

**Navigating the Divide: Understanding the Academic, Social, and Athletic Barriers
of NAIA Student-Athletes**

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand the low retention rate at NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) institutions. Athletics drive enrollment at these institutions, and student athletes play a crucial role in boosting retention and graduation rates. This study explores the experiences and perspectives of student athletes who enroll at NAIA institutions using a narrative inquiry method. Using Tinto's theory, this study examines how student athletes at NAIA institutions decide to stay or leave. Fifteen participants were chosen through purposive sampling. Interviews and qualitative analysis revealed key factors influencing their persistence or departure. The findings highlighted a broad spectrum of experiences among NAIA student-athletes. Many make college choices rooted in a keen sense of athletic identity, often arriving on campus less prepared for academic demands and actively seeking out meaningful support networks. Student-athletes consistently expressed the need for community, financial stability, and opportunities for career development and personal growth. These insights provide practical guidance for educators and administrators seeking to strengthen retention efforts. The study underscores the significance of academic integration, social support, and institutional commitment in nurturing persistent student engagement. This research adds to the wider conversation on student retention and presents actionable recommendations to enrich the educational environment at NAIA institutions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Students who participate in athletics invest significant amounts of time, financial resources, cognitive energy, and physical effort in higher education. Student-athletes encounter unique challenges that traditional and non-student athletes do not face (Hollembek & Amorose, 2005; Johnson, 2010; Rusbasan, 2021). By taking on dual roles, student-athletes consistently balance competing priorities, which often leads them to devote more attention to athletics than academics. Many researchers (Bandre, 2011; Bergeron, 2019; Brunet, 2013; Choi et al., 2019; D'Anna, 2013; Finnell, 2022; Goss, 2006; Letawsky, 2003; Samoila, 2023; Tinto, 1988; Windham, 2024) emphasize the necessity for institutions to support student integration during their first semester, as integration directly influences their decision to persist.

Coaches must build programs that actively prioritize and manage the dual roles student athletes assume to safeguard their well-being. When coaches neglect this responsibility, they risk exposing student-athletes to toxic environments, role conflict, burnout, diminished commitment to academics and sports, and deficient performance in both areas (Rusbasan et al., 2021). Student-athletes who identify solely with their sport often overlook academic and social opportunities beyond athletics (Borak et al., 2022). Tinto (1975) urged institutions to focus on the academic and social integration of students, which offers the best chance for persistence and graduation. When students fail to integrate academically, socially, or both, they are more likely to experience attrition, burnout, and departure (Hollembek & Amorose, 2005; Tinto, 1975; Wilkerson et al., 2020). Upon completing their degrees, student-athletes may also struggle to transition out of their sport (Reifsteck et al., 2023).

Institutions of higher education must ensure that coaching philosophies align with their missions, visions, and goals, as they primarily oversee student athletes. Research strongly encourages sports leaders to consider their coaching philosophies and the environments they

create, making necessary adjustments (Borak et al., 2022; Fernandez, 2022; Hollembeak & Amorose, 2005; Into et al., 2020; Northington, 2016). Coaches can use sports as a critical and reflexive tool to help athletes construct their identities as human beings (Isidori et al., 2015). As college athletics continue to expand, this research will help stakeholders understand how to support collegiate athletes' persistence, retention, and career self-efficacy development.

Statement of the Problem

This study addressed the issue of low persistence and retention rates among student athletes enrolled at institutions within the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA, 2024). According to the NAIA's Return on Athletics (ROA) analysis, 66% of student athletes remained enrolled in the 2019-2020 academic year, but this number dropped to 62% in 2020-2021 (NAIA, 2024). The Heart of America Athletic Conference (HAAC) and the Kansas Collegiate Athletic Conference (KCAC) serve as the primary focus for this study. Both conferences report graduation rates that fall below the national average of 64% (U.S. Department of Education, 2024), with HAAC at 48% and KCAC at 45%.

Retention serves as a key performance indicator for higher education institutions because it directly influences tuition rates (Russo, 2000). Over 83,000 student-athletes compete at more than 250 NAIA institutions (NAIA, 2024), and 81% of NAIA campus leaders identify recruitment and retention as top priorities for their athletic departments (NAIA, 2024). Because more than 80% of NAIA institutions are private and do not receive public subsidies, these schools rely on tuition revenue and actively boost enrollment through various strategies and initiatives—often by expanding athletic programs (NAIA, 2024).

Financial aid plays a decisive role in student-athletes' year-to-year persistence (Bergeron, 2019; D'Anna, 2013; Windham, 2024). As graduation rates decline and student debt rises, many student athletes face overwhelming challenges in repaying their loans. Institutions must provide

advice that strengthens career self-efficacy, since even student-athletes who earn their degrees often struggle to secure gainful employment and repay their debt (Bergeron, 2019; NCES, 2022). Without targeted efforts to develop career self-efficacy, NAIA member institutions risk perpetuating the rising cost of education and reinforcing lifelong financial burdens for those they serve.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to examine how student-athletes perceive academic, social, and athletic barriers that hinder their retention and persistence. It also explored the institutional and personal supports they believe are essential for academic success and graduation. Extensive research investigates the factors that influence college choice, persistence to degree completion, or departure from higher education (Aiken, 2013; Bandre, 2011; Bergeron, 2019; Brunet, 2013; Choi et. al., 2019; D’Anna, 2013; Goss, 2006; Letawsky, 2003; Samoila, 2023; Tinto, 1988; Windham, 2024). By uncovering the lived experiences of NAIA student-athletes, this study serves NAIA stakeholders and addresses the lack of literature on institutional support or their absence. Tinto (1975) urged institutions of higher education to create initiatives that actively support students’ social and academic integration. Research shows that social and academic integration is a leading indicator of persistence or dropout. Students receive—or fail to receive—support within the academic and social environments that shape their experiences in the institutional setting (Tinto, 1975).

Researchers have historically focused on student-athletes at the NCAA Division I level and examined their experiences. However, a clear need exists to investigate NAIA student athletes, whose distinct experiences and unique factors affect their matriculation. One major difference involves the financial implications for student-athletes at NAIA institutions compared to their NCAA counterparts.

This study highlighted the NAIA student-athlete experience and provided recommendations for the retention of this population. Subsequently, this study will help student athletes, and their families prepare for and navigate the college selection process and beyond. Investing in higher education is a decision that should be carefully considered, as it has lifelong socioeconomic implications. To meet the objective of this study the researcher collected data from student-athletes attending Midwestern NAIA Institutions within the United States. A purposive sampling method was used to identify 15 NAIA student-athletes to participate in semi structured interviews. Such data will include gender, sport, early education, sport participation experiences, hometown, parents' education, and the expected outcome of participating in sports at their respective institution.

This investigation centered on the experiences unique to NAIA student-athletes, offering empirically informed recommendations to enhance their retention within collegiate environments. The study was designed to support student-athletes and their families in navigating the complexities of the college selection process and subsequent academic journey, acknowledging the enduring socioeconomic consequences associated with higher education choices.

To fulfill the objectives of this research, data were systematically collected from student athletes enrolled at Midwestern NAIA institutions across the United States. Employing a purposive sampling approach, fifteen NAIA student-athletes were selected to participate in semi structured interviews, facilitating the collection of richly descriptive data. The dataset encompassed variables including gender, sport, early educational background, experiences in sport participation, hometown, parental educational attainment, and anticipated outcomes associated with athletic engagement at their respective institutions.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this qualitative study drew from Tinto's theory of student departure as it related to student-athletes (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) described how dropout occurred through various interactions within the institutional environment. These interactions shape a student's commitment level and influence their persistence toward graduation or their decision to drop out. Tinto theorized that successful academic and social integration led students to stay committed to both the institution and the goal of graduating. According to Tinto's model, students entered college with characteristics that affected their initial commitment to the institution and to graduating. As students interact within the institutional environment, they develop further commitment, which depends on their ability to integrate and navigate institutional norms (D'Anna, 2013; Windham, 2024; Tinto, 1975).

Additionally, Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (STD) in conjunction with Bean's student attrition model supported the direction of this study. Athletes need a level of competence, autonomy, and relatedness to experience a sense of determination (Creswell et al., 2018). Therefore, an athlete must perceive their behavior as effective, have thoughts that are their own, and feel connected to the institution to remain enrolled. Conversely, athletes who do not experience the needed competency, autonomy, or relatedness yield disengagement, resentment, or obligatory participation. Additionally, Bean (1980) suggested student attrition, finances, and satisfaction as factors for departure. Juxtaposing the lens of self-determination theory with the student attrition model is a novel approach to expounding the literature on NAIA student-athletes.

Additionally, this study drew from Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (STD) alongside Bean's Student Attrition Model to guide its direction. According to Creswell et al. (2018), athletes require a sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness to stay motivated and

determined. When athletes perceive their actions as effective, believe their thoughts are self-driven, and feel a strong connection to their institution, they are more likely to remain enrolled. In contrast, when athletes lack a sense of competence, autonomy, or relatedness, they tend to disengage, grow resentful, or participate only out of obligation. Bean (1980) also identified student attrition, finances, and satisfaction as key factors influencing student departure. By combining the perspectives of self-determination theory and the student attrition model, this study was a novel approach to expanding the literature on NAIA student athletes.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

Qualitative research methods capture social experiences in nonexperimental and noncontrolled environments. Through this narrative inquiry, the study explored the paradigms of student-athletes at NAIA institutions. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that qualitative researchers maintain a sense of curiosity throughout the study and beyond. They recognize that qualitative research offers multiple explanations, allowing researchers to remain flexible and reflexive, and to welcome new perspectives and paradigm shifts. As new themes emerge, researchers examine their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences while serving as the primary data collection tool (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach mitigates potential researcher bias. Researchers employ reflexivity throughout the process, continually juxtaposing their own positionality with the way it guides the study (Berger, 2015). In qualitative research, researchers do not approach studies with answers in mind; they focus on assumptions instead of hypotheses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from fifteen NAIA student-athletes across the Midwest region of the United States. By asking open-ended questions participants were able to provide descriptive accounts of their NAIA experience. This approach enables the audience to infer the study's meaning through thematic analysis of institutional,

cultural, social, familial, and linguistic experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Accuracy of this study was maintained through prolonged engagement with participants, referential adequacy, and member checking.

Research Questions

The research questions that directed this study are:

RQ1

What academic, social, or athletic barriers do NAIA student-athletes perceive as hinderances to their institutional integration and retention?

RQ2

What supports do NAIA student-athletes perceive are necessary for their institutional integration, retention, and graduation?

Significance of Study

The significance of this study lies in its nuanced examination of NAIA student-athletes' perceptions regarding institutional integration. Existing scholarship underscores the interconnectedness of retention, integration, and involvement within collegiate environments (Astin, 2014; D'Anna, 2013; Hollebeak, 2018; Tinto, 1975; Windham, 2024). Prioritizing integration and involvement are crucial for NAIA institutions, especially considering that over 80% are faith-based or maintain religious affiliations—a characteristic that uniquely shapes leadership approaches and the types of support made available to student-athletes. As Tinto (1975) posits, successful academic and social integration is essential for student persistence in higher education. Accordingly, leaders must deal with the holistic well-being of student-athletes, including their mental, spiritual, and financial needs, often fulfilling roles akin to parental or guardian figures. Furthermore, Hollebeak and Amorose (2005) highlight that coaches'

pedagogical development plays a pivotal role in facilitating student-athletes' capacity to navigate their dual roles and achieve meaningful integration within the academic community.

Prospective NAIA student-athletes must recognize that their commitment encompasses not only their athletic pursuits but also an engagement with the distinctive institutional norms and practices of their chosen college or university. Given the diversity of missions and priorities among NAIA institutions, retention emerges as a common and critical objective across the association (NAIA, 2024). The findings of this study furnish NAIA stakeholders with evidence-based insights and recommendations designed to enhance student-athlete retention. This research broadens stakeholders' understanding of the NAIA athletic environment, illuminate student athlete perspectives, and identify the forms of support most conducive to degree completion within this unique collegiate context.

Definitions of Key Terms

Attrition

This is a gradual process of growing weary unto the point of dropout. For college students, this may be due to any singular or number of compounding variables. These include homesickness, financial difficulties, grades, personality, relationship problems, campus or cultural norms, faculty, failure to achieve success, lofty expectations, competition, society, lack of clearly discernable goals (Stier, 1971).

Burnout

This is the physical and mental exhaustion that depletes motivation. In this state of being there is no devotion or desire to produce any results (Umanets & Song, 2023).

Career Self-Efficacy

This is described as a student-athlete's knowledge and awareness of transferable skills into the corporate, private, or public workforce after transitioning from their sport (Van Raalte et al., 2017).

Extrinsic Motivation

This is pleasure or enjoyment stemming from external factors such as receiving an award or avoiding punishment (Hollembek & Amorose, 2005).

Financial Well Being

This is a position in which one is certain of their ability to withstand current and future living standards financially. This occurs when financial stress is eliminated, and financial knowledge has been disseminated (McCoy et al., 2019).

Institutional Integration

This consists of environmental and institutional factors interwoven into the educational experience. The most predictive factor of a student's success is the ability to integrate academically and socially. That is to experience or develop a sense of belonging within the academic and social environments (Tinto, 1975; Oxendine & Taub, 2021).

Intrinsic Motivation

This is pleasure or enjoyment stemming from participation in an activity that allows one to use their competency, have autonomy, and relatability to the task or activity (Hollembek & Amorose, 2005).

NAIA

The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. The NAIA is the only athletic association that serves the interests of small colleges by driving student-athlete enrollment and financial sustainability (NAIA, 2024).

Persist

This is the ability for a student-athlete to leverage various support systems to remain enrolled and graduate from an institution. These support systems can be socially, academically, athletically, or familial (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2012).

ROA

Return on Athletics is an initiative that supports the key priorities of NAIA member institutions, which is enrollment, student success (graduation), and financial viability. This is accomplished by leveraging simple and consistent calculations to maximize the business performance of their athletic departments (NAIA, 2024).

Retention

This is an institution's ability to keep a student-athlete enrolled at an institution semesterly until graduation (Weaver Jr. & Reynolds II, 2020).

Student-Athlete

A student enrolled in secondary or higher education, participating in organized and competitive sport, sponsored and led by hired coaches and officials (Johnson et al., 2010).

Student-Athlete Well-Being

This is a student-athlete's perceived satisfaction and interaction with institutional norms. These norms include the institution's mission, leaders, policies, facilities, and services (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2012).

Toxic Leadership

This is a pattern of negative and destructive behavior in the team environment. When this is present, there is often a disregard for the welfare of the team, harmful communication, and the promotion of self-interest from the leader (Balaban & Kazanci-Tinmaz, 2024).

Traditional Student

A student enrolled in secondary or higher education, who does not participate in organized and competitive sport being led by hired coaches or officials (Johnson et al., 2010).

Summary

Engagement in higher education and participation in intercollegiate athletics at the NAIA level represents a significant investment, both financially and developmentally, for student athletes and the institutions that support them. The preponderance of research in collegiate athletics has focused primarily on the NCAA, thereby underscoring the importance and distinctiveness of inquiries situated within the NAIA context. While motivations for attending NAIA member institutions are varied, a common thread among student-athletes is the enduring responsibility associated with fulfilling financial obligations incurred during their enrollment. Absent robust institutional support, student-athletes are at heightened risk for attrition, burnout, and withdrawal, which in turn may exacerbate challenges related to educational debt repayment. (Bergeron, 2019). Thus, the present study aims to contribute meaningful insights and recommendations to NAIA institutions, student-athletes, and their families, providing evidence-based guidance to inform leadership practices and enhance the collegiate athletic experience within these unique educational environments.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The study addressed the issue of low persistence and retention rates among student athletes enrolled at National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) member institutions (NAIA, 2024). The qualitative narrative inquiry explored the academic, social, and athletic barriers that student-athletes perceived as hindrances to their retention and persistence, as well as the institutional and personal support they considered necessary for academic success and graduation. This literature review examined the experiences of student-athletes at both NAIA and NCAA institutions.

This review began with a description of the literature sources and databases used to obtain information. Next, it presents and discusses the theoretical framework in depth, drawing on both congruent and divergent research. After discussing the theoretical framework, it provides a historic overview of the NAIA and current enrollment statistics. The discussion then addresses the factors that contributed to the college selection process for student-athletes. It continues with factors that led to student-athlete departure. Then, it reviews current institutional support systems, programs, and initiatives. The review concluded with a summary of the current state of collegiate athletics.

The starting point for this literature review on NAIA student-athletes was National University's online Library. Additional search engines and online repositories such as the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), EBSCO Host, and Google Scholar were also utilized to gather sources. These search engines yielded access to numerous journals and publications such as *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *Science Direct*, *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *Journal of Applied Sports Psychology*, *International Journal of Sport and Physical Education*, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, Springer Link 'Research in Higher

Education', PLOS One, Journal of Applied Sports Management, American Sociology Review, Journal of African American Studies, Sports, Business, and Management an International Journal, Seton Hall Journal of Sport Law, Journal of Athletic Training, and JSTOR.

The search strategy employed a range of parameters, keywords, and phrases, including *student-athlete retention, well-being, financial well-being, student-athlete burnout, toxic leadership, NAIA student-athlete, and small college athletics*. Although initial efforts concentrated on literature published within the past five years, the limited availability of research specifically addressing NAIA student-athletes necessitated the inclusion of older sources as well as relevant studies involving NCAA athletics, thereby enhancing the breadth and depth of the review. The selected sources comprised dissertations, peer-reviewed journal articles, and both quantitative and qualitative studies.

Theoretical Framework

For fifty years, researchers actively investigated student departure and retention in higher education (Astin, 2014; Bean, 1979; Ryan and Deci, 2020; Tinto, 1975). Experts consistently linked integration and involvement to student retention. Astin (2014) explained how involvement shaped learning and development, asserting that students who devoted mental and physical energy to a task and experienced positive environmental influences achieved greater outcomes. Astin claimed that individuals who maintained strong involvement developed deeper commitment, while those who participated less tended to disengage and leave organizations (Astin, 2014).

According to Tinto's theory of student departure, continued enrollment at an institution is contingent upon a student's ability to achieve both academic and social integration. Frequent and constructive interactions with faculty and staff are instrumental in reinforcing institutional

commitment, while engagement in supportive social networks and co-curricular activities further enhances a student's dedication to their educational environment (Tinto, 1975).

Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory articulates that the fulfillment of three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is essential for optimal human development. Environments that nurture these needs can significantly enhance learning experience. For student-athletes, these environments encompass not only traditional academic settings but also unique athletic spaces such as training facilities, competition venues, and locker rooms. It is incumbent upon institutional leadership to cultivate supportive contexts that foster a sense of belonging, thereby addressing and satisfying these core psychological needs.

Bean's (1979) examination of student attrition applies organizational turnover theories to the phenomenon of collegiate departure. According to his model, the opportunities provided—or absent—within an institution significantly influence a student's level of institutional commitment, paralleling the concept of employee satisfaction within workplace environments. In this analytical context, institutional commitment serves as an analogue for overall satisfaction. Investigating the factors that shape student-athletes' decision-making and satisfaction thereby contributes meaningful insights to the expanding body of research concerning NAIA student athletes. The subsequent sections of this review further delineate how existing literature has informed and shaped the present study.

Theory of Student Departure

Tinto's conceptualization of student departure originates with a consideration of the student's background, encompassing familial context, parental educational attainment, precollegiate academic preparation, and individual competencies and attributes (Choi et al., 2019; Tinto, 1975). These foundational elements shape the student's initial commitment to

academic goals, most notably graduation. Upon matriculation, the student's engagement with the institution is mediated through academic and social systems. Interaction with the academic domain fosters intellectual and scholastic development, wherein performance metrics such as assignment grades and cumulative grade point average (GPA) serve as indicators of academic integration and progression.

From an intellectual standpoint, the degree of social integration experienced by students is often reflected in their interactions with peers and faculty members. Constructive engagement within these relationships serves to strengthen institutional affiliation and commitment to educational goals. For student-athletes, coaches emerge as pivotal figures in facilitating the process of social integration (DeVries, 2019; Hollembeak & Amorose, 2005; Into et al., 2020; Rusbasan, 2019). It falls within the purview of coaching staff to intentionally foster environments replete with developmental opportunities. The cultivation of personal, intellectual, creative, and interpersonal competencies significantly advances a student's commitment to both their institution and personal objectives (Bean, 1979). Further, coaches bear the responsibility to safeguard student-athlete well-being by ensuring access to resources and providing avenues for rest and engagement in pursuits beyond athletics (Rusbasan, 2019). The extent to which coaches support or impede social integration is thus critical; insufficient facilitation often results in elevated instances of disengagement and mandatory participation devoid of authentic involvement (DeVries, 2019).

From an academic perspective, integration is facilitated through the guidance provided by academic advisors and counselors, as well as access to institutional resources such as learning facilities, tutoring services, and structured study environments including study halls and peer-led groups. As student-athletes systematically engage with these institutional supports, their sense of institutional commitment is either reinforced or diminished, influencing whether they persist or

depart from the educational environment (Nicoletti, 2019; Tinto, 1975). Notably, student-athletes encounter an additional set of influencing factors that are intrinsic to their athletic programs (Brunet, 2010; Careless & Douglas, 2013; Cron, 2023; Finnell, 2022; Henderson, 2023; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2012; McCoy et al., 2019; Pierce, 2010; Umantes & Song, 2023; Windham, 2024). Within this context, academic advisors occupy a pivotal role in the academic integration process. It is essential that advisors possess a nuanced understanding of each student athlete's self-efficacy and career aspirations upon matriculation, enabling them to effectively guide both developmental trajectories and patterns of institutional engagement (Reynolds II & Weaver Jr., 2020; Windham, 2024).

A central critique of Tinto's theory of student departure is its limited applicability to nontraditional populations, including student-athletes (Choi et al., 2019). Scholars such as Draper (2023) and McCubbin (2003) have contended that Tinto's model addresses the experiences of traditional students, who typically matriculate directly from high school and reside on or near campus. According to these critiques, traditional students engage in institutional life through a longitudinal process characterized by semi-structured interactions, as conceptualized by Tinto (1975).

In contrast, student-athletes occupy dual roles—academic and athletic—which frequently engender scheduling conflicts and elevate the risk of burnout (Bennett, 2023; Henderson, 2023; Umantes & Song, 2023). Further distinctions between traditional and non-traditional student experiences include factors such as enrollment in online-only programs, age greater than 24 years, part-time attendance, and residing off campus. These variables significantly constrain opportunities for involvement and, consequently, limit exposure to institutional resources and experiences that foster persistence (Astin, 2014).

A substantial body of literature concerning student-athletes attributes the responsibility for facilitating institutional integration—both academic and social—to faculty members and academic advisors. Scholars emphasize the necessity for institutional leaders to establish supportive and inclusive environments that cultivate a sense of belonging and empower student athletes (Brunet, 2010; Burnet, 2019; Cochran, 2023; Finnell, 2022; Oxendine & Taub, 2021; Reynolds & Weaver Jr., 2020; Windham, 2024). Student-athletes are recognized as a population at heightened risk for attrition, due to the inherent tensions between their academic and athletic commitments (Bennett, 2023; Henderson, 2023; Umanets, 2023). Bennett (2023) identifies an array of unique stressors and impediments to academic integration faced by student-athletes, including absences from classes and examinations due to athletic travel, limited instructor flexibility regarding missed coursework, challenges in participating in laboratory activities, restricted access to institutional academic resources, isolation from peer study groups, and injury-related obstacles.

In addition to the pressures described, student-athletes are often subject to distinct stressors that contribute to heightened levels of burnout. These include the internalization of athletic identity, persistent physical exhaustion, elevated expectations and demands from coaches, performance-contingent treatment, fluctuations in playing time, and defined roles within the athletic programs such as being a starter, a high or low contributor, or a high or low performer (Henderson, 2023). Exposure to these conditions can yield a spectrum of outcomes, ranging from voluntary withdrawal from athletic participation to the neglect of academic responsibilities in the pursuit of athletic distinction. These observations are corroborated by Umanets (2023), who asserted that the prioritization of athletic excellence often supersedes academic commitments and perpetually impedes meaningful engagement within the academic environment.

Student-Athlete Development

Student-athletes encounter a host of challenges that often undermine the developmental and social purposes traditionally ascribed to athletic participation. In contemporary youth sports, there is a pronounced emphasis on winning, accruing social capital, and cultivating athletic distinction, frequently at the expense of foundational skill development (Bennett, 2023). The pursuit of athletic advancement compels some student-athletes and their families to relocate, further embedding young athletes within competitive programs, clubs, or under the tutelage of prominent coaches who have actively recruited them. Such affiliations contribute to the consolidation of a robust athletic identity—one that persists from youth through high school and into collegiate environments. Notably, certain student-athletes report having internalized expectations from an early age to attain collegiate, professional, or even Olympic athletic status (NCAA, 2024). These formative experiences, coupled with the investments made by parents and guardians, play a pivotal role in fostering a salient athletic identity, sometimes to the detriment of cultivating alternative identities or interests.

John P. Bean's theoretical model of student attrition elucidates the manner in which institutional, environmental, and psychological factors collectively inform a student's capacity to develop, persist, or withdraw from an academic setting (Bean, 1979). Similarly, Bronfenbrenner (1976) posited that learning, growth, and development unfold within a hierarchy of ecological systems, each nested within the next. The interplay among these systems, namely, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—function as a primary determinant of behavioral outcomes. It is through these dynamic interactions that patterns of engagement and persistence are shaped.

The extant literature demonstrates that the developmental trajectories of student-athletes are closely aligned with the environments to which they are exposed, as well as the quality of

relationships they establish with influential adults within those settings (Ault et al., 2023). The coach-athlete relationship, in particular, emerges as a salient factor, serving either as a source of stress or support (Simons & Bird, 2022). The depth and efficacy of these relationships are contingent upon the degree of emotional connection, trust, mutual respect, and expressed gratitude between coach and student-athlete. Furthermore, the extent of developmental progress achieved by student-athletes reflects not only their commitment but also the degree of cooperation fostered within the coach-athlete relationship (Simons & Bird, 2022).

The microsystem, as the foundational ecological context, initiates the individual's developmental trajectory in both learning and growth. In contrast, the macrosystem—comprising the broader societal framework—demands reflective engagement with cumulative experiences to foster the competencies required for academic and athletic achievement. For coaches and institutional administrators, a nuanced understanding of student-athletes' interactions within these multifaceted environments are essential to providing effective support. One efficacious strategy for acquiring such insights is the systematic use of exit interviews (Andrassy et al., 2014), which serve to evaluate the comprehensive spectrum of student-athlete needs, spanning mental, physical, and spiritual domains. Although optimal development is contingent upon collaborative engagement among all stakeholders, the ultimate obligation rests with institutional leadership to cultivate an environment that is conducive to both meaningful learning and holistic development.

Environmental Influences

Urie Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework offers a structured lens through which to analyze human development, especially regarding the role of environmental contexts in shaping learning processes. Bronfenbrenner (1976) suggested that development begins within the microsystem, usually the home or childcare environment, where essential skills and attitudes are

shaped through direct interactions with caregivers and everyday experiences. These formative interactions within the micro-system serve as the bedrock for subsequent developmental experiences across broader ecological environments.

Beyond the immediate home or childcare environment, educators and coaches emerge as pivotal influences in the developmental trajectories of student-athletes, owing to the frequency and significance of their interactions. The advancement of student-athletes is best conceptualized as a collaborative undertaking involving the student-athlete and the educational institution. Such collaborative relationships are more readily established at the youth and secondary levels, where the proximity of student-athletes to key figures—such as parents, teachers, and coaches—facilitates ongoing engagement and support. At these stages, young athletes typically reside with their families and depend on them for transportation, financial assistance, and emotional or spiritual guidance.

In contrast, postsecondary student-athletes often experience geographic and social separation from their families, resulting in diminished parental involvement in direct communication with coaches, academic advisors, or faculty. Consequently, at the collegiate level, the leadership style of coaches, in conjunction with the residual influence of the student athlete's microsystem, becomes a primary determinant of behavioral patterns and environmental interactions (Saxe et al., 2022).

Recent studies highlight how student-athletes' views of their team environment and organizational culture have a profound impact on their mental well-being (Saxe et al., 2022). The way people communicate within these groups, whether supportive or negative, shapes not only the atmosphere but also the relationships and leadership styles that emerge. Leaders who demonstrate transparency and openly share relevant experiences facilitate deeper interpersonal connections, thereby enhancing support networks and resilience among student-athletes. In

contrast, a lack of openness and empathy on the part of coaches can result in environments that perpetuate maladaptive behaviors and coping strategies, including disordered eating, substance use, and even self-harm (Saxe et al., 2022).

Identity

Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, the mesosystem serves as a critical intermediary, encompassing the dynamic interplay among the various elements constituting an individual's immediate settings. It is within this context that student-athletes forge relationships not only with familial figures but also with peers, mentors, and a constellation of external resources, ranging from technological devices to informational media. The influence exerted by extended family networks, peer groups, religious communities, and consumed media—such as television, literature, and digital platforms—profoundly shapes the evolving worldview and behavioral responses of the developing individual.

The developmental trajectory of a child is inextricably linked to the quality and diversity of engagements experienced within these intersecting domains. Access to positive opportunities—such as youth camps, clubs, sports, faith groups, and enrichment programs—supports self-efficacy and identity development. Conversely, exposure to adverse childhood experiences—characterized by events that are hazardous, traumatic, or emotionally destabilizing—correlates with the emergence of maladaptive coping mechanisms and deleterious behavioral patterns (Copeland et al., 2024). Such experiences, which may encompass emotional neglect, familial discord, or exposure to violence, elevate the risk profile for substance misuse, clinical depression, and suicidal ideation in later life.

In this regard, the mesosystem's capacity to mediate developmental outcomes is contingent upon the availability and quality of relational and environmental support. The presence of nurturing, stable, and empowering interactions within these settings is paramount to

offsetting the potentially adverse consequences associated with negative early life events and to promoting resilience and adaptive functioning among student-athletes.

Research indicates that adverse childhood experiences occur frequently among Black and Latino student-athletes (Ladson-Billings and Tate IV, 1995). For many Black male student athletes in particular, coping often takes the form of identity foreclosure centered on athletics. This process leads individuals to define themselves narrowly by their athletic role, restricting both their thoughts and actions. As a result, opportunities for broader personal growth, exploration of new interests, and exposure to diverse experiences are often sacrificed (Beamon, 2012).

This pattern of identity foreclosure is reinforced by societal expectations and institutional practices that often elevate athletic prowess above academic achievement (Beamon, 2012; Borak et al., 2022). As young athletes internalize these external pressures, their sense of self becomes increasingly tied to their role on the field or court, sometimes at the expense of exploring other facets of their identity. This narrowing of focus can inadvertently limit long-term personal and professional development, as opportunities outside of athletics may be overlooked or undervalued (Beamon, 2012).

Moreover, families and communities may, consciously or unconsciously, reinforce this singular pursuit by prioritizing athletic success as a pathway to social mobility or acceptance (Astin, 2014; NCAA, 2023). While such encouragement can serve as a powerful motivator, it may also contribute to feelings of obligation, performance anxiety, or fear of disappointing others (Johnson & Migliaccio, 2009; Copeland, 2024). In the absence of intentional support structures that promote holistic self-concept and resilience, student-athletes risk experiencing burnout, diminished self-worth, or disengagement from academic pursuits (Rusbasan, 2021; Umantes & Song, 2023).

Given these dynamics, it becomes essential for coaches, educators, and institutional leaders to intentionally cultivate environments where student-athletes can discover and develop multiple dimensions of their identity. By providing purposeful mentorship, encouraging participation in a variety of extracurricular activities, and facilitating open discussions about life beyond sports, educational institutions can play a vital role in shaping student-athletes' sense of self-efficacy. Such efforts are not only crucial for healthy transitions within athletics but also in broader personal and professional contexts (Oxendine & Taub, 2021; Bennett, 2023; Van Raalte et al., 1017).

This need is especially acute for Black male student-athletes, who experience lower graduation rates and are frequently led to equate athletic success with long-term achievement. Family structures often reinforce these priorities (Beamon, 2012), creating pressure for student athletes to pursue academics or athletics primarily for external approval. Relying heavily on such extrinsic motivators, coupled with a narrowed identity focused on sport, can diminish self-esteem, increase the risk of burnout, and lead to academic or athletic disengagement (Beamon, 2012; Copeland, 2024; Johnson & Migliaccio, 2009). To counter these effects, families and coaches must intentionally nurture environments that build self-efficacy through opportunities for independent decision-making and peer mentorship, rather than imposing strict conformity to cultural or familial expectations (Oxendine & Taub, 2021).

The prevalence of identity foreclosure among male student-athletes at the National Junior College Athletic Association (NCJAA or JUCO) and Division I levels is notably higher than that observed in their female counterparts (Borak et al., 2022). Empirical investigations utilizing the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale have consistently demonstrated that males tend to identify more strongly with their athletic role than females (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001; Borak et al., 2022). Beamon (2012) corroborates these findings, emphasizing that African American former

student-athletes are frequently groomed for athletic participation from an early age, often at the expense of exploring alternative interests, and sometimes engaging in sports primarily to fulfill external expectations.

Pre-college experiences are thus pivotal in shaping collegiate outcomes, as underscored by the NCAA (2023). Many student-athletes report familial expectations to pursue athletics at the collegiate, professional, or Olympic level. Data reveal that over 50% of male student-athletes in baseball, basketball, football, ice hockey, and lacrosse, as well as female student-athletes in softball, soccer, basketball, ice hockey, and volleyball, were expected by their families to advance to collegiate athletics. Perceptions of sport's significance are further influenced by familial investments, including relocation, financial commitments, and time devoted to athletic activities (Astin, 2014; NCAA, 2023). Such expectations and decision-making processes can reinforce athletic identity foreclosure, as articulated in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Carless & Douglas, 2013).

Progressing to Bronfenbrenner's exosystem, student-athletes' access to sports is contingent upon decisions made by others and the availability of resources. Participation in athletics is often a privilege, enabled by supportive familial networks and, in some cases, facilitated by significant life adjustments such as family relocation (NCAA, 2024). Sports function as a vehicle for worldview development, the efficacy of which is heavily dependent on the paradigms of parents and coaches (Hollembek & Amorose, 2006; Astin, 2014). To optimize student-athlete development, familial and institutional policies should prioritize autonomy, inclusivity, and relatedness, thereby promoting career self-efficacy, institutional integration, student involvement, satisfaction, and retention (Astin, 2014; Bennett, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Tinto; Umantes & Song, 2023).

William Stier Jr., a distinguished authority in physical education, aligns with Tinto's (1975) framework and further challenges athletic administrators to cultivate proficiency in three domains: technical skills, people skills, and conceptual skills (Stier, 1971). Technical skills underpin the fundamental operations of athletic departments; people skills facilitate collaboration across stakeholder groups; and conceptual skills equip leaders to serve as visionaries for both academic and social environments. Stier's advocacy for a pragmatic approach highlights the necessity for athletic leadership to enhance institutional integration and student-athlete development.

Tinto (1975) posited that students' interactions and the capacity to form supportive relationships within academic and social environments underpin continued enrollment in higher education institutions. This assertion is substantiated by research on student-athlete involvement, which indicates that student-athletes may remain enrolled even after departing a team, owing to the broader collegiate experience and campus friendships (DeVries, 2019). Such findings emphasize the incentive structures that encourage institutional commitment.

The relevance of Stier's (1971) scholarship is magnified by the expanding prominence of college athletics and the emergence of sports management as a distinct discipline. Notably, half (48.9%) of National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) institutions report that their student-athlete population constitutes at least 40% of their total enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Recent literature converges in advocating for a relational approach to coaching, as opposed to transactional models that may engender fear, diminished autonomy, and increased burnout (Bennett, 2023; Henderson, 2023; Pierce, 2010; Stier, 1971; Umantes & Song, 2023; Windham, 2024; Rusbasan, 2021). Coaches who develop technical, interpersonal, and conceptual

skills are better positioned to foster autonomy, relatedness, and inclusivity, thereby mitigating burnout and exhaustion (Umantes & Song, 2023).

