Commitment to Athletic Identity and Retirement from Sport

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine athletic identity and retirement from NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore former student-athletes intercollegiate experience and their transition out of sport. The findings revealed that retirement from intercollegiate athletics requires an individual to create new social networks, learn how to train without the structure and support of a team, and develop a new identity. Additionally, the study found that a strong support system and replacing the sport focus early in the process of retirement assisted with the transition from sport. Implications of the findings of the study are discussed and recommendations for future research are made.
Dedication

To my family – Mom and Dad, thank you for making so very much possible. To my sisters, Whitney and Bailey, for setting the example that anything is possible and for challenging me to be excellent in all things. To my husband, Jonathan, for walking through this degree with me and for being my continual ray of sunshine.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2014, there were 480,000 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes, but only a fraction of them will have the opportunity to compete at the professional level (Probability of competing beyond high school, n.d.). Yet for most, professional play remains the ambition. When looking specifically at NCAA Division I student-athletes, 73% of men’s basketball players, 64% of Division I football players, 49% of baseball players, 47% of women’s basketball players, and 16% of all other women’s sports reported that they are somewhat likely to become a professional or Olympic athlete (Paskus & Bell, 2015). Retirement, while often not focused on, is something that all athletes will face, including intercollegiate athletes. With high expectations for a professional career after competing in NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics, what happens when a professional career does not come to fruition? Athletes, who identify their past, present, and future with sport may be on a path to face many difficulties (Hill, Burch-Ragan, & Yates, 2001).

While retirement occurs at different times and in different manners, retirement is a transition that all athletes will navigate in their lifetime. For the majority of student-athletes, intercollegiate athletic competition marks the end of their athletic journey. The NCAA’s famous commercial highlights this fact when it says, “There are over 400,000
NCAA student-athletes, and most of us will go pro in something other than sports" (Gallo, 2011, para. 1). This focuses on the fact that a very small percentage of student-athletes will have the opportunity to continue their athletic career professionally. In light of this statistic, it is crucial for intercollegiate athletic administrators to gain an understanding of retirement and the difficulties that athletes can encounter during this transition.

**Statement of the Problem**

High levels of commitment are displayed in conjunction with athletic participation, regardless of the level of competition. One area that athletes may commit strongly to is their athletic identity. The literature has expanded over time regarding athletic identity and the impact it has on an athlete's transition out of sport. When retiring from sport, a strong and exclusive athletic identity may result in a variety of issues. The issues displayed may negatively affect their retirement (Alferman, Stambulova, Zemaityte, 2004; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, 1993; Brown, Glastetter-Fender, Shelton, 2000; Cecic Erpic, Wylleman, Zupancic, 2004; Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, Mahar, 1993; Grove, Lavelle, Gordon, 2007; Lally 2007; Webb, Nasco, Riley, Headrick, 1998). The difficulties listed, affect athletes retiring from various levels of athletic competition, including athletes participating in intercollegiate athletics.

One of the main issues an athlete may face when retiring is a disruption of their identity. If an athlete derives their self-worth and identify solely from this role it can result in an identity crisis. In addition to a disruption of self, emotional disturbances like
depression can result. Athletes who commit strongly to their athletic identity often invest less time in other areas of their life. This includes developing their career and other areas that are of interest. The diminishment of other interests can result in a longer adjustment to life without sport (Alfermann, et al., 2004; Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Brewer et al., 1993; Brown et. at., 2000; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Good et al., 1993; Grove et al., 2007; Lally 2007; Webb et al., 1998). In addition, athletes with a strong athletic identity have increased levels of denial, heightened stress and anxiety, displayed behavioral and mental disengagement, and vented emotions more frequently (Grove et al., 2007). The literature has established a firm relationship between one’s commitment to athletic identity and the difficulties that they may face upon retirement from their sport.

There are a large number of NCAA Division I athletes leaving sport on a yearly basis and encountering difficulties, like loss of self-control, when sport is no longer a part of their life (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Webb et al., 1998). Because of the current efforts in place, it is important to study “retired” student-athletes to examine how commitment to sport combines with their student-athlete experience to affect their retirement from sport. Despite the growth in the literature, there are still gaps that remain. In addition, student-athletes continue to struggle with this transition despite the efforts of administrators to implement programs on campus. Questions remain about how collegiate administrators are missing the mark in supporting these students. How do their social networks as an athlete influence this transition, and how can another identity develop when being committed to their athletic identity? By studying former student-
athletes who have made the transition from sport, administrators will be able to serve current and future student-athletes.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine former student-athletes’ commitment to athletic identity and its impact on transitioning out of NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics. The study will also look at what retirement difficulties former student-athletes encountered in order to gain a better understanding of what student-athletes face during this time. By creating a better understanding of this transition, current and future student-athletes will benefit on college campuses across the country. The study retrospectively explored, from the perspective of the participants, their retirement and transition from sport.

**Conceptual Framework**

There are several key concepts and terms that will serve as the framework of the study: athletic identity, commitment, the student-athlete experience, and retirement. The study explored former student-athletes commitment to sport, their experience as a student-athlete, and what their retirement from sport looked like. The figure used to represent the theoretical concepts of the study shows that a student-athlete, to some level, commits to the identity of being an athlete before competing collegiately. After committing to an athletic identity, an athlete receives the opportunity to continue their career as an NCAA Division I student-athlete. The next step in the model reflects that the student-athlete then has an experience as a student-athlete. Their experience encompasses their role as a student and an athlete. The final step in the model is the
student-athlete retiring from intercollegiate athletics. The study explored the participants' commitment to athletics, their experience as a Division I athlete, and what their experience transitioning from sport. Figure 1 represents the conceptual model for the study.

Figure 1. Representation of the theoretical framework of the study.

**Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity will serve as one of the foundations of this study. An athlete may strongly commit to this one area. The definition of athletic identity is “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). An individual who has a strong commitment to their athletic identity places great importance on athletics. Two structures compose an athletic identity: cognitive and social. The cognitive structure influences the processing of personal information, while the social structure provides opportunities to engage in social interactions (Brewer et al., 1993).

Webb, et al., (1998) identified that an athlete’s identity in sport is comprised of two facets: public and private. The extent to which others know and view an individual
as an athlete is public athletic identity. This feeds off the social structure of athletic identity and is often a direct result of athletic performances. This in turn becomes the public reputation of the athlete (Webb et al., 1998). The second facet, an individual’s private athletic identity, is not available for the public to scrutinize. This facet of an individual’s identity reveals how internalized the role of an athlete has become. The private profile also encompasses the individual’s assessment of himself or herself as an athlete, which includes their feelings and thoughts about people and events (Webb et al., 1998). The public and private facets are conceptually different, yet combine to compose a single construct which serves to strengthen the athlete’s commitment to their athletic identity.

**Commitment**

In addition to athletic identity, this study focused on one’s commitment to the athletic role and its influence on the retirement process. The definition of commitment presented in identity theory states that, “commitment refers to the degree to which persons’ relationships to others in their networks depend on possessing a particular identity and role; commitment is measurable by the costs of losing meaningful relations to others, should the identity be forgone” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286). Commitment has two facets in relation to identity theory, with the first being the number of people that an identity ties an individual to (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1980). The number of people it directly ties the individual to increases the likelihood that the individual will display the identity. An identity will be more salient when an individual commits to an identity. The second component of commitment in relation to identity theory refers to
how strongly one is tied to others with whom they share an identity. When an individual experiences deep ties with others, the more salient the identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). Identity theory focuses on social structures and the connections between people. Serpe and Stryker (2011) proposed that identity salience impacted by commitment, which has an influence on role choice of the individual.

**Intercollegiate Athletic Experience**

When looking at collegiate student-athletes who retire after collegiate competition, they are in a unique situation when compared to athletes competing at other levels. Collegiate student-athletes have university resources readily available to help them prepare for graduate school or a job after athletic participation. These resources can include university career centers. Collegiate athletes also have sport administrators at their service whose jobs focus on making them successful during their collegiate career and beyond. This presents a unique opportunity for sport administrators who work closely with athletes to help them connect the dots between athletics, academics, and their future career. In turn, athletes will have the opportunity to develop a broad perspective and gain knowledge and tools to help them make life transitions successfully (Hill et al., 2001).

While not all retirements can be predicted and planned for, there is a large population of student-athletes who can benefit from programming implemented through the athletic department. Programming to assist collegiate athletes with their transition from sport vary greatly between institutions, but the goal of the programs are the same:
help student-athletes be successful in the classroom, on the field, and in their future careers.

Universities have classified student-athletes’ needs into four different areas: academic advising, life skills development, clinical counseling, and performance enhancement (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). The most traditional approach to serving the needs of student-athletes is academic advising and is most widely used in athletic departments (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). An academic advisor helps keep academics and graduation at the forefront of the athlete’s experience. The second area, life skills development, exists to assist athletes with challenges they will face throughout their college career. Life skills “focuses on personal, practical, and emotional issues such as drug and alcohol education, interpersonal communication skills training, time management, career selection and development, and appropriate sexual relationships” (Broughton & Neyer, 2001, p. 49). The third area is clinical counseling and requires an individual trained to counsel student-athletes on how to face their issues. Clinical counselors can be useful in helping athletes adjust to the college life, competing, eating disorders, and life after college. The newest and fourth component is performance enhancement or sports psychology, which helps athletes achieve their greatest potential. This specifically deals with the mental side of the athlete’s performance and is implemented on an individual basis or with a team collectively (Broughton & Neyer, 2001).
Retirement

In order to gain an understanding of the difficulties that arise when retiring from sport, it is vital to look at retirement from sport. Baillie and Danish (1992) described retirement as “a point of transition from an activity in which there has been a commitment of time and energy and a role identification” (p. 77). When examining this transition, retirement from sport is unique when compared to retirement from a career.

Webb et al. (1998) identified that athletic identity holds a unique status among other identities, therefore resulting in a different retirement process. The larger culture one lives in plays a role in how unique the status of athlete is. A culture that highly values success in sports, similar to what currently exists within the United States, differentiates retirement from sport from other types of retirement as the status of athlete is highly sought after. In addition to culture, two factors make athletic retirement different from other retirements. The first factor is that athletic identity is often formed early in one’s life (Webb et al., 1998). When athletic talent, at an early age, is recognized, the individual and key figures in the individual’s life, like parents, often focus on developing that talent. This requires a time and psychological commitment, which often results in the internalization of the athletic identity. When internalized, it is often at the expense of other social roles and can dominate the individual’s self-concept. The second factor that makes it unique from other retirements is the public nature of athletic identity (Webb et al., 1998). Unlike most other roles, the role of an athlete is very visible. Included in this visibility are the athlete’s successes and failures, which are of high importance due to the competitive nature of sport. In addition to these two factors, athletic identity
encompasses performance pressure and rarely seen in other social roles (Webb et al., 1998).

Retirement from sport at the collegiate level is also unique because of the investment of resources in the student-athlete experience concerning academics and preparation for the future. As athletes continue to encounter psychological and physical issues because of retirement from sport, many intercollegiate athletic administrators have implemented programming to assist athletes with this difficult transition. Student-athletes often do not realize that success in one area of their life does not automatically spill over into other areas, like academics or a future career. As a result, programs and models have been strategically designed by sport administrators to help student-athletes as they transition throughout their athletic career including retirement from sport (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; McKnight, Bernes, Gunn, Chorney, Orr, & Bardick, 2009; Stankovich, Meeker, Henderson, 2001). Despite these efforts, difficulties still arise during this transition leaving room for more exploration.

Retirement for student-athletes occurs in one of two ways: voluntary and involuntary. With voluntary retirement, the athlete essentially is choosing to cease participating in sport. The element of choice leads to the perception that the student-athlete has control in their life and in the decision to stop participating in sport. Another benefit of voluntary retirement is that it gives the athlete an adequate amount of time to prepare them self for the upcoming changes (Webb, et al., 1998). The student-athlete then has time to decrease their athletic identity
and to begin exploring other areas of interest. Their role as a student-athlete can push other interests out of their mind. This can include career options, graduate school, or social opportunities that sport participation did not allow.

Research has studied the effect that pre-retirement planning has on a former athlete’s ability to adapt to the post sports life. While not conclusive (Cecic Erpic, et al., 2004), there is strong evidence supporting pre-retirement planning as an effective tool to help the athlete adapt to their post sports life (Coakley, 1983; Lally, 2007; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 1994; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982). Intercollegiate athletes who voluntarily retire can benefit greatly from programming and opportunities that help student-athletes plan and prepare for their transition out of sport. Additionally, this paper explored current resources and programs available to student-athletes. Lastly, voluntary retirement has improved life after sport (Alfermann, 2000; Alfermann & Gross, 1997; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; McPherson, 1980; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Involuntary retirement is the second type of retirement and is a common occurrence in the sports world. Involuntary retirement can be a result of several factors: the age of the athlete (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), being cut from a team, sports injury, and termination of a team (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). The age of the athlete can have a significant effect on athlete’s ability to perform at the necessary level to remain competitive in their sport (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). An athlete must maintain a high performance standard at all levels of competition in order to continue to have opportunities to compete. However, with advanced age, an individual may no longer be
able to perform at the capacity necessary. Elite levels of competition do not have eligibility standards, which are in place in intercollegiate athletics. Eligibility standards determine when an individual can no longer compete in intercollege athletics at NCAA institutions.

Age can result in both involuntary and voluntary retirements. With age, an athlete may experience a shift in their personal values, which may result in a loss of motivation to train. A change in values can result from having a successful career and the athlete achieving their athletic goals. In turn, an athlete may decide that it is time to pursue other life endeavors (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Ending an athletic career at a later age can also have a negative impact on the retirement process due to the investment made in the sport role and identity of being an athlete. This in turn, can result in greater difficulty establishing a new identity (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavallee, 2005).

Other causes of involuntary retirement include: cut from a team, sports injury, and termination of a team. These causes put individuals at a greater risk for having difficulties establishing a new identity. Difficulties can arise for athletes who involuntarily retire as many continue their lives in the same place, living with visual reminders of their athletic life. This can include seeing former teammates and coaches, practice facilities, and competition facilities that may make it more difficult for an athlete to establish a life outside of their athletic identity (Blinde & Stratta, 1992). When forced into retirement by one of these three means, they do not necessarily start a completely new life. The student-athlete competing in intercollegiate athletics may have years left to remain on
campus and live with these visual reminders in order to graduate with a degree. Several researchers have studied the impact of involuntary retirement on the post sports life and have found that it can cause a variety of problems during retirement, including psychological difficulties, lower life satisfaction, feelings of uncertainty regarding their future, and feeling out of control of their own life (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Webb et al., 1998; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). The difficulties experienced illustrate that when forced to retire unexpectedly, adequate time is unavailable to prepare for this transition. This can have a drastically different result than the student-athlete who can choose that they are no longer going to compete.

Retirement for each athlete is a unique process influenced by multiple factors. In addition, retirement from sport holds a unique status when compared to retirement from a career. Webb et al. (1998) identified that athletic identity is a status that differs from other identities and therefore results in a different retirement process. The larger culture one lives in contributes to the unique status of being an athlete. A culture that highly values success in sports contributes to the distinctiveness of retirement from sport when compared with other types of retirement (Baillie & Danish, 1992). In our culture today, being an athlete is highly sought after. The aspirations of young children are evidence of the importance of sports. For example, children dream of making the varsity football team in high school, competing in college, or playing in a professional sports league like the National Football League (NFL) or the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA). University campuses illustrate the importance of sport as their programs draw large crowds. Outside of intercollegiate athletics, professional athletes boast some of the
highest salaries in the world. Culture therefore can influence the importance of the sport role to individuals who grow up and are competing in athletics in a particular culture.

Many variables can affect retirement from sport. One variable that is prominent in the literature is the amount of athletic goals achieved before an athlete leaves sport (Cecic Erpic, et al., 2004; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). At the end of a career, the athlete will subjectively evaluate the goals that they set out to achieve athletically. This can greatly influence their retirement from sport as they may feel they have unfinished business and are not ready to move on. Alternatively, after a successful career, the athlete may feel that there is nothing left for them to accomplish. In addition, the extent to which an individual welcomes the transition out of sport will have an impact on the retirement process. For example, if an individual welcomes the transition it will generally be less stressful than an individual who is not ready to move on to the next phase of life (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). When working with athletes, it is important to remember that each athlete will have a different retirement experience, impacted by variables that are unique to the individual. In turn, a wide variety of difficulties surface during the process of transitioning from sport.

**Research Questions**

The research questions developed for this study seek to examine a student-athlete’s athletic identity and what the transition from sport looks like for former NCAA Division I student-athletes. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1) How does athletic identity affect the retirement process for NCAA Division I student-athletes?
2) What do student-athletes experience as they are exiting NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics?

Through the examination of the above questions, the study seeks to gain a greater understanding of how NCAA Division I student-athletes transition out of sport by examining the lived experiences of former student-athletes.

**Definition of Terms**

**Athletic identity:** “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer, et al., 1993, p. 237).

**Commitment:** “commitment refers to the degree to which persons’ relationships to others in their networks depend on possessing a particular identity and role; commitment is measurable by the costs of losing meaningful relations to others, should the identity be forgone” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286).

**Retirement:** Baillie and Danish (1992) described retirement as “a point of transition from an activity in which there has been a commitment of time and energy and a role identification” (p. 77).

**NCAA Division I:** Division I has the largest institutions when compared to Division II and Division III and has the largest athletic budgets. In addition, NCAA Division I member institutions generally have the biggest student bodies and offer the most scholarships (NCAA Division I, n.d.).
Overview of Remaining Chapters

Chapter one of this document provides an overview of the research problem, the purpose of this study, the research questions, the theoretical framework for the study, and important terms with definitions. The second chapter of this document provides an in-depth review of the current literature surrounding athletic identity and retirement from sport, NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics, and resources available to student-athletes at the Division I level. The third chapter details the methodological approach taken to perform the study. The fourth chapter provides the findings of the study and supporting evidence from the participant interviews. The fifth and final chapter provides a discussion of the findings of the study in relation to the research questions.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The purpose of the current study was to examine retirement from sport from the perspective of former NCAA Division I student-athletes. To develop the theoretical framework of the study, literature surrounding identity development, athletic identity, retirement and retirement difficulties seen in intercollegiate athletes and elite athletes, and the programs and resources currently available to NCAA Division I student-athletes to assist with this transition were examined. In addition, the current structure of NCAA Division I is detailed to understand the current culture and make-up of the division. This is important as not all Divisions of the NCAA have the same guiding principles and values and therefore may influence the experience of the student-athletes.

The identity section will include a definition of identity, identity theory, and athletic identity. Additionally, the identity section includes commitment, which is vital to this study. Secondly, this chapter includes a review of retirement difficulties identified by current research in intercollegiate and elite athletes. Since the setting of the current study is NCAA Division I athletics, resources available to student-athletes at this level of competition. Lastly, the guiding principles of NCAA Division I athletics will be explored.
Identity

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the student-athletes transition out of intercollegiate athletic competition is imperative to examine how one develops an identity and the impact of being a collegiate athlete on one's identity. The status of being a collegiate athlete, sought after by many in the world of athletics and the dream for many, begins at an early age. There may be serious implications for an individual leaving sport after achieving their dream of participating in intercollegiate athletics. To build a foundation to study the difficulties that a student-athlete encounters when leaving sport, this paper will explore how an identity is formed and identity statuses, athletic identity, the impact of committing to an identity, and differences within NCAA divisions that may foster the growth of athletic identity and in turn impact the retirement process.

