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Navigating the Transition: Factors Impacting Academic Success and Challenges Faced by First Semester Student Athletes in College

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Navigating the Transition: Factors Impacting Academic Success and Challenges Faced by First-Semester Athletes in College

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to better understand the factors that influenced first-semester college-athletes' ability to succeed academically in the transition to collegiate life, focusing specifically on not only the factors that contributed to academic success but also those the athletes considered to be challenges or barriers during their first semester in college. Interviews (n = 9) were conducted with first-year college-athletes at a Division II regional university in the northeast United States over a two-year period to identify not only the factors that contributed to academic success but also those the athletes considered to be challenges or barriers during their first semester in college. Five themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (a) expectations, (b) accountability, (c) responsibility, (d) resources, and (e) support. The findings suggest opportunities for athletic departments, student affairs, and faculty to provide time management and organization skill training, help identify expectations, and encourage the use of resources to support students' academic journeys.

Keywords: Academic Success, College Athlete, First-year student

More than 14 million students attended four-year colleges and universities in 2022 (Hanson, 2023). Of this population, more than 520,000 college-athletes competed in sports sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2022), including more than 126,000 at Division II institutions (NCAA, 2023). As such, the NCAA sets the eligibility requirements for potential college-athletes seeking to participate in their sport at the intercollegiate level. The factors considered when determining initial eligibility include high school GPA, class ranking, and test scores. However, initial eligibility does not always equate to academic success while in college. In fact, research related to student involvement (Astin, 1984) and retention (Tinto, 1975, 1988, 2006) identified that social interactions between peers and other members of the university community during a student's first year were important factors in transitioning and integrating into college and predicting student academic success.

In addition to student involvement, Parker et al. (2021) noted that success in higher education often centered on students' ability to effectively navigate both academic and non-academic obstacles. Furthermore, research has shown that the transition from high school to college is difficult in general, and adding in the unique responsibilities, expectations, and experiences that come with being an NCAA college-athlete serve to compound their academic experiences (Gayles & Baker, 2015; Parham, 1993; Scott et al., 2008). Because college-athletes face the challenges of acclimating to heightened expectations athletically and academically, studies have shown they feel overwhelmed in balancing their obligations (Clift & Mower, 2013; Cutler & Dwyer, 2020). Hawkins (2010) suggested that college-athletes might face greater challenges transitioning from high school to college compared to their non-athlete counterparts. Hawkins continued that especially noteworthy was the influence of the shift in social environments on their academic experiences. Consequently, the NCAA has allocated additional funding to bolster academic

assistance, elevate retention rates, foster persistence, and enrich the overall journey of college-athletes through the introduction of supplementary initiatives and career-related tools (Huml et al., 2014).

In a new era where universities are experiencing budget challenges, and with increased competition for student enrollment now compounded by a shrinking population of college-aged teenagers, many university presidents are looking to athletics to help grow or stabilize enrollment. It has become increasingly important not just to admit students and college-athletes but to focus on retaining those already attending the university. Studies have found that the largest attrition occurs during the freshman year, with estimates between 20% and more than 40% (Caviglia-Harris & Maier, 2020; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Retention can be positively impacted by programs that address academic habits (study habits, time management) and activities such as academic coaching with students with lower GPA's, including those on academic probation (Capstick, et. al., 2019; Caviglia-Harris & Maier, 2020).

While high school grades and test scores are the best predictors of freshman academic outcomes, first-year college outcomes are more accurate predictors of eventual graduation (Petr & McArdle, 2012). For students with lower GPAs in the early years, resilience can be an important factor for retention and continued enrollment (Caporale-Berkowitz, 2022). Recognizing the importance of the college-athlete first-year experience, many universities offer or mandate that college-athletes participate in first-year experience programs as well as structured and supervised study periods. The major challenge is that even when universities offer such programming, some college-athletes do not take advantage of them (Brouwer et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2009). Many who do not participate fully in these programs are college-athletes who present upon admission as at-risk. In addition, “there is a genuine need to make more in how we conceptualize academic risk among student-athletes. At the individual level it is clear that risk is nuanced and complex” (Paskins, 2012, p. 51).

