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## "I Didn't Know How All This Works": A Case Study Examining The Transition Experiences of Student-Athletes from High School to a Mid-Major DI Program

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## “I Didn’t Know How All This Works”: A Case Study Examining Transition Experiences of Student-Athletes from High School to a Mid-Major DI Program

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### Abstract

The transition period from high school to college includes a myriad of issues specific to student-athletes (Bernhard & Bell, 2015; Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Comeaux, 2015). The present study sought to illuminate the specific transition issues faced by mid-major, DI student-athletes by providing them the platform to describe them in their own words and provide their own recommendations for improvement. Utilizing a semi-structured interview guide that addressed transition issues, the qualitative study included 23 student-athletes in focus group settings. Analysis of interview data led to the emergence of two themes, with accompanying subthemes: (1) encounters with academic support, with subthemes of transitioning to campus and perceived responsibilities of athletic academic advisors; and (2) skewed perceptions and expectations of student-athlete life, with subthemes of expectations regarding the coach-athlete relationship, lifestyle modifications, and high-stress practice environments. The findings suggest a notable trend – student-athletes lack the support they need to successfully deal with the transition. The transition process itself also appears to involve three specific periods: (1) Prior to arrival on campus; (2) Initial arrival on campus; and (3) Following the initial transition to campus. The findings will help to better design standards for helping student-athletes navigate the transition process.

**Keywords:** *academic support services, expectations, perceptions, student-athlete, transition*

It is common that collegiate athletes, especially those entering high levels of competition such as Division I (DI) athletics, are not fully prepared for the transition from high school to college life. Their level of preparedness is the result of many factors beyond their own personal attributes. Specific to the student-athlete, the relative quality of athletic departments and support systems to aid in their transitioning experiences is vitally important to their success. Comeaux and Crandall (2019), as part of their review of current support systems for student-athletes, cited varied and significant criticism of support services and the need to engage in innovative approaches to improve many aspects of the student-athlete experience. A critical area of experience is the transition away from the relative structure of high school to the more independent nature of college. During this particular transition, the challenges facing student-athletes not only change in nature, but also in scope, as they work to balance the new demands placed on them to compete both in the classroom and in athletics (Bjornsen

& Dinkel, 2017; Comeaux, 2015).

Extant sport management literature highlights these challenges, which include mental and physical well-being, academic stressors, and managing full course loads with competition and training schedules (Gayles & Baker, 2015; Tinto, 1999). For example, in a qualitative study consisting of semi-structured interviews with 41 Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) athletes, Bell (2009) found challenges for student-athletes stemmed from six particular groups: coaches, athletic academic support systems, fellow athletes, non-athletes, faculty, and parents. Bell’s study provided a unique lens for investigating these challenges since it focused on student-athletes’ academic role expectations, rather than a more common focus on athletic role, or a combination of the two. In a quantitative study of 101 Division I athletes, Melendez (2009) investigated psychosocial influences on the student-athlete transition. Participants completed surveys focused on athletic identity (The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale) and college adjustment

(The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire). The correlational findings of the study disclosed significant relationships among gender, race, and athletic identity. While each of these studies employed different methods and investigated different aspects of student-athlete transitions, their totality puts into perspective the myriad of issues impacting a student-athlete transition from high school to college.

As intercollegiate athletics have become increasingly more popular, so has the attention paid to student-athletes and the scrutiny put on those in charge of providing support services to them. In turn, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), athletic conferences, and individual institutions have increased support services available to student-athletes and presented data to highlight increases in student-athlete graduation rates in order to justify the need to continue investment in support services (Hosick, 2016). As new strategies for improving student-athlete transitions have been adopted, existing literature highlights both successful endeavors as well as the less-than-successful to provide recommendations, many of which can be found in literature reviews on the topic (Comeaux, 2013; Gerlach, 2018). On the less-than-successful end, we find examples such as Benson's (2000) qualitative study of eight African-American football players at a predominantly white, large DI institution. Through ethnographic, open-ended, in-depth interviews focused on their overall academic experiences and transition from high school, the findings revealed a group who collectively "found themselves within an educational institution where one might presume to find encouragement of learning everywhere but discovered little to sustain them" (p. 236). Regarding more successful findings, Cranmer and Myers (2017) detailed the importance of memorable messages on student-athlete socialization and provided practical recommendations for implementation by parties such as coaches and parents. Key among their findings is that, especially during transition periods, messages conveyed from authority figures such as coaches are prominent in student-athletes' minds to shape their understanding of their role

and identity. As stakeholders continue to incorporate findings from diverse studies in order to learn from mistakes and build upon successes, it is imperative to keep in mind those whom they ultimately serve – the student-athletes. This sentiment perhaps was best captured when Navarro (2014) advocated for "consider[ing] the student-athlete voice," prior to instituting specific programming (p. 233). Perhaps too often, practitioners ignore the assessments of those they serve when implementing programs meant to increase support.

The present study sought to examine student-athlete perceptions regarding their transition from high school to a mid-major DI institution, with the goal of soliciting recommendations to improve the transition for future student-athletes. The term "mid-major" commonly is used to describe schools that are not members of a Power 5 Conference, and thus tend to have fewer available resources and finances by comparison (Lockie, et al., 2020). Mid-major institutions commonly are referred to as "Group of 5" members in order to distinguish them from Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) institutions, and this represents the distinction used in the present study. Researchers attempted to discover, from the student-athlete perspective, an analysis of what actually was available to them during their own transition, what may have been missing, and what should be included in a support system to best assist in the transition from high school athletics to a mid-major DI athletic program. The current student-athletes who took part in focus groups represent those who already have made the transition from high school to mid-major DI athletics and are in the process of balancing the many demands placed on student-athletes. As such, they have the ability to provide a unique perspective on both the transition issues they have dealt with and current issues they face. The present study is rooted in a larger study, which additionally sought to explore student-athletes' participation in a life skills and development program mandated by their university's athletic department.