Identity Development

Erikson’s theory of psychological development has become the cornerstone for understanding how one develops a sense of personal identity. Considered a life span theory of personality development his theory consists of eight stages of development. An individual moves through the stages identified in a predetermined order as personality builds upon the previous stage. As an individual encounters and overcomes a crisis, they move to the next stage of development. A crisis is defined as a time when an individual encounters a psychological need that conflicts with the needs of society. When resolved, a crisis develops self-esteem in the individual. According to his theory, adolescence is a key stage for developing a clear self-identity. In addition, developing a clear identity and committing to a self-identity provides an individual with a wholeness that allows them to
answer questions about the purpose, meaning, and direction of their life (Erikson, 1963; Berzonsky, 1994).

The eight stages of development emphasize the role that culture, society, and conflicts play within the ego across the lifespan. The first five stages of Erikson’s theory go from birth to age eighteen with the last three stages extending into adulthood. From birth to a year and a half year old, an individual is in the trust versus mistrust stage. During this stage, an infant looks to their primary caregivers for consistency and stability to determine if they are living in a safe world. The virtue of hope developed in this stage (McLeod, 2008). Individuals then enter the second stage, autonomy versus shame. Typically, an individual is in this stage from a year and a half to three years old. It is important to encourage independence in the child so that the individual does not become too dependent on others (McLeod, 2008).

In stage three, initiative versus guilt, a child is inquisitive and requires a balance of initiative and guilt. During this stage, children from age’s three to five are looking to develop purpose. Industry versus inferiority is the fourth stage where competency is developed. Between the ages of five and twelve, a teacher will play a vital role in helping them learn important things and their peers will begin to play a more critical role in the individual’s self-esteem (McLeod, 2008). Erikson’s key stage, adolescence, occurs in stage five and is the transition from childhood to adulthood where fidelity develops as an individual begins to look towards the future. There is a strong desire to fit in and the individual re-examines their identity at this time. The re-examination of their identity can result in an identity crisis or role confusion (McLeod, 2008). Again, at this stage an
individual develops a clear identity. Erikson illustrated the importance of understanding the development of personality from adolescence into adulthood (As cited in Waterman, 1982, p. 341):

The wholeness to be achieved at this stage I have called a sense of inner identity. The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him. Individually speaking, identity includes, but is more than, the sum of all the successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and often was forced to become, like the people he depended on. Identity is a unique product, which now meets a crisis to be solved only in new identifications with age mates and with leader figures outside of the family (Erikson, 1963, p. 87).

This definition speaks to the importance of this stage and is relatable to what student-athletes retiring from sport may encounter. It encompasses the idea that a student-athlete must evaluate what they have become, an athlete, with what they see themselves becoming in the future. For many student-athletes, being a professional athlete is not a part of their future. Transitioning out of sport may result in a crisis, which by the definition above, now needs solved.
The final three stages will now be explored which go into the adulthood of an individual. The sixth stage is intimacy versus isolation where the basic virtue developed is love. Individuals typically seen in this stage are anywhere from eighteen to forty (McLeod, 2008). At this time, an individual is developing relationships with a long-term commitment outside of their family. If this period is successful, an individual will commit to a relationship. If not, this stage could lead to isolation, depression, and loneliness. Stage seven, generativity versus stagnation (40-65 years of age), individuals begin to give back to society by being productive at work or starting families. The basic virtue in this stage is care. The last stage of development is ego integrity vs. despair (65+). At this stage, the individual reaches maturity and the basic virtue of wisdom is developed. During this stage, an individual is able to reflect on their life (McLeod, 2008).

As the cornerstone, Erikson’s theory spurred additional research on identity development and contributed to the understanding of how identity develops. When examining identity development it is important to look at two notable aspects that affect identity development: personal identity and social identity (Miller, 1963). Personal identity refers to the way an individual views himself or herself and is often internal to the individual. Personal identity is often private which is different from social identity, which focuses on outer relationships and roles that the individual fills. Over time, individuals studying identity development have conducted research to discover which aspect has more influence on the development of one’s identity. For example, Sarbin and Allen (1968) stated that “the shaping of one’s identity is dependent on the valuations
(sanctions, reinforcements) placed on one’s public conduct by relevant others” (p. 550). In direct opposition to this is the idea that an individual’s true identity lies in the individual’s personal uniqueness (Jung, 1957; Maslow, 1961). Cheek (1982) examined the relationship between self-consciousness and identity. The findings of the study showed that the social orientation that most influences the public self of an individual is the importance they place on their physical appearance, the groups in which they identify, and the awareness of the impressions they have on others. The study showed the importance of balancing public and private self-consciousness.

Lastly, Waterman (1982) found when identity develops there are various factors that may influence the development of an individual's identity. First, the more an individual identifies with their parents the more likely they are to form meaningful identity commitments. Secondly, the parenting style that a child grows up with will influence identity development. During adolescence, the more identities that an individual experiences the more likely they are to avoid an identity crisis later in life (Waterman, 1982). Through exposure to multiple identities, the individual would make an informed decision about who they are. The support system of the adolescent heavily influences identity development. The parent or guardian's value system may influence the formation of the individual's identity. Not only will the parents have an influence but also the peer group of the individual (Waterman, 1982).

Amongst the many identity development theories, Erikson’s theory has become the basis for understanding identity development and highlighted the adolescent’s stage where an individual changes from a child to adult. From Erikson’s work stemmed the
idea of identity statuses. Next, we will look at the four identity statuses with particular attention to the foreclosure status, which is important when studying student-athletes.

Identity Statuses

Because of Erikson’s theory, Marcia (1966) composed four identity statuses used by individuals as coping styles during the psychosocial task of forming an ego identity: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Marcia developed these identity statuses off Erickson’s dimensions of crisis and commitment. According to Marcia, a crisis occurs when an individual explores themselves or alternative views that can lead to a new value system (Marcia, 1966; Beronzky, Rice, Neimeyer, 1990). Commitment describes the extent to which one invested in the beliefs and values that they hold (Marcia, 1966; Berzonsky, et al., 1990). Marcia identified that individuals differ in forming an identity because at each stage of development they process, structure, and utilize information differently (Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1988). As a result, individuals build self-theories in different manners.

The presence or absence of commitment leads to one of the four identity statuses. Diffusion is seen when individuals are neither committed to an identity or self-exploring an identity (Marcia, 1980). The second identity status paradigm is foreclosure. Foreclosure means that an individual has committed to an identity without exploring himself or herself. Moratorium is the third status and describes a time when an individual is under self-exploration without making a firm commitment. The last paradigm, achievement, is after a period of self-exploration and is when an individual commits to an identity. Research has solidified this as an accurate way of assessing differences in
identity formation in different individuals (Marcia, 1980; Bourne, 1978; Waterman, 1982). Overall, Marcia’s identity statuses assessed how one develops an identity and the clarity of one’s identity.

Of particular importance when studying student-athletes is the second identity status foreclosure that can be adapted from general psychology literature to the sport context. Murphy, Petitpas, and Brewer (1996) conducted an example of this in the sports context when they examined identity foreclosure and athletic identity in light of career maturity. Another example of identity foreclosure within the realm of sports is Brown, et. al., (2000). The study found that when student-athletes committed early to the athletic role with little exploration of alternative roles that their ability to make career decisions suffered. Student-athletes are at risk for foreclosure when committing to athletics without exploring other areas of opportunity (Miller & Kerr, 2003). Kroger and Marcia (2011) describe individuals within foreclosure as not developing their own identity but rather accepting an identity passed onto them. Sometimes student-athletes are beginning their participation in sport during their toddler years and continuing participation into college, which speaks to Kroger and Marcia’s (2011) definition.

Identity Theory

While there have been many contributions made to understanding how one develops an identity, identity theory, rooted in Mead’s early work, began as a way to research the concepts of self and society and will serve as the framework for this study (Mead, 1934; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Mead (1934) believed that identity developed in a social process and reflexivity instead of being a singular stimulus response manner.
(Whipple, 2009). As a result, individuals are not just responding to situations but also creating meanings of the stimuli based on the actors in the situation (Blumer, 1969, Mead, 1934, Whipple, 2009). Meanings created through social interactions result in changes to the social world that an individual is acting (Whipple, 2009). Identity theory, situated within structural symbolic interactionism, serves to not only understand but also explain the impact that social structures have on self and how self affects social behaviors (Stryker, 1980). Symbolic interactionism is beneath most sociological interest in identity and “asserted that the state of human nature is a social state; that society is constituted by communication, social relationships, and interaction based on sociability and sympathy; and that society is a mirror in which people see themselves (Serpe & Stryker, 2011).

“Society shapes self-shapes social behavior” is the framework that developed from Mead’s work (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity theory began as a way to test the concepts presented in Mead’s frame: self and society. However, identity theory separates itself from Mead’s work by viewing society as organized patterns of interactions and relationships, which are a part of various groups. The theory also sees individuals as a part of networks and social relationships. Individuals within these social relationships encompass various roles that support their role in networks (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In addition, larger social structures, where networks live and give boundaries, influencing entry. Overtime, identity theory has developed into two different but closely related directions. The first direction examines the relationship between social structures and identities, which Stryker heavily researched, and the second direction focuses on the internal process of self-verification heavily researched by Burke. According to Stryker
and Burke (2000) both directions of the theory help provide scope and context for the other direction.

According to the identity theory, “the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Within each of these social networks individuals hold, certain roles that bring certain duties that are social roles, which once internalized develop into an identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). These identities, viewed as “internalized self-designations” (Herbert, n.d., p. 333). Another vital aspect of identity theory is the assertion that an individual is composed of multiple identities resulting from the various social networks that they live within. For example, look at student-athletes within intercollegiate athletics. Their title alone implies two identities: student and athlete. However, they may develop other identities like teammate, friend (social), roommate, employee, etc. This idea draws on the work of James’ (1890) who asserted a multifaceted self with many identities placed in order of importance based on the intricacies of the relationships they have. In regards to identity theory, the notion of ordering identities based on importance is identity salience, which is a necessary component of the theory.

Salience hierarchy organizes identities by level of importance. Identities higher in the salience hierarchy display more often than lower identities (Herbert, n.d.). When an identity has a high salience, the more the individual will align their behavior with the expectations of that role, perceive situations as an opportunity to display that identity, and actively seek out opportunities to display that identity. The different identities one has
will be salient at different times based on societal factors. It is important to note that the individual invokes identities not the situation (Stets & Burke, 2000). To determine what identity an individual will assert into a social situation the concept of commitment was included in identity theory and explored in detail later in this chapter.

Identity theory hypothesizes that the salience of an identity reflects the commitment to the role relationships requiring that identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Several studies have linked identity salience and behavior. Stryker and Serpe (1982) found that the salience of religious identities predicts time spent in religious activities and the salience of religious identities predicted by commitment to role relationships based on religion. A second example was conducted by Callero (1985) showed that the salience of a blood donor identity predicts how often they will donate blood. In addition, the study showed that commitment to others within that community affects the salience of the identity. These are just two examples that highlight the use of identity theory in research.

Social identity theory is another key theory to explore in relation to identity and closely linked to identity theory. The social identity theory focuses on the characteristics of a situation in which an identity would be stimulated (Stets & Burke, 2000). A social identity is an individual’s knowledge that they belong to a group socially (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). A social group is composed of individuals who view themselves in the same manner. Hogg and Abrams (1988) explicitly highlighted that social groups are a part of society and can only exist in relation to divergent groups. An individual’s sense of self is largely dependent upon the social groups to which they belong and like identity theory, social identity theory recognizes that an individual is composed of multiple social
identities that activate as the situation changes (Stets & Burke, 2000). The salience in which an identity activates depends on the accessibility and fit of an identity. According to this theory, forming an identity is self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Stets & Burke, 2000). While closely related to identity theory, social identity theory focuses on category-based identities like being black or white while identity theory primarily focuses on role based identities like teacher or student (Strkyer & Burker, 2000). As a result, identity theory will serve as the framework for the study and will allow for the exploration of Mead’s formula commitment shapes identity salience shapes role choice behavior. The final component of identity theory is commitment. Within the theory, commitment links self with social structures.

**Commitment**

Another vital aspect of identity theory is the idea of commitment that Stryker introduced to link self with social structures (Herbert, n.d.). Stryker (2007) illustrated commitment as ties to social networks that develop under the notion that life takes place in “small and specialized social network” rather than society as a whole (p. 1093). Within these networks, individuals carry out role performance and social positions. Commitment links the identity to the individual’s salience hierarchy and the greater the commitment to an identity the higher it will be in the individual's hierarchy. The level to which one commits to an identity may be a result of several factors: the value the identity holds with others, how in line they are with the expectations of others whom the individual depends for an identity, the extensive network of the individual on whom one depends, and the number of individuals in the network (Herbert, n.d.). Commitment in
relation to identity theory illustrates the importance of an identity to the individual (Stryker, 2007).

Commitment to an identity strengthens or decreases based on the emotions experienced. The first example, strengthening an identity can result from positive feedback received from others. Positive feedback serves to enhance the self-esteem of the individual, which grows commitment to the identity (Herbert, n.d.). Role performance is the second and based on feelings of adequacy or inadequacy based on role performance. Cultural values, normative expectations, assertion of identities, and emotional reactions represent areas that base judgements. Emotions serve as “markers of adequacy” for the individual letting them know if their performances were acceptable based on the given expectations (Herbert, n.d.). The emotions experienced, will affect the level at which the individual remains committed to an identity. Positive emotions result in an increased commitment to and identity while negative emotions will prompt the individual to improve performance or if not possible to decrease their commitment to a particular identity. Lastly, emotions can signify how important an identity is to an individual or how salient the identity. Emotions are an intricate part of identity theory and lead to individuals performing roles in a manner consistent with cultural and normative expectations, the situation, and salient feelings about self (Herbert, n.d.).

**Athletic Identity**

As mentioned previously, one area that an athlete may commit strongly to is their athletic identity, which is “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). Numerous factors contribute and strengthen a
student-athlete’s identity in sport. The identified factors include motivation; win at all costs attitude, media influence, extended playing seasons, joining a university team, and the emphasis placed on results over process (Hill et al., 2001). Primarily a strong athletic identity can positively affect athletic performance when an athlete devotes himself or herself fully to this role. This can affect one of the most important bottom lines in sports: wins and losses. Within intercollegiate athletics, coaches seek after student-athletes who are willing to devote themselves fully to this role due to the time commitment necessary to be competitive at this level. Sport participation also has many other positive effects on an individual, which include opportunities to engage in social interactions, develop a self-identity, and build confidence in their abilities (Brewer et al., 1993). Lastly, a strong commitment to athletic identity has been shown to result in a healthier lifestyle post retirement as retired athletes have been found to engage in more physical activity that helps keep them healthy (Brewer et al., 1993).

Lally and Kerr (2005) showed that the environment within intercollegiate athletics strengthened athletic goals for student-athletes, which mirrored the findings of a previous study (Hill et al., 2001). In addition, the participants, who were fourth and fifth year students at a Canadian University noted that because of their long time commitment to sport, success in athletic competition, and being sought after to play in college added motivation to chase their athletic dreams. In fact, two student-athletes, who did not have serious athletic goals when entering college developed them due to the talented individuals and coaches that surrounded day in and day out (Lally & Kerr, 2005). While the study noted changes in athletic identity and the student role over time, early in their
college year’s participants reported having a highly salient athletic identity that defined themselves along with their relationships with teammates and interactions with coaches. In addition, student-athletes went to great lengths to create an awareness that they were student-athletes on campus by wearing athletic gear, sitting in class with other athletes, and by organizing their schedules to accommodate their athletic commitments.

With time, student-athletes illustrated that their athletic identity persisted but was not exclusive. Participants beginning to define themselves through other social roles like the student role (Lally & Kerr, 2005). The exclusivity of which student-athletes identified with the athletic role changed when professional sport careers or Olympic dreams became unattainable. As a result, student-athletes increased their focus on academics, exposing themselves to non-athletic peers, and began to explore career options. An important finding of this study was that student-athletes could invest in both the athletic role and the academic role without compromising one of the roles. Lally (2007) also found that student-athletes when approaching the end of their university athletic career were able to invest time in roles outside of athletics and still achieve personal bests. The findings of both of these studies is critical to supporting the student-athlete in the best manner possible. The results encourage student-athletes to invest their time broadly and inform coaches that excellence is possible in multiple areas, simultaneously, without sacrificing athletic success. For coaches, there is no need to fear that a student-athlete's performance will suffer because of involvement in other areas.

Research within the field has also shown that athletic identity can have a negative impact on an athlete’s transition out of sport (Cecic-Erpic, et al., 2004; Baillee & Danish,
1992; Brewer et al., 1993; Grove, et al., 1997; Webb, et., al., 1997; Sparkes, 1998; Murphy et al., 1996). Athletes with a strong commitment to their athletic identity experienced more difficulties that are psychological and had a more difficult time organizing their life after athletic participation had ended (Cecic-Erpic et al., 2004). In addition to psychological difficulties, athletes displayed mental and behavioral disengagement and often lived in a state of denial that their athletic career had ended (Grove et al., 1997). While research has found a variety of different problems when athletes retire with a strong athletic identity, it is important to look at identity development in college students in order to gain an understanding of this instrumental time in an individual’s life.

**Identity Development in College**

When looking at identity development, the college years are an important period of development in an individual’s life. Waterman (1982) found that the college years is where the greatest gains in identity formation are made. During college, individuals are working to establish independence and a strong identity, manage relationships, and plan for their future (Cornelius, 1995). Important personality changes can take place during this period as individuals are reevaluating their belief systems and ultimately settling on an identity (Constantinople, 1969). Through the college years, individuals have the opportunity and the freedom to engage in these evaluations. With this in mind it is critical to examine how participation in intercollegiate athletics affects an athlete’s identity development as intercollegiate athletics is the most time consuming extracurricular activity that an individual can chose to participate in throughout college
(Richards & Aries, 1999). Lally and Kerr (2005) found that athletes were unable explore the student role or engage in campus clubs, community projects or volunteering because of their investment in athletics. As a result, student-athletes often sacrifice academically or socially in order to meet athletic demands. What does this ultimately mean for their personal identity development? Does it promote committing exclusively to their athletic identity? What is the result when an intercollegiate athlete retires from sport?

Researchers have found when examining identity development in student-athletes that they have three dimensions encompassed in their self-identity throughout college: the athletic role, the social role, and the academic role (Adler & Adler, 1987; Miller & Kerr, 2003). The three dimensions of the self-identity of intercollegiate athletes relates to the multiple identities that individuals encompass in identity theory. While all three roles can be present in a student-athlete's life, they may come into conflict with each other forcing one dimension to become more prominent than the other dimension. Adler and Adler (1987) found that out of three roles the athletic role was the most salient, followed by the social role, and the academic role being the least salient identity. Key individuals in the athlete’s lives often reinforce the athletic role for athletes. For example, coaches often enforce that when competing in intercollegiate athletics sport must be the highest priority in the individual’s life. When this is enforced, other identity dimensions like academics can suffer. Also compounding the decreasing academic role is the assistance that student-athletes receive from athletic department staff. Student-athletes have advisors and tutors who are overseeing their academics and even registering them for class. The
student-athlete is then able to take a more passive role in regards to academics and still achieve a level of success.

An important aspect of examining retirement from sport is examining the role that a student-athlete's identity plays in the transition, specifically the athletic identity of the individual. Student-athletes often do not realize that having a strong, exclusive commitment to athletic identity can serve as a distraction from academics (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Next, retirement difficulties found in the existing literature represent the retirement process of athletes.

**Retirement Difficulties**

Retirement from sport is a unique situation for each athlete. Regardless of whether an athlete voluntarily or involuntarily retires, they may encounter difficulties when they are no longer competing in athletics. Currently, a growing body of literature exists that examines retirement from sport and what athletes face during this transition. The research illustrates a variety of issues that an athlete may encounter depending upon their retirement circumstances.