Covid-19 has impacted student learning and needs to be considered when addressing the academic success of current students. The isolation led to an increase in mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, in first-year students (Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Lourie et al., 2023). The Lourie study noted higher levels of mental health and sleep issues among first-year students in Fall 2021 than Fall 2020, and while it may not all have been impacted by Covid-19 regulations, the long-term impacts of the pandemic may have created higher impacts on mental health. A study among Division II athletes observed decreased mental health during the pandemic, with the college-athletes noting it impacted their lives in many facets, including academics (Herbert & Newland, 2023). Creswell et al. (2023) further noted the negative impact of mental health and sleep issues on academic success, especially for first-year students.

Theoretical Framework & Purpose

This study was guided by Sanford's (1966) theory of challenge and support to explore college-athletes' perceptions of academic success and factors that influence success in their first semester of college. The theory focuses on student development through interaction with their environment and various aspects of challenges and supports. Sanford identified three areas related to student development: readiness, challenge, and support (Evans et al., 2009). The theory suggests that students need a balance of challenges and support to develop. If there is too much challenge, students may become overwhelmed; alternatively, they may become complacent if there is too much support (Schuh et al., 2011). Students need the skills and knowledge they have learned to be ready to respond to challenges (Sanford, 1962).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand the factors that influenced first-semester college-athletes' ability to succeed academically in the transition to collegiate life, focusing not only on the factors that contributed to academic success but also those the athletes considered to be challenges or barriers during their first semester in college. By gathering this information, the researchers will be able to better recommend supports and services for college-athletes to enhance their retention and academic success. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What are college-athletes' perceptions of their academic success in the first semester?
2. What challenges and supports influenced student success in the first semester?

Methods

Study Design and Population

This phenomenological qualitative study employed in-depth interviews with first-year college-athletes in their second semester (spring) at a Division II regional university in New England. This study was originally designed and funded to gather data beginning in Fall 2020, but with the Covid-19 pandemic, there were no sports that semester and the study was delayed for a year. Purposive sampling was used to identify college-athletes that met the study's criteria.

To be eligible, the student needed to be an active athlete (competing or practicing during the fall semester) in their first year of college. To look more closely at academic success, college-athletes were invited if they were considered a first-semester freshman by credit and their GPA was above 3.3 or below 2.5. For the credit markers, a student was considered a first-semester freshman if they entered with less than 6 credit hours and none of those credit hours were taken in a college setting. Those with one to two AP courses in high school were eligible, but those that had taken one to three courses at a local college were not. This was done to ensure eligible students did not have experience with taking college courses and therefore we could learn about transition challenges from high school.

During the original design of the study, students with contrasting academic markers of GPA's 3.5 or higher (Dean's List) and 2.0 or below (academic warning) were considered. The lower range was moved up to 2.5, as that is considered the marker for academic eligibility among college-athletes. The 3.3 GPA (B+ average) was used to open the sample to the higher end of the GPA spectrum. The goal with using high and low GPA's, instead of including all college-athletes, was to determine what actions might impact and foster success among first-semester students, which would help identify students at risk in time to not lose eligibility. These numbers were used as academic markers, not to create individual views of personal academic success, but instead looking at commonly used markers related to success and eligibility. During the years of study, the campus-wide first-semester students' average GPA for the fall semester was 2.56 (2021) and 2.67 (2022). All undergraduate athletes' GPA averages were 3.01 (2021) and 3.08 (2022), while freshmen athletes were 2.75 (2021) and 2.91 (2022). Team-specific GPAs can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Undergraduate GPAs by Team

