

ATHLETIC STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND THE SENSE OF BELONGING THAT  
LEADS TO HIGHER GRADUATION RATES

by

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## DEDICATION

To my son Cole Patterson, my grandfather Edward Becker, my father Ed Patterson, and my stepfather Bobbie Smotherman, may they all rest peacefully in heaven. I'd like to also dedicate all my hard work to my mother, Hollie Smotherman; she exudes what strength is and has instilled the same attribute within me. I would like to thank my family and friends for all the support they have given me in this six-year doctoral journey; even when they did not fully understand the situation, they fully understood the love and patience they shared with me.

Most importantly, I thank God every time (Philippians 1:3). You took the broken pieces of my life story and made them beautiful (Ecclesiastes 3:11; 2 Corinthians 4:5-7). Thank You for using my failure for others' good (Romans 8:28). God – All my gifts come from you (James 1:17).

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although there is a growing body of research on retention of higher education students, there is a constant need for more because of ever-changing variables that affect attrition. With dynamic retention issues changing, new empirical research such as this study can be used to keep up with higher education attrition. The specific purpose of this study is to investigate how factors of belongingness included with being a scholarly Division I athlete can lead to higher graduation rates compared to non-athletes.

The positive descriptive analysis of graduation success for student athletes will be measured by using retrospective public survey and interview results comparing them to students that do not participate in scholarly sports. Both quantitative and qualitative data are used in this study to formulate a Grounded Convergent Mixed Methods analysis study that leads to useful empirical data.

It was found that the graduation rates were overall equal despite the scholarly athletes engaging in many characteristics of belongingness. However, there are certain subgroups of student athletes found to have higher graduation rates than those not involved. One example is the fact that female athletes are more likely to graduate than females included in the general student body, particularly reflected by the characteristics of well-being. While minority athletes also seem more likely to graduate than other minority students not involved.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019), nearly 29 percent of students who entered college in the fall of 2017 at four-year public institutions did not return to their institutions for a second year. Koon (2009) shares that increasing or obtaining student retention has been difficult for college leaders; he continued by defining student retention as students remaining at an institution until graduation. Retention issues lead to lower graduation rates in the long term. Bricker (2021) shares that one of the largest issues for universities in the United States is the number of students who fail to graduate. With such a focal point defined, the opposite end of retention can be examined to further understand how to improve the issue of graduation. A connecting piece to of graduating on time is attrition. Attrition rates are defined as the measure of the number of students that have departed from an institution (Tinto, 1997). By putting the main concerns of both graduation and attrition under a microscope, initiatives can zoom in on what is needed to measure retention shortcomings. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), for full time 4-year degree-granting institutions in fall 2018, the overall retention rate in fall 2019 was 81 percent. The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) then states about 63 percent of students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year institution in fall 2013 completed that degree at the same institution within 6 years.

The gap between access and completion has put a new focus on improving retention (Yates 2020). A gap that compounds the issue is that 57 percent of college students complete a bachelor's degree in six years (Bricker 2021). A key issue leading to increased attrition for college students involves the lack of belongingness. Belonging is

defined as the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group (Tinto, 1993). As further explained later in this research, several different aspects of belonging play a role in retention effects. The lack of belongingness constitutes deprivation and negative effects (Leary & Baumeister 1995). Such ill effects stemming from the scarcity of engagement in academic studies lead to student withdrawal (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011). Key engagement factors can arise in a more wholesome fashion with more contemporary correlations. Without connecting timeless biological needs to current needs, variety of meanings to achieve belongingness can be harder to pinpoint. The sense of belonging has various definitions that connect theoretical pastimes with current college needs. Strayhorn (2012, p. 3) mentions the “basic human need and motivation is sufficient to influence behavior with the aftermath of a sense of connectedness through cognition, therefore, pinpointing the issues, defining measurements, and universally delving into belongingness to alleviate attrition.” Narrowing the sights of belonging, as in specifying variables affected; it is helpful to use the association with the sense of community (McMillan & Chavis 1986) to create a relational view of belonging.

Yates (2020) shares that there is an increasing demand for colleges and universities to provide an environment in which students can be successful in achieving their academic goals. Such environmental issues include aspects of belongingness. For example, the various theoretical perspectives that can highlight graduation issues include economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological (Braxton & Mundy, 2002). The environment should be a concern when considering degree completion shortcomings. Yates (2020) shares that there has become an increasing demand for colleges and

universities to provide an environment in which students can be successful in achieving their academic goals. Extracurricular activities can provide an engaging environment that first-year students need. However, studies about connecting student involvement to success may lack tangible academic components (Camerato et al.,2019). Some universities believe they are providing an environment that lays a foundation for success, but many could be doing more. Involvement research would be improved if more connections to patterns are made based on engagement of variables such as race, age, and gender (Baker 2008). Sometimes the main issue is lack of exposure specified for certain variables mentioned; the students have not been engaged in school and exposed to the opportunities for involvement available to them (Bergen-Cisco & Viscomi, 2012). Bergen-Cisco and Viscomi (2012) continue by discussing the need to expose students to commitment and participation necessitates in a more formalized structure specialized for each individual university's environment.

Overall, the articulated theoretical framework was used to further analyze issues such as belonging, environment, and opportunities for engagement. Literature encompassed by engaging activities that included such issues were used to make next level connections.

### **Problem Statement**

Difficulties arise with lack of initiative, but with a narrowed lens focused on specified concerns of belongingness, engagement in research is a good start. McCormick and Lucas (2014) are bombarded with concerns in their research stating there is a call for more funding towards empirically grounded research assessing degree completion or graduation outcomes. Examination of student departure in various student populations, in

different institutional settings, and at various collegial stages is crucial in the quest to improve retention rates (Tinto, 1993). A first impression is so important; a bad first impression could result in longer term negative outcomes. It has been argued that retention rates should be a focal point to help increase graduation rates because about three-fourths of dropouts leave during the first year (Tinto, 1987). Retention is important because of long lasting impressions because these issues in higher education are still prominent. Although retention is one of the most widely studied subjects in higher education, the precise issue is that the concerns continue to remain (Killian, 2018). With issues of retaining students continuing to remain, graduation rates are affected. One concern stated by the National Center for Education Statistic (NCES) is at 4-year institutions with an open admissions policy, 29 percent of students completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years. At 4-year institutions with acceptance rates of less than 25 percent, the 6-year graduation rate was 89 percent (2021). It is obvious, but Important to state that that NCES shares that graduation rates for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at 4-year degree-granting institutions in fall 2013 varied according to institution selectivity (2021). With such concerns of differentiation, the research presented in this paper seeks to deviate how the sense of belonging that occurs affects such an issue.

### **Application**

In this study, intercollegiate athletes in various sports will be examined as variables to contrast with students who are not involved in scholarly athletics. As Division 1 scholarship athletes are one of the more popular groupings discussed, a range of those that have participated will be used for specific measurements. These activities also include many key features of the theoretical framework of belonging being used.

Social involvement in such activities provides smooth social transitions to college by positively impacting students' overall sense of belonging by finding new intrapersonal connections (Hoops, 2017). Groups also cover a range of physical outcomes that relate to actions of belonging such as physical and actionable occurrences blending the involvement tasks. Warner and Dixon (2011) explain how such actionable occurrences included in extracurricular involvement contend administrative consideration, social spaces, competitive respect, equitable decision making, and leadership opportunities. Such aspects can be used to cover the key components of a sense of belonging involving the physical embodiment that also connects to the spiritual essence of belongingness by using certain characteristics (2011). By using tangible dimensions of belongingness, extracurricular research can be further dissected to rationalize the differences made to account for attrition issues. Carini (2012) identified the following dimensions of engagement as: behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social investment; these characteristics will be used to identify the traits of belongingness offered to a scholarly athlete.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The purpose of choosing the theoretical framework of belongingness is that it highlights both the negative and positive aspects of engagement involved in the components of student involvement, and more specifically, Division I athletics. Sense of belonging "is the psychological feeling of connectedness to a social, spatial, cultural, professional, or other type of group community" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 128). Shared beliefs or ideals, a supportive environment, self-esteem, and opportunities for interaction can influence the development of a sense of belonging in an individual

(Winter-Collins & McDaniel, 2003). From such shared beliefs, a hypothesis of belonging is that human beings (first-year students) will have a pervasive drive. With such a theory of discipline, students are able to form lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships (Leary & Baumeister 1995). Theorists have scaled a sense of belonging in their studies by finding many causes and effects of engagement, but the topic still could use critical and empirical evaluation. Maslow (1968) for example asserted belongingness without accompanying original data or previous findings. Freud (1930) also inserted his knowledge of interpersonal contact but used sex drive or filial bond to front load the research. Tinto (1987, 1993) extended these stages of research through a process in which college students establish membership in the communities of a college or university in general, focusing on cases of early student departure from college. Therefore, sense of belonging theorists' direct attention to the matter of institutions supporting students' feelings, acceptance, respect, value, and importance (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). In this specific study, such feelings, types of acceptance, various respects or values, and the importance of overall belonging are considered for the benefit of division one athletes. By using a more contemporary perspective that includes theories that incorporate various sociological standpoints, a sense of belonging further elicits a positive understanding of 'self' and the college community (Cooper & Newton, 2021).

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to investigate if student involvement in Division I sports, as measured by comparing the variables of those not involved, is associated with frequency of students graduating. More specifically, the purpose is to look at how the resources included with the belongingness of being involved in Division I sports affects

graduation rates in a positive way. A variety of Division I student athletes will be assessed according to belongingness. With such assessment, one can factor the positive outcomes of accessibility to the aspects of belongingness athletes have, and how it can make a difference in graduation rates. This is because students are responsible to be engaged in activities that are meaningful, while universities must provide accessible activities to engage them (Owolabi, 2018).

### **Significance of Participation**

Bergmark & Westman (2018, p. 1353) defined participation as “students being active and engaged in the classroom, students impacting the curriculum design as well as students’ feeling of belonging to a community.” The theories involving participation reflect connections through involvement. Being involved creates an ecosystem of community that is important in connecting and supporting students in their incorporation into the university community (Braxton & Mundy, 2002). Involvement could be aligned with an institution’s overall mission. Akhmedtzyanova (2015) identifies that extracurricular activities that focus on institutional goals, such as building and sustaining community on campus can also sustain student retention.

Participation involves more than just community; it can be classified in ways that connect to livelihood goals that are relatable to those of an institution. Leithwood et al. (2004) defined participation in terms of response to requirements, class initiatives, extra-curricular activities, and decision making. Each part of participation is just as important to build better community members (Osterman 2000). Community includes participation that elicits a variety of aspects. Patterson et al. (2018) found that participation in instrumental activities likely work through all four mechanisms of civic identity

development; they are associated with an increased likelihood of nearly all measures of civic engagement in adulthood. There are also positive relationships between participation in expressive activities, such as band, chorus, and drama, and academic and hobby clubs and civic engagement in adulthood (Patterson 2018). Conclusions from ACT (2010) in a final report cited the following three action program areas as critical to retention: involvement experiences, student participation, and interaction with a wide variety of programs and services on the campus. The criteria for such engagement programs are reflected in the actionable questions and statements below.

### **Research Question**

In order to examine the underlying issues, the following research question will guide this study:

1. What effect does belongingness have on the academic performance of Division I intercollegiate athletes compared to non-athletes?

### **Definition of Terms**

1. Academic engagement- is defined as “student participation and integration into mentoring and formal and informal academic integration programs” (e.g., tutoring) (Pope, 2002, p. 32).

2. Attrition-the measure of the number of students that have departed from an institution (Tinto, 1997).

3. Belonging-the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group (Tinto, 1993).

4. Cohort-is the period in which a group of students enter their home institution for full time study towards an undergraduate degree (Williams, 2013).

5. Community-a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals (Osterman, 2000).
6. Constraints-are factors that may inhibit activity participation or limit satisfaction (White, 2008).
7. Engagement-identified as both social engagement and academic engagement in retention studies (Tinto, 2007).
8. General Student Body-students defined as students not members of a particular group or organization being analyzed in this study.
9. Graduation Rate- measures the percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who complete their program at the same institution within a specified time period.
10. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). According to the author, FERPA requires educational institutions to protect the privacy of students' educational records which refer to any record from which a student can be personally identified (Rainsburger, 2009)
11. Happiness- a state of psychological well-being or contentment (Maslow, 1954).
12. Institution Review Board (IRB)- research ethics committees that provide a core protection for human research participants through advance and periodic independent review of the ethical acceptability of proposals for human research (Grady, 2015).
13. Participation- “students being active and engaged in the classroom, students impacting the curriculum design as well as students’ feeling of belonging to a community.” (Bergmark & Westman 2018, p. 1353)

14. Retention-student retention is the measure of students that enroll, continue, and finish their academic studies in the same school (Koon, 2009).

15. Social Cognitive Theory-portions of an individual's knowledge acquisition can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside media influences (Bandura, 2001).

16. Social engagement describes student integration and patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution, especially during the first year of matriculation (Tinto, 2007).

17. Social Capitalization Support- intangible support services users receive via social interactions with other consumers/members participating in a service experience (Plaud & Urien, 2021).

18. Student Athlete- college student that participates in an organized competitive sport that is sponsored by a college or university (Miller & Tolliver, 2019).

### **Limitations**

As with all studies, there are limitations on the implications that can be drawn based on the work's design. This study was limited by existing public data presented by a variety of organizations. Data was retrieved from the following organizations: National College Athletic Association (NCAA), Gallup, and American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment (ACHA- NCHA). Some institutions had overall power of choices and timing of administering the survey. Others were conducted via the web, but in English only. Therefore, the results may not represent student success at all institutions. Utilization of accessible student athletes was investigated, which means that only involvement that can be measured with retrievable

data from the NCAA organization was used based on policies in the NCAA manual. Therefore, not all engaging activities that share belongingness tendencies were discussed, which may affect the variability of any subjective findings. Of the utilized grouping of student athletes, results may not reflect a complete representation of all college students. Lastly, this study has only examined student athlete graduation outcomes from a student involvement and academic performance perspective. There may be several other contributing factors affecting students other than their involvement, such as: financial constraints, family problems, psychological hindrances, and personal reasonings that contribute to a student's academic success or failure to return that will not be investigated. Other potential contributing factors not investigated by this study included variables such as: influx of finances, family support, therapeutic help, or other personal strengths that positively affect student success.

A concern was limiting outside variables because there may be other motivations for student success that may have to be measured with surveys or other tactics. It is hard to account for only the extraneous variables that were chosen to be accounted for (e.g., demographic variables), but a researcher cannot account for everything (e.g., finances), which then results in a limitation to the generalizability of the study. However, a researcher can make inferential statements regarding the results for the population accounted for (delimitation). To mitigate the issues of a lack of direct control, as this is not an experimental design, the results will be controlled statistically for noted extraneous variables. Question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls. Although there are extraneous variables question bias, the margin of sampling error is at the 95% confidence level.

**Delimitations**

The investigator attempted to control homogeneity in the sample by sampling from multiple cohorts across time. It was assumed that creating a larger sample size across time-points will provide more variability in the subject pool. By multiple cohort sampling, the investigator attempted to derive a sample that is most representative of other similar institutions. By using a truncated cohort category of student athletes from specific years, the data was more streamlined. Therefore, the cohort category was set as the most representative population of the subgroup population and a peer group of traditional college students. Samples were weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. There may have been other contributing variables such as social class, age, biological sex, and ethnicity. Although there were other significant contributing factors to student graduation outcomes, the investigator has determined that a mixed methods approach was the best choice. Therefore, it was the most salient method for examining how participation interventions affect student persistence, success, and graduation.

**Summary**

The available research pinpointing lack of student success is a continuous interest in higher education. “Gaps in graduation rates coupled with external pressures of institutional accountability for student learning have intensified the need to better understand the factors that influence student success” (RickShoup, 2008, p. 541). However, it is not completely up to the institution to lead students to succeed. If opportunities to be involved are presented, the student must still want to engage in such

actions. Scholars in the field suggest there is a dual responsibility for engagement (Tinto, 2016).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This is a synopsis of all the ways relevant literature appropriates empirical data of student engagement and retention. This literature will review the theoretical and practical research that informs the issues of non-completion of degree. More specifically, the review of literature will reflect how the sense of belonging included with college athletics can lead to higher graduation rates.

First-year student attrition continues to soar (Lake & Cheng, 2020), and so literature on the subject continues to increase as well. Literature reflecting first-year attrition rates affect both students and the institution. Since 2015, “the first-year student attrition rate has increased 10-12% every year with more than 40% of first-year students dropping out during their first year of school” (Mickens et al. 2022 p. xiv). With such issues pertaining to new college students, one of this chapter's objectives is to connect the theories of belonging to intercollegiate athletes to further understand the issue. With such issues being examined, institutions can also further understand why “approximately 75% of those students who do depart will leave during the first two years of college. First-year student attrition has gained much attention at two-year and four-year post-secondary institutions” (Mickens et al. 2022 p. 1). By diving into theoretical variations of belonging not often taken into account, such as overall student experience, effectiveness of student retention can be analyzed (Ryan & Greg, 2017).

