014; Parker, 2017; Southall, 2014). The GSR tracks all student-athletes, including transfer students in its measurement of graduation rates (Chrabaszc, 2014; Wolverton, 2014). If a student transfers in good academic standing and is eligible to play their sport, the GSR does not penalize them (Wolverton, 2014). Thus, the GSR measures academic success more accurately than the FGR because the FGR does not account for the total number of athletes who graduate from NCAA member institutions GSR is a more accurate rate than the FGR because the FGR underestimates the total number of students who graduate from NCAA member institutions (Wolverton, 2014). The NCAA determines student-athlete academic success by eligibility status and the GSR's reported graduation rates (McCarty, 2014).

The NCAA's academic standards include initial-eligibility rules, the number of time students can participate in athletics per week or daily, Progress Toward Degree(PTD), and Academic Progress Rate(APR) (Davis & Hairston, 2013). In Division II athletics, entering students are required to score at least 820 on their SAT and carry a 2.0 GPA (Hendricks and Johnson, 2016). Silver (2015) argued these initial-eligibility requirements control access to education, and overlook students who are teetering the line of eligibility, while increasing the likelihood of academic fraud, which is difficult to identify. Standards are determined by the member institutions. Those member institutions must control the balance between academics and athletics in intercollegiate sports (Davis & Hairston, 2013; Matthews, 2011). If a school is a NCAA member institution, they must abide by the NCAA's policies and procedures, which are in alignment with the NCAA's stated mission (Kane, 2015). Recent concerns over academic integrity in NCAA participating schools called into question how strictly these mandates are followed and enforced by both the NCAA and school's presidents and athletic departments.

Hickman and Meyer (2017) indicated that few variables affecting a student's retention have impact at the institutional-level. Indicating, changes need to be made from the top down.

Athletic reform needs to take place at the government, organization (NCAA), and institutional levels. Several theorists and researchers have given examples of ways the levels can include reform into their policies. Weight and Huml (2016) suggested the NCAA and member institutions develop programs relating to athletics that student-athletes can participate in to provide credit towards their degree requirements. Weight and Huml (2016) pointed out doing so at a Division II university may be difficult because those schools do not have the same resources, such as population size, as a Division I college.

The NCAA is at the precipice of creating meaningful and larger changes regarding academics and intercollegiate sport. The organization has made notable changes in recent years, but those changes are not enough to ensure student-athletes at every level receive a quality education (Silver, 2015). Many of the issues causing academic integrity issues relate to the sheer amount of rules athletes have to know and understand regarding athletics. Silver (2015) pointed out it is nearly impossible for rules not to be broken, unintentionally, because of the volume of the rules student-athletes must abide by. The manual needs to be mainstreamed to make it more accessible to all involved.

### **Student-athletes**

Student-athletes are at the center of the educational issues facing the NCAA's academic policies. The lives of student-athletes became more complex over time. There is added burden to be prosperous both on and off the field (Huml, Hambricks, & Hums, 2017). Student-athletes are aware of their roles academically and athletically, and they want to succeed in both, but there are many internal and institutional/environmental factors that influence their ability to accomplish

their dual goals (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013). It is imperative that the perspectives and lived experiences of the student-athletes are heard in their own voices. The NCAA needs to listen to and understand the academic experiences of the student-athletes that participate in the organization's programs to make the best possible changes to create educational policies, which will improve the academic quality of student-athletes' educational experience and the standards which they must abide by, while not overwhelming the balance the circumstances of playing intercollegiate sports cause. Gerlach (2017) stated strictly enforces policies may cause additional pressure to be placed on student-athletes. In some respects, student-athletes are a vulnerable population on a college campus since many of them are underprepared when they enter the college campus, and many place their athletic pursuits ahead of their academics.

To protect student-athletes, colleges and universities should provide resources for student-athletes to help them balance their academics, competition, and the additional stress which comes from being a student-athlete (Gerlach, 2017). Many student-athletes struggle with career exploration, academic concerns, and a demanding schedule (Gerlach, 2017). These issues may explain some of the reported academic underperformance by college athletes. Researchers report many student-athletes' struggle to prioritize their dual role as student and athlete (Avery et al., 2016; Huml, Svensson, & Hancock, 2017; Mamerow & Navarro, 2014; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). Policies changes have been ratified and taken effect to enrich the academic experiences of collegiate athletes. These reforms were intended to aid the student-athletes' ability to balance life between athletics and academics (Comeaux, 2015b). Although it is important to understand how the reforms affect all student-athletes, it is essential to understand academic reform data at the institutional level (Comeaux, 2015b). This is where the most

effective changes will take place—where the students are part of the academic community, academically and athletically (Comeaux, 2015b).

### **Student-Athlete Support Systems**

Hodes et al. (2016) declared student-athletes have the best educational outcomes when they circumnavigate the intricacies of college life with a support system. One of the potential academic support resources athletes have at their disposal is academic advisors, who know and understand the difficulties of balancing academics and athletics. It is the job of athletic advisors to track student-athletes' PTD, and guarantee student-athletes meet eligibility requirements (Tellez, 2017). The roles an academic advisor play in the academic lives' of student-athletes are not clearly defined, and the position needs to have a clear definition, so those interested know exactly what their position is intended to do (Vaughn & Smith, 2018). Many student-athletes have difficulty making important decisions pertaining to their academics and careers after their college athletic time is completed. This emphasizes the need for athletic advisors to guide student-athletes throughout their academic career (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2013). Student-athletes, academic advisors, and athletic advisors must engage in active and regular communication to ensure the student-athlete's goals are being met (Stokowski, Rode & Hardin, 2016).

Advisors, who are often self-taught, stated one of their biggest concerns in dealing with student-athletes is the student-athletes' lack of time, independence to learn, preparedness, and time (Vaughn & Smith, 2018). Similarly, student-athletes score low on help-seeking behaviors. Most of the responsibility of student-athletes' academic success or failure is placed on the academic advisor, no one else (Davis, 2015). If asked, many of the current academic support advisors would state two concerns exist as the framework to how to perform their job: the

NCAA's minimum standard requirements, and the possibility of looming sanctions, and the gravity of ensuring the sustained eligibility of at-risk (academically low performing) student-athletes (Davis, 2015). Because of the added academic requirements the NCAA has placed on student-athletes, for academic advisors achievement must happen, whether the student-athlete is willing to participate in the educational learning process or not (Davis, 2015).

Concerns exist for athletic advisors. Their position depends on the eligibility of student-athletes, so oftentimes the advisors guide student-athletes in a direction which places their eligibility above their academic needs and concerns (Castle et al., 2014; Navarro, 2015). At times, student-athletes are advised into specific courses and majors (known as clustering) to ensure they meet the requirements of PTD, eligibility, and competition standards (Mamerow & Navarro, 2014). Some advisors use their power to persuade student-athletes away from majors that may increase their stress level (Terrell, 2012). Student-athletes also have concerns with the amount of time advisors have available to them, and the sincerity of the counsel they receive (Kamusoko and Pemberton, 2013). Houston and Baber (2017) found clustering to be a phenomenon happening by factors of more than just chance, and may be impacted by institutional culture.

A key to student-athlete success is their interaction with others in the college community. Positive interactions, which create and foster a positive self-image, along with an interactive academic support system, will help student-athletes feel included, and help them experience an uplifting academic community. This will aid in their success. Rost (2015) reported higher retention and graduation rates were connected to the NCAA mandate that all student-athletes have certain times to meet with their academic advisor. This is not so different from typical college student requirements. Being socially, emotionally, and psychologically connected to

one's teammates had a substantial, positive and impact on an athlete's well-being (Wayment & Walters, 2016). Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) discovered the socialization process and messaging of the athletic department advocated that athletes have control over athletics and that the academics were going to be easy and student-athletes would receive extensive academic support. This increases the rationale of an athlete to put more effort into their athletics than their academics.

Another resource available to student-athletes is the use of academic centers tailored specifically to student-athletes. Student-athletes prefer to study in these centers because they prevent outside distractions, provide one-on-one tutoring, and allows for socialization with other student-athletes (Rubin & Moses, 2017). It is important for student-athletes to socialize with peers, ones they have common interests with, especially those outside of their sport and team, so they don't become isolated from the campus community. Rubin and Moses (2017) also noted that student-athletes, who supported each other in their academic pursuits were more successful in those academic pursuits, and socialization and student-athletes' individual identities help shape the academic integrity of their teams. Wayment and Walters (2016) warned if a student-athletes ego can negatively impact how student-athletes interact with others. Gomez, Bradley, & Conway (2018) asserted that socialization may have adverse effects for student-athletes, but also demonstrated different athletes in different sports, especially if the sport is individual or a team sport, had varying opinions regarding socializing with other students. Indicating, while it is important for student-athletes to interact with others on the campus community, they must do it in their own way, and in their own timeframe.

In 2015, the NCAA partnered with the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics, better known as N4A, to provide daily oversight and program operations for life skills



professionals and student-athletes at NCAA member institutions (Leach, 2015). The partnership was intended to help student-athletes get the best support possible to be champions on the field, in the classroom, and in life (Leach, 2015). At the same time, the NCAA introduced new initiatives to help student-athletes' success off the field. These initiatives include: online education curriculum; discounted Kaplan Test Prep materials; DiSC behavioral assessments; the IMG Wooden Academy leadership academy; Effective Facilitation Workshop; Leadership Workshop Academy; the Athlete Development Professional Certification Program at the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School; a leadership presence in the National Association of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education's student-athlete knowledge community (Leach, 2015).

Another type of advisor that helps support student-athletes is the NCAA life skills administrators. These life skills administrators serve as the student-athletes' point of connection between academics and other student affairs and their athletics (Leach, 2015). These administrators are available at both the national and local levels. Life skills administrators aim to fully prepare student-athletes for life by teaching them skills useful in college, as well as after they graduate (Leach, 2015). Some of the skills taught in the life skills programs are: customized education, tailored programming, and speakers, who speak on topics such as values, building character, financial literacy, mental health, community service, transitioning to life after college, and leadership styles (Leach, 2015). All of these skills and topics will help student-athletes become contributing members of society after they leave the campus community.

Advisors have many responsibilities intended to help the student-athletes achieve academic success while they are in attendance at the university. These include academic rigor, athletic rules, and future preparation (Gerlach, 2017). An advisor's goal is to assist student-

athletes are successful on the field, off the field, and after graduation. Their major role is to ensure the wellness of every student-athlete they come in contact with Gerlach (2017). If a student-athlete becomes ineligible, it is the advisor's role to report the infraction to the proper authority (Gerlach, 2017). Many advisors are concerned with the NCAA's strict eligibility policies because they feel the policies do not provide student-athletes the freedom to choose their major, which inhibits their academic experience (Gerlach, 2017). The academic progress and success of a student-athlete should be in the hands of the student-athlete, as they are ultimately responsible for their decisions (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013).

As a way to avoid some of the academic concerns student-athletes face, Cooper (2016) recommended student-athletes have a mentor from outside of the athletic department to advise them about their academics. This would avoid any issues with clustering, while still keeping student-athletes eligible and give them the academic freedom every college student deserves. Current academic advisors report the NCAA's mandates place pressure on the student-athletes, increasing the likelihood of clustering. Furthermore, student-athletes, who feel additional academic pressure may choose course with guaranteed academic success (Weight & Huml, 2016). Having someone unconnected to athletics will allow the student-athletes to openly express their academic concerns and interests with someone who will not try to push eligibility requirements on them. Academic advisors are intended to help student-athletes, but evidence has shown that their ties to the NCAA may be having the opposite effects of their intentions.

The NCAA also provides student-athletes with career and academic counseling (Goodyear, 2016; Hazelbaker, 2015). Current NCAA bylaws require student-athletes must spend time involved with support services that provide counseling and tutorials (Rost, 2015). Other NCAA bylaws require member institutions to provide academic counseling and tutoring services

for all athletes on campus (Comeaux, 2015a; Comeaux, 2015b). These services should create a more well-rounded academic experience for student-athletes. However, Cooper, Weight, & Fulton (2015) believed the advising practices of member institutions demonstrate the problems existing with the NCAA's academic reforms. Organizational values, which place student-athletes into easier majors etc., faculty and other administrators, take hold of the NCAA's mission and values, which reinforces the student-athletes dependence of the NCAA's system (Cooper et al., 2015). Academic support centers focus on eligibility rules over academic expectations (Comeaux, 2015a). Other special programs and academic departments exist to improve student-athlete retention, and thereby, more likely increase graduation rates (Scott, 2017).

Although many different types of academic support services exist on NCAA's member institution's campuses, all student-athletes must participate in the NCAA Champs/Life Skills Program, which is part of the Academic Performance Program (APP) initiative began to assist low resource institutions (LRI) in the NCAA (Burns et al., 2013; Cooper, Cavil, & Cheels 2014). The goal of the NCAA Champs/Life Skills program is to retain student-athletes (Cooper, Cavil, & Cheeks, 2014). One benefit the program provides to student-athletes is professional development for staff and additional financial aid to enroll student-athletes in summer school if they need to attend (Cooper, Cavil, & Cheeks, 2014). Schools are offered a LRI pilot if they have an APR improvement plan in place for at least a three-year period (Cooper, Cavil, & Cheeks, 2014). A school has to maintain what the NCAA sees as a sufficient APR, to receive its share of revenue from the NCAA (Houston and Baber, 2017). Navarro and Malvaso (2015) point out few changes have been made to these initiatives since they were introduced by the NCAA.

Scholarships are a resource that may be invaluable for student-athletes. Student-athletes, who receive scholarships, tend to graduate faster than student-athletes who do not have

scholarships, also known as walk-ons (Gerlach, 2017). Rubin and Rosser (2014) reported student-athletes without scholarships tended to have a higher GPA than those on scholarship. Student-athletes on scholarship may be impacted by PTD (Rubin & Rosser, 2014). Although many student-athletes do not receive scholarships, academic measures and graduation rates only account for student-athletes who receive scholarship funding. This may skew the information reported (Rubin & Rosser, 2014). Student-athletes on scholarship are more likely to stay in school and graduate (Rubin & Rosser, 2014). Hendricks and Johnson (2016) noted when student-athletes don't receive scholarship money, they often do not stay in school, which leaves them in debt and without skills to be an employable member of society. This creates a rationale more scholarship funding needs to be made available for those who participate in college athletics (Silver, 2015) The NCAA has monetary means, and if they desire to make the lives of student-athletes better, they will invest in their student-athletes. Student-athletes should be rewarded funding in the same way as the non-athlete population—their likelihood to earn a degree (Silver, 2015).