## Literature Review

The transition from high school athletics to collegiate athletic programs, particularly DI athletic programs, is not without its challenges for many student-athletes. Though the challenges might be extensive, there are common challenges that often manifest themselves at some point in the lives of collegiate student-athletes. Beginning in 1991, the NCAA has required that academic support services be provided to student-athletes, which prompted the expansion of such services (Bernhard & Bell, 2015). Fueled further by a push from the National Association of Advisors for Athletes (N4A) to focus on student-athletes' eligibility and graduation rates, (Petitpas et al., 1995), a growing interest in counseling and advising began to surface among college administrators and subsequently, sport management researchers. Parham (1993) identified six demands or challenges facing student-athletes: balancing academics and athletics, social issues with the isolation of athletic pursuits, athletic success or lack of success with maintenance of mental equilibrium, physical health and injuries, demands of various relationships, and dealing with termination of playing career. These challenges are salient throughout the current research, in various formats (August, 2020; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, Hammond et al., 2013; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Miller and Kerr (2002) identified challenges in their athletic, academic, and social spheres. At the heart of these challenges was a recognition that the athletes did not feel they were able to completely achieve success in any of these spheres, as they consistently competed with one another. As such, they described a series of compromises and negotiations that constantly had to be made in order to navigate challenges. In their mixed methods study of 50 elite-level swimmers, Hammond et al., (2013) investigated the relationship of failed performance and depression, finding incidents of depression at a higher rate than previous literature suggested. While it is not specifically directed at collegiate student-athletes, Reardon

et al. (2019) provided an in-depth review of mental health challenges for elite athletes with recommendations to address such challenges. The consensus statement on mental health challenges was produced at the behest of the International Olympic Committee and necessitates consideration in this context since 80% of the 2016 U.S. National Olympic team makeup was current and former NCAA student-athletes (NCAA, n.d.). It is plausible that these same mental health issues, and accompanying recommendations, would be applicable to student-athletes. Perhaps most telling in a sample of research with such varying methods, participants, and aims, is that each incorporated aspects of the challenges described by Parham (1993). A clear implication of such research is that those charged with assisting student-athletes should be addressing these challenges.

While academic support is available in some fashion to all collegiate athletes (as mandated by the NCAA), balancing academics and athletics is a seemingly never-ending challenge for student-athletes and one that has received attention from sport management researchers. Monda et al.'s (2015) study explored the differences between two groups of first-year, Division I football student-athletes. One group ( $n = 6$ ) included student-athletes who were identified as academically successful at end of their first semester based on GPA, while the other group ( $n = 6$ ) included those identified as academically unsuccessful at the end of their first semester based on GPA. Findings indicated that both groups of athletes struggled with managing dual roles, but those who understood expectations, had well-defined academic goals, and strong support systems, were more likely to stay motivated and successful academically. Such findings highlight the role athletic academic support services may play in supporting student-athletes.

One of the seminal studies focusing on student-athlete challenges specific to their transition into college athletics was conducted by Adler and Adler (1985). Through qualitative analysis over a four-year time period, they determined that male revenue-gen-

erating student-athletes began their collegiate athletic careers with optimism surrounding their academic goals. However, after only one or two semesters, that optimism faded as the student-athletes began to devalue their academic role due to athletic demands and expectations. Student-athletes in the study began to focus on their athletic roles, seeking to become elite athletes rather than focusing on their academic development. This can lead to situations where the importance of athletic identity leads to negative academic issues. In a study of 546 student-athletes across all three NCAA Division levels, Foster and Huml (2017) found that student-athletes with a stronger athletic (as opposed to academic) identity were more likely to choose a major with a decreased academic rigor. Their study utilized the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale to measure athletic identity, and their findings aligned with previous research indicating athletes who struggle the most with transition tend to strongly base their identity from their athletic pursuits (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). These findings point to the need to intervene with student-athletes as early as possible in order to help improve how they navigate their dual roles and provide a strong foundation for why it is important to be both a *student* and an athlete.

Clift and Mower (2013) reported similar findings in their study on eight female student-athletes and their experience during their first semester of college at a DI university. The experiences of stress, tension, isolation, loneliness, and limited freedom were common among the athletes due, in part, to rigid schedules, authoritative-disciplining, self-disciplining, and peer-disciplining. Study participants struggled to balance practice schedules with their course load, as evidenced by one participant in particular who asserted, "Sometimes it felt like things were never ending because you always had something to do after you finished whatever you were doing. It was hard to stay enthusiastic about things that you're involved in when there's so many things" (Clift & Mower, 2013, p. 357). A report published by NCAA Research (2016) underscored student-athletes' taxing schedules, as

they reported DI football players, on average, spend up to 42 hours weekly on activities related to football, considerably more time than is spent on academics. When a student-athlete's demanding athletic schedule competes with academic courses, there is little time that can be dedicated to downtime, socialization, or other development opportunities offered by athletic academic support departments.

Through their interviews with 30 student-athletes from nonrevenue sports, Paule and Gilson (2010) noted other documented challenges facing student-athletes. Among the many repeated themes identified, they classified challenges in three categories: missing out on things in college, lack of free time, and being stereotyped. A persistent discussion point regarding these categories is that sports, even for nonrevenue student-athletes, dictates too much of their lives and too often leads to social isolation, simply because the student-athletes have no time to connect with general student body. With the growing distance between student-athletes and the general student body, athletes are not able to experience potentially meaningful relationships with a diverse social group. Among their findings, Berg and Warner (2019) emphasized the importance of social support and how highly it is valued among student-athletes. Their survey data, collected from 776 athletes participating in the American Athletic Conference, pointed to the importance of an athletic department in providing opportunities for both social and casual interactions, and how it positively affected student-athlete well-being. Unfortunately, social activities that typically are germane to the collegiate experience such as intramural sports, fraternity and/or sorority membership, or even student government associations, often are disregarded by student-athletes because their schedules will not allow time for participation. This is a tangible area where support services could provide the opportunities student-athletes seek, and which is supported by existing research.