Furthermore, faculty members at NAIA institutions frequently undertake dual roles—serving as coaches, administrators, educators, or graduate assistants, which increases their interaction with student-athletes and underscores the importance of skill development across multiple domains (Brown, 2021; Stier, 1971). Nevertheless, assuming dual roles may elevate the risk of burnout, with consequential effects on the environments coaches cultivate within athletic programs (Hollembek & Amorose, 2005).

At the broadest level, cultural practices and societal norms exert a profound influence on developmental trajectories. Economic, social, educational, legal, and political factors collectively inform ideologies, methodologies, and imbue meaning, purpose, and motivation (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Institutions and coaches must leverage the transformative potential of sports to broaden worldviews, encourage exploration of diverse identities, and cultivate competencies that facilitate transitions such as first-year retention, injury navigation, graduation, and life beyond athletics (Van Raalte et al., 2017).

Coaching student-athletes thus represents a unique opportunity to educate and shape the lives of young people (Fernandez, 2022). Athletic directors must carefully consider the alignment between student-athlete needs and coaching philosophies. Notably, there exists a gap in the literature regarding the criteria and rationale guiding coach selection, especially within Division I men's basketball and football, where external stakeholders may exert considerable influence over hiring decisions. Similarly, the literature lacks comprehensive insights into coaching philosophies and recruitment rationales, underscoring the need for alignment with institutional missions and student-athlete goals to foster institutional integration (Windham, 2024).

In sum, scholarly investigations emphasize the critical importance of leadership approaches in shaping student-athlete satisfaction, program commitment, and institutional retention (Brecht & Burnett, 2019; Oxendine & Taub, 2021; Brunet, 2010; Umantes & Song, 2023; Henderson, 2023; Van Raalte et al., 2017; Weaver Jr. & Reynolds II, 2020; Windham, 2024). Tinto's research underscores the value of relationships, familiarity, and frequent interaction as central determinants of social integration, which in turn influences a student athlete's decision to remain or depart from an institution (Tinto, 1975; Umantes & Song, 2023).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, offers a foundational understanding of human motivation. This theory identifies three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—as essential for fostering motivation. When these needs are satisfied, individuals tend to be intrinsically motivated, meaning they engage in activities out of genuine interest or enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the other hand, when these needs are neglected or suppressed, motivation declines, and dissatisfaction grows (Holmberg & Sheridan, 2013).

Autonomy increases when individuals have choices and their input is valued, while it diminishes under coercion or strict control. Competence is strengthened when people face appropriate challenges and receive positive feedback, but it falters in the presence of overwhelming tasks or negative criticism. Relatedness thrives in environments characterized by respect, inclusion, and safety, but weakens where exclusion, conflict, or disrespect is present.

Ryan and Deci's framework describes motivation as a continuum with three categories: amotivation (lack of motivation), extrinsic motivation (driven by external rewards or pressures), and intrinsic motivation (driven by internal interest or satisfaction). The degree to which autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met determines where an individual falls along this

spectrum. Research shows that higher self-determination is linked to greater intrinsic motivation and persistence (Calvo et al., 2010; Hollembek & Amorose, 2005; Keshtidar & Behzadnia, 2017; Wang & Demerin, 2023).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs similarly suggests that when foundational needs—such as safety, belonging, and esteem—are met, individuals are more likely to reach their full potential (Brunet, 2010). These supports are essential for fostering intrinsic motivation.

Within this continuum, intrinsic motivation sits at the highest end, characterized by genuine enthusiasm for learning or achieving. Amotivation marks the lowest point, indicating indifference or lack of engagement. Extrinsic motivation falls between these two, with individuals motivated by rewards or the avoidance of negative outcomes. This type of motivation is further divided into external regulation (driven by direct rewards or punishments), introjected regulation (motivated by guilt or the desire for approval), identified regulation (motivated by personal goals or values), and integrated regulation (when activities align fully with one's beliefs and sense of self).

In summary, the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness leads to higher motivation and well-being. Understanding these principles can help educators, coaches, and leaders create environments that support engagement and lasting success.

Societal Norms and Practices

Sports are deeply embedded in American society and the educational system. Many children participate in youth sports before starting elementary school, with families often viewing this as an investment for future athletic scholarships or professional opportunities (Combs, 2023). According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS, 2024), over eight million high school students engage in athletics. At the collegiate level, about 522,500 student-athletes compete within the NCAA and NAIA (NAIA, 2024; NCAA, 2024).

Yet, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported only 14,930 professional athletes in 2023, indicating that fewer than 3% of student-athletes reach the professional ranks.

The growth and commercialization of sports have created a competitive landscape that often prioritizes athletics over academics (Anderson et al., 2020). This is reflected in high coaching salaries, advanced athletic facilities, and new regulations such as those related to Name, Image, and Likeness (Prewett, 2014). The social status associated with being a college or professional athlete draws many student-athletes to participate, sometimes without fully considering the demands and costs involved (Balaban & Kazanci-Tinmaz, 2024; Beamon, 2012; Copeland et al., 2024; McCoy et al., 2019; Weaver Jr. & Reynolds II, 2020). Ideally, the mission of higher education is to provide students with intellectual resources (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2012), but spending has increasingly favored athletics over academics (Desrochers, 2013).

Commercial interests, including television networks, sports apparel brands, and alumni sponsors, have shifted collegiate athletics from a recreational activity to a major business enterprise (Kargl, 2017). These external influences have intensified the competition among universities, not only in sports but in efforts to attract recruits through impressive facilities and brand partnerships with companies like Nike, Adidas, and Jordan (Desrochers, 2013).

Data shows that athletic departments spend more per student than academic departments, with athletic spending increasing twice as fast (Desrochers, 2013). In major conferences, higher athletic expenditures and coaching salaries often correlate with higher faculty salaries, suggesting some complementary relationship between academics and athletics. However, there is less research on Division II, III, JUCO, and NAIA institutions, which often rely on subsidies to support their athletic teams (Desrochers, 2013). Students at these institutions, including traditional students and athletes who do not receive full scholarships, are responsible for fees and costs such as tuition, books, room, and board (Conger et al., 2018).

Universities have given athletic departments significant authority, which can influence various institutional processes, including admissions. Successful sports programs often attract more student applications after winning seasons (Desrochers, 2013; Simpson, 2024). The NCAA and NAIA sometimes make exceptions to standard admissions criteria for student-athletes, a practice seen at institutions such as the University of North Carolina, where non-qualified athletes were enrolled and participated in non-existent courses to maintain eligibility (Thomason, 2021; Lens, 2021). Such policies raise concerns about academic integrity and the balance between athletics and academics. Furthermore, some student-athletes attend college for athletic opportunities, potentially at the expense of their education (Johnson, 2009; Rhee et al., 2018; Schneider & Messenger, 2012).

NAIA “Champions of Character”

The NAIA, originally established in 1937 as the National Association of Intercollegiate Basketball (NAIB), was created to give smaller colleges a national basketball competition. Key figures like Emil S. Liston, Dr. James Naismith, and Frank Cramer participated in its founding. The tournament expanded rapidly, and by 1952 the association became the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), also becoming the first to admit Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Over time, the NAIA introduced national championships in several sports and, notably, became the first to provide postseason and championship opportunities for women’s athletics.

In 1986, the NAIA established a leadership council to oversee organizational governance and academic standards. The association emphasizes affordability, with a median institutional budget of \$4 million and an average net gain of \$10,500 per student at most member schools. The NAIA also supplies Return on Athletics (ROA) data, which helps institutions analyze

financial trends and make informed decisions about their athletic programs, including how they allocate scholarships and financial aid.

Additionally, the NAIA highlights widespread access to postseason competition: around 20% of student-athletes participate, and 80% of institutions qualify for national championships. The association also values the mentoring relationship between coaches and student-athletes. Despite these features, there is limited research on NAIA student-athlete experience, indicating a need for more targeted studies in this area. Enrollment data, such as that presented in Table 2 and 3, suggests that NAIA schools could benefit from further investing in programs to support the integration and success of their student-athletes.

Table 1 HAAC and KCAC Retention Statistics

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Graduation %</u>	<u>Withdrawal %</u>	Transfer%	Still enrolled %
Baker University	63%	14%	22%	0%
Benedictine College	66%	6%	28%	0%
Central Methodist University	47%	11%	41%	0%
Clarke University	66%	2%	32%	0%
Culver-Stockton College	49%	21%	30%	0%
Graceland University	44%	52%	4%	0%
Grand View University	55%	12%	34%	0%
MidAmerica Nazarene University	46%	12%	43%	0%
Missouri Valley College	23%	25%	52%	0%
Mount Mercy University	62%	14%	25%	0%
Park University	38%	26%	34%	2%
Peru State College	36%	23%	41%	1%
William Penn University	37%	21%	42%	0%
<u>Avila University</u>	<u>53%</u>	<u>31%</u>	16%	0%
Bethany College	31%	42%	27%	0%
Bethel College	44%	38%	18%	0%
Evangel University	67%	18%	15%	0%
Friends University	45%	0%	54%	1%
Kansas Wesleyan University	44%	11%	45%	0%
McPherson College	40%	38%	23%	0%
Oklahoma Wesleyan University	37%	45%	18%	1%
Ottawa University	42%	56%	0%	2%
Southwestern College	39%	21%	40%	0%
Sterling College	47%	18%	35%	0%
Tabor University	43%	7%	50%	0%
University of Saint Mary	53%	9%	38%	0%
York University	49%	21%	29%	0%

Student-Athlete College Selection Process

Many studies (Andrew, 2016; Chad & Potwarka, 2017; Cooper et al., 2017; Goss et al., 2006; Hochradel, 2015; Huffman, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Jordan & Korbritz, 2010; Klenosky, 2001; Magnusen et al., 2018; Nixon et al., 2021; Popp et al., 2009; Rhee et al., 2018; Schneider & Messenger, 2012; Vermillion & Spears, 2012) have examined the determinants of college selection among student-athletes. These works identify both intrinsic motivations—such as personal growth, immediate playing opportunities, televised exposure, and targeted academic programs—and extrinsic influences, notably scholarship offers and coaching staff. The following sections further delineate the decision-making processes of NCAA and international student athletes.

Coaching Staff

Attributes associated with collegiate institutions, the outcomes generated by these attributes, and the individual significance attributed to them by student-athletes collectively inform the decision-making process regarding college selection (Klenosky et al., 2001). Notably, student-athletes participating in NCAA Division I football consistently prioritize the coaching staff when selecting an institution. For these athletes, the coach serves as a pivotal figure who can facilitate skill development and foster a sense of trust and comfort. The presence of a respected coach is frequently associated with opportunities for achievement, enjoyment, and personal growth, all of which are highly valued by this demographic (Klenosky et al., 2001; Vermillion & Spears, 2012).

Comparable trends are observed among NCAA Division I women's basketball recruits, who place significant emphasis on both the reputation of the institution and the coaching staff during the college selection process. For these recruits, a winning record and established success within the athletic program are regarded as critical determinants. These selection criteria are noteworthy given graduation rates for student-athletes in these revenue-generating sports: NCAA

Division I Football Bowl Series (FBS) athletes graduate at a rate of 64%, Football Championship Series (FCS) at 61%, and women's basketball athletes at 62%, all of which are at or below the national average of 64% (NCES, 2022; NCAA, 2023).

These graduation statistics are influenced by the prevalence of special admissions processes for student-athletes in high-profile sports. Such processes allow individuals who do not meet conventional GPA or standardized test benchmarks to gain admission, a practice that athletic directors utilize to maintain program competitiveness (Vogel et al., 2019). As a consequence, many student-athletes in these contexts are more likely to identify as "athlete students" rather than "student-athletes," often limiting their engagement with the broader institutional environment and focusing their college selection on athletic department characteristics and institutional performance.

Moreover, these student-athletes tend not to pursue academic majors that would prepare them for graduate study or careers outside of professional athletics. Research indicates that students of color are disproportionately likely to identify as "athlete-students," frequently perceiving athletics as their primary avenue to higher education (Beamon, 2012; Copeland, 2024; Cron, 2023; Vogel et al., 2019). For example, Ingram (2023) found that over half (55%) of Division I FCS student-athletes admitted under exceptional circumstances graduated within six years, while 5% were dismissed due to academic performance. Black student-athletes who complete their degrees often report feeling inadequately prepared for post-collegiate life, largely because their interactions with individuals outside their athletic programs are limited and opportunities for holistic personal development are scarce (Beamon, 2012; Bergeron, 2019; Cochran, 2023; Cron, 2023).

These findings suggest that, in the absence of a coach offering an athletic scholarship, many student-athletes may not pursue higher education (Rhee, 2018). This underscores the need

for further research and institutional attention to the academic and developmental trajectories of athletes in collegiate settings.

Academics and Athletic Scholarship

Contrarily, when considering student-athletes that are not admitted under the exceptional circumstances and do not receive a full athletic scholarship, academic reputation is a highly esteemed deciding factor (Andrew et al., 2016; Schneider & Messenger, 2012). For women student-athletes, factors such as academic major, and academic support, size of school, and location also direct their decision. A major difference between men and women student-athletes that do not receive a full academic scholarship is that men do not give much consideration to academic majors when deciding (Andrew et al., 2016).

International student-athletes at the Division I level are more likely to select an institution based on the amount of athletic scholarship (Popp, 2011). Student-athletes in non-revenue sports tend to base their decision on academic degrees and the potential to obtain an excellent job. However, hockey players (non-revenue) seek the opportunity to play immediately when deciding on an athletic program to commit to. A case study of a Canadian University revealed an anomaly, which is that the desired academic program was the most crucial factor, outweighing scholarship value, athletic facilities, winning, and head coach. This suggests athletic and academic administration should seek to remain current with degree interests (Berry, 2024; Chard, 2017; Windham, 2024).

Qualitative research on motivational factors for NCAA Division I athletes indicates different motives during the recruitment process. Males seek more transactional benefits while females seek more transformational experiences and benefits. Male student-athletes interviewed by Rhee et al., (2018) indicated they seek the best scholarship offer, while women being interviewed did not mention scholarships at all. Males continued to expound on their deciding

factors, mentioning opportunity to play and opportunity to improve their skills. Females' responses were centered around team culture. The themes found by the researchers indicate male student-athletes are more extrinsically motivated than females. Females seek a sense of belonging, as they mentioned the camaraderie and social atmosphere of the campus (Rhee et al., 2018).

Monetization

Scholarly literature consistently demonstrates that student-athletes and their families actively pursue social capital through collegiate athletics (Beamon, 2012; Bergeron, 2019; Brunet, 2010; Cochran, 2023; Cron, 2023; McCoy et al., 2019; Schneider, 2012). As college and youth sports continue to expand, the opportunities for individuals to affiliate with successful and recognizable programs also increase. The “Flutie Effect,” first observed in 1984 when Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie threw a dramatic game-winning pass against the University of Miami, exemplifies how athletic success can directly influence university admissions. In the year following this event, Boston College experienced a marked rise in undergraduate applications—not only among prospective student-athletes but also among traditional students. Universities such as Alabama, Indiana State, and Louisville have similarly benefited from surges in interest following successful football or basketball seasons (Beamon, 2012; Berry, 2024; Schneider & Messenger, 2012; Simpson, 2024).

Recent developments in collegiate athletics, notably the rise of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) opportunities, further reshape student-athletes' decision-making processes (Berry, 2024). Historically, institutions prohibited payments to student-athletes for enrollment, and violations led to academic fraud and illicit financial transactions. However, as television contracts and corporate partnerships funnel significant resources into university athletic programs, student-athletes increasingly weigh NIL prospects and

brand affiliations—such as those with Jordan, Adidas, Nike, and Under Armor—when selecting a university.

While NIL opportunities provide substantial benefits to some student-athletes, they remain inaccessible to others due to limited financial literacy or time constraints required for entrepreneurial pursuits (Sinatra & Williams, 2023). The introduction of NIL and new transfer portal rules has also reduced recruitment opportunities for high school athletes, with coaches targeting transfers and experienced players capable of contributing immediately. This shift may precipitate a migration of student-athletes toward NAIA institutions. The pressure on coaches to deliver immediate results often leads to prioritizing short-term performance over long-term athlete development, as evidenced by the increased frequency of coaching changes before full recruiting cycles are completed. Moreover, NIL incentives motivate some student-athletes to remain in college rather than pursuing professional careers, despite the reality that less than 3% successfully transition to professional sports (NCAA, 2024). This trend manifests in cases such as Diego Pavia of Vanderbilt University and others seeking extended eligibility, thereby limiting opportunities for incoming high school seniors.

Although NIL legislation remains new, its impact on the collegiate athletics landscape is profound. While NCAA Division I dominates NIL discussions, Division II, III, and NAIA levels continue to present unexplored opportunities. Furthermore, several states have introduced NIL regulations in high school athletics, yielding mixed outcomes depending on legislative environments (Sinatra & Williams, 2023). Current scholarship and NCAA reports emphasize the necessity for robust educational support for student-athletes in tax and financial literacy, career planning, navigation of NIL processes, and professional opportunities in sports as they transition from high school to collegiate athletics (Meares et al., 2024; Pond, 2021; Simpson, 2024).

Institutional Differences

Nixon et al. (2021) examined how student-athletes at all three NCAA football levels choose colleges. Their study used a questionnaire to evaluate key factors: academics, athletics, coaching, location, communication, and important relationships. The rankings of these factors differed across divisions, reflecting the athletes' circumstances. Division I football players placed greatest importance on coaches, followed by athletics, location, academics, leadership, and significant people. Division II athletes ranked athletics first, then academics, coach, location, leadership, and significant persons. For Division III, academics came first, then leadership, coach, location, significant persons, and athletics. The scholarship structures help explain these choices: Division I athletes usually receive full scholarships, Division II may have partial scholarships, and Division III athletes receive no athletic scholarships, so academics are prioritized. Division I athletes often see coaches as a path to the National Football League. Division II athletes want to play immediately, while Division III athletes focus on academic opportunities (Nixon et al., 2021).

At smaller institutions, including Division III and NAIA, student-athletes make decisions similarly to those at larger universities. Studies (Goss et al., 2006; Hochradel, 2015; Johnson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2009) show that both athletics and academics are significant, with the head coach often being key (Bergeron, 2019; Huffman, 2012; Klenosky, 2021; Magnusen et al., 2018; Nixon et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2018).

