Exploring College Choice through the Lived Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes at NCAA Division II Institutions in West Virginia

A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

The Patton College of Education of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Leah M. Turner

April 2017

© 2017 Leah M. Turner. All Rights Reserved.
This dissertation titled
Exploring College Choice through the Lived Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes at NCAA Division II Institutions in West Virginia

by
LEAH M. TURNER

has been approved for
the Department of Counseling and Higher Education
and The Patton College of Education by

David Horton Jr.
Associate Professor of Counseling and Higher Education

Renée A. Middleton
Dean, The Patton College of Education
Abstract

TURNER, LEAH M., Ph.D., April 2017, Higher Education

Exploring College Choice through the Lived Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes at NCAA Division II Institutions in West Virginia

Director of Dissertation: David Horton Jr.

Understanding the college choice process for student-athletes who are first in their families to enroll in post-secondary institutions is essential in addressing issues such as access, affordability, retention, and degree completion for this population. Personal accounts of the target population explain institutional choice from the viewpoint of first-generation, student-athletes. This qualitative, phenomenological case study investigates the college choice of eight National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II student-athletes who are also the first in their families to pursue a post-secondary degree. Participants are asked questions concerning three phases of the college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987): Predisposition, search, and choice. Preliminary results reveal that this population places emphasis on college choice factors pertaining to athletics, family, money, campus culture and location, size of the institution, and degree program prestige. Discussion regarding the college choice process for first-generation student-athletes is informative when discussing strategic enrollment management for colleges and universities. This study also provides guidance to the most essential advocates of the college choice process by creating a platform for discussion in the essential areas of marketing, recruiting, application, and admission.
Dedication

Chandler Thomas and Lily Elizabeth, Mommy loves you more than words have meaning.

Defy all mediocre expectations and simple social standards. Be extraordinary.
Acknowledgements

There is an old African proverb that states, “it takes a village to raise a child.” This statement can be applied to a myriad of circumstances and is certainly the case in my educational successes.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Ansley Abraham and the team he assembled at the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) who work tirelessly to support the educational goals of minority Ph.D. aspirants. Without funding through the Doctoral Scholars Program, graduating with a terminal degree and presenting my research at national conferences would be a distant dream. In addition, the relationships and connections I made while attending the Institute on Teaching and Mentoring are priceless. The access you provide students like myself is nothing less than miraculous. Being a part of the Doctoral Scholars Program at SREB was life-changing. Thank you for all you do.

I would like to thank my family and friends. Mom, Cindy, Brandy, Shanton, Buster, and Grandma I could not have done this without you. There was never a time where I did not feel your unwavering encouragement and unconditional love. My constant drive was to make you proud. Buzz and Brenda, as a new mother, it was not easy to be away from my babies. Thank you for taking care of them when I could not. Words cannot describe how important it was to know they were in good hands. To my husband Ryan, we made it! Instead of thanking you, I would like to apologize for my craziness. Day in, day out, you watched me study, stress, write, worry, work, and whine.
You stayed consistent and understood that for me to achieve my dream, your life was going to change too. I appreciate you!

To my committee members, Dr. Laura Harrison, Dr. Adah Ward-Randolph, and Dr. Heather Lawrence-Benedict, thank you for your guidance and special advice. You allowed me to realize my new role as a “knowledge producer” instead of a “knowledge consumer.” I promise to “profess,” never hold back, and always make you proud.

To my advisor Dr. David Horton, Jr., thank you for believing in me. You were my voice of reason and the calm to my storm. I appreciate the simple guidelines, last minute skype calls, and your compassion for me as I moved across country. The time and effort you invested in me is appreciated far more than I can say or show.

Last, but not least, to my mentor Dr. T. Ramon Stuart, I am truly here today because of the potential you saw in me 11 years ago. You asked me questions I never had to answer about my personal and professional goals that helped me develop my career aspirations. I began to think and dream bigger with your help. Throughout our relationship, you introduced me to higher education, the doctoral program at Ohio University, SREB, other professionals in the field, etc. I cannot thank you enough for your persistent guidance and always available assistance. It is not often that you find someone who believes in you more than you believe in yourself, however, I found that someone in you.

Without the help and support of my “village,” my dreams of achieving a terminal degree would not have come to fruition. I am forever grateful to each of you for what you gave me.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of the Study</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Choice</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College choice for first-generation students.</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College choice for student-athletes</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice factors for student-athletes</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation Student-Athletes</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCAA Division II Recruiting Laws</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia Higher Education</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving Higher Education in America</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework: Hossler and Gallagher’s Three-Phase Model of College Choice</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase I: Predisposition</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase II: Search</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase III: Choice</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Research Design</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative Paradigm ........................................................................................................... 70
Case Study .......................................................................................................................... 72
Phenomenology .................................................................................................................. 73
Qualitative Transcendental Phenomenological Model .................................................. 74
  Epoche ............................................................................................................................... 74
  Phenomenological reduction ............................................................................................ 75
  Imaginative variation ....................................................................................................... 76
Participants .......................................................................................................................... 77
  Risks ................................................................................................................................ 80
  Benefits ............................................................................................................................. 80
  Compensation .................................................................................................................... 81
Data Collection ................................................................................................................... 81
  Interviews .......................................................................................................................... 81
    Interview framework ........................................................................................................ 82
Data Analysis ...................................................................................................................... 83
  Transcription ..................................................................................................................... 83
  Member checks .................................................................................................................. 84
  Coding ............................................................................................................................... 84
  Interpretation ..................................................................................................................... 84
Synthesis .............................................................................................................................. 85
Summary ............................................................................................................................... 85
  Dependability and authenticity ....................................................................................... 86
  Praxis and reflexivity ........................................................................................................ 86
Chapter 4: I Chose Division II and Division II Chose Me .............................................. 88
The State of West Virginia .................................................................................................... 91
Anthony ............................................................................................................................... 93
  Access to college through football .................................................................................. 94
  Changing his academic outlook ...................................................................................... 95
  His father was Anthony’s biggest college advocate ...................................................... 96
  Excluding institutions due to associated costs ............................................................... 97
Athletic influences led to proactive recruitment approach and interested college coaches. ................................................................. 98

Unfamiliarity with higher education led to missed opportunities ....................... 100

Early complications led to satisfying conclusion ............................................. 101

Summary ........................................................................................................ 102

Bianca ............................................................................................................. 103

Young college aspirations fueled academic and athletic success. ..................... 105

Actively promoting self for athletics ................................................................ 106

Being discovered ............................................................................................. 107

Campus visit sealed the deal ............................................................................ 108

Being confident in her decision ......................................................................... 109

Athletics provided financial access .................................................................. 109

Summary ........................................................................................................... 110

Gail .................................................................................................................... 111

No pressure or personal attention, only parental influences. ......................... 112

Too busy for typical recruiting ......................................................................... 113

Athletic visit helped her see a future at her current institution ....................... 114

Teammates formed her friendships .................................................................. 116

Summary .......................................................................................................... 117

Dana .................................................................................................................. 118

High school supplied the push to pursue college ............................................. 119

Early ambitions to pursue a career in business ............................................... 120

College choice approach varied during the process ........................................ 121

Looking for help in the pursuit of a future in collegiate athletics .................... 122

Researching interested institutions .................................................................. 124

Choosing to attend the only school she visited for athletics ........................... 125

Summary .......................................................................................................... 126

Emory ................................................................................................................. 126

Presence of strong family support and desire to help them. ............................ 128

Her love for sports led her to the United States ............................................... 129

A recruiting organization facilitated her college search ................................. 130
Geographic and financial barriers prevent campus visits. .......................... 132
Financial hardships at her choice institution. ........................................ 132
Getting to West Virginia took precedence. .......................................... 134
Summary. ............................................................................................ 135
Zoe ....................................................................................................... 136
Certain that her career goals would lead to economic stability. .......... 138
Working to understand diversity and resolve adversity .................... 139
Keeping college debt free. ................................................................. 140
Two times the experience. ................................................................. 142
Summary. ............................................................................................ 143
Erin ....................................................................................................... 144
Needed a college degree for the fields she was interested in .......... 145
Used a website as opposed to a college counselor in the search phase. 146
Track programs were important in college choice ......................... 147
College visits helped to limit choices. .............................................. 147
Track dreams take over on her official athletic visit .................... 149
Summary. ............................................................................................ 151
Taryn ....................................................................................................... 151
West Virginia just felt right. ............................................................. 153
Community college was not an appealing place. ......................... 154
Current institution is academically suitable. ............................... 154
Summary. ............................................................................................ 156
Chapter Summary .................................................................................... 156
Chapter 5: College Choice is Complex for First-Generation Student-Athletes .......................... 158
Phase I: Predisposition ......................................................................... 161
Self-awareness. .................................................................................... 162
Early ambition .................................................................................... 163
Career aspirations ............................................................................... 163
First-generation status ....................................................................... 165
Participation in athletics ..................................................................... 166
Perceived benefits. ............................................................................... 167
Human capital .................................................................167
Family. ..............................................................................169
Preconceptions. ...............................................................169
College rigor .....................................................................170
Distant professors ............................................................170
Support system. ................................................................171
Parents ..............................................................................171
High school. .....................................................................172
Athletic resources .............................................................174
Phase II: Search ...............................................................176
Disquietude. ......................................................................177
Alone. .................................................................................178
Stress. .................................................................................179
Research. ...........................................................................179
Introduced to university through athletics. .......................183
Recruitment. ......................................................................183
Initiating contact. .............................................................184
Athletic events. ...............................................................185
Coaches never saw participants prior to recruitment. ..........186
Coaches visiting ................................................................187
Athletic financial aid offers. ..............................................188
General university recruitment ..........................................191
Finances affected search. ..................................................192
Looking for athletic financial aid. .....................................192
Application fee. ...............................................................194
Expensive campus visits. ................................................195
Support. ............................................................................196
Recruiting companies .....................................................197
Coaches .............................................................................197
Parents ..............................................................................198
Phase III: Choice .............................................................200
Athletics. ............................................................................................................. 202
  Wanted to participate in collegiate athletics. .............................................. 202
  Athletic program success ........................................................................... 204
  Team. .............................................................................................................. 205
  Emotional impulse. ...................................................................................... 207
Money. ............................................................................................................. 209
  Athletic scholarship ..................................................................................... 209
  Expenses excluded institutions. ................................................................. 211
Campus culture. ............................................................................................. 212
  Campus. ........................................................................................................ 212
  Campus constituents. .................................................................................. 214
Campus location............................................................................................ 215
  Area .............................................................................................................. 216
  Proximity to home......................................................................................... 217
Size of the institution. .................................................................................... 218
  Campus and classroom sizes ................................................................... 219
  NCAA classification .................................................................................... 221
Academic program prestige. ...................................................................... 221
Family. .......................................................................................................... 223
Prioritizing College Choice Factors ............................................................. 223
  Prioritizing academic factors. .................................................................. 224
  Prioritizing athletic factors. ..................................................................... 224
Summary ....................................................................................................... 225
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion ........................................................ 227
Discussion ..................................................................................................... 228
  Research questions. ................................................................................... 228
  College choice factors. .............................................................................. 229
    Academic program prestige .................................................................. 230
    Athletics. ................................................................................................. 231
    Campus culture. ...................................................................................... 232
    Family. ..................................................................................................... 233
List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Demographics ................................................................. 89
Table 2: Participant Academic Information ...................................................... 90
Table 3: Participant Athletic Information .......................................................... 91
**List of Figures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Three-phase college choice model (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987)</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Characteristics of college choice and final choice factors for first-generation student-athletes</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Essential elements of the predisposition phase</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Essential elements of the search phase</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>College choice factors and the supporting elements considered by first-generation student-athlete participants</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Attending an institution of higher education to pursue a post-secondary degree is one of the most important decisions in a young student’s life. Lyndon B. Johnson was one of the first government officials to support the idea of increasing access and affordability to institutions of higher education through promotion of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 (Capt, 2013). The HEA of 1965 appropriated federal funds to strengthen the educational resources of colleges and universities by first, providing federal financial assistance for students in the form of what we now refer to as Pell Grants. The HEA also increased federal funding to universities, created scholarships, and provided low interest loans for students.

Although the HEA and its subsequent reauthorizations have addressed affordability, accessibility, and accountability to resolve most issues of retention and completion, these issues continue to plague post-secondary institutions. In effort to seek supporting information, previous research attempts to unravel the thought process of an individual’s college of choice. For example, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) expanded on the “undermatch” phenomenon coined by Melissa Roderick while studying students in the Chicago Public Schools at the University of Chicago (Sherwin, 2012). The authors suggest that an “undermatch” occurs when students apply and attend schools that are not academically equivalent to their estimated potential. This includes academically eligible students that choose not to go to college at all. From their research, Bowen et al. (2009) determined “that there is ample room for improvement in the imprecise and
seemingly rather haphazard process by which students match themselves and are matched by others to post-secondary educational opportunities” (p. 111).

Recent studies focused on college choice suggests that personal and institutional factors (Davis, Nagle, Richards, & Awokoya, 2013; Goss, Jubenville, & Orejan 2006; Johnson, Jubenville, & Goss, 2009; Judson, James & Aurand, 2004; Maramba, Palmer, Yull, & Ozuna, 2015), along with state and federal policies (Dooley, Payne, & Robb, 2012; Ishitani, 2005; Kim, 2004) influence a student’s choice of institution. This study focuses on the college choice decision-making process for an important student population in which no extensive research in known: first-generation student-athletes.

Statement of the Problem

Many studies concerning the college choice process for aspiring college students do not disaggregate student athletes from non-student athletes (Rhoades, 2014; Smith, 2008; Vultaggio & Friedfeld, 2013; Wilson & Adelson, 2012). Although an individual in the general student population may be attracted to an institution because of the quality or number of athletic facilities, it is unlikely that they are recruited or financially supported through the athletic department, as is the case of a student-athlete. Athletic financial aid, relationships with coaches and teammates, reputation of athletic trainers, etc. naturally give student-athletes more elements to consider when making their college choice decision.

Studies that specifically focus on student-athletes (Goss, 2006; Hochradel, Youssef, & Segars, 2015; Krikorian, 2014; Magnusen, Kim, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2014; McCaw, 2014; Pauline, 2010) support the notion that this population considers other
institutional characteristics when selecting their institution for post-secondary education. This study allowed student-athletes to discuss their experiences so that university administration and higher education policy makers understand all aspects of their decision and where their priorities lie.

Secondly, research illustrates how the college choice process of a first-generation student is measurably different from their counterpart (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011; Ishitani, 2005; Oldfield, 2012; Petty, 2014; Sherwin, 2012). Effective enrollment management depends on accurate accounts and deliberate efforts to all populations entering institutions of higher education (Duniway, 2012), including first-generation and others that struggle with affordability and lack of information and access (Jackson, 2012). This study permits first-generation student-athletes to explain the characteristics that influence their college decision, potentially leading to inclusion of this population in the marketing and recruitment strategies of colleges and universities. The study also seeks answers to questions about how first-generation student-athletes perceive the benefits of higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the college choice process for first-generation student-athletes to better inform higher education issues such as access, affordability, retention, and degree completion. Personal accounts of the target population will explain institutional choice from the viewpoint of first-generation, student-athletes. Research and discussion regarding the college choice process for these students could prove informative when discussing strategic enrollment management.
A gap in college choice literature resides in the population of first-generation, student-athletes, who are naturally swayed by their athletic aspirations (Hochradel et al., 2015; Krikorian, 2014; Magnusen et al., 2014; McCaw, 2014). Understanding this persuasion could inform enrollment issues, such as “undermatching” where academically gifted first-generation, student-athletes attend less selective or prestigious universities to follow their athletic dreams. Undermatching is proven to cause complications concerning retention and degree completion (Bowen et al., 2009).

In addition to the lack of focus placed on this population, most college choice research is conducted quantitatively through instrument-based questions, which produce performance, attitude, observational, and census data (Creswell, 2014). This type of data leads to a constricted explanation of the issue (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012; Harvey, 2014; Kim, 2004). Though useful, these results do not give a holistic view of a lived experience. This study aims to supplement literature from structured responses with first-hand experiences regarding college choice, contributing to the depth and breadth of knowledge on this topic.

To exemplify the need for more qualitative college choice research, Kim and Gasman (2011) used purposive sampling to conduct informal conversations and interviews that allowed Asian Americans students to talk about their college choice experience. This study did not formally structure questions around previously determined variables, but allowed the population to speak about what they felt was important during the college choice process. The results of this study will afford higher education officials
the information needed to better understand students’ circumstances of enrollment and degree completion complications as they relate to original institutional choice decisions.

This study aims to provide guidance to the most essential advocates of the college choice process by creating a platform for discussion in essential areas of marketing, recruiting, application, and admission. Kim and Gasman (2011) assert “students consider their social networks, especially family and peers, to be the most important in making decisions about where to apply and attend” (p.706). Since associates of all types continuously influence students, it is imperative to increase the knowledge and effectiveness of high school counselors, mentors, coaches, etc., during the college selection process. Secondly, McCaw (2014) states “Prospective student-athletes often believe that they are making a decision regarding who to play for more so than where to play. The prospective student-athlete and coach relational dynamic generally tips the scales when it comes down to making the final decision” (p. 1288). While higher education officials are involved in the decision-making process, it is often the recruiter and/or coach who has the closest connection with student-athletes. Therefore, recruiters and coaches should be well informed about their own institutions and knowledgeable about issues involving college choice.

Scope of the Study

The population for this study includes first-generation, male and female student-athletes within National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II sports programs in the Southeast region of United States. The NCAA is the largest American governing body for athletic programs with over 1,200 accredited member institutions,
(National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015). This study does not limit inclusion of institutions by characteristics such as Carnegie classification (e.g., rural/urban), control (i.e., public/private), or by population served (e.g., predominantly white institutions (PWI), historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). To represent all things that may impact a college choice decision, it is important to be inclusive of all types of NCAA Division II colleges and universities. As time changes, so does the process of college choice for matriculating college freshman, therefore, this study allows first-generation student-athletes of all classes an opportunity to recollect their process and experiences. This will produce the best view of college choice over the last four to five years.

**Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What is considered when a first-generation student-athlete makes the decision to attend college?
2. How do first-generation student-athletes prioritize what is important to them while making their final college selection?

**Definition of Terms**

- Athletic Scholarship - As used by Rubin and Rosser (2014) in their comparison of scholarship athletes and non-scholarship athletes, an athletic scholarship is an offer of financial aid for athletic ability. This grant-in-aid serves as compensation for participation in collegiate sports.
• College Choice - An institution of higher education where a student decides to enroll. “College choice is a complex construct that incorporates students’ college aspirations, their expectations of those aspirations becoming a reality, the beginning of their plans, and the steps taken to actualize those aspirations” (Bergerson, 2009, p.47).

• Contact – “Any time a college coach says more than hello during a face-to-face contact with a college-bound student-athlete or his parents off the college’s campus” (NCAA.org, 2015).

• Contact Period – When “a college coach may have face-to-face contact with college-bound student-athletes or their parents, watch student-athletes compete and visit their high schools, and write or telephone student-athletes or their parents” (NCAA.org, 2015).

• Dead Period – A period in the athletic recruiting process when “a college coach may not have face-to-face contact with college bound student-athletes or their parents, and may not watch student-athletes compete or visit their high schools. Coaches may write and telephone student-athletes or their parents during a dead period” (NCAA.org, 2015).

• Eligibility - An individual’s status as it pertains to athletic participation. For the population in this study (DII NCAA student-athletes), the NCAA states “to be eligible to compete in NCAA sports during your first year at a Division II school, you must meet academic requirements for your core courses, grade-point average (GPA) and test scores” (NCAA.org, 2015).
• Evaluation Period – A time during the recruiting process when “a college coach may watch college-bound student-athletes compete, visit their schools, and write or telephone student-athletes or their parents. However, a college coach may not have face-to-face contact with college-bound student-athletes or their parents off the college’s campus during an evaluation period” (NCAA.org, 2015).

• First-Generation - This term is more widely and inclusively used to define a student with parents who have not completed a degree from a post-secondary institution, as in Petty’s (2014) study on how to motivate first-generation students to degree completion and academic success. However, to accent and understand the importance of parental experience in the college choice process, this study uses a narrow definition where first-generation students are first in their immediate family to attend an institution of higher education (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This more specific definition of first-generation was also used as a subgroup in Ishitani’s (2005) research where educational attainment among first-generation students was studied.

• National Letter of Intent – This is a voluntary contract between a college-bound, Division I or II, student-athlete and an institution that guarantees athletic aid for one full academic year if the student is accepted and eligible for financial aid per NCAA rules. When a student-athlete signs a national letter of intent, they are no longer able to be pursued by other athletic programs and recruiters.

• Official Visit – A visit to an institution by a student-athlete and parent(s) that is paid for by the college or university.
• **Post-Secondary Education** - Formal education received after the completion of a high school or secondary school. This term widens the scope to include all environments of higher learning like universities, seminaries, junior and community colleges, institutes of technology, etc. For example, Byndloss and Reid (2013) include all higher education options under the term “postsecondary” in their policy brief for practitioners. Post-Secondary education is often used synonymously with the term higher education and third-level education.

• **Quiet Period** – A time during the athletic recruiting process when “a college coach may only have face-to-face contact with college-bound student-athletes or their parents on the college’s campus. A coach may not watch student-athletes compete (unless a competition occurs on the college’s campus) or visit their high schools. Coaches may write or telephone college bound student-athletes or their parents during this time” (NCAA.org, 2015).

• **Recruiter (Athletic)** - Magnusen et al. (2014) states that a coach/recruiter is among the top athletic program factors an athlete considers while making their college choice. Likewise, Magnusen, Mondello, Kim, & Ferris (2011) defines a recruiter as often a head coach or assistant coach acting as a representative of an athletic program at an institution who seeks to bring in players for their respective sports. These individuals often deal with students who are still under care of their parents or guardians and are to abide by the recruiting rules set for them by their affiliated organization. For this study, athletic recruiters are required to operate under the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) policies and procedures for Division II (DII) athletics.
• Social Networks - People who are most likely associated with an individual. Kim and Gasman (2011) indicate that the “key players” influencing a student’s academic decisions like where to apply and attend college come from their social networks. These people include families, friends, peers, teachers, counselors, etc.
• Socio-economic Status - Refers to the level of hierarchy within a group based on income, wealth, status, network, etc. O’Conner et al. (2010) speaks of socio-economic status in their research on how social capital and financial knowledge affects college choice for a specific population. The section dedicated to elaborating on socio-economic status includes factors such as earnings, education, and social representation.
• Student-Athlete - A participant in any sports program of the institution in which he or she is enrolled. According to Parsons (2013), student-athletes are challenged with task of “intertwining practices and athletic contests with classes and academic demands” (p.401). It is important to understand that although these students are attending colleges and universities, they also have a responsibility to their respective athletic programs, which could pose an additional concern when choosing their post-secondary institution.
• Undermatch - Students enrolling in a college or university with a selectivity level that is lower than his or her college qualifications (i.e. SAT, ACT, grade point average, etc.) (Bowen et al., 2009).
• Unofficial Visit – The athletic department at a college or university may only provide up to three tickets for a home athletic competition to student-athletes who choose to go on unofficial visit. A student-athlete can take unlimited unofficial visits, but may not speak with their respective coaches during a dead period (NCAA.org, 2015).
Limitations

This study contains personal accounts from first-generation, Division II, student-athletes to better understand the college choice process from their experiences. The testimonies from those who interviewed are not generalizable to the college choice experiences of all student-athletes. However, exposing the reality of this population’s process of finding an institution that fits their needs can lead to new discoveries and a platform to discuss policy changes within the higher education institutions, supporting high schools, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

High school history is not addressed prior to choice of participants. Though previous research supports the idea that the college choice process depends highly on high school experiences (Bryant & Nichols, 2011), this is not standardized in participant selection. However, high school experience is addressed during the face-to-face interviews to allow for a comparison and discussion.

In addition, participants for this study all participated in athletics at NCAA Division II colleges and universities in the state of West Virginia. This is a limiting factor when considering that choice can be based off state and institutional policies, which are not uniform for all American colleges and universities.

Delimitations

The population for this study does not include Division I or III student-athletes. Division II athletes are easily accessible and those who coach and govern them are familiar. In addition, arrangements to recruit participants was made with athletic directors and coaches in multiple NCAA DII colleges and universities in West Virginia.
Although this study requires a full and complete recollection of the college choice process, including educational history, influential individuals, characteristics considered, and a clear recollection of emotions while undergoing the process, it is not guaranteed that participants will divulge all such information. All current student-athletes were considered for the study and no preference is given to students by classification.

Summary

This study is structured to allow understanding of the college choice through the lived experiences of first-generation student-athletes at NCAA Division II institutions in the state of West Virginia. The first-generation population suffers significant disadvantages when considering higher education (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011). In addition, they can be affected by more college choice factors than the general student population when it comes to their decision on where to participate as collegiate student-athletes. Expanding research on this population can be used to strengthen and make more effective the recruiting efforts for both athletic and academic university departments.

The following chapters seek to inform and discuss the college choice process of first-generation student-athletes. A review of current literature summarizes studies that pertain to college choice, first-generation students, student-athletes, current issues in higher education, higher education in West Virginia, NCAA recruiting rules and regulation, and serves a preface for the study. Background on the qualitative research paradigm and the phenomenological case study design are introduced in the research design section along with protocols and procedures for data collection and analysis. This qualitative data was used in chapter four to depict eight individual cases of first-
generation student-athletes who chose to attend NCAA Division II institutions in West Virginia. The study proceeds in chapter five by comparing the spoken truth of research participants in a cross-case analysis, allowing for a full view of the process for this population. Finally, a discussion that addresses pertinent college choice factors, the overall experiences of current research participants and how that relates or deviates from the current literature, and implications of the study ensues as a conclusion to this research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This review of the literature provides support for investigating the process of college choice for first-generation student-athletes. Understanding what is known about college choice, especially for student-athletes and first-generation students, is important to boost higher education in the areas of marketing, recruitment, effective enrollment, retention, and degree completion. Review of literature that pertains to this research begins with studies about college choice for the general population, student-athletes, and first-generation students. To affect higher education with the findings of this research, literature on post-secondary educational issues and potential solutions is reviewed. Finally, research methods pertaining to the collection of data and Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model of college choice is reviewed to provide a framework for the current study.

College Choice

First time, full-time students applying and enrolling in college immediately following their high school graduation often consider multiple institutional characteristics when selecting an institution. Some of the most common institutional characteristics that affect prospective student’s decisions include major degree programs and courses offered (Davis et al., 2013; Ishitani, 2005; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Maramba et al., 2015), location of campus and proximity to home or other desirable areas (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012; Kim, 2004; Martinez, 2013a; Rhoades, 2014; Wilson & Aldeson, 2012), reputation and selectivity (Davis et al., 2013; Harvey, 2014), in-house scholarships offered (Kim, 2004), campus culture and climate (Stephens, Markus, Frybery, Johnson,
& Covarrubias, 2012), recruitment strategies (Rhoades, 2014), and cost (Dooley et al., 2012; Harvey, 2014; Smith, 2008). Institutional size is a factor in determining college choice as well. However, Pope (2012) aims to debunk the myth that “A big university offers a broader, richer undergraduate experience with better teaching, wider selection of courses and a more diverse student body than an undergraduate college of 1,000 to 2,500” (p.26). A larger university may use more graduate students to teach classes, which takes away from the undergraduate academic experience.

These institutional characteristics are supplemented with multiple personal circumstances, such as level of academic attainment and eligibility (Kim, 2004; Stephens et al., 2012), opportunity for waived or reduced tuition and other monetary support (Byndloss & Reid, 2013; Capt, 2013), family members or familial influences (Martinez, 2013b; Rhoades, 2014), stress (Vultaggio & Friedfeld, 2013), peers and social networks (Kim & Gasman, 2011; Maramba et al., 2015), socioeconomic status (Palardy, 2015), and cultural backgrounds (Freeman, 1999) that are also strong determinants of a student’s institutional choice.

According to Kim (2012), there is a direct relationship between state-level, need-based aid and the enrollment in select colleges and universities. Beyond the control of post-secondary institutions and attending students, federal and state granted financial aid also prove to be among the most considered characteristics in the college choice process for the general student population (Kim, 2004; 2012).

Studies completed on the college choice process discuss how the previously stated institutional characteristics, personal needs, and federal and state financial aid policies
serve varying importance based on an individual’s needs and demographic. This study will help to close the gap in literature between what we know about the general student population and how that is related to student-athletes who are also first-generation students.

**College choice for first-generation students.** Another population of students that serve an important role for American colleges and universities, but prove to be affected by persistence, college matriculation, and degree attainment are first-generation students (Ishitani, 2005). The process of application, admittance, and enrollment into a four-year, degree-awarding institutions is highly affected by parental involvement (Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper, 1998); however, first-generation students lack guidance from parents who have experienced the world of higher education first-hand, which could lead to the continuation of an uneducated population.

Parents often want their children to succeed and are willing to help, but they are not equipped with the right information to do so (Smith, 2008). For instance, positive encouragement and involvement is seen when parents insist their children not follow their educational footsteps. Some low-SES parents may not have finished high school, so emphasis is placed on finishing a high school diploma and making that achievement the capstone, negating matriculation to higher education.

Even if first-generation students aspire to attend college, they are often plagued by lack of pertinent information on preparation, application, enrollment, cost, financial assistance, etc. (Smith, 2008, p.156). Smith (2008) determines that low college matriculation of first-generation students is not for the lack of support or motivation from
the parents, it comes from what the parents do not know about higher education (i.e. advantages, assistance, etc.) and the lack of emphasis placed on achieving a post-secondary degree. Adequate college cost and financial aid information is not readily available for this population and parents of first-generation students would “benefit from assistance in understanding the advantages of college as an option for their children” (p.157).

Ishitani’s (2005) study on college matriculation choice, persistence, and time-to-degree for first-generation students, revealed that students without college-educated parents are associated with many obstacles when it comes to higher education. For instance, compared to students with parents who attended college, first-generation students are less likely to even enroll in post-secondary education and when they do, they are more likely to attend 2-year institutions (Ishitani, 2005). Those first-generation students who choose to attend 4-year degree granting schools often do so at public, rather than private institutions (Ishitani, 2005), suggesting that the selectivity and reputation factors are not highly valued among first-generation students. Furthermore, first-generation students are more likely to drop out of their post-secondary institutions and are less likely to graduate on time, no matter which type they choose to attend (2005).

Bryant and Nicholas (2011) make it clear that major differences occur between first-generation students and their continuing-generation college student counterparts. One can closely compare first-generation students to those of low-income status, those who lack parental support, and those who are unlikely to attain sufficient educational information (Ishitani, 2005). Research indicates that significant disadvantages occurred in
“high school academic preparation, college exploration behaviors, college application behaviors, and college decision-making prior to matriculation” (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011, p.17). In terms of preparation, more first-generation students admitted having considerations of not attending college, which makes sense for why continuing-generation students went on more college visits, attended more college fairs, and asked more questions about the application process (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011).

According to Smith (2008), the ability to gain access to post-secondary institutions and do so without the risk of marginalization is unlikely for young students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, which contributes to their lack of competitiveness regarding college choice (p.147). Avery, Howell, and Page (2014) suggest that the likelihood of a student finishing a degree is highly dependent on their initial choice of application and enrollment (p. 3). Where students from low socio-economic backgrounds prove to be at a disadvantage, it could ultimately lead to their failure in the world of post-secondary education and cause much frustration for the higher education professionals seeking to resolve key issues such as retention, degree completion, etc.

In addition, students of low socio-economic status are said to lack competitiveness, therefore, it is less likely for them to attain acceptance to selective universities, which could potentially affect their college match. Petty (2014) understands the urgency to motivate these students through high school and on to collegiate degree completion. After an extensive review of motivational theories, barriers, and needs of first-generation students, Petty (2014) attests that colleges and universities should find
ways through programs to inspire, motivate, and help these students through their collegiate careers.

Another important factor related to the decision of first-generation students to consider was highlighted by Stephens, Markus, Frybery, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012), who insist that the general climate of higher education creates a gap in social class and “the independent cultural norms institutionalized in American university settings can undermine first-generation students’ performance” (p. 1192). Stephens et al. (2012) conducted four studies to reveal a cultural mismatch theory that explains why there is a gap in college performance between social classes. College administrators characterize their institutions' culture as being independent, putting much more emphasis on the individual student finding their own way through completion; however, this type of culture is not conducive to the achievement of first-generation students where they are more likely to succeed in a communal environment (Stephens et al., 2012). When these results were tested at one private and one public institution, university cultures inclusive of interdependence closed the mismatch gap between social classes. First-generation students achieved at a higher level than at universities with independent cultures, where educational assignments were deemed more challenging (Stephens et al., 2012). Oldfield (2012) expresses unfortunate examples of how social-class and peers weigh heavily on the college choice process. In this case, the researcher himself was a first-generation student whose background made it hard and unlikely to “shop around” for higher learning like others.
Ishitani (2005) suggests that although educators will not likely influence a students’ social class or first-generation status, they can help by educating the students themselves and showing support for these students’ academic success. This is essential for administrators to know and understand. Student-athletes are likely to be approached first in the recruiting process by coaches and recruiters. Where the support and information available to first-generation students is so scarce, higher education officials can adjust, paying attention to how they divulge essential financial aid, admissions, and enrollment information to potential student-athletes.

Previous literature on first-generation students points to lack of information as the cause of negative college choice experiences; therefore, it is a goal of the current study to find out what students did not know, what they would like to know, and how institutions can get them the information they need. It is also a goal for this research to expose hardships and gaps in campus culture so that college administrators and university professionals can erase the gap in social class achievement among American universities. It is important for institutions to start by addressing their own cultural norms, making them conducive to college matches that transcend social class.

Kenneth Oldfield (2012) wrote about his experience as a first-generation student where he included lessons learned and tips for administrators on how to alleviate associated hardships for students like himself. In summary, shopping for higher education, trips and vacations, a school’s difficulty level, prejudices about the “arts,” required courses, and information outside of popular media, were all topics he could have used some information on before making his college choice (pg. 3-8). These accounts are
widespread issues among students entering higher education for the first time and clarify perceptions and priorities of these first-generation students.

**College choice for student-athletes.** Collegiate student-athletes enter the higher education arena with a few other responsibilities and priorities outside of what is typical for non-athletes (Goss, 2006; Hochradel et al., 2015; Krikorian, 2014; Magnusen et al., 2014; McCaw, 2014; Pauline, 2010). When choosing a university to attend, athletes in addition choose a coach, a team, a sports program including facilities and administration, etc. It is understandable for one to assume that student-athletes prioritize characteristics differently when making their college choice.

Current research on the college choices of student-athletes is often aimed toward affective recruiting and marketing for institutions and individual athletic programs (Goss, 2006; Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Klenosky & Troutman, 2001; Pauline, 2010; Schneider & Messenger, 2012). However, it is important to know, specifically, the factors that are most important to this population to aid institutions in creating the right match for these individuals and help improve areas of retention and degree completion.

In addition to easing and improving the college selection process for student-athletes, understanding enrollment and retention though exploration of initial college choice decisions is important in generating sufficient, sustaining funds for higher education institutions. Goss (2006) suggests that enrollment and retention are two of the most difficult issues for smaller colleges and universities to manage. By focusing on specific student populations (such as student-athletes), Goss (2006) purports, smaller colleges and universities could alleviate such concerns. Using athletes as an example,
financial resources are built into institutional budgets for use of athletic departments. Coaches of colleges and universities can use these fiscal resources to recruit student-athletes via scholarship, state-of-the-art facilities, elite athletic training resources, etc. Athletes who consider and prioritize these college choice factors are more likely to select their first-choice institutions and colleges are more likely to retain those who enroll in their first choice institutions (Goss, 2006), which efficiently and effectively aids institutional enrollment and revenue.

**Choice factors for student-athletes.** Factors that affect a student-athlete’s decision to attend college are discussed in this literature review and can be used by administrators to draw in student-athlete enrollment for their institution. Findings hint specifically to how college choice priorities change for student-athletes when social class, social status, and household income are considered. Huffman and Cooper (2012) used the theories of human capital, corporate social responsibility, and brand equity to structure the debate, insisting that it is important for coaches and academic officials to take note of changing college choice factors when considering marketing materials, recruiting techniques, and retention efforts.