It is evident that DI student-athletes face unique challenges when trying to navigate athletic

and academic schedules upon entering college. One area that requires further and consistent examination is how current student-athletes perceived their transition experience from a high school to college setting. Understanding the transition experience from current student-athletes can provide researchers, coaches, and athletic administrators with valuable information regarding the elements of the initial transition that are positive, and those that could be improved. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences current DI student-athletes had transitioning from a high school to college setting. Utilizing the student-athlete voice as the principal data source, researchers aimed to gain insight into this experience in the hopes of providing tangible recommendations for future transition support and efforts.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that helped direct the current study is Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) Conceptual Model of Academic Success for Student Athletes. Their model was derived from Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1975, 1993), but includes some notable differences that make it more applicable to student-athletes. First, each model contains the same six elements from the Model of Institutional Departure. However, Comeaux and Harrison (2011) included detailed components to better account for the specific experience of student-athletes and their relative academic success. The additional components included are those of sport commitment and sport participation. These are important additions in the context of student-athlete experiences as they focus on the unique aspects student-athletes face such as time and energy devoted to their sport, and interactions with athletic staff and coaches.

A second difference is that Tinto's model investigated academic departure as the outcome variable, while Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) outcome variable is based on intellectual development, matriculation, grade point average (GPA), and graduation.

Lastly, the Conceptual Model of Academic Success for Student Athletes includes two factors vitally important to the academic success of student-athletes:

- (a) The individual characteristics of student-athletes, which include their precollege characteristics and evolving commitments to the institution, educational goals, and sport, and
- (b) the degrees and types of student-athletes' interactions with the college environment (identified in the model as the social and academic systems). (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, p. 239)

The emphasis on student-athlete experiences, particularly in their differing types and degrees of interactions and commitment, position this as an appropriate framework for examining the transition from high school to a mid-major DI athletics program. In order to best explore these transition issues, an extensive range of factors require investigation, and the qualitative approach of the present study is well-suited with this conceptual framework.

### Method

#### Participants

Researchers secured IRB approval through their university, and then began soliciting student-athletes at a mid-major DI university in the southeastern United States. Participants represented athletes on the cross country, golf, softball, tennis, track and field, and volleyball teams. In all, 23 student-athletes (5 male, 18 female) participated in five focus groups between August and December 2019. The majority of participants were athletes on full scholarship, ranging from 19 to 21 years old. A pseudonym was used for each participant, and a chart of their pertinent information is provided in Appendix A.

#### Procedures

Recruitment for the focus groups was done via

email. Prior to participating in a focus group, participants signed a voluntary consent form that informed them of their right to end their participation at any time, that audio recording of the interview would take place, and that their anonymity would be assured through the use of pseudonyms and protection of interview data. Over the course of five months in the fall of 2019, five focus groups were conducted totaling 23 participants. Each focus group lasted 45 to 90 minutes and was administered face-to-face in a conference room at the convenience of the student-athletes.

At the beginning of each focus group, the student-athletes were reminded of their voluntary participation, which could be ended at any time. Focus group interviews were recorded, uploaded, and stored on a password-protected computer in order to ensure the ethical management of the data, per the recommendations of Marshall and Rossman (2016). Each audio recording was de-identified and subsequently transcribed through a reliable transcription service. Transcriptions then were read by researchers while listening to the original audio recordings in order to correct any transcription errors. This was done to add another level of accuracy and trustworthiness to the data. Audio recordings, transcription logs, and all information regarding participants was then stored, de-identified, on a password-protected computer with only members of the research team having access. In order to continue ensuring anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all participants during transcription and data analysis.

The guidelines for data trustworthiness set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were employed, which comprise the establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking and triangulation were employed to institute credibility. Transferability was established by using the comprehensive account to best portray the observed phenomena. The steps previously detailed regarding ethical data management aimed to address dependability. Finally, steps were taken to limit re-

searcher bias in order to address confirmability. Three of the four researchers were former student-athletes, so in order to keep from influencing the data collection and data analysis processes, their experiences were shared and documented prior to the coding process.

In order to allow the student-athletes to best describe their experiences, focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured question guide with the purpose of encouraging the participants to spontaneously share their own perceptions and provide their own meaning to their transition experiences. The semi-structured guide creates consistency throughout several interviews, but also invites each participant to expand on experiences unique to them when necessary. This qualitative, phenomenological approach centered on open-ended questions with broad directives was employed with the express purpose of creating a setting conducive for collecting detail-rich data (Creswell, 2013). In each focus group the same semi-structured guide was utilized, and per the recommendations of Merriam and Tisdell (2015), deviation from the guide was used by interviewers only when an additional probing inquiry was deemed appropriate. The question guide is provided as Appendix B.

## Data Analysis

Data was analyzed through each researcher independently coding the audio transcriptions using NVivo software. The coding process involved the formalization of categorizing data and performing a thematic analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Patterns and similarities in the data were observed and documented, and themes were documented as they emerged. The final process of the data analysis occurred in the formal recognition of themes by the researchers. After independent analysis from each researcher, the research team worked together to reach a consensus on the identification of themes (Krefting, 1991; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; White & Marsh, 2006). In order to provide adequate substance for each iden-



tified theme, excerpts and quotes from the participants were included in the results section. In order to ensure anonymity, each participant was provided with a pseudonym. Participant pseudonyms and demographics information can be found in Appendix A.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the experiences student-athletes have when transitioning from high school to a DI university and solicit their recommendations on how to improve the transition. Two themes and subsequent subthemes emerged from the dataset: (1) encounters with athletic academic support (subthemes: transitioning to campus and perceived responsibilities of athletic academic advisors); and (2) skewed perceptions and expectations of student-athlete life (subthemes: expectations versus reality regarding the coach-athlete relationship, lifestyle modifications, and high-stress practice environments). The themes and their subsequent subthemes are explained below.