Fall 2021					
Men’s Team	Fresh GPA	All Years GPA	Women’s Team	Fresh GPA	All Years GPA
Baseball	2.83 (n = 4)	3.21 (n = 27)	Basketball	3.34 (n = 2)	3.61 (n = 9)
Basketball	2.31 (n = 6)	2.88 (n = 16)	Cross Country	> 3.0 (n = 1)*	3.23 (n = 7)
Cross Country	3.07 (n = 4)	3.04 (n = 14)	Field Hockey	3.00 (n = 3)	3.38 (n = 11)
Football	2.34 (n = 29)	2.63 (n = 85)	Gymnastics	3.20 (n = 23)	3.30 (n = 38)
Soccer	2.96 (n = 11)	2.85 (n = 24)	Lacrosse	3.46 (n = 8)	3.16 (n = 29)
Swimming	3.09 (n = 4)	2.92 (n = 19)	Soccer	3.31 (n = 6)	3.44 (n = 24)
Track & Field	2.21 (n = 9)	2.89 (n = 51)	Softball	3.18 (n = 7)	3.43 (n = 20)
			Swimming	2.82 (n = 11)	3.11 (n = 22)
			Track & Field	2.61 (n = 5)	2.76 (n = 27)
			Volleyball	3.01 (n = 2)	3.03 (n = 14)
Fall 2022					
Men’s Team	Fresh GPA	All Years GPA	Women’s Team	Fresh GPA	All Years GPA
Baseball	2.96 (n = 2)	3.25 (n = 27)	Basketball	3.58 (n = 3)	3.33 (n = 11)
Basketball	2.37 (n = 2)	2.54 (n = 10)	Cross Country	> 3.50 (n = 1)*	3.60 (n = 8)
Cross Country	3.13 (n = 6)	3.26 (n = 14)	Field Hockey	2.60 (n = 5)	2.95 (n = 18)
Football	2.55 (n = 30)	2.77 (n = 100)	Gymnastics	3.26 (n = 6)	3.33 (n = 34)
Soccer	2.31 (n = 4)	2.89 (n = 26)	Lacrosse	3.30 (n = 8)	3.28 (n = 35)
Swimming	2.93 (n = 10)	3.19 (n = 30)	Soccer	3.58 (n = 9)	3.59 (n = 27)
Track & Field	2.94 (n = 16)	3.01 (n = 58)	Softball	3.42 (n = 3)	3.54 (n = 19)
			Swimming	1.86 (n = 5)	3.01 (n = 25)
			Track & Field	3.10 (n = 11)	3.08 (n = 37)
			Volleyball	3.33 (n = 5)	3.16 (n = 12)

*due to only one student in the group, GPA has been generalized to protect identity

Recruitment & Data Collection

The co-authors were given a list of college-athletes by team from the athletics department and used that to determine by credit which students were in their first year. Each student was reviewed in the university database to verify eligibility and find their first semester GPA. From there, those that met the eligibility criteria were invited to schedule an interview. In the first year, 58 students were invited by email in late March and three sat for the interviews in mid-April. The late-semester timing likely impacted the response rate during the first year, as instrument development and IRB approval took place at the start of the semester. In year two, students were sent a flyer via email with a QR code that linked to a survey they could take to help set up the interviews during their free time. This email went out in late January once the semester opened, and interviews took place from late January into mid-February. During this round, 49 students were invited and six participated. In both years, email invitations were sent three times to ensure maximum participation.

Once an interview was scheduled, students met with the first two authors for an in-depth interview. For the first year, the interviews were held in the university library; during year two, the

interviews were held in a conference room in an academic building where the authors have offices. All interviews began once informed consent was provided and then moved to the introductory questions. The authors shared responsibility for asking questions by section, and both offered follow-up questions throughout the interviews when necessary. The interviews were audio recorded and the recordings were uploaded and transcribed verbatim by an outside agency. Each interview lasted between 20-30 minutes, depending on the depth of the answers provided.

This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board in March 2022. The approval was extended to the following academic year to include a second year of data collection.

Instrument

An interview guide was developed by the research team; it contained six broad questions, many with follow-up questions to probe for more in-depth answers. Upon completion of the draft, one member of the research team, who is the Faculty Athletic Representative for our campus, shared it for feedback. The instrument was reviewed by the university Athletics Director and the Compliance Officer, the latter who works with students who are struggling academically or having eligibility difficulties. They provided feedback for the final draft of the questions used during the interviews. The interview opened with a general question asking how the student's first semester went and then interviewers could jump to one of four question sets to best move through the interview. These four question sets were focused on (a) course success, challenges, and use of supports and resources; (b) whether they were in or out of season for their sport and season influence on academic success; (c) impact of practice, and (d) non-class/non-sport campus involvement. The final set of questions focused on the college-athlete's readiness and transition from high school to college and addressed the impact of Covid-19 on that transition. To conclude, college-athletes were offered the ability to provide any additional information they felt might be relevant but was not asked.

Data Analysis

The researchers followed steps proposed by Creswell (2009) when analyzing qualitative data that included (a) preparing and organizing the data, (b) reading the data, (c) coding the data, and (d) generating themes. Thematic analysis occurred in two stages by the first two authors. Open coding was used for the first phase. A large code list was created based on three major ideas from the interview guide and each author coded on printed transcripts then met to discuss their codes. For the open coding phase, each major code category had a subgroup of codes; the major code categories were first semester (8 sub-codes), sport impact (5 sub-codes), and transition and readiness (4 sub-codes).