Understanding where priority is placed in the college choice decision for specific individuals is also an important piece to the discussion. Klenosky and Troutman’s (2001) research reveals reasons for student-athletes’ choices, which are labeled as “consequences:” Get a good job, play at pro level, social improvement, playing time, play on television, play in a bowl game, friends and family can watch, and feeling fiscally, socially, and academically comfortable (p. 102). These consequences of attributes lead to
overarching values that interviewees determined to be security, achievement, belonging, and fun/enjoyment (p.102). This is very useful study to be applied practically when trying to understand the underlying reasons for why student-athletes hold college choice factors to different levels of importance. The current study follows that of Klenosky and Troutman (2001) by asking participants both how and why for use in discussing issues in the areas of recruiting, admissions, enrollment, and marketing strategies. Remedying gaps in the efforts of administration and perceptions of potential student-athletes could prove beneficial for boosting revenue for the university.

The following studies highlight multiple items that student-athletes specifically mention when asked what they consider while choosing an institution.

*Student-athletes prioritizing academic factors.* Klenosky and Troutman (2001) interviewed student-athletes with a laddering technique to discover that players chose their college with the strongest of choice factors being academically related. For instance, Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, and Palmer (2003) and Goss et al. (2006) found specifically that “degree program” was the most influential factor in the college choice process of student-athletes. In addition to degree program, Huffman and Cooper (2012) revealed that academic choice factors such as “Opportunity to begin a good career other than playing professional football” and “Total academic value of the college’s degree” were most important to student-athletes of all social classes (p.234).

Although the previous studies find that athletes prioritize academic factors, other factors such as perception of the head coach/coaching staff and facilities (Klenosky & Troutman, 2001; Letawsky et al. 2003), open spots on the team, schedule, location/area,
and friend(s) on the team, (Klenosky & Troutman, 2001), and school’s sports tradition and official on-campus visit (Letawsky et al., 2003) to still hold weight in the overall decision. In addition to highlighting the most influential academic college choice factors of a student-athlete, Letawsky et al. (2003) disproves some stereotypical factors such as opinions and choices of high school teammates and friends, anticipated television exposure, opportunity to play, and how beneficial the program was for future professional goals (p.609).

These studies negate assumptions that student-athletes consider athletic factors as more important in a college decision than academics. When athletes take their official visits and speak with coaches and recruiters about their potential commitment with colleges and universities, these studies insist that academics be a part of the discussion. The availability of desired academic degree programs weighs heavily on the college choice process for student-athletes as determined by Goss et al. (2006) and Letawsky et al. (2003). Other studies (Goss et al., 2006; Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Klenosky & Troutman, 2001) determine that academic factors are just as important to student-athletes as athletic factors.

This study examines the qualities most admired by first-generation student-athletes to attract these students for admissions and enrollment. It is essential for academic staff, faculty, and administration to present information about degree programs, including prestige of the departments that house them and educational opportunities available while enrolled, clearly and concise to the first-generation, student-athlete consumer. College admissions offices can take advantage of athletic recruiting efforts by
creating marketing materials specifically designed to fit the needs of potential student-
athletes, if they know what this population is most concerned with and attracted by. A
combined approach when recruiting potential students of this target population could lead
to a boost in overall university enrollment, which satisfies both athletic and academic
departments.

Goss et al. (2006) suggests that gender plays a role in prioritizing academic
factors of student-athletes with a study that found academic factors to be more influential
in the college choice decision of female athletes, than male athletes. In support of this
statement, females showed degree programs as their number one factor when considering
higher education institutions (Johnson et al., 2009). To supplement this finding, Judson et
al. (2004) considered athletic factors to be more important when males made their college
selections. Due to the inconsistency of factors affecting the college choice decision
between male and female athletes, the current study considers student-athletes from all
genders and sports programs.

*Student-athletes prioritizing athletic factors.* Several studies on the college
selection process for student-athletes suggest athletic factors to be a priority when making
their college choice decisions (Johnson et al., 2009; Judson et al., 2004; Schneider &
Messenger, 2012). For example, one of the most highly considered among all athletes is
opportunity to play (Schneider & Messenger, 2012; Johnson et al., 2009). Nineteen
NCAA Division I hockey players were surveyed by Schneider and Messenger in 2009 to
determine if athletic facilities had any impact on this population’s college choice
decision. Results revealed the most important factor was opportunity to play. Even
players receiving non-athletic scholarships found opportunity to play as most important to them. Student-athletes’ in the Johnson et al. (2009) study chose head coach relationship and opportunity to play as the top two choice factors regardless of sport, scholarship, residency, or ethnicity. Opportunity to play is not always guaranteed. An opportunity to play might be promised by coaches and recruiters, calculated by individuals, teammates, family, and friends, but this factor is difficult to control. If there is a student-athlete who chooses a college based on how much playing time they believe they will get, there is not much an institution can do to retain those individuals when they do not get what they want. Therefore, it is important to focus on athletic choice factors like opportunity to play as they could have minor effects on retention rates of an institution.

In addition, Schneider and Messenger (2012) found that the opportunity to play factor was followed by athletic financial aid, perceived professional future, and program tradition for all student-athletes (p. 807). However, student-athletes specifically receiving non-athletic scholarships showed various athletic, academic, and personal choice factors affecting their college choice. For those student-athletes who received only partial athletic scholarships, athletic financial aid ranked highest in priority when considering their institutional choice, followed by sports traditions, opportunity to play, perceived professional career and travel opportunities (Schneider & Messenger, 2012, p. 807). Head coach relationship and athletic facilities also ranked high in Johnson et al.’s (2009) analysis of important college choice factors to student-athletes. Judson et al. (2004)
studied student-athlete college choice and predicted that athletic reasons such as coach relationship and athletic facilities were most important to the study’s entire sample (p.32).

Previous literature reveals that choice factor tendencies vary depending on personal circumstances and demographics of student-athletes. Magnusen et al. (2014) conducted a critical review and synthesis of choice factors for student-athletes in effort to understand recruiting effectiveness where they determine that certain information is important to specific athletes. Recruiters should take into consideration a player’s skill level, gender, pre-existing relationships with players, head coach’s professional career, level of recruitment of the player, stage in the recruiting process, and sport when developing a recruiting plan for each potential student-athletes.

In response to Magnusen et al.’s (2014) research, Krikorian (2014) supports the findings by stating that their research is “an accurate assessment and analysis of NCAA recruiting and their emphasis on the importance of coaches’ political skill in the recruiting process is critical” (Krikorian, 2014, p. 1290). In addition, the Athletic Director of Baylor University, Ian McCaw, also provided commentary to support the work of Magnusen et al. (2014). McCaw (2014) agrees that one of the most important factors in the recruiting process is the relationships coaches and staff have with their prospects. He references the the commitment switch of Robert Griffin III, Heisman Trophy winner, from the University of Houston to Baylor University because of Head Coach Art Briles. McCaw concludes that Magnusen et al.’s (2014) study “has practical implications and advances concepts that have a significant impact on the world of recruiting in NCAA athletics” (p.1288).
The previously mentioned studies show that student-athletes consider multiple athletic factors in addition to academic and personal factors when choosing a college to attend, therefore it is imperative that ample time be given to participants in this study to discuss their personal, athletic, and academic backgrounds. This will allow data to truly reflect a complete account of the college choice experience from a personal perspective of the student-athlete. With a holistic understanding of the college choice process, institutions can plan their approach in supporting their athletic departments to recruit athletes who will also positively impact enrollment and revenue for the institution.

First-Generation Student-Athletes

A study that combines the characteristics of first-generation and student-athlete was completed by the NCAA (2012). This NCAA GOALS study found that in 2012, 18% of students involved in NCAA sports programs across the nation were also first-generation. Nearly a quarter of those students were competing at the Division II level with saturation in the sports of football and wrestling. When comparing racial backgrounds, first-generation status is 15% more prevalent in students from minority backgrounds.

Previous research on first-generation students can be applied here where 55% of these student-athletes have financial concerns related to attaining their degrees. First-generation student-athletes rely more on self-support, need-based aid, Pell grants, loans, and athletic scholarships, whereas continuing generation student-athletes tend to rely more on family and academic scholarships (NCAA, 2012). In relation to the current study, over half of first-generation student-athletes stated that they would not likely
pursue 4-year degree if it had not been for athletics. This statistic alone feeds the need and purpose for college choice research among first-generation student-athletes.

**NCAA Division II Recruiting Laws**

To fully understand the process of college choice from the viewpoint a college-bound athlete, it is important to understand the environment a student-athlete is subjected to while being recruited to a collegiate athletic program. Every collegiate athletic program affiliated with the NCAA has certain standards and rules pertaining to the athletic recruiting process. These rules are not the same for every division. The NCAA releases recruiting guides and calendars, which set rules and regulations to help protect prospective student-athletes. A recruiting calendar is equipped with blocked dates for contact, evaluation, quiet, and dead periods. It is essential that college coaches and recruiters follow these calendars based on the classification of their prospective athlete or face tough penalties (NCAA.org, 2015).

College coaches at NCAA Division II institutions may only send recruiting materials to freshman and sophomores. In the summer, after a student’s junior year in high school, there are fewer recruitment limitations coaches must follow, not withstanding the NCAA DII Recruiting Calendar. All off-campus recruiters must be certified before beginning their recruiting endeavors. Telephone calls and any type of electronic communication with recruits may not be made during intercollegiate athletic competition. When visiting off campus, recruiters must wait to contact recruits until competition is finished (NCAA.org, 2015).
A student-athlete may choose to sign a national letter of intent if they choose. Upon signing with an institution, the student enters an agreement for athletic aid with the respective sports program and forfeits contact with any other institutions. The only way a student can be released from this financial agreement is if a request is made and accepted. Otherwise, student-athletes who sign with one institution and attend another suffer a one year loss in eligibility and are required to sit an entire academic year before eligibility is granted at their new school (NCAA.org, 2015).

**West Virginia Higher Education**

West Virginia consistently receives low scores and underwhelming reports in regard to the performance of higher education institutions (Measuring Up, 2008; Young Invincibles, 2016), especially when compared to other states. Issues such as affordability, benefits, attainment gaps, lack of spending per student, college-going rates, etc. are among the most difficult problems that higher education in the state of West Virginia faces. Coincidently, the first-generation population in this study suffers from some of the same challenges including college enrollment and degree completion (Ishitani, 2005). To better understand the college choices of students who elect to attend West Virginia colleges and universities, it is important to review higher education efforts and issues in the state. The following gives an overview of the state of higher education in West Virginia including budget, financial assistance, enrollment, completion, and experienced benefits.

According to the Young Invincibles’ 2016 Report Card on the West Virginia budget support for higher education, the state received an overall grade of D+, which
means the state is below average when compared to the rest of the nation. The three “subjects” of most concern for the state is burden of families, spending per student, and attainment equity. On average, families in West Virginia “are responsible for 57% of the cost of college” (Young Invincibles, p.59) and they’ve experienced a 26% decrease in the amount of money an institution invests back into them. Students in the state are accruing large amounts of student loan debt at an average amount of $27,320. For those who graduate with bachelor’s degrees, this number jumps to $37,763 (WVHEPC, 2015).

When compared to the Measuring Up (2008) study, the money it takes to send students to college is approximately thirty-four percent of the entire family income for those who have socioeconomic statuses of working-class and below (p.3). West Virginia Matches the national three-year default rate on student loans at approximately eleven percent.

The need-based financial aid granted to students is far too low (Measuring Up, 2008). Although West Virginia is successful with efforts such as the Higher Education Adult Part-Time Student (HEAPS) Grant, Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing In-State Student Excellence (PROMISE) Scholarship, and the West Virginia Higher Education Grant (WVHEG), averaging ninth in the nation for grant dollars spent on undergraduate full-time student enrollment, these opportunities are not income-based. The Young Invincibles’ (2016) final recommendation to the state of West Virginia to remedy this situation, is that West Virginia realign their budgets to include more need-based financial aid and alleviate their state graduates (Young Invincibles, 2016).

In the United States, sixty-three percent of high school students matriculate right into institutions of higher education the fall semester immediately following their senior
years in high school (WVHEPC, 2015, p.2). However, the statistic for West Virginia high school graduates is below that national average by nine percent (WVHEPC, 2015). The benefit of higher education is not clear in the state of West Virginia, where very few residents have earned a four-year degree (Measuring Up, 2008). In addition, although the enrollment of minorities has increased almost two percent in the last couple years (WVHEPC, 2015), the educational attainment “gap between whites and African Americans is twice the national average” (Young Invincibles, 2016).

Retention rates for first-time, full-time freshman students has not moved in the past few years, although the national average is higher by twelve percent (WVHEPC, 2015). However, the retention rates for at-risk populations, such as part-time, full-time freshman, transfer, and undergraduate adult students, all declined between the years of 2012 and 2013 (WVHEPC). Overall, graduation rates for all populations looking to earn a four-year degree are increasing except for undergraduate adults.

Commissions and councils across West Virginia have come together to address a number of identified problems and opportunities. Academic affairs have improved with the help of new transfer policies, developmental education reforms, new initiatives for international students, and encouragement for more students to study abroad. The workforce need of West Virginia is addressed by the advanced technology center. Facilities and administrative operations have improved with master plans, research studies, modules, updating classification and compensation, advanced software, and collaborative meetings. Difficulties and misinformation regarding financial aid is being addressed with free training and workshops. The fields of health science and scientific
research are flourishing with advanced educational opportunities, programs, scholarships, and additional funds. Finally, students from high school through college are being supported through programs such as Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), 15 to Finish, 5 Star Challenge, and College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV) Youth Summit.

The review of higher education in West Virginia helps to understand some of the specific reasons students may choose to go to college there. Grants and opportunities such as PROMISE scholarship and WVHEG tend to help West Virginia retain their best and brightest. Programs and initiatives in some West Virginia high schools may allow the first-generation population to better understand financial aid information and inadvertently contribute to their more knowledgeable decision regarding an institution of higher education where they also partake in collegiate athletic. With background information on the basics of West Virginia higher education, this study now is equipped with a framework for the types of institutions these first-generation, college-athletes are choosing.

**Improving Higher Education in America**

There are many pertinent issues in the discussion of improving higher education in the United States. Fortunately, access to knowledge and recruitment among first-generation students could prove helpful in matters such as affordability, accessibility, enrollment, retention, and degree completion. However, other major concerns are being discussed and addressed consecutively. For instance, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) elaborated on a study by The Chicago Consortium in their book *Crossing the*
Finish line: Completing college at America’s public universities. One of the main topics in this book is “undermatching,” where students pursuing education beyond a high school diploma do so at postsecondary institutions with selectivity standards below the student’s maximum qualifications according to their high school grade point averages (GPA) and standardized test scores, such as ACT and SAT. Bowen et al. (2009) concluded that some students enrolling in colleges and universities do not have a parental support system knowledgeable about the intricacies of college admissions and selection because they, themselves never attended.

Secondly, high school aged children are not often mature enough to resist the always-powerful peer inertia that persuades college choice (Bowen et al., 2009). Furthermore, lack of planning affects financial assistance and the overall chances of being accepted, especially at selective institutions. Each of these “undermatch” factors have a direct relationship with the previously mentioned first-generation student population research. Avery, Howell, and Page (2014) stated that, “Low-income and first-generation students are much less likely to apply to colleges that match their academic credentials” (p. 3). They cite barriers such as the application essay, lack of information, and finances, that dissuade applicants from aiming towards higher level academic institutions (Avery et al., 2014, p. 6.). Since “undermatching” affects the first-generation population, interviews in this study cover questions to the participants about their level of educational attainment and knowledge of university selectivity. If student-athletes are ignoring their academic potential in regard to college choice, statistics say universities will suffer in areas of enrollment, retention, and completion (Bowen et al., 2009).
Students looking to pursue post-secondary degrees should have the opportunity to discuss their questions and concerns to exercise knowledgeable decision-making when it comes to higher education. They should also have access to shortcuts and “how-to” information. Where this lack of information proves to be more unlikely among first-generation students, previous literature finds it imperative to engage in programs aimed to help these students with their college choice. Avery et al. (2014) adds ideas such as applying through nonprofit organizations, creating outreach programs, and providing application fee waivers, as influential resolutions to the failing application process.

Sherwin (2012) introduced a program that intervenes in the college selection process. This program was developed by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) and supported by the Bowen, Chingos, McPherson and the Consortium on Chicago School Research. This effort was put forth to improve the “undermatch” situation in American high schools. The program called “College Match” helps with information-sharing and awareness building, individualized advising, application support, parental engagement, planning, and decision making (Sherwin, 2012, p. 4). After the program’s pilot year, “College Match” influenced more students to enroll at highly and very selective colleges and prevented many students from going to two-year and proprietary colleges (Sherwin, 2012, p. 5).

In addition, the inequality of low SES students of minority backgrounds in higher education is known and being addressed by programs like the Millennium Gates Scholars Program (GMS), funded primarily by the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation, which aims to close the gap of access and affordability of high-achieving students from this
population. Davis et al.’s (2013) research on this group of students analyzed data from a college choice survey and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to reveal a trend of fiscal factors affecting college choice among 231 MGS participants. By financially aiding students of low SES backgrounds, opportunities opened for them to select institutions matching their academic achievements and overall college fit. Attendance of their first-choice, more prestigious institutions rose in direct correlation to the funds obtained by the supporting MGS program. If the result of this program is indicative to the needs of first-generation student-athletes by their own accounts, financial assistance programs can be used to pursue first-generation student-athletes to attain acceptance at more selective and prestigious universities.

Where pilot “College Match” studies and monetary higher educational resource programs such as MGS are showing improvement in the decision making of first-generation students, resulting in better college matches, participants in the current study who take part in programs like these could be more aware of their academic ceiling when it comes to university selectivity and college admission requirements. Therefore, participants are screened during interviews to disclose all support from educational programs during the college choice process (see Appendix B).

To help practitioners understand “College Match” for low-income students, Byndloss and Reid (2013) drafted a policy brief full of lessons. Byndloss and Reid urge administrators to prioritize “match” in the college search and selection process, involving parents by providing them information about college “fit” and using tools and technologies as guides in the process. Student should be encouraged to fill out FAFSA as
soon as possible and to also pursue institutional aid, scholarships, and grants. Finally, it’s proposed that student develop relationships with recruiting officers of selective universities to help in communication (Byndloss & Reid, 2013, pg. 2-7). Since these are topics that are most often associated with the college choice of first-generation students, lessons stated here are used to frame the questions concerning “predisposition” (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) for interviews with participants.

**Theoretical Framework: Hossler and Gallagher’s Three-Phase Model of College Choice**

Jackson (1982) and Litton (1982) both concluded that college choice can be summarized into three steps, which inspired Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model. Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) research to produce a consistent way to categorize the decisions made during the college choice process was driven by higher education issues pertaining to state and federal public policy. These concerns included financial aid and student access, along with institutional goals to enroll a diverse population of students to satisfy sustaining revenue aspirations. Considering the current study aims to address these issues as well, the three-step process organized by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) is the chosen framework for this research. This model shows how students’ knowledge of specific institutions increases as their stage in choice progresses. Knowledge about institutions is measured against important deciding factors for everyone, which produces a choice outcome. Individual interviews conducted for this study were framed around questions related to each of the three phases of college choice as determined by Hossler and Gallagher (1987).
**Phase I: Predisposition.** The first stage of the college choice process proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) is a period where a student determines whether they want to go to college. This initial decision is important to the college choice discussion, but is often overlooked as obvious. Research on this phase suggests that, although a preliminary stage of college choice, there are a few factors still affecting the decision: Socioeconomic status (SES), family/parental influences, peer influences, pre-college educational experiences, high school curriculum, and location of the institution. These factors are closely related and are often magnified by the lack of information that is readily available.

For instance, one’s SES is often determined by their family financial situation. It is also likely that these students live in the same communities, attend the same schools, and associate with others who are like their social class. In addition, these populations share the same local higher educational resources. Studies centered on the predisposition phase and factors affecting it often combine the effects of these factors to provide proof that lack of access among certain populations exists and stems from insufficient information. On the contrary, exceptional students, most often complimented with academic opportunities, higher educational goals and aspirations, challenging curriculums, and supportive knowledge, will often understand their potential to make more informed decisions about where to attend college (Wilson & Aldeson, 2012). Understanding individual goals, ambitions, potential, and other respective positions relates to a person’s self-awareness. Self-awareness in this study relates to the extent to
which people are consciously aware of their internal states and their interactions or relationships with others, as defined by Sutton (2016).

Bergerson (2009) examined college choice research pertaining to individuals with low SES and discussed how financial backgrounds affect access and equity in higher education for financially disadvantaged populations. This study found that low SES is linked with many other disadvantaging situations, such as school funding and lack of educational resources, which unfortunately is relative to other background factors like race and ethnicity. The unequal access to information regarding higher education compared to their higher social status counterparts alone can lead to an inaccurate idea of the benefits of post-secondary education. Bergerson (2009) assumed Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) idea that those with higher SES go to better high schools, are provided with more information on higher education, make knowledgeable decisions about their post-secondary degree options, and create a trend of success within their social class. However, the exact opposite ensues for those who are less advantaged, creating a gap between social classes.

Palardy (2015) addressed the same Bourdieu (1977) concept and supports the relationship between SES and college choice in his work relating this effect to college choice organizational habitus (CCOH). College choice organizational habitus is the collective idea that a common assembly site (i.e. school, company, business, etc.) serving as a catalyst for behavioral influence among a group, can affect a student’s personal position on the choice of their post-secondary education (McDonough, 1997). This study addressed the gap in research as it pertains to the educational structures leading to post-
secondary education and overall opinions of matriculation left by McDonough’s (1997) original study. Palardy found “support for McDonough’s (1997) theory that COOH is a mediating mechanism through which SEC influences college choice and that may contribute to social reproduction” (p. 343), which insinuated that schools with lower SES students provide an unfavorable atmosphere for higher education. In effect, these students are not as likely to get sufficient post-secondary support, information, and guidance, as are their higher SES counterparts.

An extension of original marketing research is now completed for all types of institutions. Effectively attracting potential students to post-secondary schools requires an extensive knowledge of college choice factors, which is why Confer and Mamiseishvili (2012) chose to inform organizations like the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) about what students are looking for when making their decisions, much like the purpose of this study. Institutions that typically attract specific populations such as faith-based institutions and historically black colleges and universities, need the enrollment from other populations to stay competitive against primarily white institutions (PWI) and for-profit institutions (Maramba et al., 2015), which supports the findings of Goss’ (2006) research. Institutions within the U.S. are seeing an increase in the enrollment rates of African American, Asian, and Latino populations (Martinez, 2013a). After completing their study, Confer and Mamiseishvili (2012) found that the enrollment of minority students at CCCUs is affected by location of the institution and a student’s level of academic achievement (high school grade point average). Other factors included availability of fiscal support (loans, grants, scholarships) and how well potential students
liked campus resources (activities, facilities, etc.). Moving forward with the marketing process to attract minority students to CCCUs, the study found that administrators should focus on the institution’s website and on-campus activities to drawl in enrollment. Statistics were not supportive of extensive recruiting materials or high school visits after initial admission was granted.

Maramba et al. (2015) discussed diverse populations enrolling in specialized colleges and universities for the Asian-American and Latino populations attending HBCUs. Included in Maramba et al.’s (2015) study were some of the same factors as general college choice studies (e.g., parental and peer influences, available information, and financial incentives). Data from the study showed resounding themes of encouragement and expectation of family members, peers, mentors, and advisors. In fact, peers of these participants offered information (both positive and negative) about HBCUs prior to their decision, which allowed for impact on college choice. Finally, students made accounts of both financial and practical reasons for attending an HBCU as a Latino or Asian-American student, whether that included low tuition and fees, financial aid, or proximity to home (Maramba et al., 2015, p.9).

Martinez’s (2013b) study focused solely on “familioso,” the idea of putting priorities of the family and cultural group ahead of their own, during the college choice process of Latino students and found that it plays a critical role. According to Martinez (2013b), strong familioso ties kept Latino students closer to home for their college experiences. Latino males felt it necessary to help with family financial situations and females stayed close out of loyalty to their families. The same parental influence rings
true for Asian-American students during their college choice process. Kim and Gasman (2011) found that social networks, more specifically family and peers, are the leading inducing factor for college choice, however, the influence from Asian families completely contradicts that of Latino families. It is expected from parents and self that education goes on well into post-secondary institutions, while Latino families do not typically push their youth into colleges and universities. This qualitative study with 14 matriculating Asian-American students found that in addition to the original push from their parents to go to college, they were also challenged with the task of finding a good college or the “right” college (Kim & Gasman, 2011, p. 723). Interviews conducted recorded accounts of these students considering prestige, reputation, and availability of academic programs at the top of their priority lists when determining which college was the right choice for them (Kim & Gasman, 2011). These findings support Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) ideas of the factors affecting the predisposition phase.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) made it clear that academic achievement has a powerful impact on the predisposition phase of college choice. Wilson and Adelson (2012) proved this statement to be accurate when students from academically gifted backgrounds choose institutions of higher education. This research took into consideration a multi-level, quantitative approach using college-level and student-level variables to compare college selectivity. Results show that “students selected colleges with higher mean SAT scores when prestige of the college was the reason, the students had higher achievement, and the college was farther away” (p.32).
Where first-generation students often struggle in this phase of college choice it is imperative to ask participants of this study questions about their initial decision to pursue a post-secondary degree. Previous literature leads this study to pursue information about a student’s foreseen benefits of higher education (Bergerson, 2009), their high school culture (Palardy, 1994), university materials that were most helpful to the participant (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012), their knowledge of personal academic achievement (standardized test scores and GPA) (Wilson & Adelson, 2012), etc. With a deeper understanding of the knowledge first-generation student-athletes have when they originally make the decision to attend an institution of higher learning, university administration, coaches and recruiters are better equipped with information pertaining to what students know and do not know about entering colleges and universities.

Some research attests that the choice in college enrollment is not necessarily that of the student, but a direct reflection of the practices and procedures of the institution. If this is the case, students partaking in this study will resemble a “stereotype” for their university. For example, Rhoades (2014) suggested three issues that determine possibilities of institutional enrollment for an individual: College cost and family situations, the physical placement of an institution, and their marketing strategies. These are some of the same factors affecting Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) predisposition phase. First, Rhoades (2014) made a bold claim that some institutions “raise tuition/fees beyond the consumer price index, increasing institutional revenues despite reductions in public institution’s per-student state appropriations,” (p.919) which in turn causes more student debt and risk of default on loans for those who cannot afford to pay out-of-
pocket. Now, the choice does not rest solely in the hands of the student. The choice is influenced by a college’s fiscal decisions and a parent or guardian’s ability to pay said tuition.

In addition to a college’s ability to determine the affordability and therefore accessibility of students, they also have the opportunity, in some cases, to choose their population based on location. Ecology of an institution is both political and intentional (Rhoades, 2014, p.919). It is likely that when deciding where the next 2-year university should be erected, policymakers and higher education business professionals suggest areas where the community would benefit economically from a higher college matriculating population.

Finally, Rhoades (2014) suggested that too much attention is given to amenities opposed to academics. Marketing strategies among some institutions aim to sell a lifestyle (recreation centers and facilities, sporting events, residence halls, dining options, etc.). Institutions also direct marketing and enrollment endeavors to students with the most return for their efforts (veterans, out-of-state students, low-income, etc.), all of which squeezes students out of their own college choice and makes it easier for institutions to choose their own student body population. According to Rhoades (2014) first-generation student-athletes from this study who have similar environmental characteristics, should go into the search phase with similar options for pursuing higher education.
Phase II: Search. The second stage of the college choice process outlined by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) deals with only those students who are serious about pursuing post-secondary education. According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), leading up to their final decision, students develop what is referred to as a “choice set;” a list of colleges and universities that students consider attending. In this study, participants first speak thoroughly about their personal history to address what they know about college and why they are going and then the conversation transitions with questions regarding what universities they are considering and how they made their “choice set.” This portion of the interviewing process follows the framework created by Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) study on college choice.

Students continue in their “search” by collecting as much information about these institutions as they deem necessary before making their final choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 215). Questions to participants regarding how information is collected, where they find information, and the type of information that proves most helpful in their overall decision, satisfies data collection for the second part of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) phase two of college choice. This is important knowledge for the use of colleges and universities to attract students and educate them on what their institutions offer.

Simoes and Soares (2010) studied information sources in the “pre-purchase stage” of college choice. They determined that aspiring college students search for information much like a consumer of a product. Students start by using their internal memory and knowledge to find out what they know about institutions. Then they employ external
sources to make up for the information they still would like to find out. Simoes and Soares (2010) believe that preference of informational sources directly relates to college choice factors. Fifty-three percent of participants from the study determined that organized campus visits, sporting and academic outreach to secondary schools, and short-term holiday/weekend activities of any kind is their preference in collecting information (p. 379-380). Among all students surveyed, the University website was the most used source of information (Simoes & Soares, 2010, p. 308). In addition, interpersonal sources such as teachers and former/current students of universities were the most popular sources of information among the academically advanced students (p. 381).

Although this phase of the college choice process is meant for students to learn as much about their institutions as possible before making these important decisions, is it not always likely that the majority get and use accurate financial information, hence the largest factors affecting this stage of college choice are cost and financial aid (Capt, 2013; Dooley et al., 2012; Harvey, 2014; Kim, 2004; Kim, 2012; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Lovenheim & Reynolds, 2012; O’Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010).

The literature states that the process of college choice is different for students of different social and academic backgrounds. For instance, Litton (1982) determined that first-generation students are at a disadvantage, searching less methodically and taking longer to do so. Kim (2004) agreed by adding that lower socioeconomic students and those of minority backgrounds lack in their knowledge of financial aid and subsequently, do not know how to acquire such monetary assistance (p. 63). If this is the case, it is imperative for campus officials to understand and focus on accessibility shortcomings of
the entire first-time freshman population, especially the first-generation and low SES students, to keep them knowledgeable about academic, fiscal, and institutional policies and procedures.

Harvey (2014) affirmed the importance of fiscal awareness by claiming that the most important issues concerning higher education are cost and financial aid. These findings come from his report on the annual Freshman Survey conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles. A large percentage of first-generation students take into consideration financial factors when considering institutions (Harvey, 2014, p. 2). This research insisted that students are increasingly cutting out institutions on their choice list based on cost and financial aid information (Harvey, 2014).

The United States is not the only country quarreling with the issue of financial factors constricting and affecting the decisions of students in the college choice process. A study completed by Dooley et al. (2012) took twelve years of data from nineteen Ontario universities in Canada to explain if lower net cost attracts higher quality students and if this depends on economic background of the eligible students (p. 757). This is the first study of its kind in Canada due to the recent widespread deregulation of tuition and increased efforts for individual institutions to award academic financial aid packages. The research concludes that although there is no association between the accomplished students and lower net cost, the increase of net cost does weigh negatively on the enrollment of students from low- and middle- income neighborhoods compared to students from high-income neighborhoods (Dooley et al., 2012). In addition, there are
more students from high-income neighborhoods who register for classes at Canadian Universities than students from low-income neighborhoods (Dooley et al., 2012, p.782).

In American higher education, Lovenheim and Reynolds (2012) found that housing wealth is an associated monetary indicator relative to the college choice process. Their study from National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) data concluded “a $10,000 increase in housing wealth increases the likelihood of public flagship university enrollment relative to non-flagship enrollment by 2.0 percent and decreases the relative probability of attending a community college by 1.6 percent” (p.1). Lovenheim and Reynolds (2012) claimed that students living in more expensive homes and neighborhoods keep larger and more selective choice sets, while students from lower income homes have an increased probability of graduating from college if their homes appreciate during their high school tenure. This data confirmed that there is a realistic relationship between housing wealth and the type of institution one applies and attends for their post-secondary education. To help understand this phenomenon, the discussions with our participants will include questions concerning their socioeconomic status, which is insisted to weigh heavily on their college choice.

Examples of how net cost and financial aid factors affect college choice and aid in the selectivity of specific institutions are explicit throughout higher education research. In Capt's (2013) review of the Higher Education Act reauthorizations, issues are addressed concerning financial aid and how available monetary support for education could affect access and college choice. Specific to this study are questions about socioeconomic status
(often associated with first-generation students) and access to certain institutions that, when resolved, could play a positive role in assisting policy makers.

Capt (2003) supports the fact that not all students with various monetary needs have access to elite institutions (p. 3), which ultimately affects a student’s choice in college. Kim (2004) agreed with this idea claiming that financial aid was built on principles of equal educational opportunity, but does not always provide the freedom of choice, as it does access. Kim (2012) also provided support for this idea by comparing state financial aid policies to the enrollment of high school graduates concluding “that higher statewide investment in need-based aid grants can counter unequal access to selective four-year colleges by socioeconomic status” (p.143). O’Connor, Hammock, and Scott (2010) believe that “improving access to college information, especially information about financial aid, will pay dividends in improving four-year college access” (p. 215). However, these claims only addressed access to higher education.

Certain populations look at loans, grants, scholarships, and other monetary forms of aid for higher education differently, according to Kim (2004). For some students, opportunity and selection is negatively affected by the increase in need-based grants provided by the state (Kim, 2012). Financial aid also affects the chances of students enrolling in their college of primary preference, whether the monetary support comes from grants and loans or just grants (Kim, 2004). In summary, financial aid is not accomplishing the original goal of creating equal educational opportunities for all students, only some (Kim, 2012).
Harvey (2014) found that the percentage of students attending their first-choice college after acceptance is plummeting. When asked why, these students are claimed ties to larger financial aid packages elsewhere and that the cost of attendance at their first-choice college was important in making their decision (Harvey, 2014). Kim (2012) found that financial aid continues to help advantaged populations (Whites and Asian-Americans), but showed little help to the more economically disadvantaged minority groups, contributing to the growing gap in higher education when it comes to demographics. Support for students’ enrollment decisions are expected to come from the lack of available information and knowledge among minority populations. Kim (2004) believes that a major hindrance in the holistic fruition of financial aid comes from lack of knowledge (p.63). For this study, a clear understanding of the participant’s type (athletic, academic, grants, loans, scholarships, etc.) of financial aid is necessary to address these concerns and lead a discussion in how higher education can be more equitable to all student populations especially those who are first-generation student-athletes.

As in all college choice research, factors affecting a student’s decision are completely individualistic (Klein & Washburn, 2012). The probability of students attending their first-choice college varies depending on personal circumstances (Kim, 2004). Financial aid and institutional cost are among the factors that most affect opportunity for certain populations; however, there are more factors that affect the search phase of college choice. Kim (2004) believed that location of the institution also plays an important part in the college choice of matriculating student. In addition, institutional characteristics, participant background, and personal impression are also important to
students (Klein & Washburn, 2012). In this study, participants are asked questions about what is truly important to them, where they need help, and what type of help they find most effective, so that they have the information they need to narrow their choice lists effectively.

**Phase III: Choice.** Phase III of the college choice process, according to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), consists of the students narrowing their choice set to one school that they will attend. This process is often influenced by some of the same factors as predisposition and search. However, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) attest that the influence of public policymakers is less important in the choice phase. As the student selects an institution to attend, the preferences of the applicant, the attributes of the college or university, and the courtship procedures appear to determine the outcome (p. 216).

After searching the literature for all known factors affecting college choice, the following were most closely associated with personal preference and college characteristics: Reputation and selectivity, in-house scholarships offered, campus culture and climate, and recruitment strategies.

When studying the final decisions of students, Wilson and Adelson (2012) made claims on the factors most closely affecting the final decision. Results indicate that students stated most often that their choice was based on the “prestige of the school and availability of special programs and scholarships” (Wilson & Adelson, 2012, p.48). In addition, students “most often chose colleges that were close to home or in state” (Wilson & Adelson, 2012, p.48). For academic and athletic recruiters to get students to enroll in
their universities it is imperative that they showcase these institutional attributes. This study will determine if first-generation student-athletes also consider these college choice factors most important in their final decisions and establish an understanding on why or why not.

**Summary**

This review of the literature was created to inform and frame the current study on the college choice of first-generation student-athletes. The chapter was prefaced by a discussion on the factors that affect the general collegiate student population. In direct relation to the study, it was important to understand all the factors that could be important to matriculating first-generation student-athletes. Therefore, the subsequent sections of the chapter introduced athletic factors that only student-athletes would consider, such as relationship with coach and teammates, estimated playing time, etc., in to the conversation of college choice. Additional known college choice factors and difficulties of the first-generation population were also introduced. This collaboration of factors affecting the college choice of student-athletes and first-generation students alters the conversation to create further discussion on how coaches, recruiters, high school counselors, parents, higher education administration, and policy makers can assist the first-generation student-athlete population in their college choice.