Division II student-athletes in revenue-generating sports, such as football, cluster into certain majors (Wyatt, 2016). Clustering guarantees student-athletes have an easier time academically (Svyantek et al., 2017). On the contrary, it limits a student-athletes' academic choices, while keeping them eligible (Houston & Baber, 2017). Clustering is a major problem currently occurring in intercollegiate athletics. It is not limited to student-athletes' year in school, gender, conference, or division; it is also not limited to just revenue-generating sports (Wyatt, 2016). Wyatt (2016) argued a majority of student-athletes do not choose their major based on anything in particular. Severns (2017) reported some academic clustering is due to a student-athletes' affiliation to their athletic team. Being a student-athlete does have benefits; it keeps

student-athletes on track and eligible for graduation (Grimmett, 2014). Academic advisors were crucial to student-athletes because some student-athletes had concerns and lacked knowledge of the NCAA's eligibility rules, PTD, university majors, or information about possible choices after sports (Kelly, 2012; Kamasoko & Pemberton, 2013; Parker, 2017). While student-athletes believed easier majors helped keep them remain eligible, they did not aid them with their future careers (Kulics, Kornspan, & Kretovics, 2015). This finding shows student-athletes are concerned with their academics and their life after college athletics. Conversely, many student-athletes felt PTD added pressure on their already strained academic situations (Kulics, Kornspan, & Kretovics, 2015).

Coaches also play a crucial role in supporting a student-athlete's academic success (Hazelbaker, 2015). Coaches need to recognize there is a strain between an athlete's role as a student, and their role as an athlete (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). It is imperative college coaches do the best they can to contribute to the well-being of the athletes in their care (Huml, Hambricks, & Hums, 2016). The frequency, intensity, and timing of trainings should be considered carefully, so they benefit the student-athlete. Creating more flexibility with training creates more academic satisfaction, while causing student-athletes to perform at lower levels academically (Cremin & Anderson, 2018). According to the NCAA, it is the role of coaches to be accountable for each player's APR (Roach, 2017). However, Davis (2015) noted nothing but winning matters in regards to a college coach's viewed success.

Roach (2017) indicated the introduction of the APR has improved student-athletic performance. Coaches need for their student-athletes to be academically successful. Ensuring academic success will retain scholarships and practice time, as well as keeping schools eligible for postseason play. Remaining eligible helps coaches keep their jobs and receive raises (Roach,

2017). Roach (2017) reported college football and basketball coaches are the highest paid public employees in 40 states. A coach's ability to find success in the arena, as well as in the classroom, helps the public see the program, as well as the institution as successful. Viewed success increases the likelihood of their willingness to support the program and school, monetarily or otherwise.

Student-athletes reported they felt their coaches cared about their academic success because it affected their eligibility to play sports (Kelly, 2012). Student-athletes spend a significant amount of time interacting with their coaches. Huml et al., (2016) state this is especially true in Division II schools that have smaller budgets, and hire less staff to help assist student-athletes. In fact, Huml et al. (2016) stated a college coach is often a student-athlete's primary contact on campus. Kamasoko and Pemberton (2013) reported that student-athletes know of the support systems available to them on campus, but usually utilize these services if directed to them by their coach. Perceptions say coaches even develop personal relationships with those they coach. This may be a detriment to student-athletes because their coach may become a buttress to their student-athletes, seeking assistance with higher education concerns (Huml et al., 2016).

Navarro (2015) reported coaches who assert the importance of academics to their student-athletes have a lasting and memorable positive effect on those they coach. However, Cooper, Weight, & Fulton (2015) argued coaches are judged by their win-loss record, not on their student's athletic record. Coaches have a significant say in many of their student-athletes' course choice, major choice, which often focus on eligibility requirements rather than the student-athletes' academic wants and needs (Huml et al., 2016). While students believe they should be more self-reliant dealing with their academic progress, they also believed that they needed to rely

on coaches to understand NCAA rules, regulations, and compliancy requirements to stay eligible (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013). Student-athletes indicated it was important for them their coach pressed them to be a student as well as an athlete because they value themselves as students and student-athletes (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013).

Coaches have an influence beyond athletics and academics for the student-athletes they coach. Raunig and Coggins (2018) reported coaches provide their student-athletes with a comprehensive, non-academic, life-skills oriented education. Intercollegiate athletic coaches have a unique perspective on student-athletes because they spend time with them no other person on campus does. Coaches need to share the perspective they have on student-athletes with other faculty to help the student-athletes have a successful college experience (Raunig & Coggins, 2018). Coaches need to communicate with both faculty and athletes so everyone knows what is required when a student-athlete misses a classes; communication including the faculty member clearly stating what is required of the students, and timely feedback, so student-athletes can make corrections quickly (Raunig and Coggins, 2018). Collaco (2017) suggested immediate feedback from professors will help student-athletes' engagement levels. This will require active communication from all three parties. Coaches needs to make sure the student is responsible for their own academic requirements Collaco, 2017).

Although faculty, such as professors, may not be seen as part of the college athletes' support system, they should be. Traynowicz et al. (2016) posited faculty-student interaction is a better indication of student academic success than student-athlete profile characteristics. Rankin et al. (2016) believed a student-athlete's interaction with their faculty is the biggest influence on academic success. Student-athletes need to formulate relationships with professors and other university staff. Faculty can help empower student-athletes (Traynowicz et al., 2016). Collaco

(2017) indicated student-professor interaction will help increase the engagement of student-athletes, which will help the athletes learn better. The quality and context of the interaction between faculty and the student-athlete is important to take into account, and are dependent on the faculty member's interpersonal skills, and the student-athlete's ability to overcome any stigma they may feel over seeking assistance from their faculty member (Rankin et al., 2016). In essence, student-athletes should be the biggest stakeholders in their education.

A study performed by Raunig and Coggins (2018) detailed the many ways faculty could assist student-athletes in achieving academic success. Faculty need to maximize learning experiences for student-athletes through thorough planning of assignments, resources, and assessments by developing a clear, concise syllabus with defined due dates (Raunig & Coggins, 2018). Collaco (2017) added professors need to create relatable and enjoyable activities which help student-athletes learn skills to be interactive with others. Faculty-student interaction helps the student-athlete become more socialized in the university, and influences their academic achievement, satisfaction with college, persistence, and attrition, but also shapes their educational and career aspirations (Rankin et al., 2016). Traynowicz et al. (2016) asserted faculty needs to make learning outcomes connect to other experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. Doing so will make student-athletes more well-rounded academically. This will help student-athletes create interpersonal skills and job-related knowledge (Rettig & Hu, 2016).

It is important to take into account a student-athlete's previous knowledge when creating a learning program for them. This may include creating hybrid and asynchronous class components, which student-athletes can complete when they are travelling, or missing class for other reasons related to their athletic participation (Raunig & Coggins, 2018). Faculty can create different types of learning experiences, which can positively impact all the students in their



classroom. Faculty felt creating assignments, competitive in nature, may help to engage student-athletes, who have competitive natures excel in the classroom (Raunig & Coggins, 2018).

Traynowicz et al. (2016) believed NCAA member institutions employ the engagement strategies suggested by scholars and researchers to academically ensure student-athletes receive a quality education, including specialized courses for coaches and other athletic staff, which can help them validate the diversity of the college students on their campus, and create an eclectic college experience for all students.

Another pivotal piece to a student-athlete's success is their family support system. Terrell (2012) declared if student-athletes choose a major after seeking the advice of influential people in their lives, they can make a better decision, the best decision for their future career, instead of their athletic responsibilities. Major selection can be influenced by many people in the student-athletes' lives, such as parents, siblings, role models, and counselors (Jaradat & Mustafa, 2017). Navarro (2015) indicated a student-athlete's major selection could be swayed through their communications with the athletic department, academic affairs, or if the student-athlete found difficulty balancing academics and athletics. Student-athletes should not bear this responsibility of balancing alone (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016).

Other students can be used as an invaluable resource for student-athletes. For this reason, the NCAA created Student-Athlete Advisory Committees (SAACs). In 1989, the NCAA governing body determined those students' voices needed to be heard on the division, conference, and institutional levels (NCAA, n.d.k.). SAACs are intended to ensure the needs of every student-athlete are met. It is of the utmost importance that student-athletes utilize their campus SAACs as a resource because they share a campus community with the student-athletes they are advocating for (NCAA, n.d.k.). The campus SAACs have several roles. They

communicate with both staff and students about issues the athletic department may have, and may have a say in the formation of department policies (NCAA, n.d.k).

The SAACs also ask and share student-athletes input of proposed conference and NCAA legislation additions or changes. They help build a community for student-athletes, and help those student-athletes become part of the off-campus community through service opportunities (NCAA, n.d.k). Leadership of SAACs represent the student-athletes across campus-wide committees. Finally, they help promote a positive image of student-athletes on campus (NCAA, n.d.k). Weaver and Simet (2015) argued SAACs are vital to student-athletes because they help them reach across sports and achieve goals. SAACs, if aligned with NCAA policies and procedures, will help enhance student-athletes' opportunities and experiences (Weaver & Simet, 2015). Hodes et al. (2016) suggested the best way to support student-athletes is through collaboration because no one support team can help student-athletes emotionally, socially, and behaviorally. It is important student-athletes use many different approaches to help them be successful throughout their time in college.

Life in Balance (LITB) is a series of policy initiatives, specifically designed for Division II student-athletes. Gomez and Conway (2018) showed the level of balance varied among different students. These policies are intended to help student-athletes balance their athletic and college lives, so they can truly experience college to the fullest. It has been reported that almost all student-athletes spend more than their maximum of twenty hours a week devoted to their athletic pursuits (Huml et al., 2016). The hours a student-athlete spends devoted to their sport frequently equals the same amount of time they would spend at a job. This does not leave much time for other extracurricular activities. Cremin and Anderson (2018) recommended a time management program be developed in which student-athletes learn how to more effectively

balance their athletics, academics, and other activities. Zimbalist (2017) took this idea one step farther, suggesting that policies be put in place to prevent the action of intercollegiate athletics, particularly at the varsity level, from impacting student academic responsibilities.

The NCAA reported there have been discussions about spreading LITB across all Divisions to increase the likelihood of academic success on NCAA campuses (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.i). It is important to note that when implementing new policies, such as Life in Balance into reform, governing bodies, such as the NCAA, take into account the impact those changes have on stakeholders (Huml et al., 2016). According to the Birkbeck Sport Business Centre (2010), the NCAA “should seek to implement stakeholder engagement and stakeholder participation strategies appropriate to the position of stakeholders on a power/interest matrix” (p. 6). Navarro and Malvaso (2015) added with any program initiative, the quality of campus-level programs can be improved through strong, concise objectives, comprehensive research, and input of stakeholders.

### **Summary**

Student-athletes are members of a specialized population within the U.S. higher education system (Goodson, 2015). NCAA academic policies, and recent reforms to those policies, have placed the future careers of student-athletes in danger (Ganim, 2015). Recent reforms have not changed public opinion and concerns that student-athletes do not receive an adequate education. Often, student-athletes are overwhelmed by the athletic and requirements the NCAA has placed in them. This causes student-athletes to have to choose, and academics become less of a priority. Making student-athletes into athlete –students (Wyatt, 2016).

The policies of the NCAA have changed throughout the organization’s history of influence in the realm of higher education (Goodson, 2015). The NCAA’s tightening of

academic standards may be a catalyst for the increasing numbers of academic violations in recent years. Goodson (2015) argued the main focus of the NCAA's academic policies was increasing graduation rates. Students are under more pressure to remain academically eligible to compete (Wolverton, 2015). In recent years, at least 20 investigations on NCAA campuses have been investigated, calling the organization's commitment to academic integrity into question (Wolverton, 2015).

Academic clustering has occurred more regularly on NCAA member institution campuses (Ganim, 2015). Academic clustering occurs when student-athletes, or their advisors, feel the eligibility of a student-athlete is at risk, so they begin taking easier classes or choose an easier major. Wyatt (2016) noted students in revenue-generating sports, such as football, are more likely to be a part of academic clustering. Tellez (2017) indicated graduation was important to student-athletes.

Chapter 2 presented literature on NCAA student-athletes' on Division II football players' experiences, but there is a scarcity of studies on this phenomenon from the student-athletes' perspectives. This study provided insight on Division II football players' academic experiences from their viewpoint. This study's focus on state-funded, college football programs across the Division informed the NCAA and other stakeholders on the scope of the phenomenon. Furthermore, this study will contribute literature to encourage a conversation about Division II football programs' role within the NCAA. Additionally, understanding football players' perspectives and lived experiences can help future formulation of NCAA educational mandates.

This study was a qualitative, phenomenological investigation of student-athletes, specifically football players' perspectives of the impact educational policies have on student-athletes' college experience. Responses to a self-developed survey provided substantial insight

for state-funded, Division II universities/colleges, the NCAA, intercollegiate academic special interest groups, and the U.S. Department of Education. The main focus is based on the lived experiences of Division II football players.

Chapter 3 contains a detailed discussion of this study's research design. In this study, the goal was to understand the lived experiences of Division II football players to determine how student-athletes' perspectives can help shape the future of NCAA academic policies and reforms. Chapter 3 contains a detailed discussion of the study's research design. Questionnaires were sent to Division II football programs across the country. Student-athletes, participating in those football programs chose to participate in an internet-based survey. The data collection method can assist in understanding the participant's stories, and provide consideration of the educational experiences of student-athletes, who are often overlooked by the NCAA's system of governance.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of NCAA Division II football players in public schools as they pertained to the organization's educational policies. It is pertinent for the governing board of the NCAA to understand how their mandates impact student-athletes. Division II football players from public universities participated in the study. The goal of the study was to use the survey's findings to inform the NCAA and other college sport stakeholders how education policies impact student-athletes.

#### **Research Design and Approach**

The purpose of this study was to describe the shared, lived experiences of Division II football players attending public colleges and universities, which may contribute to the development of future NCAA education mandates. In this study, the following questions were addressed: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players regarding NCAA education mandates? What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players regarding their ability to balance athletic and educational success? In answering these questions, I sought to better understand student-athletes' lived experiences and what suggestions could be made to ensure future college athletes receive a quality education. This study was important in understanding how the NCAA's policies and procedures impact student-athletes. The participants described how the current educational policies of the NCAA affect them educationally, athletically, and as a college student. Moustakas (1994) explained that a researcher can more completely understand a phenomenon and lived experiences through an iterative, reflective process. Moustakas stated that a phenomenological approach provides a researcher with the proper procedures to answer research questions and create meaning from

what has occurred in the phenomenon. To formulate a qualitative research design, a researcher should (a) determine whether a phenomenological approach is best, (b) ascertain/acknowledge the phenomenon, (c) stipulate philosophical assumptions of phenomenology, (d) collect data, and (e) analyze data (Moustakas, 1994).

