

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF AND  
UTILIZATION OF SERVICES BY COLLEGE  
STUDENT-ATHLETES DEEMED AT-RISK  
OF NOT GRADUATING

Brian White, Master of Arts, 2008

Directed By: Dr. Peter Leone, Special Education

Fifteen intercollegiate student-athletes at a Division I institution deemed at-risk of not graduating participated in a study seeking information on their postsecondary academic experiences. Student-athletes who self-reported a disability were asked if they chose to register with Disability Support Services. Research was conducted by performing individual interviews with each of the student-athletes. Findings indicated the student-athletes in this study felt positive about the support they received and their ability to graduate from their institution. Student-athletes in this study generally displayed an attitude of willingness to do what they need to do to succeed. Sentiments towards reporting a disability were varied. Student-athletes with a learning disability were willing to register with DSS, while participants with other disabilities were less willing to do so. Implications include the importance of a strong academic support system for the success of the student-athlete and both the athletic and academic goals of the institution.

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF AND UTILIZATION OF SERVICES BY  
COLLEGE STUDENT-ATHLETES DEEMED AT-RISK OF NOT GRADUATING

By

Brian White

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Advisory Committee:

Dr. Peter Leone, Professor, Chair

Dr. William Drakeford, Assistant Professor

Dr. Sherril Moon, Professor

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## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	ii
Chapter1:Introduction.....	1
Statement of Problem.....	1
Research Questions.....	4
Literature Review.....	5
Students with Disabilities at the Postsecondary Level.....	5
Major Legislation.....	10
Utilization of Disabilities Services at the Postsecondary Level.....	16
Supports for Student-Athletes with Disabilities.....	17
The Convergence of Athletics and Academics in College.....	19
Initial Eligibility.....	20
Initial Eligibility and Recruiting.....	26
Conclusion.....	28
Chapter 2:	
Methodology.....	30
The Researcher.....	30
Subjects.....	30
Data Collection and Analysis.....	35
Interviews.....	36
Document Review.....	38
Chapter 3: Findings.....	40
Attitudes Towards Disability Labels.....	40
Views of ILP Placement.....	46
Academic Expectations of Student-Athletes .....	50
Indirect Path to College .....	54
Inadequate High School Preparation .....	55
Athletic Learning .....	61
Chapter 4: Analysis.....	65
Discussion and Implications.....	65
Limitations and Directions for Future Research.....	73
Bibliography.....	77

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *Statement of Problem*

Intercollegiate athletics has become a major presence in today's society. Success in athletics can provide colleges and universities with positive exposure that they would not be able to gain in any other manner. In order to have successful sports teams, institutions must attract the most skilled athletes to enroll at their school. However, drawing these student athletes does not always coincide with the school's academic mission. Universities will often admit student-athletes who do not meet admissions criteria based on their athletic skill. This puts the burden on the athletic programs and individual sport's coaches to provide a system to keep every student-athlete academically eligible to participate.

Any coach or athletic administrator will say their mission is twofold: to win games and to see their players graduate. These objectives are often complementary to each other. Coaches count on their players to succeed in the classroom so that they can stay eligible and be able to practice and compete. Coaches look to upperclassmen to be team leaders on the field and in the classroom. To stay eligible student-athletes must meet academic criteria based on minimum GPA and credits earned.

Meeting these criteria can be difficult for all student-athletes. This problem is magnified for those student-athletes who are academically at-risk and/or have a learning disability. These individuals need as much support as possible to have success in the classroom. Problems can arise when student-athletes who would be eligible for services through Disability Support Services or other accommodations as provided by Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (most recently

reauthorized in Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 choose not to self-disclose in order to utilize them.

Some student-athletes can even fail out of school because they choose to try to succeed in the “normal” way, as they view it.

For this study a distinction was made between a student-athlete who is considered at-risk of not graduating from a postsecondary institution they are enrolled in and a postsecondary student-athlete with a learning disability (LD). In order to gather information about student-athletes who choose not to self-disclose their disability a different term must be used than LD. The exact definition of LD is debated today for a variety of reasons including, as described by Hardman, Drew and Egan (2005), “the field’s unique evolution, rapid growth and strong interdisciplinary nature” (p. 167). For the purposes of this study learning disabilities were defined in the terms described in the 1998 definition of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD), which reads as follows:

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, [are] presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the lifespan. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g. sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (ibid., p. 169).

The NJCLD definition is used in this study because of its acknowledgement of learning disabilities as a disorder with ramifications on the abilities of individuals of all ages to learn. Other definitions, such as the one used by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA), almost ignore the issue of learning

disabilities in adults. Language within this definition includes the use of the term “children” to describe individuals who have learning disabilities (ibid.). For a study involving collegiate student-athletes a definition accounting for their experiences is the proper one to employ.