Reviewing literature pertaining to the issues affecting higher education, NCAA recruiting laws, and the environment of higher education in the state of West Virginia gives context to the college decision of research participants. Where each of these students chose to attend NCAA Division II schools, they were subjected to the rules and
regulations that help govern athletics at these institutions. This information allows understanding of the procedures coaches need to adhere to while recruiting first-generation student-athletes. The state of higher education in West Virginia and the supplementary challenges of the first-generation population pursuing post-secondary education directly affect research participants’ long-term educational goals. This information proves pertinent in the choice of first-generation students who already encounter prevalent post-secondary setbacks and still choose to attend institutions in a state with sub-par higher education achievements. In addition, coaches and institutional officials will have the opportunity to generate revenue for the university and maintain retention and degree completion rates.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) help to organize college choice by breaking the process down into a three-step process: Predisposition, search, and choice. Literature states that the predisposition phase is affected by socioeconomic status (SES), family/parental influences, peer influences, pre-college educational experiences, high school curriculum, and location of the institution. Therefore, it is important in this research to allow participants to speak about their high school experiences and their background.

Although the search phase of college choice varies for different populations, the main factors affecting the search phase are cost and financial assistance. The reviewed literature supports that by aiding first-generation students in their initial college choice decision-making it will benefit in the attainment of new knowledge concerning accessibility and affordability for the generations that follow. The literature also states
that students first consider the knowledge that is readily available to them and then the attempt to employ familiar external sources to get additional information that they desire. This is imperative to remember when discussing first-generation and student-athlete populations. When students do not have parents who are familiar with the college choice process, where do they go to find the information they need? Do students with athletic aspirations rely on their sport to aid in attaining knowledge? These are valid questions left unanswered by first-generation student-athlete literature. This study is designed to address these questions and pose further discussion for the aid and assistance for this population.

Finally, the factors of reputation, selectivity, in-house scholarships offered, campus culture and climate, and recruitment strategies affect the final college decision of the general student population the most. These factors cover the spectrum from money, to comfort and “fit,” to marketing. The final decision of research participants is analyzed to address how these same factors do, or do not affect first-generation student-athletes and in what capacity. Answering these questions help to formulate a discussion concerning influential policies and procedures for matriculating first-generation student-athletes and closes the gap in college choice literature for this population.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter describes the methodology used to explore the phenomenon of college choice among first-generation student-athletes at Division II colleges in the Southeast region of the United States. A phenomenological case study research design is employed to understand the selection of post-secondary institutions among these individuals. The following section provides a history and overview of the qualitative paradigm and research design, including constructivist worldview, phenomenology, and case study. A detailed description of the participants and methods for data collection, such as interview process are discussed. Finally, this chapter concludes with the method of analyzing data for the study, which includes phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation.

Qualitative Paradigm

Stake (2010) attests that qualitative study encompasses important aspects of knowledge, which cannot be explained quantitatively. For instance, its interpretive nature allows for acceptance of data with multiple meanings, which may or may not be expected. Comparatively, quantitative data is often arranged to portray specific ideas, whereas qualitative data is more natural. Focus is placed on detailing actual accounts, resulting in a holistic view of the study topic. One of the most important characteristics of qualitative studies is “often issues are emic (emerging from the people) more than etic (brought by researchers)” (Stake, 2010, p.15). Exploring college choice through a qualitative lens adds accounts of feelings that influence an individual’s decision making process, which are important to the topic along with state-of mind, environmental factors,
personal issues, etc. Many relative studies employ qualitative inquiry (Kim and Gasman, 2011; Klein and Washburn, 2012; Klenosky & Troutman, 2001; Maramba et al., 2015; Martinez, 2013b; Smith, 2008) with first-hand examples and accounts that provide a better understanding of an individual’s situation, problem, and/or process. In this study, qualitative inquiry is used to collect data on the individual college choice experiences of first-generation student-athletes who are encouraged to divulge their most important college choice factors during the process.

Philosophically, this study uses a constructivist worldview to examine first-generation, student-athletes’ college choice, where “The researcher’s intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory (as in postpositivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2014, p.8). Constructivism stems from an interpretivist tradition, which “portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing” (Glesne, 2011, p.8). Employing a constructivist worldview provokes three assumptions originally discussed by Crotty (1998). First, participants are invited to divulge their reality of the world they experience through answering open-ended questions. Secondly, the reality that humans construct is based off their social and cultural environment, therefore the researcher gathers information from the participants’ background and assesses that information from a personal point-of-view. Finally, the researcher interprets the accounts made by the participants.

Klein and Washburn (2012) use the constructivist approach in their case study to “Facilitate student reflection of their constructed wants/needs for certain characteristics of
higher education” (p.64). By approaching data collection constructively in this study, the college choice process is understood through direct recollections of the first-generation, student-athlete participants, instead of structuring their response by giving them standard answers to choose from.

Case Study

A case study is a research strategy that consists of quantitative and/or qualitative data (Glesne, 2011; Yin, 1981). The theory behind case studies is elaborated on in Stake’s (1978) publication of the method used in social inquiry. Stake (1978) uses renowned researchers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Francis Bacon to point out that experiences are the key to understanding and that generalizations are useless in effective research. However, “naturalistic generalization, arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings” is both “intuitive and empirical” (Stake, 1978, p.6). This speaks to Glesne’s (2011) definition of a “collective case study.” To investigate a phenomenon, multiple cases are individually researched and as similarities are discovered therein lies the naturalistic generalization for the overall phenomenon (Glesne, 2011; Stake 1978).

Klein and Washburn (2012) investigated the college choice process by individual case to understand the search phase from the perspective of students visiting a Midwest College of Agriculture. Although data revealed three overarching and general choice themes, researchers determined that the college choice search phase is highly individualistic. The current study is methodologically a case study by choice of subject (Stake, 2000). Patton insists a researcher’s “first and foremost responsibility consists of
doing justice to each individual case” (p. 449). All participants are undergoing a stage in their life, referred to as college choice. Therefore, data is strategically collected and organized by individual case. To attain a “holistic and context sensitive” study, data collection consists of interviews, observations, and any documents that pertain to the participant’s individual college choice case (Patton, 2002). Employing the collective case strategy (Glesne, 2011), the investigation is pursued in phenomenological analysis.

Phenomenology

Phenomenological study was first coined and conducted by Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century and later expanded on by the works of Moustakas, Creswell, Vagle, and other renowned researchers to focus on the actual lived experience of an individual. A phenomenology is the study of a phenomenon. Vagle (2014) breaks down the idea of phenomenological study into three different ideas: “phenomenology is an encounter” (p.11), “phenomenology is a way of living” (p.12), and “phenomenology is a craft” (p.12).

In qualitative research, the truth lives in the feelings and accounts of the individuals who are interviewed, not in numerical data. Therefore, this study uses a phenomenological approach to analyze individual cases and ultimately understand the thoughts and feelings of the participants when they were undergoing the college choice experience. Martinez (2013b) conducted phenomenological research to grasp a full understanding of the college choice experience from the context of cultural and familial values and traditions of Latinos. Employing a constructivist worldview, Martinez (2013b) understood that a researcher is not able to produce a subjective truth about an experience
not lived. Therefore, participants were asked to develop their own “socially, culturally, and historically” situated meanings of their experiences.

A documented experience is nothing without how a subject felt and where the experience took place, therefore data is collected individually, yet holistically in this phenomenological case study. Clark Moustakas (1994) asserts that in an empirical phenomenological study, “The human scientist determines the underlying structures of an experience by interpreting the originally given descriptions of the situation in which the experience occurs” (p.13). It is the goal of this research to accurately decipher emerging themes through direct accounts of the college choice experience for first-generation student-athletes.

**Qualitative Transcendental Phenomenological Model**

Moustakas (1994) elaborates on the primary steps for the qualitative transcendental phenomenological model: *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of texture and structure (p.180-181). The following is an overview of each step outlined by Moustakas (1994) and how those steps are used in this study to help understand the lived college choice experience of first-generation student-athletes. It is important to note that not all data collected is used for analysis.

**Epoche.** Epoche is defined by Moustakas (1994) as “Setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence” (p.180). This step is primary and imperative in the phenomenological data collection and analysis process. Therefore, each initial interview with participants will start by asking them to speak openly about their backgrounds, high school experiences, and college experiences.
Research topics can be personal for the researcher. To pull out a raw, unbiased, and clear understanding of the phenomenon, researchers undergo an “attitudinal shift” to “remove, or at least become aware of, prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p.485). Interviews for this study start with open questions to alleviate preconceived ideas and allow the participant to speak their own truth. Epoche started in the data collection phase and continued until a clear understanding from the accounts of the participants was acquired.

**Phenomenological reduction.** The work of reducing phenomenological research can be summed up by Vagle’s (2014) statement “transcending one’s consciousness to study the consciousness of others is a tall order” (p.54). However difficult the task, it is necessary when analyzing crude, phenomenological data. Data analysis for this study calls for reduction in a six-step process outlined by Moustakas (1994), which involves bracketing, horizontalization, delimiting horizons or meanings, cluster invariant qualities and themes, integrating individual textural descriptions, and finally, integrating composite textural descriptions (p.180). In “reducing” the data, assumptions, beliefs, values, and viewpoints are taken out to leave it at its most unsullied form. This extensive process in analyzing personal testaments helps to keep data valid and reliable.

Pure transcribed data is broken down and “bracketed,” stripping it of all contextual relations. In the bracketing process, the spoken words from interviews are taken only as naked words and phrases. There are no preconceived meanings that represent these key words and phrases in this phase of analysis. The procedure for bracketing in this study is taken from Patton (2002). First, self-story key phrases and
statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question are located within the personal experience. Meanings of these phrases are interpreted and confirmed by the participant. Then, meanings are inspected for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied. Finally, a tentative statement or definition of the phenomenon is offered to describe the essential recurring features that were previously identified (pg. 485-486).

After the key words and phrases are bracketed, an equal value is placed on every statement, which is called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). The reduction phase continues with organizing the valued data into groups that give meaning to the phenomenon. Studies including Klein & Washburn (2012) and Smith (2008) use reduction to categorize data effectively. To avoid redundancy, a delimitation step is carried out to expose of repetitive data and give a straightforward representation of the phenomenon. Invariant or constant themes are identified and grouped both by individual textural descriptions and composite textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002).

**Imaginative variation.** Even though more than one individual can look at an object, it is not likely that each person looking at the object will see the same thing, both literally and figuratively. There are different viewpoints and angles to every object, idea, situation, experience, etc. The holistic aspect of this study rests in the process of imaginative variation. During this process, data is assumed from different viewpoints and developed into “enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes” (Patton, 2002, p.486). Taking advice from Moustakas (1994), imaginative variation for this study uses
universal configurations like time, space, and relationships to self and others. In addition, they are looked at from both causal and intentional perspectives. This step will group findings into composite structural descriptions and individual structural descriptions.

**Participants**

This study used purposeful sampling to select “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p.230) from individuals who have lived experiences that shed light on the overarching research question. Kim and Gasman (2011) and Klein and Washburn (2012) also used purposeful sampling in their studies regarding college choice to acquire participants who could best deliver answers for the questions they asked. These researchers selected participants from groups of individuals who were either high school matriculating seniors or undergrads enrolled in their first year of studies to explore college choice (Kim & Gasman, 2011; Klein & Washburn, 2012).

Applying criterion to the interviewee requirements assures quality among the participants. Patton (2002) suggests that all possible participants be reviewed and selected specifically based on predetermined criteria before the interviewing process takes place. Study participants were first-generation student-athletes of NCAA DII athletic programs in colleges or universities in the state of West Virginia. All participants were at least eighteen years of age. “The point of criterion-based sampling is to be sure to understand cases that are likely to be information rich because they may reveal major system weaknesses that become targets of opportunity for program or system improvement” (Patton, 2002, p.238). The literature supports the presented design to expose shortfalls in
college “fit” or “match,” recruitment, retention of first-generation student-athletes and overall enrollment and completion for colleges and universities.

Vagle (2014) suggests that the sample size be determined by the phenomenon. Eight participants allows for sufficient divulgence of the process and relating college choice factors. This sample size also allows for a variety of participants related to sport, school, ethnicity, and gender. Participants were each assigned pseudonyms for purpose of discretion and anonymity.

To maintain the anonymity and privacy of participants, data was recorded with a code to replace identifiers. A master list connecting the code and the identifier was used to keep track of participants. The code list was kept via Word Document on a password protected, external hard drive of the primary investigator (PI) and kept in a locked cabinet.

Administrators and coaches of athletic programs were excellent resources in finding participants for the study who match inclusion criteria. To recruit first-generation student-athletes, athletic directors of two different NCAA Division II schools in West Virginia were contacted via phone and scheduled for a face-to-face meeting where they were briefed on the current study. Both are 4-year schools in the same athletic conference, however, one school is an inclusive public institution where the other is a private, selective institution. The athletic directors of both institutions agreed to help find eligible participants for this study. Athletic directors sent an email to their student-athletes with the PI’s invitation to participate document (Appendix A). Interested student-
athletes were asked to follow the link in the email to a short demographic survey (Appendix B), which included their contact info.

Questionnaires were also used by Maramba et al. (2015) and Martinez (2013b) to collect demographic information about their participants. Previous studies have shown that first-generation status is often relatable to family income (Ishitani, 2005; Sherwin, 2012) and this demographic factor weighs heavily on the college choice process of matriculating students (Davis et al., 2013; Kim, 2012; Palardy, 2015; Sherwin, 2012). In addition to income, personal factors such as hometown/high school (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011; Dooley et al., 2012), race/ethnicity (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012; Judson et al., 2004), and affordability (Byndloss & Reid, 2013) have various impacts on college choice and other higher education issues like college “match” (Avery et al., 2014), application (Oldfield, 2012), retention (Ishitani, 2005), and completion (Ishitani, 2005; Petty, 2014). Knowing a little about the participants in this study built trust in the relationship and improved the interviewing process. In addition, having background information on study participants informs the discussion and adds depth and breadth to the study.

Potential participants who completed the online survey and who fit the criteria for inclusion were contacted by the PI via phone and asked to schedule an in-person interview. To avoid coercion, potential participants were assured that no one in their athletic departments would know of their participation in the study. A second plan was created in the case that there were less than five interests. Current participants of the study would be asked to reveal additional first-generation student-athletes from DII institutions in WV through chain sampling (Patton, 2012). This approach would help
identify additional participants by asking those who have already committed or student-athletes who may have teammates and/or friends who are first-generation. If chain sampling in the two schools was not successful in identifying participants, athletic directors from other schools would have been contacted and the process would have begun again.

After the search for participants was complete, participants were contacted via telephone to set up meeting times and locations. Locations were neutral and convenient to the participant. Places such as libraries, student unions, and gymnasiums were suggested during the telephone conversation. All locations suggested on the student’s campus were previously identified classrooms and/or meeting rooms with locked doors to maintain privacy of the participant. At the scheduled face-to-face meeting, all participants were introduced to the primary investigator and given a short summary of the study.

**Risks.** Risks were minimal for involvement in this study. However, participants may feel emotionally uneasy when asked to recall their college choice experience and answer personal questions about their status as a first-generation student. This was noted in the informed consent. Participants were reminded that they could skip any questions they felt uncomfortable answering.

**Benefits.** There were no direct benefits for participants. However, research on this population contributes to the knowledge of first-generation student-athlete college choice and builds a platform for discussion on how best to aid this population with their college choice decisions.
**Compensation.** Compensation was awarded in the amount of a ten-dollar gift card to Subway Restaurants to each student who participated. Participants received their gift card following the completion of data collection, transcription, and member checks. Gift cards were sent by post mail to the addresses provided via email. All participants successfully completed the data collection process including interview, questionnaire, and member check; therefore, no participants forfeited their compensation.

**Data Collection**

The current study used a manifold of approaches to assemble emerging theories that are resounding and evenhanded in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The following section describes the process of data collection for this study, which includes interviews, transcription, member checks, and peer debriefing. Allowing multiple sources of data to be incorporated in the findings of the study is called triangulation. This ensures quality data collection and a more holistic understanding of the process and the factors that affect it.

**Interviews.** To introduce well-rounded and comprehensive information into the body of literature for college choice, data was collected through one-on-one interviews with the participants. Meetings were guided by a semi-structured, general interview approach, which allowed the conversation to be led by an outline of the subject (See Appendix B), but not restricted to specific questions from the interviewer (Patton, 2002). This technique allowed questions to be asked as they became necessary and relevant to the topic and discussion (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This type of interview afforded participants the opportunity to discuss topics that were important to each of them.
specifically. The interviewee had freedom to take the conversation wherever they wanted it to go without interruption. Following the complete divulgence of thought from the participant, there was an opportunity to ask additional questions.

**Interview framework.** Two copies of the informed consent (see Appendix C) were issued to participants by the interviewer during the scheduled interview to help maintain integrity of the study. A sense of privacy and security added to the genuineness of the responses and allowed the interviewee to relax and answer honestly. One was given to the participant to keep and the other was scanned into an external hard drive of the primary investigator, which is secured by a passcode. The hard copy and external hard drive are kept in the locked cabinet located in the house of the primary investigator.

The consent form consisted of an explanation as to why the research is being conducted, how data would be collected, a clear statement that the information obtained from the participant was used to explain and elaborate on the phenomenon, and how the researcher planned to maintain participant anonymity (Glesne, 2011; Groenewald, 2004; Patton, 2002). Participants were also notified that partaking in this study was voluntary and they may abandon the study any time, for any reason (Glesne, 2011, p.166). They were also given the opportunity to ask any questions they had regarding the study and their participation before they signed the document.

Questions were framed around Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-step college choice process (See Appendix D). First, students were asked questions that pertain to phase one, predisposition. These questions cover their high school history and initial decision to go to college. Moving on to the search phase of Hossler and Gallagher’s
(1987) college choice process, participants were asked questions pertaining to their “choice list” and how they came up with those colleges. Finally, participants were asked questions about the details leading up to their final college choices. These questions addressed Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) third phase, choice.

**Data Analysis**

Phenomenological analysis requires the researcher to look at data from different angles to appreciate the holistic issue from all perspectives. Review and summation of qualitative inquiry is certainly imperative when it comes to understanding the lived experiences of an individual. The following section outlines the data analysis and interpretation of information collected for this research project. The general process of data analysis for qualitative studies involves five steps summarized by Creswell (2014): Organizing and preparing the raw data (i.e. transcripts, notes, images, etc.) for analysis, reviewing the data to develop general ideas, overall meaning, and making sure the information given has depth and credibility intact, coding the data by labeling with key words and phrases to categorize the data, generating descriptions of the setting and people involved, then finally making interpretations of what those descriptions mean (p.197-200).

**Transcription.** All interviews were recorded by an audio recording application called *Interview Monitor*. The audio recordings of each interview were exported to another application called *ExpressScribe* where they were slowed down and transcribed. Transcriptions were copied to a Microsoft Word document and edited. The audio recording was played again while looking at the written transcription to catch mistakes.
**Member checks.** Participants had the opportunity to review their responses but more importantly, this qualitative technique referred to as member checking, allowed participants to confirm the findings of the research (Creswell, 2014). After the interview was complete and transcribed, transcripts were presented to the participant in a clean and formatted document, free of false starts and “crutch words such as “you know,” “um,” “ah,” “yeah,” etc. Through Microsoft Word, participants were asked to review their interview and researcher’s notes to check for accuracy. It was explained to the participant in the email that they were encouraged to reply with any concerns they had. If there was a discrepancy, a face-to-face meeting was scheduled via email to discuss and resolve any issues. Member checking was a method used by Kim and Gasman (2011), Maramba et al. (2015), and Smith (2008) in their studies to ensure the transcribed interviews do, in fact, capture a true and honest representation of the participant’s thoughts and experience.

**Coding.** After participants confirmed the raw, transcribed data, transcriptions from each participant were numbered by line and read multiple times. During each review of the transcription, comments were tracked for every powerful and repeating statement, quote, idea, etc. (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 202). Relative comments were clustered into “codes”. “Patches,” referred to by Stake (2010) as the “data most worth including in the final report” (p.151) were identified and defined.

**Interpretation.** Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that all coded information from the transcripts get sorted into a single computer file (p.204). Therefore, all coded information was listed in Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with research participants and line numbers noted. Codes were then separated into categories that depict the full process of
college choice: Predisposition, search, and choice. Within each category, related codes were grouped again giving rise to the emerging themes of the study.

**Synthesis**

The final step in this study was to summarize findings from the data. A synthesis of composite textural and composite structural descriptions allowed for insight and intuition to produce an amalgamation (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002) of the collected data. Completing this final stage provides an abridgment of the college choice experience for first-generation, student-athletes.

**Summary**

This research design allowed the phenomenon of college choice to be explored by cases of first-generation student-athletes who attended NCAA Division II institutions in the state of West Virginia. By employing a qualitative paradigm, participants openly discussed their experiences in a more holistic way. Moustakas’ (1994) qualitative transcendental phenomenological model sets a standard for the research by encouraging investigators to understand biases through epoche, reduce the data in the conscious of the participants, and to look at the data from different angles to explore all meanings within. The participants of the study were chosen based on criteria that fit both the phenomenon and the case. Data was extracted from first-generation student-athletes who responded to an invitation to participate sent by their athletic directors. Their answers to the attached questionnaire provided contact information and the foundational demographic information necessary to understand their backgrounds. After transcription, interviews were intently combed through for the development of codes and a check for accuracy.
through member checks. Analysis ensued allowing intricate compiling and reorganizing of the codes into three phases of college choice. This allowed for a clear depiction of the college choice process through the spoken words of research participants.

**Dependability and authenticity.** According to Patton (2002), resolving the most pressing needs for dependability and authenticity in a phenomenological case study is imperative when dealing with constructive inquiry. This study employed member checks to ensure authenticity of the data collected by assuring the accuracy with participants via email. Triangulation occurred in the analysis phase of the current research design by assembling and reassembling coordinating data codes via excel to produce a picture based on multiple viewpoints.

**Praxis and reflexivity.** It is also of primary importance to focus on praxis and reflexivity while constructing the human understanding of a physical phenomenon. In that I acknowledge my own experience and positionality. I was a first-generation, student-athlete who committed to an NCAA Division II university to participate in collegiate athletics after high school. I pursued two opportunities for employment in higher education from two different NCAA Division II schools in the Southeast region of the United States: An academic position as an assistant to the dean of the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics and a position in athletics as an assistant volleyball coach.

Having this type of connection proved beneficial in connecting with potential participants and higher education administration who can help with the study. Although data collection for the study is framed around Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) research on
college choice, the questions asked during interviews are original to my own curiosity about what specifically affects college choice for first-generation student-athletes. Although my own experience sparked my interest in the college choice of first-generation student-athletes, potential bias will not ensue. Strategic checks, such as field notes and member checks are situated in the methodology of this study to ensure statements and recollections remain unambiguous. After reviewing literature on college choice and working in higher education, I realize that my status as a first-generation student-athlete had a major impact on my own college choice experience. If there are similarities between my experience and the experiences of other first-generation student-athletes, there is a need in higher education to acknowledge this specific population.
Chapter 4: I Chose Division II and Division II Chose Me

A few years ago, the NCAA developed for Division II colleges the slogan, “I chose Division II.” Though creative, little is known why or how students come to “choose Division II.” This query provided the foundation for the present study - It was present throughout the development of research questions and the data collection process, and served as the overarching subject of analysis. This chapter serves as an explanation from participants as to why they each chose their respective West Virginia NCAA Division II institution.

Content provided within this chapter include individual unit analyses collected from face-to-face interviews that were conducted to understand the college choice of first-generation student-athletes. Students were asked questions created by the researcher based on the three-step college choice process developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Questions pertaining to the predisposition phase initiated the discussion. After participants described their high school experiences and other aspects that affected their initial decision to go to college, they were asked questions related to the assembly of their “choice list.” Participants spoke about discovering colleges and universities, attaining the necessary information about each college, exploring institutions during their visits, etc. Finally, research participants were asked to give details about their final college choices and the factors that led them to make those decisions.

The collected qualitative data provided by participants was reduced and grouped by code to portray the lived-experiences of eight individual cases. Thick, rich description is used in this chapter to provide readers with a holistic view of the eight, first-generation
student-athlete who participated in the study. Findings from this study aid to further the discussion surrounding best practices used by advocates of this population to aid in efficient matriculation from high school to college.

Relevant findings from the demographic survey completed by participants are provided below. Table 1 includes participant’s responses to general demographic questions. Table 2 highlights participant’s self-reported academic achievements and collegiate aspirations, while Table 3 illustrates participant’s athletic classification and their respective sport programs.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Hometown Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>71,452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>37,158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>118,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emory</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>97,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1,209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taryn</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>35,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>175,948</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the eight participants, seven of the participants identified as female. When considering race and ethnicity participants represented diverse backgrounds. All but four of the participants came to West Virginia from hometowns that have a population of 50,000 or greater, with two from hometowns with a population less than 3,000.
Regarding participant’s self-reported academic information, for those who reported taking the ACT prior to entering college, the average reposted score was 21.5. A majority (n = 4) of participants indicated that they had completed 31-60 credit hours at the time they completed the demographic survey.

**Table 2**  
*Participant Academic Information (Self-Reported)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>ACT/SAT</th>
<th>Academic Classification</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>ACT - 19</td>
<td>Senior (90+ credit hours)</td>
<td>Sports Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>ACT - 26</td>
<td>Sophomore (31-60 credit hours)</td>
<td>Biology: Pre-med and Biomedical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>SAT - 1500</td>
<td>Sophomore (31-60 credit hours)</td>
<td>Accounting/Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emory</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>SAT - 1400</td>
<td>Sophomore (31-60 credit hours)</td>
<td>Sport Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>SAT - 1100</td>
<td>Junior (61-90 credit hours)</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>ACT - 23</td>
<td>Senior (90+ credit hours)</td>
<td>Elementary and Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taryn</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>ACT - 18</td>
<td>Sophomore (31-60 credit hours)</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>SAT - 1500</td>
<td>Junior (61-90 credit hours)</td>
<td>Integrated Communications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 3, Anthony was the only male and only participant to compete in the sport football. Three of the participants competed in Track and Field.
This chapter begins with a description and discussion of the culture of West Virginia and the higher education system within the state. Next, a discussion of the college choice experiences for Anthony, Bianca, Gail, Dana, Emory, Zoe, Erin, and Taryn is provided. These accounts are organized into themes in order to highlight the most significant experiences related to their college choice experiences.

**The State of West Virginia**

Wild and wonderful West Virginia does not rank well when concerning the prestige of a post-secondary education (Young Invincibles, 2016). In fact, this state is challenged by some of the most problematic issues concerning higher education across the nation such as retention, degree completion, attainment gaps, enrollment, etc. (Measuring Up, 2008; WVHEPC, 2015; Young Invincibles, 2016). On top of the affordability and financial access issues that West Virginia students face, the student loan debt in the state is high and rising (Measuring Up, 2008). Although the West Virginia has funding in place for specific populations, the need-based aid is deficient (Measuring Up,

---

**Table 3**  
*Participant Athletic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Athletic Classification</th>
<th>Sport(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Volleyball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Volleyball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emory</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Track and Field, Cross Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Track and Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Track and Field, Cross Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taryn</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Softball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Softball</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---
Students who enroll in higher education institutions in the state are not receiving an adequate investment back into them personally through programs and other supportive systems to assist them through degree completion (Young Invincibles, 2016). West Virginia also falls behind the national average in high school students matriculating into post-secondary schools the following Fall semester after graduation (WVHEPC, 2015).

It was formed by the separation from Virginia during the American Civil War and those who live there still feel the pull between North and South, from time to time. The state is bordered by five states (Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, and Virginia) pulling culture from each one, depending on the area. According to the United States Census Bureau (n.d.), there is an immense lack of diversity in the state and statistically, West Virginia rests at the bottom of the list for household income in America. The mining and coal industries in West Virginia are historically one of the main sources of production for the state. However, as environmentalists act on pollution and mountain top removal, the way of life for a great majority of West Virginians is changing, contributing to the low socio-economic status and overall economy of the state.

Whether an individual arrives by car, train, or airplane, they will be captivated and distracted from the issues in education, economics, and diversity by the sheer beauty of the state. Situated in the Appalachian Mountains, West Virginia boasts a wonderment of landscapes from mystic mountain views to humbling rapid waters. It may be one of the smaller states in America but it is recognized internationally for white water rafting. Hiking, bridge jumping, camping, fishing, rock climbing, skiing, and mountain biking are...
only a few of the numerous outdoor activities that locals and tourists partake in year-round.

It is easy to get caught in the splendor of the big golden capitol dome that shines bright in the valley of Charleston. Relaxing on the Kanawha River and enjoying live music from the downtown levee may serve as a distraction from the economic disadvantages of the state, as well. Between art walks, “FestivAlls,” summer concert series, etc. West Virginia is making effort to keep their locals and attract new populations that possess opportunities for the state to grow and thrive again.

Anthony

At 21 years old, Anthony was an African-American male from the state of Maryland. He came from very humble beginnings. In his family of six, he was the youngest sibling and only boy among his three sisters. His older sisters set the standard and expectations for Anthony’s high school career. Consequently, this standard went beyond the confines of their home. Because Anthony attended the same schools as his sisters growing up, teachers and administrators were aware of the success of his older siblings and therefore placed high expectations on him. The high school Anthony and his siblings attended was not the premier football high school that Anthony intended to enroll. However, it was the most economical for his family. His frustration as the most experienced and talented player on his high school team showed through his demeanor when mentioning the athletic challenges he overcame for the opportunity to pursue a football athletic scholarship. None-the-less, Anthony was a popular figure in the hallways of his high school and worked hard to uphold his reputation.
When Anthony interviewed, he entered the room with a huge smile on his face. The introduction was brief as he sat down with a water bottle in his hand and a long sigh from what was perceived as a long, exhausting day. He is a resident assistant (RA) at his current institution completing classes in his last summer semester as an undergraduate. His passion for football stemmed beyond the normal requirements of the team, leading him to stay in West Virginia for the summer, work multiple jobs, and show his leadership as a senior of the team by partaking in voluntary workouts and summer classes.

Anthony was full of excitement when he spoke about his plans to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in sports studies and pursue a master’s degree the following Fall semester. He played an influential role on the football field of his current institution last season and was looking for a repeat in this upcoming season. After he became comfortable in the intimate setting, he explained his plans for finishing his athletic eligibility as a graduate student and hopeful walk-on at Ohio State University the following year. He was anxious about this opportunity and claimed that is was possible by way of networking through his fraternal organization. Anthony’s college choice led him to positive expressions while commenting on the conclusion of his academic and athletic experiences at his current institution.

**Access to college through football.** Anthony’s college choice story was almost completely centered around his goal of obtaining an athletic scholarship to play football, helping his family with the costs associated with his higher education. He felt as though financial access limited his college choice. He said, “we didn’t have that type of money where they could just poof me into any college I wanted to.” In response to fiscal
challenges, he relied on his athletic ability to achieve the academic goals he had for himself. He began to focus on his high school studies to become a better student. He realized that eventually football would take him to college, however, it would not pass his full-time course load. Although Anthony used football to break the glass ceiling of his first-generation status, he felt as though sports would not provide a professional career in the long run. College was the perfect time for Anthony to discover and hone his future career aspirations. In his words,

    Yeah, college football was basically the big drive for me. It’s why I started taking academics seriously and I started figuring out that I was going to have to learn something else besides football or whatever sport I was playing.

    Earning and securing his athletic scholarship ultimately decided his post-graduate fate. When asked why he selected his school specifically he replied, “athletic scholarship, straight up, that was why.” In addition, he stated “football influenced me the most. I was kind of just football, football, football. Just get the scholarship and go and see what happens.”

    **Changing his academic outlook.** Although his focus on access to college was narrowed in his athletic ability, Anthony thought of higher education as a positive pathway to a successful future and was accountable for preparing himself adequately. Home life was not always easy for Anthony. Many decisions he made early in his high school career were influenced by how he could make things easier on his parents and the rest of his family. He had every intention of attending a powerhouse football high school but family problems were the cause of his attendance to a school much closer to his
house. Anthony explained that he was often the most experienced of his teammates. This played a role in the undesirable view he had of his high school.

Anthony did not struggle academically, however, he was not as adamant about his studies either. His outlook on academics changed after a while. He began to realize that not many of his friends were pursuing an education after high school graduation. He determined that this would not be his fate.

I didn’t want to be a bum coming out of high school…. I heard that college could basically make or break you. It is going to be the most important time of your life that will sort of depict what the rest of your life is going to end up being…. I told myself that when I to get to college it was going to be… on my own so there’s no way I could mess up. If I mess up, I have nowhere to go.

He made sacrifices in the pre-college choice phase of his life, defining this time as “stressful.” He said, “having to play three sports and balance grades and having to come home and worry about what I’m going to eat tonight. That sucked.” These challenges motivated Anthony to surpass subpar standards.

**His father was Anthony’s biggest college advocate.** With aspirations, motivation, and a means to attend college, Anthony’s family, more specifically his father, was his biggest support. His father found ways to introduce Anthony to college recruiting materials. Even before Anthony realized his academic and athletic potential his father was to encourage him by saying things like, “grades, grades, grades. You know you won’t get anywhere without grades.” It was important for Anthony’s father to show him an aptitude of achievement. He provided a “dream big” attitude to Anthony’s college
choice that would later influence him to consider prestigious institutions and NCAA Division I athletic programs.

Anthony looked to his father to address some of the most important and pressing questions regarding where to study for his bachelor’s degree. Although his mind was prematurely set on attending a NCAA Division I university close to his hometown, his dad encouraged him to look outside of his immediate environment for opportunities that may not seem so likely, such as Harvard University. Consequently, Anthony considered a myriad of colleges and universities keeping in mind his father’s suggestion that it was important for him to “apply to at least thirty different schools and the more the merrier.” Even though he expressed a broad variety of institutions he was considering, Anthony ultimately took the advice of his parents to accept the athletic offer from his current institution. He said, “my parents kind of influenced me to just jump on it because not everybody gets an athletic scholarship.”

**Excluding institutions due to associated costs.** There are numerous reasons for students to cross institutions off their list during the search phase of the college choice process. For Anthony, he had specific reasons as to why he did not visit, apply, and attend other universities on the list that he had assembled. He explained,

Cost and tuition. That was a big factor. Wasn't really awarded other scholarships for those other schools. So, I didn’t want to just take out straight loans. I didn’t have any other way to pay besides loans.

Although he was encouraged by his father to apply to all the schools he considered, Anthony only applied to three. He had every intention of applying to more,
however, the cost associated with submitting applications was overwhelming. He also expressed how time consuming the process was for him. He was extremely active in extracurricular activities at his high school, making it difficult to find time for multiple college application submissions.

In addition to how time consuming and expensive college applications were, Anthony did not attend additional universities on his list of probable schools due to their location. He said, “they were so far away. I don’t have a plane ticket to go to Miami and Alabama. Can't fly all over the world.” This limited the on-campus experience for Anthony and consequently aided in narrowing the institutions on his choice list.

**Athletic influences led to proactive recruitment approach and interested college coaches.** Anthony recalls a relationship with former coaches that catapulted him into the college recruitment limelight. With this help, Anthony felt encouraged to pursue collegiate athletics. He began his college search on the football field. He said, “my senior year we had a new football coach and he was the one who kind of took me to the next level with taking college seriously. So, he got me… in there a lot.” “Taking college seriously” led Anthony to a proactive recruiting approach. After attending a football camp on a college campus in the summer, he took the advice of camp counselors and initiated a promotion of his athletic talents through a recruitment website often used by prospective collegiate student-athletes. He explained,

*NCSAsports.org… connects you with so many colleges and universities you can create a profile, put your highlight tape, and then put your goals and aspirations,*
write a personal statement… put your stats on there, your skills, your grades, of course. And that basically - It provided me with a lot of exposure to colleges. This website allowed Anthony access to information about universities he had never considered. Interest accumulated by the introduction to a variety of colleges and universities. So, Anthony began to visit institutional websites to get a better feel for athletic programs.

With increasing exposure of Anthony’s athletic talents, he began to experience active recruiting from collegiate coaches. When a member of his current football coaching staff traveled to Anthony’s hometown high school to meet with him, he recalled the experience and consequent official athletic visit vividly. When he received the voicemail, an assistant coach left for him while away at a sporting event, he explained,

The main words I heard out of it was “scholarship.” So, I immediately told my parents and they were like, “oh my God, there's a guy here to see you and he’s talking about scholarship? Yeah, you better call him back.”