### Encounters with Athletic Academic Support

One of the main issues experienced by student-athletes in this sample included numerous encounters, both positive and negative, with athletic academic support services before arriving to campus and during the initial transition once on campus. Prior to starting a DI program, many of the student-athletes had an idea of what the role of the athletic academic advisor would be, but their perceptions did not correspond with the services they actually received once on campus.

#### *Transitioning to Campus*

During the transition phase, both prior to arriving on campus and the initial first weeks on campus, student-athletes in this sample reported having both positive and negative encounters with athletic academic support services. Some of the international

student-athletes were surprised at how many resources athletics, and athletic academic services, offered them. Allie mentioned how impressed she was that she would be able to travel with the team during class and scheduled exams and would not have to worry about being penalized by her instructors. This was not a condition she was used to in her home country. Lucy also mentioned that she appreciated the athletic academic advisors would provide tutors for them if they were struggling in their classes. She stated, "It's not like we're having to go out of our way to find a tutor for something when we have the resources and the people to..." Janet echoed this sentiment, mentioning that the tutoring services were very flexible, allowing them to get the extra help they needed outside of class and practice time. Both of these elements allowed the student-athletes to manage a good balance between their sport and adjusting to a rigorous academic schedule.

Interestingly, many of the student-athletes in this study mentioned that during their initial transition, they did not feel like athletic academic services offered them a substantial amount of worthwhile advice that aided in the transition. Michelle discussed her experience coming from the standpoint of a student that started at the university two weeks after classes had begun. Due to a NCAA rule, she had four days to transition into the program and was given a set amount of time each day during which she could train with the team. She was not aware of this rule prior to starting at the university, and therefore her transition time felt extremely rushed and she was not entirely comfortable with what was happening.

Another struggle some of the student-athletes faced when coming to campus was understanding how to schedule classes appropriately for their major and program of study. Jade explained, "We didn't know what classes we had to take to graduate in time. So like, we just did what the advisors said and then they put us in some classes we didn't have to take and then we found out." Jade and her teammates clearly were upset when they discovered they did not have to take those classes to graduate. Laura followed up

this statement by saying, “I didn’t know how all this works. Like we had to take classes and I didn’t know why and like we didn’t really get a plan.” This was a frustrating experience as some of the student-athletes felt as though they wasted time in classes that ultimately would not count toward the necessary credit hours for their major requirements. The common theme mentioned among the participants was structure, or a lack thereof. The student-athletes did not feel as though the first year advising resources had structure and organization, and therefore, the first few weeks on campus (until they learned the “ropes”) were confusing and many of them did not end up taking the appropriate coursework. Laura mentioned that even as a junior she had trouble scheduling appointments with athletic advisors, which is problematic because they had to approve her courses before she was allowed to register. She described the process as being “stressful” and “a mess.”

### *Perceived Responsibilities of Athletic Academic Advisors*

Several of the student-athletes in this sample voiced concerns about the role they believed an athletic academic advisor should have and the actual role the advisor played in their transition. One participant, Michelle, stated:

The advisor was to arrange my class schedule... Otherwise I haven’t really spoken to them apart from when I came to stop... I feel like they’re never there. You know, every time I go to study hall, the doors are always closed. The athletic advisors, even if you wanted to talk to them, you can’t.

Another participant felt as though there was a disconnect between the role of their assigned academic advisor and their athletic academic advisor, mentioning that the two did not communicate with one another and it caused problems with her course schedule and timeline for graduation. Emily expressed this disconnect stating her athletic academic advisor, “had no clue like what to do, to be honest,” and that he would

not take the time to contact the academic advisor. She added that, “He was like, ‘okay well take that class if that’s what she tells you to do.’” Emily continued to say that the class she ended up in was not the correct class and when her athletic academic advisor agreed to switch her to a different class, he never followed up: “I haven’t heard from him since then and I still have a hold so I can’t like plan my schedule for next semester.”

The common thread in this discussion seemed to revolve around the idea that the student-athletes were not clear on why they needed to have two different advisors, especially since, as Janet put it, the athletic academic advisor “didn’t do his job.” Several of the student-athletes mentioned that they were under the impression they needed to go to their athletic academic advisor for course scheduling purposes, but time and time again, the athletic academic advisor only sent them to another person. At this point, the student-athletes started to feel as if they were being dragged from office to office, never getting a clear answer from anyone. Janet, who came to the university as a transfer student shared her experience:

They had to sort out what classes came over and what didn’t and nobody really told me exactly what did work and what didn’t work. And then they were like, ‘Oh you’re seeing this person.’ And then they’re like, ‘Oh no, see this person.’ Oh, and then you have to see your athletic academic advisor. And that kind of confused me because when I went to [previous university], you just went to your athletic academic advisor and they did your whole class schedule because they knew when you weren’t supposed to be in class.

These instances proved to be extremely frustrating for many of the student-athletes as they felt that a majority of the meetings with the athletic academic advisors were unproductive.

## Skewed Perceptions and Expectations of Student-Athlete Life

The second theme in this study included student-athletes sharing their experiences transitioning to a DI campus from a personal and athletic standpoint. While many of the student-athletes came to campus with a broad generalization of what campus life might be like, they quickly learned significant adjustments would need to be made to their daily routines. Many of the participants explained that after initial interviews with coaches and campus personnel they formed certain expectations of what campus life (e.g., academic experiences, living arrangements) and practice/competition would look like. Upon arriving on campus though, they found that some of the expectations they formed in their minds were far from the reality they were experiencing, and in a sense, skewed. They felt that the information provided to them initially was not quite accurate, and ultimately, their reality did not match the initial expectations they envisioned.