At the NAIA level, male and female student-athletes differ slightly in what they value most. Males rank the head coach first, followed by degree programs, the chance to play, and athletic facilities. Females prioritize degree programs, then the opportunity to play, academic support, and finally the head coach (Goss, 2006). For non-athletes choosing small colleges,

important considerations include small class sizes, available degree programs, cost, location near home, financial aid, and admissions process (Bergeron, 2019).

A unique factor at NAIA schools is spiritual guidance, which is rarely cited at large universities (Andrew et al., 2016). Since many NAIA institutions have faith-based missions and high student-athlete turnover, the role of spiritual guidance in college selection merits further investigation.

Student-Athlete Departure

Research shows that student-athletes choose colleges based on both academic and athletic factors. Academically, the available degree programs are most important, while athletically, the head coach and coaching staff matter most (Andrew, 2016; Huffman, 2012; Johnson, 2004; Klenosky, 2021; Magnusen et al., 2018; Nixon et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2018). This suggests that unless there is a major change in their degree program or a coaching change, retention rates should be high (see Table 4).

However, factors such as leaving the team, managing both roles as student and athlete (Bennet, 2023), burnout (Henderson, 2023), financial literacy challenges (McCoy et al., 2019), and negative coaching experiences (Rusbasan, 2021) are common reasons for departure. Colleges can improve retention by listening to student-athletes' concerns, as these reasons are often non-cognitive, meaning they are not related to grades or test scores. This is different from older studies which suggest academic performance best predicts persistence (Pierce, 2010).

Tuition costs, student-to-teacher ratios, and financial aid also affect whether students stay in school (Webster & Showers, 2011). Bean (1979) argued that non-cognitive factors are better indicators of persistence. Recent research supports this, finding that many students leave due to feelings of isolation and not belonging (Bennet, 2023; Henderson, 2023; McCoy et al., 2019; Oxendine & Taub, 2021; Rusbasan, 2021; Webster & Showers, 2011). These studies emphasize

social factors as main reasons for leaving. Students often seek environments where they feel accepted and valued for who they are.

For NAIA schools, addressing social isolation should be a priority. According to Bean (1979), it is the institution's responsibility to understand and meet the needs of its students, rather than expecting students to adapt on their own. Supporting various student groups requires tailored resources for each demographic (Oxendine & Taub, 2021). These supports should help students feel like they belong, which can reduce isolation and, as research shows, is a key factor in whether students stay or leave (Astin, 2014).

Leadership

Small, faith-based colleges face special challenges in helping student-athletes feel that they belong and improving retention. To serve diverse groups of student-athletes, it is important to understand their backgrounds and needs. Peer coaching programs can help coaches learn from student-athletes and support student-athletes in building confidence and career skills. These programs also allow athletes to develop identities outside of sports, reducing feelings of isolation and supporting student retention.

The head coach, with their assistants, plays a key role in recruiting student athletes. For athletes, coaches are often the first point of contact with the college. If the relationship between athlete and coach is not maintained, athletes may choose to leave (DeVries, 2019).

There are over 20,000 head coaches recruiting student-athletes. In men's sports, 94% of head coaches are men, and 6% are women. In women's sports, 59% of head coaches are men, and 41% are women (NCAA Demographics Database, 2022). Most head coaches and athletic directors are white men. Black, Hispanic/Latino, and other groups are much less represented in these roles. Academic advisors are mostly white women (44%) and white men (19%), with Black women representing 9% and Black men 7%. This lack of diversity may be linked to low

graduation rates among Black student-athletes (Cron, 2023; Finnell, 2022; Soloman, 2022). More research is needed to understand how relationships with coaches and advisors affect retention for Black student-athletes.

Coaching styles and leadership are important for student-athlete persistence. Research shows that coaching staff heavily influence college choices (Vermillion & Spears, 2012). Surveys of NAIA student-athletes who stopped playing sports but stayed enrolled found that satisfaction with class sizes and campus relationships encouraged them to remain. Athletes who lack opportunities outside their sport feel less satisfied and less autonomous (Desi & Ryan, 2000; Tinto, 1975). Autonomy is needed for intrinsic motivation.

Limited engagement in activities beyond athletics may result in what scholars' term "athletic identity foreclosure," wherein a student-athlete's sense of self becomes singularly defined by their sport (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2012). Empirical evidence underscores the importance of institutional resources—such as tutoring, library access, and robust athletic facilities—in supporting student-athlete retention. The aspiration to complete a postsecondary degree consistently emerges as a salient motivator for persistence. Conversely, withdrawal from collegiate athletics frequently stems from dissatisfaction with coaching practices, diminished enthusiasm for competition, and an erosion of passion for sport, factors which are often external and non-academic in nature (DeVries, 2019).

Negative coaching behaviors, such as public criticism, unpredictability, and rigidity, cause burnout and drive student-athletes to leave (Rusbasan et al., 2021). Sometimes athletes are coached by staff they have no prior relationship with, which can worsen these issues. In contrast, coaches who serve as supportive leaders create positive environments that reduce burnout and departure (Umantes & Ho Song, 2023). When athletes have input and feel included in decision-

making, they are more intrinsically motivated and less likely to burn out (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Holmberg & Sheridan, 2013).

High school athletes also experience burnout due to coaching climate, overtraining, and negative school atmospheres (Into et al., 2020). Coaching that listens and engages athletes shifts the environment from disempowering to empowering. Male students are more likely to experience a disempowering coaching climate, while female athletes often benefit from more supportive communication. Coaches of team and individual sports form different relationships with their athletes, but people skills remain essential (DeVries, 2019; Rusbasan, 2021).

Peer coaching is recommended for improving retention, confidence, communication, and team dynamics (Merian & Snyder, 2015). In studies, most student-athletes who participated felt better about themselves, increased interest in their sport, and believed their team performed better. Peer coaching is also a cost-effective way to support first-year student-athletes (Finnell, 2022). Incoming freshmen feel more supported and comfortable when mentored by older athletes. This builds networks and camaraderie, which helps future students as well.

Peer mentoring was used in a Canadian university's women's soccer program and led to better engagement and team cohesion (Petersen et al., 2023). Mentees were more likely to seek help because they felt psychologically safe. However, student-athletes, especially men, often see help-seeking as a weakness, which prevents them from accessing support (Bennett, 2023).

Student-athletes are at higher risk for mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and eating disorders than non-athletes (Bennett, 2023). Many avoid seeking help, turning instead to unhealthy coping mechanisms. Half of student-athletes abuse alcohol (44%), and other substances are also commonly used (Bennett, 2023; NCAA, 2023).

Physical injuries are a visible risk, but mental health problems like concussion, addiction, and eating disorders are equally serious. Overtraining can lead to both mental and physical

fatigue, affecting academic performance. There is limited research on time commitments for NAIA student-athletes, but NCAA data shows many spend over 40 hours per week on sport activities (NCAA, 2023). Many also get less than 7 hours of sleep per night, increasing risk for substance abuse (Lund et al., 2010).

Research suggests that student-athletes need access to psychological resources and support networks (Cochran, 2023; D'Anna, 2013; Finnell, 2022). Coaches should encourage extracurricular involvement to help athletes develop multiple identities, which supports retention (Astin, 2014). Student-athletes with limited identities are at greater risk for negative coping behaviors (D'Anna, 2013).

Athletic departments could increase support by involving social workers, who offer neutral perspectives and help athletes connect with campus resources. At faith-based institutions, a chaplain or spiritual leader can provide psychological safety and guidance. There is currently a gap in research on the impact of chaplains at small colleges, which should be further explored.

Regular and positive connections with peers, faculty, and staff increase student-athlete retention (Weaver Jr. & Reynolds II, 2020). Social workers and other support roles can help student-athletes integrate into the institution and improve overall well-being, offering models for NAIA and similar institutions to follow.

Summary

Over the past century, access to higher education has grown, in part due to athletics. The potential for increased enrollment and revenue has led institutions to invest more in sports programs (Beamon, 2012; Brunet, 2010; NAIA, 2024). Athletics, once considered a leisure activity or a means of social development, now comes with greater expectations and challenges for student-athletes (Bennett, 2023). The social value assigned to athletic success and the commercialization of sports has gained prominence in both society and higher education

(Bennett, 2023; Cron, 2023). NAIA member institutions use athletic initiatives to attract more students, often under the ‘Return on Athletics’ philosophy. Many student-athletes enroll without fully understanding the academic, social, and financial challenges they may face. Retention rates at NAIA institutions show that more support is needed to help students continue their studies and remain enrolled.

Current literature shows gaps in research about NAIA student-athletes and their experiences. Areas needing more attention include their relationships with athletic directors, coaches, and academic advisors or counselors. Research should also examine the financial challenges these students face and the opportunities available to them after graduation (Bergeron, 2019). Additionally, future studies should explore how student-athletes’ self-efficacy relates to their identity and choices, especially when they enroll at faith-based institutions.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The central issue addressed by this study is the low persistence and retention rates observed among student-athletes attending institutions affiliated with the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA, 2024). The aim of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to systematically examine the academic, social, and athletic barriers that student-athletes perceive as impediments to retention and persistence. In addition, this research sought to identify the institutional and personal support that student-athletes consider essential for academic achievement and degree completion. The study further explored the motivations that influence student-athletes' decisions to enroll at a given institution, as well as the factors contributing to their departure.

This chapter details the methodological framework of the study, focusing on the rationale for employing qualitative research, the selection of instruments for investigating the lived experiences of NAIA student-athletes, and the approaches used for population selection and sample recruitment. The procedures for data analysis are outlined, alongside a discussion of the study's assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and considerations for ethical compliance. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive summary of the qualitative research approach and describes the overall structure of the investigation.

Research Methodology and Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, chosen for its suitability in capturing the nuanced social experiences of participants outside experimental or controlled settings. Such an approach enabled the researcher to interpret and analyze data through a reflexive lens (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Qualitative data sources may include observations, interviews, focus groups, case studies, field notes, journals, photographs, and biographies (Frey, 2018). For the purposes of this research, semi-structured interviews were implemented due to

their feasibility and their capacity to elicit detailed accounts of participants' institutional support experiences. Additional methodological options considered included observation, focus groups, and case studies; however, these were excluded. Observation was deemed impractical given the private nature of team schedules and potential distractions, while focus groups were avoided to mitigate risks associated with group think, dominance, or social influence. The case study approach, with its focus on singular cases, was also set aside in favor of gathering multiple perspectives. Thus, a narrative inquiry design was selected as the most fitting.

Narrative inquiry offers a descriptive account of individuals, contexts, or events, emphasizing participants' life histories as recounted to the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This study utilized semi-structured interviews featuring open-ended questions, allowing participants the flexibility to richly articulate their experiences, while the researcher adapted questioning as needed to maximize depth and authenticity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Such an approach was deemed appropriate for comprehending student-athletes' decision-making processes, as it facilitated exploration of the pragmatic factors influencing their persistence or attrition. Throughout data collection, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance, probing further into the institutional, academic, social, cultural, familial, and linguistic dimensions described by participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). While phenomenological methodology similarly centers on lived experience, it requires readers to construct meaning and empathize with participants (Paley, 2017). The flexibility, clarity, and straightforwardness of narrative inquiry distinguished it as the optimal approach for gathering historical and current perspectives from student-athlete participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Ethnography, by contrast, investigates behaviors, communication patterns, and interactions within defined cultural groups (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This design yields a richly detailed understanding of both the culture and its members. For example, Rhoads (1995)

employed ethnography to study fraternity life at a major research institution, entering the field with certain presumptions regarding the oppression of women and the perpetuation of problematic behaviors within fraternal organizations. This required extensive immersion in the participants' natural environment. While ethnography might also illuminate the cultural norms shaping student-athletes' experiences, constraints related to time and access—particularly those imposed by athletic coaches—rendered this design impractical for the current investigation.

Population and Sample

This investigation examined the lived experiences of NAIA student-athletes, focusing on the factors they perceive as barriers to institutional persistence. The NAIA encompasses over 83,000 student-athletes across more than 250 member institutions. Employing purposive sampling, the study recruited fifteen current and former student-athletes participating in NAIA basketball, football, or wrestling. This sample was selected due to the notably low retention and persistence rates observed in these sports (NAIA, 2024) as illustrated in Table 4. Moreover, the rationale for recruiting male participants stemmed from comparative retention statistics: in every sport, male student-athletes demonstrate lower retention rates than their female counterparts, with the exception of swimming and diving (see Table 4).

Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate, given the necessity for participants to meet specific inclusion criteria. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to facilitate access to this challenging population, leveraging initial participants to identify further respondents (Parker et al., 2020). Sampling continued until saturation was achieved and no added information emerged. The unique demands placed on student-athletes, including restricted autonomy over their schedules and limited opportunities for professional networking and personal development outside athletics (Cochran, 2023; Cron, 2023). This phenomenon intensifies the risk of athletic

identity foreclosure and social isolation while simultaneously hindering student-athletes' successful academic integration (Van Raalte, 2017; Windham, 2024).

Table 2 NAIA Retention per Sport

Sport	Gender	Average Retention Rate
Baseball	Men	68.88%
Basketball	Men	56.54%
Basketball	Women	66.14%
Bowling	Men	67.43%
Bowling	Women	74.16%
Competitive Cheer	Both	59.60%
Competitive Dance	Both	76.38%
Cross Country	Men	68.00%
Cross Country	Women	73.31%
Football	Men	57.23%
Golf	Men	73.40%
Golf	Women	76.58%
Lacrosse	Men	66.74%
Lacrosse	Women	75.77%
Soccer	Men	61.86%
Soccer	Women	67.56%
Softball	Women	71.94%
Swimming & Diving	Men	77.52%
Swimming & Diving	Women	73.76%
Tennis	Men	69.18%
Tennis	Women	73.25%
Track	Men	71.87%
Track	Women	75.95%
Volleyball	Men	66.53%
Volleyball	Women	66.37%
Wrestling	Men	56.66%
Wrestling	Women	69.94%

To facilitate participant recruitment, the researcher utilized their established professional network, initiating outreach through a LinkedIn post. Supplementary identification of eligible candidates was accomplished by reviewing athletic department websites and team rosters. Additionally, targeted recruitment efforts extended to various social media platforms, including X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram. To participate in this study, individuals

were required to meet specific eligibility criteria, namely, they had to be current or former student-athletes specializing in football, basketball, or wrestling. This criterion ensured that the research sample was appropriately aligned with the objectives of the qualitative investigation, thereby enhancing the relevance and rigor of the subsequent data collection and analysis.

Materials or Instrumentation

Qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of individuals' experiences in naturally occurring settings, without experimental manipulation. Data collected through this approach primarily reflects the attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and perceptions of participants. In this paradigm, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the present study, semi-structured interviews formed the core method of inquiry. Participants responded to questions and prompts outlined in Appendix C, which were meticulously designed to address the central research questions. These questions drew upon the researcher's personal expertise as a collegiate football student-athlete and coach, as well as theoretical frameworks including student departure, involvement, attrition, and institutional integration (Astin, 2014; Bean, 1979; Tinto, 1975). Additional influences included the Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire (ASQ) and the student-Athlete Motivation toward Sport and Academic Questionnaire (SAMSAQ).

The ASQ, developed by Harold Reimer, was crafted to assess the satisfaction of current and former student-athletes (Reimer & Chelladurai, 1998). Following extensive field testing involving five iterations, the finalized ASQ was distributed to over six hundred participants and comprised 197 items across fifteen subscales. These subscales encompassed dimensions such as individual and team performance, ability/utilization, strategy, personal treatment, training and instruction, team task and social contributions, team ethics, integration, personal dedication, budget, medical personnel, academic support services, and external agents. In addition to the

ASQ, participants in Reimer's study completed a preliminary questionnaire consisting of eleven open-ended items, affording them the opportunity to articulate their student-athlete experiences in greater detail (Reimer & Chelladurai, 1998). Building upon this foundation, Bergeron (2019) modified the ASQ and administered a streamlined 15-item questionnaire, coupled with follow-up interviews, to seven former NAIA and Division III student-athletes.

The student-athlete motivation toward sports and academics questionnaire, designed by Joy Gaston serves to measure both academic and athletic motivation among student-athletes. This instrument comprises thirty items each relating to academic and athletic attributes—accompanied by eight demographic questions. The study utilizing this questionnaire encompassed 236 Division I and Division III student-athletes across eight sports disciplines.

To ensure the relevance and rigor of the interview items implemented in the current study, field testing was conducted with input from athletic directors, coaches, academic advisors, and student-athletes. Mirroring the iterative process of the ASQ, a thorough vetting procedure was employed to refine the questions and elicit insightful responses. The study sample consisted of fifteen student athletes who engaged with open-ended interview questions, thereby enabling the generation of rich, narrative data. This approach facilitated comprehensive thematic analysis of institutional, cultural, social, familial, and linguistic dimensions of the student-athlete experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Prolonged engagement with participants, referential adequacy, and member checking procedures were enacted to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings, thereby enhancing the scholarly rigor with which the researcher narrates and interprets the lived experiences of the individuals studied.

Study Procedures

The data collection procedure commenced with the acquisition of institutional review board (IRB) approval, ensuring adherence to ethical standards for research involving human

subjects. Upon securing this approval, the recruitment phase was initiated through formalized outreach on professional and social media platforms, including LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. Following initial contact, prospective participants were identified and informed consent was duly obtained to confirm their willingness to participate in the study.

Subsequently, arrangements were made to conduct interviews with each participant, offering flexibility in the format, whether in person, via video conference, or by telephone, each scheduled to last approximately sixty minutes. After each primary interview, a ten-minute follow-up session was conducted upon transcription of the recorded conversation. Interview sessions were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams, leveraging its built-in functionalities for accurate data capture.

The follow-up interview, commonly referred to as member checking, served to validate the accuracy and clarity of the transcribed data. This verification process ensured the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by providing participants with the opportunity to confirm or clarify their responses prior to the onset of systematic data analysis.

Data Analysis

To further illuminate and contextualize the experiences shared by participants, this investigation systematically narrates formative events and influences that have shaped their identities and trajectories as student-athletes. Notably, recruitment practices at NAIA athletic departments frequently reflect an imperative to fulfill institutional quotas and there exists an underlying assumption that student-athletes select institutions in pursuit of enhanced social capital (Bergeron, 2019).