One difficulty encountered by former student-athletes are social difficulties (Botterill, 1988, Bailee & Danish, 1992, Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Lally, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). This can also be labeled psychosocial issues, which can include missing sport related social activities, friends, and missing the athlete lifestyle (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004). Through years of training and competition, other athletes become a peer group and social network for the individual.
Retirement removes athletes from the intimacy of their social group and the athletic subculture, which can result in a lack of social support for the athlete.

Lally (2007), through qualitative work and a longitudinal study, showed that being cut off from their social network and friends was a fear that athletes had about leaving sport. Participants had seen former athletes retire and subtly cut off from the athlete subculture. The results of the study showed that a year after retirement the individuals did not have much interaction with the intercollegiate athletic subculture (Lally. 2007). Losing a social network can result in a period of loneliness for the retiring athlete. In addition, there can be difficulty in building new relationships (Mihovilovic, 1968). When forming new friendships athletes often do not know how to begin those relationships. With their former friends, their sport was a common denominator and a natural way to start relationships. It is important to keep in mind that athletes having social and emotional support during this time is key to making a smooth transition (Grove, et al., 1997).

In addition to encountering social difficulties, athletes who are retiring from sport may also encounter an identity crisis (Baillee & Danish, 1992; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Lally, 2007). The amount of time and effort that invested into achieving an athlete's goals helps root their identity in their role as an athlete. An identity crisis can occur due to having a strong and exclusive athletic identity, which has been problematic for retiring athletes (Alfermann, et al., 2004; Baillee & Danish, 1992; Brewer et al., 1993; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Murphy, et. al., 1996; Sparkes, 1998; Webb et al., 1998). In addition, athletes have reported feeling lost when
transitioning out of athletics (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998). Not only can they feel lost during this time but they may also experience an overall sense of loss. This can encompass losing their self-worth and an overall sense of self (Sparkes, 1998). Sparkes (1998) participant stated, “I have lost an aspect of myself, a self that I wanted to be, a part of me that was the single most important aspect of my conception of self” (p.655). While athletes struggle with losing their identity, they can also encounter difficulty in constructing a new identity that does not involve sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000, Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998). When searching for a new identity, athletes are essentially reconstructing themselves without sport. Many established an identity in sport at an early age and is fundamental to how they view themselves, making it a more difficult process.

When retiring from sport, athletes may experience an uncertainty about their future that may influence their view of self (Webb et al., 1998). Uncertainty about the future can stem from athlete not thinking about what their life will look like after they are no longer competing. A study conducted in 2004, found that 26% of former athletes who had competed at the national or international level had not thought about their post sports life and 39% had no exact plan for their future (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004). Not having a plan for the future can contribute to an athlete feeling that retirement puts their life on hold (Sparkes, 1998). However, to avoid having an uncertainty about the future, research has noted the importance of finding a hobby or interest to replace sport (Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Replacing the sport role will be different for each individual but may include a career, continuing education, or engaging in activities that
were not possible due to sport participation. The faster the sport role is replaced with a new area of interest, the smoother the transition out of sports.

One area that can benefit from the replacement of the sport role is athletes feeling like they have lost control of their life (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Webb et al., 1998). Upon retiring from sport, athletes may encounter difficulty finding a replacement for the sport role. However, research has found that the more education an individual has the easier it is for them to transition from sports into the workforce (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; McPherson, 1980; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). This is particularly encouraging for intercollegiate student-athletes who retire from sport after completing their collegiate career. In theory, they are graduating with a degree that will help them replace the sport role in a timely manner.

Additional retirement difficulties can include, psychological issues (Cecic Erpic et al., 2004), body issues (Sparkes, 1998; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), lower self-respect (Crook & Robertson, 1991), anger, anxiety and depression (Alfermann & Gross, 1997), decreased self-esteem (Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004), decline in life satisfaction (Webb et al., 1998; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and emotional problems (Alfermann & Gross, 1997; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Retirement difficulties are widespread and depend greatly on the career and experiences of the athlete. With the growing body of literature surrounding retirement from sport and the difficulties that athletes encounter, researchers developed retirement models to explain the retirement process and to help identify athletes who are at risk for encountering difficulties.
Retirement Models

The identification of at risk, athletes plays a key role in preparing student-athletes for this transition (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Schlossberg (1981) offered a model to help predict when difficulty would arise when retiring from sport. The six areas identified for putting student-athletes at risk for retirement difficulties are athletes who based their identity on their athletic performance, have a difference in their ability athletically and their aspirations, have limited prior experience with the transition, have difficulty dealing with change emotionally or behaviorally, experience difficulty when developing and maintaining a support system, and who lack material and emotional resources that could assist in the process (Schlossberg, 1981). Through identification, athletes can engage in educational programs that can begin to prepare them for retirement with the hope of decreasing the level of difficulties they experience. Other researchers have since provided models to help identify at risk athletes and to help create a greater understanding of the retirement process.

Retirement Among Athletes developed by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) provides a comprehensive picture of the retirement process for athletes. The five-step model begins by recognizing the causes of retirement and from there transfers into step two: factors related to adaptation to retirement. This step in the model recognizes that athletes face many transitions at the end of their athletic career and success will depend on the development experiences, self-identity, social identity, perceptions of control, and other contributors like financial resources (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). The third step encompasses the available resources to assist with the retirement process. This step
recognizes the impact that coping skills, social support, and pre-retirement planning can have on the retirement process. Step four, quality of adaptation to athletic retirement, is a direct result of steps two and three. Depending upon the transitions faced by the athlete and the resources available to assist with this transition an athlete will experience a retirement crisis or a healthy transition from sport (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). If a crisis is experienced the athlete would then move to step five of the model in which intervention would take place where cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or social support are extended. The model provides a visual map for understanding retirement from sport and can serve as a guide for understanding how to provide support. Appendix A has a visual representation of the model.

Wylleman & Lavallee (2004) proposed a developmental model that proposes a holistic approach, or beginning to end perspective, looking at the transitions faced by student-athletes. According to Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, and Cote (2009) the model encourages multiple identities and engagement in more than sports. In addition, the model illustrates the interactive nature of athletic transitions that occur in four different areas: psychologically, socially, academically, and at vocational levels. The four levels encompass several issues commonly seen in the research examining retirement difficulties. The four layers, which represent the stages of transitions that an athlete may encounter during their entire athletic career, contain stages that provide detail on the particular stage. The first stage focuses on athletic development. The second stage of the model focuses on psychological development of the athlete from childhood to adulthood (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The third stage looks at social change
related to athletic endeavors and includes aspects of building a social network within athletics. The fourth and final stage looks at transitions that occur academically and at the career level for athletes. The academic transition goes from early childhood through higher education. The nature of this model is to provide a representation of what transitions an athlete may encounter during their athletic career. Not all athletes will encounter every stage but are rather dependent upon the individual and their experiences (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Appendix B provides visual representation of the model.

**Resources available to Division I Student-Athletes**

As athletes continue to encounter psychological, psychosocial, and physical issues because of retirement from sport, researchers have begun to focus on how to prevent retirement difficulties from occurring. For example, at the Olympic level, the Career Assessment Program for Athletes (CAPA) was developed to assist with career transitions for Olympic athletes (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, Murphy, 1992). CAPA consisted of primarily three topics: managing the emotional and social impact of transitions, creating an awareness of qualities that will assist with coping with transitions and career development, and providing information about the workforce (Petitpas et al., 1992). Carried out as a one-day workshop, the program helps athletes identify transferable skills in order to assist the athletes in future difficulties. CAPA is just one example of programs developed for elite athletes. Intercollegiate athletics has a variety of programs that aim to prepare student-athletes for this transition. Next, details are provided about the make-up of these programs provided in order to understand what is available to student-athletes in this studies setting.
When comparing collegiate athletes to athletes at other levels of competition, they are in a unique situation due to the university resources available to help them prepare for their future post-athletic participation. Research has shown that investing in pre-retirement planning can help create a smoother transition out of athletics (Lavelle, 2005; Lally, 2007; Stankovich, 1998; Stankovich, et al., 2001). Athletic administrators have implemented programming to assist athletes with this difficult transition. Programs established to assist student-athletes in identifying skills developed through athletic participation and will benefit them in their future endeavors. Often student-athletes do not realize that success in one area of their life does not automatically spill over into other areas like academics or a future career. As a result, programs have been strategically designed by sport administrators to help student-athletes as they transition throughout their athletic career including retirement from sport (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Carodine, et al., 2001; McKnight, et al., 2009; Stankovich et al., 2001).

Stankovich (1998) in his dissertation examined the effectiveness of implementing a class for student-athletes to take before graduation that would assist with preparing student-athletes for this transition. The course focused on six different areas: identity exploration, goal setting, decision-making, communication skills, career training, professional preparation, and future planning. The results of the study found that after taking the course, student-athletes had more confidence to face transition from sport and the next phase of their life. Evidence showed that student-athletes who participated in the class decreased their athletic identity, displayed greater career maturity, were more confident in making decisions regarding the future of their career, and were ready to
retire from sport (Stankovich, 1998). The class met weekly and was available to fourth and fifth year student-athletes. Based upon the results, Stankovich (1998) suggested the class be available earlier in the college career and meet more frequently. From this research, The Positive Transitions Model was developed.

The Positive Transitions Model is a program implemented that is comprised of a class that athletes can elect to take before graduation. The class focuses on identifying and analyzing the skills that the athlete has acquired throughout their athletic career that apply to other areas of their life (Stankovich et al., 2001). The first component of the model focuses on the athlete’s identity, personality, and values. The second component of the model is transferable skills, designed to help athletes identify and apply their athletic skills to other areas of their life. Applicable skills can include, but are not limited to, decision-making, goal setting, leadership skills, work ethic, and communication. During this phase, awareness is created within the student-athlete on how skills they already possess can assist them in achieving professional success (McKnight, et. al., 2009; Stankovich et al., 2001). Lastly, the program teaches athletes interview skills, resume writing, and how to professionally network. The class utilizes a variety of different means to engage the athlete and distribute the information (Stankovich et al., 2001).

After implementing the Positive Transitions Model, the researchers received feedback from multiple student-athletes regarding the effectiveness of the course. One athlete stated that the “Positive Transitions Class was probably the most useful course I had taken in college” (Stankovich et al., 2001, p 83). In addition to this, another participant said, “The class definitely helped me to start thinking about all those things I
pushed away for years, such as creating a resume, meeting with graduate school counselors, and preparing for job interviews. I gained confidence through talking to others” (Stankovich et al., 2001 p 83). The comments acquired from the student-athletes that completed the course, showed that the Positive Transitions Model helps address a variety of issues brought to light during the literature review.

Another approach to helping athlete’s transition into retirement is the seven-step model (McKnight et al., 2009). The model consists of seven steps that assist the student-athlete as they transition from sport. Engaging in counseling is the first step in the model and addresses athletic identity, core meaning, employable identity, and results. The next step in the model deals with the emotional elements of retirement from sport. In the third stage, athletes receive knowledge regarding transferable skills. In the next stage, athletes deal with the perceptions of their transferable skills by looking at different scenarios to identify application (McKnight et al., 2009). Perceived competency is the fifth step in the model. This step works toward the athlete feeling competent in using their skills outside of athletics and in everyday life situations. When athletes retire, they lose the close network of friends in which they have always been a part of therefore, the sixth step in the model focuses on developing a new social network. This expands the athlete’s friendships and gives them a broader, diverse group of friends. In the last step of the model, evaluation of the counseling occurs to determine how useful it has been in helping the athlete transition out of sport (McKnight et al., 2009). This step provides constructive feedback for the counselor to use in their continued work with student-athletes.
Specifically within the realm of Division I athletics, The Georgia Institute of Technology was a leader in developing programs for their student-athletes to assist in their development as a whole person. The Total Person Program developed off Dr. Homer Rice’s philosophy that “excellence is a result of a balanced life including academic achievement, athletic success and personal well-being” (Life skills, n.d., paragraph 2). Dr. Rice, the former Georgia Tech Athletics Director, developed the program to help student-athletes excel in all areas of their life through various opportunities. The Total Persons Program affords student-athletes opportunities in four areas: Student-Athlete Advisory Board (SAAB), career development and placement, personal health and well-being, and community outreach (The Total Person Program, n.d.).

SAAB offers leadership opportunities for student-athletes to be a representative voice for student-athletes and to provide necessary feedback regarding programs and the services offered. The second area, career development and placement, was put in place to assist with deciding a future career, preparation for a career, internship opportunities and job placement. The personal health and well-being portion of the program is a series of topics that directly relate to the student-athletes health. Topics can include time and stress management, finance, drug and alcohol, sexual assault, etiquette training, and sports nutrition and supplements (The Total Person Program, n.d.). Lastly, the program encompassed community outreach, which SAAB members led to get student-athletes active in serving as role models on campus and in the community through engagement in various events. The Total Persons Program spurred the development of Challenging
Athletic Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS)/Life Skills program developed by the NCAA and the Division IA Athletic Directors Association.

The CHAMPS/Life Skills program, developed to enhance the experience of student-athletes and help them develop skills that will serve them for life, focuses on NCAA Division I student-athletes (Carodine, et al., 2001). Dr. Homer’s philosophy of developing a balanced life spurred the program’s development (Life skills, n.d.). The NCAA collaborates with over 1,200 member institutions, conference offices and affiliate organizations in order to carry out CHAMPS/Life Skills in an effort to develop skills useful for a lifetime. CHAMPS/Life Skills identified five commitments that serve as the pillars of the program. Academic excellence is the first component of the program. Graduating student-athletes is the ultimate goal of the program and to reach this goal, stage one focuses on a variety of areas including study skills, writing, scholarship, time management, tutoring, and study tables. The second component of the program is commitment to athletic excellence and brought to life by meeting the changing needs of student-athletes. This includes travel accommodations, administrative support programs, facilities, equipment, and scheduling. Third, the program is committed to personal development and educates student-athletes on eating disorders, relationship responsibilities, manners, communication, self-esteem and other areas closely related (Carodine, et al., 2001). The fourth component is commitment to career development from the athlete’s freshman year through their senior year. Key areas focused on in this component of the program are internships, cover letter and resume writing, networking, and job search skills. Lastly, the program is committed to service, which includes peer
education and counseling, service to the community, mentoring, and student-athlete assistance programs. The program meets all of its objectives by building partnerships in the community and throughout the university (Carodine et al., 2001).

In 2016, CHAMPS/Life Skills collaborated with the National Association for Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) who now oversees the day-to-day operations and implementations of the program for member institutions. In an effort to continue to evolve the program and its relevancy for student-athletes, N4A will be solely responsible for the program in 2018. By creating a formal partnership, academic advising and life skills combined creating an opportunity to serve student-athletes holistically (Leach, 2015).

The Huntington Bucks Go Pro Internship Program established by the Ohio State University Athletic Department is a student-athlete development program designed to prepare student-athletes for a successful life. The eight-week internship program provides an opportunity for student-athletes to acquire professional experience through on-campus internships. Student-athletes assigned to a professional area on campus where they work 20-25 hours (Huntington Bucks Go Pro Student-Athlete internship program, n.d.). In addition, two days a week the interns engage in professional development sessions. The professional development sessions topics include: learning to lead, personal finance, athletic identity, professional development, community service, diversity and inclusion, and personal brand. To obtain an internship within the program student-athletes must apply and go through an interview process. The program strives to
provide an experience that will benefit the student-athlete regardless of major or career aspirations.

Another program developed by Ohio State University Athletics Department to prepare student-athletes to transition from sport is the Wolstein Leadership Academy (WLA). The WLA is a three-year program that focuses on leadership development to enhance performance on and off the field. Each year focuses on a different aspect of leadership development. Year one focuses on knowing yourself as a leader, year two focuses on being a leader on your team, and year three focuses on leading in a professional setting. The WLA gives student-athletes the opportunity to learn from their peers, athletic administrators, and business professionals. Leadership development is also an initiative that the NCAA provides for student-athletes to transition out of college (Leadership development, n.d.). The goal of NCAA leadership development programs is to connect the lessons student-athletes learn in sports to life. Through the trainings available, student-athletes return to their campuses better equipped to lead and serve as role models.

In addition to the programming in place through athletic departments, student-athletes can also use the resources provided to the general student body through their campus student affairs department. These resources include a career office where students can get help creating a resume and cover letter, practice interview skills, and engage in activities like etiquette dinners. In addition, all students can engage in career fairs to help identify potential employment opportunities. All of these services can assist students in making a successful transition into the workforce including the student-athlete
population. Additionally, clinical counseling and academic advising are available to all students on campus. However, despite their access to these services they rarely engage because of time commitments associated with being a student-athlete. Student-athletes are more apt to engage in programs provided through the athletic department and not seek university resources that are available to all students.

Efforts to holistically care for student-athletes and help them be successful in life post-sports has improved. Through these programs, athletes have the opportunity to develop a broad perspective, gain knowledge and tools to help them make life transitions successfully (Hill et al., 2001). However, despite sport administrator’s efforts, student-athletes still encounter difficulties when leaving sport. As a result, the current study will examine retirement from the perspective of former Division I intercollegiate athletes qualitatively in an effort to generate a greater understanding about the difficulties encountered, the programs used, their effectiveness, and to identify programs or services that would have been beneficial to engage in. While it is important to consider current programs developed within intercollegiate athletics, it is also important to examine the makeup of NCAA Division I athletics in order to account for the impact it may have on student-athletes.

**NCAA Division I Overview**

When looking specifically at a student-athlete's transition from sport it is important to examine the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the three levels of competition: Division I, Division II, and Division III. The three Divisions of intercollegiate athletic competition were created in 1973 in order to align schools with
like mind institutions in order to create fair competition and opportunities for student-athletes (Our three divisions, n.d.). Fundamental differences arise in the approach taken towards athletics in each Division that could have a significant impact on the extent to which an athlete identifies with their role as an athlete. For example, Division III places the highest priority on the educational experience of the student-athlete. Athletics is in turn an extension of their academic work but never placed as a higher priority. One major difference between Division I and Division III is that in Division I the focus is on creating an experience for the spectators whereas Division III focuses on the participants. Division II is the middle ground of the aforementioned Divisions and seeks to foster a balanced approach between academics and athletics.

As each level of competition differs within the NCAA, they each produce a unique experience for student-athletes that can in turn influence a student-athlete's transition from sport. By examining the three models of intercollegiate athletics, one can see how each division produces a unique experience for student-athletes and why differences may emerge. Division I encompasses the largest institutions when compared to Division II and Division III and manages the largest athletic budgets. Budgets within the Football Bowl Subdivision average $65.9 million (Our three divisions, n.d.). Division II athletics provides the highest championship ratio in the NCAA by providing one championship opportunity for every seven student-athletes. Lastly, Division III has a graduation rate of 87%, the highest among all three Divisions (Our three divisions, n.d.). Appendix C provides a breakdown of the differences that can be seen at all three levels of NCAA competition. The differences that exist between the NCAA’s three levels of
competition including information regarding the number of schools, the student-athlete to student ratio, the average number of teams, and athletic scholarships.

Because of the NCAA model and the differences found among the three Divisions of competition, this study specifically focused on former NCAA Division I student-athletes. The prominence of this Division within our society and the resources that are available at this level of competition make it an important group to study. In addition to hosting the largest athletic budgets, NCAA Division I member institutions offer the most generous scholarships (NCAA Division I, n.d.). In 2015-2016 school year, the Atlantic Coast, Big Ten, Big 12, PAC-12, and Southeastern conferences voted to give their student-athletes full cost of attendance as part of a full athletics scholarship (Cost of attendance Q&A, 2014). Cost of attendance dramatically increased the cost of a scholarship as it now covers expenses not covered by the traditional athletic scholarship. The traditional scholarship included tuition, room and board, and books. Now scholarships will account for individual circumstances like transportation, medical expenses, and childcare needs when determining the scholarship amount (Cost of attendance Q&A, 2014). The value of a scholarship will vary depending upon the school, individual, and are subject to federal guidelines (Cost of attendance Q&A, 2014). Not only has the dollar amount increased but scholarships are also non-revocable due to athletic reasons.