### *Expectations Versus Reality Regarding the Coach-Athlete Relationship*

Many of the student-athletes in this sample discussed how their coaches helped them transition to a DI setting. The experiences discussed were both positive and negative in nature. Monica mentioned how when she got to campus, she appreciated that her coaches repeatedly checked in on her because they knew she did not have family nearby. Valerie and Allie shared similar sentiments, stating their coach arguably helped them more than other staff members from athletics, with initial paperwork and finding housing. Some of the student-athletes felt one of the reasons they had a positive transition is because the coaching staff showed they cared. Alice supported this sentiment saying, “That’s one thing our coaches do very well, is that they know each and every one of us.” Building initial rapport through caring and support

was extremely important for the transition process.

In addition to helping the student-athletes transition to campus life, some of the participants mentioned their coaches were significant in helping them transition to a new training style as well. Student-athletes coming from high school settings are asked to adopt new training regimens and train for more hours than many of them are used to doing. Steve discussed how his coaches used cue words during the first few weeks to remind the new team members to incorporate certain techniques into their running so they could gain strength and get faster.

While the student-athletes shared many positive experiences with the coach-athlete relationship, a few of them did mention that their coaches were not always “lovey dovey,” as Lucy put it. Lucy added that if an athlete is struggling, the coach will help that athlete figure out what is going on, but they are not going to “hug you” or “feel sorry for you.” Joshua revealed, “I don’t think any of our coaches have very good communication skills or relatable skills... Like I don’t think I can have a regular conversation with any of my coaches.” He maintained that he wished his coaches would have taken the time to learn about him as a person so that he could have built a better relationship with him. When asked if her initial talks with her coach prepared her for life on campus, Julie responded, “I mean, it’s a lot different from when you talked to him before you get here and when you actually get here. ‘Cause he’s trying to make everything sound so nice. And then it’s a lot harder.”

Jade and Laura echoed this sentiment, expressing that prior to coming to campus, the coach was the only point of contact and there were a lot of things about campus that he did not know about. As such, their coach was unable to assist them in several areas. They wished that they had been given some better information during the recruiting process so that upon their initial arrival, they knew what to expect of their living and academic situations.

***Lifestyle Modifications***

Another area of adjustment for these student-athletes was the transition from high school life to college life in general. Julie summed up this transition:

I think it was a big step. Like just living alone all of sudden, like, I've been living with my parents for 18 years...I had to go here and be all alone and be more independent and take care of stuff, food, and dinner and all that. So that's a big change.

Emily shared a similar experience, stating, "everything is just so much bigger," especially in regard to all her classes being spread out across the campus as opposed to just being housed in one building. Many of the student-athletes said one of the biggest lifestyle changes they had to endure was adapting to new eating patterns. Maureen explained:

Just the hardest part is clearly your move away...So you're still kind of like in your comfort zone, you know, like, with the food that you like...you know your system, and then you move away and then now you need to like seek for something new, something different. And I found myself not being able to eat the same food I was eating back home because the nutrition value is so much different. So I had to like adapt and like learn, like what I need to eat in order to feel close to the same as I did before.

Maureen was not the only one with this struggle. Allie said that her struggle was with fast food: "...Getting used to fast food. You have to kind of control yourself and you know, at the cafe[teria] and everything." Several of the student-athletes did not enjoy the food options offered at the cafeteria, especially from the perspective of using this food as fuel during competition and training, but they also had no other option but to go there. Not only were they now responsible for eating on their own, but by living in residence halls without kitchen facilities, they lost their ability to cook for themselves, and that, too, was a downside.

Michelle explained:

I used to cook for myself like all the time cause I am at home. And so not having that freedom to like cook whatever I want and like, I really like nutritious foods...I feel like limited in what I can eat sometimes.

One of the major adjustments the majority of the student-athletes in this study mentioned was having to adhere to new schedules and learn to better manage their time. Monica explained her struggles with time management by saying,

Like when they say that you're not going to have that much time, like you really don't have that much time. So it's like trying to plan out your weeks and months and trying to get everything and then meet with tutors and stuff. And try to sleep and take naps.

Lucy agreed with this, further mentioning it was problematic learning how to balance a more difficult workload coming from high school to college with the additional pressures of being a DI collegiate athlete. Linda struggled adjusting to her new schedule, though for a drastically different reason than Lucy. With only a few classes to attend each day, Linda experienced newfound freedom:

It sounded pretty easy for me to have like three classes a day. I was like, what am I doing the rest of the day? Or like even just after practice, you don't have anything do. Like you can do your stuff actually.

Steve mentioned that he, too, had trouble adjusting to the courses, mainly because there was no homework: "They wouldn't assign homework. You just really had to go in there and kinda like, learn it...And it wasn't for a grade...you're like not having to go to class." He and his teammates mentioned they lacked motivation in attending morning classes, and when nothing they did was for a grade, they would just rather not show up. He said time management was so important in that regard, because between no homework and sleeping late and missing class, it was really easy to be caught off guard during exams. Many of the life-

style changes the student-athletes endured were the result of having not only a new academic schedule, but having to adjust to a new, higher stress practice environment, which is explored in the last subtheme.

### ***High Stress Practice Environments***

Steve explained that in high school, an athlete might practice for an hour after school and then be done. In college, he is expected to go to practice (for however long the practice session takes that day) and then go to weights afterward. He also had to adjust to listening to multiple coaches (e.g., endurance coach, strength coach, position coach, speed coach), which was a major change. Laura, an international student-athlete, identified similar modifications, stressing that prior to coming to a DI institution:

Practice and stuff was all on me. Like I had the choice to go whenever I want and we didn't have like practice schedules. So I went to school in the morning and then I could decide if I want to go or not.