In this chapter, retention that leads to higher graduation rates are also connected to theoretical motivations and engagements to highlight the positive qualities of how to retain student athletes. When higher student enrollment led to more growth and diversity,

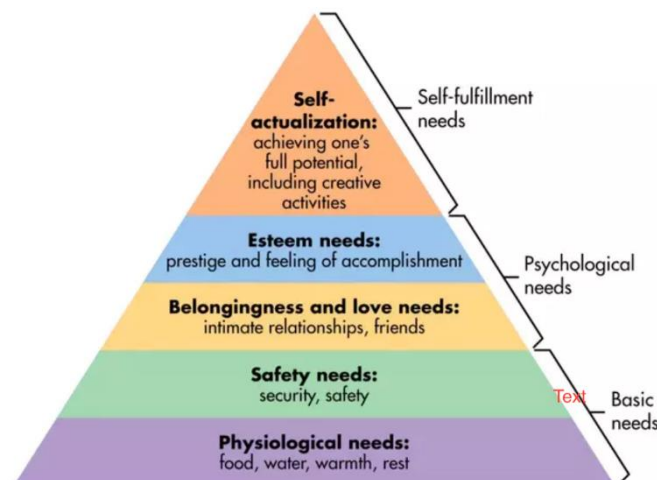
higher educational leaders responded by paying more attention to retention (Mickens et al. 2022). With more attention on the issue, more studies were explained in literature. Mickens et al. (2022) shares the fact that increasing awareness of lower retention rates amongst higher education institutions led to some of the first research studies on student attrition. In the 1970s and 1980s, college attrition and retention became a significant issue in higher education and moved to the forefront of many institution's agendas (Forsman et al., 2014). Retention and student motivation measures of retention have been studied: intention to persist or leave (Suhlmann et al., 2018). Theoretical studies have emerged to connect the catalysts for retaining students. Many literature studies use characteristics of belonging to explain the reasoning of retention and lack thereof.

Students said they needed a sense of belonging and quality level of education to be satisfied (Mickens, 2021). Belonging is a critical dimension of success and can even determine or adjust the degree of whether a student achieves educational goals. Such dimensions have proven success with students' interactions with both peers and faculty, and can be formal or informal, even inside or outside the classroom (Bray, 2006). By analyzing such a theory of socialization through previous researched literature, an overview can be found to determine the impact that belongingness has on retaining first-year college students. Concerning the psychological dimension, new students' self-concept emerges significantly increased by the feeling that they are part of more than a reference group (Diaz, 2022). The theoretical aspects of success and failures break down the psychological causes that lead to higher education issues involving higher education students in general. This feeling of belonging within a diverse social setting if not met through institutional support systems could adversely affect the successful transition,

retention and graduation of students (Diaz, 2022). By using cognitive explanations within theory, higher educational retention issues can be explained by using the aspects of psychological needs of belonging. The psychological, categorical issues can then be contrasted with extracurricular involvement and how they help with certain shortcomings. The gaps involved in success can then be expressed with the holes involved in first-year student success in higher education.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Within Motivation Theory**

As much of the research indicates (Maslow, 1954), belongingness was originally a part of a wider scale of human needs. The more these basic needs were met, the better an individual's psychological health was. A sense of belonging began with Maslow's hierarchy of needs when he proposed the classification of needs into five categories referring to the following (1943): physiological, safety and security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. The five categories, shown in Figure 1, reflect the level of importance that emphasizes certain needs over others. With belongingness in the middle of the scale, Maslow (1954) ensures that belongingness is not only more beneficial than prestige or creation but is almost necessary to accomplish one's goals to the full extent.



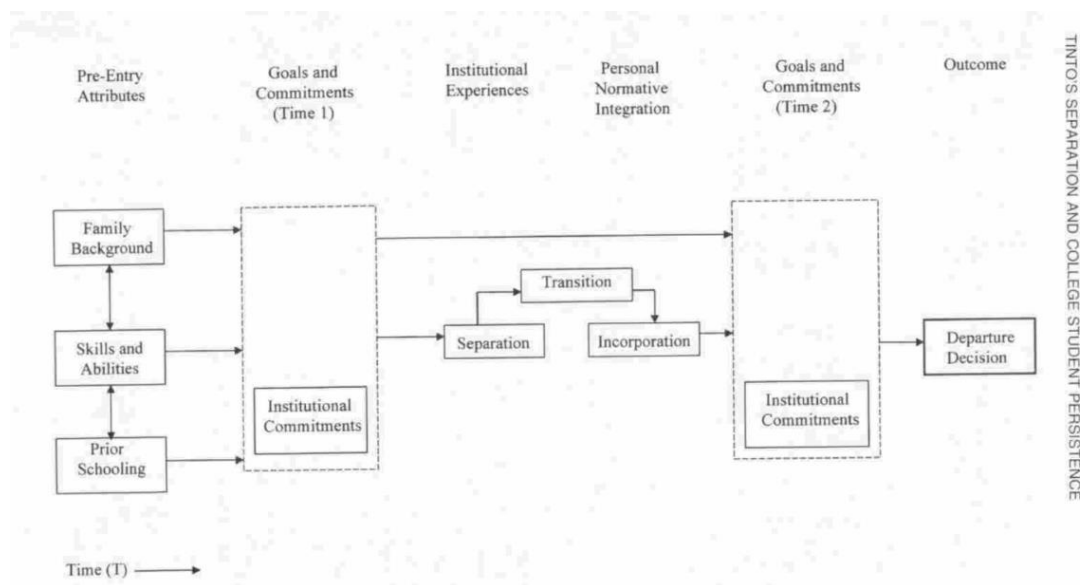
**Figure 1.**

Such a displayed figure is inspired by what happiness could be based on needs being met first. Maslow (1954) argued that people are happiest when they meet their basic hierarchy of needs. What is happiness? Happiness is defined as a state of psychological well-being or contentment in one's experiences (Maslow, 1954). Maslow studied happy people to determine what made them happy or self-actualized (Maslow, 1987).

Maslow (1987) refers to "peak experiences as the experience of happiness" (p. 22). Maslow described peak experience as a "tremendous intensification of any of the experiences in which there is a loss of self or transcendence of [self]" (Maslow, 1987, p. 165). Happiness can include several psychological variables. However, the differentials typically streamline to common characteristics. Diener (1984) for example, found variables important in promoting happiness were love, marriage, sex, children, exercise, health, friends, education, work, income, recognition, success, independence, personal values, and community involvement. Although the basic variables have typically stayed the same, new variations of happiness have transitioned into new knowledgeable advances further studied by Pettijohn. In a study Pettijohn (1996) examined representative examples from Maslow's four basic need levels to assess which need level is perceived by college students to lead to the greatest happiness; the results indicated that close social relationships are extremely important for happiness. Without focusing on such results of relationships and the causes of them, institutional belonging affects student departure.

### **Tinto's Interactionalist Theory of College Student Departure.**

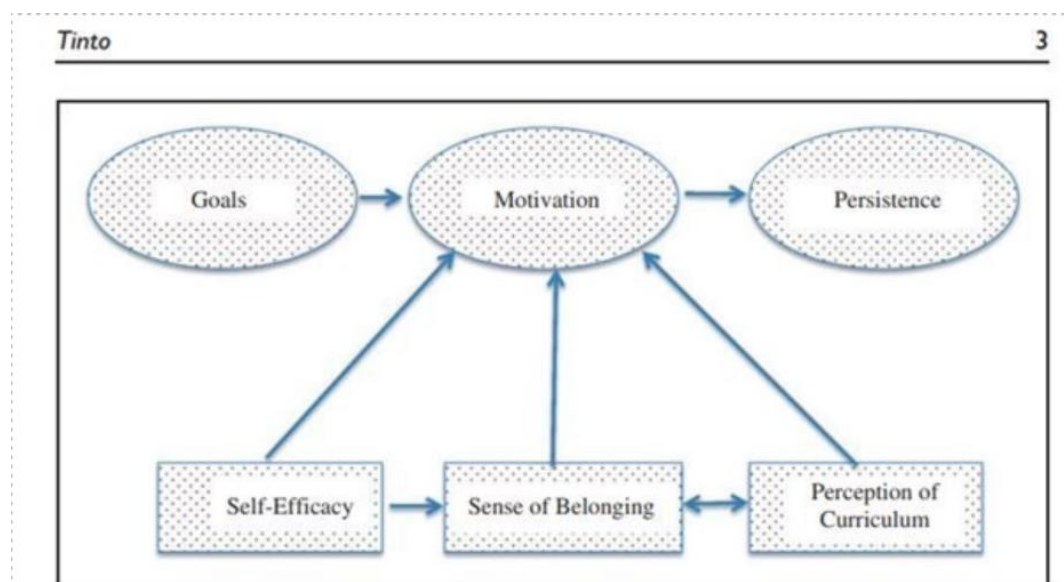
One of the most prominent theorists of student retention is Vincent Tinto. Tinto's theory stemmed from research on student retention issues at four-year colleges, his 'Model of Institutional Departure' (1993) has been widely tested and accepted by the educational community for over four decades. Tinto (1993) found that student's ability to reconcile the differences between their pre-determined expectations and goals with lived college experience affects their decision to depart or persist at their institution. Some examples of experiences that led to departure may include a lack of expectations, support, involvement, etc. Tinto (2004) suggests that "expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning promote persistence" (p. 2); these are key components to retention (Penn-Edwards & Donnison 2011). Tinto (2005) observes that 47 percent of American students do not complete their tertiary studies and 56 percent leave during their first year. Whether a student departs depends partly on how much they develop a strong sense of belonging and/or integration within the community (University of Main 2021). Integration can be determined with numerous facets of education. Dutch anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep contended that the movement of individuals from one group to another was marked by three distinct stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. Figure 2 reflects the combination of variables that lead to a student's departure decision.

**Figure 2.**

Tinto (1993) extended Genep's rites of passage stages through a process which college students establish membership in an institution's communities and of early student departure from college. With the stages of a framework, experiences of achievement and knowledge are presented. Tinto outlined the important relationship between the classroom experiences of student persistence and learning. In doing so, Tinto demonstrated the relationship between the student's experiences in the classroom and in other communities within the institution. The community that involvement brings is an important set of formulations centered on the institution as an interactive system comprised of academic and social reform. Reason (2005) proposed that the framework included multiple interrelated students, faculty, and institutional forces that influence an institution's success. These formulations posited academic and social integration as important factors in the departure decisions of students (Reason 2009). Tinto (2012) offered a similar framework that institutions could use to enhance student success based

on a sense of belonging, which is represented in Figure 3: where he emphasized the need for assessment and thoughtful reflection before initiating any intervention plan. Some students engage in certain stages more in depth than others. Separation for example, is the disassociation from one's previous communities. Students face separation from close friends and family in their first year of college. Based on outcomes, knowing how to mitigate such separation would be beneficial to college students, especially during the first year of their college career when they have most recently departed from their loved ones. An understanding of the influence of separation on early first-year student departure would contribute to policies and programs designed to reduce first-semester student departure (Braxton 2000).

**Figure 3.**



To understand a student's experience, it is helpful to examine the recurring problems a student encounters during their time at an institution. Recently, Tinto (2017) challenged institutions to refocus their lenses to see from a student perspective and move

from retention to persistence. To promote degree completion, Figure 3 reflects how institutions must consider the student perspective; not only how they should act to retain their students but also how they can help more of their students want to persist to completion. Doing so could help universities evolve and create opportunities for the success of all students (University of Maine 2021).

### **Pascarella and Terenzini's On Astin's Impact Theory**

Building on Tinto's initial model, Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) stated that "the absence of significant interactions with others facilitated with the college is the single leading predictor of college attrition." Students must experience interaction beyond the classroom to feel integrated. Research designed to test Tinto's model often confirms the importance of social and academic integration and the decision to withdraw (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Bean, 1980).

Pascarella & Terenzini (2017) state that the college environment has been the focus of a great deal of development research, and this research ultimately revealed a link between advanced morals and college attendance. Environmental and social needs can determine the moral compass of one's responsibilities, which is why great efforts have been made to determine how the collegiate environment contributes to a student's growth (Rest, 1986; King & Mayhew, 2002; 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005; 2017). This theory reflects the importance of being involved, but it also highlights the attrition issues that can occur if not highlighted. Tinto (2005) stated that "integration is a vital component for retaining all students, and it is particularly important in retaining minority students." Focusing on student involvement can increase retention for freshmen and minority students. The focus that the theory extends leads to new methods of retention

and achievement. For example, Braxton (2000) explains the forces shaping student departure during the first six weeks (e.g.) are qualitatively different from those after the first six weeks. It is more important to focus on the integration of earlier students than those that have been a part of the institution for more than a year. In a review of various studies, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991; 2005; 2017) identify important mechanisms for promoting growth in college students' moral reasoning: exposure to differing perspectives (e.g. family, friends, professors, roommates, classmates). For example, a certain experience might result in moral reasoning growth if it happens to an individual who is particularly receptive and reflective (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005; 2017). Pascarella (2006) indicates that, beyond racial and ethnic diversity, other types of diversity such as that related to religious beliefs, political views, social class, and friendships may also be important for retention. Indeed, exposure to various types of diversity can result in engagement with a wide variety of ideas and perspectives (Pascarella, 2006).

Among findings, campus racial climate influenced student participation in such social organizations. Lack of perceptions of racial diversity on campus enhanced white students' joining, but negatively affected minority students (Hurtado, 1997), whereas campuses that committed to diversity had a negative effect on white student participation (Chang, 1996). If one method of belonging in a network lean to one race or another, there may be another method to find a middle ground to limit diverse effects. One example may be overall multicultural avenues for students that get involved. Findings show that youths' peer networks are multicultural, school and home are more likely to be monocultural (Bauer, et al, 2012). Furthering our understanding of cultural identities in

adolescence can give us insight into how interculturalism functions in schools and in multicultural societies. In contexts where multiple ethnicities are present identity development may be understood with the concept of symbolic interactionism that poses we have multiple identities; that one or other identity is constructed and expressed primarily in interaction with others. Meaning, a university cannot control all interactions, or the perceptions of those reactions. In a classic work by Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism explains this phenomenon by placing the actor in the center of research observation, with a goal of the research being to understand the meaning that individuals give to their reality understood with three principles: (1) humans act toward people and things based on the interpretative meaning they have for them; (2) meaning is derived from interaction with others; and (3) meaning is manipulated and changed as humans interpret elements of their social world (Blumer 1969). In other words, identities are dynamic, not static; and revolve around situational, social, and personal characteristics that come into play in our social roles. Situational identities emerge in face-to-face interactions within the context of our socially situated roles at the time of an interaction (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney 2003). During an interaction, individuals in attendance will try to build a mutual definition of the situation.

Social class has an undeniable influence on college students' experiences in higher education. Social class shapes students' eligibility to attend college, influences what college they choose to attend, and negatively affects their persistence in higher education (Soria, 2012). Scholars with lower social economic backgrounds struggle with students' involvement and engagement on campuses. For example, Walpole (2003) found college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spent less time in student clubs

and groups compared to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Most scholars addressing the lower retention and completion rates of students from working-class backgrounds focus on examining differences in students' social integration and sense of belonging at their colleges and universities (Lehmann, 2007). Several scholars have noted that working-class students are more likely to withdraw from higher education because university life feels alien (Soria 2012). The students can have problems connecting with their wealthier peers, and they experience significant challenges becoming integrated into the social life of the institution (Aries & Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991; Hurst, 2010; Lehmann, 2007; Stuber, 2011). Overall, students of color and those from low-income backgrounds are much more likely to not benefit from opportunities (Heller, 2021).

Another demographic variable that can cause effects in research is biological sex. Opportunities for male and female students are still substantially different, and researchers such as Sheehan (2012) believe that this negatively affects motivation, which can also lead to decreasing of performance in school and overall life. One of the main factors in retention include biological sex. Wallace and Joy (2007) explain how crucial the differentiation of sexes is; they continue by expressing that shared research can help further understand the separation of students returning. Males for example display a greater amount of negative social behavior than females in the classroom (Downey & Yuan 2005). Perna (2005) suggests higher rates of college enrollment and degree attainment for women than for men. The payoff to educational attainment is generally greater for women than for men. The higher levels of educational attainment suggest that the higher college enrollment and degree attainment rates for women than for men reflect

rational decision-making processes (Perna, 2005). However, males are more willing to take risks and are less compliant than females, which may lead to a reward of belongingness (Thorne 1993).

There are risks in taking collective social variables for granted because of the analysis of impact factors such as biographical particularities (Althusser, 2010). “Concrete socio-political and cultural contexts are influential even when the analysis is accompanied by reflection from an intersectional or interdependent perspective” (Wimmer, 2009, p. 244).

### **Belongingness Overcoming the Many Factors of Attrition**

Belonging may pertain to emotional attachment and feeling at home, feeling ‘safe’ (Yuval 2006a). Even when simplified to feeling safe, it seems undeniable that belonging is multidimensional (Antonsich 2010). One can think of it as layers, or a pyramid of levels reflected by Maslow, or even characteristics of well-being. Kuurne and Vieno (2022) also define and connect belonging to multidimensional variations. Not Antonsich (2010) argues that many scholars assume that belonging is a term that divides societies into nations, cultures, classes, ethnicities, and sexualities.

Belonging tends to be become articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way. As Yuval (2006a) describes, the politics of belonging comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways, and at the same time, the politics themselves are constructed by these projects in very particular ways; its use also resides throughout the academic community. While the terms sense, place and practice are involved with belonging, Yuval (2006) argues that such aspects are used to preface belonging. Often under the theoretical microscope, belonging itself is

often considered self-explanatory, yet more empirical research continues to grow more than self-explanations. Paradoxically, the term is slippery and flexible. Belonging as a term has not been as theoretically contested as many terms in geography (Antonsich, 2010; Skrbiš et al., 2007; Wood and Waite, 2011). While many authors do engage with the term in detail, it is fair to say that belonging somehow seems to have escaped the level of rigorous theorization applied to many other foundational terms (Wright 2015). Despite ambiguity, belonging can be a pervasive concept, it is found in multiple articles, book titles and songs. It is, indeed, a concept of fundamental importance to people's lives. Feeling legally, morally or socially recognized as belonging or not has the power to bring together and to separate in the most intimate, loving, accepting, exclusionary or violent ways (Ahmed 2012). Ahmed (2012) offers a support explanation saying it explores the gap between symbolic commitments. Such an aspect of theory that explores uncharted ground can lead to an understanding of grey areas of belonging.