The term “student-athletes at-risk of not graduating from college” is important to define for the context of this study. Much like the definition of learning disabilities there can be some debate as to who these student-athletes are. This term will be operationally defined to include student-athletes at the institution involved in this study who have been deemed by the academic support staff of the university to need extra academic assistance through the Intensive Learning Program (ILP). The criteria for this enrollment program is subjective and at the discretion of the staff. Criteria for inclusion in this program can include, but may not be limited to; low high school GPA, low SAT scores, history of a learning disability, history of another form of disability such as emotional disturbance, and low scores on a battery of tests administered upon enrollment which includes the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, the WRAT-III (Wide Range Assessment Test) and a writing sample evaluated by the academic staff.

Student-athletes failing out of school because they choose not to seek support for their learning difficulties has an obvious negative effect on the individual but also hurts the team and the institution. Teams who expect the athletic skills of that individual are hurt when they lose that individual from their roster and are forced to replace that spot with a freshman in the next year’s recruiting class. This delays the team’s developmental progress and can result in defeat. The overall mission of the

institution, to graduate players, is also damaged. Statistics regarding retention and graduation rate are often how schools are judged and diminishing these scores with failing student-athletes can hurt the reputation of the school.

This study examined the experience of these student-athletes who are at-risk of not graduating to determine whether or not they are taking advantage of any services or accommodations for which they may be eligible. This study also looked at services which these individuals received because of their status as a student-athlete and any services available because of a disability label. Special attention was paid to those individuals who choose not to seek services when they are in fact able to do so. The answers to these questions provided important information that can be used to assist coaches and administrators in understanding the experiences of their student-athletes who are at-risk of not graduating. This information may be used to assess policy that may be used to help ensure the academic success of student-athletes and to help the overall mission of the institution.

### *Research Questions*

This study addressed several questions about the experiences of student-athletes who are at-risk of not graduating from postsecondary institutions.

Specifically this study asked:

1. Are student-athletes who are at-risk of not graduating using any accommodations that are available to them?
2. Are student-athletes who are at-risk of not graduating benefiting from the use of accommodations and/or programs such as the Intensive Learning Program?



3. If student-athletes who are at-risk of not graduating are not choosing to use and/or seek accommodations what factors are preventing them from doing so?
4. What are the general academic experiences at a postsecondary institution for student-athletes who are at-risk of not graduating?

### *Literature Review*

*Students with disabilities at the postsecondary level.* Education is arguably the most important factor in determining the success that an individual can obtain in today's society. Employment and quality of life are closely tied to the amount of formal education that each person has completed. Unfortunately, obtaining higher levels of formal education can prove difficult for individuals with disabilities. Even though many of these people have the natural intelligence and ability to earn bachelor degrees the lack of support systems often drive them away from the education system. With a comprehensive plan developed by faculty and staff of postsecondary institutions, students with disabilities can rise to the levels of success enjoyed by their peers. These services should be aimed at addressing the academic, motivational and esteem issues that inhibit many students with disabilities (Hall, Spruill & Webster, 2002). More specifically, these supports should be focused in the areas of academic support, faculty and staff training, pre-admission counseling and career placement assistance (Sergent, Carter, Sedlacek & Scales, n.d.). This section will describe the experiences of students with learning disabilities as well as provide greater detail on the types of services that these students need.

Statistics show a growing population of students with disabilities attending some form of postsecondary education. In 1978 only 2.6% of students in higher education reported a disability, which rapidly increased to 19% by 1996 (Stodden, 1998). The influx of students with disabilities will only continue to grow, as in 1999 9.4% of freshmen reported a disability upon entering college (Tutton, 2001). Laws improving the ability of students with disability to access postsecondary education, both physically and academically, have contributed to these increased statistics. In addition, laws have also resulted in a greater awareness of teachers and students without disabilities to the needs of those students with disabilities.

The increasing number of students with disabilities in postsecondary education has put a greater strain on institutions to provide opportunities for support services to meet the needs of these students. The inability to provide these services effectively is reflected by the number of students with disabilities who drop out of college after one year or are unable to complete their degree. In the general population of all students 68.3% are enrolled in postsecondary education three to five years after graduation from high school. In comparison, only 26.7% of individuals with any form of disability are enrolled in postsecondary education at the same time period. Those individuals who identify as having a learning disability have 30.5% of their population enrolled (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). These numbers are contradicted by research that has shown that only roughly 17% of students with learning disabilities enter some form of postsecondary education in the year immediately following their high school graduation (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). Students who do not enter postsecondary education right after high school, regardless

of disability status, often have a difficult experience entering and finishing a postsecondary degree program. These statistics also suggest that students who are entering postsecondary institutions might not be doing so directly from high school and are entering later in life.