Both researchers listed potential themes in the detailed reviews of the transcripts and discussed to find alignment for the second phase of coding, which utilized an axial coding process. Each had the same five general themes, so a new code list was developed to identify information based on these themes. The five themes were (a) expectations, (b) accountability, (c) responsibility, (d) resources, and (e) support. All but the first one had sub-codes created for the second round of the coding process. Dedoose software was used for this phase of coding, as the software allows multiple people to code independently and create various reports on code usage. Overall, inter-rater reliability was high between the two researchers who did the coding; Dedoose provided charts showing linked, overlapping, and differences in coding, which allowed us to have a picture of the alignment of coding during this phase. When there were differences, the researchers discussed them to identify common codes, which were often close or included one but not multiple codes for the same quote.

Results

Sample

A total of nine interviews were conducted over two years. The first three took place in April 2022, and the remaining six took place in January and February 2023. Table 2 contains further details on each interviewee.

Table 2
Demographic Overview of Participants

Interview	Sport	GPA Classification	Race/Ethnicity	Academic School
1 (2021)	Men’s Basketball	< 2.5	Black	Health & Human Services
2 (2021)	Women’s Track	> 3.3	White	Health & Human Services
3 (2021)	Football	< 2.5	White	Business
4 (2022)	Volleyball	> 3.3*	Black	Arts & Sciences
5 (2022)	Women’s Basketball	> 3.3	Multi-racial	Arts & Sciences
6 (2022)	Women’s Lacrosse	> 3.3	White	Business
7 (2022)	Football	< 2.5	Hispanic/Latino	Health & Human Services
8 (2022)	Football	< 2.5	Black	Arts & Sciences
9 (2022)	Football	< 2.5	White	Undeclared

*Student is a member of the Honors College

First-Semester Success

The researchers posited that there would be differences in perceptions between the students with higher GPAs (3.3 and above) and lower GPAs (2.5 and below). Despite anticipating differences in strategies and views, in many cases the students said similar things about the support services they used on campus and the things they found helpful to manage their first semester. Their comments also were similar in addressing challenges they faced during their first semester, regardless of their perceived academic success. The following themes address students’ thoughts and perceptions on their first semester as a college-athlete, including things they did well and things they wished they did better.

Resources and Supports

To get through their first semester in college as college-athletes, the participants used many different supports on campus. Some of these resources were formalized, such as required study hall, while others were more informal, including support from their teammates, coaches, and faculty. The university requires first year college-athletes to attend study hall for five hours a week in the Academic Success Center, located in the library, during the fall semester. The center has tutors, computer labs, and quiet rooms. While required, not all students attended, and participants talked about teammates that signed in and left.

The students who attended study hall noted that the service was helpful for getting their work done, trying to stay on track, and even utilizing free tutoring. Based on their personal descriptions of how they utilized study hall time, it was clear that some stayed beyond the required five hours because they had a quiet place to work, and it helped with balancing their workload. One noted: “...honestly, it helps because there is, you know, this quiet area. That, for me, is what I personally

work best with. So, being able to sit in there and just finish stuff without distractions was really nice” (INT4). Another said:

I think that was a good idea, just 'cause it, it forces you to at least have five hours a week where you're focusing on schoolwork. And that helped a lot, especially with like, uh, ALEKS and the Math 100P, like that stuff. Like that, when people do it there, and just like writing papers and stuff, it's – I was happy that I was forced to get five hours a week in (INT9).

A third said:

I do find it useful because you just – you go there. You get into a mindset where everyone else is working around you and stuff so you just, you're like oh, well, I might as well work, too, right? And so you put your phone down and just kind of get in the zone.

The computer's right there and there's really no excuse to not be doing the work (INT3). Some students, especially those who were highly successful in the first semester, noted that study hall could be a challenge. Some preferred to work in their room with fewer distractions. Even those who saw the value in study hall noted that it could have more distractions, and that their peers wouldn't stay so there was temptation to do the same. As one noted:

It works kind of because it's like a place for us to go do our work, but also people have like their own ways of studying. Like, I do better when I pace and do my homework, and I couldn't really do that in the library 'cause it's supposed to be quiet (INT2).