The primary focus of a phenomenological study was to explore how a group of individuals with shared life experiences understands those shared experiences. To more fully understand a phenomenon and those it impacts, researchers employ phenomenological techniques (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). After understanding the shared experiences, a researcher may construct meanings regarding what is occurring. Moustakas (1994) explained that “in phenomenological science a relationship always exists between the external perception of natural objects and internal perceptions, memories, and judgments” (p. 47). Given the scope of the current study and the research questions, I determined the phenomenological design was appropriate for the study of Division II NCAA football players’ lived experiences relating to the NCAA’s educational policies and mandates. The fundamental phenomenon of this study was the lived and shared experiences of football players from Division II public universities/colleges regarding their educational experiences stemming from NCAA academic policies.

Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement was used to explore the participants’ perceptions to how current NCAA policies and procedures impact their educational and athletic success, as well as their overall college experience. Participants were Division II football players from public colleges/universities in the United States. These student-athletes represented their universities to form the study’s focus. I obtained information from several Division II NCAA conferences.

The name of the school within each conference was kept confidential. From information obtained from the NCAA’s website, a preliminary email was sent to Division II public football

programs and IRBs from around the country. After a list of football programs with interest was created, an additional email was sent to the schools' football programs inviting them to participate in the study. Once the colleges agreed to allow me to contact their players, emails were sent to members of the football team, detailing the study. This diverse group of Division II football players represented all major geographic areas of the United States. Such variation raised expectations for different opinions on the lived experiences of student-athletes' educational experiences, which led to informed suggestions for reform for NCAA educational mandates.

A qualitative design was chosen for this phenomenological study. Qualitative methods allowed me to more fully understand the lived experiences of the study's participants in the words of those participants (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The information was in a form that could be contextualized and reflected upon, and may eventually be examined in a quantitative study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016).

### **Research Questions**

The central phenomenon of this study was U.S. public college/university football players' perceptions of their lived experiences in relation to their academic and college experiences relating to the NCAA's educational policies and processes. The research questions for this study were the following:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players regarding NCAA education mandates?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players regarding their ability to balance athletic and educational success?



## **Research Design and Rationale**

Moustakas (1994) detailed five qualitative inquiry strategies that researchers can use to evaluate the data collected: ethnography, grounded theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and heuristics. Answering a series of open-ended questions allows the participants to report the details of their lived experiences. The phenomenological design allowed me to explore, understand, and describe the players' perspectives of the phenomenon. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), narrative research describes the stories of individuals' lives by allowing them to write about the experiences. It was through this inclusive approach I was able to comprehend the rich context of the information I obtained. The phenomenological design provided an open-ended set of survey questions, which I used to obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. I was able to investigate the phenomenon within a narrow lens to provide a comprehensive perspective of the lived experiences of the participants.

The narrative, phenomenological research design was chosen because it allowed me to provide the reader with rich descriptions of experiences that allowed for greater insight into the phenomenon. These descriptions were provided through narrative storytelling, which is how people share their life experiences with one another (Guillemin & Heggen, 2012). Engaging in storytelling to discuss a subject and providing an interpretation to assist the reader with a more thorough understanding is a common communication approach. College athletes, specifically those who play football, frequently engage in the narrative form of communication. During my career in education and through direct engagement with college athletes, I had many encounters with college athletes, coaches, parents, and professional athletes who shared aspects of sport and education through detailed stories of their lived experiences. From these previous experiences, I

determined the narrative, phenomenological design was the most effective and appropriate approach for this study.

### **Phenomenon**

Although various individuals share responsibility for the academic needs of student-athletes, the most important people in ensuring the quality education of students is the students themselves. An important aspect of the NCAA is the SAAC, which represents the student-athletes' voice on campus and at the regional, conference, and national levels, including educational experiences and information necessary for leadership to understand the student-athlete college experience (NCAA, n.d.k). The central phenomenon of this study was Division II football players' perceptions of their educational needs, and how the rules/policies/mandates of the NCAA impact the academic, athletic, and college experiences of those athletes in public universities/colleges. Gaining an understanding of Division II student-athletes (a group that is often overlooked by NCAA policymakers because they do not bring in a large revenue stream) and their perspectives regarding education may aid NCAA policymakers in drafting and implementing effective policies to improve the education quality of Division II student-athletes across the country. Findings may be used to improve the academic success of all student-athletes, no matter the division or sport in which they play.

### **Tradition of Inquiry**

Qualitative inquiries aim to direct human science research. Human science research needs researchers to prepare and collect data, analyze that data, and have its methods and procedures presented in a unified, concise manner to present the most accurate description of the researched phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The primary reason to use qualitative inquiries is for researchers to immerse themselves in what they are studying to discover the why or how and to

capture the full essence of the research question (Moustakas, 1994). The primary purpose of qualitative inquiries is for the researcher to become immersed in the study to discover why or how and to depict the full essence of the research question (Moustakas, 1994). A qualitative research design provided the opportunity for me to investigate a research phenomenon.

Qualitative inquiry is exploratory in nature, and the intricacy of research design requires that the data be collected from communications between the researcher and the participants. Exploring the lived experiences of Division II NCAA football players to better understand how their thoughts/ideas/perceptions may lead to policy advancement in the NCAA's educational mandates required a qualitative approach.

### **Phenomenological Research Design**

There has been an evolution in scientific practices based on researchers' philosophies and suppositions that form the studies' philosophical paradigm. My philosophies and suppositions created the study's framework. Phenomenological research methodology was originally conceived as an accepted set of procedures by Husserl (Groenewald, 2004). Phenomenology allows the researcher to see data inductively through the lived experiences of participants, which will influence human science research and how it is conducted for years to come (Finlay, 2012).

**Step 1: Epoche.** In this stage, the researcher identifies and brackets their biases. Epoche, which is of Greek origin, means "to stay away from or abstain from prejudgments" (Moustakas, 1994, p.85). Epoche is the stage in which researchers identify and disclose their experiences while setting aside their previous knowledge, biases, and preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche helps the researcher prepare to obtain new knowledge after setting aside their own knowledge to make room for new, fresh experiences as if the researcher is experiencing them for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche guided me to remain transparent with myself as I

discovered more information about the lived experiences of the participants (see Moustakas, 1994). To derive new knowledge, I needed to set aside my researcher bias to view the Division II football players' experiences as if they had not been experienced before.

**Step 2: Phenomenological reduction.** Stage 2 is used to describe the phenomenon being studied in rich terms. This can help readers get a better understanding of what is happening in the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) asserted that during phenomenological reduction the researcher describes the phenomenon, looks and describes the phenomenon again, and repeats the process while ensuring there are references to the textual qualities of the phenomenon. There may be an intersection between one perspective and the whole, so it is reasonable for the researcher to separate her experiences from the experience of the whole (Moustakas, 1994). The reduction process develops the researcher's progress towards a textually meaningful and essential study reflexivity, and the ability to identify and detail the phenomenon's description (Moustakas, 1994). If a researcher follows Moustakas' (1994) steps, "bracketing, horizontalizing, clustering the horizons into themes, and organizing the horizons and themes into a coherent textual description of the phenomenon" (p. 97), the challenges that arise from constructing a complete description of the NCAA Division II college football players' experiences can be overcome.

**Step 3: Imaginative variation.** NCAA Division II football players spend many hours in the classroom, on the field, and attending games in attempt to create a balanced college experience. From the overall balance, the football players will have multiple experiences which will help them navigate life after playing football in college. Life is like football in many ways. Players face obstacles—even being stopped at times—before reaching their end goal: in football, the end zone; in life, success. Applying imaginative variation is like playing a football game because it calls for several possible avenues to a phenomenon by approaching the phenomenon

in different ways, while engaging imagination and various frames of reference, roles and functions (Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi (2007) suggested a researcher fully embraces the phenomenon which they are studying, whether it is actual or fictitious, and with the addition of imaginative variation, helps the researcher gain a sense of essence of the phenomenon being examined. Essentially, phenomenological imaginative variation guides the researcher to determine the essence and relevance of the study's various themes that become present while the researcher is collecting data. According to Moustakas (1994), there is not a single pathway to a phenomenon's "truth," and along the research journey, the researcher will find multiple "truths" that arise from the essence of the meanings of the participant's experiences. For this study, I, with the support of the research participants, through the discussion of their lived experiences of the phenomenon, effectively decided the true essence of the information being provided, and its possible relationship with enhancing college football players' academic success to guide the direction of this study. This, in turn, will help all NCAA Division II student-athletes' achieve intellectual success, and guided the direction of this phenomenological study.

**Step 4: Synthesis of meanings and essences.** Synthesis derives as a result of the previous step, imagination variation. Moustakas (1994) asserted synthesis represents the essences reaped from using exhaustive techniques of imagination and reflective analysis of the study's phenomenon, occurring at a specific time and place. Synthesis is meant to be an iterative occurrence throughout the course of a study. By synthesizing the meanings and essences of the study, the researcher will learn to integrate the descriptions of the research themes, which will yield help the researcher produce a unified statement of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). After the study was completed, the synthesis yielded

phenomenon themes which may aid NCAA policymakers in creating effective academic policies for all student-athletes—no matter their sport or their Division.

### **Philosophical Foundations**

Phenomenology depends on several factors: beliefs, ontology, epistemology, purpose, goals, participant characteristics, audience, funders, and the positions and environments of the researcher (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Simply understood, qualitative research is the general study of the social world. Moustakas (1994) explained human science research involves human experiences that cannot be approached quantitatively because they focus the entirety of the experience by searching for the meaning and essences of the phenomenon, and qualitative studies focus on first-person accounts. Qualitative research required me to give the research participants a direct role and power in the research process. Doing so provided me opportunities to discover the phenomenon through a more in-depth lens. Importantly, the process of qualitative research created the opportunity to take an iterative, reflexive approach to the research process, which allowed me to discover a more in-depth and rich textual and structural understanding of the descriptions of the study's findings.

Through the study's process I inevitably learned and understood more about the social world, but faced issues regarding the arousal of the difference in qualitative philosophical foundations. For instance, interpretivism, which some researcher used to give full attention to the human interpretation of the social world, while giving equal attention to both the participants' and researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Ritchie et al., 2013). A popular, qualitative philosophical foundation is constructionism, which argues that knowledge is actively and constantly constructed by human beings (Ritchie et al., 2013). Other researchers focus on the psychological, social, historical, and cultural factors to gain an all-inclusive understanding of the

phenomenon (Ritchie et al., 2013). All of these different types of approaches show the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research, which are as varied, if not more so, than the options of research approaches, and may be influenced by the worldview of the researcher.

I included my opinion of the world into the expanding development of the qualitative research methodology. Through the qualitative research approach, the participants were actively involved in the dialogue and allowed for data to be discovered, which may lead to social, cultural, and organizational changes in athletic and academic balance and success. For the purpose of this study, it was believed a mixture of worldviews influenced the research design. This The findings of the study may lead to organizational improvements pertaining to academic rules and regulations across divisions and sports. The research questions were both broad and general, allowing for the participants' responses to guide the scope of the study and the meaning of the phenomenon. Open-ended survey questions were asked to allow the participants to discuss the potential problems related to a student-athlete's ability to balance their academics and their athletics.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, necessitates direct involvement from the researcher because it requires interaction of the researcher with the study's participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Qualitative researchers rely directly on the participants' statements and observations of the phenomenon. These statements allow the researcher with the ability to more fully understand and apply meaning to the participants' individual lived experiences because the qualitative research inquiry approach provides participants an avenue to express their inner lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Although the personal biases of the study's participants may have skewed their responses, the information obtained in the study's findings, I better

understood the phenomenon through my direct interactions from trustworthy, personal accounts of those who are experiencing the phenomenon. By using the research instrument, I also took upon myself the role of the research instrument interpreter and became more connected with those participating in the study. As the researcher, it was crucial to describe the participant's various qualities, experiences, expectations, assumptions and biases related to the study's subject material.

### **Researcher's Role**

It was significant for me to gain an understanding of the football players' perspectives on their academic and athletic success to suggest policy changes. These suggested changes may aid reformations to the NCAA governing board. This can be done through a direct dialogue with NCAA Division II football players. From this study's information, it is intended that I will share obtained information with participating schools' SAACs and groups such as The Drake Group—both which have an influence in NCAA policymaking. Through reports from this study, suggestions can be made to positively and effectively impact NCAA education policies for future student-athletes. For an appropriate and impactful direct dialogue to be a component of this study, it was imperative to employ a qualitative research approach. To be a critical researcher, I set aside my personal and lived experiences to more fully understand the shared, lived experiences of the study's participants (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing is a highly effective and accurate way to garner the phenomenon's meanings and essences.

If I was unable to bracket my personal experiences, I would have created more complexity and difficulty in my role as a researcher. I intentionally sought out and isolated my predetermined notions and philosophies through bracketing, which helped clarify my ideas, and separate them from those of the participants. Moustakas (1994) argued it was this intentionality



that allowed me to have the freedom to be objective. Finlay (2012) suggested qualitative research requires the researcher to have a curiosity and passion for the phenomenon, which can be seen in the presence of the research question(s). In deciding to research this phenomenon, I was fully aware that personal experiences as a mentor, tutor, and host family member of student-athletes, along with other professional and personal experiences, may influence the study and my interpretation of the study's findings. I posited that from an etic position, I was able to more fully describe and explain the lived experiences of the study's participants.

The research contains personal viewpoints of student-athletes, which I was fully aware of. These viewpoints allowed for the potential of research bias, so I remained neutral and free of suppositions. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) believed a researcher's worldview will always undergird how the world should be studied and understood. Finlay (2012) stated challenges exist for the researcher to bracket biases and to remain open to new understandings of the phenomenon existence. These biases and understandings were recognized by me. It was both critical and essential I utilized all efforts to interpret the meanings of the phenomenon that the study's participants shared with me about their lived experiences.

### **Self of the Researcher**

Guba and Lincoln (2005) argued it is important for a researcher to persuade an audience to understand the findings of a research study need to be paid attention to. Because of the researcher's passion and closeness to the research focus, a study is generally framed from a distinct place formed by the researcher's set of ideas, experiences, and understanding of the phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). I had to be particularly careful of biases and subjectivity since the study is using an etic approach to understand the data being collected. Because the language that will describe the phenomenon will not be derived organically from the study's

participants, I needed to be mindful of my own interpretation overriding the lived experiences of the study's participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Using an etic approach allowed me to determine the beliefs, behaviors and ways of being from an outsider's perspective. Football players may feel pressure to answer survey questions in a particular way (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). My intent was to be fully immersed into the study—to be an ally and co-agent of change for future student-athletes. I wanted the participants to feel they could engage with me because they were confident I supported their cause, and I did not judge their position as an athlete-scholar.