Belonging and learning are positive, so long as the structure remains. Borner (2013) reinforces the idea of structure with complexity as a theory that leads to practice. Therefore, it helps to be consistent with such structure when considering belonging. Osterman (2000) shares that the framework maintains that individuals have psychological needs, that satisfaction of these needs affects perception of behavior. Such characteristics of the framework can be used to maintain structure. The findings suggest that students' experience of acceptance influences multiple dimensions of their behavior but that schools adopt organizational practices that neglect and may undermine students' involvement experiences (Osterman 2000).

Not only must a framework be included for belonging to connect theory and action, but also that students come to see themselves as a member of a community of faculty, staff, and other students who value their participation, that they matter and belong (Tovar, 2013). The result is a bond, often expressed as a commitment, which serves to bind the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise (Tinto, 1987). It can refer to specific smaller communities within the institution such as with students with whom one shares a common interest or more broadly to the institution. This is the case because a smaller community of students may see themselves as outcasts from the larger institution (Sidanius et al, 2004). It is here that engagement matters, at least as it pertains to their engagement with others on campus (Trolan et al, 2016).

Tinto (2016) shares his newfound ideals of belonging in “From Retention to Persistence” by exclaiming that although sense of belonging can mirror students’ past, it is mostly shaped by the campus climate and perceptions of belonging in the community. Students derive such perceptions from their daily interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators on campus and the messages those interactions convey about their belonging (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

It is not only engagement that matters, though more engagement with others is generally better than less, as it is students’ perceptions of those engagements and the meaning they derive from them as to their belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1967; Strayhorn, 2012). Thus, the term “sense of belonging” is more about quality over quantity. Students who perceive themselves as belonging are more likely to persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also a willingness to engage others in ways that further

persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). By contrast, a student's lack of belonging, or feeling of being out of place, leads to withdrawal from contact that further undermines motivation to persist (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Extracurriculars can be further explained as examples to reflect a sense of belonging.

### **Introducing Intercollegiate Athletes and Belonging**

A student athlete is defined as an active member of an intercollegiate athletic team (Middle Tennessee State University 2020). Student athletes have an amazing opportunity to engage in experiences that offer a sense of belonging. Some opportunities include academic engagement, which is defined as “student participation and integration into mentoring and formal and informal academic integration programs” (e.g., tutoring) (Pope, 2002, P. 32). Although very busy balancing academics and athletics, college athletes are provided with environments and occurrences of belonging that can lead to helpful characteristics of success. Research shows a significant difference in the life satisfaction of athletic and non-athletic students, with athletic students having better life satisfaction (Malekian et al, 2014). The results indicated that career adaptability could partially mediate the relationship between future work self-salience and proactive career behavior among college student-athletes. In addition, athletic identity moderated the relationship between future work self-salience, career adaptability and proactive career behaviors (Lu, W., 2020). Some aspects of the examples of exemplified behaviors can blend the success that is involved in college, career, and overall life.

One characteristic that leads to student success of an athlete is the sense of belonging to a team to both struggle and accomplish together. Sport involvement cultivates in the realm of identity and recognition. A sense of belonging can be achieved

through recognition and cultural identification as one's environment can reflect aspects of self. Carter-Francique and Richardson (2015) outlined how traditionally HBCUs have provided safe havens for Black female college athletes to defy negative stereotypes attributed to them such as the notions of womanhood and beauty. Select empirical works have offered in-depth insights into the ways cultural artifacts, espoused beliefs, and nurturing personal relationships at HBCU campuses including athletic departments contributed to positive developmental outcomes for Black college athletes (Cooper & Cooper, 2015).

Similar to sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), the sense of community theory has been attributed to acknowledging the ways in which college athletes create and adopt community while attending institutions of higher education (Carter- Francique, 2018; Warner & Dixon, 2011). In their study of Division I college athletes, Warner and Dixon (2011) contended administrative consideration as social spaces, competitive respect, equitable administrative decision making, and leadership opportunities are key components of a sense of community. Culture is understood as shared characteristics among group members and these characteristics range from language, music, and social habits (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). A sense of belonging can be achieved through cultural recognition and cultural identification as culture can reflect aspects of self (Joseph Cooper & Ajhanai Newton, 2021).

When connecting belongingness to societal achievements, one study conducted by Bettina J. Huber (2010) lead to preliminary insights that suggest that participation enhances GPA, reduces time to degree among respondents entering as first-time freshmen, and increases the likelihood that respondents will graduate in a timely

fashion. This study could add insights to experiential learning and high-impact practices which could inform student success initiatives.

### **Time Used Appropriately**

When considering the time demands of student athletes, rigid scheduling is a major factor of student success that can stand out (Jolly 2008). One often questions what causes the time deficiencies of athletes academically.

Jolly (2008) shares how “athletic culture, extreme time demands on student-athletes, and the university setting all contribute to the difficulties that many student-athletes face in succeeding academically. Most student-athletes carry a full load of courses and practice at least two to four hours per day. Little do outsiders know, student-athletes usually enroll in a full course load of 15 credits. Dropping a course because of time constraints could lead to them losing their NCAA eligibility (Meyer, 2005). Nationally, 82.1% of student-athletes report spending over 10 hours a week practicing their sport, and 40.2% report spending over 10 hours a week playing their sport (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006). This time commitment begins as soon as the athletes sign the dotted line. Hollis (2002) says “once student athletes sign their letter of intent, coaches and athletic administration have control over [their] lives...” (p. 95).

With such a factor, athletes miss class, exams, or even choose specific majors that help accommodate their time in athletics (Hollis 2002). Such time constraints lead athletes to being described as a disadvantage population.

Although time constraints may lead to a negative viewing of student athletes succeeding academically, there is literature that reflects athletes do want help with their

time constraints. “In a nation-wide study (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006), approximately 53% of student-athletes stated that they had not spent as much time on all aspects of their academic work as they would have liked, with 80% of them citing athletics participation as the reason. Approximately 68% said that they would have liked to have spent more time and pursued more educational opportunities available at their universities, including research projects and internships.”

With the invitation for help, the use of time athletes are engaged in reflects many positives qualities of belonging. Literature suggests that college athletics programs can be beneficial in promoting student-athlete character development, academic success, and opportunities (Jolly 2008). Athletic leaders can hinder the negative factors of academic time for their athletes by delving into such characteristics of belonging. One characteristic is to ensure that an athlete's identity is that of a student rather than just an athlete (Jolly 2008). Perhaps student-athletes’ relative isolation from other students and campus academic life is one reason why 61.8% of student-athletes still at least “somewhat agree” that they view themselves as more of an athlete than a student (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006). Too many students identify as athletes because most of their time requires athletic ventures. Jolly (2008) continues by stating such an issue can be done by continually monitoring class attendance and grades, coaches create a structured environment, which supports the objective of attaining academic success. With time constraints, plans and structure can be used to prosper. One example shared in Rost’s (2015) dissertation about the “Academic Plan” program at Middle Tennessee State University:

“The academic plan is an objective based program where student-athletes are assigned to study table hours and complete daily objectives to ensure their work is completed on a scheduled basis. Study hall is available to all student-athletes during the hours of 7:00 AM - 10:00 PM Monday - Thursday and 7:00 AM - 4:30 PM on Friday. The Student-Athlete Enhancement Center consists of a computer lab, private tutoring rooms, private study rooms, and study tables. A full-time staff member, mentors and tutors are available to provide assistance and to monitor academic progress” (Middle Tennessee State University, 2014, p. 1).

College athletes are allocated a limited amount of time for athletic participation (Moleski 2023), which may lead to persistence academically. With allocation of time, other areas of success may correlate. Studies have found sense of belonging, financial aid types, and amounts change over time and consequently influence behavior differently as students persist (DesJardins et al., 2002; Kamer & Ishitani, 2021; Means & Pyne, 2017). The overall changes over time can involve such programs selections previously shared.

### **Well-Being of College Athletes**

Amongst success factors, an athlete's well-being is an important focus. Athletes continue participation in intercollegiate athletics could result in adjustment problems, emotional concerns, and psychological distress during their time in college (Watson, 2005). The stigma of mental health concerns continue to cause tensions because of the lack of support and consistency. Student-athletes experience college differently than their non-athlete peers as athletes have responsibilities for competition, performance, and academics (Moreland et al., 2018).

With tensions and differences amongst peer groups, organizational barriers prevent student-athletes from seeking mental health assistance, such as the lack of on-site services (Sudano & Miles, 2017), a safe physical space for emotional expression (Taylor, 2014), and an organizational infrastructure for care (Sharpe, 2014). With such previously researched, it is argued that athletes are more at risk for mental health problems than their non-athlete peers, including depression, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, and disordered eating (Moore, 2017). If student athletes are more prone to mental disorders, one would think that the first step would be to find out how an athlete qualifies for help. Kaier et al. (2015) reported that 10-15% of collegiate athletes experience mental health challenges significantly enough to qualify for psychological services. Moore (2017) found that 23% of Division I athletes met the criteria for clinical help for their depression. It is no wonder athletes fall into the category of needing mental support with what one may say is too much engagement. It is safe to say that stressors include academic challenges, travel, time compression, or even competition pressure if they experience injuries which require rehabilitation (Kaier et al., 2015). However, other literature shares how the many engaging activities can lead to positive outcomes (i.e. graduating on time) with certain parameters and support.

With the well-being of athletes having so many negative factors hindering their success, it is important to make some adjustments to level the playing field and lead student athletes on the right path to success. Sasso et. al. (2022) student-athletes in this study coped with generalized anxiety, episodic depression, and stress from their schedule compression but sought informal support because of the fear of stigma. Informal support may be better than no support at all, but formal support with characteristics of

belongingness such as community study spaces, discussing patterns, mentoring, and many others are proven to lead athletes to success. To begin, on-site services (Sudano & Miles, 2017), a safe physical space for emotional expression (Taylor, 2014), and an organizational infrastructure for care (Sharpe, 2014) are some formal physical ideals to help students deal with their well-being. With spaces provided, Sasso et. al. (2022) explains how it is important to understand the patterns of support seeking behavior. Patterns of mental health described challenges among student-athletes such as anxiety and depression. Although each athlete has unique situations, some patterns can be pinpointed by professionals. Sasso et al (2022) shares this can be done by including educational programming and collaborative efforts with university counseling services. Although it seems to be common sense, it was found that student athletes prefer same-gender counselors (López & Levy, 2013) and athletic trainers for “intimate-area” injuries (O’Connor et al., 2010). Like any other counseling enigma, it helps that counselors are chosen based on familiarity with their specific sport, gender, and age (López & Levy, 2013). When preferred characteristics of well-being are taken care of, aspects of belonging thrive. One aspect would be that of building relationships. More specifically, strong relationships with the mental health professional, positive interactions with the provider, and positive social support (Gulliver et al., 2012). Such interactions can lead to a certain hierarchy of needs that can help lead athletes to success. One need that grows when focusing on well-being is the ideal viewing of oneself. Self-development focuses on the support given to student-athletes that enhances professional career development and other experiences that enhance the self (e.g., community engagement initiatives). When one enhances, it gives the chance for others to hear about it, leading to the circle of

well-being enhancement. For instance, the seminal work of Gable et al. (2004), shows that the sharing of good news with others (a positive event) can lead to greater levels of affective well-being.

Not only can the increase of engagement help with one's well-being, but the lack of it may lead to backwards effects. This lack of engagement with support services such as counseling among athletes also impacts their mental health as they navigate performance, career transition, and personal life issues (Tuner, 2016). The line between succeeding in helping athletes and their mental health is very thin. In Sasso's et. al. (2022) research, participants explained that they felt supported by athletic department staff but understood that many of them may lack the experience or knowledge in helping with mental health concerns. The participants reported that they rarely sought support or resources outside of the athletic department. So not only might there be an issue where student athletes are not getting the help they deserve, but there may also be a smoke and mirrors situation causing more issues.

Luckily for universities, they have the trusted help of the NCAA. The NCAA provides guidance on additional best practices that emphasizes the need for mental health providers and supports to be easily accessible to all student-athletes (Sudano et al., 2017). The NCAA strongly encourages institutions to employ a mental health professional relating to sport psychology; this could even be a certified athletic trainer who specializes in mental health (Zakrajsek et al., 2016).

### **Athlete Support Services**

For this study's purpose, academic services can be defined as services offering flexible study, course options, and personalized academic guidance. Examples of academic support are personal tutors that work with student-athletes to help guide their study in specific courses and flexible course scheduling (e.g., Ko et al., 2008). Such services have reflected success since Tinto (1993), who found that counseling and advising programs lead to goal clarity and actuality of presence on campus. With such clarity, research has shown that the provision of educational services assists individuals to live more fulfilling and satisfying lives (Michalos, 2017).

A different transformative approach of services includes social capitalization support. Social capitalization support can be defined as intangible support services users receive via social interactions with other consumers/members participating in a service experience (Plaud & Urien, 2021). Social support promotes well-being through sharing with others the positive impacts that experiences and events offer; this amplifies the positive outcomes of the event or experience and leaves a longer-lasting impact on well-being (Feeney and Collins, 2015). Such support increases student athletes' success and leads students away from negative outcomes. Perceived support can be characterized as individuals' interactions with each other while participating in a service is typically created and used to protect people from negative events or experiences (e.g., trauma, stress, depression) (Shorey and Lakey, 2011)

Overall, the lack of a transformative service orientation and the absence of an explicit focus on the interrelationship between performance and well-being outcomes in relation to support services.

Support services are offered in many shapes and sizes. One example of developing an understanding of different supports and forming an effective relationship with student-athletes are opening new lines of communication beyond the classroom; this can be done by venturing into their world. Informal, social interactions between faculty and students can provide an important foundation for students to pursue more academically oriented interactions with faculty (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). Such interactions may be visiting athletes at practices, games, or other team functions. By developing a greater understanding of the student-athletes' world, faculty enable themselves to provide more effective and compassionate academic support. (Jolly 2008). Jolly (2008) strongly believes that faculty are uniquely positioned to play one of the most significant roles in student-athlete academic success.

Another positive ideal includes helping athletes right before their transition, or immediately upon entering the college realm. What may have a significant difference on the retention and academic success of student-athletes is a system-wide requirement for first-year students academic support activities or receive powerful consequences. The data showed that summer school before the beginning of the freshmen year of college is statistically significant and has a positive impact on student-athlete graduation rates (Hollis 2002).

Diving into the more specific aspects of such student-athlete services, mentorship may be at the top of the list. Studies indicate that information and advice, such as that provided by a mentor, might be a productive remedial factor for reducing student attrition at the college level (Campbell 2007). For the sake of the literature, Campbell defines a mentor as a "more-experienced member of an organization maintains a relationship with

a less experienced, often new, member and provides information, support, and guidance for the purpose of enhancing the latter's chances of organizational success" (p. 136). Mentorship often enhances academic support in other areas (tutoring, counseling, financial aid), with the objective of creating a campus climate that contributes to the retention and academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It helps to match mentor and mentee applicants with faculty or staff based on such criteria as academic specialty. Moreover, tactics to use mentors in a correct manner may need structured guidelines. Some practical sub scales of athletic department support services include common interest, equity in administrative decisions, administrative consideration, healthy competition, leadership opportunities, and social spaces (Campbell 2007). Campbell (2007) continues by describing four principal themes that emerged directly from the college athletes themselves, which were openness and honesty, equal treatment, intentional programming, and informal interaction. With examples presented by the athletes, the themes demonstrate the athletic department culture that resulted in a high sense of community.

Specific qualities of the athletic department, such as a willingness to have open and honest dialogue, equal treatment, purposeful efforts to create opportunities for social interaction, and easy opportunities to casually interact, were important to the athletes and indicate the department's valuation of the athletes' well-being during their time at the institution. While openness and honesty, equal treatment, intentional programming, and informal interaction are all supported by the job satisfaction and community building sport literature (Warner & Dixon, 2013), this work demonstrates how these mechanisms are fundamental to the college athlete experience.

Considering accountability, it is important for educational facilitators to provide the right services and management to ensure the positives included with being a student athlete. The management of athletes is particularly important for the various college sport stakeholders (e.g., coaches, teammates, administration, athletic trainers, etc.) who work to maintain athlete motivation and overall performance (Rey & Johnson, 2021).

Stakeholders are the catalyst for student athletes to feel a sense of belonging and community.

Of the services mentioned, there are many unique prime examples universities engage in. One clear service provided is Louisiana State University's Cox Communications Academic Center for Student-Athletes, which has 90 computer stations, including 14 private computer rooms within its 54,000 square feet of space and cost upwards of \$15 million. Another example is the MTSU Student-Athlete Enhancement Center (2020), which is committed to a comprehensive program of life skills that provides educational experience and services to accomplish the following:

- a. Encourage growth in decision-making, planning and fulfillment of career and life goals
- b. Enhance the quality of the student-athlete experience within the university setting
- c. Support the efforts of every student-athlete toward intellectual development and graduation
- d. Enhance interpersonal relationships in the lives of the student-athletes
- e. Assist student-athletes to make meaningful contributions to their communities

If universities struggle to find ways to enhance the success of their student athletes, the NCAA can help. Although some may think the NCAA runs a tight ship, it leaves athletic leaders accountable for student athletes. By providing powerful

consequences for academic support service attendance, the NCAA and athletic departments have significantly improved academic performance, retention, and graduation in a population that was otherwise underachieving (NCAA, 2011). The recent academic success by this subpopulation might have identified a significant link between required attendance in academic support services and increased academic performance among college students.