In addition to the budgets, scholarship, and prominence of this Division, Division I was chosen due to the findings of the 2015 Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in College (GOALS) study conducted by the NCAA (Paskus &
Bell, 2015). The study examines several topics including athletic experiences, academic experiences, social experiences, the recruitment process, health and well-being, on-campus support, and finances in all three Divisions of NCAA competition. The study found that Division I student-athletes reported that participation within athletics has prevented them from enrolling in the major of their choice or taking courses that they were interested in. When looking specifically at the campus and team environment, an increased number of student-athletes reported that their closest friends are their college teammates despite reporting frequently socializing with non-athletic peers (Paskus & Bell, 2015). In addition, student-athletes are more comfortable confiding in a teammate or coach then a faculty member or administration if a problem arises. One of the major findings of the study was in regards to time spent on athletics. Since 2010, current student-athletes are reporting more time devoted to athletics. Specifically in Division I, student-athletes reported a median of 32 hours per week in season in 2010 and in 2015 are reporting 34 hours per week. Out of all sports, football reported the highest weekly time commitment of 42 hours per week with softball leading women’s sports with 39 hours per week. Appendix D contains a graph that illustrates the student-athletes self-report of Division I – Median Hours Spent Per Week on Athletic Activities In-Season.

Time spent on academics was a similar increase found in the study. In 2015, the reported median time devoted to academics was 38.5 hours per week, which is up 3 hours since 2010. The academic-athletic balance is another key area of importance. Several sports, Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), baseball, and men’s golf, still report more time spent on athletics relative to the time
spent on academics (Paskus & Bell, 2015). The study also examined relaxation and socialization during the course of the study. High percentages of student-athletes desired to have more time to socialize and relax. This was especially true among Division I student-athletes and women who have high levels of commitment to their sport and to academics (Paskus & Bell, 2015). Appendix E contains a graph that illustrates the student-athletes self-report of Division I – Median Hours Spent Per Week on Academic Activities In-Season.

The study also examined when NCAA student-athletes began participating in their sport. The results showed that from the early age of nine, several student-athletes began participating in their sport, specialized in their sport by age twelve, and had high expectations from their parents and family to play in college, professional leagues, or to become an Olympian. Not only did the study examine the expectations of others but also how likely the student-athlete thought they were to become a professional or Olympic athlete. When looking specifically at NCAA Division I student-athletes 73% of men’s basketball players, 64% of Division I football players, 49% of baseball players, 47% of women’s basketball players, and 16% of all other women’s sports reported that they are somewhat likely to become a professional or Olympic athlete (Paskus & Bell, 2015).

With the results of the NCAA GOALS (Paskus & Bell, 2015) study and the Division I model, it is imperative to explore what the transition out of athletics looks like for Division I student-athletes and how their commitment to athletics has an impact. Due to the time demands of Division I athletics; it is likely that student-athletes will encounter difficulty when retiring from sport. In order to better prepare student-athletes for this
transition retirement from sport will be examined retrospectively in former Division I student-athletes.

When examining student-athletes transition from sport identity development, commitment, athletic identity, and retirement from sport are imperative to gaining a comprehensive understanding. By examining former student-athletes after they have transitioned out of sport, they will be able to explain the difficulties, if any, that they encountered because of having a strong commitment to athletic identity. By looking at retirement from sport through identity theory’s definition of commitment, it will allow for a greater explanation of the process of retirement for intercollegiate athletes. In addition, the study will add knowledge about the student-athlete experience and their development. Intercollegiate athletes when transitioning from sport face an identity change. In order to be optimally effective requires identity to change over time and be restructured (Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1988).
Chapter 3: Methodology

As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to examine commitment to athletic identity and retirement from sport for NCAA Division I student-athletes. The design of this study was to examine recently retired student-athletes in order to understand several facets of the retirement process. First, how collegiate athletes’ commitment to sport and their athletic identity affects this transition. Lastly, how their experience as a student-athlete may combine to affect their retirement from sport. Knowledge produced in this study will help administrators gain a greater understanding of the experiences of student-athletes when they are leaving intercollegiate athletics.

In the realm of social science, data takes shape quantitatively or qualitatively (Blaikie, 2003). This chapter provides an overview of the research design and qualitative methods used for this dissertation. The qualitative design of this study provides the opportunity to learn from the participants of the study through descriptive results produced through semi-structured interviews. The chapter will begin by examining my role as the researcher which accounts for my own experience as a student-athlete, my experience as a Division I athletics administrator, and my personal demographics. Next, details of the research design, including case study approach, participants, setting, sampling, and participant descriptions are detailed. The next section of the chapter will
detail the techniques used to collect data for the study. The specific data collection techniques utilized in this dissertation were interviews, participant journals, and a researcher’s journal. Lastly, this chapter provides a detailed overview of the data analysis process. Additionally, trustworthiness, the use of peer briefers, strategies used to provide trustworthy findings, and ethical considerations of the study.

Positionality

My interest in this research topic began because of my experiences as an NCAA intercollegiate student-athlete. While my experience initially sparked my interest and led me to conduct this study, other factors like my current position as an athletics administrator has continued to fuel my passion for this topic. It is important to examine all aspects that have led me to conduct this dissertation study.

As previously mentioned, my interest in this research topic began with my experiences as a student-athlete and my transition out of sport. During my collegiate career, I had a career ending hip injury that forced me into retirement before my eligibility ran out. Up until this point, my focus was on becoming the best pole vaulter that I could be. In addition to this, I had high academic standards for myself, but I wanted to see how far I could go with track and field. My future career would work itself out. Regarding athletic identity, my investment in this identity led me to transfer institutions in pursuit of my athletic goals. When I became injured, I fought through the injury for years, as doctors were unable to diagnose my injury correctly. Once diagnosed, the injury meant that I was no longer able to return to training and competition. Suddenly my focus shifted to my career and life after college. Because of
athletic administrators pouring into my life, I was able to build experience and develop a plan for after graduation.

Despite having a plan, I wrestled with feelings of disappointment and wondering what could have been if not for my injury as I left track and field. As I transitioned from sport and started my career as an athletics administrator, I began to see that leaving intercollegiate athletics appeared to be a struggle for many. I continued to have a front seat watching as athletes transitioned out of sport. Not only was I observing this in my teammates and friends, but also in student-athletes at the institution where I was working. I began to see extremely high achievers, athletically and academically, struggle with finding the next step in their life.

As a result of my experiences, I think a relationship exists between athletic identity and retirement from sport, meaning that the more invested an individual becomes in their identity as an athlete, the more difficult the transition when sport is no longer an option. In my role as an athletics administrator, I have been witness to many student-athletes exiting intercollegiate athletics at the Division I level, often manifesting in difficulties. Regardless of the next step, whether it is continuing on to graduate school or a full-time job, many have experienced difficulties. Apart from my role working in athletics is working with programming designed to prepare student-athletes for life after sport. Specifically, I have worked with a leadership academy and an internship program that challenge student-athletes to grow and develop outside of athletics. I am passionate about these programs because of the difference that these programs make, my desire to
know exactly what student-athletes need today, and how athletic administrators can serve the majority of student-athletes rather than the minority.

Concerning demographics, I am an able-bodied Caucasian female who grew up in the Midwest of the United States. I began athletics at the age of three and specifically began track and field as a 12 year old. However, I did not begin competing in the event I would specialize in until I was 13. My college experience is untraditional as I competed at three institutions throughout my time as a student-athlete. The first two institutions were NCAA Division I institutions where I received an athletic scholarship to compete in track and field. The third institution was an NCAA Division III institution where I competed for only one year due to injury.

My own identity as an athlete and athletic aspirations are what drove me to follow a coach and transfer to the different institutions that I attended. Despite suffering what would be a career ending injury in my sophomore year, I continued to chase my dream of becoming an Olympic athlete. However, being unable to compete my senior year, forced me to begin considering life after track and field. During that year, I found a mentor in the athletic director who was able to help guide me in how to build a career in intercollegiate athletics. While moving on from sport was not easy, this year allowed me to develop a plan for attending graduate school with a graduate assistantship. I firmly believe that student-athletes can excel in their sport and achieve excellence in other areas of their life that will help them when competing in athletics is no longer a viable option.

My experience as an athlete in college has shaped me into the person I am today and has made me passionate about improving the experience of current and future
student-athletes. I believe that my experience as a former student-athlete had a positive impact on the study. The primary reason I feel like it positively impacted the study was in building rapport with the participants. Throughout the course of the study, participants were very open with me and I believe that having a similar background helped foster an environment of trust and understanding. In summation, I recognize that I have the experience and knowledge as a student-athlete that has transitioned from sport and that this context particularly plays into my positionality as the researcher. I have maintained self-awareness throughout the course of this study and applied research tools that allow my own biases not to influence the findings of this case study.

Research Design

Case Study Approach

A case study encompasses unique attributes that have a focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon under study (Yazan, 2015). In addition, a case study is descriptive, providing rich descriptions regarding the phenomenon studied and is heuristic, allowing for the discovery of knowledge by the researcher (Yazan, 2015). Merriam (1998) defines a case study as “the case as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 27). The definition allows for the studying of any topic as long as the researcher is able to identify the area of interest and draw boundaries (Yazan, 2015). For this case, the participants had to meet several criteria that are detailed in the participants section of this chapter. As a result, case study research has the ability to influence policy, practice, and future research directly (Merriam, 1998). In the case of
this particular study, the author desired to influence the future practice of athletic administrators and coaches in order to better prepare student-athletes to leave sport.

Cases are simply “units of analysis” (Patton, 2002, p. 447). Cases can constitute a particular stage in life, which for this case is retirement from intercollegiate athletics. The current study provides an in-depth study focused on former NCAA Division I student-athletes who have been retired for less than five years. The case provides an in-depth understanding regarding retirement from sport from the NCAA Division I level. Additionally, it explores retirement from the perspective of athletes retiring from different sports in order to illustrate differences.

**Participants**

Participants in this study were former NCAA Division I student-athletes. The NCAA is comprised of three divisions, Division I, Division II, and Division III. Each Division is composed of unique attributes with Division I being the most prominent of the three Divisions. The study will specifically examine the retirement process for former NCAA Division I student-athletes who participated in a variety of sports during their student-athlete experience. It is desirable for participants to represent a variety of sport teams in order to provide a comprehensive study and to provide varying perspectives of retirement from intercollegiate athletics.

The study sought to have a range of 10 to 12 participants in order to answer the proposed research questions. To participate in the study, participants had to meet the specific requirements. First, former student-athletes must have competed at the NCAA Division I level. The second requirement that participants had to meet was that
retirement from intercollegiate athletics had to take place within the previous five years. Additionally, participants could not have competed professionally during their time as an athlete to be eligible to participate in this study. This was an essential criterion to the study in order to examine student-athletes transition out of intercollegiate athletics. Student-athletes who go on to have a professional career are in a separate category then the participants of this study. Participants could also not be graduate assistants coaching within the sport that they competed in. Lastly, this study focused on former intercollegiate athletes that did not experience a career ending injury, but rather were able to compete collegiately until they decided they no longer wanted to compete or ran out of eligibility (i.e., voluntary retirement).

The scope of the participants will allow differences in the retirement process to emerge from former student-athletes who participated in different sports. Additionally, the study sought to have an even split regarding the gender of participants. By encompassing former male and female student-athletes allows for differences in retirement to be illustrated based on gender. By having a diverse population, retirement from intercollegiate athletics from a variety of experiences will be examined.

Setting

Participants of the current study were former NCAA Division I student-athletes. Throughout the course of the study, interviews took place with 10 former student-athletes. This population was chosen for numerous reasons including the fact that Division I offers cost of attendance scholarships with 56% of student-athletes receiving athletic aid (Our three divisions, n.d.). Additionally, as previously mentioned, Division I
has the largest budgets. In addition to the characteristics of NCAA Division I athletics, the accessibility of this Division was another reason for selecting this group. This group is the most accessible on two accounts. First, as a former student-athlete, I was able to utilize my network for participants. Secondly, as an athletic administrator, I work closely with current student-athletes competing at this Division which has expanded my network of potential participants.

**Sampling**

In regards to finding participants, purposeful sampling allowed for the identification and selection of participants. This method places “emphasis on in-depth understanding” and was therefore selected for this study (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Patton (2002) stated the use of purposeful sampling, “leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 46).

Snowball sampling was a secondary method used to identify and solicit participation in the study. Yingling and McClain (2015) identified four steps to carrying out snowball sampling: find professional gatekeepers, find known participants, advertise strategically, and ask participants if anyone in their network would be interested in participating. The gatekeepers in this study were the participants who completed the interview process. Participants of the study served as the gatekeeper to their network of former NCAA Division I student-athletes. Without the participant serving as a gatekeeper, I would have been unaware of the individuals that they introduced me to and unable to access them as potential participants for the study. At the end of our time
together, I asked participants if they knew any individuals who might be interested in participating in the study (Yingling, & McClain, 2015). Snowball sampling allowed for the full utilization of the participants network in order to select participants and generate a deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

**Participant descriptions**

In total, 10 former student-athletes who competed at the NCAA Division I level agreed to participate in the study. Furthermore, each former student-athlete served as an individual representative of their sport. The sports represented include women’s swimming, men’s basketball, women’s volleyball, men’s and women’s track and field, women’s gymnastics, baseball, women’s soccer, wrestling, and football. Interviews took place with five males and five females providing equal representation of former male and female student-athletes. All participants were retired from their sport for less than five years in order to capture the immediate experience of former student-athletes leaving intercollegiate athletics and to deal with the issue of recall.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Years Training</th>
<th>Years Retired</th>
<th>Conference</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Big 10</td>
<td>Caucasian/not shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Basketball</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Big 12</td>
<td>African American/not shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Volleyball</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Conference USA</td>
<td>Caucasian/not shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Track &amp; Field</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Conference USA</td>
<td>Caucasian/Jewish</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Big 10</td>
<td>Asian/Southwest Asian &amp; Pacific Islander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Atlantic 10</td>
<td>Caucasian/Greek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Soccer</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Big 10</td>
<td>Caucasian/not shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrestling</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Big 10</td>
<td>Caucasian/ German, Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Track &amp; Field</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Big 10</td>
<td>Not shared/not shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Atlantic Coast</td>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The former Division I women’s volleyball player that participated in this study was originally a walk-on. However, during her time at her undergraduate university she earned a scholarship. She began playing volleyball in the seventh grade and played throughout her collegiate career. In total, she participated in the sport for nine years. Her final season of collegiate volleyball took place five years ago.

The former Division I women’s track and field athlete specialized in a field event during her intercollegiate athletic career. Beginning track and field in the seventh grade, she competed in the sport for 10 years. Graduating in 2016, she has been out of track and field for over a year and a half at the time of the study.

The former Division I women’s gymnast who participated in this study began participating in the sport when she was four years old. For the majority of her career as an intercollegiate student-athlete she was a walk-on, but earned a scholarship during her senior season. During her lifetime, she trained as a gymnast for 18 years. The participant has been out of gymnastics for one year with 2017 being her last competitive season.

A former Division I women’s soccer player participated in this study. At the age of three, she began her soccer career and played throughout college. In total, she participated in the sport for 19 years. A 2017 college graduate, the participant has been retired from soccer for one year.

Another participant in the study was a former Division I women’s swimmer who trained for her sport for 16 years. Her career as a swimmer began when her parents placed her in swimming lessons at a young age to ensure her safety on the family boat. At the time of the study, the former swimmer had been retired for three years.
The former football player who began playing the sport at the very early age of six. When beginning his collegiate career, he was a walk-on, but earned a scholarship during his time on the team. Additionally, he graduated with his undergraduate degree in three years and then transferred to another NCAA Division I institution where he finished his eligibility. At the time of the study, he had been retired from sport for one year.

The former men’s track and field athlete who participated in this study specialized in a field event. He began participating in track and field in the sixth grade. As the primary sport he focused on in high school, he trained for 10 years total when he reached the end of his college career. At the time of the interview, he had been retired from intercollegiate athletics for two years.

The former men’s basketball player that participated in this study began his intercollegiate athletics career at a junior college where he intended to play both football and basketball until he got a Division I offer. His first Division I offer came for football and that is where he began his career. However, after playing a season he switched from being a student-athlete on the football roster to being an student-athlete on the basketball roster. He began basketball at the young age of six and trained for 16 years. He finished his collegiate career five years ago.

The study also included a former NCAA Division I baseball player who started his collegiate career at a junior college. He played at the junior college level for two years before transferring to a Division I program. His baseball career started with tee-ball at the age of five. In total, he trained as a baseball player for 18 years. His transition from collegiate baseball was three years ago.
The former Division I wrestler that participated in the study began wrestling at the age of five. His career continued through college making his career a total of 19 years training for competition in the sport. His intercollegiate athletic career ended two years ago.

Data Collection

Interviews

The focus of this study was on former student-athletes who competed at the NCAA Division I level and retired from sport. The data collection technique utilized in this study was interviews. Each participant engaged in two interviews throughout the data collection process. Each interview ranged between thirty to sixty minutes in length. After conducting the first interview, the interview was transcribed and then I checked the transcriptions for accuracy. Next, the participant was emailed the first interview transcript and the participant journal. At this time the second interview was set based upon the availability of the participant. The second interviews took place at least two weeks after the first interview.

Interviews were chosen to collect data because they allow the interviewee to “grasp the point of view of the actor” (Becker, 1990, p. 57). Specifically, this study utilized semi-structured interviews allowing me to “become aware of things they had not anticipated which may have a bearing on their subject” (Becker, 1990 pp. 56-57). This method allowed practitioners to hear directly from the participants and focused on the “meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewees” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314). In addition, semi-structured interviews allow for the discussion of the
perceptions and interpretations of a situation between the interviewer and the interviewee. I then worked to “pick out its relevant aspects, details which can be abstracted from the totality of details that make it up so that we can answer some questions we have” (Becker, 1990, p. 64). With interviews, I looked to identify “vocabularies, symbolic boundaries, cultural scripts and repertoires that give meaning to action” (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 156).

By using semi-structured interviews to collect data, I was able to explore multiple aspects of the retirement process to help generate a greater understanding of what happens when an intercollegiate student-athlete’s eligibility runs out. The interviews explored the background of the former student-athletes, including how they came to participate in their sport, at what age participation began, and how they chose their institution of higher education. While exploring background information, the study also focused on their time as a student-athlete: what their experience was like, how did they spent their time, and how they prepared to exit competitive collegiate play. Lastly, interviews looked at former student-athletes and their transition out of sport: what difficulties they experienced and what helped them make this transition.

By using semi-structured interviews, the participant’s emotions and social dimensions of the retirement process could surface. It also allowed for the exploration of the meanings that activities and relationship held for the individual (Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Pugh, 2013). By using semi-structured interviews, the participant guided the course of the interview. Additionally, it allowed the interviewee to follow up on relevant aspects that came to light. Semi-structured interviews are “open to what the interviewee
feels is relevant and important to talk about, given the interests of the research project” (Alvesson, 2011, p.3). This left room for the interviewee to view the retirement process in a way that they never imagined and allowed for follow up on relevant topics that the participant brought to light. Questions were open-ended and designed to elicit a narrative of actual events and concrete descriptions of the participants lived experiences. Questions designed to provoke rich, narrative descriptions of how actual events unfolded (Czarniawska, 2004). The interviews focused on getting a descriptive account of the retirement process by examining experiences of the participants. The goal was to have rich narratives surrounding how they dealt with situations, people, and made decisions. In order to get the rich descriptive narratives described, an emphasis was placed on how questions instead of why questions. By asking how questions, the hope was to have participants reconstruct their retirement experience in the context of their life (Seidman, 2006). The questions in Appendix F reflect topics that I anticipated discussing with the participants. The questions provided were not a script or protocol that was rigidly followed.