### **Researcher Background**

Growing up with a love for sports of all types, specifically college sports, caused me to be a passionate researcher of sports. I have also been active in athletic programs serving as a volunteer and a compensated employee for youth, high school, and college athletes for seventeen years. During that time, I observed players struggle to find balance in their academic and athletic pursuits. In 2017, my family hosted a college baseball player in The Coastal Plains League. During that summer, I was able to interact with athletes from Divisions I and II and from schools across the country to learn about their athletic, academic, and college experiences. During the summer of 2017, I viewed the documentary *Schooled: The Price of College Sports* (Makuhari Media, 2013), and determined something needed to be done concerning student-athletes' struggle to receive a quality education while playing college athletics. In the time since, I have discussed players' academics with researchers and advocates for student-athletes' educational success. I recognized there is a serious problem with the education policymaking in the NCAA. Specifically, the policies in place tend to overlook student-athletes outside of Division I sports.

After doing further research, with several key stakeholders regarding student-athletes' balance of academics and athletics, it was determined that it was crucial in understanding how to

make NCAA policies and procedure more effective for student-athletes is the student-athletes themselves. I learned more about Division II athletics, NCAA policies and procedures, and student-athletes. This research pointed to the necessity for changes to be made in NCAA policies and procedures. By seeking the student-athletes' opinions, I was able to better help student-athletes create academic reform, which may greatly impact their college experience and can positively impact the lives of student-athletes in the future.

### **Methodology**

The quality of the qualitative study is developed through selecting those most suitable sampling techniques (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). A purposeful sampling strategy, employing analytically focused techniques, will be used to carry out the research design of this study. A purposeful, analytical sampling strategy is based upon cases that are selected to support and deepen the analysis and synthesis of the patterns and themes. This is considered a form of emergent sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I determined the criteria, and I based the criteria upon what is deemed most appropriate to answer the research questions. Moustakas (1994) believed there were no advanced criteria for locating and selecting research participants. There may be general characteristics the researcher may consider: age, race, gender, religion, etc.—the most important consideration being given to those who have lived the experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Ravitch and Carl (2016) further explained the use of emergent sampling helps researchers understand the different experiences for different subgroups within the study's participants.

Emergent or analytically purposeful sampling will be used to select this study's research participants. Ritchie et al. (2013) described purposeful sampling as sampling that specifically selects research participants based upon location and relations that are in line with definite

Purposeful sampling me to include individuals that may have experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). Taking all these qualities into account, I took caution in remaining objective, and participant selection criteria overcame independent scrutiny (Ritchie et al., 2013). Although purposeful sampling is prone to researcher bias, the strategy provides the researcher with participants who will best represent the essence of the phenomenon, which supports a balance in student-athletes' academic and athletic success, and creating policies which will further the balanced life of student-athletes' lives, both on and off the field.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Colleges must report all NCAA student-athletes, especially those that receive funding from the government. Those students' Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) and graduation rates must be included in the college's report. These annual reports must be sent to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), along with scholarship details of student-athletes, including classification by type of sport, race, ethnicity, and gender (Chrabaszcz, 2014). Over 122,000 student-athletes participate in football throughout Division II member institutions—about 22% of the entire population of Division II schools (NCAA, 2019). The Federal law impacts Division II student-athletes, about half of which are enrolled in public universities (NCAA, 2019). For this study, there was a purposively selected group of Division II football players from public colleges or universities. These student-athletes were important to study because they belong to the two key groups the study wishes to examine: Division II football players and student-athletes attending public universities. The survey was sent to football players, enrolled in public, Division II schools and universities from around the country. This includes players from 5 of the 24 conferences participating in Division II Conferences.

Getting a broad representation of Division II student-athletes was important for the success of this study. A large percentage of Division II schools and universities budgets are used for athletic budgets, especially those schools and universities with football programs—this is about \$28 million dollars a year (NCAA, 2019). While some of this money goes directly back to the school and its athletic program, it does not necessarily translate into the academic success of the football players or other athletes. Research has shown schools will receive more funds from alumni, the NCAA, and other entities if the athletic program is successful. If athletes are successful students, the Department of Education will invest more money into those students, which will increase their likelihood of staying in school.. It has become an iterative cycle, which is necessary for the academic and athletic success of student-athletes in public universities, participating in Division II athletic programs.

Because football is an integral part of receiving funds for many Division II colleges/universities, it was important members of the football programs in Division II, public schools were surveyed to understand how they may achieve academic success and stay in school until they graduate. Football has a diverse level of impact in different states due to history and program success. It was important that the study take place at schools in locations with varying interest in football because students would have differing opinions about how playing football impacts their educational success. Surveying football players at schools of different sizes was important for the same reason.

From a list of Division II schools, narrowed down by those wishing to participate in a study involving their athletic programs, each of the potential research participants was contacted seeking their voluntary participation in the study. The personal information of the potential participants was located through public means (such as student directories), and an introductory

email was sent to potential participants to confirm study participation (Appendix A). In the email, it was stated the data collection would take place in a survey, what day the survey would be sent to the study participants, and when the deadline for returning the study's survey would be. I did not contact the prospective research participants prior to the introductory email, and I did not contact after the initial email was sent. .

### **Data Collection**

**Data gathering.** The qualitative research approach involved surveying the study's participants and analyzing the data gathered during that process. Planning for the qualitative process included preparation and execution of exploring data resources like videos, newspaper articles, photographs, observations, field notes, etc., utilizing analytical software tools, interpreting data collected, and presenting the results. The survey questions were prepared in advanced. The inquiries included questions on a variety of topics including athletic stereotypes, academics, balancing athletics and academics, and overall college experience. During the data gathering process, I examined the benefits and forewarnings associated with the research approach and determined its effectiveness to the study. During the data collection period, I was responsible for carefully planning the data gathering process to ensure the study lead to credible and reliable results.

**Data collection process and instrument.** For this study, one school's football program was chosen from 5 Division II Conferences. The football players were invited to participate in the study. Although not every football player invited to participated, the data collected from the participants provided responses appropriate and adequate to sufficiently answer the research questions (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Onwuebuze and Leech (2007) stated a sample size should not be too small that it will not accomplish data saturation, theoretical saturation, and

information redundancy. Currently, there are approximately 118,000 Division II student-athletes. About 17,000 of those athletes play football. About half of all Division II colleges and universities are public, narrowing the possible participant pool to approximately 8,000 (NCAA, n.d.c). It was presumed a large sample of the potential participants would allow for an accurate representation of the population. For this qualitative, phenomenological research approach, it was determined to be the best approach for this study, it is appropriate for a smaller participant pool (Moustakas, 1994). A typical response rate is about 20% of those contacted. I contacted football players from programs at 5 colleges, which there are about 90 on the roster. From the approximate football players I contacted, 12 responded.

A sample size from 5 colleges/universities was acceptable for this study to provide rich, in-depth data that may serve to advise effective education policy for the NCAA governing board. The sample size was sufficient to extract in depth and rich descriptions of the phenomenon (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). The open-ended and broad questions allowed for the participants to freely describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon. The data was collected, analyzed, presented, and should be a catalyst for a dialogue toward creating, reforming, and implementing effective policies or policy changes to increase academic success and a balanced college experience for Division II student-athletes.

My initial contact with potential participants was through email (Appendix A). The email introduced the study and requested the participants confirm their interest and availability to participate in the study by responding to the link located in the email. The link sent participants to a Google Doc with the study's background gathering tool and the study's questionnaire (Appendix B, C). All the participants were asked open-ended questions (Appendix C) in the survey, which they answered in any way they chose.

Ethical concerns were addressed and paid attention to at every phase of the study. The study did not include participants under the age of 18 (minors). There were no known risks taken and no intentional acts to harm the research participants. The research was in compliance with the Walden University Institutional Review Board, and the Institution Review Boards of any participating Division II school. Each participant was treated separately and collectively, with respect, dignity, and attention was given to their personal comfort and status throughout their participation in the study. For study participants' comfort, I conducted the study anonymously, so I did not know if they responded, or how they responded. Each participant was allowed to review his individual survey responses for accuracy prior to the commencement of the data analysis process. As stipulated in the informed consent for the study, each participant was unrestricted from stopping participation in the study at any time they wished, without any penalty.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Qualitative research is designed to help the world understand a phenomenon in the study participant's natural setting. This study utilized the qualitative, phenomenological approach, with an emphasis on a narrative and analytic approach to the research. These approaches were used in attempt to answer the research questions: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players of NCAA education mandates?, and What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players on their ability to balance athletic and educational success? The selected research approach aimed to gain understanding of the phenomenon through the research participant's lived experiences, and its findings were based upon the researcher's interpretive analysis of the data. Bazeley (2012) argued qualitative coding is prone to the researcher's disposition regarding their research intent, selection of methods, and



experiences. The data analysis may also be impacted by the study's intended audience. For these reasons, I remained cognizant of bias while remaining diligent to objectivity throughout the entirety of the study, particularly during the data analysis process.

Once I saturated the data collection process, the data analysis process began with me engrossing myself in the rich texts of the research participant's descriptions. The main goal of the data analysis phases was to identify trends or themes in the collected data, which led to a well-rounded and rich description of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) explained phenomenological research data analysis in terms of constructing textual and structural descriptions from the synthesized data and the organization of invariant qualities and themes derived from the essence of the shared experiences of the study's participants. To analyze the data and explain the acumen of the study's phenomenon, I engaged in a reflective and iterative interpretation and analysis process.

With large amounts of data, I was involved in every stage of the study. Some researchers choose to utilize qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). For the purpose of this study, and to remain close to the data, the decision was made not to use QDAS. Although, the decision of whether or not to use QDAS or to hand code was heavily weighed out with the pros and cons of each, it was ultimately determined hand coding was the best option for this study. Hand coding allowed me to have an easier time comparing, analyzing, and identifying patterns and themes for future research. I was aware this decision increases the likelihood of bias, so I was vigilant in every step of the process to ensure bias was avoided during the entirety of the data analysis process.

I began the manual coding process by copying responses to the one larger document. Saldaña (2016) suggested electronic coding may be overwhelming for small-scale research

projects, and for those researchers, who are coding for the first time. For these reasons, it is important to manually code. Because the scale of the study was small, and I was inexperienced with electronic coding, manual coding was used for this study. Furthermore, hand coding allowed me to take more ownership of my work by manually coding the data from the surveys (Saldaña, 2016). Although software programs were not used to code the data retrieved from the study, I used functions of Microsoft Word to aid in the coding of data after the first pass.

Most of the work was done using “old-school” techniques (Saldaña, 2016). A large area was used, along with notecards, papers, and sticky notes. These were organized into appropriate clusters to determine how the smaller pieces fit into the larger puzzle. Methods, such as these, were not possible on the size of a computer screen. After the initial hard-copy work, the analyzed data was transferred into an electronic file. This transfer was only done after the dataset codes were fairly set and determined to give me a detailed account of the study’s participants’ perspectives and lived experiences (Saldaña, 2016). According to Saldaña (2016), even proponents of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) admitted it is wise to occasionally manually code data because it allows the researcher to view the data in “fresh ways.”

Moustakas’ (1994) qualitative research methods were followed. Before data analysis commenced, all the data collected was backed-up by making several copies. All surveys were fully coded and stored in an individual file. Data in all forms were stored in secure location with only the researcher having access. This included a USB and a cloud. All survey responses were destroyed at the completion of the study. All data was reviewed in whole at the commencement of the data analysis process. I identified relevant and significant statements (quotes, jargon, idioms, etc.) that described the participants shared experiences and perceptions (Moustakas,

1994). I created a list of statements, which were identified relevant and significant. Each statement was explored with equality for relevance and significance (horizontalization of data) (Moustakas, 1994). These statements were deemed nonrepetitive/overlapping, and were unique to a single participant's experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I synthesized invariant meaning units and themes, and identify relevant and significant statements to be categorized (clusters of meanings) (Moustakas, 1994). Identifiable themes and sub-themes surfaced from the categories of data and were documented (Moustakas, 1994). I ensure the construct of the textural-structural descriptions illustrated the meanings and essences of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Narrative discussions defined the themes and sub-themes with attention to the context and location in which the phenomenon was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). I integrated all individual textural descriptions to construct amalgamated textural-structural descriptions. At times, I utilized verbatim examples in the textural descriptions of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Steps to Ensure Trustworthiness**

Phenomenological research design and its methodology is a qualitative approach to human science research in which the researcher is able to (1) focus on the entire lived experiences and perceptions of the research participants, (2) frame questions based upon the researcher's interest and intent for the study, (3) clarify meanings from the experiences, (4) develop textual accounts of the experiences; (5) presume all data gathered from the study is relative to gain an understanding of the experiences, and (6) conclude all parts of the study, including the experiences, behaviors, and responses to questions, are a significant part of the entire study's findings (Moustakas, 1994). Guba and Lincoln (1994) asserted the researcher must engage in certain assessment practices to make sure the research inquiry is rigorous; particularly,

internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Guba and Lincoln (2005) also theorized a qualitative research approach and its findings should be adequate to construct social policies and legislation. Because of the nature of the study was qualitative, the study's findings were high quality, realistic, and valid to assist in influencing public policies, which will allow for American college athletes to receive a better education and a better overall college experience. For this reason, the study's results should evidence the addressing criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

### **Credibility**

One of the most important aspects of a qualitative study is the credibility of the study. Credibility is also known as internal validity, and is determined by the level of accuracy of the implications made during the study, and whether those descriptions are recognized by those who have had the experiences being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I gave careful attention to ensure the data collection process was accurate and complete during the participants' survey responses to guarantee the findings provided the in-depth data required achieving credibility. Tracy (2010) explained credibility in a qualitative research design is achieved by necessitating there are thick descriptions, member checking, and multivocality and partiality.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is determined by a study's data collection process, interpretation, and analysis consistency and ability to be repeated for the same results (Morse, 2015). Trustworthiness was a part of my criteria from the beginning of the study because remaining subjective was often difficult during a qualitative research approach because my approach, focus, intent, and experiences influenced my thinking (Bazeley, 2012). I established neutrality by bracketing bias prior to and during the collection of data, interpretation, and the analysis process,

which assisted in making sure the study has dependability (Popper, 1965). Dependability is often dependent on the study's ability to be repeated in the same context, with the same methods, with the same participants with the expectation the study's findings will be similar each time (Sata, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014). I employed in-depth methodological descriptions, void of bias, to realize dependability. One way which the research achieved this was through data and perspectival triangulation. Triangulation is ways in which the researcher enhances the study's validity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data triangulation uses many data sources—in the case of this study, space and person—to analyze the data collected more fully (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Perspective triangulation employs the intentional and systematic inclusion of many different participant perspectives to determine the complete range of perspectives on what is occurring in the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Employing deep methodological processes, being void of biases, and employing triangulation warranted a dependable and authentic interpretation of the data collected.