The analytic strategy adopted was thematic analysis, operationalized through the use of NVivo software in concert with comprehensive handwritten notes. Thematic analysis was selected for its methodological flexibility and its independence from any singular theoretical

framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach facilitated the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives—including student departure theory, self-determination theory, the student attrition model, and the model of ecological development—while enabling the identification of salient patterns and themes within the qualitative data corpus.

Following the completion and transcription of interviews, initial codes were generated based on the researcher's interpretive engagement with participant responses. These codes were then systematically reviewed and organized according to their relevance to the study's central research questions. Subsequent theme development was undertaken and presented to participants for member checking. This process enhanced the validity and credibility and enabled participants to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. The integration of member checking thereby strengthened the narrative coherence and facilitated the alignment of empirical research findings with the current investigation for the purposes of methodological triangulation (Bradley-Levine, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire, 2017).

Assumptions

The present study is underpinned by several foundational assumptions regarding the enrollment and experience of student-athletes at NAIA institutions. First, it is posited that student-athletes primarily select NAIA institutions to pursue athletic opportunities rather than prioritizing academic achievement. A further assumption is that student-athletes often possess limited awareness of the financial implications associated with attending these institutions, particularly given the nuanced structure of athletic scholarships (Bergeron, 2019). While scholarships are frequently offered during recruitment and may imply substantial financial support, they often constitute only a partial contribution toward the total cost of attendance, which averages between \$30,000 and \$50,000 (Bergeron, 2019; USA Sports Scholarships, 2024). Extant research affirms that financial considerations are a salient determinant of student

departure, a phenomenon that may be especially pronounced within NAIA institutions due to their cost structures.

Additionally, the study assumed a misalignment between coaching philosophies and the overarching missions of NAIA institutions. Drawing on the researcher's experience as both a collegiate football coach and a student-athlete, it is believed that coaching staff may not necessarily share the faith-based values or institutional affiliations that characterize NAIA member schools, nor the values held by the student-athletes themselves. These discrepancies are often overlooked in the recruitment process, as attention tends to focus on immediate concerns such as playing time, scholarship offers, and academic major selection (Beamon, 2012; Bergeron, 2019; Brunet, 2010; Cochran, 2023; Cron, 2023; Henderson, 2023; Windham, 2024). The recognition of this assumption introduces the potential for researcher bias, which is addressed in the subsequent limitations section.

A final assumption that guided this inquiry was that academic advisors, coaches, and student-athletes maintain divergent visions and goals concerning the student-athlete experience. The literature reveals a paucity of research addressing the specific objectives and philosophies of academic advisors and coaches. Nevertheless, drawing upon empirical evidence and the presumption that participants responded with candor, it is reasonable to conclude that both athletic and academic influences represent critical factors in the decision to enroll at NAIA institutions. Despite these influences, retention rates for student-athletes remain below 80%, with graduation rates even lower (NAIA, 2024).

Limitations

This study was limited by the composition and scope of the participant sample. While the investigation focused on capturing the perspectives of NAIA student-athletes, it did not extend to the viewpoints of coaches or academic advisors regarding the factors impeding student-athlete

progression. Collecting data from these additional stakeholders could provide valuable comparative insights and enrich the analysis by juxtaposing differing perspectives.

Furthermore, the potential for researcher bias constituted a notable limitation. The primary investigator's subjective experiences as both a student athlete and a coach informed the inquiry, particularly regarding the advisability of enrolling at NAIA institutions. To address this bias, the researcher employed bracketing throughout the study, conscientiously setting aside firsthand experiences and emotional responses prior to, during, and following data collection (Tuffold & Newman, 2012). The consistent use of memos and reflective journaling facilitated ongoing examination of positionality and ensured methodological rigor.

Bracketing also influenced the development of interview questions and the selection of participants. Initially, the study aimed to explore the experiences of Black student-athletes within revenue-generating sports such as football and basketball. However, the research design evolved to include student-athletes of all ethnic backgrounds, thereby expanding the breadth of data collected and enabling nuanced comparisons across diverse groups. Although Black student athletes exhibit lower graduation rates, incorporating the experiences of non-Black counterparts enhanced both data collection and thematic analysis. This inclusive approach fostered opportunities for comparative inquiry and strengthened the study's overall validity.

Throughout the research process, reflexivity was further promoted by ongoing journaling after each interview and member checking session, as well as consultation with peers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Such practices supported the researcher's commitment to neutrality and the faithful representation of participants' narratives (Tuffold & Newman, 2012). Finally, the absence of quantitative data for triangulation with the qualitative thematic findings represents an additional limitation, potentially restricting the generalizability and empirical robustness of the results.

Delimitations

This investigation was deliberately restricted to student-athletes participating in three of the twenty-seven men's and women's sports offered at the NAIA level: football, men's basketball, and men's wrestling. These particular sports were selected due to their consistently lower retention rates compared to other NAIA athletic programs. The researcher posited that focusing on these student-athletes would yield a more nuanced understanding of the factors underlying elevated attrition rates within select NAIA programs. Furthermore, football programs, given their large roster sizes, tend to exhibit greater demographic diversity, thereby increasing their accessibility and relevance to the current inquiry. The utilization of snowball sampling further limited the representativeness of the participant pool, confining the scope of the study primarily to NAIA institutions within the Midwest, Southern, and Western regions of the United States.

Ethical Assurances

Prior to data collection, this inquiry received formal approval from the Institutional Review Board, affirming ethical compliance. The anticipated risk to participants was minimal. To safeguard participant anonymity, pseudonyms were systematically assigned, and all data and interview transcripts were securely archived in encrypted digital files protected by confidential passwords. In recognition of potential researcher bias, member checking procedures were implemented as a primary strategy to mitigate the influence of positionality on data interpretation and analysis. Throughout the recruitment process, it was clearly communicated that all participants would be treated with respect and retain the right to withdraw from the study at any time, should they desire.

Summary

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the research methodology and design, emphasizing the rigor and intent underpinning the qualitative narrative inquiry. Qualitative approaches are particularly suited to elevating participants' voices, enabling the nuanced exploration of their thoughts, opinions, and lived experiences. Through in-depth interviews, the study sought to generate rich, contextualized data that illuminates the realities faced by NAIA student athletes.

The participant sample for this investigation comprised individuals currently or formerly involved in football, men's basketball, or wrestling within NAIA institutions. Interview questions were constructed from a thorough review of the extant literature on student-athlete experiences, with particular attention to the limited research focused on NAIA populations and the researcher's own positionality. The insights generated from these interviews hold practical significance for NAIA institutions and stakeholders, offering an evidence-based foundation for understanding and addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by student-athletes in these programs.

Chapter 4: Findings

The central issue addressed in this investigation pertained to the persistently low rates of persistence and retention among student-athletes enrolled at institutions affiliated with the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA, 2024). To expound this challenge, the present qualitative narrative inquiry sought to examine the academic, social, and athletic barriers perceived by student-athletes as impediments to retention and persistence, in addition to identifying the institutional and personal forms of support deemed essential for academic achievement and graduation. This chapter presents a rigorous analysis of the collected data, establishing trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, and confirmability independent of participant or researcher bias. The salient results of the study are delineated herein, followed by research questions, a critical evaluation of the findings, and a concluding summary.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research means ensuring the data is dependable and valid. This is achieved through four important criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Brown, 2025). To build credibility, researchers use multiple sources to support each theme, making the findings more trustworthy and verifiable (Brown, 2025). As Cope (2014) notes, qualitative findings must be both true and believable. The methods used to ensure the trustworthiness of this study's data are explained in the following sections.

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher recruited current and former NAIA student athletes for one-on-one interviews. Recruitment took place through LinkedIn and TikTok. Once participants were identified, consent was obtained, and a 60-minute interview was scheduled. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to refer peers or teammates for participation, following a snowball sampling approach.

During each interview, the researcher took notes in a field journal to support later analysis. Interviews were reviewed and notes were updated to capture new insights. This allowed for refining interview questions and clarifying responses through member checking. Interviews continued until no added information emerged, indicating data saturation. All interview transcripts were reviewed and coded using NVivo14 qualitative analysis software. Initial codes were suggested by the software.

Each participant received an email containing a copy of their transcript and a summary of the researcher's interpretation of their responses. This allowed participants to confirm or clarify their statements, helping to prevent misunderstanding and reduce researcher bias.

Findings

This research explored the challenges that NAIA student-athletes face in staying enrolled and graduating, as well as the types of support that can help improve retention. Understanding these students' perspectives addresses a common concern for NAIA institutions (NAIA, 2024). Athletic department leaders in the NAIA have identified recruitment and retention as major priorities, yet there is currently limited public data on student-athlete satisfaction or expectations. This study contributes new knowledge about the concerns and needs of NAIA student-athletes.

Sample

Interviews were conducted with fifteen male NAIA student-athletes, both current ($n = 1$) and former ($n = 14$), between the ages of 18 and 37. These participants shared their experiences with NAIA programs. Among them, one was still enrolled, four had withdrawn, and eleven had graduated. Of the graduates, five completed their studies at their original institution, four started at a junior college (JUCO), and two of those transferred more than once. Among the withdrawn group, one had transferred from an NCAA Division I program. All but one participant received

athletic scholarship financial aid. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure diversity in enrollment status, sport, conference, and institutional backgrounds (see Appendix E).

Research Questions

RQ1. What academic, athletic, or social barriers do NAIA student-athletes perceive as hinderances to their institutional integration and retention?

Identity Foreclosure. The interviews began by exploring how and why these student athletes chose their colleges. Most participants expressed a strong motivation to play sports at a higher level, even though they were not widely recruited. Their decisions about where to enroll were influenced by opportunities to play, receive athletic scholarships, or gain more playing time. Academic factors were rarely mentioned and seemed to have little influence on their choices. Many participants demonstrated identity foreclosure, meaning they made their college decisions based on their athletic identity. Participant 1:

I did not play much, so I did not have many videos to show. Many schools did not recruit me. I made my own videos and sent them to every coach I could find in the western U.S. and waited to see what would happen.

Participant 8 experienced significant adverse childhood experiences. Both parents left school after the 10th grade, spent time in prison, and struggled with drug abuse. Despite these challenges, his parents encouraged him to pursue an education. However, neither the participant nor his family was familiar with the college admissions process. It was their high school coach who played a key role in initiating their recruitment journey. Participant 8:

I had a limited recruiting process, coming from a high school in a small rural town. There was no hudl (online recruiting service), no X (the social media platform, formerly known as Twitter), and I did not know anything about recruiting. I just thought people came and found you. Nobody from my high

school went on to play sports. My high school coach paved the way for me. He knew I needed to get out of my circumstances, and that I needed to attend a college more than two hours from where I lived. So, he started sending my film to college so that he thought I could actually play for—small schools, NAIA and Division II programs which were not particularly good.

Participant 4 did not receive significant recruitment attention during their high school years. However, their exposure to an NAIA institution was facilitated by an older sibling who played collegiate soccer there. Regular attendance at their sibling's matches provided Participant 4 with firsthand familiarity with the campus and its athletic environment, which influenced their decision to pursue enrollment at the same institution. Participant 4:

My introduction to the school and its athletic program came through my older sister, who enrolled there to play soccer after high school. Attending her matches gave me a firsthand sense of campus life and what it meant to be part of the athletic community. From early on, my goal was always to play football at the collegiate level—regardless of division. Since I did not receive much recruitment attention from high school, walking on at a Division I school was technically possible, but I knew I would spend four years on the bench, which did not appeal to me. Being familiar with the campus thanks to my sister's experience, I decided to take matters into my own hands: I reached out to the football coaches, sent them my film, went on a campus visit, and was eventually offered a scholarship.

Participant 6 similarly aspired to continue their football career at the collegiate level. Recognizing the need to improve academic standing, this individual first attended a community college before transferring to an NCAA Division II institution as a walk-on athlete. Despite completing three semesters at the Division II institution, opportunities for meaningful athletic

participation remained limited. Upon consultation, their coach recommended seeking alternative institutions where greater playing opportunities might be available. Participant 6:

After spending a year and a half at community college to improve my GPA, I transferred to a division II program that was quickly establishing itself as a powerhouse. The coaches offered me a spot as a walk-on, explaining that earning a scholarship would be a gradual process, but they encouraged me to stick with the team. I committed to their plan and played for another year and a half. Eventually, the coaching staff was honest with me, they were already deep at my position and would not be able to keep me as a walk-on. While I was initially upset, I now appreciate their candor. They suggested that if I genuinely wanted to play, I should consider transferring to another school, specifically recommending the NAIA institution where I enrolled.

During the process of determining his post-secondary plans, Participant 10 similarly prioritized securing substantial playing time early in his collegiate career. Participant 10: My search for the right university centered on finding a place where I could play and truly contribute. Many of the colleges I considered had already filled my position on the roster, so I shifted my focus to NAIA schools that welcomed athletes like me, a shorter offensive lineman eager for opportunity. There, I knew I'd be valued and have the chance to get on the field.

Participant 11 was an exception in this study, as they received significant recruitment interest during high school. However, academic difficulties prevented them from immediately enrolling at an NCAA Division II institution, requiring attendance at a junior college (JUCO) first. While at JUCO, Participant 11 increased their exposure by using the Next College Student Athlete (NCSA) online recruiting service. After completing two years at junior college, Participant 11 transferred to an NAIA institution. Participant 11:

During my first year after high school, I found myself uncertain about my future. I had ambition but my grades did not reflect my potential; all the colleges interested in me were Division II or lower. Determined to play Division I football on a full scholarship, I declined those offers and chose to stay home for a year. Eventually, I enrolled at my local community college to improve my GPA, taking two classes each semester. That college had recruited me straight out of high school, but I was convinced the level of competition would not push me, so I moved on to a new junior college. As a freshman among seasoned sophomores, I quickly realized the importance of advocating for myself because my coaches offered little support in the recruiting process. My dad and I took matters into our own hands—creating an NCSA profile and arranging visits to several Division II programs. Yet, I remained steadfast: I would only commit if the opportunity came with a full scholarship. In the final stretch of my search, I connected with a coach from an NAIA school. Initially, I was reluctant and felt burnt out, but he encouraged me to visit, assuring me I would love it. They flew me out, and from the moment I arrived, I felt at home. The experience exceeded my expectations, and that night—over dinner—I joyfully committed to the program.

Participant 12 also attended a NAIA institution after beginning at junior college. In this case, he was considered academically gifted, but his path to junior college was influenced by an academic setback and a challenging childhood that included frequent moves between states. Before attending junior college and signing up with an NAIA school, he was recruited by several NCAA Division I institutions and considered enrolling at one of them. Participant 12:

Throughout the recruitment process, I closely considered several schools in the PAC 12 and Western Athletic Conference. However, late in the cycle, it became

apparent that I was missing a required English credit—an oversight resulting from discrepancies between course names when I transferred from my high school in Ohio to one in Los Angeles, California. Although I had priority walk-on opportunities at smaller Division I institutions, financial realities prompted me to rethink my plans. I accepted a scholarship at a junior college in Arizona for my first semester. During that semester, I reflected deeply on my priorities and realized I wanted to attend a school where I could play football without worrying about NCAA eligibility hurdles. A friend of mine had recently received an offer from a university in the Midwest and connected me with their offensive line coach, who also hailed from Los Angeles. After sending in my film, I received an offer from the program—only later discovering it was an NAIA institution. The transfer requirements were different, allowing me to join the team and play right away. Within two weeks, I gathered my belongings, purchased a Greyhound ticket, and left Arizona behind to embark on a new chapter at a university in Oklahoma.

Participant 14 also transferred from a junior college and enrolled at an NAIA institution shortly before the start of the academic year. Participant 14:

Fresh off a national championship victory on Saturday and back on campus by Sunday, I received an unexpected email that Wednesday from an offensive coordinator in Kansas, near to my hometown. Both he and the head coach had heard positive things about me and extended a scholarship offer. Still, I felt drawn in a different direction—I wanted to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), following in the footsteps of many in my family. One of my JUCO coaches put me in touch with a football program at an HBCU in the

Midwest, and after a promising conversation, I made a verbal commitment. However, finances became a barrier: I needed to clear a \$6,000 balance at my junior college, which meant taking the spring semester off. Throughout that time, I stayed in contact with the HBCU coaching staff—until, unexpectedly, the entire staff was let go. With only a verbal commitment and nothing in writing, I suddenly found myself with no options as June arrived. Determined to keep pursuing my goal, I reconnected with the offensive coordinator in Kansas and began exploring other possibilities. Around this time, I discovered a school in South Dakota seeking a running back—my position. They initially offered a walk-on spot, but tuition was affordable, and there was a pathway to a scholarship after the first semester. En route to South Dakota, I stopped in Nebraska to visit a friend. That very night, the Kansas coordinator called again, reaffirmed the scholarship offer, and I made my decision. I committed to Kansas and turned back toward a new chapter in my athletic journey.

Participant 13 likewise finalized their college decision later in the process, enrolling at their chosen university during the summer months. Participant 13:

Just a month after graduating high school, I found myself without any recruiters or coaches reaching out-of-date calls, no offers, nothing. Determined, I compiled a highlight reel of my high school career and sent it to as many coaches as I could, with some help from my high school head coach who was well connected with smaller programs across the country. At the same time, I began conversations with a small university in Iowa and was on the verge of accepting their offer, believing it to be my last chance. The day before I was set to sign, a high school alum who had wrestled at a university in Tennessee approached me and piqued my interest

in his alma mater. After researching the school and learning about their strong athletic tradition, including a recent championship, I was impressed, but discovered the program was in transition due to the head coach being dismissed. The alum helped me connect with the assistant coach, who was still on staff, and despite the uncertainty, time was running out for my decision. While I was out delivering DoorDash, the newly appointed head coach from Tennessee called me; our conversation was engaging, and he extended an offer that was both reasonable and financially appealing, especially compared to other small schools. The low tuition, combined with my reluctance to move to Iowa, led me to commit to Tennessee, making my choice sight unseen and without ever visiting the campus.

Preparation. The concept of preparation emerges as a salient theme, encapsulating the extent to which participants were equipped—academically and athletically—for the transition to collegiate sports. This readiness, or its absence, shaped their experiences and expectations at the post-secondary level.