**Participant Journal**

In addition to participants engaging in two semi-structured interviews, the study used participant journals. Giraud (1999) stated, “A journal is a written record, created by the participant, of the participant’s observations of a given situation over time and also how the participant experienced the situation in question” (p. 3). Participant journals provided more data and a way to triangulate the data regarding retirement from sport. Before sending the participant journal, I had the interview transcribed and I checked it for
accuracy. The journal was composed of 2-3 questions designed based on the information shared by the participant in interview one. Additionally, the participant received the first interview with the journal giving them an opportunity to check for accuracy and reference if needed.

Participants had the opportunity to complete the journal between interviews and the questions asked in the participant journal were specific to information brought to light. Additionally, the journal gave individuals the opportunity to identify any other aspect of their retirement that would be important to discuss. This provided an opportunity for the participants to elaborate on topics discussed, clarify, and to share anything else they feel is important that was not discussed in the first interview. Giraud (1999) stated, “Journals, as records of participant experience, can be compared advantageously to interviews as sources of evaluative data” (p. 3).

Of the 10 participants, 8 individuals completed the journal with 7 returning it to me. To return the participant journals, all of the participants except one returned the journal via email. One individual brought the participant journal to the second interview. The journals provided more in depth information and new topics to discuss in full during the second interview. The three participants that did not return the journals agreed to do so, but based on differing circumstances, were not able to complete the entry. One limitation of the study was not receiving participant journal entries from all 10 of the participants. To increase the number of journal entries returned, sending an additional email a couple days prior to the second interview may have increased the return rate of the journals.
Researcher Journal

Throughout the entire research process, I kept a researcher’s journal in order to keep notes and organize my thoughts. The researcher’s journal provided a place for me to reflect on the interviews and information that participants brought to light. Being a reflective practitioner in my teaching is an important practice that has extended over into the research process. When thinking about what it means to be a reflective practitioner, an important component is the ability to not just define a problem but to approach the defined problem in a way to gain new insights and to develop new ways of looking at the problem (Jay & Johnson, 2002). When preparing for the second interview, I was preparing to gain new insights and new ways of looking at retirement from sport.

In particular, the journal was extremely useful when I was preparing for the second interview. Before the second interview, I checked the first interview transcript and beginning to analyze the data by keeping notes on emerging themes, areas to clarify, and questions to ask the participants during the second interview. Additionally, the journal helped me keep track of where each participant was in the data collection process. For example, I kept track of which interviews I had checked for accuracy after having them transcribed. The journal I kept helped provide clarity to my thoughts and kept me focused in my conversations with participants. By documenting the questions I wanted to ask during the second interview helped me capitalize on the times I spent talking to each participant. Additionally, the notes taken in the researcher’s journal from interview one helped develop the participant’s journals.
Data Analysis

Upon completing the interviews, I had the audio recording of the interview transcribed by a transcription company. This was the first step in analyzing the data. After receiving the transcribed interview, I checked the transcript for accuracy and removed any identifiable information to ensure that the participant’s identity remained confidential. Checking the transcripts was a vital step in the research process and allowed participants stories to be accurately portrayed in the findings chapter of this study.

To analyze the data, each interview was transcribed, checked for accuracy, and underwent a detailed examination to identify relevant information that confirms or denies the theoretical concepts of the study. Coding began after the first interview took place as I was checking the interview transcript for accuracy. Beginning at this time allowed me document and highlight potential themes at an early time. In turn, coding was a continuous process throughout the course of the study. Tesch (1990) determined two main approaches to qualitative analysis: interpretational analysis and structural analysis. The first, interpretational analysis, allows themes, patterns, categories, and the like to emerge from the data instead of having them predetermined by the researcher. When using this method of analysis, I was working to develop the best classification system that fits that data with minimum overlap between the categories (Cote, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993). For the purposes of this study, interpretational analysis was utilized, which has become one of the most popular methods of analysis in sport psychology (Cote et al., 1993).
The study utilized interpretational qualitative analysis to help structure the data from the study and create a greater understanding of intercollegiate student-athletes and their transition out of sport. Tesch (1990) identified two main operations when organizing unstructured data that this study followed. The two main guidelines produced and followed are:

1) Creating Tags - create a set of concepts that serve as a representation of the information in the interview.

2) Creating Categories - listing and comparing the tags developed in phase one and re-contextualizing the information together under a category name that reflects the group.

Under the first main operation, I examined the data in great detail in order to identify topics that best represent different segments in the text. An open coding system helped develop the codes, utilizing the participant words to develop meaningful codes that accurately reflect the data collected (Cote et al., 1993; Strauss, 1987). Codes remained flexible at this stage of analysis because of the potential for them to change or combine with other tags that have similar meanings. By creating tags, I separated the data collected into meaningful segments, which allowed further analyze of the retirement experience of participants to take place (Cote et al., 1993). Developing codes allowed me to work with the concepts that were emerging from the data and best represent the retirement process of student-athlete based on their lived experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).
Secondly, common features among the text segments were identified that can illustrate the relationship between topics. I then created categories by further analyzing the tags developed in step one in order to look for common tags that could combine to form one category. A category name was then be developed to encompass the tags that encompass one category (Cote et al., 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1984). The outcomes of the second step of analysis was to develop an organizing system that remained flexible and open to change until a system has been developed that satisfied the needs of all the data and the tags that have emerged. The organization system built initially was developed using three characteristics of categorization: coding experience, inductive inference (the process of reaching a general conclusion from the data that should be applicable to data not yet collected), and similarity (judging the categories against each other to ensure that they are separate and distinct) (Cote et al., 1993; Smith, 1990).

Cote et al. (1993) provided useful examples to illustrate interpretational qualitative analysis by looking at a study presentation made by Salmela, Russell, Cote, and Baria (1991) on expert gymnastics coaches and their construction of knowledge. In the first step, the tag “good coaches are disciplined and goal-oriented” (as represented in Cote et al., 1993, p. 131) developed from an interview with a coach:

Good coaches are very disciplined and very goal-oriented. They totally understand the process that produces a high-performance athlete. They focus constantly on that process. There is not one minute in the gymnasium when they don’t focus on that process. Everything they do has a reason. Sometimes you watch and you don’t understand the reason, but there is a reason. (p.131)
Later the tag developed, “good coaches are disciplined and goal-oriented,” was combined with other tags that were similar in nature under the overarching category “coaches’ qualities” (as represented in Cote et al., 1993, p. 131). This is an example of interpretational qualitative analysis at work analyzing the data collected from participants. Lally (2007) utilized this method of analysis when exploring retirement from university athletics at a Canadian university longitudinally. One-on-one in-depth interviews took place before retirement, one-month post retirement, and a year after retiring from sport. Analysis of the data collected followed the guidelines outlined by Tesch (1990).

The two phases of interpretational qualitative analysis are data organization and data analysis (Cote et al., 1993). The guidelines produced allow qualitative analysis to remain a flexible process to allow for adaptation to the individual study, yet provided basic guidelines to systemize the analysis procedures (Cote et al., 1993). The current study used this type of analysis to make meaning of the data that was collected through semi-structured interviews of former NCAA Division I student-athletes. This method of analysis ensured that the participant’s experiences were the focus and driving force of the development of codes and tags. This allowed for understanding concerning retirement from sport generated from the perspectives of the participants and their lived experiences.

There are numerous studies looking at athletes transitioning from sport. Many research studies surrounding athletic identity have focused on elite athletes who have competed on their country’s national team, at the international level, or Olympic athletes (Alfermann et al., 2004; Erpic et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Lavelle & Robinson, 2007).
instead of intercollegiate athletes. In addition, many studies designed quantitatively, identifying a relationship between having a strong commitment to athletic identity and retirement difficulties (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985, Brewer et al., 1993; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Erpic et al., 2004; Good et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997). This study expands research to intercollegiate athletes and to the qualitative side to gain a greater understanding of the relationship that commitment to athletic identity plays in retirement from sport. Qualitative research will help explain retirement from sport. The proposed study would help gaps that currently exist in the literature. Ultimately, the study has the potential to help administrators provide a better collegiate experience that can result in a more fulfilled life after they can no longer compete in their sport.

**Trustworthiness**

Reliability and validity correspond to the question: How can a researcher prove that the findings of their study are worth paying attention to? (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this question in mind, qualitative researchers must be concerned with these two concepts when designing, conducting, analyzing data, and reporting the findings of a qualitative study. It is imperative to examine these concepts in the qualitative paradigm for the purpose of this study. In qualitative research, both reliability and validity have been defined and represented by qualitative researchers to better encompass the meaning they hold when examining a topic qualitatively. When looking specifically at reliability, the researcher is examining the quality of the work presented to “generate an understanding” (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 551). Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined that
dependability in qualitative research is synonymous with reliability in quantitative work. In addition, the authors argued that while reliability and validity are essential parts of quantitative work, in qualitative research other terms might better describe quality work. The terms include credibility, neutrality or confirmability, consistency or dependability, and applicability or transferability. Other researchers also have supported the use of dependability in qualitative work as a measure of consistency and reliability (Clont, 1992; Seale, 1999).

When looking specifically at validity it is important to examine how it applies to qualitative work. Stenbacka (2001) redefines validity as a concept of quality “to be solved in order to claim a study as part of proper research” (p. 551). In qualitative work, words like trustworthiness, quality, truth-value, and rigor have been established that relate to validity (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Noble & Smith, 2015; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001). With qualitative research, validity is replaced with trustworthiness, which can be defended and provides confidence in the findings of a study (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With the definitions of reliability and validity defined in light of qualitative research, we will now explore how they were established for the current study examining athletic identity and retirement.

As a result of choosing a qualitative approach, the study used various methods during the course of the study to establish a quality study. The first step taken to establish trustworthiness was accounting for my own personal bias (Noble & Smith, 2015). This account, detailed in the research role section of this chapter, shared my own perspectives that existed prior to beginning the research study. Secondly, recording and
transcribing the semi-structured interviews allowed for revisiting of the data in order to provide consistent and transparent representations of the data.

In an effort to produce the most trustworthy study and to account for my positionality, I utilized triangulation. According to Patton (2002), “triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods” (p. 247). Additionally, the use of one data collection method subjects the study to errors that are associated with the particular data collection method used (Patton, 2002). To implement triangulation, former student-athletes engaged in semi-structured interviews and participant journals. This engaged participants in multiple methods of data collection offering deeper insights into the participant’s transition from sport. Triangulation allowed me to rely on various forms of evidence instead of one single account or data point (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Another tool used to establish validity within the study was member checking. Member checking according to Lincoln and Bubba (1985) is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Member checking allows the participants to have ownership in the validity process of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). During the course of this study, participants had the opportunity to check the transcript from their first interview allowing them the opportunity to clarify topics discussed and ensure an accurate representation of their story. Only three participants made edits to their transcripts and the edits were minor in nature. Edits primarily revolved around deleting unnecessary words, making spelling corrections for programs, and filling in any parts of the transcripts that were inaudible. In the second interview, I discussed changes made to the transcript with the participant to ensure that I had a thorough understanding. In
regards to member checking, one participant of the study specifically mentioned that he
did not want to make edits to the transcript because it served as a representation of where
he was at that particular point in time regarding his transition from sport. He viewed
transitioning from sport as a growing process and felt it important to leave the interview
intact.

Another tactic employed in Chapter 4 of this paper was the use of rich, thick
descriptions to support the themes identified in the study. Rich, detailed quotations from
the participants of the study transparently represent the codes established throughout the
analysis process. By linking my codes to concrete examples from the participants, the
reader will be able to identify how the codes were developed and allow them to view the
supporting evidence (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Throughout the course of the study, a peer debriefer helped establish credibility
within the study by serving as a sounding board for me and by reviewing the themes that
were identified. The peer debriefer helped maintain the trustworthiness of the study in
order to prevent my bias from affecting the results of the study. Creswell and Miller
(2000) advocate for the use of the peer debriefer throughout the entire study. As an
outside lens to the study, the peer debriefer served as a sounding board for me and
provided feedback as I collected the data, analyzed the data, and wrote the findings of the
study. The peer debriefer for this study provided support and raised critical questions and
ideas that challenged my perspective throughout the course of the study. By creating an
outdoor lens to the study, I was able to help establish credibility within my research.
An identified threat to the reliability of the study is the issue of recall among the participants. Participants engaged in retrospective interviews in order to learn from their experiences, which is often associated with memory decay, and recall bias (Brewer et al., 1991; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). In order to combat this, participants engaged in two interviews. This allowed individuals to tell their story, but also provided the opportunity for participants to add anything to their story that may not have been top of mind. In addition, the second interview provided an opportunity to ask for clarification for areas of the interview in question. Despite the threat of recall bias to the study, the potential knowledge that could be gained by examining retirement from sport retrospectively can still further athletic administrators’ knowledge about the student-athlete experience.

**Ethical Considerations**

In conducting the research for this dissertation, a primary concern was keeping the participants anonymous in order to facilitate an environment that would be conducive to having open and honest conversation. While some participants were not concerned with having their identity anonymous, it was important to others as they shared information about their experience as a student-athlete. This was mostly important to them because they wanted their experience as a student-athlete portrayed as positive but wanted to be truthful in the information they shared. The sport participants competed in during their intercollegiate athletic career identify the participants throughout the study. Keeping the identity of the participants anonymous was the foundation to producing a trustworthy study. By using their sport to reference the participants, I believe that participants remained anonymous.
Chapter 4: Findings

The study used a qualitative case study approach to examine retirement from NCAA Division I collegiate athletics from the perspective of 10 former student-athletes. Identified using purposeful sampling, participants were invited to participate in the study. Former student-athletes were representative of their individual sport and were not required to attend the same institution of higher education. Rather participants are embedded on the larger scale of being former NCAA Division I student-athletes. To report my findings the following codes identify when participants shared the information with me: first interview (I1), second interview (I2), participant journal (PJ).

Participant Overview

Participant Breakdown

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there were a total of 10 participants in the research study. Each participant was a former NCAA Division I student-athlete who had been retired from their sport for five years or less. A detailed breakdown of the participants was provided in the participant descriptions section of chapter 3. Before examining the themes that emerged from the participant interviews and journals, we will explore how each participant came to participate in their sport.
Pathways to Collegiate Athletics

Expectations for an athletic career and the outcomes of that career can have a significant impact on how smooth the athlete transitions from sport. Participants were asked in their first interview to describe the expectation they had for their intercollegiate athletic career. As a result, I found that the 10 athletes who participated in this study had varying degrees of expectations for their athletic career. This included the two extremes of having a pro career after college and just being happy to have the opportunity to play at the NCAA Division I level. Table 2 illustrates the expectations that were present for the individuals as they entered their career as a college athlete. Career expectations were taken from the transcribed interview and inserted into the table to best illustrate the career expectations of participants.

It is important to note that several former student-athletes in the study experienced shifts in their career expectations once they were on their respective campuses. One example of this was the former women’s volleyball player. She stated, “I think it definitely it (sic) shifted once I got there because I started for four years as the libero” (I1). Additionally, the former football player also experienced a shift in athletic career expectations. “Initially as a freshman, I was just trying to make it through the day, make it through the practice, most of the time. Once I did get recognized for my accomplishments, got put on a scholarship, started playing, the NFL became a very clear picture to me,” he stated (I1).
Table 2
Expectations for Intercollegiate Athletic Career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Career Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W. Swimming</td>
<td>To make a Big 10 team, but not like necessarily make NCAA's.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Basketball</td>
<td>I was playing professional sports or bust. Those were my options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Volleyball</td>
<td>I literally was just so happy to be a part of the experience and to play. I didn't really set too many expectations as far as being a starter or anything along those lines. I really was just so excited and happy for the experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Track &amp; Field</td>
<td>When I came to college my goal was to break the school record. My goal was to make it to the NCAA Prelim Championships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Gymnastics</td>
<td>Any academic thing that you can put on a student-athlete, that was my goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>That (professional baseball) was the dream. You never know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Soccer</td>
<td>I think for me I was never one to ever want to play more than college soccer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrestling</td>
<td>I had expectations of being an All-American. All-American in the first year or two of starting and then work my way to winning a national title.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Track &amp; Field</td>
<td>Getting bigger, faster, stronger and throwing things farther.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>I just want to be the best I can be.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Career Expectations are direct quotes from the participants.

This is important to note when working to understand the experience of NCAA Division I athletes and the impact it has on the retirement process. Based on participants of this study, the experience as a Division I student-athlete may encourage individuals to have high expectations for their athletic career.

Findings

As previously noted, interpretational qualitative analysis was used help structure the data from the study and create a greater understanding of collegiate athletes and their transition out of sport. Tesch (1990) identified two main operations when organizing
unstructured data and were followed for this study. Two main guidelines for analysis are as follows:

1) Creating Tags - create a set of concepts that serve as a representation of the information in the interview.

2) Creating Categories - listing and comparing the tags developed in phase one and re-contextualizing the information together under a category name that reflects the group.

The process of interpretational qualitative analysis allowed for data analysis to remain a flexible process that was adaptable to the study while also providing basic guidelines to adhere to.

The process of leaving collegiate athletics is different for each individual. However, through semi-structured interviews several common themes emerged that speak to the difficulties that student-athletes may encounter as they transition from sport. Based on the experience of 10 former NCAA Division I student-athletes, 5 categories emerged: Retirement as a Transformation of Social Relationships, Independent Training, Developing New Identities, Support Systems, and Replacing the Sport Focus. Each theme will be detailed and display supporting evidence that was shared by the participants of the study and used to determine the category name.

Retirement as a Transformation of Social Relationships

One of the primary findings of this study was how transitioning from sport is not just ceasing to have sport define you, but that retirement also changes the individual’s social relationships. Therefore, when one is ceasing competition in their sport, they are
also reconstructing their social core. Significant findings in this study centered on the role team played in their time as a student-athlete on campus, difficulty losing these connections, and the struggle to establish new relationships outside of sport.

For many participants, team played an intricate role in their time as a college athlete. The importance of team started when they stepped on campus. The women’s swimmer stated, “I automatically had that group of people and so it was like 80 immediate people that you know, and you see their faces on campus, and I feel like a community kind of whenever you get here” (I1). She also illustrated that when adjusting to college life team played an intricate role. She stated, “I think I had an easier time adjusting then, like other people that came from out of state that didn't know anybody else on campus, which was pretty cool” (I1). Additionally, in the former wrestler’s participant journal he shared, “The wrestling team provided me a group of close friends which felt like a family” (PJ).

The women’s gymnast also supported the importance of team to her time on campus. She explained that her concept of team began at a young age but was lost as she competed in high school. She explained, “Team played a big role, until there were a lot of girls in high school who started wanting to like, be in high school and not do gymnastics. And that's when I lost my sense of team” (I1). When she started her intercollegiate athletics career, she re-gained her sense of team and that became a central aspect of her student-athlete experience. She stated, But when I got to college gymnastics, I never even imagined my teammates being in classes with me, being the ones that I called for a ride, the ones that picked me
up when I was really down outside of the gym. And team played a huge role, I
don't even know how to explain it. It was just like they understood. They see you
cry, they see you sweat, they see you get hurt, they see you make ugly faces when
you're falling down on the ground. They see everything but they still accept you
and they still want the best for you. Because without you and without them,
there's no conference championship. There's no whatever you're striving for. And
as much as you want yourself to compete, you want the other person to compete
better than you because you need to be better. You need to be a better person, and
you're trying to make them a better person in and outside of the gym (I1).