This definitely was not the experience she had when transitioning into life as a DI athlete. Janet echoed this, noting the transition to practice and competition was significantly different mainly because the university chooses what tournaments they will play in, when they will practice, and how they will travel as a team. She was not used to the lack of autonomy in choosing when and how she competed, and this major difference was an additional stressor.

Valerie also mentioned feeling more pressure to perform at a higher level. She focused on the social pressure of doing her part as a member of a team sport, and she acknowledged, "...that was like the hardest part because I wasn't doing so good. So then my team wasn't doing good and then I started doing, like, worse. So that was kind of like I couldn't manage the pressure." Her teammate, Jessie, further elaborated that she had no idea practice would be so intense. She thought she would be able to join the team and was "just going to play" and she quickly realized

that many of the girls on the team were at a much higher caliber of play than expected. While she was pleased that the level of play was strong, the pressure to play to that level at every practice was something she had not expected upon joining the team and it was a significant adjustment.

Nate felt pressure from a different source: his scholarship. Nate expressed that not only did he feel like the coaches at this level were more intimidating, but, "...they were intimidating because you didn't want to like, if you were on scholarship, you didn't want to not win or anything." Neil also said there was an initial pressure to give 100% as a freshman because he wanted to prove himself. This resulted in a serious hamstring injury. This experience was echoed by his teammates, explaining that the training at this level is much more intense, so it is imperative the athletes ease into the training and do not succumb to pressure to go too hard too fast, as the result will be injury or burnout.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to examine the transition from high school to mid-major DI college athletics by utilizing student-athletes' actual experiences during their transition period. The first theme centered on encounters with academic support, with subthemes focused on their transition to campus and their perceived responsibilities of athletic academic advisors. The second theme centered on their skewed perceptions and expectations of academic life, with subthemes focused on the coach-athlete relationship, lifestyle modifications, and high stress practice environments. Both of these themes, and their subsequent subthemes, have a clear link – that student-athletes are lacking in support – whether it is leading up to, during, or after their transition from high school to DI athletics.

This link between the findings should not be surprising given what we know from previous research regarding the specific struggles for student-ath-

letes and their transition (Gayles & Baker, 2015; Huml et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2019). However, the present research provides some very specific areas of focus for mid-major student-athletes to improve the transition process. Based on the responses of the student-athletes, the transition process can be broken into three significant components, each of which requires particular attention in order to improve the overall process: (1) communication (or lack thereof) prior to a student-athlete ever stepping foot on campus; (2) the immediate transition, encompassing the first few weeks when they arrive at campus as are forced to adjust; and (3) the entirety of the first semester, which fluctuates based on the student-athlete.

### **Missed Communication and Miscommunication**

Many of the issues discussed by participants can be tied back to a lack of communication prior to arriving on campus. In regard to their encounters with academic support, participants discussed their general level of surprise with the day-to-day operations within the athletic services department. This is not uncommon, as many students struggle during their first semester on campus (Clift & Mower, 2013); but student-athletes are supposed to have access to academic support the typical student does not since athletic obligations make their transition atypical. Rubin and Lewis (2020) tackle one particular finding from the present study in their qualitative exploration of the relationship between athletic and campus advisors. Participants in the present study routinely discussed the disconnect not only in communication between the two advisors, but also in the student-athlete's understanding of the role of each advisor. It would appear that more deliberate collaboration on the part of athletic and campus advisors would help to alleviate numerous communication issues, which certainly aligns with the findings and recommendations of Rubin and Lewis (2020).

There also appears to be a disconnect in what student-athletes believe academic support should

provide, and what actually is provided to them. Perception versus reality is present in much of the participants' responses, and their perception upon entering the collegiate environment fundamentally is rooted in what they are told prior to arriving on campus. For many prospective student-athletes, especially at the mid-major (or small-college) level, the coach recruiting them largely is responsible for determining their perceptions (Goss et al., 2006). This can represent a good thing in terms of building trust with a coach, as Judson et al. (2007) found to occur during the recruitment process. However, a very concrete challenge can materialize when a coach fails to properly set expectations. This possibility is evident in Barnhill and Turner's (2013) findings, which suggested that when coaches fail to deliver on their promises it reduces a student-athlete's trust, leading to more skepticism, less confidence, and an increased intention to leave the team. Much like the documented need for athletic and academic advisors to better collaborate, an improved and intentional relationship between coaches and the entire support staff would appear to decrease issues related to inaccurate perceptions. Since mid-major deficiencies in resources often force coaches to be the face of the university to recruits, this need may be even more pronounced.

Participant responses also suggested their envisioned expectations of general campus life are not met upon arriving to campus. This is evident in areas such as student-athletes feeling they are missing out on the expected or "normal" college experience (Clift & Mower, 2013; Paule & Gilson, 2010). Huml et al. (2019) pithily asserted that such experiences could leave student-athletes "missing out on some of the greatest strengths of the college experience" (p. 5). As mentioned, these initial expectations often are formed based on conversations with coaches, and thus, the coach-athlete relationship is discussed as an issue within the transition process. Coaches will not necessarily know how to properly prepare student-athletes for general life on campus, living in the residence halls, or academic challenges and

expectations, because frankly, that is not their area of expertise. But professionals in each of those areas do exist on a college campus, and perhaps they should have more explicit communication with student-athletes to better frame their expectations. Whether it is in the quality of information being passed along by coaches, or in the relative lack of communication with anyone outside of their coaches, both the quality and quantity of communication needs to be a focal point for improvement. This relates to the second and third subthemes as well. But it should be clear that expectations regarding practice environment, athletic time commitments, and overall athletic experience are the coach's responsibility to establish. These particular expectations fall under the realm of sport commitment and participation, which are key components of Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) model, and more purposeful attention has the potential to improve the student-athlete experience.

