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**Student-Athletes' First-Year College Transitions at a Mid-American
Conference University: Investigating Stressors in Different
Identities and COVID-19**

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Student-Athletes' First-Year College Transitions at a Mid-American Conference University:
Investigating Stressors in Different Identities and COVID-19

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Abstract

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), roughly 180,000 student-athletes are making the transition from high school to college in order to have the opportunity to compete in collegiate athletics ("NCAA recruiting fact," 2020). First-year student-athletes face the same transitions that non-student-athletes go through regarding social and academic identity, however, student-athletes have the additional stressor of having an athletic identity (Freeman, 2015; McFarlane, 2014; New, 2015; Skinner, 2004; Smith & Hardin, 2020). An additional transition came in the spring of 2020 with COVID-19 (Bullard, 2020; Roetert et. al., 2020). The purpose of this study was to investigate how the first-year transition process affected Division I student-athletes from the Mid-American Conference. The participants answered questions about transitioning to their university, rating their level of support across different areas, and transitioning unexpectedly due to COVID-19. Positives aspects of the transition included having a helpful coaching staff, supportive family and friends, approachable academic staff, and relief COVID-19 brought in providing a break. Negatives aspects of the transition that were mentioned included: adjusting to a new environment, struggling to balance being a Division I athlete, poor relationship either with academic or athletic staff, and readjusting to life back home during COVID-19.

Introduction

In our world today, the industry of college athletics has an estimated worth of \$60 billion, from media contracts, revenue generated from members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and other related sport events (i.e., championships) (McCormick & McCormick, 2006). More recent data has shown that in 2012-2013 alone the NCAA reported \$797,598,000 in revenue (Osborne, 2014). With this amount of money invested into college athletics, it is easy to forget who is at the center of this billion dollar industry – college students. To those watching college athletics, a student-athletes' lives seems glamorous, and that they are living this dream life that every young adult wants to have when they continue to college. The reality of being a college student-athlete is anything but glamorous from the grueling off-season workouts to 40 hours a week spent just on athletics during season, all on top of having to maintain a specific GPA in order to be able to play their sport (New, 2015; Tinto, 2006).

These college student-athletes face the same struggles any nonstudent-athlete college would face from having a new roommate, leaving their hometowns, and trying to fit in at their new university (Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Student-athletes face having to go through these transitions like any non-student-athlete; additionally, they are faced with the task to perform in their sport at a Division I level, maintain their grades to continue that sport, and adjust to a new team and style of coaching (McFarlane, 2014; Skinner, 2004).

This student-athlete transition into college is an important area to analyze. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), roughly 180,000 student-athletes are making the transition from high school to college in order to have the opportunity to compete at the Division I level of their sport ("NCAA recruiting fact," 2020). Unfortunately, most transition research focuses on how to help student-athletes transition out of sport and into the workforce.

However, the first-year student-athlete is a crucial area to devote research to help this transition run smoothly to prepare these student-athletes for the rest of their college career. These first-year student-athletes are in this new world with intense schedules, new academic requirements, changes in their sport, and faced with the typical stressors of nonstudent-athlete (Freeman, 2015; McFarlane, 2014; New, 2015; Smith & Hardin, 2020).

An additional stressor in spring 2020 was the COVID-19 pandemic. First-year student-athletes were faced with transition in two separate cases, once coming into college then transitioning back home midway through their spring semester. On top of moving back home, student-athletes experienced their season being canceled and classes switch to online instruction in a rapid transition (Bullard, 2020; Roetert et. al., 2020). The COVID-19 global pandemic caused rapid transition in spring 2020; however, gaining insight now from the first-year student-athletes who went through this event firsthand can help prepare those who work with student-athletes either academically or athletically for future events that might have similar rapid transitions.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the first-year transition process affected Division I student-athletes from the Mid-American Conference. In addition to the various stressors, a non-student-athlete transitioning into college experiences. The purpose of this study is to investigate how those stressors affect student-athletes in their first year of college. This study will investigate how academic performance, athletic identity, social adaptation, and the unique stressor of COVID-19 factored into the success of transitioning from a high school to a new college setting.

Research Questions

1. What factors impact the transition process from high school to college for a first-year athlete at a Mid-American Conference University?
2. Has COVID-19 impacted the first-year transition for athletes at a Mid-American Conference University?

Review of Literature

Theory

During a person's lifetime, they might experience different events that could change or shape them for the future. These life experiences are usually called transitions. According to Schlossberg (1981), "a transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). Transitions can come in many different events; some of the more common ones are going to college, starting to enter a job after finishing college, getting married, etc. However, Schlossberg (1981) kept the term transition broad in this model because transitions can also come in smaller moments, such as changing a major and anticipating a promotion that never comes (also known as a non-event). The model created by Schlossberg (1981) to analyze adaption to transition has three significant factors, which are "(1) the characteristics of the particular transition, (2) the characteristics of the pre-and post-transition environments, and (3) the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition" (p. 5). Simply put, the model suggests that transition starts with an event (can be a significant event or a non-event), followed by the three main factors, and finally ending on the adaption of this new transition (Schlossberg, 1981). The primary purpose of adaption is when "an individual moves from being preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life"

Schlossberg, 1981, p. 7). Schlossberg (1981) addresses a vital point that a transition can be either a positive or negative experience for a person and is not the same experience for everyone, even if the event is similar.

In the world of college sport, there is a solid amount of research indicating the importance of helping student-athletes transition out of the sport. This transition would be considered an anticipated transition (Smith and Hardin, 2020). An anticipated transition is a type of change that can be described as identifiable or planned for, like student-athletes running out of eligibility and leaving sport (Smith and Hardin, 2020). However, one transition for student-athletes that is not heavily researched is the anticipated transition from high school to college. Evidence shows that student-athletes who are transitioning out of sport have feelings of loss or unreadiness (Stokowski et. al., 2019). However, there could be strong arguments made to say these same feelings apply to first-year student-athletes transitioning into university.

Stambuloya (2021) mentioned in their transition model that, “The unsuccessful transition is usually associated with premature athletic dropout, overtraining, substance abuse, or other negative consequences of not coping with the transition demands, and it also signals a need for intervention (usually a clinical one)” (p. 527). Incoming first-year student-athletes are exciting point in their lives but usually do not know all the trials of being a college athlete and student. Research and understanding more about the first-year transition of student-athletes can help prepare them for a successful transition.

General Hardships of First-Year Students

Generally, the transition from high school to college is an enormous life change for any student coming into their first-year. Many different areas in this new experience could add stress to a first-year student. A few common areas that might cause stress are finding a new friend or

social groups, having to live with a roommate, new academic standards, distance from home, and other different stressors, which can be different for every first-year student (Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Tinto, 2006). Pittman and Richmond (2008) noted that an estimated “one third of entering college students leave higher education without obtaining a degree, and most do so during their 1st year” (p. 344). Having a better understanding of what a first-year transition process might look like and typical stressful areas that could cause students to drop out will benefit future generations of first-year students.

One of the main challenging areas for first-year students transitioning into college is having no proper support system or quality friendships. Pittman and Richmond (2008) found that a sense of belonging at a university is positively related to the quality of friendships a first-year student has during that first year. This result means that a possible explanation to have a more successful first-year transition, a student might need at least one quality friendship for them to feel that he or she belongs at their university (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). A second area that might cause stress is learning how to live with a new roommate. Sharing a room with someone a student may or may not know can bring new complexities to the student’s life. Most of the time, a roommate might be someone whom they do not know. Having this random pairing could lead to a stressful living situation and creating a difficult transition into college (Hicks & Heastie, 2008).

Student-Athlete Hardships during First-Year

As previously mentioned above, being a first-year student at any university is a challenge and can add stress to any part of one’s life. However, student-athletes entering university have an added stressor that many other first-year students do not have, which is being an athlete.