From the statistics available the assumption can be made that the increasing numbers of students with disabilities attending colleges and universities has not been met by a proportionate increase of students requesting accommodations for their learning disabilities. Only an estimated 1-3% of all enrolled students take advantage of service providers and request accommodations (Hartman, 1994). This number is not consistent with the number of students who are reporting disabilities. This means students who have documented disabilities are not actively advocating for themselves and seeking their available services and accommodations. Consideration should be given to the fact that students with disabilities are requesting services at a higher rate. Research has indicated that the number of students utilizing services rose from 33% to 50% between 1992 and 1996 (Totten, 2001). This is important progress but emphasis should be placed on getting all students with disabilities to both report their disability and use the services available to them.

Even though there is great diversity among college students with disabilities they do share some common characteristics. The most common disabilities found in adults occur in the areas of reading comprehension, spelling, writing mechanics, math computation and problem solving (Vogel & Sattler, 1981). There are more males with disabilities attending postsecondary education than females, which is the opposite of the general population. Males account for 52% of students with

disabilities but only comprise 45% of students without disabilities (Getzel & Wehman, 2005). These statistics show that males are overrepresented among the population of students with disabilities. Many students also have issues with their own self-image because of their disability. Koch (2004) found that the most troubling obstacle for students with disabilities is their “own perceptions of their inabilities and the self-doubt that this creates.” Students with disabilities have also been known to have limitations in the areas of motivation and self-monitoring (Hall, Spurill & Webster, 2002).

Trends are apparent in the type of postsecondary institutions in which students with disabilities choose to enroll. Those who enroll in a four-year or two-year college do so at a larger institution (10,000+ students) or a medium size institution (3,000 to 9,999 students). A 1998 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study showed that almost 85% of students reporting a specific learning disability attend this type of school. The vast majority (roughly 80%) of students with learning disabilities attend public schools. Choosing to attend a public institution may be because of economic factors. Approximately 65% of students with reported disabilities come from households where neither parent has earned a bachelor’s degree or higher (NCES, 2000). The relationship between education and income has been well documented. As expected by the high percentage of students coming from homes with low education attainment only 20% of students reporting disabilities come from homes in the upper quartile of household income (ibid). These economic factors, barring any form of academic or athletic scholarship, make enrolling in a large public

university, like the university in this study, the most feasible option for students with disabilities.

The education that students with disabilities received prior to enrolling in a postsecondary program can also be an issue affecting their ability to adapt to the college setting. In high school, students with disabilities often do not have the same preparation in academic subjects as their peers without disabilities. This is especially true for students who have not spoken to a career or guidance counselor about creating a transition plan that will include an academic regimen that will adequately prepare them for college (Getzel & Wehman, 2005). The average high school student earns 22 academic credits towards high school graduation. Students without disabilities earn 15 of these credits in academic subjects, while students with disabilities only earn 12 in academic subjects (Blockorby & Wagner, 1996). Students with disabilities are often placed in vocational and skills courses. They are often not placed in academic courses that will fully prepare them for the course-load that they will encounter in college or may even prohibit their acceptance into the college of their choice.

Learning disabilities can inhibit the learning process in some aspects but should not restrict an individual from being able to earn a degree or certificate from a postsecondary education program. Obtaining such a degree has been positively linked to obtaining employment not only for students with disabilities but for those without them as well (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). This makes the value of a degree from a postsecondary institution almost immeasurable, as it allows for individuals to succeed in a very competitive job market. The degree also provides

some level of security, as individuals with disabilities have been shown to be the “last-hired and first-fired” from employment opportunities (Stodden, 2001).

*Major legislation.* The increasing number of students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education has been prompted by legislation and actions of postsecondary institutions themselves. A discussion of legislation affecting students with disabilities often begins with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This legislation is often referred to because of the shift in thinking that resulted from it. The rights of unprivileged and underrepresented groups now became relevant in the minds of the public. However, this section will not detail the Civil Rights Act and will instead focus on legislation that is directly related to education. Specifically, these include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

One of the more important pieces of legislation which should be mentioned is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (PL 94-142). Even though IDEA does not directly apply to postsecondary education once a student is on campus, its establishment in 1975 led to a change in culture regarding the way in which the education of individuals with disabilities is executed. The law drastically changed the manner in which public education in the United States handled students with disabilities. IDEA demands that a free and appropriate public education be made available to all students from ages 3-21 by any federally funded school district (Jarrow, 1999). One of the major advantages to students and their families is that IDEA mandates that school districts assume responsibility for identifying which students need disability services. At the college level, this same mandate does not

exist; both the ADA and Section 504 place the impetus for self-advocacy on the student (Brinckerhoff, Shaw & McGuire, 1992).