### **Academic Performance Affected to What Degree**

Student-athletes often enter the realm of post-secondary education with low self-efficacy as students and, hence, low academic motivation. A University of Maryland study found that student athletes were less confident about their ability to make good grades (“B” average) than non-athletes (Eiche, Sedlacek, & Adams-Gaston, 1997). Student athletes often have a weak self-image of themselves as students and corresponding low academic motivation creates significant challenges to their academic success (Jolly 2008).

Some athletes may seek short-term academic success by choosing an easier major like Communication Studies. Jolly’s example (2008) shares that many student athletes are trying to make it academically in the field of Communication Studies. At California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), approximately 25% of student-athletes are Communication Studies majors, such as broadcasting, journalism, public relations, etc. Some athletes generally want to pursue such majors to shift their identity in an academic way, but other actionable academic purposes may be the better answer.

Part of helping student-athletes overcome their academic challenges is working with them to strengthen their identity and self-efficacy as students (Jolly 2008). Too

many athletes view themselves as more of an athlete than a student. Higher education leaders can help this by understanding the day-to-day lives of student-athletes and the challenges that they face.

Moleski (2023) states the higher the GPA in the first year of attendance, the greater success, which increases the influence on retention and degree completion (Millea et al., 2018). First year attention is crucial for the impact of retention and success. In that first year, faculty interaction significantly impacts student success (Kuh et al., 2006). Overall social integration such as participation in extracurricular offerings, contact with peers, and living on campus also positively influence retention rates (Boatman & Long, 2016; Chen, 2012).

Payne , B. C., et al (2016) states that such success characteristics are needed: standardization, camaraderie, and non-favoritism. Whether by design or by chance, this system appears to have leveled the academic–athletic chasm that institutions can experience. Which leads to Payne, B. C., et al (2016) finding that student-athletes perform comparably to nonathletes after controlling for predicted academic performance. While non-athletes are generally able to manage their own academic schedules and social lives, many athletes' schedules are set by others and are tightly regimented. Their results suggest that athletes perform at or above a level consistent with their nonathlete counterparts after controlling predicted academic performance. The NCAA (2022) states that since the implementation of Division I academic reform initiatives in the early 2000s, long-term graduation rate increases have been observed. Many question whether there have been transfer issues or uncontrollable pandemics that have affected student athletes' achievement. The NCAA shares that even though Division I has seen an increase in

transfer behavior, many subgroups federal graduation rates continue to trend higher for student-athletes (2022). Such success is highlighted by certain initiatives that universities can include in their support service plans for athletes. The initiatives published by the NCAA (2022) include modified initial eligibility and progress-toward-degree standards, and application of the Academic Performance Program.

### **Chapter Two Summary**

It can be important to use the sense of belonging and theories that branch from it to further understand the disconnect of achievement. Students who feel that they belong show greater persistence and goal-directed learning (Schachner et al., 2019). “As a result, they perform better, which in turn may lead to more academic educational trajectories and higher educational attainment” (Burger, 2023, p. 30).

Abraham Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs comes at the forefront of the most important studies on motivation. This theory put forward by Maslow argues that humans are motivated not by external motives such as reward and punishment but by internal needs (Uysal et.al, 2017). In his theory, Maslow (1943) argues that human needs are unlimited, after a need is satisfied, another need will arise, needs have a certain hierarchical order. Every need is related to satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other needs, and unsatisfied needs are a great source of motivation for humans (Maslow, 1948).

To connect Maslow’s needs to retention, Tinto’s Integration Theory is used to combat his attrition studies. “After enrolling at a college, a student’s integration and fit into a college environment is viewed as determining the likelihood of retention” (Lee et al, 2010, p. 260). If a student’s environment is encompassed by commitments and goals regarding the requirements of student athletes, the ideal of fitting in can lead to a higher

likelihood of graduating. Tinto's model has been utilized to demonstrate that a student's initial commitment to an institution and to the goal of graduation influences the level of the student's integration into the academic and social systems of the college (Beil et al., 1999). In turn, there is a reason why researchers continue focusing on student experiences and the effects on undergraduate retention and graduation rates (Haupt 2018).

With Tino's theory highlighting attrition issues, Pascarella and Terenzini's College Impact Theory can then be used to connect the significance of the absence of interactions. Such a theory takes a student's previous experiences and correlates them to how a student will interact with an institution's environment. "The nature and quality of these interactions lead to differences in students' levels of integration into academic and social systems" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, p. 214). Such a theoretical standpoint transitions higher levels of engagement to persistence.

Student-athletes face unique challenges to succeed academically. Some issues forementioned are managing time and well-being. Other issues include lack of knowledge or resources. Unfortunately, many general campus academic support personnel and faculty have limited, if any, direct knowledge of these challenges. By continually monitoring class attendance and grades, coaches create a structured environment, which supports the objective of attaining academic success. Such scholarly services influence initial enrollment decisions, signal an institution's commitment to a student, and improve the retention of college athletes (Millea et al., 2018).

To test the effect of hierarchal needs, interaction, and persistence, student athletes seemed to be the best variable to use because their engagement encompasses the

theoretical components previously mentioned. Engagement activities such as college athletics, embody the sense of belonging and enlisted aspects of theoretical streams of student success.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Design**

The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between student involvement in collegiate sports and graduation success. The importance of belonging in collegiate athletics was measured with graduation rates, but its effects are also determined by interviews and surveys student athletes took part in. With a variety of qualitative and quantitative data used, a mixed methods design was chosen. A mixed methods design is specifically defined as incorporating elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell & Creswell 2018). However, a mixed method type of research has many elements. To further understand the characteristics of such a design, the Creswells' shared that (2018, p. 215) it involves the collection of both qualitative (open-ended research) and quantitative (close-ended). For this study, such open-ended and closed-ended data is in response to research questions. Although a mixed methods approach is typically rigorous, both the quantitative and qualitative data used were publicly shared and easily obtained. The mixed methods process can be further explained by describing it as merging, explaining, building, or embedding (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Since a mixed methods approach is typically based on some type of theory, the sense of belongingness to the lens of informational differences.

A mixed method has many different types of pathways to further analyze research. For this study's purpose, a convergent mixed methods design was chosen because the researcher is converging data from interviews, surveys, and expo facto data already collected. "A main assumption of this approach is that both qualitative and

quantitative data provide different types of information-often detailed views of participants qualitatively and scores on instruments quantitatively-and together they yield results that should be the same” (Creswell & Creswell 2018, p. 217). The following figure reflects the alignment of mixed methodology phases.

Figure 4.

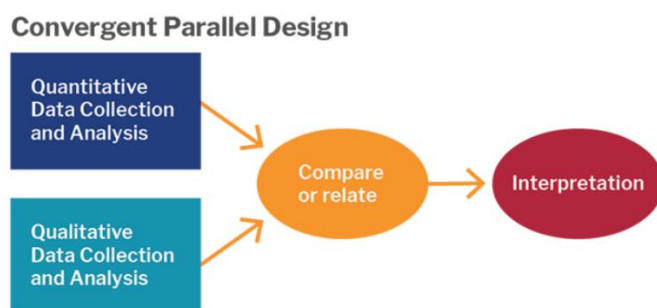


Figure 4 depicts how both qualitative and quantitative were both accessed publicly at the same time. Both were accessed in the beginning of the process, giving the researcher time to compare and interpret later in the study. A mixed method approach strengthens the data collected by converging them. Figure 5 reflects the pros and cons of the convergent design used in this study.

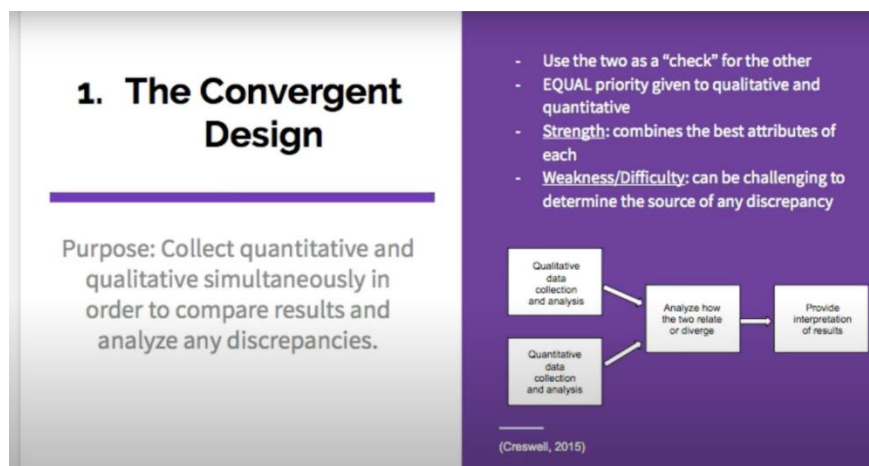


Figure 5.

(Estes, L. Haptner, C. & O’Konis, K., 2017)

To use the similarities and differences to yield similar results independently, a certain process is needed. “Analyze the qualitative database by coding the data and collapsing the codes into broad themes. Then analyze the quantitative database in terms of statistical results. Finally, the mixed methods data analysis integrating the two databases is completed” (Creswell & Creswell 2018, p. 219).

This study presented no risk to the participants. As the dataset was retrieved from public databases for secondary analysis, there were no identifiers or personal information of any of the subjects within the analysis. Leman (2004) defines “minimal risk” describes the probability and magnitude of harm or potential discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Also note that research that involved more than minimal risk will disqualify this study from exemption. The study provided minimal risk, but also no reward for the participants. However, similar future students may benefit from the public findings. The public availability is particularly important as it enhances transparency, credibility, and dependability of both the data obtained by the platform and the results of this study (Nowell et al., 2017)

As graduation rates from previous years of archived data were available, the method used is deemed as an Ex post facto design. Ex post facto study, or after-the-fact research, is a category of tableign in which the investigation starts after the fact has occurred without interference from the researcher (Salkind, 2010). This research design did not include any form of manipulation or measurement before the fact occurred. In essence, the researcher did not interfere, nor can interfere with the students that have or have not continued their education. Afterward, the continuation of the process was followed by the exploration of the causes behind the evidence selected for analysis. The

researcher took the dependent variable (graduation rates) and examined it longitudinally to identify possible causes and relationships between the dependent variable and one or more independent variables (student athletes vs. non-student athletes). After the deconstruction of the causal process responsible for the facts observed and selected for analysis, the researcher can eventually adopt a prospective approach, monitoring what happens after that (Salkind 2010).

To specify the distinctions between student involvement and success, the most recent cohorts were used to compare the graduation rates of both athletes and non-athletes. Since graduation rates (numerical data) from archived data were used, a quantitative method was chosen. Other quantitative characteristics described by (Johnson & Christensen, 2020) are the following:

- a. Top-down research, defined as the researcher tests the hypothesis and theory with data
- b. Ontology including objective, material, structural, and agreed-upon
- c. Views of human thought and behavior are regular and predictable
- d. Casual explanation and description
- e. Interests identify general scientific law and inform national policy
- f. Focus including a narrow-angle lens testing a specific hypothesis
- g. Behavior isolates the causal effect of single variables
- h. Data is collected by structured and validated instruments

To narrow the descriptive distinctions of student success, a qualitative method was also used to get more of a holistic analysis of the study. Qualitative research is defined as the means to explore groups or individuals based on a social internal or

external problem (Creswell & Creswell 2018). In the case of qualitative data for this study, its data was generated from interviews shared in the publicly available.

Considering the certain sense of belonging characteristics involved in the question process, interpretations were made involving the graduation rates affected.

Of the differentiated methods, a non-experimental design was used because of the (Kerlinger 1986) systematic empirical inquiry in which the researcher did not have direct control of the independent variables. Inferences about the relationships involving the variables were made without direct intervention (p.348).

### **Data Collection**

As stated before, all data used in this study was archived data. Archival research involves seeking out and extracting information from public and/or private documents and records (Blendinger & Adams, 2015). All data used in this research is considered a secondary analysis because the data sets were previously used in other studies.

Of the sources of public data used, the first counteracts the claims made about the struggles of time demands (see Table 1. in chapter 4) and academic experiences for athletes (see Table 2. in chapter 4). This data source refers to athlete responses collected from the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) exit interviews published by the NCAA in 2019, further used in a 2021 published dissertation entitled “NCAA Exit Interviews and Surveys: Academic Experiences of College Athletes” by Molly Harry of University of Virginia. The data was also gathered by a Journalism platform entitled *The Intercollegiate*, which was used to further explain the secondary analysis in this study. Analyses revealed that exit interview and survey (EIS) questions pertaining to educational experiences focused on the following areas surrounding athletic/institutional

environment and academic achievements. The first sample set will include exit interviews from a mix of athletes selected. Seventeen FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision) institutions' exit interviews and surveys with 528 athletes, focusing on athletes' academic experiences. "These required interviews are conducted by the athletic director, senior woman administrator (SWA) or another representative (excluding coaches and team staff members). Interviews must be performed with each sport, but the sample of athletes selected is determined by the institution (NCAA Manual, 2019). The only factor institutions must consider when selecting athletes is that their athletic eligibility has expired. Having completed eligibility may result in less retaliation and allows for athletes to provide feedback and express their opinions more honestly" (Harry 2021, p.66).

It is unknown if the representatives interviewing the athletes performed member checking by returning their session notes to athletes to corroborate findings. Additionally, the validity of the responses requires some assumptions. The first assumption is that the athletes participating in the EIS answered the questions honestly. The second assumption is that for EIS that were recorded by a representative rather than the athletes themselves, the representative accurately and truthfully represented the answers athletes provided. Thus, the EIS documents only reflect the insight provided by the athletes to their institutions. (Harry 2021).

Although the internal validity of these documents has not been addressed by the researcher, this data set is available to the public and other researchers, reliability of this research is maintained (Merriam, 2002; Nowell et al., 2017)." In regard to the study, the number of athletes used are efficient for a descriptive analysis adding to the effects of graduation rate success.

The second data analysis stems from the Gallup Alumni Survey that reflects the well-being of students. This survey includes 4,889 athletes and 69,012 non-student athletes were used as the sample set (see in Table 3. in chapter 4). In partnership with the NCAA, Gallup endeavored to examine the long-term outcomes of NCAA student-athletes who graduated from college between 1975 and 2019 through the Gallup Alumni Survey, the largest national study of U.S. college graduates. The following excerpt defines the purpose research of the research pulled from the second data analysis:

“This study builds on prior research Gallup conducted on behalf of the NCAA in 2016, which demonstrated that NCAA student-athletes enjoyed greater levels of thriving in their wellbeing and engaged in important undergraduate experiences at higher rates than their non-athlete peers. The current investigation sought to delve more deeply into the long-term experiences of U.S. college athletes, looking specifically at patterns across decades, comparing sports, NCAA membership divisions, and a variety of athlete characteristics including gender, first generation and transfer status. These findings serve as evidence of NCAA leaders’ fulfillment of the NCAA’s scholastic mission, in addition to its support of student-athletes on the field and in terms of their lifelong success. It also offers insights into how NCAA members can further promote student-athletes’ long-term wellbeing and achievement by enhancing undergraduate experiences aligned with positive outcomes for decades beyond their wins in collegiate sport” (2020 p.2).

The third leg of data used stems from the American College Health Association’s National College Health Assessment (ACHA- NCHA). ACHA-NCHA is known

nationally for its survey findings that benefit the academic performance of students. For this study's sake, the data used examined self-reported mental health concerns of NCAA student-athletes compared with their nonathlete peers (see Table 4. in chapter4). The semi-annual survey of college students covers several mental and physical health topics reflecting specific concerns of student well-being. Institutions have overall power of choices and timing of administering the survey. The data spans from Spring 2018 to Spring 2019. See sample set explanation for further information in Appendix A.

The fourth and final public study included the graduation rates of 2019-2022 used by the NCAA (see Tables 5, 6, and 7 in chapter 4). Like most studies reporting rates, this too highlights four-class aggregations, which were based on cohorts that entered 2012-2015.

Within the updates reflected in the report, the federal graduation rate is defined a specific way. Part of the studies abstract explains the measurements in the following way:

“The federal graduation rate is federally mandated reporting of student body and student-athlete (if on athletics aid) graduation from an initial college/university. The rate essentially measures retention at that school. Graduation must occur within six years of initial entry. The federal rate makes no accommodation for transfers into or out of a school. Transfers out are recorded as academic failures. Transfers into the school are not tracked. The federal rate is the only published rate that allows a direct comparison between student-athletes and the general student body. Federal Graduation Rate Calculation The graduation metric was developed by NCAA presidents. The calculation is mandated for

student-athletes only. It should not be compared with the federal rate. Graduation must occur within six years of initial entry.” (NCAA Research, 2022, p. 33).

The Graduation Success Rate (GSR) is also used in this NCAA research study. GSR is used to include the transfers, midyear enrollees, and non-scholarship students without the typical athletic aid. The following abstract information further specifies certain discrepancies that must be included:

“Student-athletes who leave school while academically eligible to compete are removed from the calculation (assumed transfers passed on to another school’s cohort). Student athletes who leave school while ineligible to compete are coded as nongraduates (even though many are known to transfer). Both assumptions are imperfect but lead to a graduation rate that better approximates a true student-centered rate (student earns a degree from some college within six years of entering higher education)” (NCAA Research, 2022, p. 34).

As shared within the description, tables that reflect single years refer to the respective cohort. For example, 2022 data represents the 2015-26 cohort. While 2021 represents 2014-15 cohort data. These cohorts of retrospective reported years are used in tables that reflect trends.