### **Confirmability**

In a qualitative research study, I took on the role of the research instrument, which made avoiding researcher bias, objectivity, and data interpretation inventions more challenging than if I was not hands-on (Polit & Beck, 2012). Confirmability, also known as objectivity, is pivotal to attain during the course of a qualitative study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The best way to achieve confirmability was to be sure my belief construct was discussed in the research report, including why I chose the approach I did, so the reader knew of any weaknesses in the techniques I adopted (Sata et al., 2014). According to Morse (2015), the use of triangulation and the reflective process will help reduce researcher bias and strengthen confirmability. I remained aware of my

bias and predispositions but was authentic with the data during every stage of the data interpretation and analysis processes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Polit & Beck, 2012).

### **Transferability**

To attain external validity, or transferability, it is vital the research results can be extended to other individuals, settings, times, and situations than the one which has been studied in the present study (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). Transferability occurs when the reader feels the research can overlap and is representative of their own story. The reader can place herself in the story, and therefore, understand the data through her own experiences (Tracy, 2010). It was the goal of the present study to achieve transferability by describing the phenomenon, as described by the study's participants, in thick, rich, and in-depth descriptions of their lived experiences that were inferred upon other settings and similar groups (Morse, 2015). It was the hope the data presented from the findings of this study would be able to be transferred to other college athletes. The research participant's descriptions of the phenomenon were included in my description, and if necessary, I included quotations from the participant's surveys to illuminate the study's themes. Doing so helped demonstrate the study's findings to further achieve transferability. Most importantly, the goal of this research was to appeal to the reader, while feeling real to them, especially current college athletes. This study intended to shed light on Division II college athletes, a population often overlooked. I hope this study will gain the interest of the wider population and have external validity to support its ability to influence NCAA's education policy creation and implementation.

### **Ethical Procedures**

According to Simpson (2011), most universities require the researcher to discuss her plan for ethical procedures to protect the school and the researcher from litigation and funding.

Funding sources are discussed to include the entire plan, preparation, data processes, and the termination of the study (Simpson, 2011). This qualitative study involved human research participants, I committed to presenting the authentic representation of the data collected and the use of raw data, I put forth every effort to protect all parties from risk and harm resulting from participation in the study (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012; World Medical Association, 1964; World Medical Association, 2008). The compliance oversight of this study's procedures was the responsibility of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB was completed, submitted, and received full IRB approval, # 08-16-19-0662182, before the data collection process commenced. There was no contact with the research participants or any data collection performed prior to the IRB approval (Rowley, 2014). During the entirety of the study, each participant was made aware and reminded they did not need to respond to the survey, and there was no penalty for doing so.

I was present and active during all phases of the study and was the only person to have direct access to the data. There was no additional researcher or persons engaged in the data collection or analysis process, and there was no additional confidentiality requirements necessary of any additional person (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012). Those participating in the study were informed of all the aspects of the study prior to their involvement, and those participating had the option to not participate. Each participant was made aware of the procedures to protect the confidentiality of the data, including anonymity of participation, data storage in a locked safe and saved on a password-protected computer, and deletions of all completed surveys at the conclusion of the study. There was no anticipated risk or harm done to any of the research participants as a result of their participation in the study. Each participant was assured of their anonymity, with no direct identifying markers stated in the research report.

It was my responsibility to fully disclose to those participating in the study: the purpose of the research, the study's procedures, and the survey protocol. Following IRB protocols and standards, each participant was given an informed consent (World Medical Association, 2008). The informed consent form detailed: the nature of the study, the participant's expectations, the anticipated risks and benefits, confidentiality notices, and emphasized participation in this study was strictly voluntary. It was disclosed to the research participants the research will be used to fulfill a portion of the doctoral degree requirements of Walden University. I disclosed the study's information and findings are intended to be shared or published in whole or part to the Division II SAACs, The Drake Group, in academic journals, textbooks, and may be utilized for presentation purposes at academic and sport stakeholder settings, inclusive of sport governance conferences and meetings.

### **Summary**

To richly describe the essence of the studied phenomenon involving the examination of the shared, lived experiences of college athletes, specifically Division II football players at public colleges/universities, the qualitative, phenomenological research approach was the most appropriate. I solidified my determination to utilize the qualitative research approach during the research design and rationale section of this chapter, in which the traditions of inquiry and philosophical foundations are discussed and supported the selection of the phenomenological research approach. Due to the nature of the qualitative research approach, it was essential to discuss the role of the researcher, and how potential bias was bracketed to produce the best study possible (Moustakas, 1994). The research methodology section details the participant selection logic, data collection, and data analysis plan to further justify a qualitative research approach will provide a thorough, detailed, and comprehensive research report, which will present an



understanding of the phenomenon studied to potentially influence NCAA policymaking and implementation regarding college academics. It was of critical importance the trustworthiness (and any potential concerns regarding trustworthiness) were considered and addressed in full detail with a full description of what steps were taken to achieve credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Chapter Three offered an in-depth account of the ethical procedures and concerns, including a detailed discussion of the Walden University IRB oversight and compliance, the data handling procedures, and the care of those participating in the study, which were crucial components in the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study's results found in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological, narrative study was to share the opinions of a selected group of college football players attending Division II public colleges and universities; to explore their ideologies, influences, and motivations in their college experiences and how these decisions are influenced by their ability to balance their academic and athletic lives. Their responses were explored in relation to the NCAA's education mandates. The phenomenological methodology approach was employed to provide opportunities for college football players in Division II, public schools to discuss their shared, lived experiences relating to their ability to balance their athletic and academic lives. The following central research questions shaped the questions for the questionnaires used in this study:

*RQ1:* What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players of NCAA education mandates?

*RQ 2:* What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players on their ability to balance athletic and educational success?

The chapter presents findings from participant questionnaires of 11 NCAA Division II, public university/colleges who were currently enrolled in their school and on the football team roster. Descriptions of the participants' lived experiences were gathered from the responses to the sent questionnaire. Additionally, in this chapter, the setting of the questionnaire, the research participants' demographics, and method of data collection will be discussed. There is a discussion involving the data analysis of the study including a presentation of the evidence supporting the trustworthiness of the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's results answering the overarching research questions.

### **Setting**

Each research participant was in a different setting for their questionnaire responses. No one was requested to be moved from their regular routine or place of residence for the duration of their responses to the questionnaire. Informed Consent was received when the participants responded to the questionnaire. Each participant chose the location, date, and time which they responded to their questionnaires, as the questionnaire invitation was sent to each participant during the study's data collection frame (three weeks).

Because all the participants were located in different areas of the country, each questionnaire was sent via email, and their response time and location, etc. was determined by the respondent. Conducting the questionnaires through email minimized research bias because I was not involved in the collection of data on a face-to-face level. As I reviewed the participants' responses, they were unaware of my facial expressions in response. Although the questionnaire was intended to take the participants 15-20 minutes, each participant was allowed as much time as they wanted to freely respond. Each research participant was comfortable in their setting of choice and was able to answer the interview questions in whichever way they chose.. Each questionnaire response was recorded in Google Docs, and enough information was obtained an understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Demographics**

The criterion sampling design for this study required that the research participant was a football player at a public, Division II college or university. There were 12 male participants, who played a variety of positions on the football team. The participants work and reside in several states across the United States. The participants ages ranged from 18-22, All of the respondents were sophomores, juniors, or seniors. However, the eligibility ranged greatly, with

half players indicated they were redshirted. In college athletics, a player is considered redshirted when their academic year is a year ahead of their athletic eligibility. For example, a redshirt freshman indicates an academic sophomore, who is in their first year of athletic participation. The participants GPAs ranged from 2.0-3.53 with a mean GPA of 2.92. Most of the participants were not starters, but every respondent received scholarship funding to attend school. Answers on how many hours the student-athletes spent on athletics each week ranged from 8-20, with half of the responses responding 20 hours. Figure 1 and Figure 2 illustrate key demographics asked in the Background Information Form.

Significant to this study is each of the football player's perspectives on how their academics and athletics influence one another. It was important for the research questions to be answered in the participants' own words because they are a group that is not frequently researched. To gain an understanding of this study's phenomenon, it was imperative to explore several aspects of the respondents' college lives. I wanted them to tell me in their own words how they felt they were able to balance college life—academically and athletically. Through their responses, it was evident, like other college students, college athletes have a variety of experiences while attending their university or college.

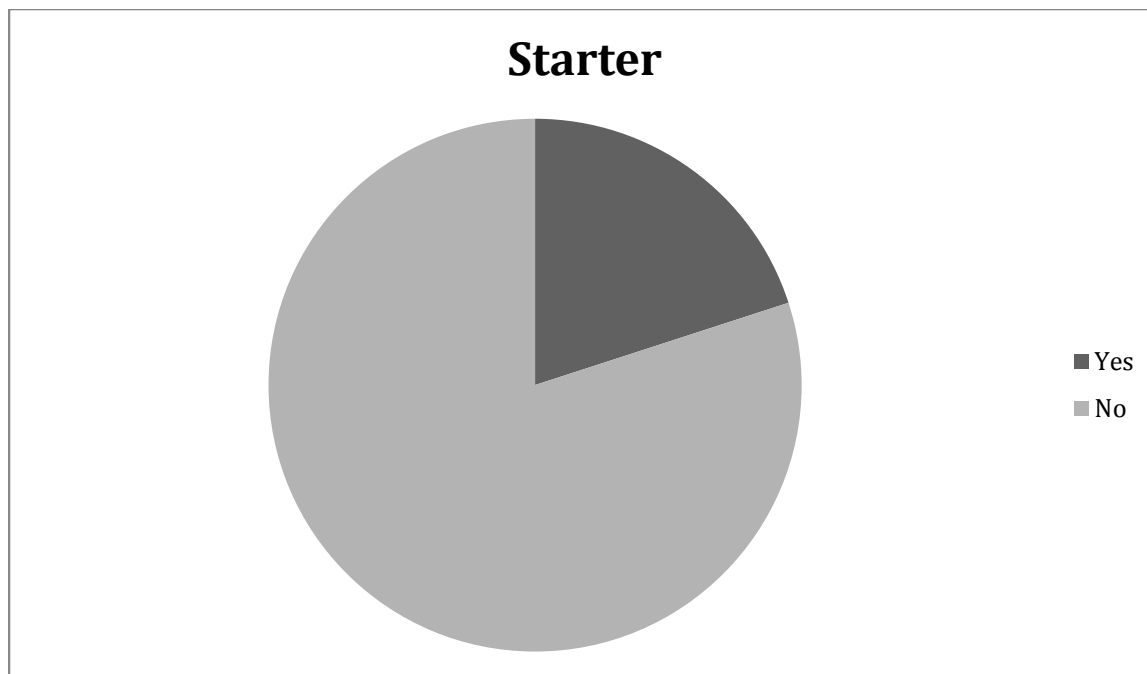


Figure 1. Starter versus nonstarter

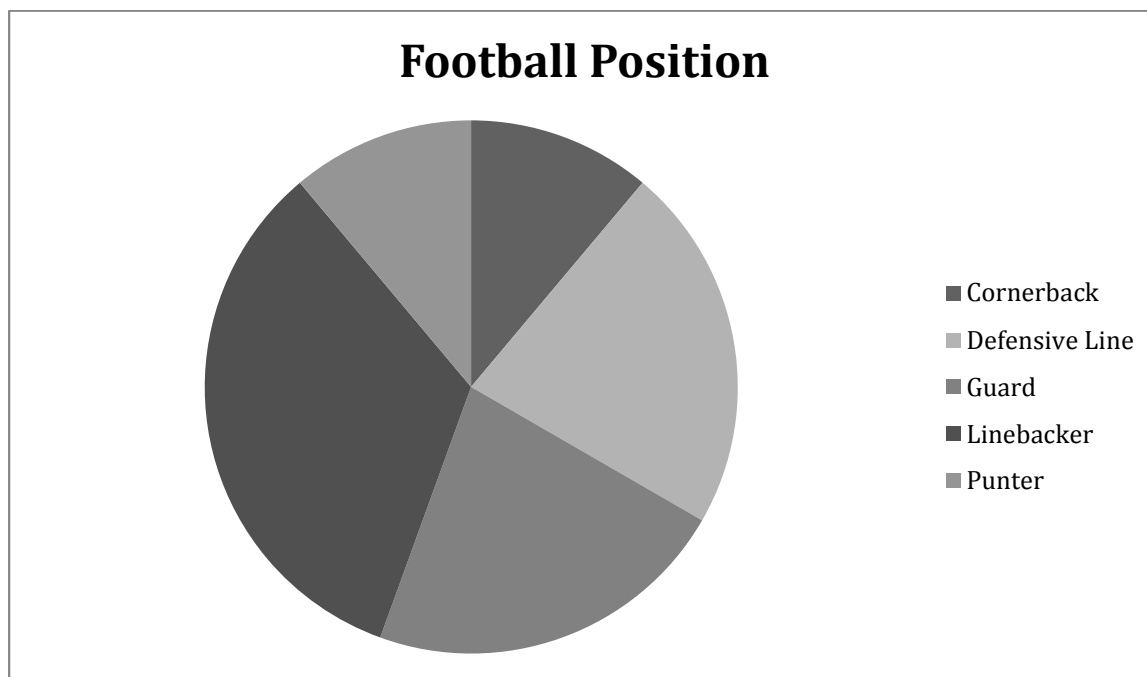


Figure 2. Football position

### Data Collection

According to NCAA statistics, there are about 122, 000 Division II football players (NCAA, n.d.c). To narrow down the participant pool, I focused on public colleges and

universities, where the student scholarship funds are obtained by taxpayer dollars. Doing so reduced the potential participant pool to about 65,000 (NCAA, n.d.c). For this study, 5 schools and I worked together to contact their football players. From the 500+ questionnaire invitations sent, 12 participants responded. All the participants were active male football players on Division II football squads. Each participant's contact information was retrieved from public sources through their respective school's athletic department, student directory, or social media. Recruitment and receiving questionnaire responses took approximately 60 days from the date of receiving IRB approval. There were no variations in the data collection presented in Chapter 3.

Because the nature of the study was total anonymity, the participants were thanked for choosing to fill out the questionnaire at the time the study's invitation was sent to them (see Appendix A). It was their choice to answer the questionnaires. I did not contact them after the invitation email was sent. I do not know who responded to the questionnaire. In conjunction with the questionnaire, participants answered a series of questions about their background (see Appendix B). Each participant was reminded of the research focus, that the questionnaire responses would be recorded, and that the responses would be sent in a report to their school's SAAC's and to The Drake Group (see Appendix A). As the final statement before the beginning of the questionnaire, the participant was informed that at any time they could choose not to participate in the study for any reason, or leave questions unanswered, with no penalty to them.

Because the anonymous nature of the questionnaire, I was unable to see the participants' responses, and I was also unable to prompt the participants to further explain their responses. There were 10 open-ended questions as outlined by the Data Collection Tool (see Appendix C). The investigative questions assisted with gathering information of the lived experiences of the participants. Each response occurred at the participant's convenience, and was recorded using

Google Docs. There were 5 rounds of surveys sent out between August 19-September 25, 2019. The participants in each round of surveys were given 3 weeks to respond to their invitation. The deadline for the last round of surveys was October 16, 2019. The participants were given as long as they wanted to complete the surveys, and by submitting them, they agreed their responses were acceptable. Some participants chose not to respond to every question. The emphasis of the study was to ensure an underserved population in the country's largest collegiate sports organization had to opportunity to express their opinions.