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), there around 480,000 student-athletes across the NCAA; roughly 125,000 of that total are first-year student-athletes

making the transition from high school into college (“Estimated probability of,” 2020). This first-year transition can be difficult for student-athletes because they are going through the same stressors as non-student-athletes on top of learning the world of college athletics (McFarlane, 2014; Saxe et. al., 2017).

One of the most problematic areas to get used to when making the transition from high school is the schedule of being a student-athlete. The NCAA found Division I sports like football, basketball, and baseball spend about 40 hours a week just on athletic activities. However, for all sports within the NCAA (Division I-III), no team reported less than an average of 28 hours on athletic activities (New, 2015; Saxe et. al, 2017). With having a significant amount of time dedicated to athletics, first-year student-athletes find the balancing act between academics and athletics challenging to manage (McFarlane, 2014; Saxe et. al., 2017). Throughout existing research, first-year student-athletes main stressors of transition can separate into three main categories: Athletic Identity, Social Identity, and Academic Identity.

Athletic Identity

The idea of athletic identity is when one places more importance on the role athletics play in one's life, resulting in finding self-worth in one athletic performance (McFarlane, 2014). Going from being a star on a high school team as a senior then transitioning back to a freshman also contributes to the stress of a first-year student-athlete. High school seniors feel "on top of the world" being a star is on the team. These high school seniors are back down to freshman might be a rough transition for some if their self-worth comes in athletic achievements (Saxe et. al., 2017). As well, the general fear of not being ready to compete at that level or to play at the best level every day (Edwards, 2010; Freeman, 2018). Student-athletes have a unique position because some of them have their school paid for scholarships. Having a scholarship is a blessing

yet can add a unique pressure to first-year student-athletes by feeling the need to perform to the best of their ability each game to keep that scholarship (Edwards, 2010). This type of pressure can come from the student-athlete themselves, or even sometimes a coach might add to the outside pressure since the team is their livelihood (Skinner, 2004).

While in college, student-athletes have high standards placed upon them in regards to their athletic identity. McCormick and McCormick (2006) argue that at times student-athletes, especially those in sports like football or men's basketball, are more like employee-athletes rather than student-athletes. For example, when it comes to being a football student-athlete, McCormick and McCormick (2006) continue their argument by mentioning football student-athletes' schedule for 50 plus hours a week on football activities alone, including time spent in the classroom or on homework. When demand on athletics is higher than any other identity while on campus, there is more of an understanding of how first-year student-athletes can get caught up since they are some of the most recognizable students on a college campus (McCormick & McCormick, 2006; Skinner, 2004).

Social Identity

A student-athlete's social identity is who he or she is outside of their sport. For instance, how meaningful their relationships are and how they feel supported through the different transitions (Freeman, 2018). Just like any other first-year student, student-athletes also have the stress to find or make friendships. Student-athletes do benefit from transitioning into college with either other first-year student-athletes or just having a group of people on a team. However, first-year student-athletes do not necessarily know their team's roles yet and are trying to find a way to feel included (Freeman, 2018; Smith & Hardin, 2020). Even though student-athletes might seem lucky on the outside for having a built-in group of friends, there still is stress in trying to

build relationships outside of their sport (McFarlane, 2014; Melendez, 2006; Stokowski et. al., 2019).

Specifically, Smith and Hardin (2020) mention the idea of the size of the athletic 'bubble' at any given university in the NCAA. Researchers use the word 'bubble' to describe this environment because, even at a large Division I university, the athletic community's size is still somewhat small. Building relationships outside of this 'bubble' is challenging due to game schedules, multiple workouts a day, academic commitments, and more (Smith & Hardin, 2020). Being in this small community might place more eyes on these first-year student-athletes than ever before (McFarlane, 2014). McFarlane (2014) briefly describes this idea as a type of "celebrity status" on a university that brings added pressure to new student-athletes because of the amount of scrutiny their actions might face (McFarlane, 2014).

This new social environment can be a significant stressor for many first-year student-athlete. As previously stated, first-year students have new social changes by finding new social groups and new living situations. Student-athletes do not also figure out the new dynamics on an athletic team but also figure out a new environment within their own families. Student-athletes are trying to figure out the new dynamics on an athletic team and figure out a new environment within their own families. First-year student-athletes come from an environment where their families might always be around or come home after a brutal practice or game. Student-athletes move from their comfort zone to a new place where their family could not be as close to visit or talk to every day. The new team these first-year student-athletes have come on to is their new family, but those types of connections might take longer to form, unlike having a parent or sibling nearby (Freeman, 2018). During this period of transition from high school to college in

terms of social identity, there might be high feelings of loneliness due to difficulties of building friendships and meaningful connections (McFarlane, 2014).

Academic Identity

The last of the main areas that might cause stress for a first-year student-athlete is one's academic identity. This identity is how student-athletes see themselves in regards to their academic capabilities. This area might cause the most stress due to emphasis placed on the athletic identity (McCormick & McCormick, 2006). More specifically, due to the hectic schedule caused by athletics with traveling for games, workout times, team events, and more; academics might be placed lower on the priority list for first-year student-athletes learning how to balance this new standard (Edwards, 2010; McFarlane, 2014; Paule & Gilson, 2011).

According to the NCAA, a student-athlete must reach a minimum 2.3 GPA in high school, a minimum test scores (ACT or SAT), and other core class requirements to be able to compete right away coming into college ("Play Division I Sports," 2021). These requirements to even be accepted to a university are stressful for those who are more focused on their athletic identity more than their academic identity ("Play Division I Sports," 2021). While student-athletes are in college, there are requirements to stay eligible to compete; for example, at the start of student-athletes sophomore year, student-athletes must have at least a 1.8 GPA and 36 credits from courses completed towards their degree ("NCAA GPA Requirements," 2021). Having requirements for areas like GPA might have student-athletes consider if the college environment is even for them.

Tinto (2006) investigated student retention rates and possibly different reasons students may drop out due to their lack of motivation. One main point brought up in Tinto's (2006) research is that at the start of tracking student retention, those who dropped out were seen as

weak, unable to handle the college environment, unmotivated, and unwilling to go through the rigorous process to achieve the benefits college offers. In recent research, talk began wondering if students were not totally to blame. However, the university's lack of training and hiring adequate staff might be partially to blame for student retention (Tinto, 2006). These requirements might be hard to reach or seen impossible for student-athletes because faculty might not be willing to work with the student-athlete to help improve their overall GPA.

For some first-year student-athletes, the GPA requirements are not an added stressor, but other areas might be more stressful in this identity. A unique stressor that some student-athletes might face in their first-year is the stereotypes that come with being a student-athlete by classmates and professors (Paule & Gilson, 2011; Skinner, 2004). Having stereotypes like these might be new for first-year student-athletes and can cause them to have the other battle of proving themselves more than non-student-athletes in the same class.

The most common stressor identified in a first-year student-athlete's life is the increased demand for a college schedule. At any level in college, there is a constant challenge of learning how to balance being a student and being an athlete (Edwards, 2010; McFarlane, 2014; Paule & Gilson, 2011). Paule and Gilson (2011) investigated how athletic participation affects academic performance in non-revenue sports. The researchers concluded there were mixed reviews on this question, but some of the challenges faced were lack of study time, limited time to craft good study skills, and how athletics were prioritized academics (Paule & Gilson, 2011). One of the biggest challenges identified was the fatigue of being a student-athlete and how the lack of sleep played a role in little motivation or time for academics (Paule & Gilson, 2011). First-year student-athletes are unaware of the schedule and prioritization of athletics that college offers. These student-athletes often miss classes due to traveling, playing catch-up on missed

assignments, and working their academic schedule around their practice or workout schedules (Edwards, 2010). This type of schedule also leaves little time to network with other classmates and attend university programs or workshops to gain better skills outside of sport (Paule-Koba & Tashenberg, 2018). Generally, this type of hectic schedule can leave first-year student-athletes less motivated to focus on academics and might blame athletics' causes for not doing better in the classroom (McFarlane, 2014).