Without hesitation, Anthony returned the phone call and quickly set up a visit to check out the school first hand. Upon arrival, he explained how the food was great, the dorms were exciting and he was sold on the persuasion of some of the current players at the institution. He enjoyed his experience on the college visit, which only reaffirmed his instinct to consider the athletic aid they were offering.

Recapping other recruiting endeavors, Anthony recalled a coach who persuaded him with achievements of the football program. When the coach showed Anthony their championship rings, he began to think attendance at an institution which had a tradition
of winning would guarantee his own athletic achievement. He said, “I really wanted to win. So, then I really wanted the ring. So, that’s why I considered there.”

**Unfamiliarity with higher education led to missed opportunities.** Anthony’s college choice experience began with an uncertainty about higher education. He stated, “I always wanted to go to college, but I was young and didn’t really know what college was about. It was just a thing where oh, it’s what I’m supposed to do.” He felt as though college was an extension of his secondary education. This was the type of relaxed mentality Anthony had when it came to considering the academic aspect of his college career.

Anthony was asked about how knowledgeable he felt about his college choice and he replied, “not very knowledgeable. I mean, I kind of just jumped on the opportunity when I was offered a scholarship.” This absence of information echoed in the knowledge of his choice institution. He explained, “I had no knowledge of… [my current university] until I was offered a scholarship.” Without the pursuance of a football coach and supplemental athletic financial aid offer, Anthony would not know about the institution that her is currently attending.

Anthony was missing pertinent information regarding multiple facets of the college choice process and higher education. He felt like he missed out on beneficial opportunities. For instance, he mentioned on a couple different occasions that he could have or should have received academic financial aid. Academically, he qualified for scholarships, but never applied because he did not know they existed. He claimed that he would have liked more help with attaining additional financial aid explaining, “if I knew
half the scholarships I'd be set to this day. Wouldn't have to worry.” He sought help to address this issue and was eventually awarded academic scholarships to supplement the athletic aid and Pell grant he was already awarded.

**Early complications led to satisfying conclusion.** Initially, Anthony experienced a tough acclamation to the university he chose to attend for various reasons. Upon arriving, he was uncertain of the major he wanted to pursue. It was football, again, that helped him narrow his options. He said, “choosing a major I was kind of undecided, but I just picked sports studies because I was a football player and… I didn't know what I wanted to be.”

His freshman athletic experience was no different. He described his first year as “rough.” Anthony was earnest in his explanation of the time and effort that was put into football. He expressed that he and his teammates worked hard only to come up short with an unfavorable win/loss record. This was depressing for Anthony. He expressed, “putting all those hours in and then not winning, it sucks.” He made a comment about wanting to leave the institution after his freshman year. He said, “at first I felt like I made the wrong decision and I wanted to transfer out right out of the first semester and I hated it here.”

He also felt like the work he put in was underappreciated and not sufficiently recognized by the monetary support he was awarded. As a part of the “core group of guys” the coaching staff challenged with leading the program, Anthony was surprised by the lack of compensation for his special efforts. He expressed that he felt “underpaid,” especially after making the necessary arrangements, putting in extra work and time for
the program. Anthony’s appearance of confusion and uneasiness during the conversation directly portrayed distraught associated with this period in his college athletic career.

Regardless of the controversial start, Anthony stayed steadfast in his decision to attend his first institution, and it paid off for him. He said, “I got used to it and it started to grow on me a little bit. I just toughed it out and a lot of great things happened here that probably wouldn’t have happened anywhere else.” Although he still does not care for certain aspects of the university such as the cafeteria food or the fact that most of the student population commutes to the university, Anthony is not upset about his college choice and explained that he does not regret his decision to attend his current institution. In his words, “kind of just toughed it out and see where things would go if I worked hard. That…was my drive. If I work hard, I'd be rewarded.” Contrary to the start of his college choice where football played an overwhelming role in the decisions for his future, Anthony gave credit to patience and persistence, realizing that his work ethic would afford him the type of collegiate experience he desired.

**Summary.** Anthony never doubted that he would pursue a post-secondary education. His driving force was imbedded in his dream of playing collegiate football, which pushed him to work hard academically and allowed him to achieve beyond what was expected of him. Anthony made the best out of a difficult decision to attend a less prestigious high school by achieving accolades he was proud of. He did the same when collegiate football and the institution he played for did not seem like the deal he had originally committed to. With the continued support of his family and former coaches, Anthony took advantage of athletic recruiting materials such as websites and summer
camps. His early aspirations of being recruited athletically and obtaining a scholarship to compensate for his athletic talents became a reality shortly after a visit from coaching staff and the official offer of athletic aid. Anthony felt compelled to accept and was urged by his parents to take advantage of the opportunity afforded to him by his current institution. However, he did not feel thoroughly knowledgeable about the decision or the institution. In addition, he bypassed his original ambitions to attend an NCAA Division I university closer to home. However hard the transition to college, Anthony found his niche and now thrives as an essential product of the university. As a captain of the football team, an active member of student organizations, and supporting employee for student life, Anthony plans to use the connections he assembled to propel him into a master’s degree program upon successful completion of his bachelor’s degree.

Bianca

Bianca exuded confidence and energy from the time she sat down, until the time she left the interview. The 19-year-old, African-American female approaching her sophomore year of college sat tall in her seat situated in the main office of the College that housed her educational major. She had a brief opening during her lunchtime to meet, so it was most appropriate to schedule a time and place closest to her laboratory. At the time of the interview, Bianca was taking full advantage of a summer research opportunity she was selected for in the Department of Biology. She applied for the College’s Summer Undergraduate Research Program (SURE) in the spring semester of her freshman year, which provided students in the College a stipend to conduct research in the summer and present their findings at an annual symposium. She was nearing the end of this
experience and her advisor seemed proud of the work he was completing. Her anxiousness was apparent as she discussed her final project and presentation for the upcoming week.

Bianca was recruited athletically from the state of Ohio to play volleyball at her current institution in West Virginia. With a self-reported 3.43 GPA and high scores on her standardized tests, Bianca proved to be an asset not only for the athletics department, but also academically for her school. It was never a problem for her to do well in the classroom and that level of academic achievement was encouraged by the advanced courses she took in high school. Her dreams of becoming a doctor are supported by her tenacity for success at the collegiate and professional levels.

It was a pleasure to interview such a well-spoken and assertive young individual. She answered the questions she was asked with precision and certainty. It was easy for her to recollect the moment she knew she wanted to pursue a higher education and gave supporting details as to why. She proceeded in the conversation by explaining that her environment supported her decision to go to college even though her parents never attended and her siblings had not been challenged with the process yet. Her thoughts about college choice requirements were organized and informed immensely by the influence of her older friends. She explicitly explained desirable and undesirable aspects from living spaces, to educational classrooms, to athletic expectations. Even though she felt like athletically the window for her college choice was closing in on her. She felt lucky in finding an institution that crossed so many essential college choice factors off her list.
Young college aspirations fueled academic and athletic success. Bianca always knew that she would pursue higher education. As a young girl, Bianca recalled visits to the obstetrician/gynecologist doctor while her mom was pregnant with Bianca’s younger siblings. Ever since that time, Bianca had dreams of becoming a doctor herself. She expressed that nothing would stop her from achieving that goal. In addition to her own aspirations, her academic environment cultivated future college-going students on multiple levels from prominent educational courses to community service. Bianca did not experience any individualized attention directing her to college enrollment. With the advanced course loads and high school prestige, it was assumed that students would advance into a post-secondary education. The push in college preparation aligned her to pursue a post-secondary education. She expressed how fortunate she was to go to a school with high expectations of their students, even though she did not receive any formal information about attending college. Her future career aspirations depend on her completion of college and the instilled expectations of her success in doing so pushed her to believe that, “it was not an option to not go to college.”

She experienced ample opportunities to flourish in a high school setting where extra-curricular activities were supported and gratified. Athletics were a big part of her high school career. She stated,

I come from a high school where athletics are everything. Everybody always goes out to the football games or always at the basketball games, volleyball game. Our school pride is really, really high.
As a contributing player to the successes of her volleyball team, Bianca enjoyed her time in high school as a relatively popular student-athlete. She was liked and accepted among her peers, however, she felt as though she was defying racial stereotypes and standards in the classroom. Contrary to the “pretty diverse” student population of her high school, Bianca often found herself alone in challenging courses as the only minority student. It even made her feel uncomfortable at times. She explained,

I was always in honors or AP courses and then one day I looked around and realized that I am the only African-American in this classroom or there’s only two of us, and that kind of bothered me about my high school.

With perseverance, she continued to hone a work ethic necessary to succeed in honors courses, which prepared Bianca for a continuing education in college.

**Actively promoting self for athletics.** Even though Bianca had academic qualifications acceptable for most institutions, she remembered colleges pursuing her for her athletic skills, rather than on the strength of her academic records. Coupled with her history of athletic support and supplementary ambitions, Bianca made the decision to take an active approach in the college choice process that focused on athletic recruitment. She specifically stated, “I wanted to play volleyball in college. I wanted to play since I started playing in the seventh grade. So, if I had to go DIII [NCAA Division III institution], okay.” She used recruiting services to drive the search phase of her college choice. She said, “There was a website that I used [BeRecruited.com]. I put my highlight tape on there and go to tournaments and they would have showcases at the tournaments and the coaches would come and watch us.” She used the information she gathered from
the website and other recruiting efforts to educate herself on the colleges that were interested in her athletically. Meanwhile, she created a list of institutions that she felt were viable options for her post-secondary education.

At one point during the college choice process Bianca felt discouraged that she would not be recruited to play volleyball. She explained, “my senior year I had thought, ‘I'm probably not going to get recruited. I'm probably going to have to go run track’ and…I didn't like track.” During this time she nearly considered participating in a sport that she happened to be good at, rather than one she was passionate about to maintain student-athlete status and supplementary athletic financial aid while an undergrad. She claimed, “It was my senior year I'm like, ‘okay, well maybe I'm not going to get recruited. The big recruiting year is your junior year.’” Consequently, she began to look at institutions outside of those she aspired to play for, tapping into other features she coveted on her list of institutional requirements such as location, campus culture, and selectivity.

**Being discovered.** Eventually Bianca’s fate changed when she was approached at an out-of-season, travel volleyball tournament. There, a coach from a NCAA Division II institution in West Virginia took an interest in Bianca. The coach exchanged contact information with her after the conclusion of the tournament and explained to Bianca how she would “be a great fit for this team.”

Bianca stayed in communication with the head coach and shortly thereafter was invited to campus for an official athletic visit. Bianca was approaching the end of her senior year in high school when this opportunity presented itself, so she felt compelled to
visit the school and explore her athletic options. She said, “it was by the grace of God, I would like to say… I thought it was a sign. I needed to go. I needed to go on this visit and maybe this is where I’m supposed to be.”

**Campus visit sealed the deal.** On her visit, she was blown away by how many important characteristics the school possessed. She toured the university and found a campus with the right fit for her academic expectations. The facilities were not brand new, however, they seemed maintained. In addition, the small classroom sizes were important for Bianca to build relationships with her professors. She appreciated the contemporary dorms, which all included private sleeping spaces. She said,

The dorms were awesome. I didn’t have to share a room as a kid. I’m the only girl. So, I wanted my own personal space. So, I liked that the dorms were set up that I had my own room.

She spoke highly of the volleyball team and coaches stating, “I loved the girls. It was a very welcoming experience. They seemed very loving when playing with them… There was a great feel with the coach. She seemed very homey, it was just like, open arms.”

Bianca mentioned that she liked the fact that it was a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) for the associated rich cultural experience. Her aspirations of joining a historically African-American, international Greek lettered sorority became a possibility for her when she found that the sorority she hoped to join was active at this institution.

She found that this school had many of the characteristics she desired in an undergraduate institution stating, “It won me over completely.” Bianca took the visit into
consideration but made her decision based on a factor that was the most important to her: an athletic scholarship. Bianca stated, “I specifically selected this university because it gave me the most athletic scholarship.”

**Being confident in her decision.** Bianca was not hesitant in explaining how assured she was in her college decision. She explained, “I was very secure in it, because I knew this university had everything that I wanted.” She elaborated by detailing that she did not have many questions when it came to her college choice. She said,

> I just knew what I was looking for. I knew I wanted… somewhere I would have a lot of one-on-one with professors. I wanted to have smaller classroom sizes so it was more personal. I wanted to make sure I could play volleyball and I wanted my school paid for.

She found all the essential qualities in the institution she chose, which made for an optimistic view of her college choice process and decision. In her words and body language she illustrated a high level of confidence in the decision she made.

**Athletics provided financial access.** Bianca’s college choice was centered on extremely important events that allowed her to gain access to higher education. Specifically, athletics provided her access to college. She explained during the interview that her parents did not set money aside for her to attend college. Had it not been for athletics, her college choice story would be completely different. Bianca explained how her family’s financial situation dictated her options, but athletics opened doors that would not have otherwise been available. She said,
My family, they didn't have the money to pay for me to go to college. I didn't have a college fund. There wasn't money for me to have for college and I didn't want to be in debt. That was the main goal of mine. Since I was six I wanted to go to college for free.

She deliberately held herself back from NCAA Division III schools who wanted her to play for them, but could not offer her any athletic aid. If those schools were still not able to present her with a considerable academic financial aid package, she would move on from them.

For Bianca, one of the final institutions she visited awarded her the type of financial aid she needed and was looking for. She expressed in her interview how excited she was to have been awarded this opportunity. She said, “being my last visit that I went on she offers me and I’m like ‘wow, this is good’ so that’s what made me decide on colleges. What I could get financially.” She found a school that met all her expectations, offering her the type of aid she desired, so Bianca signed her national letter of intent and agreed to play for them in the Fall.

**Summary.** At the young age of six, Bianca aspired to become a doctor and had a clear vision on how to achieve that dream. She took challenging college-prep courses in high school and kept herself busy in extra-curricular activities. Realizing that there were no funds set aside for her to pursue these dreams, Bianca took a proactive approach to her college choice. She used her athletic talents to showcase herself to coaches, both in person and on popular athletic recruiting websites. Before collegiate coaches approached Bianca, her expansive list of colleges included HBCUs, Ivy League schools, and various
research institutions. To narrow down her list, she focused on specific qualities a school had to have for her to attend, such as a degree program in pre-medicine. Bianca became discouraged initially when she was not recruited to play volleyball her junior year in high school. However, while at a volleyball tournament she was admired by her soon-to-be assistant coach. Her current university met all of Bianca’s most important qualifications. She felt confident and secure in her decision to attend and is delighted to be a part of the college family.

**Gail**

As a resident assistant (RA) for her school, it was mandatory for Gail to be on campus a few weeks prior to the rest of her team in August. The day Gail interviewed, she was preparing to participate in the activities that she had planned for the rest of her teammates that were on campus. She seemed to be a “go-getter” on the track team at her university and a leader who was well respected amongst her peers.

Gail is a 21-year-old, Caucasian, female. She was a well-decorated high school track athlete earning West Virginia State championships in three different individual events and as a team her last three years of high school. She was recruited to her current institution from a very small town in Northwest West Virginia to participate in both track and cross-country. As she sat for her interview she presented herself as proper in etiquette, gracious, and soft-spoken. Her demeanor matched her aspirations to become a special education teacher and with a self-reported grade point average and ACT test score of 4.4 and 23, respectively, it did not seem as if she would have any trouble achieving her educational and career dreams.
Her parents did not attend college, so they were unable to give her a first-hand experience of the process. However, she was not the only child from her family to attend college. Her older brother was enrolled at a similar institution near her hometown in the state of West Virginia at the time of the interview. She did not recollect his process during the interview, however, she did explain that she went on visits to the same school and felt like she wanted to follow her own path, which led her to her current institution.

When we began to talk, I noticed that Gail was concise and assertive in the conversation, answering specific questions that were asked directly. She did not deviate from the semi-structured discussion much, so it was necessary to provide probing questions, more than was required in the previous two interviews. Her persona as a thorough observer showed through her experience in choosing a post-secondary institution. Her reserved nature supported what she had to say about the experience of choosing a college. During this process, the institution Gail chose grabbed her attention and provided concrete purpose for her enrollment.

No pressure or personal attention, only parental influences. Growing up in a small West Virginia town, Gail never felt like she was afforded guidance on the steps necessary to gain access to higher education. When asked if she knew anything about higher education, her reply was a very casual, “not really. I was just kind of thrown in.” She explained that the discussions she had with coaches and counselors were very general. In Gail’s predisposition phase of college choice, she never felt that conversations concerning post-secondary education were tailored to her. She said, “guidance counselors [would talk about college], but they push everybody. I mean my coaches in high school
would just talk about it to our whole team but it was never me personally.” The generic advice administered to all her classmates and teammates was not influential in Gail’s decision to attend college. She attested that the only real driving force in her choice to attend college came from her parents. She said, “my parents never really gave me a choice. It was kind of just like ‘you’re going to go to college.’ Me and my brother both…. So, it was just kind of a no-brainer, just going to do it.” Gail’s parents were her sole influence and resource. She could not recall any college preparation programs or other assistance available to her within her community.

Regardless of the external lack of inspiration, she was motivated by her own career ambitions. She was assertive and strong in statement as she spoke about her teaching aspirations. She said, “I need it [a degree] to be a teacher.…. So, if I don’t have it, I don’t get to do what I want to do.” It was clear to Gail in high school that she would go to college and pursue a degree in elementary education. From her own collection of information and the help of her parents and older brother’s experience, she knew the necessary steps she needed to take to achieve her long-term career goals. These goals were prevalent and reoccurring in the rest of her college story.

**Too busy for typical recruiting.** Gail was an incrediblel active young woman. She played three high school sports along with other extracurricular activities, like the violin. With so much on her plate, she took a more relaxed approach to the athletic recruiting process. In fact, at times she felt bothered by the constant contact of some collegiate coaches. She explained that the most common form of contact during the recruiting process was by phone. Collegiate coaches always happened to reach her when
she was unavailable to talk. She found this method “inconvenient” and seemed bothered in her description of the process.

Gail explained that the Internet was her best and most convenient approach to staying in contact with coaches. In fact, her current coach initially contacted her via social media, which she appreciated. She said, “he added me on Facebook and messaged me and then we started talking about it and then after that he called me and we talked on the phone.”

She did not know how the college she eventually attended came to know about her as an athlete. She figured it was from the exposure she gained at the West Virginia state track meet. Gail recalled her accolades with pride stating, “I’m a state champion three times in the 4x2, 4x4, and the shuttle hurdle relay, and then also our team won the state championship three years in a row.” In response to her outstanding performance on the track, three different in-state institutions recruited Gail run track at their institution.

**Athletic visit helped her see a future at her current institution.** Gail was an extremely well rounded student-athlete in high school. She received communications from multiple institutions who offered her athletic and academic financial assistance and began to exclude institutions for various reasons. As she commented on the location of one institution she claimed that it was “out in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do.” She assumed that she would be bored on campus and could not envision a fulfilling experience, so there was no reason for her to consider that institution any further. In addition, she ran into complications after canceling an official visit due to a death in the family. She said the coach was not happy and unwilling to work with her in rescheduling
the visit. At that point, Gail felt a disconnection with the coach and would not commit without experiencing the institution for herself.

Gail was not looking for a long list of necessities in a post-secondary institution. She spoke about three institutional characteristics that steered the search phase of college choice. First, Gail said that smaller institutions were more attractive to her because she came from a small town and a small high school. She also wanted to be close enough to home that she could return easily if there was an emergency. Lastly, the education curriculum and overall program was important to her college choice. Therefore, the institutions Gail chose to visit were pre-selected by set criteria. She named four universities, including the one she currently attends, as the only universities she considered. These four institutions recruited her athletically and made offers for her to visit their campuses on official athletic visits.

Gail took advantage of the schools that put the most effort into recruiting her. As she continued to reflect on her experience in the search phase of college choice, she noted that there was only one campus visit where she felt the coach, team, and educational program fit her vision. Her current coach is young, lively and likeable. His ability to make Gail feel comfortable while in a new environment was important to her. He showed her the campus and introduced her to the team, which she felt was essential in envisioning a life at the institution. The visit to the education department was the icing on the cake for Gail. She was delighted with the experience she had on her visit and explained, “everything was actually put together rather than trying to imagine it walking around the school.” The ability to see for herself who she would be around, the programs
she would be a part of, and the environment in which she would live was key in her college choice.

In making her final college choice, she analyzed the amount of athletic aid offered. She determined that the amount was not as important as the experience she would get in return. She said, “[the other school] was going to give me a full ride there, but at the same time it wasn’t really what I wanted and… [my current institution] wasn’t far from that.” Although financial assistance played a role in Gail’s college choice decision, it was ultimately the visit that sold her on the institution and the fact that she was comfortable with the first impression she received.

**Education department was key in final decision.** In addition to the outstanding visit she experienced with her future coach and teammates, Gail felt fulfilled and confident that the institution she currently attends would satisfy her academic standards after meeting with the education department on her visit to the university. The coach and members of the department worked together to set up a meeting for Gail. She explained that the department chair was a great representation of the academic excellence she expected. The projected academic experience ranked high among Gail’s college choice factors. When she was asked to rank her college choice factors, the prestige of the education department was first on her list.

**Teammates formed her friendships.** In addition to the importance of having an education department that was successful, Gail stated that her team was the second most influential factor in her college choice process. She said, “I love my team. I don’t know if I would have loved them if I went somewhere else. That was a big positive thing
for me.” She immediately developed an affinity for the people she met at her current university. Comradery was essential to her in making the right college choice. She explained,

When you go to a place to visit you should look at the people that work there and the students that are already there because the time that you have is really going to be based off of whether you make friends and whether you have a good time. I know I have friends that go to bigger schools like Marshall and they hate it because no one talks to them.

Gail followed her instinct while on her visit with the coach and team and found a place she could call home for the duration of her bachelor’s degree.

**Summary.** Gail’s family made it clear from the start that she would be following in the footsteps of her older brother by attending college. She had no problem with the inherited plan as her dream of becoming a school teacher requires a degree. During the college choice process, Gail’s attention to details outside of the athletic scholarship afforded a different look at how first-generation student-athletes perceive the process and participate in their college choice. With a laid-back approach to college choice, she assembled a list of institutions by entertaining coaches who contacted her. She narrowed that list with only a few choice factors including, location, proximity to hometown, degree program, and future teammates. Finding a home at her current institution, she raved about the education department, the professors, her teammates, and coach. Even though she did not have much guidance from her small West Virginia high
school, she made a college choice that was completely satisfying stating that the only thing she would have changed about the entire process was the time she spent looking.

**Dana**

Dana was a bi-racial, 18-year-old, female student-athlete majoring in business accounting at her current institution. She was coming off an athletic redshirt freshman year, where she experienced NCAA ineligibility as a matriculating freshman. She was the only student who signified a difference in classification in sport and in classroom from the demographic survey that was administered. She was eager to begin her second volleyball preseason and the first season she would be athletically eligible to play.

Her home life at the time of the interview can be best described as complicated. She was living with a boyfriend in near Houston, TX, away from her mom, and just outside of the town she grew up in. As she became acquainted in the interview environment, she insinuated a complex connection with her mother and she decided to move in with her boyfriend’s family recently. The relationship she has with her mom played in to the athletic ability impediments for her as well. She claimed that her mom was an “interesting woman,” not always completing things in a timely matter, which also contributed to a delay she experienced in receiving the Pell grant. However, beginning her second year at her current institution, everything was going well for her. Documents were signed and she was ready for her sophomore year in college.

Her decision to attend a NCAA Division II school in West Virginia was influenced by her future career aspirations and what she perceived to be the best way to achieve those career goals. Originally, Dana had lofty dreams of playing volleyball at a
large, prominent institution, but when she began her college search it was based off her athletic ability alone – which did not afford her offers from these types of institutions. She did, however, land a plethora of NCAA Division II looks from college coaches with a myriad of institutions contacting her throughout the recruiting process.

Although she began her college choice promoting her athletic talents, she resorted to her academic dreams to take over in the final selection. Dana spoke passionately about pursuing a business degree. She fidgeted in her seat while explaining her career goals. It was clear that she knew she had a business mind and would want to follow that passion, but did not know exactly what she wanted to do upon graduation. She expressed the need to be more knowledgeable about the “business world.” Understanding accounting and finance so that she was prepared to practice her discipline. These ideas drove her intentions and fueled her fervent passion for higher education and the college choice process.

**High school supplied the push to pursue college.** Dana had several peers, teachers, and volleyball coaches around her who expected her to attend college after high school. She discussed specifically how her school counselors would encourage students and her teachers would mention post-secondary education during class time. She made it clear that her entire high school staff promoted higher education and that she felt comfortable with asking anyone questions that pertained to the college choice process. She continued,

At my high school, college, it’s a very big deal. Almost everyone went [to college]. I think there was maybe like 20 kids in my whole class that didn’t go to
college. So, college was always a big deal in my school and they always stressed it a lot. So, literally anyone in my school was available to talk to.

As advocates for post-secondary education, her high school took measures to introduce their students to the information necessary to pursue a degree. They set up seminars and speakers who would come in to discuss with students what their options were and how college could benefit them and their future. These sessions and lecture would take place approximately twice a year with her entire class. In addition, the principals and administrators would take more time in the same format to explain what students needed to do at their school to achieve their college dreams.

She did not have to go far to find support. Opportunities for information about higher education were available to her in a myriad of ways, including collegiate recruiting initiatives. First, she recounted the reading materials from various colleges and universities that were sent to her personally through post mail and email. She also explained how these materials were available for her to pick up when colleges and universities would send recruiters to set up tables during lunch hours at her high school. She often visited those tables as an upperclassman and found that the most helpful information and advice came straight from the recruiters themselves.

**Early ambitions to pursue a career in business.** Dana knew exactly what she wanted to do with her life and what kind of degree she needed to get there. She explained, “knowing what I wanted to major in, knowing what I wanted to do, that was easy. I’ve known that since seventh grade.” She always wanted to be “in the business world” and she felt like college was the only way to succeed in that endeavor. She was
hopeful in the idea that college would educate her on how to become a leader in business, making her successful upon application of those learned principles. As a joke, she expressed that college was her only option unless she invented something, which she stated was unlikely. She stressed how the successful completion of a bachelor’s degree would assist her in the goal of attaining monetary growth and stability.

**College choice approach varied during the process.** Dana did not always approach the college choice process with the intent of participating in college athletics. As she began thinking about institutions she would attend, she was not confident that she would play sports in college. Therefore, her list of schools focused less on athletic aspirations and more on the general college experience. She contemplated the culture of institutions by considering how much fun it would be. She gave weight to institutions with winning football programs and prestigious business programs, with the notion that they would make her happy in college. She also considered how nice it would be to have friends that went to the same institution. Dana, however, categorized these college choice factors as “nothing of any true substance.”

In addition to the “quirky” college choice factors she considered, she assembled her list of colleges in an unsystematic way by excluding universities for random reasons. Many of these reasons had nothing to do with the institution or academia. She explained,

I’m a very picky person and I always found something wrong. I always found something wrong, like the Wal-Mart is too far away, or this is a school in the middle of nowhere, or they don’t have one of my favorite fast food restaurants. It was always something weird like, “I can’t live here for four years or maybe five.”
She did not experience much pressure from her immediate family, so she proceeded with the idea that her college choice process would be a personal task. She said, “I didn’t really feel pressure, cause at home school wasn’t really a big deal…it was more like a self-motivation thing rather than anything else.” Dana came from a single-parent household and explained that her mom did not have any money saved for her to attend college. As her own best advocate in the college choice process, she moved forward with the one thing she was certain would gain her financial access: volleyball. After looking at the financial responsibility of attending college and her athletic skill level, she quickly made the decision to narrow her institutional search to fit her athletic ability in volleyball, crossing off bigger NCAA Division I dream schools, like Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. She explained, “I did not have a good enough skill level to play at those places and get a scholarship.”

**Looking for help in the pursuit of a future in collegiate athletics.** Dana’s proactive approach to athletic recruitment was extensive. She began her junior year of high school by documenting her volleyball talent on film. She would ask the advice of her teammates’ parents who were also actively participating in their daughters’ recruitment processes. She borrowed homemade game film and other videos that highlighted her abilities to assemble her own recruiting video, which she posted on www.ncsasports.org website. In addition, she sent out those same recruiting videos and stats to universities and colleges in hopes of gaining recognition as an essential player. She said that the method of choosing which institutions to send the videos to was “random,” in hopes to gain as much interest as possible. Coaches responded to Dana’s
emails and would follow up by calling her and taking trips to see her at volleyball tournaments.

Athletic recruitment was not a foreign concept to Dana. Most of her teammates, past and present, underwent the same processes and would share some of the experiences and information with her. However, her agitation and frustration for the process was apparent while expressing that she could have used more help with the process, even though she was around good players who were being recruited athletically to play in college as well. She said, “it’s kind of like a guessing game, honestly, but I kind of went off what other people said.”

Dana thought she should have received a little more help from her coaches during the recruiting process. Even though they encouraged her to pursue a volleyball career in college, they never took a hands-on approach. She recalled, “they [her club coaches] didn’t talk to the recruiters for us unless the recruiters actually came up to them and asked them about us, but they didn’t really help us do anything.” She knew she was not getting the type of assistance she needed from her club coaches, so she asked her high school coach to help her out. Dana loved her high school coach who resembled a motherly figure by pushing the importance of grades and eligibility for collegiate play, leaving the importance of recruiting to club coaches. Dana believed that help should have been offered by her coaches and given freely to her in support of her college selection process. She realized that this type of help was not realistic and consequently determined that recruitment would be her responsibility.
Researching interested institutions. As Dana received responses from interested coaches, she marked the institution as one to investigate and did the necessary research to learn more about the college and their athletic programs. She used a specific website that she could not recall to research what others had to say about the institution. It was important for her to find formal information that the schools offered on their own websites and informal opinions coming from individuals who had experiences at the institutions. While this process continued into her last year of high school, she finally made some hard choices and limited the schools she was seriously considering for enrollment based on her athletic ability and which schools offered her athletic aid. She said,

My senior year I really narrowed it down to the schools I had been talking to and I’d made a small list of schools that I really liked and the areas that I really liked and the coaches and the teams and the programs and… [her current school] ended up being at the top of that list.

Realizing that after graduating with a bachelor’s degree she would be on her own to thrive in the professional world, she held education and program prestige at the very highest of her choice priorities. Additional factors that played the most influential role in her final college choice decision were how good the athletic program was and where the school was located.

She explained that the hardest piece of the entire process was simply the choice. She knew what she wanted in a university and she checked for those requirements while conducting research. She had an idea on how to market her athletic talents to attract
athletic scholarships for monetary support, however, finding the right college to pursue her dreams, in her opinion, “was probably the hardest thing to do.”

Choosing to attend the only school she visited for athletics. Dana visited a few schools in her area just to see what they had to offer, she went on general campus visits lead by the admissions office for two that she could recall. In addition to those two, she also went on three other campus visits that her high school organized. She explained how alike the campus visits were. They showed her the dorms, the classrooms, and spoke to them in the auditorium but this discussion did not amount to the excitement she showed when speaking about the visit at her current institution. She recalled,

I stayed the night in the dorm with one of the girls on the team. I met the team. I played with the team. I met professors. I met advisors… we talked about the cost of going there and we talked about the different programs that were offered and my majors that I wanted to do and how… [the school] worked because… [it] was different from other schools and the classes you took- You didn’t do two years of your basics and then move into stuff for your major. It was like every class you took applied to your major somehow. So, I thought that was really cool and I liked that a lot, yeah.

Other schools that were interested in her were forced to visit with her virtually through live video chat. The visit to her current institution was the only athletic official visit she went on due to family issues. She explained that her mother was injured in a motorcycle accident, making it was hard for her family to find the funds necessary to travel since every school Dana considered was out-of-state.
Dana found comfort in her current institution after the visit. She explained, “I wanted to experience something new and all my little checks on my checklist got checked off.” She felt confident with the coaches, her future teammates, and the program from an athletic point of view. In addition, she loved the environment and the fact that she was not close to home. With a real experience of what life would be like at her current institution, she signed the national letter of intent, committing to play the upcoming Fall season.

**Summary.** Dana began her college search with big locational aspirations and lofty institutional goals. Coming from a high school where college was the normal transition for graduates, Dana’s initial approach to her college selection was inclusive, rather than deductive. When she realized that searching for colleges would be more of an independent venture, she relied on what she knew from former teammates to aid in athletic recruitment, which resulted in financial resources that made access to higher education possible. The athletic profile she submitted on the internet allowed for college coaches to pursue her through open access to stats, highlight videos, and game film. After a few general, academic visits to local institutions, she finally took an athletic official visit to the NCAA Division II institution in West Virginia that she now calls home.

**Emory**

Emory was a 19-year-old, Hispanic, female from Venezuela entering her sophomore year in college and working on her sports business degree. As the only international student who participated in the study, Emory brought a necessary and new aspect to the research data.
Emory was shy when she began to introduce herself to me during her interview. As she continued in the conversation her expressions became deeper and more enthusiastic. Anyone listening to our conversation would have felt her emotions through her tone, which varied from excitement to sadness. She experienced an entire spectrum of emotions during her college choice stemming from negative and positive moments of the process. The opportunity to study in the United States, participate in collegiate athletics, receive a degree, and potentially make a better life for her family were the best parts of her experience.

Not much focus was placed on sports in her home country. She felt that to do the things she loved and get acknowledgement for them, she would have to attend college in a different country, like the United States or Spain. The passion for her future career feeds off her athletic talents. She spoke of plans to start a company that aids in the advocacy of triathletes and she believes that her experience as an American collegiate athlete and subsequent bachelor’s degree will help her achieve her dream.

Along her college choice journey, she was challenged by financial issues initiated by her country’s government and their unwillingness to provide her with American dollars to pay tuition. So much so, that Emory is almost required to stay in the States full time, working in the Summer months to earn U.S. currency for her remaining college tuition bill not covered by her athletic and academic scholarship. The inability to travel home causes homesickness for Emory. Coupled with a difficult transition to the American culture, Emory showed some feelings of depression during the interview, which spoke to how hard it really is to leave family, friends, culture, and country as an
international student. However, with the help and support of her mother, father, aunt, and new school, she made it past those cross roads and is now thriving with a very interesting college choice story to tell.

**Presence of strong family support and desire to help them.** Emory explained that in her country, families choose to send their children to free public schools or private schools with an associated tuition. The one she attended was not the most expensive but still a “good school.” Her high school prepared her sufficiently for college level coursework, and her passion for pursuing college stemmed from her ideas that a degree would benefit the future of her family. Many of her initial statements concerning the disposition phase of college choice were focused on helping her family. She explained in the interview that her home country is not well off. There is a shortage of food, the government is corrupt, and if her family wanted to leave the country, she wanted to be in a place where she could help. She said, “I’m the one who’s going to help them to do that because they have been helping me a lot. So now it’s going to be my turn to help them.”

Realizing the magnitude of her college decision she said, “I think it’s like the biggest opportunity I’ve ever had… I need to get my education… and I want to achieve everything that I want to… help my family and to make them proud.”

Her decision to attend college was embedded in the idea that those who attend and complete college would be successful. This idea came from her parents and historical figures from her country. Her parents always spoke to her about what knowledge meant to them. They insisted that if Emory went to college she would be successful. Emory recalled them making statements such as, “you need to get an education because
education equals success” and “if you want to get a good job, you need your education, because successful people are going to hire successful… employees and to be a successful person, you need your college degree.” In explaining how important a higher education is to her, she mentioned recalled, “there was this person, 200 years ago that said ‘education is what’s going to drive you to success.” A clear push and support from her environment allowed Emory to see the potential benefits of human capital for those who chose to further their knowledge. Emory bought into these ideas with the decision to pursue higher education in hopes of building a company that supports triathletes.

**Her love for sports led her to the United States.** One thing that Emory exuded during our conversation was her love of sports. Not only does she love to participate in athletics, she also plans to use that passion to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors. Coordinating sports into the educational system is not common in Venezuela like it is in the U.S. She had the opportunity to play volleyball and basketball recreationally at her high school, but athletics were not offered competitively. Emory had to make her own accommodations to partake in the athletic events she loved the most such as swimming, biking, and running.