For many of the participants, teammates were a central part of their student-
athlete experience. Teammates and other student-athletes served as the primary source
for friendships. The women’s volleyball player talked about her relationship with
individuals in her major. Despite having many of the same individuals in her class each
semester and year after year, friendships did not extend past the classroom. She
described these relationships, “I started to develop a relationship with them so that way I
could have study buddies and that kind of stuff. I didn't really take the friendship outside
of the classroom or outside of talking about school” (I1). These examples provide a
snapshot into the important role team plays for student-athletes during their
intercollegiate athletic career. Another aspect of this category that participants brought
up during their interviews was the impact that team had as they transitioned out of sport.

When exploring the difficulties encountered when leaving intercollegiate
athletics, several former student-athletes noted the loss of their social network established
through athletics. The women’s volleyball participant said, “I think friends was a big one. Especially because I moved to an area where even though I grew up here none of my high school friends are here. All my best friends were still in (state of university)” (I1). As student-athletes transition out of intercollegiate athletics, they are sometimes uprooting their lives and moving to a new area or back to an area that they have not lived in for a number of years. The men’s track and field participant also illustrated this when he moved to a new home 24 hours away from his undergraduate institution after graduation, “I think once I left there, I had really longed for a team” (I1).

When discussing relationships with teammates who served as the former student-athletes social core while competing in intercollegiate athletics, participants talked about how those relationships rapidly changed upon transitioning from sport. The men’s basketball participant illustrated the change in relationships with teammates when he stated,

But I think one of the biggest differences in our relationships now is just that, you just kind of lose that personal connection because everybody just kind of goes out into the world, and is doing their own things, and I've got guys that are overseas playing basketball that I graduated with, there are dudes that are in the NFL that I played with, and there are some guys that are just working a 9-5 and they're an accounting major, and they're doing the whole Fortune 500 company thing. So I think the biggest difference is that you never, well at least for me, I haven't lost touch with them like if I saw them we wouldn't talk, but at the same point, you went from basically living every single minute of every day, like you worked out
with these dudes, you ate with these dudes, you had class with these guys, then when you were on the road with them, so you were with them all the time. Then you go and you do your own thing in life, and it's like if you randomly have an opportunity where you're in the same place, or you see that somebody is like in your city it's like, yo we should catch up, let me come see you because I haven't seen you in a long time. But it's more of just like you go from being like family to acquaintances like really, really quickly (I1).

The former football player also experienced a similar change regarding relationships with teammates. The men’s football participant shared,

That was almost like a sad realization for me in that once we weren't all together in the same space, doing the same thing, a lot of those friendships, I didn't realize were just acquaintanceships. We were just friends because we were together in the same space. Now, I probably talk to four of my former teammates consistently (I1).

These quotes illustrate the change that occurs when foregoing athletic identity and the impact it has on one’s social core. While participants remained close with a couple of their former teammates, the majority of the relationships they had built on their team changed because of no longer being on the team and competing with them. For participants, losing these relationships seemed to be a shock due to the closeness that shared by the individuals while they were competing in intercollegiate athletics.

Not only is there a loss of social relationships with former teammates but for many the period after intercollegiate athletics was the first time they were trying to
establish friendships outside of a team. The former women’s soccer player enjoyed this challenge but also described it as “intimidating.” She stated,

It was intimidating because for the first time it wasn't like, okay, here's 30 girls, and you'll end up meeting and talking, getting really close with all of them but you're gonna end up clicking with 1 or 2 and those are gonna be your best friends.

The time after intercollegiate athletics presented a new challenge for former student-athletes and many reported difficulties building a new social core. The former men’s track and field participant shared one prominent example of this. After graduating with his undergraduate degree, he worked as a graduate assistant coaching track and field while getting his masters. While talking about his experience obtaining his master’s degree, he encountered difficulties finding a new social core at that institution. He stated,

I didn't feel like I was a part of a team there (master's institution). That was one of the reasons why I decided to finish my degree early and for most people that wouldn't really matter but I think coming from that background of having a team and wanting to be on a team, not having that and feeling like I was part of the group, made things really tough.

The former women’s volleyball player shared in the difficulties of establishing a new social core after graduation. When talking about the difficulties she experienced making friends after collegiate volleyball had ended, the women’s volleyball participant stated,
Really just when I got to (graduate institution) it was you sit in your classroom and you look around. I'm just like, "I'm living in my parents' basement so I don't have any friends anymore." Like, "How do I even make friends?" "I don't know what to do." In our graduate orientation meeting for all the new graduate students there was a girl. I have curly hair and there was another girl with curly hair. I was like, "Am I really going to talk about curly hair to try to talk to this person?" But I did. I opened up with like, "Oh your hair looks so good, what do you use? Like, my hair is always frizzy." I had one friend, starting off in grad school in that meeting was making friends. It was just so weird. Because I never felt unprepared for the next transition or whatever. Even when I was changing and going to graduate school I felt like I was capable to do everything. But it was just all of the friendships and those kinds of thing that I just didn't know how to do (II).

During her collegiate career, as shared above, her social core consisted mainly of other student-athletes. She lacked a social network in the greater university community. Additionally, the women’s gymnast supported this theme talking about her desire to find connection after gymnastics and difficulty doing so. After graduation in May, she started graduate school in the fall on a new campus. In sharing her experience establishing a new social core she shared,

So in undergrad, everyone joked that I literally knew every single person on campus, which I felt like I kind of did. Even when I visited this weekend, people were like, how do you know so many people? Here, which is weird, because this
is my home state, and its two hours away from (major city), and there's a lot of people. But I kind of assumed, there were so many people here who are my age who I knew, but everyone had kind of graduated. I'm very fortunate. My best friend from kindergarten goes here still, so I have her. And I know some of the gymnasts on the team. I know a few undergrads here and there, but besides that, I think people are in disbelief because I literally have been saying, "I haven't made friends." I have people in my cohort who I'm friends with, which there's 18 people in my cohort, but like everyone ... I don't think people understand the rigor that I was under in undergrad, so when I'm like, "I'm free to hang out." They're like "Oh I'm so tired, I can't, I have to do the homework," whatever. So I can't hang out with them too often, but I've been really fortunate to have at least my best friend here. But besides that, it's been really hard. And for the first like three months, I was like “I'm transferring”. I don't even care where I transfer. I don't even care if it's back to (undergraduate institution). Like I'm just transferring back somewhere else. Because it's a different culture on campus, but it's also just that there isn't a team and they're very Greek life, I can't connect in that way to anyone here. Like I can't be like "I was a Tri Delt or I was this” I've been struggling to find connection, which is probably why I've been visiting (undergraduate institution) a lot. But it's very different. And it's definitely very hard, because I feel like since it's not a team, no matter how close I let someone get into my life, they still don't understand the blood, sweat, and tears that I've gone through, and they can't understand me on that level (I1).
Retirement as a transformation of social relationships was one prominent theme that participants identified as a difficulty when retiring from intercollegiate athletics. Many participants experienced a shift in their relationships with teammates once they were no longer training and competing with the team. Additionally, team played a key role in their experience as a student-athlete and building of a new social network outside of athletics shown to be one a difficulty post retirement. Former student-athletes were encountering a new situation when they were experiencing making friends without a team for the first time.

**Independent Training**

Throughout the exploration of retirement, another theme that emerged was learning how to train after intercollegiate athletics had ended. Former student-athletes, after spending a number of years training with top coaches, had difficulty learning how to work out without the direction of their coaches. Participants also noted difficulty in no longer training for the specific goals and objectives required for their sport.

The women’s volleyball participant explained the challenge that working out without training for volleyball and without a team was like for her. During her interviews she stated,

> It sounds so silly, but I didn't know how to work out without working out to be a volleyball player. I only knew all of the different kinds of workout movements that we did when I was training for volleyball. When I went back to the gym and I was just like, "Am I supposed to get on the treadmill or am I supposed to be lifting like real weights?" I'm pretty sure they don't want me doing hang clings in
Planet Fitness or anything. That was interesting. I've struggled with my body changing a little bit but not as dramatically or anything like that (I1).

The women’s track and field participant initially talked about this as a difficulty in her participant journal. She shared, “I have been trying to figure out what to do now with physical activities and workouts. I have been so goal driven for so many years, now I have to figure out what motivates me” (PJ). The difficulties she encountered were learning to train without having a competition to work towards or without trying to reach personal bests in her training. She talked about this struggle in detail during her second interview. She illustrated this point when she stated,

My whole purpose for the past six years of lifting, has been to do more weight. Get stronger, so then you can throw things farther. That's literally how it worked. It's been hard because I go in the weight room and I'm like, okay, how much weight can you do? That's the first thing in my mind that I need to do. And it's hard, it doesn't matter that this is lightweight. That means you're feeling it, are you getting a good workout? Are you getting all the right numbers and all this other stuff, and just making sure I'm doing what's right for my body now. Instead of like, you don't have to lift for three hours now and get stronger now. You can cut it down to an hour if you like, or like this week. I just said, "Nope, I'm not going to do anything because I want to study." And I actually have that option to do that, which is kind of satisfying. But, just trying to figure that out (I2).

Additionally, she talked about the importance of training for an event and the influence it has on her motivation to work out. While competing in intercollegiate
athletics she was constantly working towards the next track meet, throwing farther, and qualifying for post season meets. As a result she has grown accustomed to this and shared,

I don't know if that's something I can unlearn or like train my mind to think differently. But, think having a big competition or a big event to give myself as a goal I think is something that I'm learning that is a big motivator for me (I2).

The participant representing women’s gymnastics explained that finding time to work out without a coach has resulted in body issues that were not present throughout her gymnastics career. In her participant journal, she identified body issues as a struggle she has encountered post retirement. In her journal she wrote,

I personally never have had body image issues. I know that they are very common in my sport of gymnastics, and athletics in general. I’m fully aware that being a female, a student-athlete, and a gymnast, and in a time of social media, put me into a category that is at-risk for eating disorders and negative perceptions of self-image. But, I never had that. But even four months out of sport I had jeans that didn’t fit the same. I was working out, but not to the same rigor or the same consistency. Unfortunately, I’ve gotten a little self-conscious about this, but I’ve also kept the attitude that I need to be healthy, not just reliant on the mirror. I love working out, but I’ve taken the whole flipping part out of my workouts, so that definitely plays a role (PJ).

During her second interview, she described her experience with learning how to work out in greater detail,
It's kind of been a little annoying little roller coaster, in the summer I was like, "Okay, I'm just going to take a break. My body hurts, I'm going to take a break."

But, in the middle of summer, I started realizing that some of my clothes weren't fitting the exact same, and I was getting kind of annoyed. I started working out a little bit more. But then when I came to grad school I was super pumped, and I made this, I'm not kidding you, this is just how I am, I made an Excel sheet for every single day of the semester of what I was going to eat and what I was going to work out. My friend, she's a nurse, and so she works crazy hours. She was like, "Oh, yeah, I hate to say this, but that's not going to work out for you. That's really not going to work." I was like, "Oh, no." I was like, "You quit gymnastics when you were like 16, you wouldn't understand. I'm dedicated." And surely enough, after like a month and a half, I was like, "No, yeah, it doesn't work." At first, I was like, "Yeah, I'm used to waking up at 6:00 a.m. in the morning, I'm going to work out from 6:30 to 7:30 and then go into work." That's what I was doing. But at the same time I was realizing I need it to hurt to know that I worked out. I was running a little bit, because I enjoy that, but I also have feet issues, so it hurts to run. But I was lifting a lot. Just body weight stuff, and dumbbells. But I was still probably maintaining muscle, but I wasn't really burning fat that much. So my clothes still weren't fitting the same. Just recently, I was like, "Okay, now I need to get more into the cardio aspect. But how do I do that while enjoying it, while my muscles aren't really burning?" I'm not kidding you, I love when my arm muscles burn. I mean, we talk about working out makes you happy because of all
the different endorphins, whatever it is. I was noticing that because I wasn't working out as much, and I wasn't working out to the same extent, that that affected me mentally and physically. I've noticed as well that I've been getting sick more. That comes with grad school, but also I don't think my immune system is as strong anymore because of that. There's a lot of factors, I think, that go into why I do try to work out more. But honestly, I don't have four hours in my day anymore to work out, and that's what's I think really hard. When I come home after a long day, it's not like there's a coach saying, "Okay, practice starts now." It's like, "Oh, if a good show comes on TV, or if I have to finish this paper, I'm going to do that versus work out." It's been a challenge.

The wrestling participant identified lifestyle changes and diet changes as a difficulty that he has experienced in his transition from sport. Specifically, he shared that he has experienced difficulties learning how to balance working out and diet changes. When talking about these difficulties he stated,

You go from being an athlete, I'm a heavy weight too, I've never really had to cut weight, never really had to diet. So I'm eating all these calories because I'm burning, doing two practices a day burning everything off, so I got to make that transition of eating a third or half the calories that I was actually eating. That was one of the major parts especially with having the injury on top of that. I didn't have a detrain process. It was like, train, done. No detraining, no re-adjusting, it was just over. So that was a hard part. Lifestyle change was hard because you go from working out, structured workouts two or three times a day,
six days a week, to now you got to do it all on your own. I have to manage my time to make sure I am working out and doing things. That was a major difficult part (I2).

Lastly, the women’s soccer participant discussed difficulty in this area and navigating this space after soccer ended. When asked about working out without soccer she stated that figuring out exactly what to do was a difficulty she encountered,

I ended up having to have a second arm surgery after I was done, so I could only run. I couldn't lift, I couldn't do anything. And with how bad my ankles were, I also couldn't run very far. So, I had to figure out how to work out because I was very limited in what I could and couldn't do. And after I finally got cleared with my arm, I started going to Orange Theory. And that has been really, really good. I had to do heart rate training for soccer all the time, and you have a heart rate monitor on, you can see yourself on the board, what level your heart is at. So it releases a lot of the competitiveness that I needed. And that was the other thing too, when I was going for runs, I wasn't really getting the good feelings of exercises, just the competitiveness of training for sport, you don't get that when you're going for just a jog by yourself. So the switch to Orange Theory was really, really nice (I2).

Former student-athletes who participated in this study illustrated through their interviews that after retirement they had to re-learn how to work out without training for their specific sport. For many, they had to learn what exercises to do as well as find motivation and time for workouts. They were transitioning from a structured life where
working out was dictated by a coach and motivation was built into their competitive season and achieving new levels of success. Additionally, former student-athletes had to work through what constituted a good workout as they were used to training at a high level with high intensity.

**Developing New Identities**

Another aspect that former student-athletes brought to light during the interview process was navigating how to cope with having their identity change. Transition from sport includes constructing a new identity internally and socially. For the former men’s track and field athlete, one of the greatest difficulties “was really finding yourself outside of the sport” (I1). The investment of the participants in sport since early childhood and the athletic success of becoming a Division I student-athlete had rooted their identity in sport, regardless of the career expectations they had upon entering intercollegiate athletics. Due to this commitment, difficulty coping with the end of their athletic career and finding a new identity. The women’s volleyball player described this struggle as an almost identity crisis. She said, “I'd always introduce myself as, "I'm (name) and you know, I play volleyball at (undergraduate institution)." That was me. When I had to introduce myself (after retirement) I was just like, "Well I guess I'm just (name) now." Aren't I?” (I1).

Many think of college as a key time for individuals to develop an identity and acquire life skills but not all student-athletes had this experience. Participants of this study showed that due to the heavy demands of their athletic participation this did not
occur. The participant from women’s volleyball when reflecting on her collegiate experience stated,

I think I struggled a lot with identity just because it's the way that I had just gone through this whole acceptance. I've just lived my life by just accepting it what it is kind of thing and not really challenging anything. I know that's unique to me and maybe not always so unique to other student-athletes but being able to know who you are, college is so important for that (I1).

She did not use her college years to explore her identity, values, and set of beliefs that in turn added to the feelings of having an identity crisis post athletic retirement.

College development also includes acquiring life skills like making a budget or finding housing. The former men’s basketball player was used to having all the little things taken care of for him. He stated, “You don't learn to how to be a functioning adult when you're done playing basketball because those are the type of things you're supposed to be learning while you're in college. We just didn't” (I1). For the men’s basketball participant, he compared graduating from college to getting a job at “the school of hard knocks” (I1). From the data collected, personal development and basic life skills seem delayed through collegiate athletic participation.

Three participants specifically discussed the need to withdraw completely from their sport after their athletic career had ended in order to establish an identity outside of sport. The participants needed the time away from their sport to establish a new identity that did not revolve around their athletic abilities. The participant from baseball illustrated this when he stated,
That first year, I'd barely watched baseball, too, which was really odd. I think I almost was sad that it was, like, cold turkey, done, so that I can't even look at this. And I'm the guy who has it on the radio on the way to work, turns it on when you go home, reads about it. I'm back to that now, but that first year, I was like, "I don't even want to look at it." Like, "I don't know what's going on." Literally, yeah, it did. It was just like, "This isn't who I am right now," and for some odd reason, I was like, "I just can't even look at it," like, "I'm done." But so that was weird, honestly. It think it hurts a little bit. It's like a pride thing. It's kind of, like, it's like breaking up with somebody. Like, I don't want to see them. I don't want to think about them. I don't event, just stay over there away from me. That's kind of how it was (I1).

Specifically with the baseball participant re-iterated this point in the second interview,

You guys want to want to put it away out of sight, out of mind and just try and refind yourself and I think all that's the best way I can describe it still. The more I think about it because it was breaking up or like losing somebody because it's like you don't sit there and dwell on it because for you, life still goes on and I knew it would always be there. Still in a way like regardless of the fact that if I was ignoring it for a year that was just to try and explore some other areas within my own interest that I couldn’t before when I was playing. That was what it was for. It wasn't like I had hard feelings towards like, oh, I hate baseball. I won't get
it. I mean I did. It was just like, all right, let's just put this aside. What else is out there for me? (I2).

The former football player also separated himself from his sport during his transition in order to help establish a new identity. Similar to the baseball participant the time away from football presented an opportunity for him to explore other areas of interest. At the time of the study, the participant was still separating himself from football by cutting off all contact with the sport. He explained his break from football stating,

I made a promise to myself in July that I was going to take this season, so this 2017 season, completely off of football. So since July, I haven't watched one snap, one play, one game, anything of football. Just complete cold turkey none of it. Probably one of the most uncomfortable things I've ever done, but it's really been a huge, huge benefit to me personally and professionally, as well. It's challenged me a whole new space. I'm so used to pushing my body to the limit. Physically, mentally straining in preparation and film study, to where now that I've removed that from my life, I forced myself to find identity outside of football. I spend my Saturdays, I actually leave my cellphone at home, and I go hiking. I'll go hiking, I'll walk around spend time thinking, doing a lot of journaling. Doing a ton of reading, and actually really kind of found my career interest in what I hope to do in the future, so it's forced me to find an identity outside of football. It's really interesting how it's helped me develop. But at the same time, I'm still ... I'll be honest with you, I'm still struggling to be okay with that, and still struggling to
continue to find that identity. Football's everywhere. Especially NFL, and college football nowadays. Every time I see a television screen or Twitter or Instagram, it's something football. If I see an image, it's almost like a relapse, where I'll want to watch it and I'll get upset about the NFL and all that whole experience. So it's definitely a constant battle that I have to just deal with myself (I1).

During the second interview, I asked if he felt like football would have a role in his life in the future. Similar to the baseball participant he compared the transition to a breakup. He stated,

In due time. It's funny I was trying to explain this to my mom actually, how you would compare it. It’s like, would you call your ex-boyfriend, or ex-girlfriend again and just talk and hang out? In due time. I don't know. I don't know if we're there yet. I would say it's a similar feeling. But yeah, definitely I gave so much to it, and it's a great way to just help people and develop people, so one day (I2).