Abnormal Stressor

The 2019-2020 academic year added a unique stressor for everyone in college, especially first-year student-athletes, a global pandemic. The Coronavirus (aka Covid-19) pandemic became a significant concern within the United States in March 2020. Many universities faced difficult decisions on how to protect their students while still having them complete their courses. During this same time, universities were contemplating what to do; the NCAA was also asking similar questions about the upcoming spring season and the upcoming end of the winter season for many sports. When many states started lockdowns, universities around the country started to move to remote/distance learning. The NCAA decided for their athletes' safety to cancel the upcoming seasons, championships, and any other activities going on for sports out of season (Bullard, 2020; Roetert et. al., 2020).

While preparing to come back in the fall, the NCAA conducted a well-being survey asking over 37,000 student-athlete asking different questions on areas that pertained to arriving back to campus in the fall. This survey's main point was to gather data about thoughts and feel how student-athletes felt about returning to their sport (Bullard, 2020; Roetert et. al., 2020). With the ongoing pandemic, this topic is very new and not as well researched yet; this survey and

researchers who have reviewed the information have started the process to help provide information on how this situation has affected student-athletes.

In this NCAA study, the data showed that student-athlete experienced more stress than usual, like having trouble sleeping, more feelings of loneliness, and overall feeling more exhausted (Roetert et. al., 2020). The NCAA looked at a couple of significant sections of returning to campus in the fall, including academics, living environment, training, and thoughts on resocialization. During this time for first-year student-athletes, many were starting to get used to living on their own. However, first-year student-athletes were thrown back into possibly living at home away from the friends and teammates that had grown closer to in the fall semester (Bullard, 2020; Graupensperger et. al., 2020; Roetert et. al., 2020). Academics were hugely affected by this change. Roetert et. al. (2020), analyzed data from the NCAA well-being survey and concluded some students were concerned with,

the online format, others lacked the technology to be able to connect to their courses remotely, some shared that faculty had increased their assignment load as a result of moving online, and others reported struggling to connect with faculty, learning specialists or tutors when they had questions about course material. (p. 19)

However, one area forgotten is that these student-athletes still needed to train and prepare for the upcoming season. However, student-athletes did identify around 51% claimed they were feeling positive in this switch due to the ability to keep up with their classes easier (Roetert et. al., 2020).

The NCAA's well-being survey showed that many student-athletes had their training affected by COVID-19 restrictions and mental health issues like anxiety or depression. First-year student-athletes could feel like this more due to not being sure how to stay in shape by conducting workouts like completing at college or feeling overwhelmed by another sudden

change (Bullard, 2020; Roetert et. al., 2020). Roetert et. al. (2020) highlighted that many student-athletes rely on their coaches for their training routines. With this drastic switch, an estimated 40% of participants claimed they lacked motivation when training at home. Furthermore, the primary emotional barrier identified was around 43% of student-athletes were worried about COVID-19 and fear of exposure (Roetert et. al., 2020).

Besides the NCAA, there has not been much research conducted yet investigating the effects of this ongoing pandemic on student-athletes or specifically first-year student-athletes. However, Bullard (2020) investigated the effects of the pandemic on student-athletes from the New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC), which consists of 10 Division III universities (7 included in this study). Similar to the NCAA study, Bullard (2020) found more than half the student-athletes in this study stated they were having more stress than average during the past spring semester. By analyzing the data, Bullard (2020) concluded that significant stress areas were moving home, academics being away from home, and general worry and anxiety. When asked about the transition to online classes, first-year student-athletes were groups that found the transition to online classes to be more challenging (Bullard, 2020). Having one semester done, lack of motivation, or being new to an online course could have been why first-year student-athletes found the transition more difficult. Some first-year student-athletes identified the difficulties and stress in preparing for the upcoming semester due to lack of contact with advisors or knowledge of courses to take regarding academics (Bullard, 2020). Overall, the spring semester was an unforeseen stressor for first-year student-athletes that added a unique experience to their transition that could have impacted them negatively or positively.

Resources Available

Throughout this transition process, there are some essential resources to help first-year student-athletes located in a university's Student-Athlete Services department or a name similar to that. Non-student-athletes have a campus advisor to help them, however, this resource of Student-Athlete Services is additional for those who are student-athletes. The role of a student-athlete academic advisor/counselor is defined as there to assist student-athletes in learning how to balance this new transition of athletics and academics (Brown, 2007; Paule-Koba & Tashenberg, 2018). Besides helping student-athletes find a balance between many different areas, this student-athlete's advisor is also a contact person between university professors and coaches when it comes to staying updated on academic status (Paule-Koba & Tashenberg, 2018). Lastly, one of the other prominent roles for an academic advisor is keeping track of their student-athletes' eligibility by making sure they meet requirements set by the NCAA or the university when it comes to GPA and degree completion requirements (Paule-Koba & Tashenberg, 2018).

Besides having a specific academic advisor, Student-Athlete Services also comes with many other resources for student-athletes. Some of the more popular resources are tutoring availability, assigned study hall times, early enrollment for classes, and orientation programs (Edwards, 2010; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Skinner, 2004). When a first-year student-athlete is in their first semester, a majority of the time, their academic advisor will assign required study hall hours for that student-athlete to complete each week (Edwards, 2010). One of the main benefits of study hall hours is having a set time for first-year student-athletes to set time in their busy schedules to do their schoolwork. Having tutoring available through this department is also very beneficial in finding a time that will work around the student-athlete schedule. Many departments will have a freshman orientation program for incoming student-athletes; however,

programs like this are usually up to the university to create (Edwards, 2010). McFarlane's (2014) research includes one last significant benefit to highlight when investigating student-athletes' first-year transition. While conducting interviews, McFarlane (2014) found that many student-athletes highlighted the relationship built with their assigned academic advisor. Most of the time, the student-athlete needs to take the initiative on creating this relationship, but many found having someone there to help during this transition process was beneficial (McFarlane, 2014).

Effects of Negative Transition

The topic of the first-year transition of student-athletes is not a heavily researched area. However, the topic is critical due to the negative consequences of a rough transition into college from high school. A rough transition could lead to student-athletes developing negative habits. Cadigan et. al. (2012) found that first-year student-athletes were more likely to develop more drinking problems like frequent intoxication, heavy drinking, and other drinking-related problems than non-student-athletes transitioning into college. Cadigan and colleagues (2012) mentioned that possible reasons for this increase in alcohol consumption could be the pressure put on student-athletes, anxieties in and out of sport, and the culture of athletics (Cadigan et. al., 2012).

Another possibility of a negative transition could be more mental health-related and unable to be noticed by those around the student-athlete. Transition into college brings many new experiences and feelings for anyone, but student-athletes do have the other new experience of athletics. Being in many different new phases of life could lead student-athletes to many different feelings like loneliness, isolation, and moving towards questioning their self-worth (Stokowski et al., 2019). If mental health issues are not noticed or taken seriously, those types of problems might lead to something worse, like a student-athlete wanting to end their life. Fagan

(2017) investigated the circumstances that led to a University of Pennsylvania first-year student-athlete who lost her mental health battle. This first-year student-athlete had a disguise on towards the rest of the world yet was profoundly struggling with many different emotions that might occur during the transition process.