Beyond study hall, students used many other supports. All students talked about the faculty in a positive manner, especially the understanding shown to them with challenging schedules. Those in-season would have to miss class or change test/paper deadlines. They also found faculty ready to meet and help them and felt comfortable seeking out that support. As one noted:

Then as soon as meets hit, I kept missing Fridays because meets would be on Friday. And my professors were super understanding about it. Like I had to move an exam and they were like, 'Oh, it's fine. You can take it the day before, the day after, like whatever.'... I thought that college professors were a lot more understanding of the fact that we are athletes here and that like, sometimes we can't control the fact that we have to go to Boston for a meet every Friday (INT2).

When challenges arose for students, they felt they could count on their faculty, saying:

I think just also talking to your professors. That was big. I definitely, you know, last semester I got into a really bad hole. I know a couple of my professors, I talked to them, and we came up with a plan to kind of so I could still be successful in some way or form (INT3).

The participants also found strong support from coaches, as the coaches emphasized the importance of seeking help and being successful in their classes. Coaches had an open-door policy that students appreciated, and as one noted: “I feel like I can go talk to any one of them about anything” (INT9). Teammates also were a big help, including upper division students who had more experience on campus and with balancing courses and athletics. As one student mentioned:

My coach was there to help me if I ever had issues, um, and there are some girls that work at CASAS [Center for Academic Success and Accessibility Services] on my team that, um, I could just, like, ask to be set up with a tutor, and then it was pretty easy to go from there. I just had a lot of support (INT1).

Another noted: “We're all super close. I think that we're, we go through a lot together at practices like we're all just dead on the field after we work out... It's just a big community” (INT2). Beyond outside support and resources that helped them be successful, a number talked about self-care actions as ways to manage their time and/or stress level. Even with long hours as athletes, plus coursework, a number talked about finding outlets to help them find fun and stress relief. They joined clubs, went to fun campus events (carnivals, free picnic lunches), and went to residence hall meetings. For many, this gave them downtime to meet non-athletes and feel like other college students. One student was part of a program related to social justice work, coming to campus three days early for training. She noted: “[university name] has done a really good job of, like, kind of keeping people involved and like, getting activities and trying to do a lot on campus... that was also a big part of why I came here” (INT5).

Accountability & Responsibility

There were some differences among students, most notably how they viewed the role that personal accountability and responsibility played on their course success during their first semester. Those students with higher first-semester GPAs noted that holding themselves accountable and feeling accountable to the team helped them stay on track. One stated: “Setting high expectations for myself and like, kind of wanting to meet that expectation... just wanted to prove myself this first semester” (INT4). As another noted:

Probably my teammates and my coaches...our team is really big on, like, school is first. So, um, having coaches who aren't, like, ever telling us, like, to come to basketball over class, or, like, miss class for basketball, um, is really nice, and they set high expectations for us. So, like, me especially, like I don't like to fail those, so, like, our team's GPA was a 3.5 or higher, like that was our goal, so for me, like I didn't want to be the one person to kind of have, like, a low GPA that hurts us (INT5).

Those who struggled during their first semester often talked about how they didn't hold themselves as accountable as they felt they were capable of being and noted that was a big lesson they would take moving forward into a new semester. One student stated:

I definitely struggled a bit and I fell really behind at first. And, um, that's no one to blame but myself. I just really – my head wasn't on straight as far as classes and, um, my priorities weren't in check, really. And so I think that, obviously, that's what made me struggle. I was developing tendencies here that I didn't have at home because like I said, accountability and stuff. And you know, I would do things and be like oh, maybe I'll just miss this class today. You know what I mean? And then the next thing you know, you are way behind and, uh, so it definitely didn't – it didn't go the way I planned. But, um, it was definitely a tough first, first semester I'd say (INT3).

Preparation for College

Several participants noted that they lacked the organizational skills to be successful academically. One student described the importance of time management and organization skills:

I think that you really just have to, coming in, stress the importance of the balance and...I think that's where I just had the most trouble, plain and simple. I think that...I was overwhelming myself a little bit too much and, and... not creating enough time to be comfortable. And so...once you realize what you have to do and your responsibilities, you, um, that first semester I did poorly. Take accountability for it. I'm doing a lot better this semester and I still have a lot to work on. But I think I'm definitely headed in the right direction. I plan on keep heading in the right direction and it's all about, um, just trying to figure it all out, I guess. And that's basically what it comes down to (INT3).