As she began to entertain the idea of attending college, she admired the way that American colleges and universities showcased athletics. Growing up as an athlete in an environment that does not openly honor and promote athletics, Emory decided that she wanted to be a part of a program that was supported during college. However, she could not recall any colleges in her home country that offered that type of experience. She said, “I want to go there [United States of America]. I want people to notice me running… that
was my motivation.” She acknowledged that the sole reason she chose to be an international student pursuing her college degree in the United States was to participate in collegiate athletics. American schools place an emphasis on athletics by equipping their secondary schools and colleges with varsity teams and supporting departments that facilitate sporting events. Emory missed out on that type of environment and wanted to engage in her favorite hobbies during her college career. These aspirations led to a college choice decision that was centered around finding the right institution that would also accept her into their athletic program and provide her with an athletic scholarship.

A recruiting organization facilitated her college search. With the clear goal of moving to the U.S. for her undergraduate studies, she did not waste time finding resources to help her. She heard of an organization that helped students from her country study abroad, so she took advantage of that local resource. She was a junior in high school when she and her parents sat down with the recruiting agency to talk about international and U.S. collegiate requirements such standardized academic and language tests. EduSport, an organization dedicated to getting prospective student-athletes noticed by colleges, made classes available to students to get their standardized test scores and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores high enough to meet minimum requirements for admission and athletic scholarships. Emory took advantage of all of those classes her senior year, which made quite the workload for her.

They also informed her of the variety of scholarships that could be awarded to her if she chose the right institution. She said, “they promote us. They send the emails to the universities, ‘hey, this is…[Emory]. Her snapshot is attached to this email.’ In the snap
shot is everything, my GPA, my address, my awards, everything.” In fact, the first communication that came from her current institution was in response to EduSport sending the institution her educational information. An admission’s counselor from the school she currently attends emailed Emory directly to introduce her to the university. When Emory realized that it was an institution she would like to pursue, she mentioned it to EduSport and they set up a connection between her and her coach.

Although members did not have to be athletes to join this company, their focus was on marketing members to receive athletic financial aid offers from international institutions. Emory explained that attending international institutions to pursue a post-secondary education was more affordable as an athlete since there was a possibility for athletic aid. She aimed to use her athletic talents as financial access to the institution she chose.

In addition to the support and promotion they provided, EduSport encouraged their members to use supplementary websites to peruse and explore their educational options. One site Emory found useful was College Board. Emory used College Board at the beginning of her institutional search by entering criteria, which filtered the most relative schools. She had the opportunity to enter factors concerning athletic, academics, campus culture, location, etc. When she received the list of institutions that met her qualifications she applied to every institution on her list.

Emory understood that it was a very difficult process for students to study outside of their country, which prompted her interest in EduSport. From an institutional point of view, a student from Venezuela must be able to thrive in an American college or
university. Personally, it is important for international students to acquire as much institutional financial aid as possible, leaving less of a burden for them and their families. Emory knew that EduSport could help her exhaust the college search until she found a school that fit their personal and financial needs. They recommended that she complete a thorough investigation and kept her options open in case the opportunity for a larger financial aid package presented itself at another institution. With advice from EduSport, and given her financial situation, she continued her search for schools who offered her the most in financial aid.

**Geographic and financial barriers prevent campus visits.** Emory only visited one school during her college choice process because it was hard for her to find the financial means to travel back and forth to the states. Her only institutional visit was with a NCAA Division I university in Florida. EduSport helped her set up this unofficial visit with the school while she was on vacation with her family in the States. They also reached out to two other schools Emory wanted to visit, but the institutions did not get back to her in time to make the travel arrangements while in the United States. She loved the University in Florida; however, they could not offer her the type of athletic aid she needed to attend. After realizing how expensive it was going to be attend the institution she decided to continue her institutional search.

**Financial hardships at her choice institution.** The track coach of her current institution replied when EduSport contacted him. She appreciated the reciprocated interest her school had in her because at that point she was doing most of the work communicating with colleges. She explained that it was nice to have a school so
interested in her. Supplemented by the athletic scholarship offer, she put her current institution at the top of her list. She said, “if you are that interested in someone, it’s because you really want them to go to your university, or to run for you, or to come here.” She also believed that the amount of athletic aid her coach was offering was relative to their interest in her athletic talents, which served as her motivation to attend. After deliberating with her advisors at EduSport they determined that it was a good amount and she moved forward with finalizing her selection.

To attend the university who offered her the most in athletic aid, she would also have to do her very best on the SAT to attain a supplemental academic scholarship. She took the SAT three different times after her coach advised her that the only way she would be able to receive any more aid from the school was to earn it through academic scholarships. She did not have enough money saved for post-secondary education, so Emory stayed in her home country the Fall semester of what would have been her freshman year so that she could study, achieve a higher score on the SAT, and earn a larger academic scholarship, which she did.

As an international student, Emory does not receive federal financial aid or assistance from the American government. She also did not have the opportunity to request or receive financial support from her own government. Therefore, Emory worked hard to get the largest athletic and academic scholarships offered at her current institution. The financial situation in her country is poor. When money is earned in her country, they receive it in their currency. To apply it towards tuition in the United States, she had to apply to her country’s government to receive U.S. dollars. This process was
extensive. In her country, it was extremely rare and nearly impossible for common people to successfully obtain legal U.S. currency from the government.

She proceeded with the necessary requirements and her family helped her with the application process for U.S. dollars in her country, but she was denied. Emory attempted to reapply when the opportunity was available but she was turned down again. She mentioned during our interview an alternative way of obtaining dollars, which was extremely costly, unsafe, and illegal. With the semester fast approaching, Emory made her college choice commitment and decided to work in the U.S. year-round to pay for additional educational expenses. She said,

My parents paid for my first semester. My second semester my aunt gave me around 3,000 [dollars] to pay maybe half, maybe less and I worked the entire summer, this summer to get the money and pay for the last semester which is spring 2016 and now I need to figure out how I’m going to pay Fall 2016, which is this semester.

While Emory laid out the details of her unfortunate financial circumstances, it was clear that the entire process took a toll on her. She felt the pressure of time passing while at home taking standardized test and applying for U.S. dollars. Through her decision to attend her current institution, she committed to a complicated financial situation for herself as well.

**Getting to West Virginia took precedence.** She grew up knowing that after high school she would go to college, but she explained during our conversation that she was not familiar with higher education. She said, “I didn’t know too much. I just knew I
needed to get my education. My college degree.” Although she had a good idea of what she wanted to do and what her interests were, she was still confused about her major when she made it to West Virginia. She explained,

   I was not really sure. I wasn’t sure in what I wanted, in my future, what to do. So, I came here with a major, athletic training, and I did one semester and my second semester I changed it to sport business because I made up my mind.

Before she physically made it to West Virginia from Venezuela, she did not spend too much time on deciding a major. She focused most of her efforts on finding a school that offered her the financial support she needed and making financial arrangements. Emory initially pursued a major that she thought would be beneficial to her. She did not have any conversations with higher education officials or advocates to discuss the recommended routes to achieve her future professional dreams. Emory self-reflected once she arrived in West Virginia and calculated her educational goals at that time. Emory explained,

   My vision is get my degree in sport business with a minor in sport psychology and I want to take my master in athletic training because I would like to have my own company for triathletes because I don’t really know of many.

Emory streamlined her educational and career goals during her first semester and successfully switched majors with little setback.

**Summary.** Emory’s college choice experience was different from any other story I had heard. It was clear to her that she wanted to attend college in a place that supported athletics, so she pursued institutions outside of her country. She began her college choice
experience by joining an organization that helped students through the process. With the guidance and assistance of an experienced organization, Emory took classes, researched colleges, and consulted with expert advisors. The company advocated on behalf of their clients landing Emory an opportunity she could not turn down with the university she attends currently. She never went on a visit to this institution. In fact, the expense of visiting colleges outside of her country was so extreme that she only went on one college visit altogether. She set herself back a semester to score higher on qualifying exams for academic scholarships. She worked hard and finally felt that she could afford the school where she chose to study abroad. Her country made it hard for her to come up with the rest of the money, not because she did not have it, but because it was not in the form of U.S. dollars. The stress that came with her financial situation surmounted before finally landing in West Virginia. She is content at her current university and with a clear vision for her future Emory plans to enroll in a Master’s degree program shortly after she finishes her bachelor’s degree.

Zoe

Zoe is a 20-year-old, junior, transfer student from California who identifies as a Native Pacific Islander. She made her way to West Virginia from the state of California to play softball for her remaining two year of athletic eligibility. She explained that she was no stranger to adversity since her parents decided to divorce when Zoe was in the third grade. She viewed this time of her life optimistically by explaining that the hardship of moving back and forth between households helped her look positively at situations and remain flexible. She originally lived with her mother in California while she was making
the decision to pursue higher education and transitioned into her father’s household recently.

Zoe was very aware of her first-generation status and how that affected her from the viewpoint of others. She was determined to be a good role model for her younger brother and cousins by being the first to enroll in a post-secondary institution. Finding a way for her to set an example for her family was important to her and she expressed that being a student-athlete “opened a lot more doors” for her collegiately.

In high school, she was a proactive student, taking college level courses to give her a head start. Even though she scored well above the SAT requirements for a community college education (1500), she took an opportunity to play softball and started her collegiate studies at a community college in Texas. Once she finished her associate’s degree, she committed to play softball at her current four-year institution.

Zoe had and energetic, free spirit upon meeting her. Since the interview occurred on her campus during the first week of the Fall semester, she had only been on campus for a few days. She had a very broad idea of what her new university was like, but was enthusiastic about the transition. None-the-less, her satisfaction with her current institution showed through her big smile and complimentary, positive attitude. Her excitement for her new environment was contagious as she explained that she knew enough about the institution to make the decision to come to West Virginia, but planned to actively learn more about her surroundings. Nevertheless, she commented on the experience she had thus far and added essential commentary to the college choice process of first-generation, transfer, student-athletes.
Certain that her career goals would lead to economic stability. Zoe was active in high school. She participated in a plethora of different activities, clubs, and programs, making her well-rounded and highly marketable for post-secondary studies. These activities collectively set the backdrop for her ambitions. After exploring her options in high school, she determined that communication within the deaf culture was a passion of hers. She explained her affinity for her major with excitement and persistence, claiming that she went against the grain in high school to pursue sign language as a requirement for graduation when everyone else chose to study Spanish. She chose communications as her major area of study in college and plans to take sign language at home. Zoe also has an alternative plan if things do not fall into place after graduation. She explained, “communications is broad. So, if my interpreting thing doesn’t work out then I’ll probably go into advertising or business management and stuff like that.”

She acknowledged that college was the key to obtaining a good job. Taking advantage of higher education, for her, meant that she would not have to worry about unemployment. Her concern for the economy was noted in her explanation of how she felt degrees benefitted individuals. She said,

College gets jobs. Easier said than done, I mean. There’s a lot of majors that you chose now-a-days where they don’t help you. Like the jobs are going down and down and everything is getting more and more expensive…. You can’t afford to live without going to college.

She had the support of her family and mentioned that her mom and dad spoke to her originally about attending college. Just knowing her lifetime career goals and trying
to reach those goals by pursuing a higher education made it seem possible for her to help her family. She said that the thought of being financially successful upon graduation “helps me push forward into actually wanting to go to college and wanting to be successful and help out my family as much as possible when it comes down to it.”

**Working to understand diversity and resolve adversity.** Zoe did not know much about college. She realized it would be different; different cultures, populations, academic standards, etc. She did not have any clear views on what college would entail. She said, “it’s going to be harder. A lot of diversity and adversity. That’s all I knew. It’s a big step. That’s all I knew.” Zoe thought that if an individual had “good grades and athletic skills” they could make it in college. Her mother instilled a code of work ethic that encompassed school and softball, making her believe that anything is possible if she put in the work. Zoe recalled her mother saying, “you need to work harder than anyone else. You need to work hard to get what you want. No one is going to give it to you.” She believed that athletic ability may get an individual recognized and recruited, but no one would be able to survive college without putting in academic effort. She said,

You can’t just think your skills are going to take you there. You can’t fail out of high school and get there. So, growing up it was always work hard, work hard, work hard. I think that helped a lot.

Zoe used that type of mentality in her pursuit for the right school and her entire college choice story was infused with her love of athletics. She finalized both of her college choice decisions by focusing on softball. She used the success that resulted from hard work to find schools that could offer her the most in athletic financial aid, and based her
college choice decisions off who wanted her to play for them the most. Athletic aid through softball provided her with access to higher education institutions. She stated, “softball’s actually been a really big help in my life.”

**Keeping college debt free.** Zoe was lucky to be a “signed” junior high school athlete. She was first spotted on the field by a community college recruiter and coach during a winter recreational game. She originally did not believe that she would play in college because of her inability to participate in out-of-season travel softball. She felt that she was at a disadvantage for getting noticed as a potential college athlete because her family could not afford the associated fees for travel ball in her area. With an opportunity to receive an athletic scholarship at her fingertips, Zoe kept in contact with the coach and agreed to participate in an unsigned all-star game. It was there that she impressed the community college coach and entertained their offer for an athletic scholarship. Her excitement was heightened by the fact that her and her mother did not think that Zoe would have the opportunity to play in college.

The second time around, Zoe had to search to find a college that was going to offer her what she needed to keep her time in college debt-free. A teammate at Zoe’s community college mentioned that the university she was pursuing was still looking for additional players and had scholarship money left in their budget. In a straightforward conversation with the softball coach he said, “I can offer you right here, and right now, and here’s the money I can offer you.” The other universities Zoe was looking at either had full rosters or they could not offer her enough money to attend. Even though they were closer to home, which was an admirable characteristic, Zoe decided that the
financial responsibility associated with being an out-of-state “walk-on” was not something she could afford. Therefore, her reply to the offer was very simple, “if you can offer what you say you’re offering, I’ll come.” After a little bit of communication with the softball coach, she determined that the NCAA Division II university in West Virginia would be the one she attended to complete her bachelor’s degree.

Zoe understood the expenses of a college visit and determined that they were just not affordable for her. She said, “financials, plane tickets, driving. Everything was so much money and so far.” She explained to the West Virginia coach that she did not need to visit to sign the national letter of intent. She was confident in her financial aid offer but still described her choice as “pretty risky.” She told her coach that she did not need a visit to attend. She realized that she would need to provide funds for travel and determined that an $800 plane ticket for a two-day visit was out of her budget. The coach at her current university encouraged Zoe to move forward with the commitment process if she was comfortable in doing so without a visit. She said, “he was like, ‘well, you know, if you say you can sign without visiting, I’m all for it, just send me a video of you hitting.’” After review of the tape, the coach followed through with signatures on the necessary documents to seal the recruiting and commitment process.

Zoe still has a small balance with her university, but claims that the amount of money she pays to attend her current university is “nothing compared to a lot of places.” With the help of softball and a Pell grant, Zoe made it to her third year of college completely debt free. She was proud and acknowledged the fact that she has not had to take out any loans to pay for college thus far.
**Two times the experience.** When applying to college out of high school, the community college that Zoe attended her freshman and sophomore years was the only one she made mention of. Zoe committed early to that school, which eliminated parts of the college choice search phase in the process. She did not apply anywhere else coming out of high school and she also did not visit the community college before enrolling.

Her second college choice story was quite different from her first. After reaching out to a few different big schools, she still did not find the financial aid she was looking for. She applied to four different schools and visited two. She took the opportunity with her community college teammates to see one school while traveling for a softball game, and the other visit she took independently. While taking an unofficial athletic visit to a university in Texas, she received some undesirable feedback stating that for her to be on the team she would have to work to become a left-handed batter. She appreciated the offer, however, she turned it down realizing that it would be a very hard transition with two years left to play. In addition, her potential teammates were not as welcoming as she hoped. Zoe had no problem crossing that institution off her college choice list. Zoe was proactive in her second college choice search. She emailed multiple coaches and found herself in communication with the coach at her current institution after encouragement from a former teammate to contact him. She recalled the coach saying,

> You know; I haven’t seen much of you. I never really watched you play. I’ve only seen a video from regionals like two years ago, but I want you on this team…. you should look into our education programs first.
He stayed in close contact with her throughout the next couple weeks and presented her with a financial aid package that included an athletic scholarship. With the coach’s interest, an academic and athletic scholarship offer on the table, and no means to make a visit to West Virginia, she consulted her parents briefly. She said, “I told my mom about it. I was like ‘I got to ask my mom first, get her permission.’ So, I called her and she was like, ‘why, didn’t you just sign, like just go?’” Shortly thereafter, Zoe committed to begin her junior year at a NCAA Division II school in the state of West Virginia.

Even though contact with her current school was initiated by softball, she completed the necessary research to ensure her second college choice was right for her as well. She explained that academics precede athletics. While looking at the communications program, she found their coursework and associated internship opportunities appealing.

During her second college search, she considered multiple universities, completed background research on their educational programs and spoke to more representatives of the schools. In comparison to Zoe’s first experience with college choice, she described the second decision as more extensive and thorough.

**Summary.** As a transfer student, Zoe experienced the college choice process two different times; once from high school to community college and again from community college to a four-year degree awarding institution. Although her two experiences were different, they were both lead by her aspirations to play college softball for four years. She used her athletic ability to avoid college debt and plans to keep it that way. She made comparisons of the two institutions as being “athletic-based,” which is something she
loved about her community college in Texas and looked forward to her new school in West Virginia stating that she is “eager to see how many come to support the Softball team here.” Although softball provided her financial access to each of these institutions, her career goal of becoming a sign language interpreter helped her establish educational standards for the institution. She feels that completing her collegiate goals and objectives will break the first-generation circle and set a standard for the young family members in her life. She gives credit to her family dynamic for allowing her to view adversities as opportunities, so no matter what she faces in her new West Virginia home, she is equipped to “figure it out.”

**Erin**

Erin is a 20-year-old, white, female who appeared small in stature but big at heart. Catching Erin in action at the front of the library of her current institution was beneficial. Her interaction with the students and staff behind the desk was delightful to watch. Anyone could tell that Erin was a well-liked and friendly face on her campus. She paid the same courtesy to me as we climbed a couple flights of stairs to a private meeting room. She seemed excited to contribute her experiences of the college choice process.

She came to West Virginia from a small high school in Pennsylvania, with the original goal of getting away from her hometown. She participated in track and field throughout high school and had hopes to continue running in college, but did not originally place preference on colleges based on her athletic ambitions.

She was an exceptional student, self-reporting a high grade point average and the largest academic scholarship at her institution based on high school academic
performance. Neither of her parents attended college and her sister chose not to attend as well. Therefore, Erin did not have any expectations for college. She said, “I didn’t have people that I knew went to college. I didn’t have any of their stories coming in…. I really had no concrete knowledge of what to expect.” Her first-generation student status fueled her anxiety about the experience she would have with professors and her collegiate track and field coaches.

Initially, Erin had big plans to attend the University of North Carolina – Greensboro (UNC-Greensboro), but after her first and only official athletic visit to her current institution, she was certain that she would be happiest as a student-athlete at a smaller school in West Virginia. Her research and recent life experiences shaped her college decision and choice to pursue a degree in elementary education. Eventually, she connected with a welcoming family of teammates and friends.

**Needed a college degree for the fields she was interested in.** Each of the three different phases of college choice for Erin was affected by her personal experiences. In deciding to pursue a degree, she understood the restricted career choices of individuals who did not have a college degree and determined that what she wanted to do with her life required education beyond high school. She said, “neither of my parents went to college, so I’ve seen that kind of path. Knowing what jobs are out there for that, not very many. Nothing I was interested in doing…. So, that got me interested in college.”

Her parents spoke to her about going to college even though they did not attend themselves. They also supported the choice of her older sister not to go, so they would
not have been justified in pushing Erin to pursue higher education. Erin decided for herself that earning a bachelor’s degree was something she desired.

One necessity in Erin’s choice college was that the institution had to have three different majors. She said, “I was trying to find a school that had biology, that had business management, had elementary education, that way if I changed my mind I wouldn’t have to transfer schools.” Erin had no idea which one of these majors she was most passionate about until she began taking courses.

**Used a website as opposed to a college counselor in the search phase.** Late in Erin’s high school career, her school received funding for a college advisor, which had the entire school excited about their graduates pursuing college degrees. Administrators, teachers, and other advocates of post-secondary education began to sit down with students to establish plans for furthering their education, but by the time her school’s college advisor was implemented, she was deep into her research and college search.

The only thing Erin took advantage of was the recommended internet tools and websites to assemble her school choice list. She used College Board to find institutions that fit her criteria for a smaller institution away from home and began to set up college visits with admissions departments of those schools. She felt like her resources were scare. She commented, “it was kind of just figuring everything out on your own.”

Options in a post-secondary school were not something she or any of her family members ever had to consider either. She said, “I literally had no idea what I wanted in a school at that point.” The College Board website helped her with this by listing criteria to choose from and she picked accordingly. These criteria were applied to a nationwide
search and her results lead her to start researching and visiting schools. Consequently, Erin visited seven different institutions in her search. All of them varied greatly in size, location, academics, and athletics.

**Track programs were important in college choice.** She expressed how important sports were to her concerning her college selection, so she wanted to have the option to run track if she so chose. She explained, “I’ve done sports since 6 [years old]. Being un-athletic would have been very weird for me.” Her high school track coach was the one who inspired her athletic dreams the most. She played soccer for her school originally until a family friend, who was also the track coach, persuaded her to try it for a season. She fell in love with the sport and continued to set goals on and off the track, which were supported by her teammates and coaches. She said, “he pushed us to do our best and that’s really what got me to love the sport, was him encouraging us, cause track is all about… individual goals and setting stuff for yourself because it is an individual sport.” Her ambition to run in college grew over time until she realized that she would be interested in joining a track team if she found a school where she wanted to run.

**College visits helped to limit choices.** Before Erin went on an athletic official visit to her current institution, she self-composed a list from the information she retrieved on the College Board website and planned six other unofficial college visits. She was also contacted by other schools and sent miscellaneous marketing paraphernalia, but they were not quite what she was looking for. Being far enough from home, but close enough to return in case of an emergency was one of her essential factors.
With her parents by her side, she began traveling through Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and West Virginia to gain a little insight about the colleges on her list. The feedback she gave about each institution she visited was thorough, including good and bad details about each institution. However, the negative comments were dismissive in nature, excluding those institutions from the search. One of the institutions she visited was small, just like her hometown, but had a tuition twice the amount of her current institution. It was also in a suburb of Philadelphia, which was just too big for her and not far enough away. They also did not have a track team and through the college choice process, that became a big factor for Erin.

The next school she mentioned was the exact opposite of the first. She loved the big-time feel of the athletic resources, but did not find the location appealing. The things she enjoyed about the institution were that they were collaborative in the community, allowing students to use their meal plan money at different restaurants in the area, however, she did not feel comfortable exploring the area.

While visiting another school, an admissions counselor mentioned how sports were important to the institution and that “game day” was a big deal. Erin realized that she found value in a school’s support for athletics. Exploring this school further, she noticed that the buildings were not up to date. Since she was also looking for a more modern campus, she quickly crossed that one off the list.

As she told her stories about the institutions she visited, she continued to reference her current institution. In her comparisons, the affinity and admiration she has
for her school was clear. She had an experience at her current institution that was unmatched by her previous visits. She explained,

Getting to meet the coach. Getting to see him, talk to him and just having him email and go “Hey. What’s up” and “How’s your summer going?” Just kind of made that experience completely different…. I automatically got in with the running people. To just having that family to come right into.

**Track dreams take over on her official athletic visit.** Erin participated in high school summer track camps and listened to the advice from coaches and other runners on how to get recruited. While searching for the right institution she wanted the option to run, so she looked for schools who had track and field programs. However, her college choice was not solely dependent on track. She explained that when she went to visit universities her main objective was to see the school and what it had to offer. After returning from the visit she would submit her athletic and personal statistics to the school’s running program via their webpage.

The only official athletic visit she took was to her current institution. Before scheduling her visit, she contacted the coach, which is something she had never done before. The coach was delighted to have her at the school and made the necessary arrangements. Erin was astonished upon arrival when the coach was running late from practice and he left a gift card for her to get beverages from the campus coffee shop while she waited. This was not comparable to her other campus visits where she was one of many. When he arrived, he made a great first impression with his likable personality and energetic spirit. They continued by showing Erin the campus. The coach made sure Erin
had the full athletic experience, which helped her to realize what she could have in a school athletically. She enjoyed her personalized experience, which was very different from her expectations.

Initially, UNC-Greensboro was at the top of her list, but the visit to her current institution went well, so she began to look at her first choice differently. The institution was aesthetically attractive to Erin, but the magnitude of the campus posed a concern for her. She said, “It was a large campus. It was one that buses take you wherever. You’re going to drive across campus to your classes.” On her visit to the institution she was on a tour of approximately 30 other aspiring students and did not received the one-on-one experience she desired. She already began to see how her affinity for a small school and smaller atmosphere could benefit her. With the immediate attention of the coach, more intimate classroom sizes, and professors who afforded a more personalized experience, Erin saw her current school as a huge contender against her original choice in institution.

After the visit at her current institution, the track coach put together an athletic offer. While considering, she began to recap on the undesirable traits of her first choice. Ultimately, her decision came down to the college that she felt most excited about. She recalled how she came to her final college choice decision,

When I got the letter in the mail for [my school], it was the only one I was nervous to open…. I got approved to all the colleges, but for some reason when I pulled that one out of the mail and saw it was from… [current institution], I was like “oh geeze, what’s it going to say?” Obviously, that’s the school I wanted. That’s the only one I had feelings towards when I got the letter.
The possibility to participate in collegiate athletics drove Erin’s excitement for her choice institution. She said with confidence that track was the deciding factor in her college choice.

**Summary.** Erin began her college search in a way that was very impersonal. At the start of her experience, she used a website to compile a list of institutions. With the help of her parents, she visited the schools in her area that fit her desired characteristics. Even though she aspired to pursue athletics in college, she never went on an official athletic visit until she changed her approach to her college search. The one college track coach that she contacted before her visit showed her that campus visits could be fun and personable. This led her to question her original desires of a big public university in North Carolina and settle for a smaller, NCAA Division II, athletic-based institution in West Virginia. While receiving the response to her college application, an anxious mind had her convinced that her current institution was where she needed to be.

**Taryn**

Taryn is a 19-year-old, white, female from Florida beginning her sophomore year in the business administration program. Before coming her current institution, Taryn lived with her mom who was also her biggest advocate to attend college. She said, “I always had my mom telling me ‘college, college, college. You need to get a degree to be successful. There’s not much you can do without one.’” Growing up she saw how her parents struggled. She felt like finding a job without a degree would be a hard thing to do and remembered how it felt to be left alone while her parents worked long hours. She determined not to experience that for herself. Getting into college for her meant that she
would do something no one else in her family had done before and she was adamant on being the first.

She saw college as an opportunity to live a better life, but she did not use academics as a means of access. Her high school experiences were full of stellar softball accolades as she played all four years and was very successful. She was not finished playing the sport she loved so she decided to continue her athletic journey in college. College softball was a dream of hers for quite some time.

She knew college would be hard and she was not looking forward to the school work. In fact, she stated, “school isn’t my thing.” She relied on her mom for encouraging words and she would always tell Taryn that she would struggle and it was expected, but people would be there to assist her. She knew that the next step in becoming the person she wanted to be in life was to find a college to attend. With encouragement from her mom, she knew that whatever academic troubles she faced, she would find a way through it if that meant she could continue to play a sport she loved a little while longer.

Taryn’s uneasiness in the predisposition phase of college choice stemmed from her idea that her high school was not as strict. She felt like she attained good education but was not prepared for the advanced curriculum and instruction of college courses. She was intimidated by higher education. She said, “I kind of didn’t want to do it, but I wanted to play and school isn’t my thing. I always wanted to play college softball. So, you obviously have to go to school and do the school part.” She planned to use softball as an educational resource as well, allowing coaches, teammates, and administration keep her on task and help her through her degree.
West Virginia just felt right. Taryn was presented with collegiate athletic offers before she found herself actively participating in the college search process, which set the tone for this phase in her college choice experience. She did not begin the college choice search phase until her junior year of high school and determined that it was late considering she was an athlete. Coaches contacted her with various athletic offers, mostly from community colleges in Florida, but these institutions were not what she was looking for. She sought help from a well-known recruiting website of the National Collegiate Scouting Association. Like other prospective student athletes, Taryn used this website to set up a profile and post stats and film. She also began to look into the institutions who set up their own profiles. After noticing that her current institution took a look at her page, she checked “interested” and then emailed the softball coach with additional videos and her schedule to watch her play. After initial communication with the coach, she went on an official athletic visit to her current institution where she got to meet with the players, eat with the coaches, tour campus, and stay overnight in the dormitories. She explained, “it was a good time.”

The state of West Virginia and the school she was pursuing met specific requirements she prioritized in her college choice. One of her friends was recruited to play softball for the institution right out of high school, so she would have an immediate comrade. Furthermore, some of her family members live in the state and she had visited frequently when she was a child. She saw the state and institution as being sort of a home away from home. It was important to Taryn that she did not go to a Florida school. She said, “I want to experience it in a different atmosphere.”
Community college was not an appealing place. Erin did not want to have to go through the college choice process again. Some of her acquaintances chose community colleges after high school and determined that the extensive recruiting process was too much to partake in a second time. Taryn was recruited by some of the top community colleges in the State of Florida, but none of them were appealing to her based on their location and two-year athletic eligibility.

She did not go on any other official athletic visits. She did, however, take a tour while at a softball camp at the College of Central Florida. That was one of the community colleges considering Taryn as a softball prospect, but before they could get her to visit officially, the offer from her current institution was presented to her. Before she visited the other college, she knew that she wanted to go to her current school. She said,

I kind of had in my head once I got the offer from here and they were talking to me and they were interested I was kind of set with this school…. he called me and offered me…. I talked it over with my mom what they were offering and it was doable and called him back and told him I wanted to commit. Once I got the offer from here I turned down the other offers and applied here right away. It all went too fast. It really did.

Current institution is academically suitable. Schoolwork was never an interest of Taryn’s. She struggled in high school, taking intermediate courses in reading and never testing well. She took the ACT one time with a score that was just high enough for her to get accepted, and her GPA was just slightly above the cut-off point as well. With
scores high enough to get her into her choice institution, she did not put extra effort in to attaining higher scores.

High school teacher and administrators advocating for post-secondary education informed Taryn and the rest of the student body that college would be a big transition. They stressed the fact that classes would be harder and faculty would be strict on their requirements for attending class and turning in assignments. This presented anxiety for Taryn.

After completing research and attending her current institution for a visit she realized the student to faculty ratio was a quality she needed in an institution if she planned to be successful. She also felt comfortable that the university she chose to go to was a private university with a small student body made up of mainly student-athletes. Knowing the demographic of the institution allowed her to see that other students like her could be successful.

Although she pursued her current institution initially through athletics, she did mention a little bit about how she prepared herself academically for college. As upperclassmen in high school, their administration instituted a “college academy” where students could attend Nova Southern University for a college fairs, engage in conversations about college, and participate in quizzes to reveal personal strengths and recommended career paths that coincide with them. That in mind, she appreciated the academic qualities of her current institution as well. Smaller classroom sizes and individualized attention were characteristics she appreciated in her choice institution.
**Summary.** Taryn’s decision to go to college stemmed from her collegiate softball aspirations. After high school, Taryn’s main goal was to play the sport she loved for four more years. She knew that a college education would aid her in finding suitable jobs so she would not have to struggle as her parents did. After realizing she was behind in the recruiting process she chose to employ the internet for access to colleges and universities. While looking for the right institution, she prioritized location, classroom sizes, and four-year universities and found all those qualities in her current institution. In addition, she had the opportunity to join a former teammate of her. Taryn found value in a wide array of qualities at her current institution. Beginning with the coach’s interest in her, the campus academic environment, and the state itself, Taryn’s choice in college met her expectations and qualified for an institution where she could pursue her degree comfortably.

**Chapter Summary**

Seidman (2013) suggests that creating individual participant profiles “allows us to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis” (p.122). This chapter detailed personal accounts of the eight, first-generation student-athlete participants followed with thick, rich description to fully understand their respective college choice stories and why they chose to attend NCAA Division II institutions in the state of West Virginia.

Themes that demonstrate cohesiveness throughout these personal accounts make up the most important matters in the college choice process for these first-generation
student-athletes. These themes were grouped by individual and followed Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-step college choice process. Demographic information displayed via table depicts the type of participants involved. Individual case analysis in chapter four allows a thorough description of participant’s experiences to aid in the discussion of how practitioners, coaches, families, and other advocates of the population can help in the college choice of transitioning first-generation student-athletes. In addition to the individual cases analysis, it is essential to combine the experiences to develop an overall picture of college choice for first-generation student-athletes. A cross-case analysis of emerging themes outlines the discussion in chapter five.
Chapter 5: College Choice is Complex for First-Generation Student-Athletes

Understanding the college choice process for student-athletes who are first in their families to enroll in post-secondary institutions is essential in addressing issues such as access, affordability, retention, and degree completion for this population. Due to their athletic status, student athletes must manage additional college choice factors that the general student population does not consider. The literature suggests that when selecting a college or university, athletes often consider factors such as perception of the head coach/coaching staff and facilities (Klenosky et al., 2001 & Letawsky et al. 2003), open spots on the team, schedule, location/area, and friend(s) on the team, (Klenosky et al. 2001), and school’s sports tradition (Letawsky et al., 2003). Accordingly, questions guiding this research addressed what specific factors this population considers when making their institutional decisions and the specific ways in which these considerations influenced their final college decision. Findings from this study contribute to the knowledge of first-generation student-athlete college choice literature. This work also provides a platform for discussion in the fundamental areas of marketing, recruiting, application, and admission.

The accounts of these eight student-athletes illustrate the institutional choice process from a student’s viewpoint through semi-structured interviews. Within this chapter, individual cases of the study are compared in a cross-case analysis and presented as new knowledge. The research design and interview protocol were developed with guidance from Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model for college choice:
Predisposition, search, and choice. Figure 1 illustrates Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model of college choice.

![Three-phase college choice model](image)

*Figure 1. Three-phase college choice model (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987.)*

When considering the phases of the college choice process independently, several reoccurring themes were present within the collected data. Within the predisposition phase, prominent themes included self-awareness, perceived benefits, preconceptions, and support systems. The elements recorded in phase two of college choice were highly rooted in athletic aspirations, which was not the case in phase one. Participants experienced disquietude and financial influence while partaking in research and recruitment during the search phase of college choice as well. Overall, themes documented from the initiating steps of the college choice process led each of the eight participants to factors that ultimately guided their final institutional decision. These choice factors included athletics, money, location and size of the institution, campus culture, family, and prestige of degree program. Figure 2 presents the emerging characteristics of the predisposition and search phase, which lead to the final college choice factors in the choice phase.
Figure 2. Characteristics of college choice and final choice factors for first-generation student-athletes.

This chapter analyzes and compares each case within the study to better understand major themes within the phases of predisposition and search and reveals the comparative college choice factors from phase three. The predisposition phase is discussed first. This phase will address themes of self-awareness, preconceived benefits, preconceptions, and support systems that developed from participants’ recollection of this time. Secondly, feelings of disquietude, active research and recruitment, support systems, and the way finances affected this process will be addressed in the search phase. Finally, choice factors concerning athletics, money, campus culture and location, size of the institution, family, and degree program prestige are elaborated on to understand why participants chose their respective institutions.
Phase I: Predisposition

The predisposition phase of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) Three-phase model for college choice includes all accounts of the initial decision to pursue a post-secondary education. Data from this phase uncovers experiences concerning why participants decided to go to college, what they knew about post-secondary education, who helped them arrive at their decision to attend, and other influences that made an impact on that decision. This phase explores the following major themes: Self-awareness, perceived benefits, preconceptions, and support system. Within this section each of the above themes will be defined, insight into how these themes were developed is given, and examples of each from the collected data are provided. Figure 3 illustrates the major themes and supporting elements of the predisposition phase.
Self-awareness. First-generation students lack guidance by parents who have experienced the world of higher education first-hand. Accordingly, students must often navigate this process independently, given that parents or other family members are not equipped with the right information to provide the necessary support (Smith, 2008). Included within this independent navigation is the development of awareness about their academic abilities, career goals, financial situation, and future aspirations. Participants within this study each described experiences that led to their self-awareness. Sutton (2016) defined self-awareness as “the extent to which people are consciously aware of their internal states” (p.646). Self-awareness in the predisposition phase is relative in college choice literature of economically privileged and academically endowed students.
These matriculating students have the supportive knowledge and comfort to set educational and career goals for themselves, which is a characteristic of self-awareness. For this study’s participants, self-awareness developed because of their reflection and development of professional aspirations and career goals, which is unlike that of the wealthy and academically advanced student.