Effects of a Positive Transition

On the other hand, there can be many benefits during this transition for first-year student-athletes. There are general benefits of this transition process, for example, being highly excited to be in a new environment, being a part of a new time, and building new relationships either with teammates, athletic advisors, or coaches (McFarlane, 2014; Paule & Gilson, 2011; Paule-Koba & Tashenberg, 2018; Skinner, 2004). Melendez (2006) followed these thoughts when investing in how athletic participation influences college adjustment in first-year college students and sophomores. The main points found were that athlete participation did increase overall satisfaction while at college and eased social adjustment during the first year (Melendez, 2006). These results point out that even though athletics might cause a large amount of stress during the first year, the benefits of having a built-in support system and common interest with a select group of people might make the process easier and increase feelings of belonging at that university (Melendez, 2006; Richmond & Pittman, 2008).

Lubker and Etzel (2007) furthered this point home when investigating the first-year college adjustments in current college student-athlete versus those who were not competing or not given a chance to compete (i.e., disengaged athletes). Lubker and Etzel (2007) found that those first-year students labeled as disengaged student-athletes had a rougher time transitioning into college than the current student-athletes who were studied. As previously mentioned, being a part of an athletic team in college is advantageous and could result in better academic scores or

just quality experiences (Lubker & Etzel, 2007; Melendez, 2006; Richmond & Pittman, 2008). Focusing on this first-year transition for student-athlete can lead to easier transitions for other events coming up in their lives and overall making the experience while at college slightly more enjoyable (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; McFarlane, 2014).

Methodology

Participants

Participants for this study included 51 second-year student-athletes who all compete at the Division I level at seven different Mid-American Conference institutions. Second-year student-athletes were chosen for this study because they recently have gone through their first-year at their university and the transition from high-school to college would be more recent in their minds.

Participants included 37 female student-athletes making up 72% of the sample and 14 male student-athlete making up the remaining 28% of the sample. The majority of the respondents, 40 in total, identified as White/Caucasian, three as Hispanic, three as other (did not specify), two identified as African American, two identified as Asian, and one identified as Native American. Thirty of the participants were nineteen years old, 18 were twenty years old, and three stated they were twenty-one years old. Participants came from seven out of the twelve Mid-American Conference institutions: 12 from the University at Buffalo, ten were from Ball State University, ten from Central Michigan University, eight from Bowling Green State University, six from Ohio University, five from Miami University (OH), and three from University of Toledo. According to the results, six respondents participate in softball, six respondents participate in women's swim & dive.. The following sports had five student athletes: football, women's field hockey, women's track & field, and women's cross country and track &

field. Three student-athletes play baseball, three compete in women's gymnastics, two compete in men's track & field, two play women's basketball. The following sports all results from one student-athlete: men's cross country/track & field, men's swimming, men's tennis, wrestling, women's golf, women's synchronized skating and women's volleyball. Lastly, there was one male individual who participated in both football and track.

Design and Instrumentation

The current study was designed to examine student-athlete's thoughts and feelings on their first-year transition experience. A qualitative study was the best route for this survey design to allow student-athletes to write down their thoughts and opinions. The beginning of this survey was designed with several demographic questions about the participant's age, gender, race, followed by which university attended and sport participated in. Due to the unique first-year many of these student-athletes experienced, this survey was split into two different parts. The first part being questions addressing the first semester transition. These questions set out to gain insight on how the first-year transition started out asking about general experiences in athletics, socially, and within academics. The second part was designed to gain insight specifically in the area moving to remote learning, cancellations of athletics, and additional thoughts and feelings from the second semester.

The information assessment method that was chosen for this study was a qualitative survey. The survey (Appendix A) developed for this study that included 26 questions that included multiple choice and short answer questions. The multiple choice questions asked the participant to describe their experience or support from either Very Easy to Very Difficult or Very Poor to Excellent. Once the participant made their selection, they were asked to explain

their response. The researcher's advisor reviewed the survey to ensure that it included questions that would help the researcher answer the main research questions of the study.

Multiple demographic questions were included asking about the participant's age, gender, race, hometown city and state were included followed by questions about sport involvement and current Mid-American Conference university the student attended. Since the transition experience was abruptly changed due to COVID-19, the rest of the survey was split into two parts. The first part were questions pertaining to summer/fall semester 2019. These questions assessed how the participant felt coming into their university, which asked to describe or rate their first-year in terms of overall experience, coaching staff support and academic staff support. The participant was asked to explain their ranking for each question, then the section finished by asking the participant to explain if their first semester is what they hoped or expected from college.

The second part of this survey was set up the exact same as the first part with the multiple choice questions and short answer but focused on the winter and spring 2020 semester. Again, these questions focused on the participant's opinion on their level of support when they transitioned back from winter break. After their initial thoughts were gained, questions turned to specifically to COVID-19. These questions asked how the participant felt about classes moved to online, sport seasons cancelled and if this move impacted their learning and relationships. The survey concluded with two questions which asked the participant's overall thoughts of their first year and if they would want to add or change anything about the transition into college. As well as, what the participant liked or worked well during their transition.

Procedures

This research study was submitted for approval to the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at Bowling Green State University. Once the study was approved, the researcher identified those student-athlete who were in their second-year of eligibility according to information on the roster. Once those names were chosen, email information was found from Mid-American Conference institutions that had public student directory search options. In total, 882 emails were sent out across seven Mid-American Conference institutions. The recruitment email explained the reason for the research study and asked if the participant were willing to participate in the email. This email also contained the consent form, which participants were asked to read and a link to the survey, which was on *Qualtrics*. The beginning of the Qualtrics survey included the consent form again reminding them they are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. As well as the only individuals with access to this information would be the researcher and her advisor. Contact information for the researcher and the researcher's advisor was also provided for any further questions or concerns. If the participant agreed to participate in the study, they simply clicked agree at the beginning of the survey and were able to begin. The survey was open for about three weeks, with 81 student-athletes submitting the survey, however out of that number, 30 student-athletes just completing the demographic information and 51 student-athletes completed all or majority of the survey. Only the 51 athletes who completed majority/all of the survey were included in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

The data collected through the qualitative survey provided a varied type of responses. The demographic questions provided straightforward data, which was included with little analysis. Going further into the survey, participated were asked a number of multiple choice

questions to rate their feelings or support during different points in the semester. Each other these questions were followed by open-ended/write-in questions to explain their response. Also included were general open-ended/write-in questions about different areas within the transitioning experiences. These questions were analyzed into three major themes: positive experiences, negative experiences, and the COVID-19 experience. Within each of these three major three themes, there were four main subcategories identified throughout the participants' responses. These four subcategories were athletic identity, social identity, academic identity, and other areas to note.

Results

This study investigated first-year student-athletes' thoughts and feelings at a Mid-American Conference university during the transition into college from high school was the survey's original goal. However, first-year student-athletes also had a unique experience of going through a pandemic, which caused an additional transition on top of the anticipated transition of entering college. Therefore, this survey gathered information from student-athletes on their feelings and thoughts on the transition of the first semester coming into college and then going through a pandemic. Throughout the data, three significant themes occurred, with different subcategories beneath each of those central themes.

Transition: Positive Experience/Effects

Throughout this survey data, the first theme identified was positive experiences and feelings stated by first-year student-athletes who completed the survey. Pointing out the positives from this transition will help better understand what these student-athletes found helpful during the process. In analyzing the data, student-athletes mentioned many different factors that helped

them have a positive experience with the transition into college from each of the different identities mentioned previously.

Athletic Identity

First-year student-athletes mentioned having a positive relationship with their coach helped transition into their first semester on campus—critical characteristics of coaches and staff highlighted by student-athletes who had a positive experience. Characteristics mentioned were compassionate, constantly communicating, supportive, helpful, continuously checking in, showing interest in other areas besides sport, and creating a strong culture within the program that was like a second family. Most student-athletes felt this way as well. When explicitly asked about rating their experience with coaches and other athletic staff, 46 out of 51 (90% of the responses) rated their experience either “good” or “excellent” with their athletic staff. A female track and field student-athlete from Central Michigan University specifically mentioned,

The communication between the coaches and myself was good when I was first coming to campus. They made sure I had everything I needed to feel comfortable.