Similarly, another described the need for better time management skills: “I did have challenges, yet I would go get help. It, it's just like the amount of time I had, like I didn't have enough time... Being more organized and being more consistent would've helped” (INT8). Another noted the challenge and then finding a solution, saying:

Just kind of, um, organizing everything, and getting adjusted to, um, higher education and college and stuff... Um, y'know, I think – I had to learn how to take notes... I wasn't really used to doing that. And that, when I got that down, that helped me (INT9).

Influencers of College Expectations

Many students talked about the influence their family and friends had on their expectations entering college. On the subject of listening to others while maintaining an open mind, one student noted:

I think coming into it, I just looked at it with an open mind and just said, you know what, this is the next chapter and I'm, I'm just gonna make the best of it...And I think that's all you can do when you're going into a new situation is just be prepared as much as possible and, you know, hope for the best (INT1).

Another noted about expectations: “If you are a guy that doesn’t do work at all, you’re gonna be in trouble... you need to be a guy that finishes on time, gets ahead. Like those are – that’s what college is all about” (INT8).

Describing how family and friends’ influence was a factor in being prepared for the college experience, one student stated:

I guess you hear about it growing up and you get all the different point of views and... people kind of guided you to tell you like what’s important, what you need when you get there. And I have a few relatives – like a couple of relatives that came here. I know some people like family friends. And... I knew that – I did prepare myself... I knew like football would be, um, definitely hard... And then the academic side, I knew coming into it that I would have to try to, you know, balance both of those. And I would say at first I was a little overwhelmed so I maybe underprepared a little bit in the transition process. I guess I wasn’t fully, you know, matured to kind of realize. And I still am not but it’s definitely improving, you know, day by day (INT3).

Similarly, another revealed:

I have an older brother who went to college and just told me it's a lot of work, and that's really what hit me because I was, like I said, I was never an academic student, I didn't like work. But that was really what it was, like all the work they give you and stuff like that, and it's really just being on time with your work, like being on top of your work, because if you fall behind, they always tell me that you're, it's not good if you fall back... my brother helped me a lot (INT7).

For those without family knowledge, the lack of information created a challenge with expectations. One stated:

I’m the oldest sibling in my family, so I’m, I was the first sibling to go to college. I didn’t have like an older sibling to ask... it was kinda like a mystery, I guess, what it was gonna be like (INT9).

Another group that commonly influenced students’ views on college and what to expect was their high school counselors and teachers. There was much shared about teachers’ views on professors, especially coursework behaviors. One described this, stating:

My teachers in high school told us that all of our professors weren't gonna really care about what was going on outside of school... (my) town is very, like, if you don't go to an Ivy, like if you don't go to an upper school, you're not doing well academically. So, I was always kind of pushed to get above a B because if you got a B, my peers, it was seen as like failing basically.” (INT2)

Faculty often were portrayed negatively, creating expectations for the students. Another noted:

But I think [high school teachers and counselors] also painted a very negative image of college professors... And they said, these professors don't care. Oh. They'll just, yeah. If you don't, if you're, you're late for an assignment, they'll give you an F. All of my college professors, whenever I have sent an email giving reasonable, um, explanation as to why I need an extension on an assignment, they've all communicated and got back to me and given me the extension that I requested and without any hassle or problems (INT1).

Given the timeline of the study, it was important to see if students felt Covid-19 impacted their expectations and preparations. Many did feel prepared, but also felt that it had an impact on their preparation, especially online learning and its impact toward creating positive learning behaviors. One student stated:

I would say... there were some really good things I took out of it and I would also say because of the whole online schooling and last year we were still hybrid... so it was really hard to get adjusted. I think the whole last year, I think everyone was kind of, even the teachers were very relaxed and lenient with everything. And it’s hard to create like a routine and... mentally prepare yourself when you know, two days you’re going in, two days you’re staying home and you could just lay in bed and do school. I mean, that’s what I would do sometimes... But I would say that the good things I took out of it was... in high school, you learn to take accountability for things and your teachers are still tough on you... it did help create somewhat of a routine... It’s not like I totally lost that (INT3).

Others felt the online learning created a problem for the transition, with one noting: “No, it didn’t help at all... like it was online... and it didn’t really – you didn’t learn nothing” (INT8).

Season & Practice

Almost all the participants observed that practice and season did not negatively impact their academic success. In fact, many noted that having a strict schedule helped provide a routine between their sport and academic requirements. One noted:

I don't think it impacted in a negative way because I was always able to, I had time in between practice and, like, classes and stuff to do what I had to do in order to get a class, so I don't think it impacted, like, in a bad way, my classes (INT7).