The last participant that disconnected from their sport was the women’s swimmer. At the time of her second interview she had just recently begun to swim again. This took place three years after she had transitioned from being an intercollegiate student-athlete. She stated,

Whenever I was done swimming, I felt like I just needed a break. I had been swimming since I was four or five years old, I had done it almost every day for my entire life, and I felt like I just needed a break. Then, probably a month ago, I decided to go swim. I was swimming and I was like, "Man, I really miss this. I
forgot I liked this." I think I just needed that break and now since then I've gone back to swim a couple times a week just because I'm like, "I forgot how much I enjoyed this." Having that time away, I think, figuring out who I was outside of swimming, and now I can go back and start to add that back in (I2).

For many participants, training and competing in their sport had dominated much of their identity from an early age. In turn, developing an identity outside of sport was a challenge when they could no longer root their identity in athletics. However, it is important to note that many participants view establishing a new identity as an ongoing process that they continue to navigate. The women’s volleyball participant illustrated this five years into the retirement process. She stated,

One thing when I think about identity in terms of, I think, identity is important to someone's transition out of college athletics, because they've identified as a student-athlete, or not even a student-athlete, but just an athlete for so long that's a part of their identity. I feel like that's really where a lot of the struggle is. I'm no longer this volleyball player, or what have you, so who am I? I feel like that's where, I kind of mention I'm still trying to figure that out. When, I know who I am as volleyball player, so I spend time in that identity most of the time. But then, I just replaced it with my job, I like to be good at my job and I spend a lot of time thinking about my work even when I'm at home or, I feel like I'm always trying to think of something else I could do in class, or I could do this better at work. Even my times away, when I'm not at work, I'm thinking about work. That was similar to me playing volleyball. When I wasn't even playing volleyball, I
still was thinking about that kind of stuff. I do think that to have a very solid and healthy identity, you have to be able to turn it off and be in your work identity at work and then, finding identity outside of that. It's not all of me, it's just a part of me. I still feel like I'm finding that balance of, not making it all (I2).

In addition to her interview, the participant representing women’s volleyball shared that this aspect of the transition “has been really tough for me. I’m not sure how long it takes, but I feel like I am still “finding myself”’ (PJ). Throughout the process of establishing a new identity, she shared insights to her experience that have helped in this process. She explained that, “overcoming my fears of disappointing others and being comfortable with making my own decisions” (PJ) has been an intricate part to finding out who she is.

The former women’s track and field participant also shared her feelings that establishing a new identity is a slow process that is ongoing. After transitioning from her sport she said,

I have also had other experiences now, which I think I can define myself such as a full-time employee, graduate student, and high school track coach. I am also very proud of those three definitions of myself. I am slowly getting to the point of establishing a new and improved identity, but I am still getting to that point (PJ).

Several participants noted the importance of finding strength in their transition from sport by placing greater emphasis on other roles that they encompass. In turn, they were viewing themselves as more than athletes. The men’s basketball player spoke to the importance of being rooted in something bigger than he is. He stated,
And to be honest, the other thing that helped me is that I feel like a lot of athletes, when they're in college, they find their entire identity in their sport. They are their jersey number. And without that, they don't know what they are. Me having a relationship with Jesus Christ, and knowing that he has already put in plan for me what it is he wants me to do, and knowing that I'm first and foremost, I am a Christian. And I am a son of my God in heaven, and I don't have to worry about, well, if not an athlete, I'm not anything. I'd never even gone into sports with that mentality from even as young as a junior higher high school age. So, because I already was rooted in something that was much bigger than just sports, it kind of helped me when the sports stopped, that I wasn't like okay, well I don't know anything besides this anymore. And I don't even know who I am anymore (I2).

In addition to the men’s basketball player, the women’s gymnast also talked about acknowledging the value she finds in the other roles in their life. She shared,

Outside of gymnastics though, I’ve always been a daughter, a sister, and a friend. I’m an aunt to a niece and nephew, the third child of three, a friend to people I’ve known since kindergarten and high school. I think I’m very lucky in that. Whenever I come home, I have my best friends surrounding me, and I don’t think everyone has that even in their hometown. So, I think I find joy in that identity, that I’m a friend to many and that my friends are always there for me. I love being an aunt too. So, maybe I’m not a gymnast anymore. But I’m still accomplished as a person in terms of family and friends. I want to do good in this world, to help people, especially youth and families. And I’m a graduate student
who has an awesome assistantship. And I’m a coach, which I’m proud to have
girls who look up to me and respect almost everything I say (even if it doesn’t
make sense). I think that’s a big identity right now for me. I get to be a coach
and a big sister to gymnasts and show them the love and support that I didn’t
really receive from coaches at the end of my athletic career. But this is really
where I find my identity now, in being a master’s student, a family member and
friend, and a coach (PJ).

Developing New Identities outside of athletics was a common theme identified as
a difficulty that many former student-athletes experienced as they were leaving
intercollegiate athletics. It is important to view this theme as an ongoing process of
finding themselves as many continue to work on developing an identity that is not rooted
in sport.

Support Systems

Among the struggles identified throughout this study, student-athletes having a
support system as they retire from intercollegiate athletics was found to positively impact
retirement. A support system can include family, a mentor, athletic department staff, or
friends who had previously made the transition. Each participant that shared the
importance of their support system had a different makeup of individuals who served in
this role in their life. The former women’s swimmer stated,

I think something else that had an impact on it was like my support system.

Family was really supportive of me obviously throughout it all. My sister had,
when she was in college a bunch of internships, and she kind of knew what it was like to transition from being just some regular college student (I1).

Approaching retirement, she was able to glean knowledge from her sister. The former women’s volleyball player also leaned on her parents, “I think the support system, I moved back in with my parents so I never really lacked a true support system” (I1).

Even though she struggled, she knew that she had her family behind her as she transitioned to a new identity. The former men’s track and field participant also found a support system in his family who helped him identify what the next steps would bring. Additionally, a mentor established during his collegiate years helped him navigate the transition. The mentor assisted with job preparation including mock interviews.

Additionally, the former football player noted the importance of having a diverse population of individuals in his support network. He stated,

I think it's a really, really great thing and super helpful to me, is to have different people in my life for different things. So, what I meant by that is just different ways of support. You know, I have people who I call if I'm just having a tough day, and you know I just need somebody to vent to. Then I have another individual I call if I need some development of my skill set or you know, different things that I use at work. I have other people that are important to me in a spiritual sense, in my faith, and then others who really just keep me in check, and hold me accountable to things. So having different people for different things and mentorship has been a huge, huge thing in my life recently. But it's allowed
me to not only diversify by ways of feedback, but it's also allowed me to build different relationships, which has added to helping me through the transition (I2).

Administrators and coaches need to understand the importance of a support network and the positive impact it can have on a student-athletes transition from sport. The former baseball player brought another important aspect that administrators can convey to student-athletes as they near retirement. When reflecting on his transition it took time for him to realize that the support system he had at his institution did not shut him out because he had graduated. He explained,

I think I thought those people wouldn't be there. I was kind of shutting them out. I didn't talk to my coach, as you know I'm very close with. I didn't talk to some of my teammates, because it's like you're trying to move on, I guess. In reality, I realized the short time through that first year that they are still there. If I had a job concern, just like a question that you would ask a mentor, they were still there. To my best effort trying to shut them out, I came soon to realize they're not going to shut me out just because I'm not a part of this anymore. They're always going to be there for me. Mentally, I thought I lost my support group, but low and behold they were there the whole time. I just chose not to reach out to them, because I was trying my best to redefine what I stood for, I guess (I2).

Several participants noted the importance that a support system played in their transition from sport. Support systems for each individual were composed of different individuals but proved to help ease the difficulties encountered when leaving.
intercollegiate athletics. As participants transitioned from sport, having a strong support system proved to be an invaluable resource to them.

**Replacing the Sport Focus**

Another prominent theme that emerged during the interview process was the importance of quickly replacing the sport role. The former women’s soccer player talked about replacing the sport role and how it helped give her a goal outside of athletics. She explained,

I took the LSAT. Well, I didn't know the entire time that I wanted to go to law school, but I kind of nailed that down the winter going into my senior year. So, I think it helped because it gave me something to look forward to. I was studying for something in the summer, so it was giving me a goal that was not athletic, which was super weird. But in the summer, obviously my goal was to pass fitness tests and to prepare myself for the soccer season, but my goal was also to prepare myself for the test to get myself into a law school. So I think it kind of helps that I had a goal that wasn't just athletics, and it wasn't just college, like getting a degree. It wasn't just finishing college, there was something for me afterwards. And I'm sure that would have been the same if it was a job search or something, but just knowing that I had something to look forward to outside of athletics after it was over, I think that really helps too. I took the LSAT in September or October, one of those months. And I got my scores back in November, so I essentially got my scores back, actually I remember when I got my score back. It was the week after season ended. So almost immediately, my focus changed from
athletics to applications. So then, it gave me something to take my mind off of not playing, and it gave me something else to do in the four hours that we used to have practice. And I think it also helped being a fall sport, just having a semester of college left. I was still there with the team and I still have the team, and I got used to them going to practice, and me not going to practice, if that makes sense. You get used to seeing your team move on without you is not easy, but I think it was better that I was still there, and not from afar, if that makes sense. I got to let go of the sport and I didn't have to let go of the team, I guess (II).

For the men’s track and field participant, he worked to fill the void track and field left by finding activities that allowed him to use the skills that were important to his success in his event. He illustrated this when he stated,

This one will sound funny, but you can kind of be creative. There are multiple different techniques for different events and I love the creativity of track and field and of javelin. Because if something didn't work, you had to think of another cue. You had to be creative. I think one of the things that filled that void after was cooking. I loved cooking when I was in school. I had a small on-campus apartment and I did have a full kitchen. It had everything. A full size frig, oven, stove top. But I think after I left, that was something that I really love, because I couldn't be super creative at my job in Louisiana, and even here. There are some things I can't do. But I need to be creative, and I'm only my happiest when I can be creative. That was something that allowed me to be creative and fill that void, along with, I know I mentioned weight lifting and the team that I'm on. It's the
same thing as track and field. It's so technical and so tough to make things happen and learn different cues and really just build upon the technique, and it takes a long time to get there, like track and field. That's probably one of the closest things that fills the void and why I love it (I2).

The former football player also talked about replacing the sport role. Through his retirement experience he had and was currently being cut off from the world of football. He used the time away to explore new interests and to take time investing in himself in ways he never did when he was a football player. He stated,

Hiking's a big one, because sometimes a hike will turn into a trail run-if I'm feeling it and that, I don't know, it's just been fun for me to be with myself, and you know, trail running is much different than running on a treadmill, and you have to adapt to rocks, and hills, and all this kind of stuff, so at least gets my adrenaline going. And that's probably the biggest thing is something to get my adrenaline going, and excitement, and obviously there's not going to be anything like me running out of a tunnel with a 100,000 people over it. I mean it's probably the closest thing, the other thing to, uniquely enough, has just been learning. And I'm still taking courses here, and really just developed a hunger and desire to continue learning, and doing a lot of innovative things, and pouring a lot of my competitive drive into my work. And, you know not competing against anyone else, but competing against myself and seeing how good I can become, has been pretty cool. Definitely still a void with football, by no means is it taken over all of that, but it's definitely helped ease that gap, for sure (I2).
The former women’s volleyball player talked about replacing the sport role with her work. “I transferred my passion for volleyball to a passion for helping student-athletes” she stated (PJ). A year after graduating, she was able to secure a full-time job helping student-athletes and having her work increase to become a large part of her identity has “really helped me “get over” not being a volleyball player” (PJ).

**Summary of Findings**

In summation of the findings of this study, former student-athletes were able to identify areas that were challenging to them when retiring from sport and things that provided much needed support during their transition. The 10 former student-athletes each had a unique experience as an NCAA Division I student-athlete and in turn had differing experiences when leaving sport. Despite the differences, similarities materialized to help better explain the experiences of student-athletes when they transition out of sport.

Retirement as a Transformation of Social Relationships was the first finding of the study. During the participant’s time as a student-athlete, teammates played a central role to their experience. In turn, when transitioning from sport, difficulties arose in the change that former student-athletes experienced with these relationships. Additionally, as they moved onto the next phase of their life, challenges presented themselves in establishing a new team without having an existing core through their sport. The second finding of this study was Independent Training. Retirement from sport presented unique challenges in regards to working out. Participants had been training so long for their specific sport that it was difficult to figure out how to work out. Another key aspect of
this theme was finding motivation when it was no longer built into their training by them trying to achieve personal bests, win championships, or have competitions in place.

Developing New Identities was another finding of the study and an area where former student-athletes struggled. Leaving sport raised questions including “who am I now?” and “what is out there for me?” Former student-athletes had to find out who they were outside of sport. Within this particular finding, developing a new identity is an ongoing process that has not ended. Additionally, embracing other roles in their life during this process was helpful to them viewing themselves as more than just athletes.

The final two findings that emerged had a positive impact on their retirement. First, former student-athletes talked about the importance of having a Support System. Support systems varied for each participant but having individuals in their life holding them accountable and walking with them through this transition was vital to their success. The final finding of the study was Replacing the Sport Role. The quicker the former student-athletes was able to replace the sport role the easier the transition from intercollegiate athletics. Participants had different ways of replacing the sport role including work, cooking, weight lifting, hiking, and coaching. By replacing the sport role, they helped fill the void left by their sport. Through semi-structured interviews and participant journals, I was able to find commonalities among the participants experiences leaving NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics.
Chapter 5: Discussions and Conclusions

Discussion

The first purpose of this research study was to examine athletic identity and if it has an effect on the transition from sport from NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics. The second purpose of the study was to examine what student-athletes experience during the transition from sport. This chapter addresses, in discussion format, the participant’s experiences transitioning from sport in relation to the research questions:

1) How does athletic identity affect the retirement process for NCAA Division I student-athletes?

2) What do student-athletes experience as they are exiting NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics?

The research questions listed were developed based on the theoretical framework of the study. The theoretical framework included looking at commitment to an identity, specifically athletic identity, how it combines with the NCAA Division I student-athlete experience, in order to better understand the transition from sport. The study utilized interpretational qualitative analysis to code the data and to develop categories. This chapter seeks to answer the research questions developed based on the framework of the study using data from the 10 participant’s interviews and personal journals. The categories that were identified from the data were Retirement as a Transformation of

This chapter will also address the conclusions of the study and provide and provide a discussion of the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes by presenting recommendations for future research.

**Research Question #1**

This section discusses athletic identity in relation to retiring from NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics. As defined earlier, athletic identity is “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). When specifically looking at athletic identity the participants of the study spoke strongly about having to develop a new identity after transitioning from sport. One category that strongly relates to this question is Developing New Identities.

**Developing New Identities.** The participants of the study, through their interviews and participant journals, discussed this topic more prominently than any other. For many participants, they brought the process of developing new identities up in each interview and in the participant journal. Retiring from intercollegiate athletics represented a turning point for the participant’s identities. The former student-athletes had devoted a significant amount of time to being an athlete beginning at a young age. The years spent training for the participants ranged from 10 years to 19 years. During retirement, they had to reconstruct their identity and root it in something other than sport. When reconstructing an identity not rooted in being an athlete, an imperative aspect is that it is a continuous process. Participants noted that developing a new identity and who
they are outside of sport takes years and several noted during the course of the study that it is something they are continuing to work on. This aspect of developing a new identity speaks to the importance of being an athlete to the individual. The study revealed that being an athlete, or specifically a volleyball player, baseball player, etc., was an important aspect to their concept of self. When no longer able to participate in sport, the individuals had to develop a sense of self-worth outside of being an athlete.

The struggle with developing a new identity has been found in prior work (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998). However, this study expands this knowledge by noting that former student-athletes may have to completely disengage from their sport in order to develop a new identity. Participants throughout the course of the study illustrated the need to remove themselves completely from sport in order to find who they are without it. Apart of this process was not watching their sport live or on television, not engaging with their sport on social media, and not listening to games on the radio. Based on the information provided by the participants, this was interpreted as the most difficult aspect of leaving sport. The participants had been firmly rooted in their identity as an athlete for a significant amount of years and it was a difficulty identity to see come to pass. Based on what we know about Division I and the time commitments of student-athletes, their identity as an athlete continued to strengthen during their time as a student-athlete making it difficult to let go of this identity when it was no longer an option. This category was brought up by the participants and talked about in greater detail than any other category.
Replacing the Sport Focus. Another category that emerged from the data which relates directly to answering the first research question of how athletic identity affects the process of retiring from sport is Replacing the Sport Focus. Apart from replacing the sport focus was completely removing the presence of the sport from their lives. For example, some of the participants would not watch any game or match, they would not keep track of team rankings or accomplishments, and they would not participate in their sport. This was all a part of developing a new identity outside of their identity as an athlete. When participating at the NCAA Division I level, the opportunity was not provided for them to explore other areas of interest due to the time commitment of being an intercollegiate athlete. In turn, to adequately explore these areas required and to help in the development of a new identity, some participants disengaged from their sport. The disengagement from sport was temporary and participants eventually began to re-engage in their own time. The length of time that an individual separated from their sport ranged based on what the individual needed in order to develop an identity outside of athletics. Disengaging from sport in order to explore other areas of interest was a unique finding to the current study.

Earlier research has mirrored the importance of the student-athlete replacing the role (Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Another similarity is that the sport role will be replaced with something unique to the interests of the individual. Participants in the current study replaced sport with a variety of activities, which included a new career, cooking, weightlifting, hiking, or graduate school. Regardless of the activity, it was important that the individual was exploring other areas of interest to them which were
delayed based on the time commitment of being an NCAA Division I student-athlete. By picking activities that allow them to utilize the skills they developed as an athlete speaks to sports being able to teach individuals life skills. This could be as simple as creativity, which was an important characteristic for the former men’s track and field athlete when pursuing new areas of interest. In turn, their time spent as an athlete can have a lasting impact on their life even when they are no longer an athlete. From the information shared, participants of the study seek out activities that allow them to continue to utilize skills developed in sport that were responsible in part for their athletic success. Even though participants are no longer considered athletes, this category shows that participants will continue to value this aspect of their life and the skills they developed during their time as an athlete.

Retirement as a Transformation of Social Relationships. A third category identified throughout the course of the study that impacted athletic identity and retirement was Retirement as a Transformation of Social Relationships. While competing collegiately, participants found that their deepest relationships were with teammates or other athletes on campus. Friendships did not always extend to classroom peers or others in the campus community. In turn, upon retirement participants did not have an automatic connection with individuals that they were surrounded by. Additionally, they were not a part of a team that shared common ground in loving a sport which stimulated the development of friendships. In order to develop friendships outside of athletics, participants had to identify other areas of their identity that would allow them to connect with others. The struggle experienced by participants to connect and find a new team of
friends was a common difficulty experienced and an area where former student-athletes were lacking preparation. Developing a new identity and replacing the sport focus allows an individual to begin to connect with others and experience a transformation of their social network.

Prior research has supported that the student-athletes’ social network changes as a result of transitioning from sport. Cecic Erpic et al. (2004) was one study that found that retirement from sport removes the athlete from the subculture that is created within athletics. As a result, athletes were found to miss the social activities related to sport, friends, and the athletic lifestyle. Furthermore, other studies have noted that former student-athletes encounter social difficulties (Botterill, 1988; Baillee & Danish, 1992; Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, Van Raalte, 1991; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Lally, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). The information shared by participants of this current study confirmed the findings of future research in that participants experienced a separation in their relationships with former teammates. What seemed like close friendships that would last a lifetime quickly became acquaintances once teammates were no longer living the student-athlete life. The former women’s gymnast shared that maintaining contacts with friends and collegiate teammates is of the upmost importance to her and despite her efforts it has been difficult to maintain the same level of closeness post retirement. There are two ways that I interpret this finding. First, it may be painful for student-athletes to maintain the same level of closeness based on no longer having a similar schedule in a similar space. Secondly, based on the transformation that former student-athletes are undergoing, the friendships which they shared may be too painful to
engage in while working to establish a new identity and a new social network. Further research is required to fully understand this relationship and to confirm the researcher’s interpretation of why former student-athletes experience an abrupt separation of social networks upon retirement.