Furthering the positive relationship, a male football student-athlete from Miami University (OH) claimed,

My position coach is fantastic about supporting us and helping us get what we need. My head coach is also good about it. They definitely helped me feel more at ease.

To echo a majority of the responses from student-athletes, a female soccer student-athlete from Ball State University summarized best in her thoughts,

All of my coaches have been very supportive when it comes to school, sports, and just about everything else. They are constantly checking in with all of us even if we are on break. They continue to show their support in any way that they can.

This positive relationship between a first-year student-athlete, from the sample's perspective in the survey, seemed to give a majority a positive experience when coming into the college environment.

Social Identity

An additional factor contributing to the positive transition for first-year student-athletes was having relationships either with their teammates, roommates, or friends outside of their sport. When asked about their transition into the first semester of college, 17 out of the 51 (33%) of the respondents claimed to have an “easy” transition. When asked to explain their ranking, a female track and field student-athletes stated,

I felt comfortable with the people I was living with, and I think that played a big part. I also had a good experience with my team in terms of practice and bonding, which made the transition smoother.

Furthering this point, 16 of 51 (31%) student-athletes claimed to feel “neutral” (i.e., neither easy nor difficult) on the transition into college; those extended responses mentioned a positive was having supportive people around. In those “neutral” responses, many student-athletes mentioned having faced many challenges or difficulties transitioning into college, but mentioned teammates, friends, family, etc., made the process easier. An additional point brought up within this identity was living with people or teammates could make the transition easier. A female track and field student-athlete mentioned two older roommates who could give advice or answer questions that made the transition easier. A male football student-athlete from Miami University (OH) continued this thought when stating what made the transition easier was living with roommates from high school that he knew before. To summarize the importance of relationships during this transition, a female softball student-athlete from Bowling Green State University

stated, “It was a smooth transition because it felt like I was leaving one family and coming to another.”

Academic Identity

One of the topics that heavily impacted the perception of the positive or negative transition would be in terms of a student-athlete’s academic identity. In general, this college aspect can be challenging for some, but there are resources available for first-year student-athletes to make this identity seem less challenging. In this survey, a specific question asked student-athletes to rate how they perceived the help from one of these resources – their academic advisor. The results showed that first-year student-athletes rated their help from academic staff highly during this transition process, 24 out of 51 (47%) selected “good” and 19 out of 51 (37%) selected “excellent” to describe their academic advisor during the transition from high school to college. From student-athletes' explanations, common characteristics emerged that helped make this process positive, like being helpful, supportive, caring, and easy to contact. An additional theme was that these academic advisors helped these student-athletes stay on track with academics, stay organized, and learn how to manage/balance their new schedules. Some first-year student-athletes provided examples of what exactly their academic advisors did to help make this a positive transition. A male football student-athlete from Ohio University mentioned,

My advisors had a class for us that introduced us to resources around campus and had a class in a different building every class so that we would get a good feel of where everything was around campus.

Many student-athletes mentioned how their academic advisors would set up meetings to discuss different things going on academically or athletically, register for classes, set up tutoring appointments, and even arrange study hall hours for them their first year.

Other Areas to Note

A trend started to occur throughout analyzing explanations student-athlete gave for the specific rating given to different questions. This trend was a student-athlete would have an area they noted having no challenge in yet identify a different area that was more challenging in their first semester. For example, a female synchronized skating student-athlete from Miami University (OH) mentioned,

Transitioning to sport was not hard. Adjusting to more independent living was a little difficult

On the other hand, some students mentioned how they struggled with the athletic transition more than other areas. A female cross country/track & field student-athlete from Bowling Green State University concluded,

I think academically, the transition was not drastic at all. Athletically, the shift was more challenging as I came in with only 1 season under my belt (was very new to the sport).

Lastly, some student-athletes mentioned the opposite. They felt that the transition to college academics' change was a more significant adjustment, while the transition to collegiate athletics was easier than expected.. A female softball student-athlete from Bowling Green State University mentioned,

Took some time to learn how to balance school with sports. It was also difficult being away from home.

When asked about overall satisfaction about their first-year, many student-athletes wrote in that they had fun, was the best year, and how they would not change anything about it. A male football student-athlete from Ohio University summed up their experience stating,

My first semester last year was exactly what I had hoped for, I was able to develop a strong friend group and balance my course load with good grades and time for fun on the weekends.

Transition: Negative Experience/Effects

The second central theme discovered throughout data analysis was factors that led to a negative experience through the transition process. Generally, when asked what the most challenging part of transitioning into college there were mixed responses. Several student-athletes identified academics, athletics, time management, and relationships as some of the leading causes of hardships during this transition process.

Athletic Identity

Overall, respondents to this survey did not have many negative experiences with their athletic staff; however, 5 out of 51 (less than 10%) did mention characteristics of their athletic staff that made the transition experience negative. Characteristics mentioned were lack of communication, exclusive, and unable to understand everyday struggles. A female swim and dive student-athlete at the University at Buffalo mentioned,

I don't feel like I was truly considered a member of the team until after my freshman year. I think the coaching staff did not trust the freshman, [which] made for a hard transition after leaving your family for the first time.

To continue, a female field hock student-athlete from Central Michigan University stated,

I feel as if my coach saw that I was a good student in high school and just expected me to be a good student in college but didn't take into account the differences between college and high school classrooms.

Aside from the athletic staff specifically, the transition into college athletics brought up various stressors that first-year student-athletes identified. The new intensity of the sport, learning how to juggle the new fast pace of being a Division I athlete, adapting to new coaching techniques, and balancing the new amount of training were all highlighted as stressors student-athletes faced with transitioning into college.

Social Identity

One point to mention when discussing social identity stressors is that friends did not explicitly cause stress. However, around 12 student-athletes did mention moving away from their hometown friends or significant others was a difficult adjustment. Moving away to college was an area that seemed to cause a difficult transition for some student-athletes in this sample. A female swim & dive student-athlete from the University at Buffalo summarized,

Being away from boyfriend/family. I felt that no one that I was close to truly understood my struggle.

Moving to a new state, experiencing feelings of homesickness, leaving pets and family, and even having to move across the world were all mentioned. A female field hockey student-athlete from Central Michigan University summarized her negative transition stating,

Moving across the country, learning new position, adjusting to level of play, poor relationship with coach.

Many student-athletes reflected on learning how to balance all these new areas caused added stress in the transition into college. Learning how to balance the demands of their sport, college courses, free time, and even sleep were some of the areas mentioned. A prominent topic identified when asked about the most challenging thing about transitioning into college was learning time management. Time management was explicitly mentioned by 6 out of 51 (1%) by student-athletes; however, other similar phrases were mentioned, like balancing everything or learning to juggle everything. A male track & field student-athlete from the University at Buffalo stated,

Time management in college you have so much more time than in high school so that was something that hit me the first week.

Furthering this point about time management struggles, a female softball student-athlete from Bowling Green State University mentioned,

Time management. You have a lot of homework for different classes with many different due dates on top of practice and games.

Academic Identity

A majority of responses were positive and complimentary towards the academic advisor. However, three out of the five total student-athletes who identified having a “poor” or “very poor” experience with their academic advisor mentioned their advisor leaving the university. A male wrestling student-athlete at Ohio University mentioned,

My academic advisor coming in was awesome. Unfortunately, she left and left us with someone who is not very good.

A female swim and dive student-athlete at Miami University (OH) had a similar experiencing stating,

We had a switch at the beginning of the year and she is still afraid to ask some professors and administrators things even though we need something.