### **Navigating the Transition**

The second component participants focused on was the initial shock upon arriving to campus, and the immediate transition period that ensued. The initial transition onto campus can be extremely hectic for any student, but certainly for student-athletes as they are all at once confronted with their incoming perceptions and the oft-differing reality. Several participants pointed to the change in their coach-athlete relationship once they actually were on campus, and they indicated that relationship was not in line with the expectation that had been conveyed to them. Coaches would do well to better set expectations so student-athletes do not have to add that to their list of issues during their initial transition. Clarifying expectations is a critical component of the information sharing responsibility of the coach (Rezania & Gurney, 2014; Sullivan & Gee, 2007).

In their encounters with academic support, critical issues revolve around getting in the correct classes and generally knowing who to go to for advice

and to discuss academic issues. Such critical issues are not surprising, though, as collaboration between academic and athletic advisors can be lacking, which ultimately hurt their common goal of assisting student-athletes in academic success (Rubin & Lewis, 2020). Whether the issue ultimately leads to a positive realization such as learning about the availability of tutors, or a negative realization such as having to talk to a number of people just to get a schedule correct, the academic support system needs to improve in collaborating with one another, disseminating information, and being available. This transitional issue is supported as a common problem, as Gayles and Baker (2015) noted that existing literature reliably demonstrates that successful navigation of the first-year student athlete is predicated on their involvement with both social and academic aspects of their university. If the student-athlete is forced to dedicate undue energy, both physical and psychological, toward accomplishing what should be routine tasks, it is likely to have a negative effect on their overall transition.

The lifestyle modifications, such as changes in food options, class schedules, and athletic obligations, also are met head-on during this time frame, and the participants in the study made quite clear they generally were not prepared for these changes. Athletic obligations, such as the high-stress practice environment, fall mostly on the athletic department and their coaches to better prepare them and set their expectations. Lifestyle modifications such as residence life, food options, and class schedules require better communication from other university constituents to set proper expectations.

### **Adapting After the Transition**

The final component of the transition process focuses consideration on what appears to be an overlooked area – the time following the immediate transition. It is natural to assume that people will adjust to transition after a period of time, but the sheer number of issues student-athletes are dealing with in

their transition appears to make this more difficult. To this end, Jubenville et al. (2007) found deterioration over time in the relationship between student-athletes and their coaches. Barnhill and Turner (2013) remarked this is unique to the setting since a typical relationship is more likely to have a breach early on and usually will become more stable over time. In their study, they found that fourth-year student-athletes had “developed increasing[ly] complicated psychological contracts with their coaches,” which increased the chance that a promise or obligation could be broken due to several years of added terms (Barnhill & Turner, 2013, p. 190). This should raise a red flag to anyone in student-athlete academic support that transition issues go beyond the initial transition timeframe.

Quite clearly, the persistent issues are not restricted to relationships with coaches, as many participants in the present study point to issues specific to academic support. Ongoing problems associated with appropriate class scheduling, knowing who to direct questions to, and how to navigate the hierarchy of the university are recurrent in many participant responses, including those who are upperclassmen. Enduring and clear support from academic and athletic advisors is necessary to increase student-athlete success, which becomes especially apparent in the context of Bell’s (2009) finding that a vast majority of student-athletes first sought out their athletic academic support system to answer these types of questions. Whether they like it or not, student-athletes are reliant on professionals in these areas because oftentimes they are independently not allowed to go through a process, such as registering for classes. Specific to the mid-major university in the present study, student-athletes do not have the ability to register for their own classes, it *only* is done by their athletic advisors. In this example and others like it, if the student-athlete never is properly informed on the process, the issue is not going to simply fix itself because they matriculate to upperclassmen.

Student-athletes may get used to the nature of a coach-athlete relationship, or the relative stress

level of practice, but that does not mean the issue of perception versus reality ever was reconciled. At best, the student-athletes will work through these issues as they do many others; at worst, this may lead to resentment that lasts throughout their tenure and leads to the relationship deterioration described by Jubenville et al. (2007). In particular, many participants voiced their displeasure over the reality of the coach-athlete relationship once they got on campus and beyond. Since the coach often is the main contact (and in many cases the only contact) an athlete has prior to arriving on campus, that relationship is a vital link between the student-athlete and the university. If the reality of that relationship is starkly different from the expectations, and that division continues for the next four years, it can have a significant impact on the student-athlete, which is likely to infiltrate areas of their life beyond athletic performance. This potential permeation to other areas of a student-athlete’s life should be a principal area of concern and a discussion point of future research.

### Limitations

Due to the nature of the focus group setting, it is possible participants may have been biased to respond in a manner that would be considered more socially agreeable. As noted in the methods section, the potential bias of researchers due to their previous experience as student-athletes should be considered and weighed against the customary checks put in place to best prevent such bias. There are possible limitations in terms of generalizability of the study, as the participants mostly were female and all student-athletes from the same mid-major, southeastern university.

### Implications and Future Research

Entering college is an exciting milestone for many student-athletes. Yet, it is crucial that student-athletes feel comfortable, confident, and sup-



ported during this initial transition. This case study suggests that many student-athletes do not feel as if they are receiving the proper support from athletics personnel and coaches when beginning their collegiate careers. One way to address this is to create better organization within the athletics department, including having a clear delineation of roles for the coaches, academic advisors, and athletic academic advisors. While a chain of command might be present in theory, the reality is there is a significant lack of communication between these parties, which ultimately impacts the student-athlete's experience. Explicit communication channels need to be established, roles need to be defined, and those within the academic support system need to understand each other's role so student-athletes receive clear direction from the appropriate party and know who exactly to contact for their varying needs. On many of these issues, Rubin and Lewis (2020) provided salient recommendations.