### **Data Analysis**

A researcher studying phenomenological data should concentrate on the raw data (Finlay, 2014). Phenomenological research data analysis constructs textual and structural descriptions from the synthesis and organization of qualities and themes derives from the essence of the participants' shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Finlay (2014) further explained the researcher must be fully engaged to manage all intrusions and pre-conceived notions of the data to ensure the studied phenomenon is given the attention it deserves. Using the dwelling process and staying fully engaged in the data, helped me discover the trends and themes I found in the data that were identified as rich and comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon. Furthermore, those trends and themes helped reveal the essence of the phenomenon. To consciously navigate through the data analysis process and maintain integrity, data analysis procedures were followed.

### **Prepare and Organize Data for Analysis**

The data was collected in a Google Docs file which was saved on a password-protected computer stored in my bedroom. The link the participants received was totally anonymous, and no identifying characteristics of those who responded were stored. The responses were separated

individually, as well as in comparison with the other responses. This allowed me to easily view the data, and identify themes for each of the questionnaire's questions. The questions were listed in order, followed by their responses. This pattern was followed for each of the questionnaire's 10 questions. All data was then reviewed in whole.

### **Data Review**

From the questionnaire responses of the 12 participants, there were 10 pages of double-spaced raw data. It was not complicated to review the entire set of data, and individual data, multiple times. After multiple data organizations and reviews, all reviews were performed with ease. While some responses were lengthier than others, all responses were explored with equal relevance and significance.

### **Data Analysis With Horizontal Process**

Moustakas' (1994) data analysis procedures suggest to find relevant and significant statements (quotes, jargon, idioms, etc.) be identified. This is where I began my data analysis. These statements were used to describe the participants' lived experiences. Each statement was explored with equal relevance and significance. After reviewing the participants' responses as a whole, it was evident the love of football, finances, education, and time management were important factors in collegiate athletic life. Additionally, it was clear that student-athletes didn't know, or didn't bother to learn, the NCAA's educational policies, and how they applied to them.

Statements (quotes, jargon, idioms, etc.) relevant and significant while also remaining non-repetitive/non-overlapping, and unique to a single participant's experience were identified. One participant reported, "I don't have a college life because I'm either working on homework/studying, in class, or practicing." This statement indicates there isn't much balance between the respondent's academic and athletic experience at college. If there



was a balance, he would have more of a social life while attending college. While most players suggested ways they could balance their academic and athletic pursuits, such as tutors, time management, etc. However, one participant stated what many scholars believe. He stated, “If a student-athlete wants to be successful, it's their responsibility to make it happen.”

### **Generation of Themes and Sub-Themes**

To make sense of raw, qualitative data, that raw data must be organized into some logical order to synthesize invariant meaning units and themes (Moustakas, 1994). First, the data was separated into manageable units. When reviewing the data, and searching for patterns, I asked myself to following questions:

1. What things about the college athletes’ lived experiences stand out to me?
2. What is to be learned from the college football players’ shared lived experiences?
3. What needs to be told to others to effect positive social change in the lives of collegiate athletes, regarding their ability to balance their athletic and academic pursuits while attending college?

After full investigation of the data categories (clusters and meanings), several themes and sub-themes emerged, including:

1. Players chose Division II colleges because they wanted to play football
  - finances were also a factor
  - distance from home also a factor
  - education played a small role in the decision
2. Balancing academic and athletic lives
  - time, which they must manage
  - hard work

- physical and mental stress
3. The players have recommendations for others students/NCAA
- incorporate more videos to expand knowledge of rules
  - tutoring as a resource
  - manage time appropriately
  - be knowledgeable

### **Codes and Categories**

Qualitative research design requires consolidating meaning and developing explanations of the data. To do so, a systematic application of organizing, dividing, grouping, re-organizing and linking the data needs to occur (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This systematic application creates order through data coding, which can be both a priori and emerging. After multiple reviews of the participants' responses, a priori codes were identified from the research purpose and problem areas, theoretical framework, and research questions to maintain coherence during my examination of the data. The following codes were initially utilized

- Time
- Athletics
- Academics
- Relationships
- Reasons
- Effort
- Atypical college experience
- Accountability

As codifying ensued, additional codes and categories emerged.

### **Interpreting the Meaning of the Data**

Each research participant was comfortable with responding to the questionnaires' questions. The respondents freely answered the research questions and provided varying responses. Due to the nature of varied responses, I had to rely on some researcher subjectivity and interpretation of the data, though the responses tended to lead in a certain direction. I took the liberty to interpret the data, based on the responses, to describe the participants' experiences of the phenomenon. However, I did use textural-structural descriptions and verbatim examples to illustrate the meanings and essences of the experiences discussed.

### **Presentation of Themes and Sub-themes**

The study was prompted by the overarching research questions. Narrative discussions described the themes and sub-themes of the phenomenon as experienced by the research participants. Additionally, there was an integration of textural descriptions used to construct the composite textural-structural descriptions. A descriptive narrative, including verbatim examples, formulated the details of the study's results. The findings for the study are discussed in the results section of this chapter and presented by answering each of the study's guiding research questions.

### **Discrepant Information**

Using open-ended survey questions during data collection, allowed each of the participants to respond as they wished. They were given the opportunity to freely expand any ideas they wish regarding their college experience—academically and athletically, which allowed for a variety of responses. Some statements provided more clarity, while others were not closely related to the research focus. Even though there was data collected that did not directly relate to the study, all participant statements were automatically recorded and included in the

data analysis process. The information that was shared in statements, which were perceived not to be closely related to the study, allowed me to increase the scope of patterns I found from the conforming data. Furthermore, inclusion of the anomalous statements helped me gain additional insight of the complexities of the phenomenon.

### **Evidence to Increase Trustworthiness**

It is critical in qualitative research design to ensure that the study's findings are high quality, realistic, and valid to positively impact social change. Moustakas (1994) stated that a valid research inquiry: (a) proves its truth value; (b) delivers the basis for applying it; and (c) permits external judgments to be made about the consistence of procedures and neutrality of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative study and its findings should be sufficient to construct social policies and legislation (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Standards of significance, practicality, and authenticity were incorporated into the trustworthiness of this study and were pursued to reassure the study's audience that the study's findings are reasonable. Following is a discussion of the strategies that were implemented to achieve trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

Credibility, which is also known as internal validity, is determined by the level of accuracy of the inference made during the study, and whether the reported descriptions are recognized by others who have also had the experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To ensure the accuracy of the collected data, four strategies were employed: data collection tool, electronically recording each participant's responses twice, taking written notes, and allowing the participants time to check their responses. The data collection tool allowed me to ask each participant the same questions, which they were allowed to respond to in the manner in which they chose. Reflective notes were taken during the study's time frame. Those notes include attention to the

participants' grammar, syntax, and my thoughts and reactions to the responses. As a final strategy to ensure the study's credibility, there were examinations of the results, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations of the study.

### **Dependability**

A study's ability to be repeated is its dependability—in the same context, with the same methods, same participants, and with the expectation the study's findings will be similar each time (Sata et al., 2014). In regards to this study, I ensured dependability by following the same data collection, analysis, and interpretation procedures for every participant. The research methods included code-recode procedures spanning 8+ weeks to guarantee a rich, comprehensive examination and account of the findings. Each participant provided responses to fully describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon. I utilized overlapping interview questions to confirm the responses were to similar inquiries. The research methods employed during the study support the use of a step-by-step replication process to allow other researchers to have similar findings.

### **Confirmability**

Research confirmability, also called objectivity, is crucial for to achieve in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to Miles and Huberman (2014) suggested that researchers must admit their bias to obtain research confirmability. Acknowledging research bias as a critical source of research subjectivity, I took steps to bracket my bias to further halt my experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Along with acknowledging and bracketing bias, I took reflective notes detailing what was known, and what was perceived as new information.

Furthermore, to assure the study's confirmability and minimize the intrusion of researcher bias, I created an audit-trail of the data (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Steps were taken

to facilitate researcher objectivity by employing a data collection tool to guide the participant survey questions. The participants' responses were recorded and reviewed multiple times. Additionally, data was code-recode without omission of any statements. Revelations of shared lived experiences of the phenomenon were discovered by commonly used words and phrases found in the responses. All these steps guaranteed a full report of the raw data. Once data was determined as relevant to answer the research question, it was included in a chart to safeguard against researcher bias.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is external validity, and is evident when the research results may be extended to other individuals in similar settings, times, and situations other than the ones being studied (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). I engaged a purposefully selected group of NCAA Division II, public football players across the United States due to similar goals and life experiences with their peers, and their ability to be trustworthy because of their athletic participation, to sport stakeholders. Despite this study's sample size being small compared to the potential number of research participants, the selection of these players, and the research process followed, supports the transferability of this study. This study was designed with a specific criterion sample, and a data collection tool that could be used with additional public, Division II football players to study further in the same manner. Further research could target different groups of public, Division II football players with different sets of private criteria (i.e. conference, school size, etc.) utilizing the same data collection tool in those various data collection settings.

Additionally, to further advance the transferability of this study, the qualitative research design approach was deemed appropriate for the public, Division II football players participant

group because it allowed the participants to openly share their lived experience. Although the participants responded to pre-determined, open-ended interview questions, each was allowed the opportunity to detail their experiences of the phenomenon without limitations. Because of the use of common language and phrases, themes, and similar research participant responses in the research results section, the findings and conclusions are applicable to other groups and situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). To further this study's transferability, the use of descriptive, rich, and in-depth accounts of the participants' experiences could be inferred as relevant by other groups of public, Division II football players and sport stakeholders. More football players would be able to identify the research overlap and view this research as applicable and transferable to their own experiences.

### **Results**

The current study presented the following overarching research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players of NCAA education mandates?

RQ 2: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players on their ability to balance athletic and educational success? To answer the research questions, the purposively selected group of research participants responded to a participant background form, and a survey with 10 open-ended questions, asking them about their college experiences. From the 12 participants, raw data was collected. From that raw data, it was determined that the significant themes and sub-themes that emerged during the data analysis process would be interconnected to provide focus for the results discussion. It was also the most effective means to present the findings would be to organize the results discussion, according to the participants experiences, perspectives, research question, and include quoted responses.

### **Research Participant Experiences and Perspectives**

The questions asked of the participants were intended to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives relating to the study's phenomenon. All of the participants played college football in various positions. To further explain the experiences associated with playing college football in a public, Division II school, a respondent stated: "I love football, being part of a team, and participating in something that few have the opportunity of which to be a part." This is the essence of playing college athletics. The primary influences of the players' approaches and practices emanates from a variety of sources that included "love of the sport," playing for family and friends, and the opportunity to play football while earning an education. Each participant also discussed their influences during their college football careers.

### **Reasons for Choosing Division II College**

After the participants responded to the background information form, the participants answered why they chose a Division II college. The answers included:

- Best offer
- Best option money wise
- It was close to home and I could afford it.
- To achieve financial reward to pay for school.
- Because I love football, and needed a way to pay for school
- Only offers were Division II
- Due to the academic programs available and the ability to play football.
- So I could get an engineering degree and play football



- To play football
- To play football and get a good education

Twenty percent of responses included the terminology “offer(s). An offer is just as it sounds—an offer to play college athletics while attending college. Generally, a scholarship coincides with the offer, but that is not always the case. While 40% discussed finances as an important factor in their decision. Half of the participants listed a love of football as their reason, and another half listed education as an important factor. Therefore, it can be concluded that football players choose to play at Division II colleges for a variety of reasons.

### **Motivation**

As with the participants reasoning for choosing to go to a Division II college or university to play football at, the reasons they were motivated to play also varied widely with some overlap. These reasons included: family relationships, receiving an education, the love of the sport, and the desire to be challenged. One participant’s answer summated the answers for all the participants when he said, “I love football, being part of a team, and participating in something that few have the opportunity of which to be a part.” Clearly, motivation is an important part of playing college football, and there are many reasons why the players choose to play.

### **External Factors**

Just as there are many reasons to choose a college, and many reasons players feel motivated, there are numerous external factors that influence a players ability to balance their academic and athletic lives. Most responded their family or other close relationships, and one mentioned their relationship with God. Other factors were finances, hard work, time, studying/homework, classes, and practice. It is important to note that one respondent said, “I

don't have a college life." Because the motto of Division II regards balance, this statement tends to indicate a better job needs to be done for student-athletes to balance their academic and athletic pursuits to have a fulfilled college life.

### **Self-Advice**

It was important to discover what advice student-athletes would give themselves if they were to start over as freshman. Most of the responses included personal choices, and included:

- "Find God sooner"
- "Always do the little things right and give it your best."
- "The more time you put in the better the outcome will be."
- "be smarter about off the field decisions."
- "Don't skip classes even to do homework."
- "Time management is crucial, create a schedule and stick to it."
- "Cut down on wasted time."
- "Do better in the easy classes."
- "Do all the homework on my own without help from solution manuals. Also go into office hours more."

Time and doing well in classes were major advice that most of the participants said they would give themselves. Most of the responses were ones in which the participant would hold themselves accountable, while there was some hint of needing outside help to keep them on track for balancing their academic and athletic successes. In order for college athletes to balance their academic and athletics, they must also find balance within themselves and the resources available to them.

## **Experience**

It was also important to ask the participants what they learned since they entered the program about being an athlete and a student. Time was again crucial to most participants answers—about 50% of the responses explicitly mentioned time in some manner. One respondent stated, “School and giving back to the community are more important than athletic performance.” This was interesting to note because one of the important factors of Division II athletics is service to the community. One participant’s response indicated how important balance is to football players’ college experiences, “How much time management matters when it comes to being successful in football and school. If you're truly putting in all the work for school (extra studying, office hours, etc.) and football (recovery, extra lifts, film), then you shouldn't have time to be screwing around a lot.” This participant learned to balance his academics and athletics to have a successful college career.

## **Academic Experience Versus Peers**

Most studies regarding college athletic participation compare the academic of experience of college athletes to the experience of their peers; likewise, the twelve participants in this study were asked how they felt their academic experience compared to that of their colleagues. As in previous studies, the participants had a variety of viewpoints of their academic experience compared to their peers. Answers ranged from “much harder” (most common response” to “different” to “around the same.” Although there were a variety of responses, almost every participant stated a factor which they felt made their academic experience similar of different from their peers. These factors included:

- “professors understand our demand to represent the school and give us a little more freedom to achieve class work.”

- extra practice
- stress
- “students who are working”
- doing work “late at night”
- major choice
- time management/ no procrastination

Just as if I were to ask other college students about their college experience, student-athletes have varied college experiences.