Finally, a male track and field student-athlete from the University at Buffalo simply said,

My academic advisor left after our first meeting.

An interesting point worth mentioning comes from one female, cross country/ track and field student-athlete from Bowling Green State University. She mentioned their academic advisor was trying to give them an easier major and/or classes, feeling that “sports were assumed to be prioritized a bit more than my academic major.” Other student-athletes mentioned that their academic advisors were not helpful during this transition making, the experience even more challenging. A female softball student-athlete from the University of Toledo mentioned,

I didn't really feel like I had the best help and had to figure a lot of it out on my own or with my other classmates.

Additionally, areas to note identified by student-athletes were adjusting to college courses' level, professors not being as helpful as high school teachers, and just the overall change academically

being different from high school. A male football student-athlete from the University at Buffalo mentioned,

I was able to get by with very good grades in high school without putting in much effort. College is a completely different task than high school academics.

Other Areas to Note

When asked what contributed to the overall dissatisfaction of their first-year semester transition, student-athletes identified different areas. One area that was mentioned a couple of times was the fact that the student-athlete did not contribute or play as much as they wanted to in their sport. Others mentioned just the overall transition was harder for them, but yet they still had fun being at college. One female swim and dive student-athlete from the University at Buffalo simply said,

It was not what I was expecting. Things were not as welcoming as they appeared on the recruiting trip. Overall, I feel as though the entirety of NCAA athletics is not upfront about what the life of a student athlete is like.

Transition: COVID-19 Experience/Effects

With the abnormal stressor that occurred in this first-year transition for these student-athletes, the third theme identified was the thoughts and feelings that came from transition to remote learning, being back home, or experiencing the cancellation from their sport. First-year student-athletes identified many different emotions during this half of the survey, some having negative thoughts, others feeling positive emotions, and the majority having mixed emotions over the new normal happening.

Positive Experiences

Although the transition that the pandemic caused was stressful for most, student-athletes were able to identify some areas of positivity throughout their second semester. One of the surprising feelings noted was this sense of relief the transition brought. Student-athletes felt

happy to be home, more relaxed, thankful for a break, and the ability to take their time and finish the semester strong. One female field hockey from Central Michigan University said,

Thank god. I needed a break from field hockey or I might have quit.

Many student-athletes were excited to be back with their families, significant others, and helped them build stronger relationships even with the friends and teammates they could not see due to the pandemic.

Academically, there was a small group that thrived in the new transition to online learning. Some liked the ability to watch recorded lectures online to take notes. Others noted the helpfulness of professors during this time and felt they could manage their time better with the transition. A female cross country/track & field student-athlete from Central Michigan University stated,

I have good wifi at home and great family support. My professors also transitioned pretty well to online so my grades weren't overtly affected.

A female softball student-athlete from the University of Toledo had similar feelings about the transition to remote learning stating,

I feel like my teachers made it easy for me, but honestly the amount work we had to do was cut down a lot.

Negative Experiences

Even though the positives are important to note, far more negative effects were identified by student-athletes who responded to this survey. First-year student-athletes mentioned many different negative feelings that resulted from the additional transition COVID-19 caused.

Athletic Identity

First-year student-athletes mentioned that there was a challenge to stay in shape for their sport once they were home or even motivated to stay in shape. An overall feeling was dealing

with having their season canceled and ripped away. When asked specifically how the cancellation, a female track and field student-athlete from Central Michigan University said,

I was shocked that I wouldn't be able to return to campus and that my freshman year was cut short. I had big goals for our spring season and I was really upset. It was hard to process especially since nobody knew when we would be allowed back. I was concerned about my fitness in case there was a chance we could return, but I was more concerned about my family and our health.

First-year student-athletes noted the overwhelming sense of shock in responses to this general question. Many did identify they understood the health benefits, but it was still difficult to process for many.

Social Identity

A common theme surrounding this first-year student-athletes' social identity was the hardship of leaving their friends and teammates due to transitioning back home. A majority mentioned losing touch with friends and teammates, difficulty connecting without seeing people, and generally just losing touch with people they became close to in the first semester. Some even identified feeling more isolated and depressed due to the lack of social interaction and being home. A male wrestling student-athlete from Ohio University mentioned,

I feel that college is [no] longer going to be the best years of my life. Since remote learning I feel that my mental health has lowered sufficiently. I believe this is due to not being able to do anything I was able to do for fun last year.

Academic Identity

The area with the most challenging transition for some was adjusting to remote learning. When explicitly asked about thoughts on moving to remote learning, student-athletes noted having many different feelings, which included: difficulty from being in a new environment, more challenging time staying motivated, lack of focus/concentration, professors being unorganized, and their academic advisors barely reaching out during remote learning. Some

responses even stated that this transition was so challenging their grades plummeted compared to the first semester or realizing their major was too tricky and changing it. A female field hockey student-athlete from Central Michigan University mentioned,

My grades started to slip because I was allowing myself to get distracted when I would watch lectures or I wouldn't remind myself about homework when those reminders are easier to listen to in person and I became very lax about holding myself accountable in the classroom.

A male wrestling student-athlete from Ohio University shared similar struggles with the academic shift during COVID-19,

My grades absolutely plummeted when this happened. I had a 4.0 with an 18 credits hours and finished with barely a 3.0.

An additional thought was the how the student-athlete's learning style did not function the best in a remote setting. A male wrestling student-athlete from Ohio University stated,

My learning style does not match up to online learning. Have students stare at screens for 5+ hours a day is not healthy. I feel like I have lost sleep quality since remote learning.

Other Areas to Note

Additionally, many student-athletes expressed just general confusion, shock, frustration, and concern during this whole unexpected transition during the second semester of their first-year. A female track & field student-athlete from Central Michigan University summarized her feelings stating,

I was shocked that I wouldn't be able to return to campus and that my freshman year was cut short. I had big goals for our spring season and I was really upset. It was hard to process especially since nobody knew when we would be allowed back. I was concerned about my fitness in case there was a chance we could return, but I was more concerned about my family and our health.

A female cross country/track & field student-athlete from Bowling Green State University shared similar feelings summarizing,

I had a really hard time with this. I can still feel the emotions of the night we were told that our season was cancelled and going home after that. I was not too concerned about classes when this first happened. I know I felt a little paranoid that I was missing something because everything was online, but I had taken online courses before this so I knew how to handle it for the most part.

Many noted they had trouble staying motivated either in their classes or in sport. A common theme was learning how to have better time management with being home and holding themselves accountable. A female cross country/track & field student-athlete from Bowling Green State University described this new normal of balancing from home,

This was a strange adjustment to go back home. For school, I had to reorient my mind. For athletics, I really had to lean into my grit and mental strength to maintain quality training alone.

A unique stressor identified by two student-athletes who noted that with the transition home, they had to start working full-time to support their families. When asked about the participants opinion on COVID-19's effects on their academics, a male track & field student-athlete from the University at Buffalo mentioned,

Yes it definitely did it was harder to learn plus i had to start working full time to support my family because my mother lost her job.

Discussion

The current study set out to address two main research questions, (1) What factors impact the transition process from high school to college for a first-year athlete at a Mid-American Conference University? (2) Has COVID-19 impacted the first-year transition for athletes at a Mid-American Conference University?

As Schlossberg (1981) mentioned, there are many different types of transitions, the transition into college is usually an anticipated transition for most, but the affects and stressors do not change or become less challenging even with the anticipation. With around 125,000 high school athletes making the transition to the next level in their specific sport across the NCAA

(“Estimated probability of,” 2020), the current study identified key areas that impact the first-year transition to help NCAA Division I student-athletes making this transition in the future.