Another explained:

But, um, I think the other classes, though, that was just more of, um, that was just more of me not being able to focus on the work and stuff. And I think with football, it does bring a challenge but it’s nothing that you can’t do. It’s definitely, they give you enough time to do this and that. I mean, the coaches check in with you on the grades and stuff. And, um, I mean, ultimately, it was just a matter of, um, getting your priorities straight and just recognizing the valuables, I guess, I don’t know (INT3).

Additionally, without the structure of games and practice, the participants tended to not be as focused, with a student saying:

It just forces you to stick by that schedule... when you're out of season, it's kind of more of a looser schedule. Yeah. You still have workouts, but it's kind of more on your own time... it just adds a level...of structure and organization to your day because you have something that's set in stone that you cannot... walk away from... You are an athlete. This is your obligation here, just as you are a student. So, now you build your student life around that in a way to where you can balance both successfully (INT1).

Many did note that practice/competing did impact them socially, as they had to focus on sport and classes. Students noted that if they did anything else, it was usually required for their freshman seminar class (engagement activities are required for all), but rarely by choice. If they did things socially, it was mostly in their residence hall because they could fit it in. As one noted:

It was very hard to fit that in. I really would say that, to be honest, that I did anything else besides school and volleyball, just because it’s hard, ‘cause a lot of the times, different club meetings or things you want to do are exactly at our practice time and you can’t do it (INT4).

Self-care

In the interviews, students recognized the need for self-care in-season and out. They talked about the ability to be alone while attending mandatory study hall, with one stating: “It was kind of also a break from... everything because nobody is there, so it's quiet, like it's kind of just a peaceful place for you to go and, like, relax for a minute” (INT3). Similarly, another talked about being around the same teammates in practice, the locker room, socially, and in the dorms was important but also could be a hinderance to their studies. She stated:

Honestly... team relationship... has a big, big impact on how well you do here. In our season, there was... some ups and downs with different attitudes on the team and ...you know how girls get bickery and it's like, we're spending 40 hours plus together every single week. You're gonna get tired of your teammates... So, you see the same people... sometimes, you just want alone time... sometimes... all of the freshman, they're usually in my room... they're hanging out, and sometimes, I'm like, “Okay, guys. Like, you need to go. I just need my alone time. Like, I need to get this done.” So, definitely having those moments where you can step back and be alone – even if those are your teammates. Like, it's not like, coming from a hurtful place, but just like, personal needs. So, definitely having those moments to, you know, step back and be like, “I need some me time” is like, an important key of being here (INT4).

Many students discussed the differences between them and their non-athlete classmates, especially with regard to balancing schedules and stress level. One stated:

I see... my friends who don't play sports... and they definitely seem to...be less stressed, but like if they're not stressed, it's because... they have so much time to, like, have class and do their work...and it's stressful for anybody, but I think just the stress level of the student-athlete is already higher because your expectations are that you're doing well because you want to play and you want to be able to play. And, if you don't do well, you can't do that, and then it's, you know, like, you obviously don't want to just be doing nothing, and you see that a lot. So... it's a good thing that we have no time because then you feel... a sense of urgency to get it done. But, at the same time, then it's like, "Is my mental health okay?" (INT5).

Some students were not prepared socially for the transition to college. This can be normal for all students but may have been made worse by the isolation faced during some of their high school years due to the pandemic. One noted:

It was hard to leave my friends from my town, like from my hometown... and I just... kind of like went into like a little shell instead of being outgoing and everything and trying to make new friends... so just, like, kind of sitting in my room every night was not fun, like there were some events on campus but it was just stuff I wasn't interested in, like going to, like, the ballroom and, like, playing games, like I didn't really want to do that, so that was, like socially, that was hard. Um, and just also being away from my family was really hard (INT6).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the factors that influenced first-semester college-athletes' ability to succeed academically in the transition to collegiate life; the student interviews focused specifically on factors that not only contributed to academic success but also those the athletes considered to be challenges or barriers during their first semester in college. Five themes emerged from the analysis of the data. They were: (a) expectations, (b) accountability, (c) responsibility, (d) resources, and (e) support. These themes align with Sanford's (1966) areas of development related to readiness (expectations and accountability), challenges (responsibility and using resources), and support (Evans, et al., 2009).