### **Sport Effect on Academic Effort**

Balance requires concentrating on both athletics and academics. The participants were asked how their participation in sports impact their educational efforts. While most participants stated their participation made their academic pursuits more difficult, there reasons were similar to others stated before—time, stress level, focus, and energy. Although most participants indicated sports had a negative impact on their academic effort, one participant said, “Allows me to further myself.” The participants’ responses did not seem to designate there were feelings college athletes could not participate in athletics while earning an education.

### **How the NCAA Can Help Students Achieve**

The participants were asked, “How do you feel the NCAA rules can better help you achieve academically and athletically?” It was important to ask this question because the Division II motto is “Life in Balance,” which implies that the rules should help student-athletes achieve balance. Most of the responded they didn’t know the rules, or how the rules could help them. One responded the NCAA should provide athletes a tutor, which shows he doesn’t know the rules, and how they pertain to him. About 1/3 of the football players felt that the rules helped

“keep them on track.” The two complaints the participants stated were needing more time between games, and making sure the rules were the same for every participating school. Like the NCAA suggests, one participant said, “If a student-athlete wants to be successful, it's their responsibility to make it happen.” Ultimately, the responsibility is the student-athletes to achieve both academically and athletically. Both take time and effort.

### **How the NCAA Can Help Students Understand Rules and Regulations**

After asking how the NCAA rules could better help the student-athletes achieve academically and athletically, the participants were asked, “How can the NCAA help you better understand the rules and regulations, related to education, that you must follow?” One participant felt the rules were “pretty clear, “ and two more felt they didn’t currently know, and they “wouldn’t remember” the rules no matter what the NCAA did to present them. The most common response to the question was the use of videos to present the student-athletes the rules.

### **How to Better Utilize Assistance**

Finally, the participants were asked how they could better utilize the assistance provided to them. This was intended to be an accountability question. Most respondents—about half—stated they did not know the help available to them, or how to better utilize that assistance. One suggested to know the resources available, and two said to use the advisors and tutors available. The student-athletes must know what resources are available to them, and then take advantage of those resources.

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 proved an analysis of the in-depth data collected from the purposefully selected research participant group of public, Division II collegiate football players from 5 colleges/universities throughout the United States. The 12 research participants responded to an

email questionnaire of 10 open-ended questions to gain understanding the phenomenon of a student-athlete's ability to balance their education and athletic pursuits to have a fulfilling college experience. The responses were used to answer the study's overarching research questions: What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players of NCAA education mandates?; and What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players on their ability to balance athletic and educational success? Research participants revealed insights that could be essential to modifying current NCAA education policies, or creating new, more effective educational mandates.

The research questions inquired about the areas of college life as they pertained to college athletes in the NCAA system. Several themes emerged: time management, work ethic, personal relationships, education, finances, and the love of sport. In answering the research questions, the participants provided information relating to the experiences of Division II college athletes, and potential changes that could aid future student-athletes have a balanced and satisfying college experience. Most of the participants felt there was a need for them to receive assistance to understand the rules about education the NCAA has put in place, and their ability to accomplish both academically and athletically.

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the shared lived experiences of the research participants were explored to understand their perspectives of NCAA policies, and their ability to balance their academic and athletic lives to have a well-rounded college experience. To gain understanding of the phenomenon, the research questions explored the lived experiences of public, Division II football players from 5 colleges across the United States. Several themes emerged, which indicated accountability for the NCAA and the student-athletes themselves. The

research participants provided a list of crucial aspects to consider in drafting organizational policy regarding education in the NCAA.

Chapter 5 focuses on discussions involving the conclusions and recommendations relating to the study's findings. The study's limitations will also be discussed. Recommendations for future research and contributions to NCAA education policies, and potential federal influences will also be presented in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore Division II football players' lived experiences regarding their ability to balance their academic and athletic pursuits and to gain an understanding of how they perceived their overall college experience. For this study, college athletes were the best resource to provide information relating to student-athletes' college experience because college athletes play games, practices, studies, and try to have a social life and fulfilling college experience. There is a limited amount of research exploring NCAA Division II athletics relating to education. Therefore, exploring the perceptions of Division II football players was necessary to identify ways to improve educational policies of the NCAA.

With a growing increase of academic scandal in recent years and a growing public concern for college athletes' educational needs, the nature of this study was to investigate and describe the public, Division II college football players' experiences and perspectives of their ability to balance academics and athletics and have a fulfilling college experience.

Because of the hundreds of thousands of active Division II college football players, this qualitative phenomenological study purposively selected a small sample size. The phenomenological research size was determined to be the most appropriate for this study because it focuses on shared experiences and behaviors of the individual and group to describe the essence of the phenomenon (see Moustakas, 1994). This study had 12 research participants that currently play college football at a public, Division II school. Each participant completed an online questionnaire and provided rich, in-depth responses to the study's research questions:



*RQ1:* What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players of NCAA education mandates?

*RQ 2:* What are the perceptions of public college/university Division II football players on their ability to balance athletic and educational success?

Key findings that emerged from this study were:

- Student-athletes need to understand the NCAA rules and the resources available to help them succeed academically.
- Participants conveyed the need for accountability regarding decision-making and time management.
- Participants suggested ways in which the NCAA could help them better understand the educational rules they must follow and the resources available to them from the NCAA and their school.
- Participants suggested the need for more videos regarding training college athletes about the NCAA rules.
- The importance of close relationships was emphasized by the participants as a factor influencing their collegiate athletic career.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This study's research participants provided in-depth responses during their questionnaire responses. The questionnaire had 10 open-ended questions, which asked participants to share details of their lived experiences that included reflections of their participation in college football, as well as their educational pursuits. This section is a discussion of an interpretation of the study's findings.

The research participants shared details of their collegiate experience—academically and athletically, emphasizing the importance balancing the two plays. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are many factors which impact a student-athlete’s ability to balance their educational and athletic pursuits. Some of these factors include time management, stereotype threat, academic advisors, the NCAA rules and mandates, institutional culture, and accountability. It was clear from the research participants and supported literature that a healthy support system and positive decision-making are crucial in the players’ abilities to have a fulfilling college experience.

### **Discussion of Research Question 1**

From the participant’s questionnaire responses, it is evident not much player perspectives regarding the educational rules of the NCAA exist. While the questionnaire responses indicated participants did know the initial eligibility rules to play collegiate football, it does not appear that they know much more after they begin playing football. Several of the participants responded they didn’t know the rules at all. This is a serious problem because student-athletes across the country commit to a college for every year under the assumption they know the NCAA’s rules (Cooper et. al, 2017). Most of them don’t know what they are signing. When infractions are committed by the student-athletes, the NCAA is not forgiving of the claims of ignorance (Cooper et. al, 2017). The lack of knowledge is a problem for both the student-athletes and the NCAA.

Many parties need to be held accountable for this lack of knowledge. First and foremost, the student-athletes. Ultimately, the student-athletes are responsible for their education, and balancing their athletics and academics. This means, they need to read the manual, know the rules, refer back to them throughout the year, and ask for clarification if they need it. Furthermore, student-athletes need to make decisions about what is important to them; they need

to be able to manage their time, and their external influences to make sure they can accomplish in both their academic and athletic careers.

Although the student-athletes are ultimately responsible for their success, they need others to help them. This may include asking their head coach, assistant coaches, their academic advisers, their NCAA advisers, the SAACs, their family and friend support, and other campus resources available to them. At times, the student-athletes' support system may have to push the student-athlete, as with any other college students. However, members of that support system need proper training (Hodes et al., 2016). This will require the NCAA to make policies regarding the type of training the advisers they provide to the school will need to fulfill, and then ensure that the training requirements are fulfilled. The committee that oversees academic policies needs to do a better job at creating policies which ensure proper and efficient training because their role within the NCAA is to oversee the organization's academic policies (Chrabaszcz, 2014). After all, the NCAA's mission is complete development of the student-athletes—this means academically and athletically (Snyder, 2015). This may mean the NCAA Executive Board may need to relinquish some control to the school's University Presidents, who are supposed to play an advisory role (Chandler, 2014; Goodyear, 2016).

If university presidents were able to supervise the student-athletes at their schools, they could guarantee they get their wish—that Athletic Directors were in charge of all aspects of student-athletics to uphold academic integrity (Chandler, 2014). However, Athletic Directors being in charge of every aspect of college athletics may have the opposite effect because their interest is athletics, so it can be assumed they would put athletic pursuits ahead of academics. Furthermore, Athletic Directors may rely on the NCAA because of the funding they received

from the organization. The NCAA does not supervise the academic activities; that supervision responsibility falls on the school (Traschler & Cotrufo, 2017).

All this debate over who oversees the academic regulations of the NCAA indicates the need for a third-party to get involved. Although the NCAA is a non-government organization, and does not have to answer the Department of Education, the universities and colleges do have to report to the federal government because they receive government funding generated by taxpayer dollars. Research is ambiguous about how involved the government can be in NCAA policies because federal involvement would be dependent on federal judges' perspectives of the NCAA policies (Zimbalist, 2017). The clearest path to protect the student-athletes' rights regarding education depends on Congress getting involved because politicians can make clearly defined policies, which judges cannot (Zimbalist, 2017). Due to the dual-role colleges play, there have been suggestions of anti-trust tribunals, which would protect the student-athletes and colleges from the monopolizing effects of the NCAA (Hovenkamp, 2018). There are other alternatives, such as legislation and the NCAA reorganizing as a franchise. All of which would require time and cooperation from all parties involved (Hovenkamp, 2018). In the meantime, student-athletes are caught in the middle of powerful groups and leaders determining what is best for their college lives.

Special interest groups are trying to create reforms with the help of Senators and members of Congress to develop policies prioritizing the education of athletes over their athletics. Recently, California made steps to protect student-athletes' rights where the NCAA would not. The NCAA was not happy with the California State government overruling their policies and procedures. A NCAA press release stated the NCAA knows student-athletes need to be protected, but improvement needs to come internally (Osburn, 2019, para. 3). The NCAA also

said the new law was “creating confusion” and “a patchwork of different laws from different states will make unattainable the goal of providing a fair and level playing field for 1,100 campuses and nearly half a million student-athletes nationwide (Osburn, 2019). By the NCAA’s own words, it is evident the Federal government needs to oversee the organization’s rules to standardize policies across the country and create accountability for the NCAA and its member organizations. Ultimately, Federal involvement, at the appropriate level, would create an education-focused athletic experience for student-athletes in all Divisions.

### **Discussion of Research Question 2**

The flaws of the current system are equally apparent from participant responses regarding their ability to balance their education and athletic pursuits. Ultimately, participants indicated the responsibility was theirs to make the correct decisions to have a balanced athletic and academic life. However, the lack of clarity for student-athletes in what the rules and regulations are makes the ability to correctly prioritize difficult decisions. Student-athletes want to be successful both athletically and academically, but many factors—external and internal—influence their ability to accomplish their dual roles (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013). The participants acknowledged there were times these factors influenced their decision-making process. Student-athletes want to achieve for their parents and other people with whom they have close personal relationships. Surprisingly, there was no mention of coaching staff or school officials, other than tutors/advisers.

The participants’ responses to questions regarding their ability to balance their education and athletics also indicates a need for clear policy development from the Federal government to ensure the necessity of education over academics. Although the government does have a stake in student-athletes’ success, there is no real monetary benefit for the government if student-athletes

are successful both academically and athletically. Whereas, the NCAA benefits from athletic success whereas schools benefit from both academic and athletic successes; the monetary gains schools receive from their relationship with the NCAA outweighs the academics they should be providing those students. Both the NCAA and schools are failing student-athletes in many ways. Getting the Federal government involved would make certain student-athletes would receive a quality education, while pursuing their passion of playing college athletics. Clearly, there is a need for Federally-regulated policies to be create and implemented in the NCAA. This implementation should include a supervisory committee to regulate the academic rigor of athletic programs across the country. Any application of new policies and procedures would take time, so the NCAA would need to be included in the overhaul process and would need some leigh way as the oversight is transferred from the organization to a third-party government overseer (Zimbalist, 2017). New regulators would need to incorporate NCAA policymakers into the new protocols. Any government involvement would require a collaborative effort from the NCAA, schools, and the government. Including all parties would create mutually-beneficial policies and procedures for all stakeholders involved in collegiate athletics, but most importantly, the college athletes, who should be the top priority (Zimbalist, 2017).

The intent of the research questions was to identify key information that is beneficial to draft and implement effective educational policies to potentially make education the priority over athletics for college athletes in all Divisions across the NCAA. Significant to a student's education are the students use of all available resources and student accountability. As discussed in Chapter 2, student-athletes have a plethora of support options of available to them. People belonging to those support systems, such as advisers, have roles that need to be clearly defined and also require additional training (Vaughn and Smith, 2018). Academic advisers cannot be

held largely responsible for the academic success of student-athletes (Davis, 2015). The students, schools, Athletic Departments, coaches, and NCAA also need to play a role and held accountable for the education of student-athletes. Success for student-athletes is a team effort both on and off the field.

A Federal Committee could create and implement procedures, similar to those for typical college students, to hold those parties more accountable for the education of student-athletes. This, in addition to the mandates already in place, could guarantee a well-rounded college experience. There is no excuse for a student-athlete not to succeed academically, as the NCAA provides additional resources to them, beyond what the school provides, to help them achieve academically. The mandates the NCAA has drafted have good intentions, and are a good start, but they need to take the educational needs of the student-athletes farther. This could be done if the United States government would get involved. The Department of Education could fine tune the policies the NCAA currently has in place for their member institutions, so they are fair and equitable for every school. Participants responded they didn't feel the NCAA educational policies were the same for every school. A non-NCAA overseer could guarantee the policies in place were being met, with little change for the student-athletes, Athletic Departments, schools, and the NCAA. Mitten (2011) stated the need for National sport policy. The implementation of standard sport policy across schools and Division would help create a balanced and fulfilling college environment for student-athletes throughout the United States, while reducing potential influences from sport stakeholders in the decision-making processes relating to college athletes receiving a quality education.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Study limitations are recognized due to variables that could not be accounted for and/or controlled in the research design. Although the limitations were out of my control, I had to give attention to their existence. For this qualitative, phenomenological study, the goal was to gain an understanding of shared lived experiences of purposively selected public, Division II football players regarding their ability to balance their academic and athletic experience, and their ability to achieve a well-rounded college experience. Particular attention was paid to the student-athletes' perspectives related to educational policies put in place by the NCAA. A notable limitation for this study is the narrow exploration of the phenomenon from football players from only 5 public, Division II colleges/universities. This did not include private schools, other sports, and other NCAA Divisions. Additionally, there were limitations involving researcher bias, sampling size, dependability, and transferability.