Athletic Identity

Two first-year student-athletes identified that they did not find their first-year as successful because they did not contribute much on the field as they wanted. The idea of going from being a “star athlete” as a senior in high school to a first-year athlete on the team is a mental struggle experienced by some student-athletes going into college (Saxe et. al., 2017). As Schlossberg (1981) describes, going into college is an anticipated transition for much. However, emotions of loss or feelings of unworthiness are hard to prepare for (Schlossberg. 1981). An anticipated transition is ““life events that are expected to occur in most adults’ lives, like getting married, finishing school, going to work and having children” (Tønseth, 2018, para. 5). This new role change can come as a shock to some by the unexpected or unanticipated change. Tønseth (2018) described unanticipated transitions as,

The events that are unexpected and occur regardless of typical time in adult life.

Winning a lottery, developing a health problem, getting laid off or fired from a job, losing a partner or family members, an accidents/illness, and being the victim of a crime are examples of this type of transition. (para. 6)

There are numerous factors that can impact this role change and made the transition different for everyone. For example, this role change could be permanent (i.e., going from being a captain in high school now to second team in college) for the incoming student-athlete and create a negative impact on their view of their sport or university, especially if this role change is unexpected or unanticipated (Schlossberg, 1981).

An additional point brought up in the current study was the idea of not being prepared for the intensity of college athletics. Many Division I sports have some training every day from workouts, practice, individual work, etc.; this all could add up to at least 40 hours a week just focusing on athletics. This intense schedule mentioned by previous research can contribute to feelings of doubt on athletic ability (Edwards, 2010; Freeman, 2018). Additionally, having a schedule like this in the first year can lead student-athletes to balance the demands of athletics and academics (New, 2015). Schlossberg (1981) defines the idea of adaption as “is a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life” (p. 7). This role of adaption in the first-year transition is crucial because it is how the first-year student-athletes adjust to this new rigorous schedule and how it will impact them based on different characteristics of the environment they are from or the individual themselves (Schlossberg, 1981).

One of the main points addressed by student-athletes in the current study is how important a coach’s role is in making the transition easier for the student-athlete coming on to the team. Skinner (2004) mentioned the importance of a head coach in the first-year swim and dive student-athletes' transition process. Skinner (2004) addressed the importance of having a solid leader identify critical signs of mental or athletic struggles and provide an excellent environment to transition into. In the current study, student-athletes stated that they found helpful in their head coach, mentioning traits like understanding, helpful, compassion, and showing interest athletically and personally.

Social Identity

Many in the current study had mixed emotions relating to the social aspect of first-year student-athletes' life. Student-athletes mentioned enjoying their first year due to their support

and the friends they were able to make. However, student-athletes who rated their experience as less than ideal were those who missed being at home or leaving their friends to come to college. The idea of being “uprooted” from their comfort zone, leaving home, and coming to the hectic life of being a student-athlete was a struggle and caused many to feel lonely and isolated their first year (McFarlane, 2014; Smith & Hardin, 2020). However, one area similar to existing research was the teammate aspect of being a college athletics. In the current study, first-year student-athletes enjoyed coming onto a team that felt like a “second family” and did make leaving their family from home (Freeman, 2018). One of the three characteristics of adaptation, according to Schlossberg (1981), is the characteristics of pretransition and post-transition environments. Under this characterization, there are three main categories: internal support systems, institutional supports, and physical setting. This characteristic is worth highlighting because a key factor in adapting to this new environment is the support system around that student-athlete and the strength of those relationships (Schlossberg, 1981). These relationships can come from family members, friendships, academic advisors, coaching staff, and professors to highlight. When relationships like these are strong, the first year's transition might be easier to adapt.

Academic Identity

The area that caused the most stress for some in the current study was being a student-athlete's academic identity. The first key area to note, which was a surprising result from the current study, was the importance of having consistency in staff regarding academic advisors for student-athletes. Of those who rated their support staff poorly, half of the student-athletes mentioned their academic advisor leaving during their first year, making the first-year transition an extra level of difficulty by adjusting to something new again.

Being a student-athlete is generally challenging; an additional area from the current study consistent with previous research was that athletics sometimes seemed of higher importance than academics, making academics' motivation low (McCormick & McCormick, 2006). In addition to motivation, the hectic schedule of student-athletes, as previously mentioned, makes focusing on academics hard due to lack of sleep, as well as balancing multiple commitments in the first year that are unfamiliar (Edwards, 2010; McFarlane, 2014; Paule & Gilson, 2011).

Schlossberg (1981) brought up the point that negative transition might be negative at first and create unpleasant emotions. However, in the long run, that negative experience might be beneficial for the future (Schlossberg, 1981). For student-athletes in their first year, the transition academically can be difficult, and these negative emotions might occur, which might cause them to have a negative experience in college. According to transition theory, however, these experiences now can have positive outcomes in the long run for these student-athletes. For example, going through the rough transition academically in the first year can have favorable implications for the student-athletes' upcoming years.

Abnormal Stressors

COVID-19 provided a new, unanticipated transition for all student-athletes this past semester in Spring 2020. With the limited amount of research conducted on this new phenomenon, the current study was similar to the limited research provided. Many student-athletes in the current study identified struggling with leaving friends/teammates, difficulties in the move to online learning, struggling to stay motivated, and stress of trying to stay in shape athletically. Some student-athletes were worried about their grades or GPA slipping due to the move to online learning and not learning best that way (Bullard, 2020; Roetert et. al., 2020). However, some student-athletes were happy with the change to online learning because the

change provided more time to focus on academics. The main struggle mentioned in the current study was how their social relationships suffered due to the distance and unable to interact regularly with their friends/teammates (Bullard, 2020; Roetert et. al., 2020).

An interesting theme that emerged from the current study not covered by existing research was the overall sense of relief that the pandemic brought. A select few student-athletes stated they were happy to break from their sport and enjoyed being back home with their family to finish their semester. One student-athlete even went as far as to mention that the pandemic helped them not quit their sport. This theme brings up how first-year student-athletes might not be used to the new hectic college schedule and could need more time easing into the life of being a Division I student-athlete.

Looking back at the characteristics related to adaption, one of the critical components is relationships (Schlossberg, 1981). With this pandemic transition being new to everyone, relationships with family, friends, support staff, etc. was more crucial than ever. Schlossberg (1981) mentioned, “in the immediate aftermath of a major disaster, friends and neighbors typically draw together for mutual support and comfort” (p. 11). During an unanticipated transition like this, many participants mentioned being back with family helped them through this process, which is the point Schlossberg was trying to get across.

Limitations

With this being a qualitative study, this current study relied on the truthfulness in the responses of student-athletes’ experiences of their first-year transition. Student-athletes from different universities in the Mid-American Conference participated; however, this study is the only representative of those who chose to complete the survey and may not reflect every Mid-American Conference student-athlete experience. Additionally, this study only focused on

student-athletes from the Mid-American Conference and reflected the NCAA student-athletes' total population. The response rate was also a limitation to this study, with 46 total responses from the 882 emails sent. Lack of diversity in this sample proposes an issue due to lack of data from a diverse population in race and gender.

Future Research

This study provides more research into the area of first-year student-athlete transition into Division I athletics. With a brief analysis of a typical student-athlete's significant identities, future research should further investigate how each of these identities relates to the transition experience of first-year student-athletes. A possible future area could look more into how different demographic data (i.e., race, gender, income, etc.) affects the transition experience and how they differ or compare to the majority of transition experience. Lastly, since COVID-19 is still very new, future research should look more into the lasting effects of this unanticipated transition to see how these first-year continue in their college experience. Future academic advisors can learn to prepare student-athletes in the future in case something unexpected like a pandemic happens again.