**Research Question #2**

This section discusses the experiences of student-athletes as they exit intercollegiate athletics. To answer this question, we will discuss the positives and the negatives of leaving sport. When thinking about what would be positive we will discuss things that had a positive impact (i.e., helped create a smooth transition) for the former student-athlete. In addition, we will examine the negative, or the challenging aspects, of transitioning from sport. We will first exam the positive aspects.

**Support Systems.** One of the most notable categories that emerged as having a positive impact on the retirement process was the strength of one’s support system. Having a strong network of individuals during the transition from sport can improve the experience and help the former student-athlete move forward. Each participant’s support system was composed of a unique set of individuals based on the needs of the student-athletes. For example, family was a common component of the support networks of individuals. A couple of participants also noted that their support system included a spiritual leader which they turned to for support. The former football player stressed the importance of having a “board of advisors” (PJ) that are a diverse support system composed of different individuals that can be turned to for advice. To illustrate this point, a support system would be composed of a work mentor for work advice, a spiritual
mentor for spiritual advice, family, friends, etc. The individuals that make up the support system would be determined by the individual to meet their unique needs.

Individuals within the support system helped student-athletes navigate retiring from sport. For some, the support was received from others who had made the transition themselves and were able to offer advice on what the next step of their life would be like. Grove et al. (1997) spoke to the importance of providing adequate social and emotional sport for the athlete as they transition from sport. This study expands the knowledge about the makeup of support systems and shows the benefit of individuals having a diverse group to seek advice from. Having a strong support system is interpreted as a key to student-athletes experiencing a smooth transition from sport. While a support system does not fully diminish the negative experiences that can arise from transitioning from athletics it can help the individual navigate a new space that is filled with uncertainty. Another component that future research could explore is how to get other teammates and student-athletes to serve as a support system member. Would the transition from sport be impacted if their relationships expanded to encompass this new dimension and instead of becoming acquaintances they became closer by serving as a part of this support system? Other former student-athletes who lived in this space with them shared in their experience which could have a powerful impact on the transition.

Replacing the Sport Focus. Another positive experience was created for former student-athletes during their transition from sport was Replacing the Sport Focus early in retirement. This was done by exploring other areas of interest that were put on hold due to their commitment to their sport. New areas of interest were able to partially fill the
void that was left by their sport. This gave participants something to invest time and energy into. Of importance to the former student-athletes’ experience was that activities used to replace the sport role did not completely fill the void that was left by their sport. However, participants often found and engaged in activities that allowed them to use the skillset developed during their years of training and competing in their sport. This allowed participants to find more fulfillment in the new activities that they were engaging in.

To illustrate this, the men’s track and field participant spoke to the important role that creativity played in his success as a student-athlete. In turn, upon retiring from sport he sought out activities that allowed him to be creative like cooking because for him, that is when he is at his happiest and he felt the most fulfilled. The majority of former student-athletes, when replacing their focus on sport, were engaging in new activities that they had never explored due to their involvement in sport. The activities created a new challenge for them and a new interest to distract them from missing the opportunities and activities created by their role as a student-athlete. The former women’s track and field athlete identified a crucial aspect to this category and experience when she spoke about hoping to find something that she was passionate about like track and field. For her, track and field was always easy and she loved it. She expressed concern that she would never find something else that she would love so easily. While former student-athletes were able to identify and try new activities, they did not fully replace the role of being an athlete which was crucial to their sense of self.
Independent Training. One experience of transitioning from sport that was encountered by multiple participants of the study was learning how to train post retirement. This was viewed as a negative experience that former student-athletes endured when transitioning from sport. Student-athletes are surrounded with the best coaches for their sport and for weight lifting. In addition, they train specifically for their sport, with tailored work out plans that will help them reach optimal performance. However, after years of training to be a better volleyball, basketball, or football player, they do not know how to train without their sport specific goals. Additionally, they lacked motivation without the excitement of an impending season of competition. This was a unique finding of the study and an experience that student-athletes encountered when transitioning from NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics.

Encompassed within this category is the potential for former student-athletes to develop body issues or other mental illnesses as a result of not knowing how to continue their training for a healthy lifestyle after retirement. The former gymnast spoke to this in her interview and specifically addressed that she had not experienced body issues until after leaving sport. Research that has been conducted prior to this study has showed that some athletes when leaving sport face body issues (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998). After retirement, former student-athletes are rarely able to devote the same number of hours to working out and in turn may experience changes to their physical appearance that negatively impact the individual’s view of self.

Being a unique finding to this study, this category can be interpreted as a result of our current structure and model of intercollegiate athletics. For example, while
competing in intercollegiate athletics, student-athletes have a rigorous schedule that is largely dictated by coaches, athletic administrators, training staffs, and class schedules. Essentially a student-athletes day can be planned out for them with little to no input from the individual. Additionally, student-athletes are not actively involved in planning team workouts. In turn, this could contribute to this study finding that former student-athletes experience difficulty training independently without teammates and coaching staffs. The culture of intercollegiate athletics may be producing dependent student-athletes that require support in multiple areas of life like training. During the student-athlete experience, education should be incorporated in order to instill confidence for future life endeavors.

**Transformation of Social Networks.** Another experience that was brought to light by participants was losing the close relationships that they shared with teammates. This aspect of the transition was found to have a negative impact on the student-athletes’ transition from sport. Upon transitioning out of intercollegiate athletics, individuals lost their close knit ties with others who were on their team. In turn, they had to learn to let go of the sport and relationships that when playing they thought would last a lifetime. Their network of friends from athletics dropped to include less than a handful of other student-athletes that they would remain close with. This removed an element of support from the individual’s life that had been there from the early stages of competing in their sport before intercollegiate athletics. Lally (2007), during pre-retirement interviews, showed that student-athletes feared being cut off from the athletics subculture.
Additionally, one year post retirement, former student-athletes had little interaction with the athletic subculture.

When examining the social relationships of former student-athletes it becomes increasingly important to encourage student-athletes to interact with the greater student body on a college campus. One peer group that could play a vital role in future successes of the individual are those who are pursuing the same career path. This can help student-athletes connect with individuals who share a common interest yet help begin to expand their identity and social networks to others outside of the athletics realm while paying into their future. This can also help student-athletes examine their choice of career and if it is best suited for them based on their interests and personalities.

**Conclusion**

The 10 participant’s experiences transitioning out of NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics have helped to explain and better understand the theoretical framework of the study. The theoretical framework of the study consisted of commitment to athletic identity, the NCAA Division I student-athletes experience, and retirement from sport. The study aimed to create an understanding surrounding how these components affect each other by looking at former student-athletes who have made the transition. Generally speaking, it appears that one’s commitment to their role as an athlete increases when competing as a NCAA Division I student-athletes. Training and competing at this level of competition spurred a greater level of commitment to this role. In addition, a greater commitment to this role impacted the individual’s ability to explore other areas of interest and to develop a social network outside of one’s teammates.
The participants of the study each had a unique experience when transitioning from sport. Additionally, student-athletes had a unique support system and engage and explore in different activities to help replace the sport role. It also confirms prior findings that having adequate emotional and social support during the transition is vital for the student-athlete (Grove et al., 1997). A unique understanding of engaging in new activities brought to light by this study was that former student-athletes seek out activities that allow them to utilize the skill set that they developed when training for their sport. These activities provided the most fulfillment for the individual.

Lastly, to understand transitioning from NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics, it is imperative to view building a new identity as a marathon. Developing a new identity was not something that occurred overnight and participants of the study who had been retired for five years said they were still working on defining themselves without sport. This shows that the commitment to sport was high and that the role of being an athlete held great importance to the individual. No participant felt like they had fully developed a new identity and completely understood who they were without sport. Other studies found that developing a new identity was a struggle encountered during retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998). The current study added to this knowledge by showing the longevity of the struggle.

**Implications**

My experience as a former student-athlete and my work as an athletics administrator have developed my passion for helping student-athletes prepare for and transition out of sport. My former role as a student-athlete and my current role as an
athletics administrator have led me to conduct the current study. Specifically, watching former teammates and friends make this transition has led me to examine how athletic identity and commitment to sport combines with the NCAA Division I student-athlete experience to see what the retirement process looks like. By watching my teammate’s transition, I saw a need to better understand how to navigate the transition from sport so that future student-athletes do not encounter the same level of difficulty. In addition, I believe that intercollegiate athletics should serve as a stepping stone to success in future endeavors. Student-athletes that earn an opportunity to enter at this level of competition have achieved high levels of excellence and success within their sport. In turn, I believe that student-athletes can be highly successful in more than one area and achieve excellence in academics and in the next step of their journey. My hope for participants is that through reflecting on their own experience and telling their story a new level of clarity about their transition from sport has been created and has helped them take the next step in their journey.

From the findings of the 10 former student-athletes emerged categories that can educate athletics administrators and coaches on what student-athletes are experiencing as they are transitioning out of intercollegiate athletics. This can inform their work with the student-athletes who are on their campus. It is imperative that athletic administrators are intentional about creating relationships with student-athletes that have no bearing on their success on the field of athletic competition. This helps build the mindset that athletes are more than athletes. This helps build their self-worth in something other than athletic accomplishments and builds an identity not rooted in athletics. When these relationships
are built, the support network of the individual is expanded which can impact the experience throughout retirement. It is also imperative that student-athletes receive encouragement to expand their connections on campus to include non-athletic peers and staff members to diversify their network. Upon retirement, this can help student-athletes connect with others not based on their role as an athlete. This has the potential to assist them in building a new social network.

Additionally, student-athletes should be encouraged to be active members of the campus community and to expand their involvement outside of the realm of athletics. When involvement is expanded, the student-athlete can begin the exploration of activities that can in turn replace the focus of sport upon transition from sport. Campus communities offer an expansive list of clubs and activities for students and intercollegiate student-athletes should engage in these. In regard to training student-athletes for physical competition, the participants of the study have revealed that they did not learn the skills necessary to confidently train themselves when not training for their sport. Strength and conditioning coaches and sport coaching staffs can help student-athletes prepare for the transition by incorporating education into their workouts. Why was a certain lift selected? What muscles are you engaging? Education can help former student-athletes as they learn to train themselves and develop a healthy lifestyle outside of intercollegiate athletics.

This study adds to a growing body of literature looking at athletic identity and retirement from sport. Specifically, this study adds uniqueness by looking at former Division I student-athletes retrospectively. The findings of the study help expand our
knowledge about athletic identity and the transition from sport. Uniquely, this study found that former student-athletes often have to disengage completely from their sport in order to develop a new identity and to explore other areas of interest. Another distinctive finding is that highly skilled and trained athletes did not know how to continue their training to develop a healthy lifestyle post intercollegiate athletics. The study also speaks to the importance of replacing the sport focus early in retirement (Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007) and having a strong support network that extends past athletic peers.

**Study Limitations**

When assessing the study for limitations, one of the most obvious and a common critique of qualitative studies is that the information is not generalizable to all former NCAA Division I student-athletes. The sample size for the current study was 10 former NCAA Division I student-athletes. Despite participants articulating in great detail their experience and transition from sport, their experience is not generalizable to what others face when retiring from sport at the same level of competition. In addition, participants were being asked to recall their transition from sport through semi-structured interviews and participant journals. The study’s retrospective design creates the risk that participants may not recall intricate details of their transition from sport that could impact the richness of the data. To help combat the issue of recall bias, participants of the study had been retired from sport for five years or less. This time frame was selected in an attempt to capture participants in the immediacy of transitioning from sport. Additionally, participants engaged in two semi-structured interviews and a participant
journal to provide multiple opportunities to reflect on their transition and recall information that was relevant and important. This gave participants the opportunity to add information that they may not have thought to share in an earlier interaction.

Throughout the course of the study, arduous measures were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Due to the design of the study, my own positionality including my experience as a former NCAA Division I student-athlete and my work as an athletic administrator could be viewed as a limitation of the study. In regard to my own experience, I have watched countless teammates and friends struggle with their retirement from sport which has in turn spurred my passion for working with current student-athletes to prepare them for this transition and has led me to conduct research surrounding athletic identity and retirement from sport. As a result, it was imperative that I employ triangulation strategies to ensure that my own biases did not subconsciously impact the findings of the study.

**Future Research**

The current study focused only on former NCAA Division I student-athletes. Within the realm of intercollegiate athletics there are multiple avenues that allow for expansion of knowledge surrounding athletic identity and retirement from sport. The next step could be to expand this research to encompass NCAA Division II and Division III athletics. By individually focusing on each Division an understanding can be generated about the different experiences student-athletes encounter depending on their level of competition. Additionally, research is yet to do a comparative study of the three NCAA Divisions. This would allow for the experiences of former student-athletes to be
compared and differences in their experiences to emerge based on level of competition. Intercollegiate athletics also allows for the exploration of this topic within specific teams. A study could focus specifically on a men’s basketball team or women’s track and field. This would provide specific knowledge about the experiences of student-athletes on that team. Exploring this topic by conference is another recommendation for future research. When conducting this research, participants could represent every institution that is a member. Lastly, athletic identity and retirement from sport could focus on one institution to learn more about the student-athletes competing there.

Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a longitudinal study that follows student-athletes throughout their journey as a student-athlete and into retirement. This would allow data to be collected immediately and eliminate the issue of recall bias. Additionally, a study with this design would capture development over the course of their time as a student-athlete and allow for participants to be tracked to see how their athletic expectations change as they go throughout their collegiate journey and their involvement on campus. Lally (2007) conducted a longitudinal study looking at collegiate athletes at a Canadian university. While the study did not follow student-athletes throughout their entire collegiate journey, data was collected prior to retirement, during retirement, and post retirement.

Involuntary retirement is another area that can be explored in future research of athletes transitioning from sport. Athletes who do not have the ability to choose when they retire but are forced into retirement is a unique subset of athletes. Athletes who
experience a career ending injury allows for the examination of retirement from sport from a completely different perspective than voluntary retirement.

While there are many avenues to pursue within intercollegiate athletics, research can also expand to encompass high school athletes who are not able to continue competition at the collegiate level. There are significantly more high school athletes than collegiate student-athletes. In 2017, the National Federation of State High School Associations reported that for the 28th straight year participation in high school sports has increased and has almost reached eight million participants (High school sports participation increases for the 28th straight year, nears 8 million mark, 2017). This research has the potential to impact more individuals as the number of NCAA athletes in 2014 was 480,000 (Probability of competing beyond high school, n.d.). This line of research could also encompass the parents or guardians of the athletes to depict their experience of letting go of sport. The opportunities to expand athletic identity and retirement from sport are plentiful and expand across different levels of sport competition.
References


Probability of competing beyond high school. (n.d.). Retrieved from:
http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/probability-competing-beyond-high-school.


The Total Person Program. (n.d). Retrieved from:


Appendix A: Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) Retirement Among Athletes Model
Causes of Athletic Retirement:
  - Age
  - Deselection
  - Injury
  - Choice

Factors Related to Adaptation to Retirement:
  - Developmental Experiences
  - Self-Identity
  - Perception of Control
  - Social Identity
  - Tertiary Contributors

Available Resources:
  - Coping Skills
  - Social Support
  - Pre-retirement Planning

Quality of Adaptation To Athletic Retirement

Retirement Crisis:
  - Psychopathology
  - Substance Abuse
  - Occupational Problems
  - Family/Social Problems

Healthy Career Transition

Intervention:
  - Cognitive
  - Emotional
  - Behavioral
  - Social
Appendix B: Wylleman & Lavallee’s (2004) Developmental perspective on transitions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>35</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletic Level</td>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Discontinuation</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Adulthood</td>
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<td>Psychosocial Level</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Family (Coach)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>Coaches</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>Secondary education</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professional occupation</td>
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Note: A dotted line indicates that the age at which the transition occurs is an approximation.
Appendix C: NCAA Divisional Overview
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NCAA Divisions</th>
<th>Division I</th>
<th>Division II</th>
<th>Division III</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Schools</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>442</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of Schools in each Division</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median Undergraduate Enrollment</td>
<td>9,743</td>
<td>2,540</td>
<td>1,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Athlete to Student Ratio</td>
<td>1:25</td>
<td>1:11</td>
<td>1:06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Teams</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of NCAA Student-Athletes/ Division</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic Scholarships</td>
<td>Multiyear, cost-of-attendance athletics scholarship</td>
<td>Partial athletics scholarships model</td>
<td>No athletics scholarships</td>
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Appendix D: Division I – Median Hours Spent Per Week on Athletic Activities In-Season (2015 SA Self-Report)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men’s Sports</th>
<th>Athletic Hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Football-FBS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Football-FCS</td>
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<td>Baseball</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golf</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice Hockey</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrestling</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacrosse</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track &amp; Field</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming &amp; Diving</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>29</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women’s Sports</th>
<th>Athletic Hours</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice Hockey</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>35</td>
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<td>Basketball</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Golf</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Field Hockey</td>
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<td>Tennis</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Track &amp; Field</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swimming &amp; Diving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rowing</td>
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Appendix E: Division I – Median Hours Spent Per Week on Academic Activities In-Season (2015 SA Self Report)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men’s Sports</th>
<th>Hours/Week</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrestling</td>
<td>41</td>
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<td>Tennis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Football-FBS</td>
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<td>Football-FCS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
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<td>Lacrosse</td>
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<td>Swimming &amp; Diving</td>
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<td>Basketball</td>
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<td>Golf</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women’s Sports</th>
<th>Hours/Week</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Field Hockey</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golf</td>
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<td>Track &amp; Field</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
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<td>Softball</td>
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<td>Ice Hockey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F: Proposed Research Questions
Tentative Examples of Question Topics for Interviews

Questions for this type of research are open-ended, and often consist mainly of follow-ups. The questions reflected below reflect topics that we anticipate discussing. They do not constitute a script or protocol to be rigidly followed.

What sport did you participate in during your collegiate career?
How did you first begin playing your sport?
Did you focus primarily on this sport throughout high school?
What other sports did you play?
How did you come to specialize in this sport specifically?
What was the recruiting process like for you?
How did you decide which college you would attend?
What were your expectations for your athletic career when entering college?
Did your expectations for your athletic career shift throughout your college career?
If so, when did this change occur?
What did being a collegiate athlete mean to you?

How long have you been retired from your sport?
Overall, how satisfied were you with your sport career upon retirement?
What role do you feel that your overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with your career played in your transition out of sport?
Were you ready to move on from sport?
What were you looking forward to that made you excited for this transition?
Why do you think you weren’t ready to make this transition?

What were the time commitments of being a student-athlete?
Did you feel that your coach was invested in you having a successful career post sport while participating?
Did being a student-athlete prohibit you from participating in other activities that you were interested in?
What activities would have liked to explore but were unable to as a result of being a student-athlete?

Before the end of your career, were there things you did to prepare (pre-retirement planning)?
What programs were provided to you by the athletic department to prepare you for your career post sport?
How did you learn about these programs?
What kind of programming could the athletic department have offered that you feel would have helped better prepare you to transition out of sport?
Did you feel prepared to enter this new phase of your life?
What did you do immediately after transitioning from sport and graduating?
What difficulties did you experience post retirement, if any?
How did you cope with the difficulties you experienced?
How did your relationships with your teammates change after you were no longer on the team?
Do you feel like the skills you learned as a student-athlete's transferred to make you successful in other areas of your life?
How has being a former student-athlete benefitted you post retirement from sport?
Are you still involved with your sport?
   If so, what is your current role?
      What led to no longer wanting to be involved with your sport?