Some Division I colleges admit student-athletes who are not fully prepared academically in order to strengthen their teams (Peters, 2013). Participant 5 benefited from this approach. He first enrolled at a major Division I school, then transferred to a NAIA institution when he did not meet the academic requirements after high school graduation. To qualify for NCAA eligibility, he had to take extra summer courses. Unfortunately, his high school coaches and counselors did not anticipate the problems with his course schedule. Participant 5:

I found myself in an unexpected predicament: I had taken the same English course twice and was still short one credit. My counselors worked with the admissions team at the Division I school to find a solution, and they agreed that if I completed the missing class online, I could submit my paperwork to the

clearinghouse and return for the spring season—though I would have to sit out the fall. Determined, I finished the course in five weeks, earning 94%. After submitting everything, however, I was told I completed the class too quickly for it to count, and further review of my academic record led them to deny my eligibility. Realizing my options were limited, I decided to enroll at a nearby smaller school where I had connections and could continue pursuing my goals.

The accounts above demonstrate that college enrollment was often a practical extension of students' athletic goals, not the outcome of clear academic planning. For many participants, going to college was a way to keep playing sports after high school rather than a pursuit motivated by academic ambitions. There were differences in how prepared they were for college academics and athletics, but most participants focused more on continuing their athletic careers than on the academic side of being a student-athlete. This emphasis on athletics often meant that academic expectations and preparation were secondary considerations in their transition to higher education.

Participant 3 set out to join the football team with the intention of helping improve its performance. Participant 3:

Upon arriving, my intentions and expectations were clear: I wanted to contribute meaningfully to improving the team's performance and help usher in a new era for the program. My journey to this point was anything but straightforward. During my senior year, I encountered significant challenges, including being dismissed from the team— which severely limited my recruitment opportunities. Unfortunately, my high school coach shared negative feedback with college recruiters, further diminishing my prospects. Despite this setback, I attended a summer camp where I distinguished myself as the fastest participant, which led to

an encouraging connection with a coach who expressed genuine interest in me. At first, I was hesitant to consider this school because I was determined to remain in Texas; as a result, I passed on the opportunity. As my options dwindled and my dreams of continuing football seemed uncertain, I contemplated stepping away from the sport altogether. However, my father urged me to pursue the opportunity that had presented itself, encouraging me to reach out to the coach from the camp. With the academic year set to begin on August 7th, I made the call on August 5th, still uncertain about what lay ahead. I resolved to enroll, embracing the experience with a willingness to adapt and make the most of the opportunity before me.

Participant 15 entered college without prior preparation or clear expectations, having given little thought to life beyond high school. Participant 15:

As my senior year of high school drew to a close, I found myself without a single scholarship offer on the table. One day, a letter arrived in the mail encouraging me to apply to college, and I decided to take a chance by applying. Being the first in my family to graduate from high school, I did not have much guidance or inherited knowledge about the next steps. In the lead-up to graduation, my school did not take the time to understand our interests or plans for the future. While I occasionally spoke with my coaches and a few classes briefly touched on post-graduation opportunities, no one ever sat down with me to explain the college process or help me know what to expect.

For Participant 2, matriculation at an NAIA university represented an unforeseen development. Participant 2:

I grew up in Germany, surrounded by a vibrant basketball culture but never taking the traditional path through an American high school team. My connection to the U.S. was personal—I had friends there, and during one visit, I found myself playing in an open gym, just for fun. Unbeknownst to me, a coach was watching from the sidelines. After the game, he approached, curious about which school I attended. "Nowhere," I replied, explaining that I was from Germany and had spent my formative years playing in grassroots leagues back home, never really considering the possibility of college basketball in the States. My plan was straightforward: rise through the ranks of European pro basketball and pursue university in Europe. But the coach saw something in me. He invited me to a workout the following day. I showed up, played my heart out, and to my surprise, he offered me a scholarship on the spot. I told him I needed to talk it over with my parents. Without hesitation, he picked up the phone and dialed them without delay. We spoke, and they gave me their blessing, supportive of whichever road I chose. Everything moved at lightning speed. In July, this opportunity materialized out of nowhere; by August, classes would begin. I flew back to Europe, sorted out my student visa, packed my bags, and within days, left everything familiar behind. In a whirlwind of planning and emotion, I embarked on an unexpected journey that would redefine my future.

Although the decision regarding which institution to attend was primarily influenced by athletic considerations, a number of participants demonstrated clear awareness of the academic environment they were entering and the fields they wished to pursue. For instance, Participant 1 exemplified a thoughtful approach to navigating both academic and athletic expectations.

Participant 1:

I recall that as a high school senior, my career guidance counselor urged me to choose a major and decide what I wanted to study in college. At the time, my response was simple: I did not know what I would study, but I was certain I would be playing basketball. My confidence stemmed from taking numerous Advanced Placement classes and earning straight A's throughout school, so people were often surprised that I was not applying to more academically prestigious universities or pursuing a particularly challenging major. My true passion was basketball, and while I had always been interested in becoming an architect, the desire to play outweighed everything else. I figured I had only a limited way to pursue basketball but could always return to school to chase other dreams later on.

Unlike some of his peers, Participant 13 approached the transition to college with a scholarly mindset, despite limited guidance from academic counselors in high school. He entered higher education with an unobstructed vision of his intended career path and a conscientious attitude toward his studies. Participant 13:

I was drawn to the marketing program, convinced that a future in business was the right path for me, especially since none of the other schools I considered offered such a strong emphasis in that area. Beyond this initial certainty, though, I stepped into the experience with an open mind, unsure of what awaited me.

Participant 7 had an expectation to arrive on campus, work hard, and compete for a position in the starting rotation, and study athletic training. Participant 7:

My expectation was that I was going to have to work and get myself better. I am a naturally smart person, and so high school was easy for me. I skated by putting forth minimal effort studying and lifting. Heading to college I did not want to fall back so I knew I had to apply myself more so that I could excel like I wanted to.

Integration. Each participant in the study underwent a significant transition upon departing high school and moving beyond the guidance of parents or guardians. The degree to which these individuals succeeded in navigating change and achieving successful integration varied. The following sections provide a detailed examination of how participants utilized interpersonal relationships and institutional resources during their matriculation, as well as instances where such efforts fell short.

Coaching changes emerged as a recurring theme throughout participants' collegiate experiences. In fact, twelve participants reported navigating at least one coaching transition during their time at the institution. For some, such as those who encountered a coaching change early in their collegiate career, this shift introduced significant uncertainty regarding the program's direction and the level of commitment from new leadership. These transitions often proved pivotal, influencing not only athletic development but also participants' broader sense of stability and belonging within their teams and the institution as a whole. Participant 1: My head coach, who also served as the Athletic Director, was constantly juggling a multitude of responsibilities, which meant he often delegated tasks like overseeing study halls to assistant coaches or staff members who had little influence over playing time. I recall that many of the players required to attend study hall simply would not show up if the head coach were not present, resulting in an overall lack of accountability. It became clear that the primary objective was to keep our GPAs just high enough for eligibility, rather than fostering academic growth. Despite fulfilling all my obligations, I still found myself with limited opportunities on the field.

Recognizing these challenges, Participant 1 took initiative-taking steps to shape their own path, deliberately seeking out guidance and immersing themselves in environments that fostered a sense of belonging and growth. Participant 1:

Throughout my college experience, I had the support of an academic advisor dedicated to all athletic programs, and every semester we would meet to map out my classes, taking care to steer clear of instructors known for being inflexible with student athletes and pointing me toward those who were more accommodating. These sessions were not just about scheduling; she genuinely cared about my future and took time to discuss my ambitions and life after graduation. Her presence in the locker room was often felt more than that of our head coach, as she invested in our well-being and was always eager to help the team succeed. However, because our scholarships and playing time were controlled by the head coach, many players failed to fully benefit from her guidance, missing valuable resources. I made it a point to build strong relationships within the athletic department, getting to know the assistants to the Athletic Director and simply enjoying the energy of being in that environment, always curious about what happened behind the scenes. Academically, I started as a kinesiology major with a focus on sport management, and it worked in my favor when, during my sophomore year, the university began offering sport management as a major, allowing me to dive even deeper into my area of interest.

The formation of a relationship with a coach typically materializes during the recruitment process; however, as demonstrated above, many of these student athletes did not experience conventional recruitment or the opportunity to establish a meaningful rapport with the coach under whom they would compete. The complexity intensifies with multiple transitions in head coaching, often accompanied by shifts within the assistant coaching staff. Participant 3, for example, navigated not only several changes in head and assistant coach positions but also a transition in the role of Athletic Director, further complicating their collegiate experience.

Participant 3:

Navigating four different head coaches in five years was an immense challenge. At one point, the dismissal of our coach triggered a protest among the team, yet our voices felt lost in the decision-making of the athletic director. Our presence was valued only to balance the department's budget, with little regard for whether we won or lost. This upheaval extended beyond athletics—struggles in the classroom cost me my scholarship, prompting me to leave school and join the National Guard. That experience instilled in me a new sense of discipline and determination, which I brought back when I returned to college, this time with the benefit of financial support for my education. I resolved to make the most of my opportunities both academically and in the field. Over time, I began forging relationships with fellow students, forming study groups, and building a sense of community. Initially, I kept to myself, navigating the challenges of being an African American from a big city in a small town with few people who looked like me—especially in my classes—but gradually, I found my place and embraced the connections that enriched my college experience.

For Participant 11, the experience of navigating a coaching transition resulted in the necessity of transferring institutions due to circumstances that were unfavorable to their continued development. Participant 11:

Just a week before I was set to start college, the coach who recruited me and my teammates from JUCO resigned to take a high school coaching job. Suddenly, I found myself playing for a coach who had not recruited me, and I wanted. While he was a decent person, he made it clear repeatedly that he wanted his own recruits—his guys—on the team. Because we were not his picks, he let us go at

the end of the year. That was a tough blow, especially since I was at the peak of my basketball journey and fielding offers to play overseas. I transferred to another NAIA school in Kentucky, where the coach pitched me on mentoring the younger players. I was honest with him: I was not just looking to play big brother—I was there to compete and win. But when I arrived, the team felt inexperienced, and the program lacked the sense of seriousness for which I was searching. I voiced my concerns to the coach, but he did not seem to take me seriously. Frustrated, I decided to step away and took the year off to focus on being present for my daughter.

While not all coaching transitions yield negative outcomes, such changes inevitably necessitate the development of new interpersonal relationships and, at times, the adoption of novel approaches to communication and team integration. This dynamic was exemplified by Participant 14, who, after progressing from a junior college to an NAIA institution, experienced the arrival of a new coach and was compelled to adapt to the evolving expectations and culture within the program. Participant 14:

Initially, transitioning from JUCO, I felt like an outsider—older, guarded, and slow to trust. At my junior college, camaraderie was rare, so adapting to a pristine environment was a challenge. Over time, though, I gradually opened up, especially with the running backs coach, who became a steady presence in my journey. Academically, I benefited from the small class sizes, which made it possible to connect one-on-one with professors and receive personalized attention. Off the field, I started to form genuine bonds with teammates, and together we built study groups that bridged the usual divide between offensive and defensive players. One of my closest friendships emerged with a teammate from the other

side of the ball—we pushed each other to excel both in the classroom and on the field. That connection, forged through shared challenges and growth, has endured; we remain good friends to this day.

Participants 4 and Participant 9 reported positive outcomes following their respective coaching transitions. In the case of Participant 4, the introduction of a new head coach facilitated a notable shift away from previously adopted detrimental behaviors and supported the restoration of their personal values and faith.

Participant 9:

Early on, I quickly slipped into some unhealthy routines. Unlike in high school, I started partying more, drawn in by the newfound popularity that came with earning playing time as a freshman. Suddenly, I was spending time with teammates who were 25 or 26 years old while I was just 18 years old. Many of them did not share my values or faith, and I found myself drifting away from the foundation I had built. My freshman year lacked spiritual growth, and while my relationships with coaches were positive, there was little accountability or encouragement for personal development beyond the field—it was all about football, nothing more. Things began to shift in my sophomore year when a new head coach arrived. He started engaging us in conversations about faith and emphasized that our identities extended far beyond just being athletes.

Participant 9 did not encounter a change in head coach; however, he did experience a transition in his position coach. Since position coaches engage with athletes more frequently, they typically establish more substantial relationships compared to those with the head coach.

Additionally, Participant 9 faced a significant health challenge—sustaining a shoulder injury—which subsequently restricted his interactions with both coaches and the team, thereby impacting his overall engagement with the athletic program. Participant 9:

The summer before my sophomore year, I dislocated my shoulder during a bench press warm-up. Although I went through the rehabilitation process, I was reluctant to pursue surgery—the prospect of sitting out, enduring lengthy rehab, and not playing again until after my junior year was daunting. On top of that, the coaches were considering moving me to a different position, which felt pointless given their focus on recruiting younger players and preparing them to step in. I began to feel as though their commitment to me was fading, as if they were already preparing to focus on the next recruit. Nevertheless, I developed a strong connection with my position as coach and genuinely appreciated the moments we shared beyond the confines of football. The wisdom and support they shared left a lasting impact. However, I eventually reached a breaking point—recovering from my injury felt like an endless battle, and I decided it was time to step away from both the team and the school. Academically, I struggled to connect with the curriculum and found it difficult to trust in what the professors were teaching.

Participants 7, 10, 12, and 15 found themselves navigating significant transitions that called for thoughtful self-reflection and adaptability, particularly in relation to their roles within the program. For Participant 7, these challenges emerged at the outset, as expectations regarding both athletic and academic paths were quickly put to the test. This participant faced a discrepancy between personal ambitions and the immediate needs identified by the coaching staff, prompting careful reconsideration of priorities and a willingness to modify academic pursuits for the second time. Participant 7:

The most challenging aspect of joining the team was being recruited as a defensive lineman, only to be immediately switched to offensive line due to roster shortages. My primary contact had been the defensive coordinator, so when I arrived, I found myself with no connection to the offensive coach or even the head coach and received little opportunity to get on the field. That was how my freshman year unfolded. Things only became more frustrating in my sophomore year, when the school decided to discontinue the social work degree program I was pursuing. With my position changed, playing time was limited, and my academic goals suddenly out of reach, I realized it was time for me to move on.

In pursuit of an institution that would appropriately value his skills at the center position and acknowledge his unique physical attributes, Participant 9 entered an environment that presented new and unfamiliar academic and athletic challenges. He approached this transition with a thoughtful consideration of both his educational aspirations and his development as a student-athlete. Participant 9:

I did not expect to earn a starting spot right away, but I did hope to play center. The coaching staff provided helpful feedback and had me watching film to improve but eventually shifted me to guard. While the switch was not drastic, it did slow my progress and required me to adjust my learning. Academically, I initially declared sports management as my major, yet after enrolling in several courses, I am now seriously considering a change to computer science—my passion for technology has grown. While I know switching majors will be challenging and may mean extra coursework and cost, I am still weighing up my options. Continuing with sports management would be more straightforward

given the classes I have already taken, but I am torn and uncertain about which path to pursue.

Participant 15 found himself overwhelmed by uncertainty, having had minimal interaction with coaches due to his ambiguous role within the program. Participant 15: My initial interaction with the coach felt more like an exercise in sorting than a true welcome. Players were separated into distinct groups: returning starters, incoming freshmen, red shirts (who were ineligible to compete), medical red shirts, and walk-ons. Each group received its own set of instructions, as if we were being given varying degrees of access to the program based on our perceived value. As a walk-on, I had only a single, brief conversation with the coach—a moment that made me feel more like a statistic than an individual. I hadn't yet established myself within the team, and as a result, my opportunities to practice and play were rare. It was as though I existed on the periphery, never quite part of the heart of the program.

Upon careful reflection regarding future academic and athletic prospects, Participant 12 encountered a challenging circumstance that led to a thoughtful decision to separate from the football program. Participant 12:

Upon arriving, I sensed that my approach as a student-athlete set me apart from others. My academic dedication was unwavering; at first, I envisioned myself as a history teacher, which led me to explore history education. I even considered biology education, prompting a thorough examination of all majors and careful consideration of potential conflicts between academic requirements and athletic commitments. For football players, pursuing certain majors posed challenges due to limited resources. We relied on a communal study room stocked with textbooks handed down by former student athletes in various fields—a shared effort to ease financial burdens. Yet, despite my desire to fully engage in campus life, I often

felt distanced from the broader university community. My demanding schedule made participation in organizations and clubs impossible. There were no formal barriers to involvement, but the reality of constant scheduling conflicts left many opportunities out of reach.

Both Participant 2 and Participant 6 encountered significant financial transitions upon their enrollment. For Participant 2, adjustments to the terms of an existing scholarship necessitated careful deliberation and the need to make consequential decisions after several years on campus. Participant 2:

I had a good relationship with my coach but over the years it changed a little bit. I had scholarship issues and some of my money was reduced. I had to move off campus to cut down on the cost of school, but I also had to pay for housing out of pocket. This was a drastic change that came after a mental and performance slump as well as the head coach assuring that he would give me a scholarship while at school in the U.S.

A financial discrepancy significantly impacted Participant 6's academic trajectory at the outset of their enrollment. Participant 6:

Almost immediately after transferring from a division II school, I set sights on an NAIA institution that came highly recommended. I had heard I could combine athletic and academic scholarships, thanks to my music major, and also qualify for a Pell Grant. I would avoid excessive loans. Eager to get started, I moved onto campus early to register for classes and join the football team as they reported before the semester began. Nevertheless, just three days after moving into the dorms, an unexpectedly large bill threatened to upend my plans. It looked like I might have to pack up and go home, but instead, I found a job on campus and the

coaches helped me secure an off-campus townhome. Still, cafeteria wages were not enough to cover rent and utilities, so I quickly sought out additional positions. Within my very first week, I was juggling three jobs—on and off campus—determined to make it all work.

RQ2. What supports do NAIA student-athletes perceive are necessary for their institutional integration, retention, and graduation?