**Early ambition.** Despite being first-generation students, each participant mentioned having early ambitions to attend college. However, for each participant, these ambitions manifested themselves differently. For example, Anthony and Emory both recalled having the desire to attend college as early as their freshmen year in high school. In her words, Emory stated, “I grew up thinking that after high school, I need to go to college.” Having a vision for the future is a sign of self-awareness. Anthony and Emory’s early ambition to pursue education beyond secondary school provides support for the importance of self-awareness in the predisposition phase of college choice. It is hard to say when these participants would acquire an interest in college, if at all, without their interest at a young age.

**Career aspirations.** Six of the eight participants (Bianca, Gail, Dana, Zoe, Erin, and Taryn) attributed the importance of attending college and attending specific institutions to their career aspirations, which speaks to self-awareness. For these participants, career aspirations were a stronger influence than the desire to attend college. They collectively understood that to realize their career goals, a college degree would be necessary.
Dana, an 18-year old bi-racial female student-athlete knew that she would need a college degree to reach her career aspirations. She stated, “I wanted to be in the business world and I knew you had to go to college to be in that particular world.” Another participant, Taryn, a 19-year-old sophomore who is also in a business administration program, agreed with the necessity of a degree to attain future desirable positions. She claimed that even if she did not end up pursuing a career that required a bachelor’s degree, entering that type of position with one would place her higher in that field stating, “it still benefits no matter what.”

Erin discussed the importance of obtaining a degree to eventually secure a job that was appealing to her and her interests. Erin was not only aware that most employment opportunities would require a degree; she understood that all jobs that are appealing to her would require a degree. She contributed this awareness to seeing the experiences of her parents and how not having a degree can limit future employment opportunities. Erin went on to add, “I’m either going business management route or elementary education, so either way I had to go to school.” Even though Erin’s options are open at this stage in her college career, she is confident that upon completion, she will attain a job she enjoys because of her degree.

Gail, a 21-year-old senior noted during her interview her love for teaching as a driving force for her participation in higher education. For Gail, she was fully aware that to become a teacher she would need to have the appropriate academic credentials and training that could only be obtained by attending college. Zoe added to the career discussion that her passion for deaf studies and culture pushes her to have interest in
college. She is currently taking courses and majoring in communications, however, has plans to take sign language courses at home as well.

Bianca was also mindful of her career path when considering college. “I decided to go to college when I was young. I always knew I was going to go to college.” Experiences with her mom during the pregnancies of her younger siblings made her aware of her progressive academic and career goals. She stated,

When I was six, my mom had my first sibling and she would take me to her Ob-Gyn appointments and I said I wanted to be an Ob-Gyn at the age of six and I always had that dream and so I continued to pursue it.

She did not mention any other reason for deciding to attend college. Without the experience that opened her eyes to a career she wanted to pursue, it is hard to know if she would look at college the same.

**First-generation status.** In addition to future career goals. Erin, Zoe, and Taryn were aware of their first-generation college student statuses and used the associated idea of disadvantage to drive their early independent college aspirations. Taryn said, “I wanted to get into college as well because no one in my family ever made it. So, I wanted to be the first one to make it.” As a child, she watched her parents fight with the associated downfalls of not having a degree. Her parents dealt with a limited job market and often worked longer than full-time to keep the family afloat financially. Being aware of herself and her surroundings, she determined that her future would not be like that if she attained a post-secondary degree.
Zoe also felt a personal responsibility to set an example of academic achievement for her younger family members. She said,

It really pushed me because you want to be successful and I have a younger brother and younger cousins and I just want them to be able to do the same thing and be able to be like “well, she did it. I can do it.”

The awareness of her position as role-model to her younger family members pushed Zoe to attain achievements higher than those of her parents.

With no point of reference, Erin made decisions regarding her academic future through self-exploration. Since she did not have family members that were familiar with the college choice process, she was aware that this process would be self-motivated. She said, “It was kind of just figuring everything out on your own.” She did just that. Erin searched for and research colleges before coming up with a schedule of multiple campus visits to see first-hand what those institutions had to offer her. She did this all on her own without the knowledge of prior experience.

Participation in athletics. Only two out of the eight participants claimed that playing their sport in college served as a factor in deciding to attend college. When specifically asked, “what made you decide to go to college?” Anthony was aware that the main drive for his decision to go to college was football. He said, “well, football, of course. One of the ways I wanted to attend college was get an athletic scholarship.” He added, “yeah, college football was basically the big drive for me, which is why I started taking academics seriously.” Taryn was aware of her college motivation as well. She stated, “I always wanted to play college softball.” She was also aware of her lack of
academic affinity, but she knew if she wanted to play collegiate softball she would have to enroll in an institution of higher education. She said, “I kind of didn’t want to do it but I wanted to play and school isn’t my thing…. So, you obviously have to go to school and do the school part.”

All participants recollected present and future personal goals as a part of their decisions to attend college. Aspirations of being the first in their families to attain a post-secondary degree and setting examples for those to follow, achieving a desired career track, and following through with childhood dreams all showed accounts of self-awareness and led these participants to seek more information about higher education. Although they are all current student-athletes, sole athletic inspirations were only documented by two of the eight participants in the study.

**Perceived benefits.** Participants associated benefits with their decision to attend college. However, Bergerson (2009) stated in the college choice literature that first-generation students do not depict the benefits of higher education accurately. The associated disadvantages of being a first-generation student relate to inadequate information regarding the decision. Therefore, many of these students go through the predisposition phase without a clear understanding of all attainable benefits. Participants in this study made it through the predisposition phase from their ideas that enrolling in post-secondary education would provide access to an aspiring future, promote human capital, and/or allow them to help their families.

**Human capital.** Seven out of the eight research participants, Anthony, Bianca, Gail, Dana, Zoe, Erin, and Taryn, verbally documented personal benefits that
accompanied higher education. Anthony very strongly suggested that going to college meant he would not be a “bum.” After speaking with outside influences, he concluded that college was a spring board for his future. He said, “I heard that college could basically make or break you. It is going to be the most import time of your life that will sort of depict what the rest of your life is going to end up being.” He realized that college was an opportunity to gain profitable knowledge and build relationships with people who would help him attain his goals. Anthony explained,

There’s a lot of networking; a lot of contacts you can make through college that can help you out…. There’s a lot of people you can meet and a lot of experiences you can have in college that a lot of people don’t get to have, get to do because everybody doesn’t get to go to college.

Anthony saw networking as a form of social capital, which would eventually pay off for him as he progressed in his academic and career endeavors.

The other six participants shared ideas about how college would lead them to jobs, jobs would lead them to more money, more money would allow them to live the lifestyles they desired, and each of their statements showed how they perceived higher education to build their human capital. Bianca stated, “I believe education is the key to everything and so I know that to have the things that I want to have in life and the lifestyle I want to live, I have to pursue a higher education.” Gail agreed by implying that if she did not go to college she would not be able to teach as she hopes to. Relatively, Dana understood that it would prepare her for the type of career she wanted. She added that a higher education would allow her to earn a higher salary. Taryn’s very general
Explanation for her perceived benefits of higher education was that she knew “college is the next step to take to become what you want to be.” Both Taryn and Erin referenced their parents as examples to express the limited options for jobs with no college degree, while Zoe agreed, “college gets jobs.”

**Family.** Selflessly, Emory and Zoe mentioned how attaining a college degree would benefit both themselves and their families. Emory had a feeling that her family might want to move out of her home country one day. She felt like getting a degree from a school in America would help her assist in those family endeavors. She said, I think I’m the one that’s going to help them… I don’t know if they want to stay in Venezuela or if they want to go to Europe. I think I’m the one who’s going to help them to do that because they have been helping me a lot. So, now it’s going to be my turn to help them. So, I think it’s like the biggest opportunity I’ve ever had.

Zoe added that she is motivated to move forward by going to college, becoming successful and helping her family. She saw higher education benefitting both herself and those who raised her.

**Preconceptions.** Negative preconceptions accompanied the decisions of five participants when considering a higher education for themselves. Research participants spoke about how difficult the transition would be and the degree of difficulty in general. The lack of competitiveness regarding college choice that is associated with first-generation students (Smith, 2008), however, is not seen in this population. Participants did not always see matriculation into post-secondary education as easy, hence their
proactive approach to athletic recruitment. A few participants also assumed that their instructors would not be as friendly or personable. This also did not hold back any participants from beginning their post-secondary endeavors.

**College rigor.** Anthony, Gail, Zoe, and Taryn expressed their preconceived concerns for how difficult pursuing a post-secondary degree would be when asked what they knew about college. “It is going to be harder” was the sentiment expressed by both Gail and Zoe during my interviews. Anthony added, “college was no joke.” Zoe went on to say that she assumed college would come with “a lot of diversity and adversity.” She finished her thought by saying, “it’s a big step. That’s all I knew. It was like, once you make that big step everything will become a little bit smoother. It’s just getting the guts to do it rather than saying it.” These students all recorded preconceived thoughts of a difficult transition while matriculating into college. Staff members from her high school advised Taryn how big the transition to college would be. She came into college with the idea that her home state took academics and discipline a bit less seriously than what she would face in college. These ideas pertain to negative preconceptions of research participants, however, none of them affected their successful progression to the search phase of college choice.

**Distant professors.** In addition to the general rigor of the classroom, Gail and Erin were concerned that college professors would not know who they were or remember their name. Gail stated, “everyone talks about how your professors are not going to care about you in college.” Erin added, “your professors aren’t going to know who you are.” These
preconceptions added to the negative ideas about college rigor, but did not prohibit Gail and Erin from proceeding in the college choice process.

**Support system.** The first-generation student-athletes in this study received special support from high school personnel, former coaches, and families about attending college. This is largely seen in predisposition phase literature. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) determine that the family/parental and peer influences have an impact during this phase of college choice. Supporting data from Maramba et al. (2015) states that family members, peers, mentors, and advisors all have expectations of students. These advocates of higher education provide encouragement throughout the college choice process, beginning in the predisposition phase.

**Parents.** According to Smith (2008), “encouragement is a critical part of the predisposition stage of college choice when ideas for postsecondary options are first planted (p.156). When the participants were asked, “who spoke to you about college?” Most responses involved conversations with parents. For instance, six out of the eight participants mentioned speaking to their parents about pursuing college degrees. Zoe stated that her mom was the one who spoke to her about college. Taryn’s statement about her mom was similar. “I always had my mom telling me ‘college, college, college. You need to get a degree in order to be successful.’” Emory’s parents also associated college with how successful their daughter would be by going. She recalled them saying,

You need to get an education because education equals success …. If you want to get a good job, you need your education, because successful people are going to
hire successful … employees and to be a successful person, you need your college degree.

The parents of these participants closely associated the completion of a college degree with how successful their children would be.

Anthony’s father found other ways to inspire his son to go to college. “He would leave like a lot of brochures and stuff on my pillow and always hassling me.” Gail’s parents did not give her the choice to attend. They supported both her and her brother, who was already in college. Erin also had an older sibling. Her older sister never attended college, however, her parents spoke to Erin about higher education, they gave her the opportunity to choose, and they supported her decision.

These accounts attest to the amount of support each of the six participants experienced from their parents as they went through the predisposition phase of college choice, which contributed to their successful matriculation. Previous literature related to non-student athlete first-generation students attest that the support provided to students by parents who did not go to college is often misplaced in their desire for the student to just finish a high school diploma (Smith, 2008) and they do not have the information necessary to help them understand their access to higher education institutions. Where the participants in this study have an additional link to college access through athletics, participants did not need that type of support from their parents and used the support offered to seek the information necessary to pursue a post-secondary education.

High school. Anthony, Bianca, Gail, Dana, Erin, and Taryn experienced a push from their high schools to attend college. Some support was provided directly from
individuals working at their high school, however, Bianca and Dana felt other
atmospheric urges. Bianca explained this type of support in her recollection of the
process. She explained,

When you go to Pickerington Central, you are expected to go to college. When
you're in those AP courses and honors courses, you're expected to go to college.
Those are the students they expect to go to college. It’s not like they really have to
talk to us about it.

Dana’s high school experience was much like Bianca’s in that college was understood as
important. Per Dana, very few people at her high school decided not to pursue a college
degree after graduation. The assumptions of post-secondary education and consequent
support from their high school staff made Bianca and Dana feel like pursuing college was
the right thing to do after graduation.

Half of the participants in this study remembered a push by their high school
teachers and counselors to attend college. The academic administration also supported
positive messages about the importance of higher education. They did this by hiring
speakers and implementing supportive programs.

Dana discussed receiving support from a plethora of high school resources. She
said,

We always got lectured at school about college, like always. I think twice a year
we had these big lectures with the whole grade. We would have people come in
and speak to us…. Then our principals and administrators would talk to us about
it…. My counselor and then different teachers would always bring it up during class.

Taryn also remembered an inclusive high school event that occurred twice a year with speakers who supported the idea of students attending college.

Gail and Erin recalled encouragement and support from the guidance counselors at their high schools. Erin’s small town high school was a little late in the process of employing a counselor, however, they were effective in relaying a positive message about higher education. She stated, “the college advisor was only implemented two years before I graduated, so that was a huge resource for us, really.” Gail was influenced, however, not so impressed by the lack of personal attention. She spoke about the support that she received from her guidance counselor, however, she did not pay much attention as it was general in nature.

The amount of support throughout the high school experiences of these six participants contributed to their progression in the college choice process. Whether they were influenced by a teacher or given information through supportive programs, resources were available to aid in their successful enrollment to a post-secondary institution.

**Athletic resources.** Anthony, Gail, Dana, and Erin experienced encouragement to pursue college from their athletic acquaintances. Anthony’s relationship with his high school coach and former football coaches supported his decision to attend college. He said, “my senior year we had a new football coach and he was the one who kind of took me to the next level with taking college seriously.” When he was asked about who helped
him make his decision, he replied with a strong statement about the influence football and his coaches had on his college choice process. He stated,

I would say my father and my football coaches. Not just my high school ones, but my previous coaches I've had growing up since I was six because they've sort of been like a like a second father to me because growing up like they were just always there and they sort of like took me in as their own too, so. They influenced me a lot.

For Anthony, athletic resources helped him notice the importance of college. He began to look at a future in college and then he experienced a shift in attitude concerning the significance of collegiate academic studies.

Dana and Erin’s coaches provided support in the form of an academic approach. Erin had a new track coach who had a passion for higher education and devoted time to express where a college education would take his student-athletes. Dana’s volleyball coach insisted much of the same ideas. Dana explained, “she would always say that college was important ‘cause it helped you in life and stuff like that. She would always stress about grades. She’s kind of like our mom but we loved her a lot.”

Although Gail received much of the same information, she did not feel like it was a personalized message. She said, “my coaches in high school would just talk about it to our whole team.” Feeling a lack of independent attention was resounding in Gail’s college choice experience
**Phase II: Search**

After realizing the desire to pursue a post-secondary education, aspiring students are challenged with finding an institution to attend. This period of college choice is characterized by research and discovery to assemble a list of suitable institutions. While research participants spoke about building their choice lists in their interviews, themes of disquietude, research, recruitment, and fiscal challenges appeared from their recollection of processes and strategies. Like phase one, a support system to help students through this stage of college choice was well noted in each interview. However, unlike the predisposition phase of college choice, the search phase was largely illustrated by athletic influences and efforts, which seemed to have a dominating effect on the knowledge and recruitment of research participants. Figure 4 illustrates the major themes and supporting elements of the search phase.
**Disquietude.** During phase two of college choice, Anthony, Dana, Emory, Zoe, and Erin all experience some type of uneasiness or anxiety about the process. Multiple accounts from these participants shed light on the difficulty of the college choice process. These first-generation student-athletes were concerned about their knowledge of the process, their lack of resources, the time associated with adhering to college requirements, and feeling unaided during the process. Litton (1982) spoke about this in his research on college choice stating that first-generation students take longer to search for a college to attend and they do so in a more disorganized way. Lacking knowledge of the process, resources, and time attests to why the first-generation athletes in this study

---

*Figure 4. Essential elements of the search phase.*
experienced feelings of disquietude much like Litton suggested. The communication that
must occur between coach, player, and institution during the recruitment and college
choice process for study participants contributes to a lengthy procedure, unlike that of
their continuing-generation counterparts, which can cause much of the disquietude
experienced during the process. However, participants of this study took a proactive
approach to initiate communication resulting in more information about higher education
and the college choice process.

*Alone.* Four students felt like they were doing everything by themselves. Unlike
some of the other participants, Emory did not have a support system in high school. No
one spoke to her about attending college, so the research and decisional process was
placed solely on her own ambition. Likewise, the difficulty of being a first-generation
student was apparent in Erin’s recollection of the search phase. She said, “I did not have
people that I knew went to college. I didn’t have any of their stories coming in.” Without
these storied and experiences, Erin and Emory felt like they were alone in the process.

Both Dana and Zoe discussed that their college search process was completed
mostly by themselves, without any direct. Dana found herself in a position where she did
not know how to go about the search phase. Her recollection of the process was heavily
weighted by athletics; however, she was unsure of how to get recruited. Since she hailed
from a prestigious volleyball high school, she proceeded with promoting herself
athletically from the information she gathered from peers. “It’s kind of like guessing
game, honestly, but I kind of went off what other people said.” Feeling alone during the
search phase of college choice raised some feelings of disquietude among the research
participants. However, Emory, Erin, Dana, and Zoe proceeded with athletic recruitment to ease those reservations.

**Stress.** Anthony fought tough battles during his college choice process. He characterized this time in his life as “stressful.” “Having to play three sports and balance grades and having to come home and worry about what I’m going to eat tonight.” Anthony was extremely involved in high school. He even mentioned how popular he was in his interview. He participated in a plethora of extracurricular activities making it difficult for him to carry out the necessary college choice processes, such as applications. He said, “It takes- so time consuming when you have so many other things to worry about. You're working with SGA and prom committee and three sports and so many things.” Considering the additional athletic responsibilities that are associated with student-athletes and the unfamiliarity affiliated with being a first-generation student, it was not surprising that Anthony experienced anxiety for the process. He overcame this feeling of disquietude by using athletic recruitment to search for the right institution.

**Research.** All the first-generation student-athletes that participated in this study experienced some type of research during their college choice process. These accounts were greatly influenced by athletic endeavors, which is supported by the work of Simoes and Soares (2010) who determined that sporting activities were preferred in collecting information during the college choice process. This stage consisted of connections initiated by website and personal contact between coaches and athletes. This type of information search is often preferred by students who have higher academic abilities (Simoes & Soares, 2010).
**Internet serves as a valuable tool.** Half of the research participants used websites to look up general information about colleges and universities. Emory and Erin began their search for higher education institutions by using a website called “college board.” This website is a popular college choice tool among all matriculating students that allows one to search for schools based on criteria that is important to them. Examples of these criteria are location, average classroom size, type of institution, etc. She said,

> You can put your information. What kind of school do you want? Co-ed school or scholarships? What sports? All that stuff. We put that in and they give like 1000 universities in the United State have track, your major, and all that. So, I applied to most of them.

Coming from overseas, it was a convenient way for Emory to learn most about American higher education institutions.

College board was a website recommended to Erin from her high school administration. Her specific needs were acknowledged and she made a choice list based off the individually recommended colleges. Erin came from a smaller high school and was more comfortable with smaller institutions. College board allowed her to weed out universities based on their large sizes. Outside of “small institution size,” she did not have many criteria for her college search. Erin plugged in a few more factors, such as degree program used this list to begin her research on colleges and planned her visits.

Dana used a website to gain additional information about colleges and universities. Researching this way allowed her to read testimonies from current students at the institutions she was considering. She said, “I would type in the school and all these
different comments would come up from students that had went there and students that were currently there and it would give you insight as to what the school was about.”

Like Dana, Gail found herself searching the web, looking for information about colleges. Gail was a busy student-athlete and explained how time consuming the recruitment process was in her interview. Therefore, she found that the internet was the most helpful tool in the process of researching institutions, with the ability to use it when she was available.

Dana also used a recruiting website to continue her search, as did three additional participants. These participants took the initiative to post their personal information, athletic statistics, and game tapes for the opportunity to play sports at the next level. Collegiate coaches actively search these websites for their next recruits and these four understood the value of making themselves available. Anthony, Dana, and Taryn made accounts on the well-known NCSAsports.org website. Taryn described in her interview how the website works. She said,

On this website, you can “like” schools and they can look at you. You can see who looks at your profile and I saw that they [current institution] had looked at my profile. So, I clicked on “interested” and sent out an email to them.

This type of “social media interaction” is a very well-known and well-exercised technique to spread personal athletic information about student-athletes in hopes of recruitment.

It is not uncommon for student-athletes to ask others for advice on how to get recruited to play sports in college. Anthony was afforded opportunities to work on his
athletic skills outside of his regular season. He took that time to gain more information about the recruiting process. He said,

A lot of football camps that I went to during summer, they had this thing called NCSAsports.org and that connects you with so many colleges and universities. You can create a profile, put your highlight tape, and then put your goals and aspirations, write a personal statement, put your stats on there, your skills, your grades, of course, and that basically- It provided me with a lot of exposure to colleges and then eventually I just started going to college websites and looking at questionnaires and admissions and stuff like that.

Dana went through the same process. Prior to posting her personal and athletic information, she asked her peers and their families how they went about the recruiting process. Beginning her junior year, she took that information and began to record herself on the court to produce a recruiting video that she later posted online. She also took initiative by sending her info and accompanying video to college coaches directly via email. Bianca uploaded an athletic highlight tape to another website called BeRecruited.com. These students were proactive in their college search by making themselves available to collegiate coaches through their athletic profiles. Coaches who use these types of websites every day for recruiting purposes were introduced to the some of the research participants, resulting in connections that otherwise would not have occurred. Researching via institutional, college search, and recruitment websites allowed participants access to valuable information regarding the search phase of college choice.
*Introduced to university through athletics.* During the research process, two participants insisted that athletics provided initial introduction to the universities they were researching. Although Bianca had very impressive academic score, she made it very clear that college recruitment for her “wasn't really on the academic level it was more through athletics.” To supplement this idea Anthony added, “I had no knowledge of… [current institution] until I was offered a scholarship and coach… seen me that’s basically why, because of football.” These participants made it clear that there were instances in the college choice process where institutions approached them on an athletic level, which initially sparked their interest and consequent research of colleges and universities. First generation students who are not student-athletes will not have this type of advantageous and introductory interaction with colleges, possibly hindering their possible college choices.

**Recruitment.** After researching colleges participants all shared accounts of a recruiting process. Five participants mentioned some type of recruitment from universities’ academic and student affairs offices. However, all participants had an athletic recruiting experience. Researchers are continuously finding techniques to improve the recruitment process for student-athletes in the search phase of college choice (Huffman & Cooper, 2012). Goss (2006) suggests using institutional athletic budgets to recruit student-athletes via factors that only affect the athlete, like sporting facilities, equipment, etc. This would also improve the overall enrollment for the university. For research participants, this process consisted of initial contacts, visits, and discovery of
financial aid available. In addition, general recruitment provided by university admissions teams involved marketing tools, exhibits, and automated contact.

**Initiating contact.** Dana, Emory, Zoe, Erin, and Taryn all made efforts to contact schools and coaches to initiate a recruitment process. From her online profile at NCSAsports.org, Taryn noticed that her current institution “liked” her profile. Assuming they were interested in her, she initiated contact in hopes to begin recruitment. She said, “you can see who looks at your profile and I saw that they had looked at my profile. So, I… sent out an email to them. They got back to me." This form of contact is often the first opportunity coaches have with recruits and vice versa.

Emory also went through a third party to initiate contact with schools. When she first realized that she wanted to go to college in the United States she signed up with a company called EduSport to help her. That company contacted schools on her behalf to begin the recruitment phase and campus visits.

Dana did not set limits for the schools she contacted. She spoke about how she would initiate contact with some schools and then others would reach out to her for volleyball in the recruitment phase of her college choice. She said, “I sent out my video and my info to a bunch of different coaches. Like everywhere, I just picked random schools and just went for it.” This helped her develop a choice list of a variety of different schools in different states.

Zoe had a friend that was supposed to attend her current school until an injury prevented her from going. The friend insisted that Zoe contact the coach, which initiated
the athletic recruiting process for her. Without this mutual connection, Zoe may not have enrolled at her current institution.

Erin planned to attend her current school for a visit before she contacted the current track coach. She explained in the interview that her current institution came up on the list of schools she received from College Board. However, unlike the other institutions, she initiated contact with the coach prior to her arrival. He replied with recruiting intentions and invited her to campus for an official athletic visit.

**Athletic events.** Bianca, Gail, Dana, Erin, and Zoe spoke in their interviews about recruitment through athletic events. They used these opportunities to gain valuable knowledge about the recruitment process and demonstrate their own athletic talents while college coaches observed. Erin’s participation in a track camp her second year of high school offered her the chance to speak with coaches about how to get recruited athletically. She said, “They pushed it too and they were like, ‘this is how you go about it. This is what you do. These are the things you need to look at.’” She used this advice to inform her athletic recruitment.

Bianca found opportunities at volleyball tournaments to play in front of college coaches at events called “showcases.” Although the showcases she participated in did not result in a commitment, she was recruited at a smaller volleyball tournament, which turned in to a college fit for her. She was approached by a former assistant coach from her current institution and with an exchange of information the coach said, “Wow, I would really like you to come on a visit here. I think you'd be a great fit for this team.”
She was recognized at this athletic event and shortly thereafter began active recruitment with her current institution.

Zoe’s first recruitment story was very comparable, however, travel teams in her area were expensive and she was not able to participate. She was afraid that she was not getting the exposure she needed for athletic recruitment and determined that she would not play softball in college, until she was noticed at a recreation league softball game. She was invited to play at an all-star game and performed well. The coach decided to recruit Zoe for her softball program in Texas.

Dana had a similar experience. The volleyball tournaments she played in proved beneficial when college coaches started to initiate contact with her and her travel coaches. Dana’s coach began to recruit her via a phone call to discuss potential opportunities at her current college after watching her play.

Gail was not entirely sure how her current coach came to know of her, however, she assumed that he saw her run at the state track meet. She was relieved by how he initiated recruitment with her via social media, making the process a bit less formal and not so urgent. This allowed her to feel comfortable before speaking directly on the phone.

**Coaches never saw participants prior to recruitment.** Two participants went into the athletic recruiting process before their prospective coaches had the opportunity to watch them perform. Zoe initiated the contact between her and her current institution via email and she waited a while to hear back. Even though her second college coach never physically saw her play, he offered her athletic financial aid anyway. He said,
You know, I haven’t seen much of you. I never really watched you play. I’ve only seen a video from regionals like two years ago, but I want you on this team. I can offer you right here, and right now, and here’s the money I can offer you.

Her athletic ability was measured solely by a video of past performance; however, her coaches were still impressed. She agrees that phone calls were the main point of contact and recruitment between her and her current coach.

Erin’s coach never saw her run either. After multiple visits to various schools, she finally decided to reach out to a coach prior to arrival. This paid off for her. She secured recruitment in the form of an official athletic visit, which was her first and only.

**Coaches visiting.** It is typical for college coaches to make visits to sporting events, hometowns, high schools, etc. during the recruitment phase. Two participants explained in their interviews how colleges they considered went about visiting them. A few different schools sent coaches to speak with Anthony while he was in high school. They each had different speaking points that attracted Anthony to their programs.

Anthony recalled,

Well, one of the coaches visited my high school. Talked to me showed me all the rings. Showed me every year that they’ve won and I’m just like, “Winning is a tradition… here” and that’s actually one of their slogans. So, and I really wanted to win. So, then I really wanted the ring. So, that’s why I considered there.

Other coaches, like the one who recruited him from his current institution, visited him to speak about potential scholarships. Anthony was away from home playing volleyball when an assistant coach from a school in West Virginia visited on recruitment efforts.
After Anthony listened to a voicemail left by the coach, he immediately called his parents to share the good news. This explained how excited they were for their son. He recalled them saying, “Oh my God, there's a guy here to see you and he’s talking about scholarship? Yeah, you better call him back.” These universities traveled to sit in front of Anthony, pitch the stories of their colleges, and tell him why their schools were the best fit for him.

It is not unusual for student-athletes to send game schedules in hopes their aspiring program coaches will attend a competition, as in the case of Taryn. After initiating contact with her current coaches, they replied to her in interest. She sent them game film and a schedule of her upcoming softball games. Her current coach traveled to watch her play. She attributed that gesture to one of the main reasons she decided to commit with her current school.

**Athletic financial aid offers.** Anthony, Bianca, Gail, Dana, Emory, and Zoe spoke about how being recruited athletically meant that they would also receive athletic financial aid offers. For most of the participants in this study, athletic aid provided access to post-secondary opportunities. Zoe used softball as her sole way to pay for college tuition and claimed, “softball’s actually been a really big help in my life." Without the athletic financial aid that her current institution offered, it would be hard for Zoe to commit to her current institution.

Students also found athletics to lighten their financial encumbrance, especially on their families. “One of the ways I wanted to attend college was get an athletic scholarship
which would take some of the burden off my parents and my family,” Anthony said. This type of economical thought steered his decision on which high school to attend as well.

College funds were not kept for Bianca or Dana, so they agreed that seeking an athletic scholarship during the recruitment phase of college choice would supplement their financial aid packages and help alleviate their families’ financial responsibilities. In fact, this effort was a pre-determined objective of Bianca’s. She said,

My family, they didn’t have the money to pay for me to go to college. My mom- I didn't have a college fund. There wasn't money for me to have for college and I didn't want to be in debt. That was the main goal of mine.

Recruitment from college coaches and the subsequent athletic financial aid offers served as the main reason for some of the participants to consider and apply to various universities.

Gail applied to a few universities on her choice list only to receive official athletic financial aid offers. Coaches send those to prospective student-athletes with a full view of financial aid, including any institutional academic offers they will receive. These types of offers can only be sent to individuals who apply to the institution. Emory spoke to this based on her experience as an international student and her limited access to American currency. Independent of her passion to play a sport in college, she explained that athletics allowed access to supplementary scholarships, which are essential in funding her academic endeavors. She said, “you get more scholarships if you are an athlete because you get academic and athletic scholarship and because of our currency. It is easier for us
if we get more scholarship.” If Emory was able to attain U.S currency in the form of financial aid dollars, she would not have to find a way to convert her currency.

On the other hand, there are instances where student-athletes see their talents as subpar for institutions. Dana avoided applying to universities based on her perceived ability to attain an athletic scholarship. She said,

I knew that I would have to use something to get into school. So, playing volleyball was that, and I did not have a good enough skill level to play at those places and get a scholarship. So, I just didn’t apply because I didn’t see a point, I guess.

She limited her choice list per her athletic ability by stating that her dream school was Texas A&M University, however, she felt that she did not have the athletic talent to play for that university, so she decided to look elsewhere for athletic opportunities. Her objective was to earn a scholarship through athletic recruitment that would pay for her college expenses. “My mom didn’t save money for me to go to school and I didn’t work in high school. So, I would have to apply for scholarships, endlessly.” This way of narrowing a college choice list can only occur among student-athletes who are looking to participate in collegiate athletics.

Amid the recruiting process, two participants felt like they might not have the opportunity to attain an athletic scholarship and play their respective sports in college. Zoe’s financial challenges that kept her from participating in an expensive travel league and having no knowledge of the athletic recruiting process had both her and her mom convinced that she was not going to get an athletic opportunity in college.
Bianca genuinely wanted to play volleyball in college, however, she considered schools she was not likely to play for because she was recruited so late in her senior year of college. She explained, “I was thinking- It was my senior year I'm like ‘okay, well maybe I'm not going to get recruited, the big recruiting year is your junior year.’” She recalls sending applications to schools even though she was not recruited to play for them. In addition, she considered using a different sport she happened to be good at, but did not like because she viewed athletics as financial access for college. This is an example of how some student-athletes use sports as access to higher education.

**General university recruitment.** Dana, Emory, Zoe, Erin, and Taryn generally recalled the recruitment from universities as brief. These institutions contacted students through hard copy marketing tools, emails, and college fairs. Emory and Zoe both received emails from colleges and universities. Erin seemed to be uninterested by the recruitment marketing letters she received in the mail from random institutions. “A lot of the schools that were sending me letters where …all these strange schools that I didn’t want to see.” Dana also received recruiting materials in the mail and was afforded the opportunity to get information from the schools who set up recruiting tables in her high school cafeteria.

Emory was initially flagged by her institution based on her TOEFL score. In effort to increase their international enrollment, the university proceeded with recruitment by replying to her initial submission via email. This was the first form of contact Emory had with her current institution.
Taryn’s high school offered a program where juniors and seniors visited a nearby post-secondary institution who hosted a college fair to recruit for enrollment. While attending the college fair, all students in Taryn’s class had the opportunity to explore different educational opportunities. Although nothing came of these visits, she had the experience and had the opportunity to decide what she wanted in a university.

**Finances affected search.** Seven out of eight participants claimed that their financial situations affected which colleges they considered, the amount of applications they filled out, and how many college visits they went on. Similar accounts from participants revealed that some institutions were only viable options for attendance because of the athletic scholarship associated with enrollment. Schneider and Messenger (2012) found that the offer of athletic financial aid was the second most influential factor in student-athletes of their study.

Other participants claimed that they were not able to afford the application fees to some universities or that they were not able to find travel money to see the campus for themselves. Smith (2008) states that first-generation students are affected by the lack of information regarding financial assistance and gaining financial assistance. These misfortunes contributed to the exclusion of institutions from the choice list of participating first-generation student-athletes

**Looking for athletic financial aid.** Bianca, Emory, Zoe and Erin all eliminated colleges because of how much they cost. As previously stated, Bianca did not have money set aside for her to go to college, so her decision “was based off of what they could offer.” Emory specifically stated that she too decided to keep looking for
institutions after she realized how expensive some were. She remembers crossing
institutions off her choice list based on money and scholarships.

Zoe’s hopes of being a little bit closer to home were deflated after realizing there
were no athletic scholarships at a university she intended to pursue. The idea of paying
out-of-pocket for out-of-state tuition was not something she saw as feasible. In her
recollection, she was told, “we’re full. There’s no more recruiting money. You can be a
walk-on.” She replied, “You can’t be an out-of-state walk-on and think you can afford it.
She considered a few other schools as well, but claimed that they did not offer the
amount of money necessary for her to consider them any further. She, too, specifically
stated that the reason she did not consider other schools was based solely on “financial
reasons,” excluding other institutions because of this reason during the search phase.

Erin did not apply to a school nearby because they did not have track and she saw
the institution as too expensive to be able to afford it any other way. She stated, “just the
expense of it was not realistic…. And they didn’t have women’s track. So, I wouldn’t
have even been able to try to get an athletic scholarship.” When challenged with
monetary barriers, these students observed athletics as financial access to universities.
When they were not able to attain financial support for their athletic abilities, they
excluded institutions and opted to look elsewhere for their educational opportunities.

“Go where the money is.” Anthony and Emory were both advised to explore the
extent of possible athletic aid. Where Emory was an international student, she was
looking for the most financial aid available and was advised to “keep her options open.”
It was important that she find a university offering the most financial aid possible because
of her unfortunate currency situation. She continued to apply to other universities until she felt she was awarded enough money to attend. In fact, the company helping her throughout the process encouraged her to exclude the institutions that did not offer her enough athletic financial aid.

Anthony’s advice on the matter was two sided. He said, “a lot of people said, ‘go where the money is.’ A lot of people said, ‘go where you’ll play.’” The college that afforded Anthony the most in an athletic financial aid, also planned to have him on the field his freshman year. The award of athletic financial aid kept Anthony’s current college active in his search for an institution to attend.

*Application fee.* Erin and Anthony mentioned application fees in their interviews. Although they had different experiences, the application fee had an impact on both of their college choice decisions. One participant excluded institutions because of their application fee and the other applied to schools only if it was free, excluding all other viable institutional options.