Such a collection of data can help by being a variety of logistical athletic occurrences that lead to the knowledge of effectiveness that belonging in a college sport attribute. This content analysis allows a researcher to use close (critical) reading strategies to examine the content in publications. As Blendinger and Adams (2015) put it, the findings, conclusions, and recommendations put forth in a research report are

amenable to implementation for the purpose of solving a specific problem or providing a course of action leading to improvement (e.g., student achievement).

### **Sample**

For this study, mixed methods were used to explore the effect belongingness has on the graduation rates between student athletes and regular student body.

To first clarify the differentials of time and resources that can affect such, participants chosen from the first study included collegiate athletes selected by their institutions to complete EIS, and had also exhausted their athletic eligibility at their institution by the end of the 2019 academic year ( $n = 528$ ). Data used from these exit interviews are later reflected in Tables 1 and 2 of chapter IV. Of the 528 athletes chosen in Harry's study (2021), 437 were used as a sample set to delineate athlete responses to academic experiences. To determine athlete responses about time demands, 360 of the 528 were used (Harry 2021). Of the 528 athletes chosen, not all answered every academic performance and/or time constraint question. According to Harry (2021), *The Intercollegiate* filed formal records requests with every Division I institution subject to public disclosure laws for 2018-2019 EIS documents (Exit Interviews, n.d.). One hundred and twenty-one institutions complied with the requests, but only 63 offered athlete responses. Of those, 17 were in the FBS and constitute the sample in this study. The EIS in this sample included surveys filled out by the athletes themselves ( $n = 9$  schools) and interview documents in which athlete responses were recorded by a representative ( $n = 8$  schools). The EIS in this sample ranged in style of questions, such as Likert scale, yes/no, and open-ended and topics.

In partnership with the NCAA, the next sample set regards Gallup examining the long-term well-being outcomes of NCAA student-athletes who graduated from college between 1975 and 2019 through the Gallup Alumni Survey, the largest national study of U.S. college graduates. This data set is later used in Table 3 of chapter IV. For this well-being sample set, the total number of student athletes involved was 4,889, compared alongside, 69,012 non-student athletes were used as the sample set. The specific methodology behind the study included both web surveys and cold calls.

The third sample set from American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA); this data set is further reflected in Table 4 of chapter IV with the specified sample description as follows:

“The data used in this report spans three administrations from spring 2018 through spring 2019. However, only one administration from each NCAA-member school was part of the dataset to avoid including participants multiple times in the sample. An institution's selected survey administration was that which had the largest sample of varsity athletes. To compare student-athletes to their nonathlete peers, we further limited the sample to full-time undergraduate students, ages 18-24, attending NCAA-member institutions. The sample contained 106,374 nonathletes and 9,057 self-identified varsity athletes” (p.2)

The last sample set is further reflected in Tables 5 and 6 of chapter IV; it involved freshmen cohort years 2012-2015. Considering the entering cohorts, the sample set graduation rates for both Division I athletes and the student body were 2019-2022; these cohorts were selected because they were the most recent of the four-year cohort data represented. This sample included 96,438 students in total. A further description of

federal and graduation success rate differentiates based on certain variables. The explanations can be found in the data collection section.

Since all data sets were retrieved from public databases, there will be no identifiers as to the identity or personal information of any of the subjects in the analysis, and therefore, no informed consent, disclosure, or confidentiality documentation was required.

### **Data Analysis**

Mixed methods was chosen so neither side of research is limiting another. It allows a sophisticated tactic for tackling contemporary methods of research. On a procedural level, the Creswells (2018, p.216) describe the use of the mixed methods strategy with the following characteristics:

- Comparing different perspectives of both quantitative and qualitative data.
- Explaining quantitative results with a qualitative follow-up data collection and analysis.
- Developing better contextualized measurements instruments by first collecting and analyzing qualitative data and then administering the instruments to a sample.
- Augmenting experiments or trials by incorporating the perspectives of individuals.
- Develop cases (i.e., organizations, units, or programs) or documenting diverse cases for comparisons.
- Developing a more complete understanding of changes needed for a marginalized group through the combination of qualitative and quantitative data.

Evaluating the processes and outcomes of a program, an experimental intervention, or a policy decision.

With content analysis upon archival data, descriptive statistical details are required. Descriptive analysis is defined as an analysis of data for variables in a study which includes describing the results through means, standard deviations, and range of scores (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). To further specify the analysis design, a longitudinal secondary analysis is used to converge research. Longitudinal data is collected over time to examine the development of ideas and trends (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the specific purpose of analyzing the data, four-year cohort data will be converged of the longitudinal data of graduation rates.

Since the study used longitudinal data involving descriptive statistics, some objectivity is needed. Kolbe and Burnett (1991) share that objectivity is a necessary component of the analysis because the details affect the overall quality. With such an understanding of the process, the use of themes was used as a reference for guiding inferences. The themes from the literature provided a lens funneling the content analysis. Such a deductive approach of coding is described as top-down coding. Top-down coding uses existing frameworks or theories and assigns excerpts to those codes. Such a process increases validity, decreases bias, and enables transparency overall. The first coded data labeled as Figure 6 through 9 depicts how the literature on theories chosen connects to the categories of themes. While Figures 10 through 13 depict overall literature that supported the categorical themes.

**Figure 6. Theoretical Literature Connecting to the Effects of Time When Belonging**

<u>Deductive Theme</u>	<u>Theoretical Literature Support</u>
<b>Time Used Appropriately</b>	<p>-Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) stated that “the absence of significant interactions with others facilitated with the college is the single leading predictor of college attrition.”</p> <p>-Pascarella &amp; Terenzini (2017) state that the college environment has been the focus of a great deal of development research, and this research ultimately revealed a link between advanced morals and college attendance.</p> <p>-Braxton (2000) explains the forces shaping student departure during the first six weeks (e.g.) are qualitatively different from those after the first six weeks.</p> <p>-It is more important to focus on the integration of earlier students than those that have been a part of the institution for more than a year. In a review of various studies, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991; 2005; 2017)</p> <p>- commitment, which serves to bind the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise (Tinto, 1987)</p>

**Figure 7. Theoretical Literature on the Effects of Support Services and Belonging**

<u>Deductive Theme</u>	<u>Theoretical Literature Support</u>
<b>Support Services</b>	<p>-proven success with students’ interactions with both peers and faculty, and can be formal or informal, even inside or outside the classroom (Bray, 2006)</p> <p>- self-concept emerges significantly increased by the feeling that they are part of more than a reference group (Diaz, 2022)</p> <p>- if not met through institutional support systems could adversely affect the successful transition, retention and graduation of students (Diaz, 2022)</p> <p>- Whether a student departs depends partly on how much they develop a strong sense of belonging and/or integration within the community (University of Main 2021).</p> <p>-formulations posited academic and social integration as important factors in the departure decisions of students (Reason 2009)</p> <p>- services have reflected success since Tinto (1993), who found that counseling and advising programs lead to goal clarity and actuality of presence on campus</p>

**Figure 8. Theoretical Literature on the Effects of Well-being and Belonging**

<b><u>Deductive Theme</u></b>	<b><u>Theoretical Literature Support</u></b>
<b>Well-being</b>	<p>-The need to feel a sense of belonging and quality level of education to be satisfied (Mickens, 2021).</p> <p>-Maslow (1943): physiological, safety and security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization</p> <p>- Maslow (1954) ensures that belongingness is not only more beneficial than prestige or creation but is almost necessary to accomplish one's goals</p> <p>-Happiness is defined as a state of psychological well-being or contentment in one's experiences (Maslow, 1954)</p> <p>-Diener (1984) for example, found variables important in promoting happiness were love, marriage, sex, children, exercise, health, friends, education, work, income, recognition, success, independence, personal values, and community involvement.</p> <p>- results indicated that close social relationships are extremely important for happiness (Pettijohn 1996).</p>

**Figure 9. Theoretical Support of Academic Performance and Belonging**

<b><u>Deductive Theme</u></b>	<b><u>Theoretical Literature Support</u></b>
<b>Academic Performance</b>	<p>-“the first-year student attrition rate has increased 10-12% every year with more than 40% of first-year students dropping out during their first-year of school” (Mickens et al. 2022 p. xiv)</p> <p>- some examples of experiences that led to departure may include a lack of expectations, support, involvement, etc (Tinto, 1993)</p> <p>-Tinto (2004) suggests that “expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning promote persistence” (p. 2); these are key components to retention (Penn-Edwards &amp; Donnison 2011).</p> <p>-Tinto (2005) observes that 47 percent of American students do not complete their tertiary studies and 56 percent leave during their first year.</p> <p>-Tinto (2012) offered a framework to enhance student success based on a sense of belonging: where he emphasized the need for assessment and thoughtful reflection</p> <p>-Tinto (2017) challenged institutions to move their lenses from retention to persistence.</p> <p>-Tinto (2016) says although sense of belonging can mirror students' past, it is mostly shaped by the campus climate and perceptions of belonging in the community</p>

**Figure 10. Categorical Literature Specific to Theme of Time**

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Categories Within</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<p><b>Time Used Appropriately</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Time Management</li> <li>-Consistent Schedule</li> <li>-Struggle to Balance Demands</li> <li>-Hindered Ability to Enroll in Classes</li> <li>-Demands Come with being an Athlete</li>   <li>-Adjusted to the Demand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-students face issues in the transition to independence (Arnot 2012)</li> <li>-Walpole (2003) students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spent less time in student clubs and groups compared to students from higher income backgrounds</li> <li>-schools adopt organizational practices that neglect involvement experiences (Osterman 2000).</li> <li>more engagement with others is generally better than less (Hurtado &amp; Carter, 1967; Strayhorn, 2012).</li> <li>-Student-athletes experience college differently than their non-athlete peers as athletes have responsibilities for competition, performance, and academics (Moreland et al., 2018)</li> <li>-Hollis (2002) says “once student athletes sign their letter of intent, coaches and athletic administration have control over [their] lives...”</li> <li>- Jolly (2008) “extreme time demands contribute to the difficulties that many student-athletes face in succeeding academically.</li> <li>-82.1% of student-athletes report spending over 10 hours a week practicing their sport, and 40.2% report spending over 10 hours a week playing their sport (Potuto &amp; O’Hanlon, 2006)</li> <li>-athletes miss class, exams, or even choose specific majors that help accommodate their time in athletics (Hollis 2002)</li> <li>-53% of student-athletes stated that they had not spent enough time on classwork.</li> <li>-Approximately 68% said that they would have liked to have spent more time and pursued more educational opportunities (Potuto &amp; O’Hanlon, 2006)</li> <li>- At (CSULB), approximately 25% of student-athletes are Communication Studies majors</li> </ul>

**Figure 11. Categorical Literature Specific to Theme of Support Services**

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Categories Within</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<b>Support Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Coach and Academic Support (CAS)</li> <li>-Faculty Support (FS)</li> <li>-Overall Academic Experiences (OAE)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Students derive such perceptions from their daily interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators on campus and the messages those interactions convey about their belonging (Stebleton et al., 2014).</li> <li>-prevent student-athletes from seeking mental health assistance, such as the lack of on-site services (Sudano &amp; Miles, 2017)</li> <li>-Sasso et. al. (2022) student-athletes in this study coped with generalized anxiety, episodic depression, and stress from their schedule compression but sought informal support because of the fear of stigma</li> <li>- lack of engagement with support services such as counseling among athletes also impacts their mental health as they navigate performance, career transition, and personal life issues (Tuner, 2016)</li> <li>-Examples of academic support are personal tutors that work with student-athletes to help guide their study in specific courses and flexible course scheduling (e.g., Ko et al., 2008)</li> <li>- educational services assists individuals to live more fulfilling and satisfying lives (Michalos, 2017).</li> <li>-social support promotes well-being through sharing with others the positive impacts that experiences and events offer (Feeney and Collins, 2015).</li> <li>-social interactions between faculty and students can provide an important foundation for students to pursue more academically oriented interactions with faculty (Cotten &amp; Wilson, 2006)</li> </ul>

**Figure 12. Categorical Literature Specific to Theme of Well-being**

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Categories Within</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<b>Well-being</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Purpose</li> <li>-Social</li> <li>-Financial</li> <li>-Community</li> <li>-Physical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Belonging may pertain to emotional attachment and feeling ‘safe’ (Yuval 2006a)</li> <li>-Osterman (2000) shares that individuals have psychological needs that affect perception of behavior.</li> <li>-students see themselves as a member of a community who value their participation (Tovar, 2013).</li> <li>-perceptions of engagements and the meaning derive from their belonging (Strayhorn, 2012).</li> <li>-Students who engage in belonging are more likely to persist and help others in ways that further persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, &amp; Woods, 2007)</li> <li>-athletic identity moderated future work self-salience, career adaptability and proactive career behaviors (Lu, W., 2020).</li> <li>-Similar to a sense of belonging, components of community based on social spaces, competitive respect, decision making, and leadership. (Carter-Francique, 2018; Warner and Dixon, 2011).</li> <li>-Athletes continue participation in athletics could result in adjustment problems, emotional concerns, and psychological distress during their time in college (Watson, 2005)</li> <li>-athletes are more at risk for mental health problems than their non-athlete peers, including depression, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, and disordered eating (Moore, 2017)</li> <li>-Kaier et al. (2015) reported that 10-15% of collegiate athletes experience mental health challenges significantly enough to qualify for psychological services.</li> <li>-ensure that an athlete's identity is that of a student rather than just an athlete (Jolly 2008)</li> <li>- Student-athletes’ relative isolation from students and campus academic life is one reason why 61.8% of student-athletes still at least “somewhat agree” that they view themselves as more of an athlete than a student (Potuto &amp; O’Hanlon, 2006)</li> </ul>

**Figure 13. Categorical Literature Specific to Theme of Academic Performance**

<u>Deductive Theme</u>	<u>Categories Within</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<b>Academic Performance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Retention</li> <li>-Graduation Rate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Working-class students are more likely to withdraw from higher education because university life feels alien (Soria 2012)</li> <li>- a smaller community of students may see themselves as outcasts from the larger institution (Sidanius et al, 2004)</li> <li>-a student’s lack of belonging, of being out of place, leads to withdrawal from contact that further undermines motivation to persist (Walton &amp; Cohen, 2007).</li> <li>-connecting belongingness to societal achievements, Bettina J. Huber (2010) shared preliminary insights that suggest that participation enhances GPA, reduces time to degree among respondents entering as first-time freshmen, and increases the likelihood that respondents will graduate in a timely fashion.</li> <li>-Payne, B. C., et al (2016) finds that student-athletes perform comparably to nonathletes after controlling for predicted academic performance.</li> <li>-NCAA (2022) states that since the implementation of Division I academic reform initiatives in the early 2000s, long-term graduation rate increases have been observed.</li> <li>- NCAA shares that even though Division I has seen an increase in transfer behavior, many subgroups federal graduation rates continue to trend higher for student-athletes (2022).</li> </ul>

Within literature that supported how belonging affects student success, there were subgroups that specified the effects of such themes. Figure 14 through 16 depict literature that supported the categorical themes based on subgroups later included in the results.

**Figure 14. Literature Connected to Subgroup of Ethnicity/Race**

<u>Subgroup</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<b>Ethnicity/Race</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Tinto (2005) stated that “integration is a vital component for retaining all students, and it is particularly important in retaining minority students.”</li> <li>-Once Involvement in activities can contribute to positive racial, ethnic, or sexual-identity development (Akhmetzyanova, 2015).</li> <li>-campus racial climate influenced student participation in such social organizations, with racial conflict on campus enhancing white students' joining, whereas campuses committed to diversity had a negative effect on white student participation (Chang, 1996).</li> <li>-Involvement in activities can contribute to positive racial, ethnic, or sexual-identity development (Akhmetzyanova, 2015).</li> <li>-Ahmed (2012) reflects on being included and provides a critique of what happens when diversity is offered as a solution; it also shows how diversity workers generate knowledge of institutions in attempting to transform them</li> <li>-Belonging can be an emergent and all-inclusive geography that is diverse, caring, and careful (Wright 2015).</li> <li>-Lack of perceptions of racial diversity on campus enhanced white students' joining, but negatively affected minority students (Hurtado, 1997), whereas campuses that actually committed to diversity had a negative effect on white student participation (Chang, 1996).</li> <li>-nurturing personal relationships at HBCU campuses including athletic departments contributed to positive developmental outcomes for Black college athletes (Cooper &amp; Cooper, 2015).</li> </ul>

**Figure 15. Literature Connected to Subgroup of Biological Sex**

<u>Subgroup</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<b>Biological Sex</b>	<p>-Opportunities for male and female students are still substantially different, and researchers such as Sheehan (2012) believe that this negatively affects motivation, which can also lead to decreasing of performance in school</p> <p>-Males for example display a greater amount of negative social behavior than females in the classroom (Downey &amp; Yuan 2005).</p> <p>-Perna (2005) suggests higher rates of college enrollment and degree attainment for women than for men.</p> <p>-The higher levels of educational attainment suggest that the higher college enrollment and degree attainment rates for women than for men reflect rational decision-making processes (Perna, 2005).</p> <p>-However, males are more willing to take risks and are less compliant than females, which may lead to a reward of belongingness (Thorne 1993).</p> <p>-Carter-Francique and Richardson (2015) outlined how traditionally HBCUs have provided safe havens for Black female college athletes to defy negative stereotypes attributed to them such as the notions of womanhood and beauty</p>

**Figure 16. Literature Connected to Subgroup of Socioeconomic Class**

<u>Subgroup</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<b>Socioeconomic Class</b>	<p>-Young students face considerable issues in the transition to economic independence (Arnot 2012)</p> <p>-Walpole (2003) found that college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spent less time in student clubs and groups compared to students from higher income backgrounds</p> <p>-Working-class students are more likely to withdraw from higher education because university life feels alien (Soria 2012)</p>

### **Chapter Three Summary**

The variety of non-manipulated research used is ex post facto data archived from the following sources: Gallup, NCAA, and *The Intercollegiate* reflected in a dissertation study completed by Molly Harry of the University of Virginia. The convergent data used portrays the ideals of belonging attributes as a college athlete and how they affect the differentials of graduation rates compared to non-student athletes. With the data including exit interviews, surveys, and holistic graduation data, a mixed methods analysis approach was used. Since the study initiates in both qualitative and quantitative characteristics, a descriptive analysis was required. The analysis of some of the data has taken course over a long period of time, it is defined as a longitudinal study.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

To reiterate that task of this research, one must remember that the question being answered refers to the different effects that belonging has on scholarly athletes compared to the general student body. Public Ex Post data was pulled from four different sources to connect to all themes and confirm findings. To connect sense of belonging qualities to the data, coded themes were used to connect the literature to the data to delineate the positive and negative effects. The themes were connected to qualitative and quantitative data to support shared research. Graduation rates were used to measure the success of thematic belongingness and their subthemes that stem from them. To continue, Results are displayed and explained based on informational themes.