Throughout their elementary and secondary education careers students are protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). One of the major tenets of IDEA is the establishment of education in the least restrictive environment. This allows many students with disabilities to be placed into class setting with their peers for much of the day. Interacting with other students often leads to the development of similar goals. This is one of the major factors that lead to the increasing number of students with disabilities expressing a desire to attend college (Mangrum & Strichart, 1984). Placement in a least restrictive environment also granted these students the preparation they require to gain acceptance into a college (Getzel & Wehman, 2005).

In contrast, the two other major legislative works regarding students with disabilities place the burden on the individual students to ensure that they are getting the accommodations and support services that they require. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112) was the first authorization of major legislation relating to colleges and universities. Public schools are not the only institutions that these laws effect. Since both public and private schools receive federal funds they are required to comply with Section 504 regulations. This law has been most recently reauthorized in Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (United States Department of Labor, 1998). The literature still refers to accommodations made to education under this law as a “Section 504 Plan” (Bender, 2008). The law states no program or activity receiving federal funding can

discriminate against an individual because of their disability if they are otherwise qualified (Mangrum & Strichart, 1984). Section 504 provides assistance to anyone who has a physical or mental impairment that limits any major life function. Section 504 relates to individuals with learning disabilities because learning is considered a major life function. Colleges and universities are required to comply with this law in many different areas. The major impact of Section 504 has been displayed in the areas of access to campus facilities for students with disabilities and in ensuring nondiscriminatory admissions procedures (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). An institution may not deny admission to a reasonably qualified student because they have a learning disability. The school must also provide reasonable accommodations and program modifications so that a student with a disability can meet their academic requirements (Mangrum & Strichart, 1984). The goal of the provisions of Section 504 is not to ensure that a student with a disability will be successful, it is only to ensure that having a disability does not inhibit that student from having the same opportunity to be successful in academics (Jarrow, 1999).

The basis of Section 504 is to make all aspects of the college experience as fair as possible for all individuals. Accommodations and admissions procedures must allow for fair and equal treatment of any individual with a disability. Along these lines, one of the major provisions of Section 504 is that it does not allow institutions to base its admissions decisions on the number of students with disabilities that it already has admitted (Mangrum & Strichart, 1984). This allows for all individuals to have an equal chance of being admitted to a school based on their ability and keeps an institution from putting a quota on how many students with disabilities that they will



choose to admit. The law also states that schools must use different factors in the admissions process and not base their decisions solely on grades and standardized test scores, which are factors that can discriminate against individuals with disabilities (ibid). This is a major issue when compared with the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Clearinghouse requirements for test scores and GPA, which will be discussed in a later section.

Once a student is on campus Section 504 stresses that the individual should be included in the standard classroom and activity settings as often as possible. This is very similar to the idea of the least restrictive environment found in the tenants of IDEA (ibid). The institution must also provide for the proper accommodations to be provided to students. For students with learning disabilities some of the most important aspects of the law are that it allows for modifications in the length of time needed for the completion of graduation requirements and the substitution of certain courses for graduation requirements (ibid). For example, this allows for students with learning disabilities to take less than the required course load in any given semester and still be considered a candidate for graduation (ibid).

Section 504 also speaks to other accommodations for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities that effect their vision, hearing and/or locomotion can greatly benefit from the use of assistive technology. However, Students with learning disabilities often need more intensive accommodations than an assistive technology device. Accommodations that can help students with disabilities can range from, as previously mentioned, the ability to take less than the required full-time course load to the assignment of a tutor for specific classes or to teach study

skills. As part of the provision to prevent against biases in the admissions process students are allowed to use their 504 accommodations on College Board and placement tests (ibid) This is an important factor because it alleviates the burden from the student to try to succeed in a standardized testing environment without the benefit of their accommodations.

Another major piece of legislation affecting the experiences of students with disabilities in the postsecondary setting is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (PL 101-336). The ADA expands many of the ideas of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation ACT and is very similar to it in many ways. Like Section 504, the ADA seeks to provide a fair chance for all individuals to have the ability to contribute to society. Any entity covered by the ADA cannot discriminate against an individual with disabilities in the areas of employment and/or the utilization of the goods and services provided by that entity (Getzel & Wehman, 2005). The act is divided into five separate titles that layout guidelines for different types of entities. Titles II and III are the most significant parts of the ADA in relation to students with disabilities in the postsecondary setting.

Title II prohibits that any individual “be excluded from the participation in or be denied the benefits of [...] any public entity” (Getzel & Wehman, 2005, p. 30). In terms of postsecondary education, Title II speaks directly to state funded institutions, such as a state college or university. Private colleges are also covered by the ADA. Reference to these types of institutions can be found in Title III, which states no individual may be denied the benefits of any institution of public accommodation

(ibid). Extending services to private schools is an important addition to the mandates of Section 504 by the ADA.