Anthony gave a long list of aspirant colleges in the beginning of his search phase. However, as he approached the research and application stage, his college choice list dwindled because of the application fees to some of the universities. He explained, “that $50 fee. I can't… it’s like $500 of applications…. So, that was a big reason. Like I said, I didn’t finish a lot of the other applications for the other schools because of money.” Refusing to fill out additional applications for the schools that required application fees served as an eliminating factor during Anthony’s college choice.
After Erin completed a college search via college board, she applied to all universities on her college choice list that were free. She said, “if they had a free app, I put an application in whether- but UNC I think, the only one I paid for the application and that’s because I thought at that point that I wanted to go.” Attention to application fees became an inclusive act for Erin, applying to all schools suggested to her that did not require an application fee. For these students, an application fee caused them to exclude institutions and prevented them from applying and selecting a different institution.

**Expensive campus visits.** The expense of college visits affected Zoe, Emory, Dana, and Anthony. Whether they intended to visit a college for athletics or academics, these participants all experience monetary strains keeping them from exploring viable institutions. Anthony had big dreams of attending big schools. When he was asked why he did not schedule visits to some of them he replied, “some of them were very far away and I don’t have a plane ticket to go to Miami and Alabama. Can't fly all over the world.” Travel expenses can add up and they seem to be a hindering factor for half of the research participants.

When Emory went on a family vacation to Florida, she saw that as her chance to visit any probable colleges and universities. With time and money constraints, the visits she scheduled would have had to be in driving distance of her cousin’s home. She visited one university on her family vacation and attempted to schedule others, however, they did not get back to her in time and she did not have the money to book another flight to the United States, which excluded a lot of institutions from her choice set in the search phase of college choice.
Zoe and Dana expressed how they would have liked to attend campuses for official athletic visits. Even though coaches were willing to pay for their on-campus expenses, the travel costs were too much. Therefore, Zoe considered her current university without a campus visit. She could not afford a plane ticket or driving expenses when her current coach asked her to join them for a few days on campus. After failing attempts to get Zoe on campus, her coach finally agreed to her signing without an official athletic recruiting visit.

Dana took advantage of virtual tours with college volleyball coaches. She explained, “when I was doing the whole recruiting process I would FaceTime, like, video chat coaches and they would take me around their school.” All the schools in her choice set during the search phase of college choice were out of state. She did not have the money to travel much due to some unfortunate medical financial responsibilities her mother incurred from a motorcycle accident. She did, however, mention that the only time she did travel was to West Virginia for an official athletic visit to her current institution.

**Support.** Throughout the college choice process, participants recorded support from various individuals. Literature on the college choice says that first-generation students do not lack support, only vital college choice information (Smith, 2008). Ishitani (2005) suggests that it is unlikely an educator will influence a first-generation student to decide to go to college. They can, however, educate them and provide support for their academic success, which was apparent in the recollection of the college choice experience for first-generation student-athletes in this study. In the search phase, support
was provided to students from companies they hired to assist with the search phase, parents, and coaches. A more intimate and immediate support group characterized this phase, unlike predisposition.

**Recruiting companies.** For the international research participant, the company she hired to represent her was vital in helping her narrow her choice list. EduSport contacted schools on Emory’s behalf, gave her advice throughout the research and recruitment process, and even provided her with educational and testing opportunities to promote her scholastic candidacy. She explained the services she received in her interview as all inclusive. “They talk about all of the universities here [United States], how we get the scholarships, how we talk to them, taking the SAT, taking the TOEFL, and all of that stuff. So, they told me basically everything.” She felt that during her search phase, EduSport was the place that she found answers to all her most important questions.

**Coaches.** Where athletics made an impact on the research and recruiting process of the search phase, it is only natural that participants relied on some of their coaches for help and support. Erin experienced this type of support in the track camps she attended while in high school. Dana participated in a traveling volleyball club, where the typical objective is to prepare for the collegiate level and get noticed by college coaches. She looked to her coaches to give her advice on how to proceed in this process. In return, they gave her feedback on best recruitment practices to support her college search.

Gail’s former high school basketball coach was the one to help her understand and apply for NCAA Clearinghouse. This procedure is necessary for recruitment and participation in NCAA programs. Even though Gail decided not to play basketball in
college, she relied on this coach’s advocacy of eligibility. Anthony also said that his football coaches helped him in this process.

In addition to former coaches, current college coaches proved to be the best points of contact between some of our participants and their current schools. Erin said that her track coach answered a lot of college questions for her. Taryn also said that she felt comfortable reaching out to her coach to answer her important questions regarding her current institution. Taryn said, “usually through calling or texting coach. If I had any questions I could call him.” These accounts provide support for how influential current and former coaches can be in the college choice process.

Parents. Five out of eight participants mentioned the help and support of their parents in the search to find their institutional match. Answering questions, attending college visits, and advising in the application process were instances where Anthony, Gail, and Erin’s family provided assistance and support in the search phase of college choice. Even though the parents of participants did not attend college, often times they answered pressing questions pertaining to college choice. This was certainly true for Gail. As one of the more reserved participants, it was fitting that she would ask her parents first.

Anthony also felt that he could speak with his father throughout the experience. When Anthony was set on one institution, his dad advised him to think bigger and apply to more schools. He recalled his father telling him to “apply to at least thirty different schools and the more the merrier.” He said, “He even told me to apply to places I would never even think I would get in like Harvard. So, I applied Towson, Monmouth
University- A lot of big Division I schools.” Anthony’s father allowed him to think bigger than his expectations, influencing the application to prestigious universities that would never be considered.

Erin went on a lot of different college visits. In support of her search for the right institution, both of her parents attended almost all of them. His type of parental action showed approval for the process of college choice and encouragement to continue her search.

Athletically, Zoe and Taryn’s moms provided the most support for their college dreams. Taryn spoke of this type of encouragement as a testimony to spite her family challenges. She said,

She was just always my mom pushing me because my dad was in and out of my life. So, it was always my mom that was always there pushing me. When I wanted to quit softball and not play anymore, she’s like, “you wanna play in college, don’t you?” I was like, “yeah.”

Zoe experienced similar encouragement from her mother. She recalled the support of her mom by stating,

Growing up my mom was always- Being as tiny as I am, for softball anyways, you need to work harder than anyone else. You need to work hard to get what you want. No one is going to give it to you whether it’s favoritism or not from the coach. Nothing is given to you and that went for school work too to get to college.

It was- You can’t just think your skills are going to take you there. You can’t fail
out of high school and get there. So, growing up it was always work hard, work hard, work hard. I think that helped a lot.

Her mother instilled the values of resilience early in support of her athletic career, allowing Zoe to pursue and achieve her collegiate athletic dreams.

**Phase III: Choice**

The last stage of college choice is when students make their final institutional decisions. This decision can be impacted by many different factors. The objectives of this research are to explain which college choice factors first-generation student-athletes consider and how important each one of them are in making their final college choices. Data displayed here comes from direct accounts of participants’ experiences on college visits and their responses to interview questions that ask about factors specifically. When participants mentioned anything about what they liked or disliked in a college, they are subconsciously making a pro and con list. Acknowledging these factors in a recollection of the process gives insight to why participants chose certain universities and why they chose not to attend others. This system reveals the factors that first-generation student-athlete participants consider and how they prioritized them to make their college decisions.

After analyzing the participants’ transcribed interviews, the data reveals that these first-generation student-athletes mentioned seven college choice factors: Athletics, academic programs, campus culture, campus location, family influences, finances, and institutional size. Each of these factors were mentioned at least once in the recollection of the college choice process from participants, however, the extensiveness and frequency
was also taken into consideration. Figure 5 illustrates the major college choice factors and relative elements that support participants’ final decision.

*Figure 5.* College choice factors and the supporting elements considered by first-generation student-athlete participants.
**Athletics.** Athletic factors that do not affect the general student population were most often discussed when the first-generation student-athletes of this study were asked about their college choice experiences. Several studies on the college selection of student-athletes prove athletic factors to be a priority when making their college choice decisions (Johnson et al., 2009; Judson et al., 2004; Schneider & Messenger, 2012). Most participants spoke about how they wanted to play sports in college, which was also conclusive in the college choice literature (Schneider & Messenger, 2012; Johnson et al., 2009). In addition, participants spoke about how much they like their current coaches, which is resounding in the college choice literature for student-athletes (McCaw, 2014), as well. Other athletic factors mentioned had to do with program success, the current teams and student-athletes, and/or emotional impulse to participate in athletics at a university.

**Wanted to participate in collegiate athletics.** Six participants attributed their decisions to wanting to play sports in college. For Anthony, Bianca, Gail, Emory, Erin, and Taryn, seeking a higher education institution meant that they would choose an athletic program as well. Bianca’s goal of participating in collegiate athletics also included her aspirations of receiving an athletic scholarship for her efforts. She said, “I wanted to play volleyball in college. I wanted to play since I started playing in the 7th grade and it was either play volleyball or go run track.” Although she considered running track she expressed that she did not want to. With financial aid on the line, she was hoping to be recruited by a volleyball program, but as the window of opportunity closed, she was willing to let her athletic opportunities influence the competitive level. She
explained, “I wanted to play volleyball, so if I had to go DIII okay.” Eventually, she made her dreams come true by securing athletic financial aid at the NCAA Division II level.

Erin felt the same way as Bianca. She wanted to make sure that athletics was always an option for her when deciding which school to attend.

I was interested in running track if I found a school I wanted to run at. I wanted to have the option to run, to do sports because I’ve done sports since six [years old].

Being un-athletic would have been very weird for me.

She expressed how some colleges she looked at were expensive and without running track, she would incur those academic expenses without the opportunity to receive athletic financial aid. She was asked to explain why she chose not to attend other universities and she replied, “one of the main reasons is track.” This situated the college choice factor “athletic program” at the top of her priorities when considering institutions.

Taryn expressed how bad she wanted to play college softball. It was a well-known dream of hers, however, she was beginning to worry about the recruitment timeline. She was relieved to find her current institution, even though she began the recruitment phase later than what she had seen from recruited athletes in the past.

It was clear from Anthony’s accounts that football drove his final institutional decision. He explained, “I was kind of just football, football, football. Just get the scholarship and go and see what happens.” He never considered academics in this way. Football was always at the center of Anthony’s college choice decision.
Emory admired how this country’s higher education system included sports. She explained,

I knew here in the United States they pay attention to sports. So, like, “Yeah, I want to go there. I want people to notice me running or whatever.” So, yeah, that was my motivation…. In Venezuela, it is not like that. They pay more attention to the academic part and then sports, zero percent. So, they really don’t care about sports.

Emory could not recall any higher education institutions in her country that would give student-athletes the amount of support and attention that she knew she would receive in America. With that, she made sports and coming to America a priority and it is paying off for her.

Gail chose to exclude some probable institutions because they did not have the sport she was looking for. She was a state champion, multi-sport athlete. A coach from a comparable school initially recruited her to run cross-country, however, she chose not to attend because they did not have a women’s track team. Although academics ranked high as a priority for college choice, she determined that a school without a track team was not the right college fit for her athletically.

**Athletic program success.** Gail made a memorable comment during her interview. She said, “if you’re there for sports you might want to be on a good sports team." This was important to three other participants as well. Being a part of an athletic program in college requires time to practice, play, condition, travel, etc. Time spent with coaches, athletic administration, and teammates is also a factor. Considering a large
amount of time is spent on athletics, winning for student-athletes is an appreciated return on investment.

Dana narrowed her choice list based on how good the volleyball programs were. She knew that participating in collegiate sports takes up a lot of time. Her concerns were focused on her general contentment. She mentioned,

I knew that’s where most of my free time was going to go, so I wanted to make sure that I was going to enjoy my free time and not hate myself or my life for the amount of time that I was going to be there.”

As Dana researched the university, she was assured that her current institution “had a great program” and that she would be content with in the team.

Taryn had some apprehension towards certain athletic programs. Although she was approached by these programs, she did not communicate much with NCAA DIII schools or universities who were beginning their softball programs. She was uncertain of how good they would be and did not want to risk her efforts only to fall short in success.

Participants here chose to be a part of a good sport programs because they knew they would be spending a lot of time on athletics in college.

**Team.** As Dana mentioned in her interview, participating in a program takes up a lot of free time. Research participants in this study took that into consideration when making their college choice decision. Five out of eight participants spoke about liking their current coaches.

Being away from home, Bianca knew it was important to feel like she could have a close personal relationship with her college coach. She explained that with here coach
“there was a great feel…. She seemed very homey, it was just like, open arms.” Dana said that she specifically chose her current institution because she “really liked the coaches.” Emory also attested to an admiration for her coach. She claimed, “my coach, he is the best. He’s like the best coach on campus.”

Erin and Gail both had great things to say about their current coaches as well. For Erin, her coach is more than someone she sees in season. She stated,

   He’s a fun person…. He’s talkative. So, that was a fun experience there. Getting to meet the coach. Getting to see him, talk to him and just having him email and go “Hey. What’s up?” and “How’s your summer going?”

Gail said that her coach “is the most outgoing person ever. And he made it super fun.”

When Gail was asked for a reason as to why she chose not to attend another comparable institution she explained an unfortunate incident. She said,

   The main one was the coach, honestly, because he didn’t want to work with me to try to reschedule my visit whenever my family member- I had a family member pass away. So, I mean, that was kind of a big turn off for me.

This had a huge effect on her relationship with the coach and consequently resulted in her decision to attend a different university.

   Having teammates to bond with was important to some of the participants as well. Participating in collegiate athletes often means that teammates practice, travel, live and compete with a group of student-athletes on a team. It was important to some participants that the time they would be dedicating to their respective sports involved individuals that they liked.
Erin mentioned that having a cross-country teammate to room with her freshman year made an impact on her college decision. Meeting teams on official athletic visits was another way for Gail to envision a life at her current institution. She said, “that was one thing that really helped is I saw the team and I got to meet them, which I didn’t get to do [at different university]. So, I was just kind of- Yeah, trying to imagine how it would be.” When she was not able to visit with potential teammates at other universities, she felt uncomfortable choosing those schools.

It was important for Bianca to feel inclusion from teammates as well. She recalled an athletic visit she took were potential teammates did not make her feel welcome. She said, “when I was on the campus I didn’t really get too much of a nice atmosphere. Sitting with the girls, it didn’t feel like they really wanted me there.” She did not end up choosing that institution. Anthony, however, was persuaded by student-athletes on his visit to attend his choice institution.

**Emotional impulse.** Bianca, Erin, and Taryn had irrefutable feelings in favor of attending their current universities. As stated previously, Bianca entered the recruiting process late during her senior year in high school, when she was noticed by an assistant coach of her current institution. She recalled her emotional impulse by saying,

I thought it was a sign. I needed to go. I needed to go on this visit and maybe this is where I’m supposed to be ‘cause that was my senior year. I had thought, "I'm probably not going to get recruited.”

Her hopes of participating in college volleyball were wearing away because of how late in the recruiting season it was. For her to be noticed, receive an invitation to attend the
university for a visit, and get a scholarship offer so late in her senior year, she felt it was an act of faith.

The other schools on Taryn’s college choice list, in her mind, were not comparable to her current institution. When her coach came to visit and offered her athletic aid shortly after, she automatically knew she was going to commit. She said, “I kind of had in my head once I got the offer from here and they were talking to me and they were interested I was kind of set with this school.” At that point, she was mentally committed to her institution, the only thing she was waiting for was financial access.

Due to Erin’s excellent grade point average and academic achievement, she would have been accepted to many other schools. However, comparative to Taryn, Erin just knew that her current institution would be the one she attended if they accepted her. She recalled the entire experience of opening her acceptance letter in her interview. She explained,

When I got the letter in the mail … it was the only one I was nervous to open. I was like, “okay, what’s this going to be like …. I actually picked it up. I saw it was from UC …. I had a 4.0 [GPA] in high school. So, I got approved to all the colleges, but for some reason when I pulled that one out of the mail and saw it was from [my current school], I was like “oh geeze, what’s it going to say?” and then so, I obviously kind of knew. I was like, obviously that’s the school I wanted. That’s the only one I had feeling towards when I got the letter.
Bianca, Taryn, and Erin felt that if communication and athletic offers from institution they were considering made them feel different than any other offer or communication they received, then those were the schools they needed to attend.

**Money.** All but one student spoke in their interviews about how money affected their final college decision. Specifically, the only student who did not speak about choosing their current university due to their athletic scholarship was Dana. Schneider and Messenger (2012) determined that athletic aid was the second most important college choice factor among student-athletes in their study as well. When Schneider and Messenger (2012) considered only the participants who were receiving partial athletic aid, this factor jumped to most important. In addition to athletic financial aid packages, there were other participants who excluded universities because tuition was too high or because they did not have enough money to attend, which is also seen in the literature on college choice (Dooley et al., 2012; Harvey, 2014; Smith, 2008).

**Athletic scholarship.** Anthony depends on his athletic scholarship to pay for tuition at his current university. The potential expenses of other universities with no way to pay them had Anthony looking for less expensive options. He said, “cost and tuition. That was a big factor. Wasn't really awarded other scholarships for those other schools. So, I didn’t want to just take out straight loans. I didn’t have any other way to pay besides loans.” When he was deciding which college to attend, the athletic scholarship he was awarded at his current institution swayed his decision. She said, “Fortunately, I was able to attain a scholarship, which is the main reason why I came here.” There was no hesitation when he explained his reasons for committing.
Bianca said, “mainly it was based off of what they could offer me financially…. Me going to college was based off of who was going to pay my tuition.” Since she felt a little behind in the college choice process, Bianca committed as soon as she was given a reasonable athletic financial aid offer. She added, “being my last visit that I went on she offers me and I’m like “wow, this is good” so that’s what made me decided on colleges. What I could get financially.” She also made it clear that her final college decision was based off financial access through athletics.

Taryn’s experience committing to her current university after an official offer of athletic aid was like Bianca’s. She said,

I talked it over with my mom what they were offering and it was doable and called him back and told him I wanted to commit. Once I got the offer from here I turned down the other offers and applied here right away.

The athletic scholarship offered to Taryn made it easy for her to commit to her current institution.

Zoe’s athletic offer was also hard to turn down. She said, “it’s either go here or not get a scholarship and have to go home and figure out what I’m going to do.” Where she had only finished an associate’s degree, her current institution and the athletic aid associated with attending seemed to be her only option for a four-year degree.

Emory claimed that she was motivated by the amount of athletic aid offered to her by her current coach. Her current institution offered her more money than others, which was the reason she committed. With her currency issue, it was important for Emory to
cease the opportunity that offered her the best financial package if she wanted to pursue an academic and athletic career in the United States.

Erin explained that her $4,500 athletic aid package was a reason she chose her current institution, among others. Gail’s athletic aid offer from her current institution was not the only one of its kind. Gail was offered a full ride to a similar West Virginia school to run cross country, but she stated that it was not the school she wanted to go to and that her current university’s athletic aid offer to run track was not too much less.

*Expenses excluded institutions.* Emory, Erin, and Zoe each felt the pressure of pursuing institutions that were out of their price range. Emory chose not to attend other universities because of their cost and tuition. When referring to one of the universities on her choice list she mentioned that she liked the university, but it was too expensive, so she excluded the institution and kept moving forward in the process with more affordable institutions.

Zoe was looking at a school closer to home, however, they were not able to offer her the athletic aid she would need to afford the university. She stated in her interview that she kept looking at other schools, but she was not able to find a sufficient financial aid package until she came across her current institution. Zoe specifically excluded other schools based on what she needed to attend financially. Erin also excluded a school on her choice list due to its expense as well. She explained, “just the expensive of it was not realistic.” They did not have a track team, so she did not have the option to pursue athletic aid.
Campus culture. Participants considered their surroundings while choosing schools to attend as well. The campus environment, its constituents, and other services offered by the university emerged while interviewing participants. College choice literature supports campus culture and climate as a determining factor in the college choice process (Stephens, Markus, Frybery, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). It was obvious that these participants were looking for homes away from their hometowns.

Campus. Bianca, Emory, Erin, Dana, and Taryn made comments about the landscape on college campuses. Emory was truly in awe over a school in Florida that she attended for a visit. She said, “I saw the campus and I was like ‘Wow, it’s so beautiful.’ It was awesome. I was taking pictures everywhere. I was like ‘oh my God, yeah, this is beautiful.’” She did not attend that university because it was financially unreasonable, however, she spoke with enthusiasm over how attractive the campus was, which speaks to the importance of landscape in her college choice.

Emory was not the only one who admired different campuses. Erin had nice things to say about the school she thought she was going to attend. She said, “UNC-Greensboro was beautiful…. It really is beautiful. Like I said, it was my first choice.” Erin mentioned how beautiful the campus was while speaking about her choices of institutions. This supported her admiration and priority for an attractive campus.

Taryn knew a lot about the area of her current institution because she used to visit as a small child. Nonetheless, the attraction to this area of West Virginia did not get old for her. She said she chose her institution specifically “because of just the city and how pretty everything is.” She went on to say, "I love it here." Dana agrees stating, “the area
was beautiful…. and the landscape. It’s great cause you got the mountains and the river and the nice view. So, that’s good. It’s a plus. Yeah, that’s probably my favorite part."

Participants also noticed building structure, dorms, and classroom equipment. Erin remembered a college that she visited “just wasn’t an up-to-date campus.” Bianca also recalled campus visits to different universities. One of the first schools she visited, she mentioned that the buildings were not “run down,” but also noted that they were not new. She mentioned the another campus visit in her interview. She recalled,

The buildings were older and things like that I noticed. When I went to Ohio Wesleyan, their campus as beautiful. It was close to home; the buildings were pretty new. They were building a lot of things and expanding on their science department. Everything was nice.

Bianca also took into consideration how comfortable she would be by comparing her environment at home to that of the campus she aspired to attend. She explained,

Dorms were awesome. I didn’t have to share a room as a kid. I’m the only girl. So, I wanted my own personal space. So, I liked that the dorms were set up that I had my own room. That was another reason that made me choose it because when I was going on my visits I didn’t like the fact that I was going to have to share a room with somebody. That was just weird to me and my friend was telling me about her awful experience having to share a room and having to share showers and it was gross and I didn’t like that and I didn’t want to have to feel uncomfortable. So, that was another thing that helped me choose this university.
By this account, the dorms proved to be a choice factor in Bianca’s college choice. Overall campus facilities, structures, scenery, dorms, classrooms, etc. were influential in the final decisions of first-generation student athletes.

**Campus constituents.** Six of the eight students stated that people at the universities made an impact on their decision. Whether this was in the form of support for the athletic programs or just a feeling of inclusion from staff and faculty, research participants found it important to speak about their experiences with individuals on college campuses. Caring and kind people were important in Emory’s decision to come to the United States. She stated,

I think the people here in West Virginia are very kind. So, they were real kind to me and they were interested in me, and I was like, “if you are that interested in someone, it’s because you really want them to go to your university, or to run for you, or to come here.”

As an international student, she was leaving her family and a familiar culture behind. Feeling welcome in her new environment was essential for her transition and existence.

As Anthony sat in the stands at a home football game during a college visit, he felt a sense of inclusion from the people around him. He felt a sense of comfort from the amicable crowd and enjoyed the school spirit they exuded during the game. Mentioning this type of interaction on a college visit gave importance to how important a kind and welcoming environment can be in the college decision process.

Gail gave some good advice to close her interview. She stressed how important it was to observe people on campus to assess whether it is a good fit for the future. She
warned that a successful college experience is based off surroundings. Making friends is important to having a good time.

Taryn attributed the close-knit feeling of her current institution to how small the school and campus is. She claimed that she did not think she would get that kind of attention and help at a larger university. She prioritized this type of attentiveness into her college choice factors, which is paying off for her athletically and academically.

Erin and Bianca had good and bad things to say about the support schools offered for their sports programs. Erin experienced a school in the Carolinas where school spirit was highly regarded. An admissions counselor spoke about how game day was a big deal and she appreciated that aspect of the institution. Likewise, Bianca considered school spirit to be essential. She comes from a town that is big on athletic competition where everyone goes out and supports their high school team no matter what sport it is. She chose her current institution because of how rich it is in culture, history, and the support that traditionally comes with that type of school.

**Campus location.** Six of eight students were also concerned with where the campus was located. Anthony, Gail, Dana, Erin, Zoe, and Taryn had stipulations regarding how close schools were to their homes, what areas they were in, and whether some of their favorite places were accessible from campus. Location of campus and proximity to home or other desirable areas appeared in the literature review of college choice factors as well (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012; Kim, 2004; Martinez, 2013a; Rhoades, 2014; Wilson & Aldeson, 2012). Location often determines the population of an institution (Rhoades, 2014).
**Area.** Gail did not find it appealing that one of the colleges on her choice list was “out in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do.” The location of this institution was remote with very few options for entertainment and recreation. She eliminated this college off her choice list because of the location of the university.

Dana did some narrowing down of her own by only considering colleges in the areas she wanted to live. She explained, “I wanted it to be out of state. I wanted to experience something new.” She looked at different universities in different areas but she always found something wrong with them, “like, the Wal-Mart is too far away, or this is a school in the middle of nowhere, or they don’t have one of my favorite fast food restaurants.” She could weed institutions out based on her location.

Zoe did not have any locational restraints. She did, however, like the location of her first university, but staying in Texas did not work out for her. She mentioned in her interview that she enjoyed experiencing new places. Since she had never been to West Virginia, she was excited about the move.

Taryn expressed how the location of her institution was a deciding factor in her college choice decision. She did not want to stay in-state for college even though she had athletic offers to play softball. She said, “it was mainly wanting to get out of Florida. Being there my whole life I had the full ride offers to the JuCos, but I didn’t want to stay in Florida.” She used to visit West Virginia when she was younger, so the opportunity for her to return for college was appealing to her. She said,

What really got to me… was that it was in West Virginia and I have a lot of family from here. So, I used to spend summers here with my grandma or winter
with my grandma, so this is the atmosphere I like. I’ve lived in Florida all my life
and for the next four years of college I want to experience it in a different
atmosphere. So, that’s what basically got to me.”

She went on to say, “I love being away from home and having family here …. I’m away
from home but I’m still home because I spent time here as a child. I love the season
changes. In Florida, you don’t really get that, it’s just hot.” She also enjoyed the outdoor
culture in the state. “There’s a lot of adventurous things to do around West Virginia and I
love to adventure.”

Erin’s roots played a role in her college choice decision as well. She commented
on how a few schools she visited did not spark her interest because of their location. First,
she spoke about a small school near a big city. She said, “I also grew up in a small rural
area and that’s on the outskirts of Philadelphia. So, seeing that I was like, ‘I don’t
know.’” Then she spoke about a bigger school in the suburbs, which she loved certain
aspects of but still did not feel safe. She continued to visit campuses and she found one
located in an environment that was almost the exact opposite from her other two visits.
She found herself in the mountains and thirty minutes away from anything off-campus.
Her decision to attend her current institutions rested in the fact that I was in a bigger city
where she had everything she needed, however, she still felt safe.

**Proximity to home.** Anthony, Gail, Zoe, and Erin all referenced how close
schools were to their home. Whether these concerns were so family could watch them
participate in athletics or they were anxious to be farther away from home, proximity to
home was a college choice factor for five participants. Erin wanted to go farther away
from home, so when colleges that were close to her hometown contacted her, she decided not to pursue them. When speaking about a nearby school she mentioned that even though she had never been to the city, it was too close for her. She decided on an institution that is five and a half hours away from her hometown. To her it seemed like the perfect distance. “I wanted to be close enough that I could go home if there was an emergency at home. I didn’t want to be super far.”

Other participants wanted to be closer to home. Even though Zoe ended up farther away for her bachelor’s degree than she was for her associate’s, she still mentioned how she would have like to be closer to her hometown. Gail also mentioned that she wanted to stay relatively close in case of an emergency. She said, “I can be home in an hour and a half from here. So, if something happens, I can be home.” Anthony’s motive for staying close to home grew from the possibility of having his relatives watch his football games. Although he did not attend the nearest university, he remained in driving distance to home.

**Size of the institution.** Six participants mentioned institutional size in their interviews. These individuals spoke about their concerns on classroom sizes, campus sizes, and classifications of the institution on academic and athletic levels. The literature suggests that students should not be concerned about how large an institution when making a decision on which institution to attend (Pope, 201), as there are several myths about an institution’s size and being seen as being superior. However, there are equitable advantages to attending a smaller institution as well. These accounts were more thorough
as the participants explained their experiences on campus visits and their personal comfort levels.

**Campus and classroom sizes.** Whether they wanted small classroom sizes or a smaller institution in general, Bianca, Gail, Dana, Erin, and Taryn expressed their concerns for how big institutions were throughout their respective college searches. Dana knew that she wanted to go to a smaller college because of her experience at a bigger high school. She said, "I knew whenever I went into college, I kind of wanted a smaller school that would be more hands-on with their kids. The professors would be more hands-on with their kids and stuff."

Taryn mentioned how she appreciated smaller classes as well. She said, I definitely like the smaller campus atmosphere where you only have no more than 30 kids in a class, cause just the way I am, if I were to be in a class with 100 plus people I know I would not be able to focus or get what I need to get done. She felt like that was the type of attention she needed to be successful in college.

However, her affinity for a larger lifestyle and social experience was also expressed in her interview. She said, "the only thing that I would change would be going to a bigger school, like party school cause sometimes I like to have fun… I’ve always wanted to experience that frat style type of party. One of those big ones.”

Although a larger institution was at the top of Erin’s college list, she explained in her interview how a smaller institution was appealing to her. She spoke about her visit to the larger school and explained, “it’s so huge and I came from- My graduating class was
108 students. I’m like, ‘I never would have survived there.’” The size of the campus was more overwhelming than what she expected. She said,

It was one that buses take you wherever. You’re going to drive across campus to your classes, kind of thing and then just the tour group that I took when I went on my first visit on it. It was a tour of like 30 kids. So, it was a difference then when I came to… [my current institution] and I was the only one. Like one on one with the admissions counselor and… [the coach]."

She said that the size of her current institution played a huge role in her attending. She appreciated the fact that she can walk through the halls of her current institution and speak with students and faculty that she knows. That would not be that case at a large institution.

Gail’s opinions sympathized with this idea. She wanted a small school because she was used to attending a small high school. Bianca’s recollection of her campus visit to her current institution was similar. She said,

The campus wasn’t too large. I liked that. I liked that I would have smaller classroom sizes and things like that …. I knew I wanted to have- somewhere I would have a lot of one-on-one with professors. I wanted to have smaller classroom sizes so it was more personal.

This was something that Pope (2012) pointed out while debunking college choice myths. Students in this study all chose NCAA Division II institutions in West Virginia. When you look at the range of enrollment for these institutions, it is obvious that research participants are getting the individualized attention they desired in a college.
**NCAA classification.** Anthony, Erin, and Taryn were all influenced by the NCAA classification of institutions and the athletic perks associated with a larger university. Erin gave weight to institutions with better athletic facilities. She said, “I did my pro and cons list of each school and athletic facilities was one of my pros on it.”

Anthony also spoke about an institution that was recruiting him. Although the school showed promise in the success of their football program, Anthony said, “I painted the picture ‘oh DII is better than DIII,’” choosing his current institution over the smaller one. He also had early aspirations of pursuing a much larger school. After a few visits to a large university nearby as a high school athlete he said, “I saw the big stadium and all the gear and the girls and all types of stuff down there and it was like, ‘oh my gosh, I have to go here. It’s Division I football.’”

Taryn also chose against NCAA Division III and junior colleges. She mentioned in her interview that the size of the campus and how many students attended affected her decision. She explained, “I got a lot of offers for JuCos to stay in Florida and I got a couple of other DII/DIII offers out of state, but not exactly where I wanted to go.” These accounts suggest that the collegiate athletic level for colleges and universities played a part in the college choice of these first-generation student-athletes.

**Academic program prestige.** Half of the participants in this study mentioned their academic aspirations and how important the prestige of academic programs was in their college decisions. Dana, Gail, Zoe, and Erin mentioned their respective degree programs and the promise they saw in each of them. This relates to the literature where multiple studies show that major degree programs and courses offered affect college
choice (Davis et al., 2013; Ishitani, 2005; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Maramba et al., 2015).

Gail’s brother chose to go to a similar West Virginia institution for his college education. She determined that the education she was promised at her current school was demonstrably better than the one her brother received, her impression of the program faculty was impeccable, and she was convinced that the institution was right for her based on her observations. She explained,

It kind of blew me away …. I don’t know if it’s the best, but I think it’s the best…. I know way more than he [my brother] does about lesson plans and just things that are real life that you’re going to have to do in the classroom.

Dana was also very motivated to find a business program that could offer her a great start to her future. She wanted to be well-equipped with the knowledge it would take to be at the top of her field, so she narrowed down colleges based on who she believed offered the best academic programs. She also appreciated the way her current institution felt about general education. She explained how the curriculum at her current institution is organized in a way that bypassed the traditional two years of general education. Every course she would take at her school applied to her major. They incorporated general requirements in to the core curriculum for a rich and direct programmatic experience.

Zoe explained the primary role academics played in her in her college choice as well. She stated,
School’s always been before softball. So, I had to make sure I did all my research about their communications down here and what they could do and they’ve offered a lot of internships and stuff, so that’s one thing that really got me over here.

After the initial contact was made between her and her current coach, she did research on the communication program at her current school to make certain it was acceptable.

Erin’s investigation of the biology department at her school made her feel comfortable that she would receive sufficient instruction with the right equipment. She said it “isn’t totally up-to-date. But when I was looking in Biology major, they at least have the dummies in their PA school that have the heart beats. Have all that stuff.”

**Family.** Only two of the eight participants spoke about their families influencing them to attend specific colleges. Literature on college choice states that family members and familial influences effect college choice decisions (Martinez, 2013b; Rhoades, 2014). Anthony’s parents were impressed by the athletic aid offered to their son so they encouraged him to accept the offer. He said, “my parents kind of influenced me to just jump on it because not everybody gets an athletic scholarship.” Likewise, Zoe’s mom expressed her push for accepting the athletic aid offered to her daughter as well. When Zoe called, her mother replied, “why, didn’t you just sign, like just go?”

**Prioritizing College Choice Factors**

Each of the participants were asked why they chose their institutions specifically and what factors affected their college choice decisions the most. This question gives answers to the factors that were most important in the college choice decision. Three
students were swayed the most by the academic programs at their current institutions, which supports the findings of Davis et al. (2013), Ishitani (2005), Klein & Washburn (2012), Maramba et al. (2015), and others. The other five were persuaded primarily by athletic reasons, which supports the findings of Johnson et al. (2009), Judson et al. (2004), Schneider & Messenger (2012), etc.

**Prioritizing academic factors.** Gail, Zoe, and Dana each committed to their institutions with confidence in their educational programs. Gail specifically stated, “the first thing is the education department,” when replying to the question of how she prioritized her college choice factors. Dana said, “there were two things that were most important that was the program- the business program that they had but more importantly the accounting and finance aspect of it because that’s what I really wanted.” Zoe also agreed that she came for the communications program and that her coach “sold it really well.”

**Prioritizing athletic factors.** Anthony, Bianca, Emory, Taryn, and Erin had different goals and objectives in mind when deciding on their post-secondary institutions. Erin said, “if I had to give one reason it would be because of track. One reason, because of track.” Anthony agree and felt the same way about his sport, “I would say football influenced me the most.”

Bianca went with who offered her the most athletic aid. She said, “I specifically selected this university because it gave me the most athletic scholarship.” Emory was also influenced the most by the athletic financial aid offered to her and the way the coaches and college affiliates wanted her as an athletic asset.
Taryn’s reasons were athletically based, however a little different. She said, “definitely having him coming and seeing me play and getting to talk to him and having him offer right away was kind of like I finally did it.” When she felt that the coach committed to her, she committed to the school.

Summary

Within this study participants were given a platform to discuss and reflect upon the factors and experiences that were most important to them while selecting an institution for their post-secondary education. In the predisposition phase of college choice, themes of self-awareness, perceived benefits, preconceptions, and support provided the basis for the decisions of participants to pursue college. These themes were largely general, excluding a big presence of athletic aspiration.

Participants initially spoke about their aspirations and career goals, leading them to choose a post-secondary education for themselves. As first-generation students, they were not able to ask their parents about experiences, nonetheless they acquired preconceived ideas about what college would be like through associations with friends and other family member. Each of the participants knew that regardless of the obstacles they may face as matriculating students, completing a college degree would set them up for a bright future. With that in mind, they took the help of family members, former coaches, etc. in the pursuit of a good college fit.

When students entered the search phase of college choice, they all employed their talents by partaking in some type of athletic research and recruitment of colleges. It was not until the search phase that athletic began to take a strong influence on the process.
Along the way, each participant noted having experiences of disquietude and financial challenges at some point within their search process. However, they were still provided support by their family, coaches, and others they trusted to help them through phase two of college choice.