The second research question in this study aimed to elucidate the mechanisms by which student-athletes access and utilize institutional resources to support their academic and athletic endeavors. Findings indicate that a subset of student-athletes remains unaware of the breadth of available institutional support, while others may intentionally eschew engagement with such resources due to a predominant focus on their athletic responsibilities. In both scenarios, higher education institutions are well positioned to enhance student-athlete outcomes by intentionally curating and facilitating regular interactions with staff, faculty, and community professionals. Such initiatives would provide student-athletes with opportunities to broaden their perspectives, integrate multiple worldviews, and more fully leverage the comprehensive support systems embedded within the academic environment.

Communal Support. The concept of communal support emerged as a principal theme among participants who successfully completed their academic journeys. This theme encompasses relationships cultivated outside the realm of athletic teams—specifically, connections such as friendships, mentorships, and sources of motivation that extend beyond the boundaries of sport. Participants who developed these academically and personally enriching relationships demonstrated an enhanced ability to navigate the complexities inherent in balancing collegiate athletics and academic obligations. In contrast, those who lacked such supportive networks frequently encountered difficulties in managing their dual roles as students and athletes.

A review of the motivational factors and sources of encouragement among participants reveals a critical role played by interpersonal relationships within the institutional community. Notably, Participant 3 identified the formation of a supportive relationship with a peer as a catalyst for personal and academic growth. In this instance, the participant articulated that the engagement with a fellow student served as a profound influence, challenging them to enhance both their academic performance and character development. Participant 3:

Finding myself placed on academic probation was a pivotal moment—it pushed me to reflect and set a new course. I met a student whose perspective inspired me to reevaluate my priorities. As graduation approached, I found myself reflecting deeply on what it truly means to live with intention—to embrace my faith, pursue my purpose, and step confidently into adulthood with a sense of responsibility. I wanted to become the kind of person who could one day lead and support a family. My major also provided opportunities to collaborate with coaches in various departments, exposing me to diverse leadership styles and teaching me how to connect and collaborate effectively with people from all levels of society.

Participant 7 fostered meaningful connections with fellow students and faculty members, distinguishing their experience from others. Although they transferred from their initial institution, they persevered and successfully completed their degree, demonstrating resilience and adaptability throughout their academic journey. Participant 7:

After the NAIA institution discontinued my academic major, I decided to transfer to the state university to gain the experience of studying at a larger school. Shortly after, a professor from my former NAIA college reached out to inform me that the social work program faculty would soon launch a similar program at the state university's satellite campus. After just one semester at the main university, I

chose to transfer to the satellite campus and complete my social work degree there. During this turbulent period, I leaned heavily on the support of my fraternity brothers and sisters, who became my chosen family, three of whom later stood by me at my wedding. Our bonds were forged and strengthened through the challenges we navigated together during my time at the NAIA school.

Participant 8 strategically utilized participation in intramural sports as a means to expand their social support network and foster connections with individuals outside their immediate athletic cohort. Participant 8:

Much of my initial integration into campus life revolved around the football team, but after my freshman year, I gradually began to step back from athletics and seek broader connections. I am grateful that I made the effort to get to know classmates and participate in other campus activities, which enriched my experience. Joining intramural sports proved especially valuable, as forming a coed team encouraged me to build relationships with peers beyond my usual circle—including friendships with women I might not have met otherwise. This choice led to meaningful connections and provided the opportunity to meet my future spouse.

Participant 2, originally from Germany, demonstrated a thoughtful approach to navigating the challenges of collegiate life. The support of a host family, with whom he was able to connect in times of difficulty, provided essential encouragement throughout his academic journey. Equally important, the athletic program's training staff offered guidance and motivation during critical moments, fostering an environment conducive to personal growth and scholarly achievement. Participant 2:

Throughout my academic journey, the support of my host family proved invaluable. Their encouragement during check-ins helped me through challenging

times and kept me grounded. Yet, the most meaningful relationship I developed was with our head athletic trainer. I often found myself seeking refuge in the training room—not just for physical recovery, but for honest conversations and moments of relaxation. The training room, typically reserved for athletes nursing injuries, became a sanctuary for my mental wellbeing, thanks to the trainer's willingness to listen and offer support.

Participant 13 engaged with a “mental toughness” coach, whose specialized training contributed to the development of advanced coping strategies and psychological resilience. In addition, Participant 13 actively sought out motivational content from reputable online sources and participated in the Student Government Association (SGA), fostering leadership skills and further integrating into the academic community. Participant 13:

We engaged a mental toughness coach, meeting with her two or three times a week, and her insight proved invaluable. She collaborated not only with our team collectively but also offered private sessions for those seeking individualized guidance. I found motivation in watching inspiring videos and listening to podcasts that sharpened my focus and fueled my ambitions. My involvement in the Student Government Association opened doors to hosting campus events and serving the broader student body, which enriched my university experience. These opportunities allowed me to foster relationships throughout the institution, discover shared interests, and broaden my horizons.

Subsequent to disengaging from the football team, Participant 12 actively cultivated a robust network of support within the wider student population, a critical resource that had previously been inaccessible due to the demanding nature of athletic commitments. This transition highlights the importance of flexible engagement in campus activities as a catalyst for

the comprehensive development of student-athletes, underscoring the value of adaptive integration within the academic environment. Participant 12:

Leaving football after two years marked a profound shift in my university experience, as the relentless demands of athletics had previously limited my ability to engage with campus life in meaningful ways. Freed from this schedule, I began to explore new paths and question my identity, forging connections that helped me become the person I aspired to be. Supportive staff and faculty encouraged my growth, inviting me to conferences and seminars, and one professor even gifted me my first jacket, a symbolic gesture that inspired new confidence. Through these relationships, I connected with students involved in fraternities, student government, and the NAACP, broadening my circle far beyond sports. These experiences not only guided me through the complexities of university life but also opened doors to lasting networks and opportunities that shaped my development and sense of belonging.

For Participants 6 and 16, both the campus environment and the surrounding community were vital to their successful integration. Participant 6, especially, found mentorship through an administrator whose guidance helped build connections that extended far beyond the university, effectively bridging the gap between student life and the larger community. Participant 6:

Community resources became a gateway to essential opportunities—jobs, housing, and steadfast support. The administrator's guidance was truly transformative; without their intervention, my continued enrollment would have been in jeopardy. They connected me with a local landlord, helped me secure two jobs, and introduced me to a generous resident who furnished my townhome, even providing a comfortable bed. Having grown up in St. Louis, I initially found it

daunting to step out of my comfort zone and connect with new people, but those experiences taught me the value of perseverance and openness. Thanks to these connections, I not only endured, but truly flourished.

Participant 14 attributed much of their institutional success to the supportive nature of the surrounding community, emphasizing its critical role in facilitating academic and personal growth. Participant 14:

The alumni and broader community played a pivotal role in my personal growth, instilling in me a deep sense of pride and loyalty to the institution. Many residents were themselves graduates, and their commitment to servant leadership shaped the culture, inspiring me to develop those values in my own life. This environment nurtured my faith and encouraged me to embrace the principles of service, which I now strive to exemplify in my coaching.

In instances where participants encountered challenges integrating into the institution, the absence of robust communal support or meaningful relationships beyond their athletic circles proved significant. For these student-athletes, engagement with the broader campus community was limited and seldom self-initiated; rather, their role was primarily observational within their environment. The following narratives from Participants 5 and 15 elucidate the complexities of their institutional experiences. Participant 5:

I was given a great deal of independence but found myself lacking the discipline I needed. Study halls required my attendance, yet I only had to appear occupied, and no one deeply held me accountable. Over time, though, I learned valuable skills—how to communicate effectively with adults, lead a collegiate team, present myself with confident body language, and interact with peers whose backgrounds differed from my own. Despite these lessons, I often felt uneasy

around the professor who headed my major, criminal justice, and rarely spent time on campus outside of class. My attendance was mostly driven by my teammates' routines. When my athletic eligibility ended, I still needed 24 credit hours to graduate but eventually stopped attending classes altogether.

Participant 15 reflects that enrolling at the institution may have been a misstep, as they realized they lacked a foundational understanding of its structure, processes, and the local community. Participant 15:

Without a clear sense of direction, I often made decisions in isolation, lacking guidance from those with experience. My support system was limited—my grandparents, who raised me, knew only the world of work, and their knowledge of college life was minimal. This left me navigating a significant information gap, and I will admit, I was stubborn. After my first year, my grades suffered, and I was forced to leave. My attendance was sporadic, and on weekends I would drive three hours home, seeking the comfort of familiar faces. On campus, I rarely found people who reflected my background; a few were on the football team, but their schedules were packed, and beyond that, there were hardly any who shared my experiences within the institution.

Financial Security. This theme is best conceptualized as the capacity to dedicate attention to academic and athletic pursuits in the absence of financial concern. Multiple participants reported experiencing varying degrees of financial uncertainty, which compounded the complexity of their responsibilities as collegiate student athletes. The resulting tension not only challenged their ability to navigate dual roles but also intensified the demands placed upon them within the university environment.

Participant 3 elected to temporarily withdraw from the university in order to join the National Guard, subsequently returning after one year. This decision was primarily motivated by the inadequacy of their scholarship in covering tuition expenses. Participant 3:

Circumstances forced me to leave school during my sophomore year when my scholarship could not cover all my expenses. What was meant to be a temporary break stretched into a full year after COVID disrupted training schedules and caused me to miss the add/drop deadline. It was not until the following year that I was finally able to return to campus.

Participant 2 faced considerable financial precarity, which necessitated a strategic shift to off-campus housing as a means of alleviating economic strain. Similarly, Participant 6 was confronted with the unexpected withdrawal of financial aid, compelling a rapid search for alternative accommodation within three days of arrival. These financial limitations influenced Participant 6's decision to cease participation in the football program and seek enrollment at a different institution. Participant 6:

As a music major specializing in piano, my academic scholarship required me to devote significant energy to my music commitments. Numerous performances demanded my presence, leading to frequent absences from football activities. When I fractured my wrist during practice, it became clear that continuing as a student-athlete was no longer viable; I needed to remain available for my musical obligations, and the risk of missing important performances due to injury was simply too great.

Participant 6 subsequently transferred to another NAIA institution closer to their hometown, where they balanced employment at the university with the diligent pursuit of their academic degree.

Financial considerations played a pivotal role for Participant 11; the prospect of enrollment was contingent upon the basketball coach providing a full scholarship. Without complete financial support, attending the institution simply was not an option.

If I were not offered a full ride, there was no chance I would enroll. I made it clear to the coach: I was not about to pay to play. If I had to pay, I would rather attend a Division I school and earn a degree with more prestige. We did not have savings set aside for college, and I was not willing to take out loans just to make it work.

Participant 5, upon reaching the conclusion of their athletic eligibility, made the deliberate decision to discontinue class attendance. Nevertheless, they have since considered the prospect of completing their degree, but the financial ramifications associated with this pursuit have diminished its appeal. Participant 5:

I considered finishing my degree and found I still need twenty-four credit hours. However, many of these credits do not transfer elsewhere, and enrolling again at my original institution without financial aid is simply too costly. Taking out loans is not something I want to do.

Participant 9 expressed similar concerns, noting that financial barriers became especially pronounced after experiencing an injury and stepping away from the team. Participant 9:

I was awarded an academic scholarship to a larger university in Texas and seriously considered walking on to their team. Receiving an athletic scholarship from this school felt like genuine affirmation that I truly belonged here. The certainty of being valued outweighed the uncertainty of making the team at the bigger university.

Participant 14 reflected on their decision to accept a scholarship offer at a Kansas school, believing it provided greater financial security. In hindsight, however, they realized that walking

on at the South Dakota school would have been more cost-effective than accepting the scholarship in Kansas.

Career and Self-Efficacy Development Opportunities. This theme encompasses the acquisition and awareness of transferable skills relevant to career trajectories within the corporate, private, or public sectors. Notably, only a limited number of participants (specifically Participants 9 and 13) commenced their collegiate experience with a defined professional objective outside of athletics. While such aspirations may evolve over time, an initial sense of direction proved instrumental in guiding both the relationships they cultivated and the developmental opportunities they pursued throughout their academic tenure.

For example, Participant 9 subsequently advanced to a supervisory position within a Fortune 500 company, despite working in a field unrelated to their undergraduate studies. This professional ascent was attributed to the competencies and skills honed during their tenure as a student-athlete, which facilitated their upward mobility within Corporate America. Similarly, Participant 13 demonstrated intentionality in the pursuit of personal and professional development, leveraging the vision that accompanied them into higher education. This foresight resulted in their enrollment in a graduate program at the same university where they completed their undergraduate degree.

To conclude the interviews, participants offered reflective insights into their overall institutional experience, expressing the desirability of several enhancements to the student athlete journey. Among the most salient recommendations were increased accountability measures, improved access to internships, and opportunities for mentorship and networking facilitated by alumni connections. These perspectives underscore the critical need for holistic support structures that extend beyond athletic participation and foster long-term personal and

professional growth. Participant 1 articulated that an effective enhancement to the NAIA student athlete experience would take the following form: Participant 1:

One area where my school fell short was in providing access to internships and fostering industry connections. I noticed that my friends at larger universities were able to secure internships during their senior year, benefitting from mentorship and guidance offered by engaged alumni. It would have made a tremendous difference to have a directory of former student-athletes who successfully transitioned into professional careers. Support with résumé building and interview preparation is also essential. For me, the transition felt abrupt—like, “here’s your degree, now you’re on your own.” Without a clear roadmap, navigating the next steps was challenging.

Participant 8 echoed these perspectives, aligning their experiences with those articulated by other respondents in the study. Participant 8:

One final observation I would offer concerns the importance of mentorship for young student-athletes, particularly men. During my collegiate experience, my football coach served as an invaluable mentor—a role model whose guidance was instrumental to my personal and professional growth. Yet, I am concerned that many student-athletes now lack this built-in support, and as they transition into professional environments, they often do so without an understanding of how to seek out mentors or cultivate meaningful connections. In college, shared proximity and team dynamics naturally facilitate communication among peers, but beyond graduation, individuals are suddenly required to self-direct and adapt to new supervisory structures. I have witnessed former teammates struggle in their mid-to-late twenties, having spent much of their lives in structured athletic

settings with clear leadership. The abrupt shift to navigating career and personal development independently underscores the critical need for guidance in establishing mentorship and fostering networks beyond the field of play.

Participant 4 affirmed the critical importance of interpersonal relationships in achieving success. Although he chose not to complete his degree, he considered reenrollment on several occasions. His decision to forgo further academic pursuits was influenced by a career advancement, resulting in a position that he finds both fulfilling and suitable: Participant 4:

Nurturing relationships with teammates is invaluable, as you never know where life might lead you after college. Maintaining these connections can open doors to opportunities across the globe. My advice is to stay in touch and invest in building as many positive relationships as possible, as they can prove instrumental in both personal and professional growth beyond your athletic career.

Participant 12, having chosen to step away from athletics following their sophomore year, has since earned a Ph.D. and now serves as a Senior Manager at a prominent technology company. Participant 12:

We have to do a better job of investing in the whole person. Outside of athletics, there is room to invest in student athletes. We should consider things like, “what does it look like to be a learner during this time, what does life look like after sports.” There is not enough conversation about that. We should be talking about job shadowing and leveraging relationships at the university. If those things happen on a more frequent basis, I think folks would be more inclined to stay and if we want student-athletes to get the most out of the experience there needs to be an investment of time, energy, and effort toward development beyond graduation.

Participant 14, despite earning their degree, reflected that they could have been better equipped to thrive in their chosen profession. Participant 14:

Although I completed my bachelor's degree in exercise science, I have observed that individuals possessing specialized certifications—such as those from the National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM) often secure trainer positions before degree holders like me. Some of these candidates are as young as twenty and have not attended college, yet their professional credentials make them highly competitive in the job market. This experience leads me to question whether our curriculum was sufficiently comprehensive, particularly regarding practical skill development. For instance, we received little to no formal training in sales skills, which has proven to be critical in my current role and one that I am now developing independently. In retrospect, it is clear that exposure to industry professionals through guest lectures or job fairs would have been invaluable. Such initiatives could provide students with actionable information and connections, better equipping us for the professional landscape we face upon graduation.

Evaluation of Findings

The findings of this study align with established theories of student retention and recent research on student-athletes (Bennet, 2023; Bergeron, 2019; Henderson, 2023; McCoy et al., 2019; Tinto, 1975). Successful integration into a college or university environment depends on building strong, positive relationships within both academic and social spheres. These connections foster a sense of belonging, which is essential for students to develop sustained commitment to their institutions (Tinto, 1975). Fulfilling the need for belonging is foundational before individuals can achieve esteem or self-actualization, as described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Brunet, 2010; Mustofa, 2022). Without meeting basic needs—such as access to food,

shelter, security, supportive relationships, and opportunities for recognition, students are unable to realize their full potential.

This study identified several unmet basic needs that disrupt the integration and retention of NAIA student-athletes. Socioeconomic background, prior educational experiences, financial concerns, self-efficacy, relationships, and levels of involvement all play a role in shaping student-athletes' persistence. The emphasis on athletic identity often limits exposure to broader development opportunities during adolescence and secondary education. Upon entering higher education, student-athletes frequently focus on athletic achievement, sometimes at the expense of academic and personal growth (Anderson et al., 2020). This narrow focus can result in students choosing colleges based primarily on athletic programs, without adequate consideration of academic interests or career pathways (Bergeron, 2019).

Moreover, many student-athletes begin their college experience with limited knowledge of campus resources, academic programs, or the actual cost of attendance (Bergeron, 2019; Windham, 2024). High school advisors and counselors often provide insufficient preparation, and the recruitment process remains heavily centered on athletic opportunities and scholarships, with little discussion of broader goals. Arriving on campus prior to the start of the academic year for training camps further isolates student-athletes from the wider student body and faculty, reinforcing their limited social networks. First-year student athletes may also be coached by staff who did not recruit them, hindering early relationship building and a sense of belonging.

Those who successfully navigate the initial transition often do so because their basic needs are met—they have stable housing, access to food and healthcare, financial security, and a sense of community (Bergeron, 2019; Raabe et al., 2022). However, the ability to explore interests outside of sport is often restricted by the demands of athletic schedules. Some student athletes recognize this challenge and must choose between remaining committed to athletics or

pursuing other developmental opportunities. Factors such as playing time, injury, and involvement with the team influence these decisions and can put students at risk for early departure from college.