**Researcher bias.** The limitation of researcher bias stems from my etic approach to this study and interpretive framework based upon previous affiliations with collegiate athletes through previous endeavors (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Bazeley, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Moreover, I chose open-ended survey questions based on the premise I would receive enough answers to answer the study's research questions. Researcher bias was reduced by employing Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological reduction processes of bracketing, horizontalization, and composite textural descriptions during the data analysis of the study's findings. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the course of this study to support setting aside bias. The entire content of the participants' responses were reviewed equally, and participant responses were used in the narrative during the entirety of the data analysis process.



**Sample size.** The limitation related to this study's sample size arose from there being about half a million student-athletes throughout the United States that could have been potential research participants (National Collegiate Athletic Association, n.d.a.). I narrowed down the participant pool to one Division—Division II; to public universities, and to one sport: football. From these criteria, there were 12 research participants. Regarding the research participant size, Moustakas (1994) argued a small sample size was appropriate when a researcher conducts a qualitative, phenomenological study. From a supported position of a smaller sample size, I selected the criterion to contact potential research participants. Twelve responded to the invitation to participate, which was within the proposed 10-25 participant range to provide a description of their shared, lived experience to gain understanding of this study's phenomenon.

**Dependability and transferability.** In qualitative research, dependability and transferability are difficult to achieve because they are subjective to the researcher's approach, focus, intent, and experiences, as well as affording the study's readers to share in the participants' lived experiences through overlaps in the research stories (Bazeley, 2012; Tracy, 2010). The limitation involves achieving dependability and transferability of the study's findings from a small group of research participants with limited experiences and span of knowledge of the phenomenon. More specifically, the research participants attended schools from five states throughout the United States, and no participant attended a private or Division I or III school. To support achieving dependability and transferability, this study's research participants, public, Division II football players, are those currently enrolled in a college while actively participating in their respective schools' football program. Active participation in sport and college certifies the participants be known and respected within their peer and sport stakeholder groups.

## **Recommendations**

While the study's findings come with limitations, the examination of public, Division II football players' perspectives regarding their ability to have a balanced college experience, based on current NCAA education mandate, provides information to draft effective education mandates within the NCAA or reform to the policies already in place. This study has revealed key aspects imperative to the continued improvement of student-athletes' education. These aspects identified from the participants' questionnaire responses emphasized the importance of a) clarity of rules; b) knowledge of rules; c) fairness across colleges; and d) accountability. Furthermore, the research focuses to consider are: 1) exploring the education policies put in place by NCAA policymakers; 2) investigating outside organizations which can help reform the educational policies of the NCAA to help balance academics and athletics; and 3) exploring the effectiveness of support systems in creating a balanced, well-rounded college experience for student-athletes.

**Exploring the education policies put in place by NCAA.** Chapter 2's discussion contained elements of various educational policies, including career, academic, scheduling, and balance resources (Gerlach, 2017; Comeaux, 2015b). Furthermore, the NCAA has put in place mandates regarding academic advisors and Support Services (Comeaux, 2015b). Specific to Division II are Life in Balance (LITB) policies to help student-athletes balance their academics and athletics (Gomez and Conway, 2018). The NCAA also makes many resources available to student-athletes including scholarships, advisors, Life Skills administrators, career and academic counselors, Champ/Life Skills program, Progress to Degree (PTD), Academic Progress Rate (APR), a partnership with the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletes (N4A), and student-athlete specific academic centers (Gerlach, 2017; Tellez, 2017; Leach, 2015; Goodyear, 2016; Hazelbaker, 2015; Burns et al., 2013; Rubin and Rosser, 2014; Roach, 2017;

Rubin and Moses, 2017). Although all these resources are available to student-athletes, as well as additional resources provided by schools, they are of no use if student-athletes don't understand the rules they must follow and the resources available for them to use. The lack of knowledge of these rules and resources, as reaffirmed through literature and questionnaire responses, is a concern in the balance between academics and athletics. Furthermore, the lack of academic knowledge indicates reforms to the current policies need to be implemented to guarantee balance in collegiate life.

**Investigating outside organizations which can help reform the educational system of the NCAA to help balance academics and athletics.** This study explored how the NCAA's education policies impact student-athletes based upon the research participants meeting selection criteria. The purposively selected group of football players were from 5 public, Division II colleges and universities across the United States. As noted in Chapter 2, the NCAA needs to have an outside organization oversee the implementation of the education policies and reforms, preferably from the Federal government (Ginder, 2015; Zimbalist, 2017). Further research exploring how the Department of Education, legislation, and a Federal committee could influence NCAA policy oversight could be beneficial to gain understanding of effective policy creation and implementation. This information could aid in the advancement of effective educational reform across NCAA Divisions and sports.

**Exploring the effectiveness of support systems in creating a balanced, well-rounded college experience for student-athletes.** Through research participants' shared, lived experiences, support systems can be seen as crucial aids to student-athletes balancing their academic and athletic pursuits. Besides close personal relationships, which participants mentioned, coaches, advisers, and other school-sanctioned employees can assist student-athletes

in balancing their college lives (Roach, 2017; Traynowicz et al., 2016). Additionally, NCAA Student-Athlete Advisory Committees can be a useful liaison at the university, Conference, and Division levels, as student-athletes voice their needs and wants (Weaver and Simet, 2015).

Besides on campus and nearby supports, other outside resources can also support student-athletes. For instance, The Drake Group is a student-athlete advocacy group, who works with legislators to promote the academic integrity of college athletics. The group has worked with legislators to introduce policy reforms to the Federal government and create awareness and interest in issues pertaining to student-athletes (The Drake Group, n.d.a.). In a correspondence with The Drake Group leadership, leaders of the group shared the intentions of the group were: to defend academic integrity in higher education from the corrosive aspects of commercialized college sports. The Drake Group goals include: (1) ensure that universities provide accountability of trustees, administrators, and faculty by publicly disclosing information about the quality of education college athletes receive; (2) advance proposals that ensure quality education for students who participate in intercollegiate athletics, (3) support faculty and staff whose job security and professional standing are threatened when they defend academic standards in intercollegiate sports; (4) influence public discourse on public policy, current issues and controversies in sports and higher education; and (5) coordinate local and national reform efforts with other groups that share its mission and goals.

The Drake Group supports student-athletes in the desire to balance their academic and athletic endeavors. A report of this study will be shared with The Drake Group, who use the report of the study, “for [potential] use in Drake position statements, Congressional briefing papers and publicly issued recommendations and comment related to national athletic governance organization, state and federal legislative reforms that seek to remedy educational

and health concerns related to student participation in collegiate athletic programs.” The Drake Group is working diligently to get the Federal government involved in college athletics, and to assist in the creation of legislation which will impact the NCAA current educational issues.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Public concern over the NCAA and schools placing an emphasis on sport over academics has been growing in recent years. With recent reforms, the NCAA tried to change the landscape of the organization to become more balanced (Hazelbaker, 2015; McCarty, 2014). The aim of this research was to explore public, Division II football players’ ideologies, thoughts, influences in their decision-making processes to gain an understanding of how the current educational mandates impact student-athletes’ ability to balance their educational and athletic successes. The study’s narrative adds to the body of knowledge of NCAA educational policies currently being implemented, and the potential reforms and outside influences which can influence the drafting and implementation of future NCAA education policies. In this section, there are discussions of the potential impact to positive social changes for student-athletes and other sport stakeholders on college athletics. Policy suggestions could support enhancing NCAA education policies will also be discussed.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

Although new reforms have been put into place, it is unknown their effectiveness on student-athletes’ ability to balance their education and athletics. The research participants cited concerns about their ability to balance their academics and athletics. This study explored public, Division II football players to make sure an overlooked population’s voices were heard and understood. To ease the minds of college and collegiate sport stakeholders, proof will be needed of an increased educational emphasis by the NCAA. There are a variety of ways this can be

done. This study was intended to be a catalyst to a dialogue of policy creation and reform by providing options to aid in impacting positive social change to enrich the academic integrity of college sports.

Responses also indicated the importance of the student-athletes' support system. However, those responses failed to mention the influences of head coaches, which players often listen to for guidance and approval (Gearity & Denison, 2012). Other available supports were not listed by the research participants. This shows a lack of knowledge of available support or an unwillingness to take advantage of those support systems. Policy reform and new mandates will help create guidelines focused on maintaining the integrity of NCAA sport. This study focused on exploring football players' knowledge and use of these policies to gain understanding of the ways which policies can improve student-athletes' educations.

The research participants' responses suggested ways in which the NCAA and their schools can improve the academic policies meet the needs of student-athletes to help them balance their academic and athletic pursuits, and thereby create a well-rounded college experience. A majority of the participants stated they didn't know what the educational rules of the NCAA were, and if they knew, they would forget. Several participants suggested videos to help them learn and remember the NCAA's education rules and regulation. The suggestions made by the participants align with this study's theoretical framework of involvement theory. Furthermore, the research participants' responses support policy reform and new policy development to aid student-athletes' ability to be motivated to make decisions with ability and desire to balance their educational and athletic pursuits.

The responses of the research participants explicitly discuss the need for knowledge of NCAA education mandates. The importance of following the educational rules and regulations

of the NCAA, to create a balanced college life, is the athletes' responsibility, but can be enhanced by resources provided by the NCAA, the student-athletes' schools, and other supports available to the student-athletes. The NCAA is continually being scrutinized by various sources, and the rules and regulations which govern college athletics are constantly changing. Each year, student-athletes are responsible for knowing the organization's policies and procedures and signing agreements to follow them. This study will serve as an aid for student-athletes' opinions to be heard and understood by NCAA education policymakers and outside support groups trying to influence the government's role in supporting student-athletes. Creating a better education for the special population of student-athletes will affect sport positively—for students, schools, and the NCAA. Also, taxpayers will feel they receive a return on their investment in college scholarship if student-athletes receive a more quality education.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

As discussed in Chapter 2, a lack of student-athlete educational integrity has gained attention in recent years; the NCAA tried to reform the educational mandates student-athletes must adhere to relate back to the NCAA's mission (Hazelbaker, 2015; McCarty, 2014). These reforms set the stage to reform, create, and implement current and future policies that may increase the quality of student-athletes' education. One of the largest concerns brought forth during the study's timeframe was fairness to all schools. Through their participation in this study, the participants are considered credible policy advocates, and provided potential recommendations for the implementation of effective, or more effective, NCAA education policies (Petitpas et al., 2005). It can be concluded participants need more knowledge of the resources and supports available to them and how to appropriately use those resources and supports.

The recommendations from the participants include: 1) national education policies and procedures; 2) the need for a third-party overseer; and 3) refined focus on regulating and monitoring college education. Figure 3 demonstrates that student-athletes can find success through balance and new law.

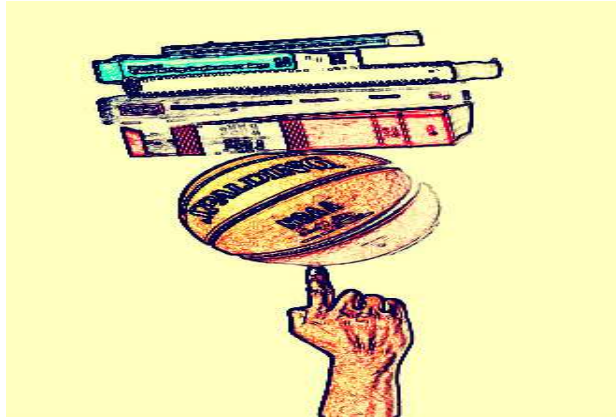


Figure 3. Student-Athletes ways to succeed.



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## Appendix A: Initial Participant Solicitation E-mail Letter

“Potential Participant’s Name,”

It is known that there is a lack of balance in NCAA collegiate sports between academics and athletics. Over time, the NCAA has tried to reform the organization’s education policies to make sure student-athletes stay in school and graduate. However, these policies often overlook Division II student-athletes because their sports do not bring in large monetary gains. This perception may or may not be true, but nonetheless, there remains the need to implement uniform sport policy to ensure every student-athlete, no matter their Division or sport, receives a quality education, while playing sports, and attending college.

Literature has revealed that although there are a number of individuals who influence the education of student-athletes, it is the student-athletes themselves, who are ultimately responsible for receiving a quality education and staying in school. Drafting and implementing effective education policy in the NCAA should not be attempted without the input from the student-athletes themselves. Given that the educational policies impact the student-athletes the most, and the NCAA states the organization listens to the students’ wants/needs, it is imperative to engage student-athletes in understanding the decision-making processes and motivations surrounding the educational policies of the NCAA.

Study Name: ***Public, Division II football players’ potential impact of future NCAA education mandates***

The purpose of this study is for the researcher to describe the experiences that contribute to how the education policies of the NCAA affect student-athletes in Division II, public universities and colleges. The study focuses on how NCAA policies impact the academic, athletic, and social life of student-athletes. The results of this study may play a vital role in determining how to effectively assist with drafting sport policy to impact the quality education of all NCAA students.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a Division II football player at a public college/university.. The study will include responding to a brief background form and a series of survey questions. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time.

The link to the survey can be found here: . Please return your responses by \_\_\_\_\_, 2019. Responding to the survey should take approximately 15-20 minutes of your time. Your response to the survey will be considered your consent to participate in the survey. Your identity, geographic location, and responses will remain confidential.

The results of this study will be used to prepare a Ph.D. dissertation.

Thank you for considering this opportunity.



Morgan Laine Lehman,

Graduate Student

## Appendix B: Participant Background Information Form

(Completed in conjunction with survey)

Study Name: ***Public, Division II football players' potential impact of future NCAA education mandates***

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

If you are not 18, please stop. You, unfortunately, are not eligible for this study.

Are you currently enrolled in a Division II, public college/university?

If no, please stop. You are not eligible for this study.

Please answer the following questions:

Football Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Year: \_\_\_\_\_

Eligibility: \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate GPA: \_\_\_\_\_

Starter: Yes or No

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you attend college/university on a scholarship?

Provide anything else you would like to add.

## Appendix C: Data Collection Tool

1. Why did you choose to attend a Division II college/university?
2. What is your motivation for participating in college athletics?
3. Tell me what external factors influence your ability to balance your athletics, academics, and college life?
4. If you could go back in time to give yourself advice as a Freshman, what advice would you give about being successful academically and athletically in college?
5. Tell me what you have learned/experienced about being a student and an athlete that you didn't know when you entered the football program at your school?
6. How do you feel your academic experience is the same/different from your peers, who do not participate in athletics?
7. Tell me how your participation in sports affects your academic efforts.
8. How do you feel the NCAA rules can better help you achieve academically and athletically?
9. How can the NCAA help you better understand the rules and regulations, related to education, that you must follow?
10. How can you better utilize the assistance the NCAA and your school provide for you to academically successful?

If there is anything else you would like to add, that you think would be pertinent for the research to know, regarding your participation as an athlete and college student, please indicate it below?