The ADA provides services to individuals deemed to have a disability based on three distinct criteria: the presence of an impairment that substantially limits a major life activity, a record of the impairment and is regarded as having the impairment (ibid). This means that many students who received accommodations under IDEA in high school might not receive them in college. Having strict criteria defining who can be considered as having a disability helps alleviate some of the confusion regarding whom may receive accommodations. Students experiencing academic difficulty for the first time may seek accommodations from their postsecondary institution, but without the proper documentation defining their disability and no apparent history of the disability they will most likely be denied services. This is important because it helps to ensure that only those students who truly need disability services will receive them.

This section has provided a brief explanation of the major legislation that has shaped the culture of postsecondary education for today's students. They have the ability to take advantage of accommodations at the secondary level under IDEA that will help them gain acceptance into college through the ability to compete academically in relation to their peers at the high school level. The ADA and Section 504 allow for students to receive accommodations on standardized testing and force postsecondary institutions to effectively disregard an applicant's disability students in terms of consideration for admission. These laws proclaim that a school cannot deny a qualified student entrance into its program solely on the basis of a learning

disability. Also, once these students arrive on campus they are granted access to the necessary accommodations that will assist the student in completing their academic program.

*Utilization of disability services at the postsecondary level.* A great variety of research has been conducted on the nature of disability support services and accommodations at the postsecondary level. Much of this research is focused on support services at community colleges. However, the scope of services at the community college level is very similar to those offered at four-year colleges (Pacifci & McKinney, 1997). The most frequent services offered are registration assistance, counseling, alternate test procedures and class note takers (ibid.).

Accommodations are available to those students at the postsecondary level that seek them out. Unfortunately, Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) have demonstrated that only a minority of these students have sought out these services. They identified two important factors in a student's decision to seek services and/or accommodations. The first of these factors is the response of a professor when approached regarding the use of accommodations in that particular classroom. A negative response from a professor will lead a student to choose not to utilize their accommodations in the future. Another key factor in a student's choice to use accommodations is the perception of being stigmatized because of their disability. In addition, the more "awkward" or "obvious" that they perceive that their accommodations or services to be, the less likely they will be to use them.

Not choosing to self-disclose a disability at the college level can be troublesome for students. A student with a disability is not eligible to receive

services unless her or she has disclosed a disability and registered with the appropriate student services agency on their campus (NCAA, 2007). The number of students that choose not to disclose their ability may be the result of a lack of self-esteem and confidence in their ability. This is an important reason that student services should address these issues through counseling and other avenues. One such avenue is participation in intercollegiate athletics.

The role of athletics at the college level is often a controversial subject. Its detractors point to issues such as the admission of less than qualified student-athletes and a perceived overemphasis on winning at the cost of education. They also point to research such as the study done by Pascarella, Bohr, Nora and Terenzini (1995) that shows male football and basketball players are “significantly disadvantaged on standardized measures of reading comprehension and mathematics” compared to the general student population after their freshman year. Pascarella et. al. (1999) performed a follow-up study and determined that the negative cognitive effects in the same areas were still present after the second and third years of college. In both studies Pascarella et al. found that the negative cognitive impacts were not found in male participants in other sports or female athletes.

*Supports for student-athletes with disabilities.* Student-athletes playing any sport in any division face challenges finding a balance between their commitment to athletics and their academic responsibilities. For student-athletes with learning disabilities managing these two different demands can become an even more daunting task. Most universities already have academic services in place specifically for student-athletes but do not have specific programs in place for athletes with

disabilities (Clark, 2002). Services for athletes can range from extensive programs housed in separate facilities to a single academic advisor for athletics (Lewis, 1996). Services for athletes are not much different from those offered to the regular student population. In most cases they include advisors and tutors who monitor eligibility, assist with course selection, assess skill deficiencies and administer study halls (Howard-Hamilton & Watt, 1990).

A good example of an academic support system for athletes is found at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC). The Academic Center is located in Kenan Field House on the school's campus. The center consists of a computer room, foreign language lab, a seminar room, tutor rooms, a study lounge and offices for the academic staff. The staff consists of a Director, an Associate Director and three academic counselors (Lewis, 1996). Student-athletes at UNC expressed an interest in the need for counselors that have the knowledge and skills to work more extensively with students with learning disabilities (ibid.).

Even with academic support available the needs of student-athletes with disabilities are not easily met. Academic support staffs can help student-athletes with disabilities by referring them to on-campus DSS programs to receive the assistance they need. Academic support staffs do not have the ability to force a student with a disability to self-disclose or to advocate for their available supports in the classroom. The nature of laws protecting those with learning disabilities also prohibits academic support staffs from employing the services of the athletic coaching staffs to take any action on the part of a student-athlete regarding their disability mandatory (Etzel, Ferrante & Pinkney, 1996).