#### **Time Used Appropriately**

The use of time is expressed as an important factor in their ability to thrive as a person. This is arguably even truer for college student athletes who deal with multiple obligations that demand much time from them. Many researchers have found evidence to support how time constraints can be a major issue for student athletes. Many reports share busy schedules of student athletes and explain how they can affect an athlete's grades. For the basis of this research, it was found that the time athletes did not affect their graduation success rate as much as some thought. The effectiveness of time shown was not only as big of a concern stakeholders thought, but it also reflected how time constraints could benefit student athletes because of the organization and/or belongingness factors.

The main purpose of the study reflected in Table 1 was to further comprehend that experiences athletes have according to their time demands. The researchers from the

public data study also strived to increase the voice that athletes have. They used a deductive approach to limit the themes of time demands that were included. The themes chosen for coding mirror many belonging qualities. There were a variety of questions used that required open-ended answers, which were then categorized into the coded themes reflected in Table 1 for a more streamlined comprehension of the athlete's answers. Regarding time demands, the most common question in this category involved whether athletes missed class for practice or competitions.

**Table 1.**

*Athlete Responses to Time Demands (n=360)*

Category	n	%
Excellent	52	14
Good	71	20
Time Management is Key	25	7
Adjusted to Time Demands	17	5
Neutral/No Issues	58	16
Demands Are Expected	18	5
Bad	18	5
Missing Class for Sport Event	37	9
Consistent Schedule Needed	24	7
Struggle to Balance Time	20	6
Hinder Ability to Enroll in Classes	20	6
Total	360	100%

Table 1 shows that 33% of the responses were considered negative. The negative responses here included the following categories: (a) being an athlete hindered enrollment choice; (b) being an athlete led to a struggle for balance of time; (c) athletes need more consistency; (d) missed class due to sporting event; and (e) just plain bad. With regards to the hinderance experienced with enrollment choices, one athlete indicated that they wanted to enroll in their institution's computer science program, but that "most of the computer science classes are during practice." One instance in which a student-athlete spoke to the academic challenges faced as a result of their position included his explanation of the difficulty with completing class required assignments that required meeting with others. For instance, he explained, "I had extra outside work assignments for classes such as interviews, site visits, meet and greets, and I always felt conflicted with having to make a choice on missing these activities or attend practice." One athlete mentioned there was "no balance" while another stated "I was not prepared enough for how difficult the time expectations of being a student-athlete were going to be. I do not know, though, if there is any amount of teaching or preparation that can get you ready for that."

As for the neutral affiliated responses, it seems 21% did not really care too much, and understood their time demands are expected as an athlete. These categories were titles as (a) demands come from being an athlete and (b) neutral or no issues. One instance of a neutral response when asked about time demands noted that being an athlete was "like having a part-time job."

While positive responses fill in the remainder of the responses, it is shown that 46% of athletes felt that time was in fact, not that demanding. These types of responses

were labeled as (a) adjusted to time demands; (b) time management was key; (c) good; and (d) excellent. These athletes responded in some way, with 34% mentioning that their time was good or excellent. 12% of others seemed to have cracked the code by adjusting or learning how to manage their time. For example, when one athlete was asked, “was your practice/competition schedule ever a hindrance to you academically,” they replied, “no, academics were always a top priority. We are STUDENT-athletes.” Another athlete voiced, “time demands were really good. Allotted time for practice is sufficient and class always comes first.” After outlining the findings regarding appropriate use of time, the next data set links to athletic support services.

### **Athlete Support Services**

Academic support services include qualities that are flexible and personable. Such accommodations can allow an athlete to carry on an identity as a successful student. The support services can also help build social relationships that may motivate the student or hold them accountable. With the write identity and relationships built up, student-athletes can use those belongingness characteristics to graduate when they are supposed to. It would be immature however to not realize that some institutions offer more services than others. Although there is not a universal baseline, higher education institutions can learn from one another to provide the best services possible and graduate as many athletes as they can.

Of the entire sample of 528 athletes, 437 (83%) answered questions about athletic-academic support services. Participants in this study included collegiate athletes selected by their institutions to complete EIS, and who had exhausted their athletic eligibility at their institution by the end of the 2019 academic year. Institutions asked

athletes to rate their overall academic experience on a scale of 1 to 10. The following excerpt explains the types of questions asked further than just the scale:

“The most common question topic in this sample of EIS reflected in Table 2 pertained to academic services offered by the athletic department. Some sub-topics in this area included discussing the quality of the advising, experiences with tutors and study hall, and potential resource improvement. These questions tended to be open-ended allowing for athletes to elaborate on their response or closed-ended Likert questions that involved rating received services (i.e., “on a scale of one to ten rate your experience with academic support”). The next most frequent question topics included those about academic experiences and time demands. Questions related to both topics ranged in style. While some institutions preferred closed-ended Likert-style questions (i.e., “rate your overall academic experience”), others asked open-ended questions on these topics (i.e., “did you have a good experience academically?”).

The final two topics covered by EIS questions reflected in Table 2 pertained to the academic support of coaches and faculty support (Harry, p.76).

**Table 2.***Athlete Responses to Support and Experiences (n = 437)*

Rate	*AS		*CAS		*FS		*OAE	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Excellent	180	41	170	44	53	33	86	60
Good	212	49	141	36	75	47	52	36
Neutral	28	6	46	12	21	13	6	4
Poor	17	4	33	8	10	6	0	0
Total	437	100%	390	100%	159	100%	144	100%

Note. *\*Academic Services (AS), \*Coach and Academic Support (CAS), \*Faculty Support (FS), \*Overall Academic Experiences (OAE)*

Table 2 reflects the athlete's rated experiences based on (a) academic services; (b) coach and academic support; (c) faculty support; and (d) overall academic experiences. Of the athletes who discussed academic services, the following aspects were brought up: general tutoring, counseling, and mentoring. When discussing such components of academic services, 90% (n=392) of athletes shared that they were "good" or "excellent." When asked about specific academic experiences, 0% (n = 311) believed their head coaches provided good or excellent support towards their academic pursuits. One instance includes coaches putting themselves in the shoes of their athletes and being open-minded about their situations outside of athletics. One athlete for example voiced, "coaches in our program were very understanding when it came to classes and school and want us to be the best students we can be." Coaches allowed athletes to prioritize their studies, even to

the point one athlete noted that their “coaches would let them leave practice early or skip weekend competitions to keep up their grades.” For coaches to be okay with letting players miss games to ensure success in the classroom speaks volumes and is reflected in graduation data. When one athlete was asked why they believe such an action is acceptable, the athlete stated that his coach “understands you have a life more than just football.”

As important as support from coaches can be, the athletes were also asked about faculty support. When considering such support, flexibility and understanding came into question. With such lenses of support from faculty, 80% (n = 128) stated professors to be “helpful” and “positive” during their academic careers.

When considering overall academic experiences, 96% (n = 138) athletes felt the services were good or excellent. One athlete said, “I love this school and its traditions. As a student the classes are difficult, but to say I got my degree from here is really exciting.” Another respondent added, “I loved it. Going to school and playing was difficult, but it was the best four years of my life” (Harry p.76). Such statements say a lot, but 0% stating that their overall academic experience was poor is powerful.

### **Well-Being of College Athletes**

The well-being of athletes has been a concern for many years. Research has shown how certain expectations of student athletes lead to physical, emotional, and mental stresses. Researchers and authors of such literature anticipate how the well-being of athletes is affected. The good news is that new strategies to help alleviate such issues can level the playing field, giving student-athletes a fighting chance to graduate on time without psychological effects. Not only are there now methods for helping athletes

survive, but now there is even enough literature to explain the positive well-being side effects that stem from being a student-athlete.

Table 3 below portrays surveys that affected the wellbeing of students, both athletes and non-athletes, based on support and services offered at the university. It is a Gallup survey of former NCAA student-athletes from 1975 to present (N=4,889) shows they fare better on several important outcomes in undergraduate experiences compared to college graduates from the same period who did not compete in NCAA athletics (N=69,012). The survey included asking 10 questions to gauge wellbeing in five elements: Purpose Wellbeing (i.e. liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals), Social Wellbeing (i.e. having strong, supportive relationships and love in your life), Financial Wellbeing (i.e. effectively managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security), Community Wellbeing (i.e. the sense of engagement you have with the areas where you live, liking where you live and feeling safe and having pride in your community), Physical Wellbeing (i.e. having good health and enough energy to get things done on a daily basis). Gallup categorizes respondents as “thriving,” “struggling” or “suffering” in each element of wellbeing. Someone who is categorized as “thriving” is considered to have strong and consistent wellbeing in that element of their lives (Gallup Inc., 2020, P.6).

**Table 3.***Table of Well-being Elements*

	<i>Student Athletes 1975-2020 (n=4,889)</i>		<i>Non-Student Athletes 1975-2020 (n=69,012)</i>			
	Student Athletes	Non-Athletes	White Student Athletes	White Non-Athletes	Minority Student-Athletes	Minority Non-Athletes
	Well-being Elements					
Purpose	54%	49%	54%	50%	55%	45%
Social	54%	47%	53%	46%	58%	48%
Financial	41%	40%	43%	42%	36%	34%
Community	49%	43%	50%	45%	48%	38%
Physical	42%	32%	41%	33%	43%	28%

Table 3 depicts well-being elemental responses first based on the differences of athletes and non-athletes, and then by ethnicity diving the belonging qualities by race/ethnicity. Based on belonging principles, the themes of well-being characteristics are supported by literature; they also back up the cause and effect that such aspects lead to success that can be measured by graduation rates. The table shows that NCAA student-athletes are more likely to thrive in purpose, social, community and physical well-being (i.e. sense of belonging qualities). Not all descriptive analysis however supports the success athletes have when considering well-being. Their financial well-being for example, is comparable to non-athletes. These patterns persist across the NCAA division, graduation cohort, gender, race and ethnicity. Table 3 shows the effects of data that is

reflected in Table 2. Such data reflects that “NCAA student-athletes are especially likely, relative to non-athletes, to have benefitted from meaningful and enriching support experiences with professors and mentors in college (Gallup, 2020,. P.2).

The information below reflects further analysis of characteristics of coding chosen in this study to reflect some sort of sense of belonging (Gallup, 2020,. P.3-4):

- Student-athletes (35%) are more likely to strongly agree their professors cared about them as a person than their peers who did not participate in athletics (28%).

- Athletes (27%) are also more likely to strongly agree they had a mentor in college who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams than the general student body (23%).

- (67%) of athletes strongly agree they had at least one professor who made them excited about learning than their peers who did not participate in NCAA athletics (65%).

- NCAA student-athletes (70%) are more likely than their non-athlete peers (65%) to have graduated college in four years or less, and they are half as likely to have taken more than five years to graduate (6% vs. 12%).

- A smaller proportion of NCAA student-athletes (22%) than non-athletes (38%) transferred to the institution from which they graduated.

Table 4 dives deeper into well-being data based on specified concerns. Table 4 reflects the data from the American College Health Association, which is a semi-annual survey of college students that covers several mental and physical health topics. After surveying, the data was then shared and used by the NCAA. It is important to know that the data compares mental health concerns between athletes and non-athletes. The

percentage portrayed in Table 4 depicts participants who endorsed “Yes or more often, in the Last 30 Days,” responding to the well-being characteristics shown in the table.

**Table 4.**

*Well-being Specifics*

*\*Undergraduate students, ages 18-24, attending NCAA-member institutions.*

*Non-Athlete n = 106,374*

*Varsity Athlete n = 9,057*

	Female	Female	Male	Male
	Nonathlete	Athletes	Nonathletes	Athletes
	N=44,814	N=2,004	N=19,270	N=940
Overwhelmed	78%	71%	61%	51%
Mentally exhausted	75%	65%	61%	48%
Felt sad	52%	47%	37%	30%
Felt overwhelming anxiety	49%	41%	30%	21%
Felt very lonely	48%	42%	38%	28%
Felt things were hopeless	36%	29%	28%	20%
Depressed; hard to function	27%	20%	19%	13%
Felt overwhelming anger	25%	23%	19%	17%
Harmed self, considered or attempted suicide	7%	5%	6%	4%

*Note. \*Undergraduate students, ages 18-24, attending NCAA-member institutions.*

This data, from a completely different study, supports what Gallup stated in the previous data explained after Table 3. For example, the findings stated in Table 3 shared that “the patterns of athletes having a more positive experience of well-being persists

across the NCAA division, graduation cohort, gender, and race and ethnicity.” Here in Table 4, non-athletes shared negative well-being experiences compared to athletes across the board. Such data allows a researcher to notice how athletes seem to be overall happier. By looking at the negative responses to the negative questions, a researcher can learn about the positive effects of belonging. An example is that there seems to be significant jumps between athletes and non-athletes regarding characteristics such as being overwhelmed, mentally exhausted, sad, anxious, lonely, hopeless, or depressed. There is also an eye-opening difference when considering gender of the well-being specifics discussed in the survey. However, there was not much of a difference between the characteristics of anger or self-harm. With what was available, the data shows that female students in general are more likely to have negative responses to well-being attributes of academic experiences. What is most interesting in Table 4 is that it reflects that even though females are more likely to have negative responses towards well-being, the difference between female athletes and male non-athletes are not far off in certain categories. For example, the characteristics of hopelessness and depression are only 1% differentials. This means that the sense of belonging in part of the specifics mentioned may help female athletes even though they struggle with well-being themes the most. To further compare the difference of belonging qualities between athletes and non-athletes, the theme of academic performance in the next section can shed more light on the situation.

### **Academic Performance Affected to What Degree**

When considering academic performance, athletes typically enter college with a cloud of negative ideals hovering over them. An athlete might be less confident in their

chance of passing a class, or other students and teachers may have a negative stigma about how students are helped in unique ways. Some student-athletes may get flexible turn in dates, or even adaptations of assignments, but the standards should be the same. Regardless of the academic services provided, it is found that athletes struggle particularly in the first year. However, with the right characteristics included in the athlete's success, it is found that the overall completion of a degree is not so different.

Table 5 introduces the overall differences between Graduation Success Rate (GSR) and Federal Rate (FR) between athletes and non-athletes. As stated before in chapter 3, GSR does not compare rates with the student body, and it includes athletes that transferred. However, all members of the reporting cohorts completed graduation in the six-year window (pre-pandemic). Single years in the tables and figures also refer to the reporting years of the respective cohort (2022 reporting year represents 2015-16 cohort; 2021 represents 2014-15 cohort, etc.). To examine trends over time, singular class rates were used.

**Table 5.**

*Overall Graduation Rates of Student Athlete vs. Nonathlete*

*n=96,438*

	Division I	Division I Men	Division I Women
Student-Athlete GSR	89%	85%	95%
Student Athlete Federal Rate	69%	62%	75%
Student Body Federal Rate	69%	66%	71%

*Note. 2019-22 Four-Class Division I Graduation Rates (2012-15 Entering Cohorts)*

At first glance, the table reflects that Division I athletes have high graduation rates of an 89% chance, even regarding transfers from one division school to another. For another study, it would be interesting to see how rates of “one and done” athletes subtracted from the GSR rates would lead to data of actual failures. For the sake of this study however, it is hard to miss the fact that both student athletes and student body are found to have the same graduation rates of 69%. Whereas male athletes have a lower graduation rate by 4% when comparing to their male non-athlete peers. While female athletes seem to be 4% more likely to graduate when comparing the data to the female student body. The NCAA (2020) reports that overall Division I student-athlete graduation rates (Graduation Success Rate and Federal Rate) and all subgroup rates are at or near their highest-ever levels. Which leads to Table 6 depicting certain subgroups of ethnicity and gender of the same overall data in Table 5.

**Table 6.**

*Comparison of Federal Graduation Rates Between Division I Student-Athletes and Student Body (Four-Class Rates for 2019-22)*

	Student-Athlete Federal Rate	Student Body Federal Rate
Overall	69%	69%
Men	62%	66%
Women	75%	71%
Black	59%	50%
Hispanic/Latino	65%	63%
White	73%	71%
Black Men	56%	44%
Hispanic/Latino Men	59%	59%
White Men	67%	69%
Black Women	67%	54%
Hispanic/Latino Women	72%	66%
White Women	78%	74%

Looking at the subgroups of the federal graduation rate for Division I student-athlete vs. student body, there is some data that stands out more than others. Looking at ethnicity, it seems White and Hispanic athletes do not have much higher graduation rates compared to the general student body. However, Black athletes have a significantly higher graduation rate than their student body at an overall 9%, with Black male athletes

having a favoring 12% higher rate and Black females 13% higher. “Even though Division I has an increase in transfer behavior, which negatively impacts the federal graduation rate, many subgroup federal graduation rates continue to trend higher for student-athletes” (NCAA Research 2022, p.6), which is shown in Table 7.