Finally, participants spoke about what college choice factors influenced their decisions the most and how they prioritized these factors. Athletic, finances, campus culture, location, size of the institution, academic programs, and family emerged as the factors that affected the college decisions of these eight first-generation, student-athletes. More specifically, sports, athletic aid, and program prestige were prioritized first in their choices. The following chapter elaborates on how this information provides essential support for the academic success of this population.
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the lived-experiences of first generation student-athletes from NCAA Division II institutions in the state of West Virginia. The purpose of the study was to understand the college choice factors of first-generation student-athletes. A review of the literature highlighted a gap in the college choice literature related to the identified population. This study helps close this gap and adds to the limited qualitative college choice literature.

This study employed a qualitative, interview-based approach to interpret the lived experiences of the target population. The four themes of self-awareness, perceived benefits, preconceptions, and support system emerged in the predisposition phase. Disquietude, research, recruitment, support system and how finances effected the search were five emerging themes in the search phase. The emerging themes of these two phases contributed to the overall college choice experience of first-generation student-athletes.

An analysis of data pertaining to the choice phase concludes that seven themes served as important college choice factors for research participants: Money, athletics, family, campus culture, academic program prestige, location, and the size of the institution.

The purpose of this section is to address the research questions of this study and present a discussion with supportive data from research participants. In the subsequent section labeled “College choice factors,” college choice factors considered by first-generation student-athletes in this study are discussed. Secondly, the section labeled “Prioritizing college choice factors,” presents the primary factors considered in each participant’s final college choice decision and provides supportive discussion for each
factor. Thereafter, the phases of predisposition and search phase are addressed. A discussion pertaining to the predisposition and search phases are supportive to the overall college choice process and relate to the theoretical framework of the study. Finally, implications for research and practice are addressed, followed by a conclusion and reflection.

Discussion

Research questions. The aim of this study was to uncover the college choice experience for first-generation student-athletes of Division II colleges and universities in West Virginia. This study adds depth to college choice literature pertaining to first-generation students and student-athletes. I sought to understand experiences of participants when they decided to go to college, when they searched for post-secondary institutions to attend, and when they made their final college decisions. This study was guided by the following questions:

Question 1: What is considered when a first-generation student-athlete makes the decision to attend college? This question was addressed by illuminating every characteristic that is valued and desired by research participants through the analysis of college visits and direct interview questions pertaining to the final college choice.

Question 2: How do first-generation student-athletes prioritize what is important to them while making their final college selection? This question was addressed by participants through their direct answers to supporting interview questions. Questions that pertained to the most important college choice factors were asked to help address this research question.
**College choice factors.** First-generation student-athletes in this study had the opportunity to describe their college choice process from high school to matriculation. Research participants were challenged with decisions to pursue post-secondary education, assembling choice lists, and evaluating college characteristics without parents who had prior experience with the process. Contrary to the general student population, these students were also challenged with the task of evaluating factors considering athletics. In disclosing their entire lived-experience of the college choice process, the eight, first-generation student-athletes revealed that athletics, money, academic program prestige, size and location of the institution, campus culture, and family emerged as the choice factors considered while making their final college decision. Not all factors that were important to participants are important to the general student population who are matriculating into college. This supports the fact that student-athletes consider different college choice factors. To elaborate, these overarching themes are broken down further to address the specific experiences of the research participants. Out of these seven general college choice factors seen in the decisions of first-generation student-athlete participants, five are seen in the decisions of the general student population, three are seen in the decisions of all first-generation students, four are seen in the decisions of the student-athlete population, and there is one college choice factor that emerges as special to this research population.

**Question1:** What is considered when a first-generation student-athlete makes the decision to attend college?
Academic program prestige. Half of the research participants in this study noted the importance of academic degree programs while making their final college choice decision. Participants who expressed the importance of degree program all took an interest in the education they would receive while enrolled at their current institutions. Each of them looked past their college experience to determine if they were attending a school that would prepare them for their future careers. Accounts of curriculum, internships, and contemporary technology added to the conversation surrounding the importance of this academic factor to their college choice. While some participants investigated this factor during their visits to the institution, others contacted administrators and faculty to confirm the degree program was suitable for their future goals. One participant stated, “I wanted to really know what I was doing when I left,” which captivates the significance of this factor in the college choice of all four participants. According to the first-generation students in Ishitani’s (2005) study, 63.2% selected “specific courses” as an important college choice factor. Degree program also ranked first in most important college choice factors among NCAA Division I student-athletes. Findings of this study are conducive to the literature on both first-generation students and student-athletes.

Academic program prestige as a college choice factor for first-generation student-athletes debunks the affiliated “dumb jock” stereotype. Although academics were not always at the top of their choice list, the relation of academic success to future career endeavors was resounding throughout the population of this study. Technically, the decision to attend college was focused on the benefits of educational attainment,
contributing to the importance of the academic program that they commit. Although this idea is not situated in the final college choice decision, it is highly related to the academic concerns of the first-generation student-athlete population.

**Athletics.** Seven of the research participants in this study noted the importance of athletics while making their final college choice decision. Participants who expressed the importance of athletics did so in various ways. Whether they used their athletic talent in lieu of academic excellence to gain access to post-secondary institutions, or they chose their institution because they knew they would be able to compete in collegiate sports, many of the participants who acknowledged athletics as an important college choice factor did so because they simply wanted to be college athletes.

Others explained their affinity or dislike of coaches and potential teammates, the success of the athletic program, and/or their own personal intuitions to pursue athletics at their current institutions. The importance of athletic environments is also prevalent in the previous college choice literature for student-athletes (Johnson et al., 2009; Judson et al., 2004; Schneider & Messenger, 2012) and supports the idea that the population for this study considers athletic factors not considered by the general student population.

The participants in this study, much like other student-athletes, search for institutions that are supportive of their athletic dreams. As stated by the research participants themselves, participation in athletics takes up a sizeable portion of their free time. It is dedicated to practice, weights, conditioning, film, meetings, athletic training, etc. For student-athletes to thrive in their educational environments, their athletic endeavors must be justified. Regardless of their first-generation statuses, participants
considered athletic factors in their college choice to position themselves in productive situations. It is not uncommon to witness a student-athlete transfer or drop-out altogether because of their athletic circumstances.

In addition, the participants expressed athletics as their introduction to universities through recruitment and financial access. If it were not for athletics, some of these participants would not know about their institutions and/or would not be able to attend. Although the parental support in this population is affluent, this issue speaks to the first-generation literature in that parents who have not went through the process may not be able to provide the type of information which comes from experiencing the process first hand. In that case, athletics transitions from a want to a need in the college choice of first-generation student-athlete participants. It becomes their access to gain information about institutions and financial access.

Campus culture. Seven of the eight research participants recalled a college choice experience where campus culture was influential in their final decision. Admiration for the landscape, inclusivity and optimism of institutional affiliates, and the social environment of schools were important in the decisions of first-generation student-athlete participants who valued campus culture. Each of the students that commented on campus culture valued their social interaction and saw their college environment as valuable in foreseeing their happiness at an institution. The importance of campus culture is summed up by participant’s statement that suggested,
When you go to a place to visit you should look at the people that work there and the students that are already there because the time that you have is really going to be based off of whether you make friends and whether you have a good time.

Campus culture as a college choice factor is seen in the literature of first-generation students (Stephens et al., 2012). In addition, Sherwin (2012) speaks on the academic college fit of a first-generation student and claims that academic college fit will help with retention and degree completion for this population. However, Stephens et al. (2012) believes that the importance of campus culture among participants of this study will lead them to find a college that also suits their ideals socially.

It is important for a student to feel academically and socially comfortable in the transition to a university. Researchers refer to it as “college fit.” This holistic approach to college match plays a substantial role in the retention and completion of first-generation students of all backgrounds. First-generation student-athletes, in this study, needed to feel comfortable in their environments to make their final college choice decision. When athletics and/or academics are not in their favor, the comfort of having an environment they fit into acts as a sense of security for participants.

*Family.* An influence from family members was present throughout the predisposition and search phases of all participants as seen in the previous literature on college choice for the general student population (Kim & Gasman, 2011; Maramba et al., 2015; Martinez, 2013b; Rhoades, 2014) and first-generation students (Hossler et al., 1998; Ishitani, 2005; Smith, 2008;). However, only two participants claimed that their parents affected the *final* decision to attend their current institutions. The parents of these
two individuals did so in the same way. They influenced their child to take athletic financial aid when it was offered.

The students who were influenced by their parents did not indicate that they were concerned about staying close to their families to help provide support was in the case of Martinez’s (2013) study. One participant said, “my parents kind of influenced me to just jump on it because not everybody gets an athletic scholarship.” Students from this study placed more emphasis on other college choice factors when making their final decision to enroll which, supports the finding that continuing-generation student-athletes depend more heavily on family while choosing an institution to attend (NCAA, 2012).

The appearance of family in the college choice of first-generation student-athletes showed predominantly in the predisposition and search phases of college choice. As opposed to the influence from a family member to stay close to home, the push from parents of first-generation student-athletes in this study was focused on encouraging their children pursue their athletic and academic dreams at an institution that was willing to pay for the associated costs. This is not the typical family influence from the parents of first-generation students, which contributes to why this population should be given more attention. Moreover, it attests to why only two participants felt this familial influence in their final college choice decision. First-generation student-athletes are influenced and affected differently. Characteristics such as first-generation status and athletic experiences combined provide an entirely different population with its own challenges.

**Location of the institution.** Six of the eight research participants in this study considered where an institution was located when making their final college choice
decision. Aspects of geographical locale and campus proximity to hometowns were
grouped in this factor to represent the locational desire of first-generation student-athletes
of this study. Pertaining to geographical location, some participants had preferences to
begin their college careers in new places, others did not want to be “in the middle of
nowhere,” and yet others desired the comfort of safe new homes that resembled that of
their old environments. Participants also considered whether they would be far enough
away to experience life for themselves and/or be close enough to their hometowns in case
of an emergency. Location of campus and proximity to home or other desirable areas is
noted in the college choice research of the general student population (Confer &
Mamiseishvili, 2012; Kim, 2004; Martinez, 2013a; Rhoades, 2014; Wilson & Aldeson,
2012) and student-athletes (Klenosky & Troutman, 2001).

Participants in this study were expected to experience locational preferences in
much the same way as the general student population. Locational desires stem from
partialities and should not change due to the first-generation and/or athletic status.
Matriculating college students consider where institutions are located as a general college
choice factor, as predicted for the first-generation student-athletes in this study.

Money. The impact of financial aid and cost on college choices were prevalent
in the literature of all three populations reviewed for this study: General student
population (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012; Davis et al., 2013; Dooley et al., 2012;
Harvey, 2014), first-generation students (Smith, 2008), and student-athletes (Schneider &
Messenger, 2012). Seven out of eight participants attested to the major impact athletic
financial aid had on their final college choice. One participant mentioned, “me going to
college was based off of who was going to pay my tuition.” In support of this, participants were often able to articulate financial reasons as factors that excluded institutions as possible choices. This resulted in a process of elimination. For instance, a participant stated, “cost and tuition. That was a big factor. Wasn't really awarded other scholarships [athletic] for those other schools.” Although this college choice factor encompasses a general concern for monetary limitations, this emerging theme was highly focused on financial access to institutions by way of athletic means.

Statistically, it is not typical for first-generation students to acquire all the necessary financial aid, cost, and tuition information. However, as a student-athlete who is being recruited, athletic financial-aid, the cost of the institution, and other associated costs are laid out by coaches in the form of “offers” to provide that type of necessary information. From the literature, first-generation students look at the cost of an institution in a pessimistic way such as, “am I going to be able to afford it?” This type of situation controls However, the first-generation students in this study used their athletic abilities to challenge institutions for athletic financial aid, giving them more power over their institutional destinations. Therefore, the advantages of being a student-athlete for research participants is supported in the ability to overcome first-generational disadvantages concerning money and knowledge.

**Size of the institution.** Six of the eight research participants in this study claimed that the size of the institution was important to them in some way. The qualities of a small school, the overall size of the institution, and the negative reaction to community colleges were grouped together in this overarching theme. Most of the participants who
valued the size of their current universities saw smaller classroom sizes as imperative in attaining personal academic attention from professors and a way to become acclimated into the institution.

In addition, students considered the athletic size of institutions and spoke about the relevance of NCAA divisions in their final college choice decision. NCAA Division I schools have the largest student populations out of the three NCAA Divisions. Although they can offer multi-year scholarships that include the entire cost-of-attendance, their class sizes show to be undesirable to most of the current study’s participants. Due to financial concerns, the choice of attending a Division III university, where scholarship is based solely on academic performance was not desirable to research participants either. Therefore, first-generation student-athletes in this study chose to pursue NCAA Division II institutions where athletic scholarships are still offered, but there is more emphasis placed on academics and the institution is not too small, but not too big. In the review of the literature, this feature was also prevalent when Goss et al. (2006) researched the factors and influences of the selection process for freshman student-athletes at small institutions.

Prioritizing college choice factors. Participants in the study were challenged with a choice their parents never had to make. During interviews, they had the chance to explain what choice they made and how they made it. Their recollections of the process contributed to seven emerging college choice factors that they considered during the process.
A second question pertaining to the study asks research participants to explain specifically why they chose their current institutions. The accounts summarize the priority of college choice factors in the decisions of the research participants. Five participants listed one factor as most important in their decision, while three participants stated that there were two different factors working together to influence their decision the most. The four deciding factors were: Athletic scholarship, degree program, sport, and coach. After dividing the weight for four individuals who chose two factors equally, the results showed athletic aid and degree program as the most important factors overall.

Question 2: How do first-generation student-athletes prioritize what is important to them while making their final college selection?

The following college choice factors come from participants’ responses to the question: What influenced your final decision the absolute most. These questions were asked in effort to understand how first-generation student-athletes in this study prioritized their college choice factors.

**Degree program.** Although “athletic scholarship” was mentioned by more participants (Anthony, Bianca, Emory, and Taryn), Gail and Zoe choosing only “degree program” as their most influential factor for attending college places these two factors as most important to research participants. Degree program as a dominant college choice factor is congruent with previous college choice literature on student-athletes (Goss et al., 2006; Letawsky et al., 2003; Pauline, 2010) and on the general student population (Klein & Washburn, 2012). These studies found that “degree program” was first among the most influential factors in the college choice process.
Considering degree program for college-going students is expected. Colleges are directly associated with educational degree programs that prepare students for their future careers. In addition, the NCAA requires that their student-athletes progress towards degree completion to be eligible to participate in athletics. Since education is housed within colleges and it is a requirement for student-athletes to maintain good academic standing, it is not unreasonable for any type of student-athletes to consider their degree program as a top priority in choosing an institution.

This, however, may change as student-athletes of higher talent levels begin to choose universities as a spring board for their professional athletic aspirations. Considering these students will either leave college before graduation or not use the college degree they obtain; these types of student-athletes may only consider athletics as factors for college selection. At the NCAA DII level, this situation is not as prevalent.

*Athletic scholarship.* Athletic scholarship was not as widespread in the literature as an influential factor in the final college choice decision. Most of the literature on the college choice of student-athletes is based on research conducted at NCAA Division I institutions. These sports programs (especially revenue-generating programs) can give more full scholarships to qualified student-athletes (Klenosky & Troutman, 2001). Most of the student-athlete college choice literature in the review involved quantitative survey data collection from NCAA Division I student-athletes. These studies (Goss et al., 2006; Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Johnson et al., 2009; Judson et al., 2004, Letawsky et al., 2003) did not include “athletic scholarship” or “athletic financial aid” as a factor for college choice, therefore it was not reported. Two additional studies on the college choice
of NCAA Division I lacrosse and hockey (both non-revenue generating) student-athletes (Pauline, 2010; Schneider & Messenger, 2012) list athletic financial aid first and third among important college choice factors. Pauline (2010) was more inclusive and holistic with their study, allowing participants to choose from 53 college choice factors on their survey. Other studies in the review kept their survey factors relatively short in comparison. The sole qualitative literature review study (Klenosky, 2001) agreed with data collected from the research participants of this study claiming that student-athletes found financial security to be an important factor of college choice. The question here is, if all studies on the college choice factors of student-athletes included financial aid, would that factor be more prevalent in the literature? This study contributes to the gap in literature on NCAA Division II student-athletes, relative college choice factors among these students, and qualitative studies including student-athlete college choice. Allowing participants the opportunity to express which college choice factors were most important to them contributes clarity and precision to the college choice literature of student-athletes.

**Sport.** Some students in the present study just wanted to play their sport and the opportunity to do so in college attracted them to their current institution. Erin went to her school primarily to run track, however, Anthony and Dana grouped “sport” with one additional primary factor. The college choice factor of “sport” in this study is relative to other studies where student-athletes valued the “opportunity to play” as most important (Johnson et al., 2009). The opportunity to play remains a constant college choice factor in additional literature (Goss et al., 2006; Judson et al., 2004; Klenosky & Troutman, 2001).
Opportunity to play, win championships, play in front of large crowds, etc. were factors listed to choose from in some studies with quantitative surveys. “Opportunity to play” relates to this study’s finding of “sport,” however, when research participants mentioned this factor it was more general. Research participants of this study were choosing to play their sport in college, rather than choosing how much playing time they would get.

Although these two factors are relative, they are different. Research participants recorded how “weird” it would feel if they did not play sports. This played a large role in their college decisions, as they excluded institutions that did not offer their sport and, in turn, an “opportunity to play.” This factor relates back to the importance of academic program. The “student” in student-athlete needs the right academic program to succeed, much like the “athlete” in student-athlete needs the right sport.

**Head coach.** Finally, the reputation and amicability of the coach served as an important factor in many studies among student-athletes (Goss et al., 2006; Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Johnson et al., 2009; Judson et al., 2004; Klenosky & Troutman, 2001; Pauline, 2010), however, it was never ranked first. This remained consistent in this study where participants chose head coach as the most important factor and supplemented their statements with other primary college choice factors.

The relationship of a head coach and player is as important in the college choice decision of a student-athletes as the program itself. A head coach acts as a parent away from home, they manage schedules, provide academic support, predict challenges of their athletes, etc. Choosing a head coach to play for in college can easily effect the educational outcome of a student-athlete. Most participants of this research explained
their aspirations for educational attainment, therefore it is not surprising that the person who recruited them, introduced them to the university and team, made them an athletic financial-aid offer, and would control their schedule for the next four to six years of their life would be important factor in their enrollment.

**Theoretical framework.** When studying college choice scholars often use the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987). The theory here suggests that the college choice process is completed in three steps: Predisposition, search, and choice. This theoretical framework was used in the research design, which helped to build a timeline and structure for participants’ experience. Both predisposition and search phase lead up to the final institutional choice and have importance in the college choice discussion of first-generation student-athlete participants.

**Predisposition phase.** Hossler and Gallagher (1987) states, “In the first phase, attending high-quality high schools, positive attitudes towards education, and early information on financial aid, as well as institutional costs, may be important factors in stimulating the aggregate primary demand for places in colleges and universities” (p.209). Most participants in this study had great high school experiences and a positive attitude towards matriculation into college. Their predisposition phase was not centered around institutions, rather their own self-awareness, perceived benefits of higher education, preconceptions as to what college is like, and a support system that helped them organize their thoughts and feelings about enrolling in post-secondary education. This finding defies Petty’s (2014) idea that first-generation students are psychologically underprepared and that they need to be motivated to take on college. In recollections of
the process, participants were conscious about their own objectives, motives, and feelings about college. They openly discussed their future career endeavors and early ambitions as foundations for their collegiate aspirations. Participants perceived higher education as advantageous in building human capital through access to networks, jobs, money, and ultimately, a desirable lifestyle. Some participants viewed college as difficult, however, each participant found support from either former athletic coaches, family, high school administration, etc. while making their decision to pursue higher education. It is likely that research participants gain motivation from their athletic ambitions, propelling them through the college choice phase by athletic recruitment and on to degree attainment due to NCAA eligibility standards.

Contrary to the Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) findings, financial aid and institutional cost was not addressed in the predisposition phase by any of the research participants in this study. This is a reoccurring issue among first-generation students. Smith (2008) puts the responsibility on parents stating that that they are “unaware of financial aid issues” (p.156). First-generation students do not have essential information regarding ways to pay for college. The proactive self-recruiting and consequent importance of athletic scholarship as a final college choice factor affecting the institutional selection suggests that research participants “sold” their athletic talents in return for monetary access to higher education. In fact, further review of the literature gives credit to leadership opportunities and extracurricular high school activities, such as athletics, as indicators for college success (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).
**Search phase.** In the second stage of college choice, a student begins to research colleges and universities to develop a “choice set.” A more thorough investigation of the institutions, follow by application and admittance, ultimately leads to the final college choice. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggest that this phase is characterized by “student preliminary college values,” “student search activities,” and “college and university search activities” (p. 213). The following describes how participants in this study addressed each of the previous activities in their description of the college search process.

As seen in the predisposition phase of this research, first-generation students do not always get necessary and valuable information regarding cost, tuition, and financial aid, which is also resounding in the previous college choice literature for first-generation students (Hossler et al., 1998; Ishitani, 2005; Smith, 2008). Although they experience moral support from their parents, first-generation students’ parents did not undergo the process of selecting an institution of higher education in its entirety. They are unexperienced and often unknowledgeable about the application, admission and enrollment phases, which leads to the tough matriculation for this population. Relatedly, participants’ “preliminary college values” in this study focused on institutions that seemed affordable. This standard quickly excluded institutions from participants’ choice sets. They chose not to visit campuses that were far away due to travel costs and they did not apply to every school they considered because of the associated application fee. Participants were, however, open to the institutions that offered scholarships. These views served as exclusionary principles of the search phase for research participants.
Athletic recruitment spearheaded the “student search activities” for all research participants in this study, which supports the idea that without athletics, participants of this study and other first-generation student-athletes would start at a disadvantage based on their lack of knowledge concerning the college choice process. Proactive efforts on behalf of the participants came in the form of initiating contact with coaches, developing online profiles, and attending camps and showcases where college coaches recruit. As college choices took notice of the participants in this study, they began actively recruiting them by visiting their schools and sporting events, inviting them to campus, and offering athletic financial aid. In some cases, the introduction through athletics was the participants’ first encounter with the institution. They proceeded to use online resources like “College Board” and institutional websites to become acquainted with colleges and universities.

Limited “college and university research activities” were discussed in recollections of the search phase for research participants. Over half of the participants mentioned general college visits or speaking with university representatives, however, much of their search phase experience focused on athletic recruitment.

During the search phase, some participants acknowledged challenges like stress due to their busy and demanding lifestyles. Some felt like they lacked guidance during the search phase. This is likely in accordance to their first-generation status. Oldfield (2012) gave insight to this situation by listing lessons for the first-generation student. In this article, Oldfield stated, “Because nobody in my family had ever mentioned enrolling beyond high school, I knew not to seek advice there. By definition they could not have
provided help anyway” (p. 3). Although some of their parents were present to answer questions and help with the process, the experience they lacked with search and recruitment could have attributed to these feelings of disquietude. To ease this process for participants, former coaches and higher education advocates stepped in to aid in the search phase.

**Implications for Research**

Eight student-athletes from first-generation backgrounds in this study chose colleges based on seven overarching factors: Academics, athletics, campus culture, campus location, family, finances, and size of the institution. These themes emerged from recollections of their college choice process. They also had the opportunity to express their most influential factors to address priority. There are gaps in this study that can be addressed by future research.

Participants of this study currently attend NCAA Division II institutions in West Virginia. Future research on first-generation student-athletes should broaden the scope to include first-generation student-athletes at all NCAA levels. Although the institutions represented in this research study classify differently, consumers of the study would benefit from a participant’s consideration of a large variety of institutional amenities. In addition, expanding the population would include additional participants from varying backgrounds, contributing to the depth and breadth of this qualitative research.

In addition to the broadening the scope of the research, it would also benefit advocates of student-athletes to consider different types of first-generation student-athletes. For example, in this study, Emory is an international student. She was
challenged with a myriad of obstacles during her college search and decision that did not relate to any of the other participants in the study: Currency, international culture, a higher education agency, TOEFL scores, etc. The population of first-generation international student-athletes is a sensitive population that deserves intimate attention and research in the future.

Zoe was a transfer student-athlete from a community college in Texas. She had the opportunity to choose a college twice. Literature on the college choice of first-generation student-athletes would benefit from understanding the difference in these two decisions. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to understand how the first-generation student-athlete status effects both of those decisions differently.

Participants of this study included matriculated freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. It is possible that participants who underwent the process years ago left off pertinent information to the overall understanding of college choice factors. To gain a clear recollection of the college choice experience, researchers should consider interviewing first-generation student-athletes that just recently signed their national letters of intent. This approach supports clarity in the study.

Assuming that college choice is not the same now as it was years ago, a portrait of the factors effecting college choice over a period of decades would aid in understanding how far the advocacy for first-generation student-athletes has come and how far it can go. The ability to see stagnation and/or innovation in this process would help to develop policies for the future. To progress in the activism for first-generation student-athletes, it is important to first see where they began.
Finally, in addition to the immediate study, future research could include a study four to six years after the original college choice to determine how beneficial each of the participants’ college choice factors were in their final decisions. This study would be used to determine whether they were successful in scholarship and/or athletics based on their college choice factors. Results from the research could be used to educate matriculating first-generation student-athletes on the importance of emerging college choice factors in the final college choice decision.

**Implications for Practice**

This study found that first-generation student athletes consider more factors than other matriculating populations. An overwhelming number of factors to consider can have negative effects on students without parents that have prior experience with the process, as seen in the study results of the search phase. To address some of the most challenging higher education issues for this population, it is imperative to review the processes and policies relating to admission, recruitment, and academic support services. It is impossible to do this without asking first-generation student-athletes what they need and equipping them with pertinent information so that they can determine for themselves what they want most.

Acknowledgement of this population is the first step to policy and procedural change. Nearly one in five NCAA student-athletes are first-generation (NCAA, 2015). They suffer from the same disadvantages as any other first-generation student. In screening for first-generation student-athletes, college administrators can better address their needs, such as understanding scholarships and other forms of financial aid, which
was found to be an important factor students accessing and remaining enrolled at their institution.

In this study, most participants initiated the recruiting process athletically. They posted videos and sent statistics in hopes of grabbing the attention of college coaches. When they received information, it was from the admissions offices, however, participants typically began their college choice searches and established choice lists from the interest they received from coaches. If this is the case, coaches should begin their recruitment of players with a transparent and holistic approach to the information given. Whether this is by email and link to their websites, by postal mail, and/or by visitation, first-generation student-athletes should get information pertaining to the college choice factors they consider.

Academically, they deserve to know what types of majors are supported with in the college and more intimate details such as how long it takes on average to graduate with certain degrees, especially for student-athletes. In addition, information like the prestige of degree programs, academic scholarships, application and acceptance requirements, classroom size, etc. would be helpful to student-athletes who did not have parents that went to college.

Details on the area of the university and the culture within would be helpful in making the decision also. Possibly programming and support that pertains to the demographic of that individual, such as, student support services, work-study, honors programs, Greek life, etc. This information would help first-generation student-athletes understand the environment they are entering. As a sensitive population, first-generation
student-athletes would have the opportunity to bypass awkward acclimation by engaging in activities and extracurricular activities that they enjoy most.

Finally, a clear depiction of the program, coaches, and players is necessary. First-generation student-athletes would benefit from understanding what their coaches expect from them. This includes, but is not limited to, workout schedules, seasonal breaks, team rules and regulations, coaching philosophy, etc. Program history and goals are also important to include. Not every student-athlete has the same mindset while transitioning in to college. They should be well briefed on where the program has been and where it plans to go with their commitment. Finally, players typically turn into associates and friends. They live, work, study, sleep, and travel with each other on a daily basis. Recruits should be given the opportunity to meet all the players and determine if the athletic program is a good fit for them socially.

These recommendations came directly from the college choice factors first-generation student-athletes in this study considered while choosing a university. Policy and procedures can be developed institutionally to adhere to a more transparent and holistic recruitment process.

**Conclusion**

From the results of this study, it is clear first-generation student-athletes consider more college choice factors than three other college-going populations: General students, student-athletes, and first-generation students. They also prioritize these factors differently. Participants began the college choice process in the predisposition phase. They all had a keen sense of self-awareness that influenced this phase of their decision.
Each participant had a vague idea of what college would be like, but they each knew that attending college would benefit their futures. With the help and support of their closest higher education advocates, they made the decision to pursue a search for the right institution.

The search phase of college choice was overwhelming for the participants. They had no support from parents who experienced the process. As a result, they found a different way to gain access to institutions: Athletics. Aspirations to receive athletic scholarships drove participants to actively partake in athletic recruitment. With financial access at the forefront of their search, they began to assemble their choice sets.

Participants considered seven factors while making their final college choices: Athletics, academics, campus culture, size of the institution, money, campus location, and family. These overarching factors contain specific desired characteristics of the research participants. Although participants considered academic factors, athletics helped each one of them make their college choices.

**Personal Reflection**

My experience as a first-generation varsity student-athlete was much like those of my research participants. If it were not for volleyball, I do not know where I would be. When I was offered an athletic scholarship, I signed and enrolled. I had never heard of my undergrad institution, like many of my research participants. I did not know that it was a historically black college/university (HBCU) or that my professors who used the prefix “Dr.,” were not all medical doctors. I believe that athletics gives student-athletes a familiar and comfortable way to be proactive in their future, especially in the decision to
go to college. Much like me, they used athletics to drive their searches because they did not have the important information to make a college choice decision without sports.
References


Confer, C., & Mamiseishvili, K. (2012). College choice of minority students admitted to


http://www.highereducation.org/reports/reports.shtml


Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Exploring College Choice through the Lived Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes at NCAA Division II Institutions in West Virginia

Dear Potential Participant,

I invite you to participate in a research study that investigates a first-generation, student-athlete’s experience while deciding to attend a NCAA DII institution in West Virginia. I am currently enrolled in the higher education doctoral program at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio and am in the process of writing my dissertation.

The purpose of this research is to allow understanding of the college choice process through experiences of student-athletes who are the first in their families to attend college. Closing the gap in literature on this under-researched population has the ability to benefit recruitment efforts for both athletic and academic university departments.

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a short demographic survey and participate in an interview (approximately one hour). Upon reviewing this interview, you will be contacted by email with a copy of your written interview and asked to check for accuracy. If there is discrepancy in the written interview, a meeting will be scheduled to review, discuss, and correct answers accordingly. To compensate you for your time, a $10 gift card to Subway Restaurant will be awarded to you after data collection is complete.

No one from your athletic department (coaches, athletic director, teammates, etc.) will be informed of your participation in the study. Data from this research will be kept under lock and key and reported anonymously. No one other than the researchers will know your individual responses to the questions asked.

If you would like to participate in this project, please follow the link to the Demographic Survey and answer the questions as best you can. It should take a couple minutes to complete.

If you have any questions about this project, feel free to contact Leah Turner at 304-415-7321 or ltt095313@ohio.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664 or hayhow@ohio.edu.

Thank you for your assistance in this important endeavor.

Sincerely yours,
Leah Turner

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Appendix B: Questions Asked on the General Demographic Questionnaire

Name

Phone Number

Email Address

Age

Gender
  Male
  Female

Race/Ethnicity
  American Indian or Alaska Native
  Asian
  Black or African American
  Hispanic
  Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  White
  Two or More Races

Hometown

High School

High School GPA

ACT and/or SAT Test Scores

Where do you attend college?

What is your academic classification?
  Freshman (0-30 credit hours)
  Sophomore (31-60 credit hours)
  Junior (61-90 credit hours)
  Senior (90+ credit hours)

What year are you athletically?
  Redshirt Freshman
  Freshman
  Sophomore
Junior
Senior
5th Year Senior

What sport(s) do you play?

What is your college major?

What is your family college history? (Please check all that apply)
- First-Generation (Parents did not go to college)
- Continuing-Generation (Parents went to college)
- Sibling(s) went to college
- Grandparent(s) went to college

What is your estimated household income?
- < $20,000
- $20,000 - $40,000
- $40,001 - $60,000
- $60,001 - $80,000
- $80,001 - $100,000
- > $100,001

Where you recruited to your current university?
- Yes
- No

If you selected "yes" to the previous question, please select which university departments initiated recruitment.
- Athletics
- Academics
- Both (athletically and academically recruited)
Appendix C: Ohio University Adult Consent Form with Signature

Title of Research: Exploring College Choice through the Lived Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes at NCAA Division II Institutions in West Virginia

Researchers: Leah Turner, PI
Dr. David Horton, Jr., Advisor

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study was developed to allow understanding of the college choice process through experiences of student-athletes who are the first in their families to attend college. Expanding research on this population has the ability to benefit recruitment efforts for both athletic and academic university departments.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a short demographic survey and participate in a face-to-face interview with the primary investigator. After the interview, you will be contacted by email with a written copy of your responses to the interview questions and asked to check for accuracy. If there is discrepancy, an in-person meeting will be scheduled to give you the opportunity to amend and/or expand on your responses.

You should not participate in this study if you are under the age of 18, not a student-athlete at an NCAA DII institution in West Virginia, or if your parent(s) attended college of any kind.

Your participation in the study will last approximately one hour. After reviewing the transcribed interview, I may ask to set up an additional one-hour meeting to review your responses.

Risks and Discomforts

There are minimal risks for participating in this study. However, you may feel emotionally uneasy when asked to recall your college choice experience and answer
additional personal demographic questions. You may skip any question(s) you may feel uncomfortable answering.

Benefits

You may not benefit personally by participating in this study, however, this study aims to provide guidance to the most essential advocates of the college choice process by creating a platform for discussion in essential areas of marketing, recruiting, application, and admission. Since associates of all types continuously influence students, it is imperative to increase the knowledge and effectiveness of high school counselors, mentors, coaches, etc., during the college selection process. While higher education officials are involved in the decision making process, it is often the recruiter and/or coach who has the closest connection with student-athletes. Therefore, recruiters and coaches should be well informed about their own institutions and knowledgeable about issues involving college choice.

Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential by the primary investigator (Leah Turner). You will be given a fake name and your real names will not be used in the write-up of the study. None of your personal information or the recordings of the interviews you participate in will be available to anyone outside of the PI and advisor of the study. All information is securely locked by password and protected on a external hard drive in a locked cabinet. All information for the study will be securely disposed after the study is complete (December 2016).

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:  
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;  
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;  
* Southern Region Educational Board (SREB) who help funded this research endeavor.

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the investigator Leah Turner, lt095313@ohio.edu or (304) 415-7321 or the advisor Dr. David Horton, Jr., hortond@ohio.edu or (740) 593-4163

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664 or hayhow@ohio.edu.
By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered;
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction;
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study;
- you are 18 years of age or older;
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary;
- you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
- If you have any questions pertaining to the study and your participation in it, please feel free to ask before signing below.

Signature_________________________________________ Date __________

______________________________
Printed Name______________________________

Version Date: 06/8/16
Appendix D: Interview Questions

Phase I: Predisposition

1. Tell me about your high school experience
2. Who spoke to you about attending college?
3. What made you decide to go to college?
4. What did you know about college as a senior in high school?
5. What programs were offered and/or what kind of assistance was available in your school or community to students who wanted to go to college
6. Where did you apply to college?
7. What are your foreseen benefits of higher education?
8. What university materials were most helpful to you?
9. What are your standardized test scores and GPA?
10. Where your personal academic achievements considered when deciding to go to college?
11. If you were recruited, tell me about how that happened and any experiences relating to the recruiting process.

Phase II: Search

1. Name all the universities you ever considered.
2. Where did you apply?
3. Why did you apply to ________________?
4. Why did you not apply to the other universities?
5. Which universities did you attend for a visit?
6. Were these visits athletic official, athletic unofficial, or academic?
7. Why did you not visit the other universities?
8. What was your experience on each of the visits you took?
9. Why elect not to attend _________?
10. With what aspects of the college choice process did you need most help?
11. Where were you able to find the most answers to your important questions regarding college choice?
12. What does your financial aid package at ______________ consist of?

Phase III: Choice
1. Why did you select ________________?
2. Describe your college freshman athletic experience.
3. Describe your college freshman academic experience.
4. Describe the campus culture/environment your freshman year.
5. How knowledgeable do you feel you were about your college choice decision?
6. What influenced your final decision the most?
7. What information about your college would have been useful to you as you transitioned from high school to college?
8. How do you feel about your final college choice decision?
9. If you could change anything about your college choice, what would it be and why?