*The convergence of athletics and academics in college.* Athletics can place a strain on the focus of institutions of higher education. Universities would ideally like to enjoy the benefits of having a strong academic reputation along with the financial windfall garnered by schools with powerful athletic programs. However, the simultaneous pursuit of these two objectives can create conflict on college campuses. Intercollegiate athletics help schools provide extensive local, regional and national exposure and grant them an opportunity to present themselves in a positive manner. Excelling on the athletic field only helps to boost the image of the university in the public eye (Covell & Barr, 2001). Athletic success is important for image because most of the general public derives their view of particular institutions from seeing them compete athletically (Pascarella et al, 1999). Excelling on the field of play can help a university draw interest from prospective athletes and regular students. However, conflict arises from the need to recruit highly-skilled athletes in order to produce winning athletic teams. The decision to admit certain student-athletes does not always coincide with an institution's desire to attract only the most academically competitive students (Covell & Barr, 2001). Some claim that the revenue generated by athletic success leads to the admission of "academically deficient" student-athletes (Harvard Law Review, 2001). This can prove unfair to both the student and the university community.

In many instances, athletic recruiting at the collegiate level does grant opportunities for students who would not normally have access to a college scholarship and/or admission to attend a postsecondary institution (Sack & Thiel,

1979). This means that many of the students who comprise intercollegiate athletic teams were granted admission in large part because of their athletic, not academic, ability. They also received scholarships allowing them to attend college where otherwise they would not have the financial resources to be able to do so. Research has demonstrated that college football players are consistently being drawn from densely populated urban areas and areas that have a large concentration of minority population (Yetman & Eitzen, 1973). This information and the work done by Harry and Klinger (2005) demonstrate that minority and urban students are vastly overrepresented in special education displays the need for educators to be aware of the dangers of a potential collegiate student-athlete in their school not meeting the criteria to qualify academically.

Sack and Theil (1972) examined the impact of participating in “big time” college football at the University of Notre Dame on student-athletes from lower socioeconomic levels. The football players displayed a similar increase in income compared to their father’s income as the general student population. This is significant since more of the football players came from poorer areas of the country and were not necessarily as successful academically in their high school career. The ballplayers at Notre Dame are representative of student-athletes all over the country who can succeed in and after college because of the opportunities afforded to them by their ability to play a sport.

*Initial eligibility.* Student-athletes with disabilities often face difficulties with their studies once they reach the postsecondary level. However, NCAA regulations regarding Initial Eligibility rules for incoming freshman can prohibit student-athletes



from participating in athletics at the college level. The NCAA requires each incoming freshman to meet certain academic standards based on their performance in NCAA mandated “core” courses and their performance on the SAT or ACT. Students with disabilities are at a great disadvantage because of these rules due to a variety of reasons. This section will delineate the current standards and their development as well as discuss some of the reasons that many critics object to their seemingly unfair nature.

During the 1980s, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) began to implement initial-eligibility standards for incoming freshmen athletes in an effort to legitimize the academic integrity of intercollegiate athletic programs (Heck & Takahashi, 2006). The incoming freshman class of 2008 will be affected by the latest change to the NCAA Clearinghouse initial eligibility requirements. The core course component of the standards for eligibility will see a rise from 14 required courses to 16 required courses (NCAA, 2007). To satisfy this requirement each student entering a Division I institution will need to take an average of four core courses per academic year. These 16 courses must include a minimum of 4 years of English, 3 years of math at a level of Algebra I or higher, 2 years of science, 2 years of social science, 1 additional year of English, math or science and 4 additional years from any area (*ibid.*). Students entering Division II institutions are not affected by the changes in the standards as are their peers in Division I. For Division II, only 14 core courses are required. The difference is that only three years of English are required and only three additional courses are required, instead of four.

The other component in determining eligibility is a student's score on the ACT or SAT. Division I student-athletes must meet a sliding scale requirement with a grade point average of 2.0. For example, a student who meets the minimum requirement of a 2.0 in 16 core courses would need to score a combined 1010 on the math and verbal sections of the SAT or an 86 on the English, math, reading and science portions of the ACT. As the student's GPA increases the required SAT/ACT score decreases. A student with a 3.0 in sixteen core courses would need a 620/52 and a student with a 3.55 and up would need to score only a 400/37. Division II has set requirements of at least a 2.0 GPA in fourteen core courses and a minimum test score of 820/68. Students who fall short of meeting these requirements cannot participate in athletics at a Division II institution.

The 2008 changes to the initial eligibility rules are just the latest amendments to Proposition 48, passed by the NCAA in 1986. Proposition 48 was the first legislation passed by the NCAA that focused on the academic performance of student-athletes before they entered college. Previous eligibility rules, such as the 1.6 rule, only mandated that each athlete maintain a certain level of performance once they enroll in college and accept an athletic scholarship. These types of rules led to allegations of academic fraud since the control of each athlete's eligibility standing rested on the institution itself (Covell & Barr, 2001). Proposition 48 led to a shift in focus to high school academic performance, which also opens the door to a great deal of controversy because of the wide range of secondary school experiences of potential student-athletes. This is especially true in the cases of students with disabilities and minority students.