**Table 7.**

*Twenty Year Student Athlete Graduation Trend*

Student Athlete Group	2002* GSR	2022 GSR
Overall	74%	90%
Black	56%	81%
Hispanic/Latino	64%	88%
White	81%	94%
Black Men	51%	77%
Hispanic/Latino Men	56%	84%
White Men	76%	91%
Black Women	71%	90%
Hispanic/Latino Women	79%	92%
White Women	88%	97%

*Note. \*2002 was the last cohort that entered under the former initial-eligibility rules known as Proposition 48. It was also the first cohort for which GSR data was collected.*

These are notable increases in single-year Graduation Success Rate over the 20 years of calculating this rate in Division I: — Overall student-athletes 74% to 90% — Black student-athletes 56% to 81% — Hispanic/Latino student-athletes 64% to 88% — Black FBS football student-athletes 53% to 81% — Black men’s basketball student-

athletes 46% to 81%. To continue, Figures 17-20 showcase the coded themes that align with the data depicted in the tables. This method of Top-Down coding applies the literature claims to the data by revisiting certain claims made in the previous chapter.

**Figure 17. Connecting Literature to the Themed Data of Time**

<u>Deductive Theme</u>	<u>Categorical Data Within Tables</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<p><b>Time Used Appropriately</b></p>	<p>-33% of the responses were considered negative.            -21% did not really care too much and understood their time demands are expected as an athlete.            -46% of athletes felt that time was in fact, not that demanding. (34% mentioning that their time was good or excellent. 12% of others seemed to have cracked the code by adjusting or learning how to manage their time.)</p>	<p>-Nationally, 82.1% of student-athletes report spending over 10 hours a week practicing, 40.2% report spending over 10 hours a week playing (Potuto &amp; O’Hanlon, 2006)            -athletes miss class, exams, or even choose specific majors that help accommodate their time in athletics (Hollis 2002), “once student athletes sign their letter of intent, athletic administration has control over their lives”            -53% of student-athletes stated that they had not spent as much time on all aspects of their academic work as they would have liked, with 80% of them citing athletics as the reason.            -68% said that they would have liked to have pursued more educational opportunities available at their universities, including research projects and internships (Potuto &amp; O’Hanlon, 2006)            - At (CSULB), 25% of student-athletes are Communication Studies majors.            -schools neglect and may undermine students’ involvement experiences (Osterman 2000)            -more engagement time with others is generally better (Strayhorn, 2012).            -Jolly (2008) athletic culture time demands affect student-athletes.</p>

When connecting time considerations to belonging characteristics in the top-down coding, certain aspects both hindered and helped lead to the success of athletes. One hindrance of time that data connected to within the literature was the extended hours passing the twenty regulation policies. This instance can lead a researcher to think about how much sense of belonging is too much. Another issue supported by the data was that institutions made it difficult for athletes to choose the career paths they wanted to choose because of time constraints. Even with such struggles however, athletes shared their lack of concern for time constraints in a few different ways. The athletes shared their expectations that come from being an athlete, and the interview data depicted that with quoted expectations. Although time engaging in the belongingness of sports can be cumbersome, athletes find the time to succeed.

**Figure 18. Connecting Literature to the Themed Data of Support Services**

<u>Deductive Theme</u>	<u>Categorical Data Within Tables</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<b>Support Services</b>	<p>-90% of athletes (n=392) felt as if academic services were good or excellent. -80% (n = 311) believed their head coaches provided good or excellent support.</p> <p>-80% (n = 128) found professors to be helpful and positive during their academic careers.</p> <p>-96% (n = 138) athletes felt their overall academic experiences were good or excellent.</p>	<p>-Lack of on-site services (Sudano &amp; Miles, 2017)</p> <p>-sought informal instead of formal support because of the fear of stigma.</p> <p>-educational services assist individuals to live more fulfilling and satisfying lives (Michalos, 2017).</p> <p>-social support promotes well-being through sharing with others the positive impacts that experiences and events offer (Feeney and Collins, 2015).</p> <p>-social interactions between faculty and students can provide an important foundation for students to pursue more academically oriented interactions with faculty (Cotten &amp; Wilson, 2006)</p>

As for support services, the data connected to the literature supporting the quality of belonging offered to athletes by others. Initially, negative allegations of support services such as not having enough options are stated in the literature. Then it even got to the point that informal situations were an issue. However, the positive instances were shared by expressing the effects of belonging. One example would be the mention of more fulfilling and satisfying experiences, reflected in the data, with most athletes speaking highly of the help they receive. Another would be mentioning of the foundations needed to succeed, which was also shared in the responses of athletes stating that the services were good or excellent.

**Figure 19. Connecting Literature to the Themed Data of Well-being**

<u>Deductive Theme</u>	<u>Categorical Data Within Tables</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<b>Well-being</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Student-athletes (35%) are more likely to strongly agree their professors cared about them as a person than those that did not participate in athletics (28%).</li> <li>-Athletes (27%) are also more likely to strongly agree they had a mentor in college who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams than the general student body (23%).</li> <li>-(67%) of athletes strongly agree they had at least one professor who made them excited about learning than their peers who did not participate in NCAA athletics (65%).</li> <li>-non-athletes shared negative well-being experiences compared to athletes across the board. -female students in general are more likely to have negative responses to well-being attributes of academic experiences.</li> <li>-even though females are more likely to have negative responses towards well-being, the difference between female athletes and male non-athletes are not far off in certain categories. For example, the characteristics of hopelessness and depression are only 1% differentials.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Involvement in activities can contribute to positive racial, ethnic, or sexual-identity development (Akhmetzyanova, 2015).</li> <li>-nurturing personal relationships at HBCU campuses including athletic departments contributed to positive developmental outcomes for Black college athletes (Cooper &amp; Cooper, 2015).</li> <li>-Males for example display a greater amount of negative social behavior than females in the classroom (Downey &amp; Yuan 2005).</li> <li>-students see themselves as a member of a community of faculty, staff, and other students who value their participation (Tovar, 2013)</li> <li>-Students who perceive themselves as belonging are more likely to persist and also a willingness to engage others in ways that further persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, &amp; Woods, 2007)</li> <li>-athletes are more at risk for mental health problems than their non-athlete peers, including depression, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, and disordered eating (Moore, 2017)</li> <li>-Kaier et al. (2015) reported that 10-15% of collegiate athletes experience mental health challenges significantly enough to qualify for psychological services.</li> </ul>

Well-being is considered a wide input of belonging characteristics connected to the effects of being involved or not. One disparity was that athletes have a higher chance of mental issues, but this was not the case. Another false section supported in literature was the fact that males had higher mental issues than females, which was not the case. Some other literature did stick to the data. For example, there were enough mental health issues amongst athletes that supported the qualifications of receiving health. Although this was shown to be true, the data of athlete responses supported the higher willingness to engage and further persist. The data also not only reflected the positive identity outlook of athletes, but even more so for black athletes. Such acts may stem from the literature discussing the positive outlooks of well-being based on feeling like a member of the community and may include many other aspects of belonging following such feeling.

**Figure 20. Connecting Literature to the Themed Data of Academic Performance**

<u>Deductive Theme</u>	<u>Categorical Data Within Tables</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
<p><b>Academic Performance</b></p>	<p>-division I athletes have high graduation rates of an 89% chance, even regarding transfers from one division school to another</p> <p>-male athletes have a lower graduation rate by 4% when comparing to their male non-athlete peers.</p> <p>-While female athletes seem to be 4% more likely to graduate when comparing the data to the female student body.</p> <p>-Black athletes have a significantly higher graduation rate than their student body at an overall 9%</p> <p>-Black male athletes having a favoring 12% higher graduation rate.</p> <p>-Black females 13% higher.</p> <p>-notable increases in single-year Graduation Success Rate over the 20 years of calculating this rate in Division I: — Overall student-athletes 74% to 90% — Black student-athletes 56% to 81% — Hispanic/Latino student-athletes 64% to 88% — Black FBS football student-athletes 53% to 81% — Black men’s basketball student-athletes 46% to 81%.</p>	<p>-Tinto (2005) stated that “integration is a vital component for retaining all students, and it is particularly important in retaining minority students.”</p> <p>-Opportunities for male and female students are still substantially different, and researchers such as Sheehan (2012) believe that this negatively affects motivation and performance</p> <p>-Perna (2005) suggests higher rates of college enrollment and degree attainment for women than for men.</p> <p>-Payne, B. C., et al (2016) finds that student-athletes perform comparably to nonathletes after controlling for predicted academic performance.</p> <p>-NCAA (2022) states that since the implementation of Division I academic reform initiatives in the early 2000s, long-term graduation rate increases have been observed.</p> <p>- NCAA shares that even though Division I has experienced an increase in transfer behavior, many subgroup federal graduation rates continue to trend higher for student-athletes (2022).</p>

Of all the graduation and retention data found, every situational statement is connected to the academic achievement literature in some way, shape, or form. For one, integration of sports is supported by the graduation success of athletes, especially in certain areas. Such areas include success of graduation more so for female or black athletes. Although certain areas of integration for specific athletes reflect higher graduation success, the overall success mentioned in the literature was even within the data. Most of all, the trends of success portrayed in much of the literature discussed were extenuatingly supported in the final table. Based on the coded connections, one can easily expect the trends to continue.

#### **Chapter IV Figure 17-20 Themed Coded Summary**

By looping back to the literature after the results are explained, it further specifies the findings in the research. Current researchers can get a side-by-side view of the connections made without having to go back and read the literature that supports the findings. Further researchers can use the coded charts to narrow the goals and objectives they may be seeking in the future. Overall, the side-by-side coded correlations help increase the understanding of the characteristics of belonging and how they affect the graduation rates of athletes vs. non-athletes.

## **CHAPTER V.**

### **DISCUSSION**

This introductory statement presents the summary, recommendations, and conclusion. This chapter will also include a research comparison of athletes to non-athletes that work for various reasons. For one, making such a comparison further supports the secondary analysis of data presented in this study. By shining a light on students with jobs, a researcher can also take certain aspects of this study further with different controllable variables.

RQ1: What effect does belongingness have on the academic performance of Division I intercollegiate athletes compared to non-athletes?

The findings from this study document that the characteristics of a sense of belonging positively impact the academic performance of college students, as measured by the graduation rates and yearly trends. The results also support previous findings regarding how the sense of belonging correlates to higher student success. Student athletes do portray higher graduation rates compared to their peers in most coded categories that involve belonging. Although athletes fared better in belonging themes of time, well-being, support services, and academic performance, athletes that were shown to have higher graduation rates were either female, black, or both. Characteristics highlighted within the theoretical frameworks further home in on the descriptions of findings.

#### **Use of Maslow's Hierarchy of Motivation Approach**

By studying Maslow's approach (1943) of physiological, safety/security, belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization were connected to a baseline of

understanding and the overall hierarchy of used data in this study. Based on responses, athletes seemed to be provided basic needs that involved physiological and safety characteristics. By discussing how the general view of belongingness changed from the 50s to 80s, a researcher can further describe the changes of belongingness from the public to that of collegiate athletes. The bases of needs can be used to compare to extenuated needs of athletes. Even when identity becomes a topic of discussion, there is a hierarchy of topics that Maslow provides that can be used to define athletic situations first. From a physiological standpoint, they were provided understandable mentors and coaches closer to them. Athletes also were surrounded by staff that catered to their health needs that led to many responding to enjoying their overall experiences. They may have wished to pursue other classes, or even lost their way at times when considering their identity. However, with the glue of belongingness aspects that interacting in scholarly sports includes, the possibility of maintaining success was readily available. Maslow (1954) ensures that belongingness is not only more beneficial than prestige or creation but is almost necessary to accomplish one's goals. Whether those goals are to graduate college or simply achieve happiness, Maslow pinpoints the generic view of the chances to succeed; meaning that without one aspect of the hierarchy Maslow shares, others may be difficult to accumulate. With such a basis, it is easier to dive deeper into the findings of other theorists such as Tinto, Pascarella, and Terenzini.

The findings declare the effect of identity between athletes vs. non-athletes. It seemed to be important that an athlete saw themselves as more of a student than an athlete; that the athlete should not input their entire identity in the outcomes of their sport engagements. The findings touched base on identity throughout the study in a variety of

ways, but the happiness of an athlete was what can be used to describe such an identity of success. To reiterate the definition of happiness from Maslow's perspective, he defined it as a state of psychological well-being or contentment in one's experiences (Maslow, 1954). Some of the elements portrayed in the findings that were also shared in the literature include: Diener (1984) love, marriage, sex, children, exercise, health, friends, education, work, income, recognition, success, independence, personal values, and community involvement, From these elements that many athletes experience, they can build those close social relationships that are extremely important for happiness (Pettijohn 1996) and overall experience a quality level of education to be satisfied (Mickens, 2021).

#### **Use of Tinto's Internationalist Approach vs. Attrition**

Based on the study of research and literature within Tinto's perspective, athletes seemed to struggle less than their non-athlete counterparts when considering dropping out or quitting. Many athletes disclosed their negative feelings of time struggles but found certain structures early on in their transition to higher education. With such a perspective, I now support the examples of experiences that led to departure including lack of expectations, support, involvement, etc. (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (2004) discussed how such qualities promote persistence and refrain from the 56% (2005) of students leaving the first year. The graduation rates in this study may not have reflected such qualities in the athletic transition, but the long-term data supports the defeat of attrition for most athletes overall. Based on the connections of the results, I believe that the answers lie within Tinto's framework (2012), shaped positive climate (2016), and shifting of lenses towards persistence (2017). An institution can then mirror the ideals that work for athletes and use

the same tactics to help non-athletes. By having an institution mirror such ideals for both athletes and non-athletes, we can help tackle such issues as first-year student attrition rates increasing 10-12% every year with more than 40% of first-year students dropping out (Mickens et al. 2022).

### **Use of Astin's Impact Theory Approach Expressed by Pascarella and Terenzini**

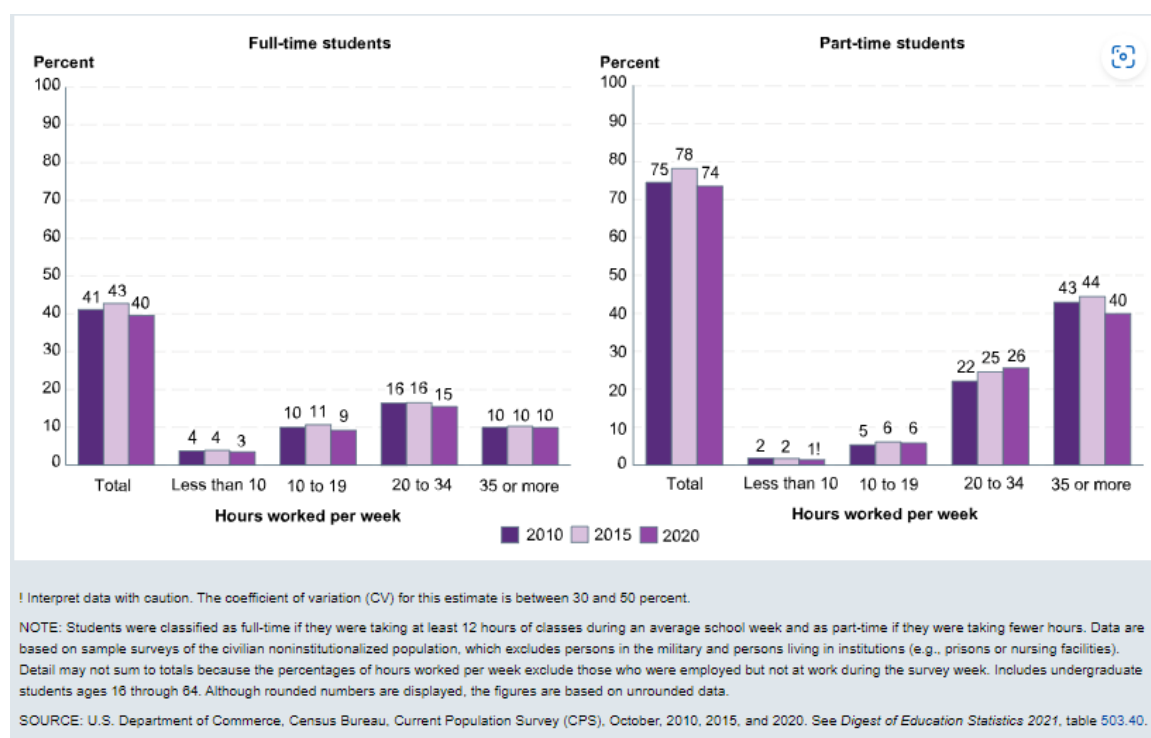
Pascarella and Terenzini began their claims taking Tinto's theory of Departure and continued to use that to further Astin's Impact Theory. I chose their mixed theory approach because they combined theories in a more contemporary way that is more relatable to the belongingness that college students interact with today. More specifically, Pascarella and Terenzini share the importance of significant interactions, early integration, and environment. One example would be their reference to the fact that Tinto (1987) first expressed that commitment serves to bind the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise. Pascarella and Terenzini (2017) made such a claim more relevant by focusing on the commitments early on so that students can focus on the integration before other forces shape student departure during the first six weeks in particular (Braxton 2000). Amongst scholarly athletes, they are pretty much forced into commitment and community early on, which does not leave much room for quitting an impactful situation. Which also leads to the theoretical support that the college environment has been the focus of a great deal of development research, and this research ultimately revealed a link between advanced morals and college attendance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2017). Which such movements of success with these aspects of theory, an institution can increase graduation rates by helping their students engage in impactful

situations like the occurrences that athletes are exposed to, especially within the beginning college transitioning period.