There also appears a need to establish an initial transition program for student-athletes that goes beyond a recruitment interview. It is not a surprise that many coaches and athletic programs will pull out all the stops to sell their program in an effort to get the best student-athletes to commit to their university. While it is exciting for a student-athlete to see all the best parts of a university and program, an alternative reality exists, and these circumstances need to be communicated to the student-athlete prior to arrival on campus. To this end, student-athlete first-year seminar programs have the ability to improve the transition process. Grafnetterova et al. (2020) examined the design of such seminars and their findings prompt many valuable implications. Perhaps key among them is that any first-year seminar design should consider the "specific student-athlete population being served and their unique needs" (p. 139). In the case at hand, that requires an intentional effort to understand the specific challenges faced by mid-major student-athletes and to develop a program to address those challenges. While not the particular aim of the present study, it is part of a larger research endeavor that also included examining student-athlete

experiences in mandatory first-year seminar (Forester et al., 2020). These findings in conjunction with those of Grafnetterova et al. (2020) have the potential to further develop a first-year seminar to better address transition issues.

In this study, student-athletes suggested their teammates were pivotal in supporting them during their early transition period. That being said, universities might benefit from creating peer-mentorship programs that would pair new students with veteran students, so that these campus "realities" can be navigated more easily. Some of these programs do exist informally within each sport in the present study, but universities might benefit from creating a more formal, established program that all student-athletes will be involved in. Hoffman (2019) provided a detailed collection of successful peer mentoring strategies, many of which have been studied at, or could reasonably be applied to, a collegiate athletic structure. If mentoring is to be implemented for all first-year student-athletes, perhaps the first-year seminar would represent a suitable vehicle for such a program.

A final issue worth exploring is what athlete academic advisors and academic advisors can do to ease the transition and help student-athletes during their full academic enrollment. This is an area for future research, as it appears there could be distinctive challenges that mid-major universities face in this regard, compared to a Power 5 school or lower division schools. A crucial first step in this process is identifying what those distinctive challenges are, and the findings of the present study adds to that body of knowledge. With limited resources, it may be challenging for mid-majors to consistently ensure all the needs of student-athletes are being met. It is important to explore how these universities can function more efficiently in consideration of budget constraints and limited personnel. Research specific to mid-major universities has yet to explore the perceptions that academic support staff, including academic and athletic advisors, have regarding student-athlete transitions, and this could be a beneficial line of research moving forward.

### Conclusion

Whether it relates to academic support, athletic support, or changes in lifestyle, an improper and inadequate process to approaching the transition period for student-athletes from high school to a DI university can have ramifications beyond the obvious. Transition periods, for anyone, often are lynchpin points because they include unavoidable confusion, as there is no way to prepare for each factor of a transition. What happens during these periods have immense impacts on whether or not people will find success in their endeavors. The NCAA and member institutions want student-athletes to be successful both as students and athletes during their time at the university, but the definitive measure is how they are prepared for success beyond their time as student-athletes. A successful transition from high school to a DI university is paramount to establishing the grounds for this success and deserves to be treated as such by listening to what those who have gone through the process have to say about its shortcomings.

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**Appendix A***Participant Information*

Pseudonym	Sport	Sex
Michelle	Volleyball	Female
Emily	Soccer	Female
Janet	Golf	Female
Allie	Tennis	Female
Lucy	Softball	Female
Jade	Golf	Female
Laura	Golf	Female
Monica	Softball	Female
Valerie	Tennis	Female
Alice	Softball	Female
Julie	Golf	Female
Maureen	Volleyball	Female
Linda	Soccer	Female
Jessie	Tennis	Female
Steve	Track and Field	Male
Joshua	Track and Field	Male
Nate	Track and Field	Male
Neil	Track and Field	Male

Note. Additional participants (4 female and 1 male) were not directly quoted

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Question Guide

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1. Describe your experience transition from a high school recruit to a DI student-athlete.
  - a. What obstacles did you face?
  - b. What was the hardest part of your transition from high school to college in the classroom?
  - c. What do you know now that you wish you would have known in your first few weeks or months as a DI athlete?
  - d. What did the [University involved in study] Athletic Department do to help with your transition?
    - i. If they did not do anything, what do you wish would have been done?
  - e. What did your coaches (head/assistant/strength conditioning/volunteer) do to help with your transition, if anything?
    - i. If they did not do anything, what do you wish would have been done?
  - f. What did you teammates do to help with your transition?
    - i. If they did not do anything, what do you wish would have been done?
  - g. What was the most difficult part of the transition to college athletics?
  - h. What was the most difficult part of transitioning to college socially?
2. Do you feel you were prepared for college athletics? Why or why not?
  - a. Class/practice/travel schedule?
  - b. Stress coping mechanisms?
  - c. Alone for the first time in your life?
  - d. Support from coaches/faculty/staff?
  - e. Ease of navigating on campus?
3. Describe your experience with [University involved in present study] PE 158 course.
  - a. What were the positives and negatives?
  - b. Did it prepare you appropriately for the upcoming semester/season?
  - c. If the course was optional, would you recommend it to other student-athletes? Why or why not?
4. If [University involved in present study] was to develop a new life skills program for incoming freshman student-athletes, what would you want the program to include?
5. For student-athletes moving into their sophomore, junior, and senior seasons, what types of academic programming would be most beneficial for them?
  - a. Athletic?
  - b. Life Skills?
6. How would you describe your experience with student-athlete academic services?
  - a. In what ways is/has this department preparing/prepared you for success?
  - b. What could this department be doing differently?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience(s) with life skills programs?



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