Proposition 48 required college students to complete 11 core credits with a minimum GPA of 2.0 and an ACT score of 700 (Covell and Barr, 2001; Williams Jr., 1983). Many different issues have been discussed regarding the validity of these rules. One key issue is that the general student body is not subject to rules regarding minimal qualifications (Williams, Jr., 1983). However, the most and disputed aspect of Proposition 48 is its reliance on standardized test scores. Another debated tenant of Proposition 48 is its reliance on core courses with the implications that this has for students with disabilities. Courts within the United States have seen many cases in which individuals fought various aspects of the NCAA's initial eligibility requirements.

Proposition 16 was introduced by the NCAA in 1995 in response to attacks on the seemingly unreasonable and arbitrary "hard" cutoffs of Proposition 48 (Williams Jr., 1983; NCAA, 2007). Proposition 16 was the first attempt of the current sliding scale model. The hard cutoff point for SAT/ACT score was at 820/68, which is 220 points higher than the current model. Even with this alteration NCAA initial eligibility rules still faced great opposition. Again, the rules appeared to favor students from regular education, non-minorities and affluence. Statistics show a staggering difference in African-American and White students in regard to the number who do not qualify. In 1997 only 4.2% of White student-athletes did not meet Proposition 16 criteria, while 21.4% of African-American students failed to meet the standards. Similarly, when examining these numbers based on income only 2.5% of student-athletes from families with an income of over \$80,000 did not qualify, while 18% of student-athletes from families who earned under \$30,000 failed

to qualify (NCAA). These discrepancies in qualifying status do not bode well for students with disabilities. Even though there is little research to show the effect of Proposition 16 on students with disabilities, the assumption can be made that many of the poor and minority students who do not qualify are special education students.

One example of such as case is *Ganden v. NCAA 1990* (Pitasky, 1997). Chad Ganden sought an injunction against an NCAA ruling denying him the opportunity to swim for the intercollegiate program at Michigan State University. Ganden claimed that the NCAA's decision not to count some of his special education coursework in high school towards the core course requirement was unjust and he should be granted a waiver to be allowed to compete. Without counting the grades he received in alternative courses as part of his Individualized Education Plan, Ganden would not earn the required number of core courses. Ganden applied for eligibility under Proposition 16, which requires the completion of 13 core courses. He only completed 11 NCAA certified core courses during his high school career. In an attempt to gain "full qualifier" status Ganden presented a waiver application to the NCAA. This action was denied and gave Ganden the impetus to seek an injunction.

The NCAA automatically reviews any waiver application that is presented to them. In reviewing Ganden's case the NCAA choose to count some of his alternative courses and his typing and computer courses as core course grades. This gave him the required number of core courses. However, even with these grades taken into consideration Ganden did not meet the requisite GPA. This case did not move on to trial and an injunction was not granted to Ganden. The court saw Ganden's request for a waiver as a "fundamental alteration" of its eligibility requirements, since even

with accommodations he did not meet the GPA requirement. The requirements themselves were also deemed a necessary and just method of determining eligibility. In specific cases the NCAA grants a waiver to an individual who falls short of the requirements to qualify if they are just shy of the requirements. This is usually in cases where the GPA or SAT/ACT score is .1 or 10 points from the respective requirement.

Another important case brought against the NCAA is *Cureton v. NCAA 1999* (Harvard Law Review, 2001). Tai Kwan Cureton was a track star at a Philadelphia high school with good grades but failed to meet the SAT score requirement on Proposition 16. A federal district court originally ruled in favor of Cureton's claim that the NCAA violated Title IV of the Civil Right's Act of 1964. Cureton claimed that the NCAA's use of a standardized test to determine eligibility is unfair to minority students who are at a relative disadvantage on a culturally biased test. This is similar to the argument of students with disabilities who are at a disadvantage because of the structure of standardized testing.

The Third Circuit Court reversed the decision of the district court and ruled in favor of the NCAA, claiming that there is no violation of Title IV on their part. Their decision was based on the assertion that the SAT is a predictor of first year success at the college level so any student who does not meet the requisite score on the test would disrupt the academic integrity of the NCAA member institutions (ibid.). This case is another example where the NCAA ultimately wins a court battle and its eligibility standards are upheld.