### Implications for Research Comparison with Students That Work

When considering the time and engagement included in having a job while attending college, comparisons can be used to further alleviate certain claims against matching characteristics involved with athletics. Before diving into the characteristics, I felt it was important to share a visual representation of hours that college students work, Portrayed in Figure 21, National Center for Education Statistics (2022) shows the percentage of undergraduate students who were employed (attendance status and hours worked per week: 2010, 2015, 2020)

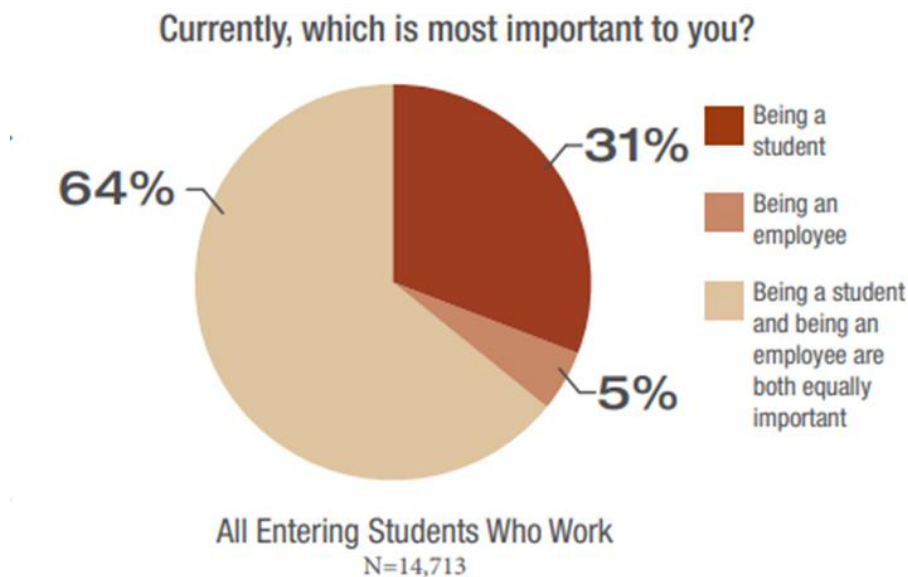
**Figure 21.**



By using this chart, one can compare the supposedly 20 hours a week student athletes engage in sports to typical non-athlete students with jobs. With similar time constraints, the belonging characteristics included with sports involvement carries more weight. The retention and graduation success also allows me as the researcher to further clarify the data that supports the points made about the sense of belonging.

One example point may be the connections of importance students see their tasks as. As discussed earlier, the identity of athletes seeing themselves more as a student first overlapped with the success of certain belonging characteristics. One example that connects to Maslow's hierarchy is the need for athletes to succeed in their sport or else they will lose the bottom tier safety and security bases holding up the sense of belonging. Another example of overlapping can be described by revisiting the interview responses of the athletes when they felt 'conflicted' about choosing between attending sporting events vs those required as a student. When interviewed, athletes felt more of a student most of the time because coaches and professors were understanding but firm. Whereas other athletes felt as if it was harder to see themselves as a student when they were withheld from choosing certain vocational paths to study, or even miss classes in general. However, such ideals were not strong enough to affect the graduation rates of said athletes overall. Looking at the comparison of students working, Figure 22 reflects instances of identity from a study by Center for Community College Student Engagement (2020).

**Figure 22. Identity as a Student or Employee**



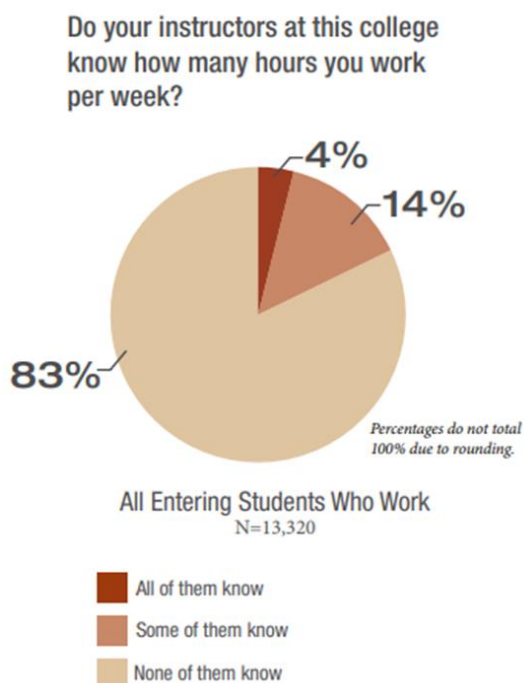
*\*Note: 60% (N=9,988) of those aged 18–19 also view working and being a student as equally important.*

Nearly two-thirds of students view working and being a student as equally important. Interestingly, most athletes chose being a student as important. Although the study was different, it can be safe to say that the needs and identity are different. That athletes seem to be in a better head space when considering importance. It is also important to know that entering students who are enrolled full time are more likely to view being a student as more important than being an employee.

Similarly to as for mentioned survey data of instructors or professors understanding the schedule of athletes in a previous chapter, non-athletes that work correspond to the same issue. However, Figure 23 by Center for Community College

Student Engagement (2020) reflects that there is not as much awareness for the non-athletes with a job.

**Figure 23. Communication with Professors**



The data in Figure 23 indicates that most faculty don't know how much their students work. Over 80% of students report that their instructors do not know how many hours per week they work. Athletes are typically obligated to inform their instructors of their schedules. Although practices may be easy to work around, games and community involvement may not be. Not only are athletes more apt to share their situation with instructors because of their structured schedules that are usually planned months in advance, they also have help from coaches and counselors to inform their instructors of instances of missing class. Faculty members can't control their students' work schedules, but if they know whether their students are working and how much they are working,

they may be able to make reasonable accommodations for students who must miss class due to a work conflict.

If certain support services and flexible occurrences help athletes succeed in certain aspects of persistence based off of belonging, why can't non-athletes with jobs.

Figure 24 reflects the lack of help non-athletes receive even though their hourly involvement in other situations may be like scholarly athletes from Center for Community College Student Engagement (2020).

**Figure 24. Help from Staff Members**

At this college, has a staff member helped you decide how to balance the number of classes you take and the number of hours you work for pay?

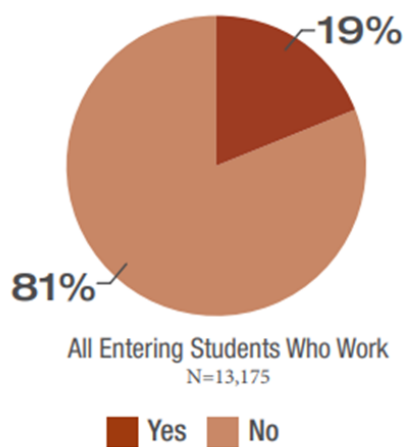


Figure 24 depicts 80% of students reported that a staff member did not help them decide how to balance the number of classes they take with the number of hours they work. According to Center for Community College Student Engagement (2020), non-athlete students that work portrayed a higher level of engagement, reflecting more success in class, if the following two instances occurred: (a). Students informed their

professor about how many hours they worked, (b). Someone helped them decide how to balance the number of classes they attended and the hours they worked.

Center for Community College Student Engagement (2020) continues by saying that not only are the non-athletes that work engaged at a much higher level, but to much more effect than students who say no one helped them discuss balance.

With such representation of study, I can firmly share my data found. I can do so alongside those like Scott-Clayton (2011), who found that participating in work study has a negative effect on GPA and a positive effect on credits earned. It seems as if there is an even playing field between athletes without jobs and non-athletes that have jobs. It is safe to say that the main difference is the impact of belonging on the experiences they have while in college. Many implications are consistent with other instances. Dadgar's (2012) for example estimates of the impact of off-campus work with evidence that working during the school year has a negative effect on students' grades and may cause student success skills that are already difficult to develop, impossible to maintain (Dadgar, M., 2012). The next step is to lead such solutions to a practical framework.

### **Solutions to Practice**

One step would be to hire counselors, tutors, and mentors for the general student body. In Table 2 of chapter 4, it reflects that athletes respond very positively about academic services provided such as coach, academic, and faculty support. Although graduation rates for non-athletes and athletes were found to be equal overall, the exit interview responses reflected that athletes had better overall experiences. This may be because student athletes prefer same-gender counselors (López & Levy, 2013) and athletic trainers for "intimate-area" injuries (O'Connor et al., 2010). This could be a sign to also

pair the general student body with same sex counselors. Even if “intimate areas are not being worked on, the relatability and relationship built may lead to an overall experience towards the graduation process. If an institution is capable, having a variety of mentors for non-athletes can also be beneficial, especially for those that have a job. Sasso et al (2022) shares this can be done by including educational programming and collaborative efforts with university counseling services. Like any other counseling enigma, it helps that counselors are chosen based on familiarity (López & Levy, 2013). Familiarity, extending same sex counselors or mentors to knowledge of the student’s vocational choice or sport. Such a task could be included for both athletes and non-athletes. With such clarity, research has shown that the provision of educational services assists individuals to live more fulfilling and satisfying lives (Michalos, 2017).

Another practice that could be put into place is to include more flexible class options. Athletes can then choose the career paths they truly desire, which may lead to less identity confusion and overall increase of happiness when considering a sense of belonging at a university. An example adding on to academic support can be a guide that includes specific courses and flexible course scheduling (e.g., Ko et al., 2008). In the exit interview process, athletes responded stating that they felt “conflicted” when choosing between school or sport related activities. With flexible options, they may no longer feel obligated to make tough decisions that may lead them to losing their eligibility that provides them safety and security. Such practice of flexible classes may also help students with jobs. Similarly to when student athletes mentioned that their “coaches understood” certain reasons behind missing sporting events, non-athletes with jobs also deserve such flexibility when communicated. Maybe a program for busy athletes and

students with a job can have certain career path or class choices. Such services have reflected success since Tinto (2005), who found that “available” programs lead to goal clarity and actuality of presence on campus. This would also alleviate the time demand issues portrayed in Table 1 early in chapter 4. A future researcher can use such responses to relay corrections for the general student body. With such ideas, identity with certain aspects of belongingness have a narrower pathway, but it all depends on how it is viewed

Perception is also important to include in place of values of an institution. How one views environment and culture can be a major factor. A reminder of the definition of culture is shared characteristics among group members and these characteristics range from language, music, and social habits (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Such characteristics are included in various ways throughout college athletics. Emulating athletic cultures, the objective of creating a campus climate that contributes to the retention and academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). If students perceive that support services are readily available, they should be more liable to engage in them. Maybe host get togethers in the Career Development Center or Writing Center. Students might learn that these support services are available and perceive them positively. With these types of perceptions, a sense of belonging can be achieved through cultural recognition and cultural identification as culture can reflect aspects of self (Joseph Cooper & Ajhanai Newton, 2021). Some practical sub scales of athletic department services include common interest, equity in administrative decisions, administrative consideration, healthy competition, leadership opportunities, and social spaces (Campbell 2007).

Transitioning programs to get the students acclimated would be a good move to relieve the issue. Young students face considerable issues in the transition to economic

independence (Arnot 2012). If not met through institutional support systems, it could adversely affect the successful transition, retention and graduation of students (Diaz, 2022). Like athletes being welcomed by more seasoned teammates or coaches, the regular student body may also benefit from such type of mentors. The data showed that summer school before the beginning of the freshmen year of college is statistically significant and has a positive impact on student-athlete graduation rates (Hollis 2002). If that is not an available practice, some type of transition community could be ready to accept new students with open arms. Students seeking leadership positions could earn college credits running the transition program, or the retention rate increase based on the program may allow finances to give stipends to professors. Whatever the choice is, the initial transition for students is an important time. Social involvement in such activities provides smooth social transitions to college by positively impacting students' overall sense of belonging by finding new intrapersonal connections (Hoops, 2017).

The final solution ties into some others; it is to allow student athletes the opportunities to identify as more of a student than an athlete. Belonging is defined as the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group (Tinto, 1993). Identifying through belonging may include perceptions, flexible classes, or even environment. Students typically identify with what they choose to believe, see, and understand. It may take a mentor or overall program to help students understand how to be a student, study like a student, handle the pressure of a student, etc. Patterson et al. (2018) found that one or other identity is expressed mainly in interaction with others. Identities are dynamic and revolve around situational, social, and personal characteristics that come into play in our social

roles. Situational identities emerge in face-to-face interactions within the context of our socially situated roles at the time of an interaction (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney 2003). Although an institution cannot control all interactions, providing and marketing such engagements are possible.

### **Further Research**

For further research, others can delve deeper into the characteristics with the sense of belonging by including other variables. Some other variables may include other clubs, communities, sports, or programs at an institution. Similar characteristics of belongingness mentioned in this study are also said to be in other engagement opportunities. For example, cheerleaders may find a sense of well-being around other students with similar interests. Band members may bond when achieving a sound when coming together playing different instruments simultaneously. Fraternity brothers and sorority sisters may feel safe and secure in the housing provided, which may lead to further aspects of happiness and persistence discussed by the theorists in this study. To get more results in a quicker fashion, a researcher could use first-year GPAs of students engaged in such clubs, communities, sports or programs instead of using long-term graduation rates as a measurement. Tinto (2004) discussed how such qualities promote persistence and refrain from the 56% (2005) of students leaving the first year. Moleski (2023) states the higher the GPA in the first year of attendance, the greater success, which increases the influence on retention and degree completion (Millea et al., 2018). First year attention is crucial for the impact of retention and success. To add more layers to major impacts of this study, a hierarchal regression analysis explores the relationship between the dependent variable and multiple independent variables.

One example may be to dive deeper into how socioeconomic status affects the ability to belong, hence affecting certain avenues to graduate. Social class has an undeniable influence on college students' experiences in higher education. Social class shapes students' eligibility to attend college, influences what college they choose to attend, and negatively affects their persistence in higher education (Soria, 2012). Scholars with lower social economic backgrounds struggle with students' involvement and engagement on campuses. For example, Walpole (2003) found college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spent less time in student clubs and groups compared to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Most scholars addressing the lower retention and completion rates of students from working-class backgrounds focus on examining differences in students' social integration and sense of belonging at their colleges and universities (Lehmann, 2007).

A researcher may also use a deeper analysis of the subgroups of minority and/or female students. Since the data reflected that the graduation rates of minority and female athletes were higher than non-athletes, a future researcher could build their theories around these findings and create a hypothesis finding the frequencies of the reasons why such an occurrence is true. One example would be using the different opportunities provided as a different lens. Sheehan (2012) shares that opportunities for male and females are so different that they negatively affect motivation and performance. With interviews asking about certain support services in this study, a researcher could dive deeper into how specific answers differentiated between males and females. Since females struggles more so with well-being characteristics, the researcher can attempt to find out why. Another option would be to use college enrollment or degree attainment

differences between males and females. By using the NCAA data success and trends of athletes, differences between male and female sports may provide certain characteristics that can also be used to differentiate successes and trends for males and females that are non-athletes. Similarly, the same tactics can be used to further look at the successes and failures of minority athletes. With such an objective, the following data from the results of this study can be further analyzed:

- While female athletes seem to be 4% more likely to graduate when comparing the data to the female student body.

- Black athletes have a significantly higher graduation rate than their student body at an overall 9%

- Black male athletes having a favoring 12% higher graduation rate.

- Black females with a 13% higher notable increase in single-year graduation success.

Then a researcher could even take it further by seeing how the same engagement qualities of belongingness correspond to non-athletes at an institution.

Another may be comparing the difference of federal graduation rates for student athletes comparing them to "one and done" athletes that go pro. Collegiate underclassmen leaving school early to turn professional is an issue that spans the academic canon over the past several decades (Caro & Doval, 2017). An increase in transfer behavior, which negatively impacts the federal graduation rate, many subgroup federal graduation rates continue to trend higher for student-athletes" (NCAA Research 2022, p.6). It is first important to create a universal method of exit interviews. The NCAA presidents have created the current method and have given institutions a lot of autonomy; this is understandable, but there is no set measure for better comparison of graduation results

because institutions all engage in the exit interviews in slightly different ways (Harry 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study document the positive impact of having a sense of belonging. The characteristics of belonging lead to the motivation and persistence to graduate college. If colleges and universities wish to help their students graduate in a timely fashion, the pathway can be paved with the proper tactics of involvement, support, structure, community, identity, and well-being.

Institutions can use thematic ideals to help relieve retention issues and increase college graduation rates. Maslow began studies that included the necessities and characteristics that lead to happiness. A part of Maslow's hierarchal characteristics included how belonging is an important part of being a successful human being. Tinto later introduced the issues of student departure and began the empirical studies of figuring out what can relieve attrition issues at college institutions. Tinto found out there are many attributes that cause student departure, those that can be combatted with a sense of belonging. Then Pascarella and Terenzini continued research to enhance the understanding of how interacting in certain environments leads to success. Such impacts lead to the themes of belonging in this study to breakdown how the theories were involved in the engagement of scholarly athletes.

In the end, the sense of belonging faired evenly with non-athletes even though athletes thrived in many different categories. It was also found that the themes involved with being a college athlete such further positively affects black athletes, as well as

female athletes. The themes involved were time demands, support services, well-being, and overall academic experience; these are just the beginning of many to be analyzed.

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**Appendix A.**

## ACHA-NCHA Data Disclaimer

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