Financial concerns become more pronounced after the first year, as athletic scholarships at NAIA institutions rarely cover all expenses. Student-athletes must often seek additional grants, loans, or employment, increasing their responsibilities and risk of burnout (Rusbasan, 2021). Coaches, faced with recruiting pressures, may reallocate scholarship funds, leaving returning student-athletes with reduced financial support. To manage costs, many move off campus, further complicating their academic and athletic commitments.

Despite these challenges, the development of strong institutional relationships can support persistence. Student-athletes who establish meaningful connections with peers, faculty, and staff are more likely to remain engaged and committed beyond their athletic roles (Cron, 2023; Finnell, 2022; Merrian & Snyder, 2015). Networking across academic and social spheres fulfills esteem needs and supports the journey toward self-actualization.

Reaching self-actualization, as defined by Maslow, corresponds to achieving graduation. At this stage, student-athletes pursue growth, development, and purpose, becoming intrinsically motivated and actively engaged with their institution (Hollembek & Amorose, 2005). The findings emphasize that frequent and familiar interactions with campus members significantly enhance student commitment (Oxendine & Taub, 2021; Windham, 2024).

This study also highlights a disconnect between student-athletes and academic advisors during recruitment, which results in limited information about institutional resources and career options (Kamusoko, 2012). As in previous research (Beamon, 2012), many student-athletes make decisions without fully exploring available opportunities.

Notably, these findings diverge from earlier research that attributes student-athlete departure primarily to cognitive factors, such as academic performance indicators (Brecht & Burnett, 2019). Instead, this study suggests that campus and community involvement is a key predictor of academic success.

Narratives from participants illustrate the benefits of purposeful engagement beyond sports. Through inclusion and open dialogue, student-athletes begin to break down academic and social barriers, transfer skills from athletics to other settings, and receive valuable feedback from institutional leaders. These experiences not only foster resilience in times of adversity (Finnell, 2022; Kamusoko, 2012; Van Raalte et al., 2017) but also provide healthy coping strategies and support the overall well-being and growth of student-athletes (Copeland et al., 2024).

Summary

Student-athletes typically enroll at NAIA institutions for athletic opportunities (Bergeron, 2019). Athletics increases access to higher education for these students, but it also creates additional challenges. Many NAIA student-athletes do not have their basic psychological, physical, or financial needs met. Relationships with peers, staff, and faculty, as well as housing instability, changes in scholarship support, and injuries, all affect student-athletes' ability to build self-esteem and purpose. When student-athletes lose their sense of esteem or purpose, they are more likely to leave both their athletic programs and their institutions. Academic and athletic administrators must work together to support student-athletes' self-esteem and increase retention.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The issue addressed in this study concerned the low persistence and retention rates of student-athletes who were enrolled at member institutions of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA, 2024). The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to examine the academic, social, and athletic barriers that student-athletes perceived as hindrances to their retention and persistence, as well as the supports they identified as necessary for graduation. Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry design, the study yielded mixed results regarding the academic, athletic, and social challenges that NAIA student-athletes navigated. This chapter presented the implications of these findings for persistence and retention and discussed the necessary support for student-athletes. The conclusion offered final reflections on the study's contributions.

Implications

The findings of this study underscore that student-athletes encounter barriers rooted in their formative experiences, with these obstacles shaping their educational trajectories from early childhood through secondary and postsecondary education (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Bennett, 2023; Carless & Douglas, 2013; Copeland et al., 2024; Finnell, 2022; Johnson, 2010; Oxendine & Taub, 2021; Solomon, 2022). Family structures and socioeconomic status directly influence the resources and relationships available to young athletes, thereby affecting their access to opportunities. Student-athletes who report adverse childhood experiences often face restricted access to resources and support networks and are at a heightened risk for negative outcomes such as chronic illness, abuse, maladaptive coping, and addictive behaviors (Copeland et al., 2024). Notably, these student-athletes frequently hesitate to seek assistance, perceiving help-seeking as a sign of weakness—a tendency particularly observed among male student-athletes. It is

imperative that institutions adopt initiative-taking measures to facilitate student-athletes' self-discovery and understanding of their individual needs.

This study demonstrates that enhancing student-athlete experiences requires intentional development of self-efficacy and the cultivation of robust networks among administrators, faculty, staff, traditional students, and fellow student-athletes. Deliberate relationship-building mitigates social isolation which is a common challenge for student-athletes whose schedules, academic clustering, and financial illiteracy can separate them from their peers (Harry, 2021). Harmonizing social, academic, and athletic support is essential for student-athlete persistence; when misalignment occurs between athletic and academic roles, institutional and goal commitment are compromised. Consider, for example, Participant 4, who, after earning increased playing time as a freshman, developed detrimental habits in the athletic and social spheres and did not pursue academic integration due to a perceived divide between traditional and student-athletes. Such divisions are exacerbated by persistent stereotypes, such as the "dumb jock" label, which perpetuate isolation and diminish persistence (D'Anna, 2013).

Participants 5 and 9 further exemplify these challenges, as their strong athletic identities and time commitments resulted in limited social interactions outside of their teams and coaches. For Participant 9, conflicting values with faculty hindered positive engagement and academic integration. These narratives reveal a lack of career preparation and professional development outside of athletics, and in some cases, tuition barriers precluded a return to higher education after athletic eligibility or financial support lapsed. Participant 9, specifically, withdrew due to financial constraints.

In contrast, Participant 12's trajectory illustrates how academic and social engagement can foster long-term educational attainment. After transferring from a junior college and limiting athletic participation, Participant 12 leveraged faculty mentorship and involvement with

traditional students to pursue new professional interests, earning advanced degrees. Similar patterns emerge in the experiences of other participants, such as Participant 3, whose pathway to graduate study was facilitated by overcoming inconsistency in institutional support, leveraging military scholarship opportunities, and reframing his identity beyond athletics.

Among the sample, only four participants successfully integrated and persisted at their initial institutions. Participant 1's initiative-taking relationship-building with faculty and staff outside the athletic department—motivated by values instilled during childhood. His preparation for life after sport enabled him to maintain perspective and diversify his interests, illustrating the importance of socioeconomic influences and relational skills in successful persistence.

The narratives of Participants 8 and 13 reinforce this theme: both attributed their positive experiences and transition to broader campus engagement and relationship-building. Participant 8 overcame inadequate secondary preparation through coaching connections, employment, spiritual growth, and forming friendships outside athletics. Participant 13's involvement in Student Government Association and library-based networking facilitated access to academic and professional resources, supporting his long-term academic and professional aspirations. Participant 2's unique narrative highlights the distinctive challenges of international student athletes, including adapting to unfamiliar academic systems, financial tensions, and shifting athletic commitments.

These findings signal the necessity for NAIA institutions to adopt data-driven, reflexive practices informed by comprehensive feedback—akin to exit interviews and surveys (EIS) utilized in the business sector (Harry, 2021). Given concerns over retention and recruitment, it is logical for institutions to systematically gather and analyze the perspectives of their stakeholders, as required by the NCAA (Harry, 2021). Such practices inform improvements in precollege recruitment, institutional integration, and post-enrollment support. Coaches, given their pivotal

role in initial student-athlete commitment, should closely examine these data, as coaching philosophies and practices significantly impact both integration and retention (Douglass, 2013; Henderson, 2023).

Recommendations for Practice

It is recommended that the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) requires member institutions to systematically collect feedback from all stakeholders. Colleges and universities should seek to understand the experiences and perspectives of those they employ and serve. Tools such as exit interviews and surveys can help institutions remain reflective and adaptive in fulfilling their mission, as well as in recruiting and retaining students (Harry, 2021). By utilizing these methods, NAIA campus leaders can address issues more effectively, fostering collaboration between academic and athletic staff.

Additionally, involving local community members and alumni in the survey process can enhance the social environment on campus and expand professional development opportunities—addressing needs such as those highlighted by Participant 2. For greater honesty and transparency, it is advisable that these exit interviews and surveys (EIS) be conducted by third-party facilitators and that survey remains anonymous. To improve retention, these assessments should take place at the end of every semester, allowing institutions to keep up with current sentiments and concerns. Conducting surveys at the beginning of each semester as well could enable comparison of initial expectations with end-of-semester experiences.

It is further recommended that exit interviews and surveys be extended to faculty and staff. Analyzing these responses alongside those from student-athletes will offer insight into the relationships among student-athletes, administrators, coaches, and other campus personnel. This is important because the relationship student-athletes have with their coaches significantly influences their commitment and integration (Harry, 2021). To enhance retention, institutions

should promote positive interactions between student-athletes, staff, and faculty. The process can also be strengthened by incorporating survey results into collaborative decision-making, such as voting on team captains, student government representatives, or campus events. Overall, regular, and thoughtful use of exit and entrance interviews and surveys offers institutions a sound approach to building autonomy, competence, and connection among all members of the campus community (Creswell et al., 2018; Harry, 2021).

Recommendations for Future Research

In light of the framework, findings, and implications presented in this study, it is prudent to recommend that future research undertake a careful exploration of the perspectives held by coaches, athletic directors, and academic administrators. Employing qualitative methodologies, such as case studies or focus groups within NAIA institutions, would yield deeper insights into the barriers faced by leadership in facilitating the integration and success of student-athletes. The results of such inquiries would elucidate the expectations, priorities, and challenges encountered by NAIA leadership.

Moreover, the pursuit of longitudinal studies that systematically measure academic and athletic progress across semesters would significantly enhance our understanding of the nuances in practice and their respective impacts on student retention and graduation rates. Such data would be invaluable for policymakers and instructional designers seeking to implement evidence-based strategies. Further scholarship may also extend this inquiry through comparative analyses between NAIA institutions and various NCAA divisions, enabling the identification and dissemination of best practices for student-athlete support. Assessing the relative effectiveness of different institutional programs, and their influence on retention and graduation outcomes, would provide critical guidance for policy formulation and institutional leadership. Lastly, expanding

the research to encompass non-revenue-generating and Olympic sports would contribute to a broader, more inclusive perspective, enriching the foundation for future inquiry and practice.

Conclusion

This qualitative narrative inquiry confronts the critical issue of low retention and graduation rates among NAIA student-athletes. The findings make it clear: insufficient secondary school preparation, a prematurely foreclosed athletic identity, and weak relationship building throughout institutional integration all contribute to this persistent problem. NAIA colleges must take decisive action—leveraging these insights to better support student-athletes through every transition, from high school to college and onward. The research underscores the vital importance of collaboration between academic and athletic staff, elevating the entire campus community’s ability to respond proactively to student needs.

If NAIA institutions ignore these recommendations, they risk losing both student-athletes and coaches at alarming rates, facing unsustainable costs, compounding the student loan debt crisis, and, in some cases, closing their doors—an outcome that has already affected numerous small colleges in recent years (Bergeron, 2019). The clear takeaway is that sustained, thoughtful investment in comprehensive support systems is not optional; it is essential for institutional survival and the long-term success of student athletes. Student-athletes must be empowered with the knowledge and resources to choose institutions aligned with their personal and professional aspirations, ensuring that their college experience is not just a steppingstone, but a launchpad for future achievement.

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**Appendix A Heart of America Athletic Conference and Kansas Collegiate
Athletic Conference Retention Statistics**

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Graduation %</u>	<u>Withdrawal %</u>	Transfer%	Still enrolled %
Baker University	63%	14%	22%	0%
Benedictine College	66%	6%	28%	0%
Central Methodist University	47%	11%	41%	0%
Clarke University	66%	2%	32%	0%
Culver-Stockton College	49%	21%	30%	0%
Graceland University	44%	52%	4%	0%
Grand View University	55%	12%	34%	0%
MidAmerica Nazarene University	46%	12%	43%	0%
Missouri Valley College	23%	25%	52%	0%
Mount Mercy University	62%	14%	25%	0%
Park University	38%	26%	34%	2%
Peru State College	36%	23%	41%	1%
William Penn University	37%	21%	42%	0%
<u>Avila University</u>	<u>53%</u>	<u>31%</u>	16%	0%
Bethany College	31%	42%	27%	0%
Bethel College	44%	38%	18%	0%
Evangel University	67%	18%	15%	0%
Friends University	45%	0%	54%	1%
Kansas Wesleyan University	44%	11%	45%	0%
McPherson College	40%	38%	23%	0%
Oklahoma Wesleyan University	37%	45%	18%	1%
Ottawa University	42%	56%	0%	2%
Southwestern College	39%	21%	40%	0%
Sterling College	47%	18%	35%	0%
Tabor University	43%	7%	50%	0%
University of Saint Mary	53%	9%	38%	0%
York University	49%	21%	29%	0%

Appendix B NAIA Retention per Sport

<u>Sport</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Retention rate (Avg)</u>
Baseball	Men	68.88%
Basketball	Men	56.54%
Basketball	Women	66.14%
Bowling	Men	67.43%
Bowling	Women	74.16%
Competitive Cheer	Both	59.60%
Competitive Dance	Both	76.38%
Cross Country	Men	68.00%
Cross Country	Women	73.31%
Football	Men	57.23%
Golf	Men	73.40%
Golf	Women	76.58%
Lacrosse	Men	66.74%
Lacrosse	Women	75.77%
Soccer	Men	61.86%
Soccer	Women	67.56%
Softball	Women	71.94%
Swimming & Diving	Men	77.52%
Swimming & Diving	Women	73.76%
Tennis	Men	69.18%
Tennis	Women	73.25%
Track	Men	71.87%
Track	Women	75.95%
Volleyball	Men	66.53%
Volleyball	Women	66.37%
Wrestling	Men	56.66%
Wrestling	Women	69.94%

Appendix C Interview Questions

1. Explain what your recruitment process was like and how you decided to enroll at this institution?
2. What thoughts or expectations did you have about your classes before arriving to campus? Have those changed?
3. What thoughts or expectations did you have about your role on the team before arriving to campus? Have those changed?
4. In what ways do you feel connected to the academic and athletic aspect of your role as a student-athlete?
5. In what ways do you feel disconnected from the academic and athletic aspect of your role as a student athlete?
6. Where does motivation come from to achieve academically and athletically?
7. In what ways have you been successful academically and athletically?
8. In what ways have you been unsuccessful academically and athletically?
9. What relationships do you find most valuable and most unvaluable?
10. Share your thoughts regarding your academic, social, and athletic growth? What helped you grow or shrink?
11. What do you think about the resources and support in place to help you be successful academically and athletically?

Appendix D Participant Recruitment Email

Dear prospective study participant,

My name is Juan Redmon Jr, and I am a doctoral candidate at National University. This email is an invitation for you to participate in a research study regarding support throughout your student-athlete experience at an NAIA institution.

The purpose of this study is to understand how NAIA student-athletes can be better supported throughout their collegiate career.

The study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the National University Institutional Review Board.

This study will be conducted during spring of 2025. During that time, I will collect and analyze data related to academic and athletic support of student-athletes.

If you agree to participate, you will be contacted to schedule a two-part interview. An initial 90-minute interview consisting of fifteen open-ended questions and a follow up 45-minute interview to confirm the precision of my analysis.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and all data is confidential. If you choose to participate in the study, you can stop participating at any time. Participation or nonparticipation will have no bearing on your academic or athletic standing.

By participating in this study, you will provide insight as to how you became a student athlete at your respective institution, your expectations before arriving on campus, and how being on campus has impacted your outlook as a student-athlete at your institution.

If you are interested in participating, please click on the link below and complete the Microsoft Form. Upon completing the Microsoft Form, I will contact you to schedule the initial interview.

Thank you very much for your consideration. If you have any questions regarding this study or the consent document, please contact me via email at j.redmon6082@o365.ncu.edu

Blessings, Juan K.
Redmon Jr.

Appendix E Participant Demographics

Participant #	Sport	Enrollment Status	Ethnicity
Participant 1	Basketball	Graduated	Caucasian
Participant 2	Basketball	Graduated	German
Participant 3	Football	Graduated	African American
Participant 4	Football	Withdrawn	Caucasian
Participant 5	Football	Withdrawn	African American
Participant 6	Football	Transfer/Graduated	African American
Participant 7	Football	Transfer/Graduated	Caucasian
Participant 8	Football	Graduated	Caucasian
Participant 9	Football	Withdrawn	Caucasian
Participant 10	Football	Enrolled	African American
Participant 11	Basketball	Transfer/Graduated	African American
Participant 12	Football	Transfer/Graduated	African American
Participant 13	Wrestling	Graduated	Hispanic
Participant 14	Football	Transfer/Graduated	African American
Participant 15	Football	Withdrawn	African American

Appendix F H.A.A.C and K.C.A.C Enrollment Statistics

Institution	Undergraduate enrollment	Men	Women	SA enrollment	SA men	SA women	% of SA
Avila University	872	366	506	388	249	139	44%
Baker University	944	450	494	573	376	197	60%
Benedictine College	2,134	1,056	1,078	683	449	234	32%
Bethany College (KS)	678	407	271	523	365	158	77%
Bethel College (KS)	486	258	228	388	231	157	79%
Central Christian College	436	221	215	265	169	96	60%
Central Methodist University	1,065	515	550	768	421	347	72%
Clarke University	705	393	312	538	362	176	76%
Evangel University	1,246	592	654	496	321	175	39%
Friends University	896	456	440	617	363	254	68%
Graceland University	818	474	344	525	367	158	64%
Grand View University	1,390	648	742	921	558	363	66%
Kansas Wesleyan University	752	420	332	552	402	150	73%
McPherson College	802	545	257	501	334	167	62%
MidAmerica Nazarene University	916	434	482	553	346	207	60%
Missouri Valley College	1,201	748	453	935	615	320	77%
Mount Mercy University	998	392	606	499	277	222	50%
Oklahoma Wesleyan University	605	353	252	428	270	158	70%
Ottawa University (KS)	775	487	288	738	483	255	95%
Park University (MO)	3,009	1,434	1,575	757	468	289	25%
Peru State College	997	444	553	359	220	139	36%
University of Saint Mary (KS)	751	406	345	631	368	263	84%
Southwestern College (KS)	629	394	235	564	346	218	89%
Sterling College	500	324	176	423	285	138	84%
Tabor College	501	313	188	429	291	138	85%
William Penn University	1,286	653	633	483	293	190	37%
York University	403	215	188	279	139	140	69%