Students in this study talked about taking responsibility and accountability for their academic success after the first semester, regardless of their GPA. Of interest, students on the lower end of the GPA spectrum knew where they needed to improve and how to go about making that change. Specifically, students described learning from their successes and mistakes to make changes to how they approach their academic careers going forward. These findings are similar to research by Brouwer et al. (2022), who noted that students in their study provided ideas about how to be successful academically by accessing support and resources, enhancing their time management skills, attending class, and finishing assignments. Similar to our findings, which align with Sanford (1966), Longerbeam (2016) identified that students achieved academic success when they embraced their struggles. Furthermore, college-athletes are more likely to have a more supportive academic setting when there is "buy-in" from a wide variety of stakeholders on campus (Huml et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to emphasize to student-athletes that they are responsible for their success, while also providing guidance and support from faculty, coaches, and the university about academic issues that may arise in class.

In this study, first-year college-athletes also were aware of the available supports and resources offered by faculty, the campus academic success center, and the athletics department, but they did not always take advantage of them in their first semester. This is similar to findings from Brouwer et al. (2022), who noted that even though athletes did not always use the resources early on in their academic career, they were grateful for the resources offered. Additionally, students in this study talked about how the mandatory study hall for first-year athletes provided organization to their schedule and a quiet space to get their work completed. It also is important to note that some athletes with higher GPAs described certain study-hall spaces as not quiet enough, which caused them to be distracted. This supports Collings and Eaton's (2021) findings, which suggested students who repeatedly study in low-distraction areas may be more likely to have

higher academic success. First-year college-athletes should be provided opportunities to learn about the types of support and resources offered by their university. In addition, the benefits of such support and resources should be emphasized.

Limitations

As with most studies that involve students, there are limitations. Covid-19 played a role, as the grant was written and submitted in January 2020, delaying the start of this study until athletics resumed. The first year was still impacted by Covid-19, so a second year of recruiting was needed when the campus was basically back to normal (no masks, full athletics, majority of courses on-ground). Recruiting was challenging, as the researchers could offer no incentives due to NCAA rules; it was difficult to align with the IRB recruiting rules while not impacting eligibility. This made it hard to get students to agree to sit for interviews. Therefore, while the study had a smaller sample size ($n = 9$) than desired ($n = 15$), the researchers did find data saturation by the later interviews. While there were students of both genders in each recruiting group, only females with high GPAs and males with low GPAs agreed to sit for interviews.

Implications and Recommendations

As universities focus on retention, assisting college-athletes is a key area. Additional challenges, including significant time blocks for practice and competing, make it more difficult for first-year college-athletes to focus on their schoolwork, a careful balance that is integral to supporting their success on campus. Based on these findings, three ideas can be beneficial to supporting the transition for first-year college-athletes:

1. While all first-year students can benefit from training in time management and organizational management, college athletes have different needs. Many universities, including this one, have first-year specific courses that all incoming students take that often address these two topics. Creating tailored workshops for first-year college-athletes could be beneficial, especially if they are created with Sanford's theory to help address the necessary balance between providing the right amount of support and teaching how to address challenges. For those that require study hall, these workshops can be given there, as in the beginning of the semester, there is rarely a significant amount of homework. Getting the trainings in during the first two weeks of the semester will help students once their workload increases.
2. Expectations and accountability were deeply important to our college-athletes, regardless of how successful they were or how much they struggled. Helping students identify their personal expectations and set goals could be helpful. Students also noted team expectations, so having coaches and upperclassmen discuss the importance of academic success could help first-year college-athletes determine their personal goals and find tools to help them meet their personal expectations.
3. Finally, these resources only work if they are accessible to help the college-athletes. While many may not outwardly discuss their desire for things such as study hall, these participants noted that it was a valuable resource to have. Helping students use that resource wisely, using expectations and goal setting to set the tone along with quiet nooks for those that need less distraction, could increase college-athletes' potential for academic achievement in the first semester. Other resources — including free tutoring, access to faculty and coaches that are supportive, and opportunities for college-athletes to focus on fun/self-care — also could be vital for their success.

Many of these items work best in conjunction with each other. The students noted each of these items never as individual but in context with other items, which suggests the importance of supporting them from a place that addresses the whole college-athlete. From there, they will be able to find balance between classes and sport while also engaging in the university community. This balance and engagement will lead to academic success and retention, which, for athletes, can lead to an easier path to graduation and post-college success. Given Division II athletes are not likely to go pro in their respective sport, obtaining a degree can have a positive impact in their personal, professional, and civic lives.

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