Practical Implications

This study's overall implication is to help provide information to academic and athletic staff to help better assist these first-year student-athletes in this transition. This study can help with a practical situation knowing what topics to cover in an orientation seminar or program for first-year student-athletes. Additionally, this study helps provide information on what areas those working with first-year student-athletes should be aware of and the possible effects of a negative transition into college.

Specifically, this study can be helpful for those working with first-year student-athletes during this transition. The academic staff is doing an excellent job with having orientations and classes for first-year student-athletes to help ease this transition. However, this study can help enhance those programs. By identifying specific areas that might be slightly harder in this sample's eyes, academic staff can use this to highlight or spend more time on areas on these specific areas.

For the coaching staff, this study shows behavioral characteristics student-athletes liked or disliked during their transition. Coaches can use this area to possibly change up their techniques or better understand what their student-athletes are looking for in terms of support. Another critical area this study brings up is the schedule in general. To anyone, college is a challenging transition, and adding the schedule that being a Division I athletic brings is a significant stress. This study shows that student-athletes differ in their response to stressful situations. Sometimes, adding a fun activity to practices or having meetings with athletes to just talk might be a possible suggestion for coaches to add.

Conclusion

The first-year transition into college is a significant, stressful change for anyone who jumps from high school. However, being a first-year student-athlete comes with additional challenges on top of the anticipated stressors associated with transitioning into college. To better assist first-year student-athletes in this journey, it is essential to investigate the different identities related to transition and identify everyday stressors felt by student-athletes. Learning more about these areas will help those who work with student-athletes better assist first-year student-athletes in their first year and further in their college careers.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY

1. Sex:
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
 - Prefer not to say

2. What is your race?
 - White/Caucasian
 - African American
 - Hispanic
 - Asian
 - Native American
 - Pacific Islander
 - Other

3. What is your current age?
 - 18
 - 19
 - 20
 - 21
 - 22
 - 23
 - 24 or older

4. Hometown City and State: _____

5. What sport are you involved in: _____

6. What university do you currently attend?
 - Ball State University
 - Bowling Green State University
 - University of Buffalo
 - Central Michigan University
 - Miami University
 - Ohio University
 - University of Toledo

7. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 very easy and 5 very difficult) how you describe the adjustment when you first got to your university?
 - Very Easy
 - Easy
 - Neutral
 - Difficult
 - Very Difficult

8. Please Explain your ranking from Question 7:
9. What was the hardest part of transitioning into college for you? Please explain your answer.
10. How would you rate your support from athletic support staff (aka academic advisor) coming into college?
 - Very Poor
 - Poor
 - Neutral
 - Good
 - Excellent
11. Please explain your ranking from Question 10:
12. How would you rate your support from your coach and/or assistant coaches coming in to college
 - Very Poor
 - Poor
 - Neutral
 - Good
 - Excellent
13. Please explain your ranking from question 12:
14. When you look back on your first semester at your college, is it what you were expecting and/or hoped for? Please explain your answer.
15. When spring semester began, how would you describe your transition back to campus from winter break?
 - Very Easy
 - Easy
 - Neutral
 - Difficult
 - Very Difficult
 -
16. Please Explain your ranking from question 15:
17. At the very beginning of spring semester, how would you rate your support from athletic support staff (aka academic advisor) coming into college
 - Very Poor
 - Poor
 - Neutral
 - Good
 - Excellent

18. Please explain your ranking from question 17
19. In mid-March, classes moved to distance or remote learning and sports were canceled. What were your thoughts during this time? Please explain your response.
20. How would you rate your experience transition from face to face classes to distance or remote learning?
 - Very Easy
 - Easy
 - Neutral
 - Difficult
 - Very Difficult
21. Please explain your ranking for question 20:
22. What were your thoughts and/or feelings about spring athletics being cancelled? Please explain your answer.
23. Do you believe the transition to distance or remote learning had an impact on your academics? Please explain your answer.
24. Do you believe the transition to distance or remote learning had an impact on your social relationships? Please explain your answer.
25. Looking back on your freshman year, what would you have changed or wanted to be added to make the process easier transitioning from high school to college?
26. Looking back on your freshman year, what was something that you liked or thought worked well for your transition to college from high school

APPENDIX B: HRSB APPROVAL



DATE: October 21, 2020

TO: Kristen Kenfield
FROM: Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [1661139-3] Student-Athletes' First-Year College Transitions at a Mid-American Conference University
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: October 20, 2020
EXPIRATION DATE: September 29, 2021
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the [Review Details page](#). You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the IRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on September 29, 2021. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or orc@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY
School of Human Movement, Sport, and Leisure Studies

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Student-Athletes' First-Year College Transition at a Mid-American Conference University

Key Information

This study is about student-athlete transition from high school into college, different factors that might make transition easier or challenging, and how helpful were the services student-athlete services provided during the transition. Once you agree to participate, you will fill out one Qualtrics survey. Survey time might be dependent on the individual; however, this should take about 25-30 minutes. This information will be confidential and not being shared with anyone. This study has very little risk, no greater than what happens in everyday life.

Additional Information**INTRODUCTION OF THE RESEARCHER:**

My name is Kristen Kenfield. I am a graduate student in the School of Human Movement, Sport, and Leisure Studies at Bowling Green State University. My advisor is Dr. Amanda Paule-Koba, a professor in the sport management program.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT FOR THE STUDY:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the transition from high-school to college for first-year student-athletes. The goal is to understand if the services (tutoring, study hall, one-on-one meetings, etc.) being offered by student-athlete academic services are helping athletes have a successful transition into college. The main benefit of this study is to provide information to universities on how to better improve resources given to athletes during this transition.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY:

Participants (18 years of age or older) will be asked to fill out one online survey using BGSU Qualtrics software. This survey will only need to be taken one time during a single day. The participant will be provided with the survey link and left to answer the questions. Your responses to each question will be confidential. The survey should take from 25-30 minutes but could run longer for some individuals. Once the student-athlete has completed the survey, they will be recommended to clear their browsing history once exiting the survey site.

FREEDOM TO PARTICIPATE OR NOT:

Student-athletes' participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can skip any questions you do not want to answer. While completing this survey, student-athletes can leave at any time if questions become too difficult to answer. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University, the BGSU Student-Athlete Services Staff, Ms. Kenfield, Dr. Koba, or anyone else involved in this research.

CONFIDENTIALITY PROTECTION:

The Qualtrics survey responses will be completely confidential in order for student-athletes to feel comfortable answering them freely. Since this information will be online, no one will have access to the data results except for the researcher who created the survey and her advisor. The only identifiable information will be the student-athlete's sport and gender. Student-athletes do not have to put any other identifiable information and can select on the survey not to have further contact about their answers. In order to help keep confidentiality while taking this survey, student-athletes will be recommended to take this survey on a personal device or a private web browser if needed to use a device that is not personal due to possible tracking software in public computers. Also, once completed either on a personal or public device, it is suggested to clear your browsing history in order to protect your computer as well.

RISKS:

This study does not pose any greater risk than everyday life. However, some questions might bring up difficult memories to relive or any other unpleasant emotions. If at any point in the study you do not want to answer a question or want to leave, you are free to do so.

In the event that a participant does experience emotions that are difficult to process, the BGSU counseling center is open for walk-ins and free to all students who are enrolled at the university. The BGSU counseling center can be contacted at 419-372-2081 and is located in the College Park Building in room 104. Along with BGSU counseling information, there is a National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) hotline open Monday-Friday, 10:00am to 6:00pm. The phone number and email for NAMI is, 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) or info@nami.org.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have any additional questions about this study, you may contact Kristen Kenfield, at 262-914-5326 or kkenfie@bgsu.edu, or Dr. Koba at apaule@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair of the Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board, at 419-372-7716 or orc@bgsu.edu, if you have any concerns or questions about your participation in this study. Thank you for your time.

Statement of Consent

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

Kristen Kenfield
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