*Initial eligibility and recruiting.* High school student-athletes with learning disabilities are often placed in a difficult position because of the negative perception of learning disabilities that many college coaches have. College coaches are looking for excellent athletes who will also be able to meet the academic criteria set forth by both the institution that they are working for and the NCAA's initial eligibility requirements. College coaches who are not certain about the nature of disabilities or the NCAA's rules can shy away from a student-athlete who is in special education in high school. An excellent example of a student-athlete who lost his scholarship offers after recruiters saw his IEP plan is the case of Michael Bowers. Bowers was a prominent football recruit from New Jersey who had a learning disability and an IEP at his high school. College coaches came through to recruit Bowers but were turned off by the fact that he was on pace to only complete three core courses because of the alternative courses he was placed in on his IEP. Without scholarship offers Bowers decided to attend nearby Temple University as a commuter student, where he earned a 3.6 GPA his first semester. Sadly, Bowers would die of a drug overdose a short time later (Dale, 2007).

Bowers' story is representative of other student-athletes who are part of a shrinking pool of freshmen recruits. A study by Heck & Takahashi (2006) found that since the introduction of Proposition 48 college coaches have shifted their recruiting focus. Before the implementation of Proposition 48 college football programs were recruiting an average of 22.1 scholarship freshmen per year (the NCAA allows each program to bring in up to 25 scholarship recruits per year). By 1991, Division I-A

programs were only bringing in an average of 17.5 freshmen recruits per year. This means that roughly 475 less scholarships are available for high school recruits. The other approximate 7.5 scholarships are instead given to junior college recruits.

College coaches can choose to recruit a high school student who has little chance of qualifying after high school graduation. Usually, these students will be placed with a junior college or prep school program. The recruiting coach has no guarantee that once the player has met the qualification requirements and graduates from a junior college or prep school that he will choose to attend that particular university. Parenteau (1997) surveyed every Division I-A head coach and found that the recruitment patterns changed dramatically since the implementation on Proposition 16. Without the ability to enroll partial-qualifiers because of conference or university rules and the declining pool of eligible recruits the average number of non-qualifiers programs are recruiting dropped to .92, or less than one per year. Colleges might select one excellent prospect per recruiting class to take a chance on and place in a junior college or prep school. Other high school students who are on the borderline of qualifying are now being looked over, hurting their chances of being recruited.

These policy changes in recruiting strategies of collegiate athletic programs greatly affects student with disabilities throughout high school and college. The Bowers story is indicative of this. In an effort to receive attention and scholarship offers from coaches potential recruits may choose to hide their disability and avoid taking any courses that would alert a recruiter to a potential disability. This can result in the student qualifying academically to play in college but then not being able to

manage the coursework in college level classes. The culture of hiding a disability can become so ingrained in a student that they will refuse to seek the help they need by either self-identifying a learning disability or allowing themselves to be tested for one (Etzel, Ferrante & Pinkney, 1996; Clark, 2002). Instead, students often allow themselves to become academically ineligible to play a sport or even fail out of school.

### *Conclusion*

This literature review has researched a field of study that is ever-changing and under examined. The experiences of college students with disabilities have been documented but specifically examining how college athletes with disabilities function has not received a thorough evaluation. This study sought to delve deeper into this area specifically. The issues presented in this literature review provide a thorough background for understanding the issues presented to today's student-athletes with disabilities. Information related to the experience of student-athletes with disabilities will be valuable to coaches, faculty and administrators at both the high school and college level.

Coaches and administrators at the high school level must work in unison to successfully handle the rare occasion when one of their student-athletes has the ability to earn a scholarship to play intercollegiate athletics. This is especially true when discussing a student-athlete with a learning disability. The Bowers and Ganden cases provide examples of how scheduling can conflict with the ability of the student to successfully gain clearance to play in college through the NCAA Clearinghouse. Educators in these instances must ingrain early in their students the necessity for



strong self-advocacy skills so that students will not feel ashamed of their learning disability once they enter college.

Studying the utilization of accommodations by student-athletes in postsecondary education is a major step towards intervention and will help intuitions of higher education lessen the disparity between the desire to perform well on the athletic field while still graduating students and maintaining a prestigious academic reputation. This information will provide two very important services. The first service is to the student-athletes. Equipping each institution of higher education with the ability to provide quality support through a better understand of student-athletes with disabilities will give those individuals a better chance of reaching their own goals. Also, each university will gain the benefit of having student-athletes who are successful in all aspects of their college experience, which will be a boon for the goals of the university.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### *The Researcher*

The reader should be made aware that the researcher in this study was a Graduate Assistant coach working with the student-athletes in this study in an athletic capacity during the time this research took place. This allowed the researcher greater access to and familiarity with each student-athlete. The prior relationship between the researcher and each participant may have led to one or more of the student-athletes feeling comfortable enough to share information about their experiences. However, because of the researcher's role as an authoritative figure within the athletic program some of the student-athletes in this study may have felt less inclined to share information.

In addition, the researcher in this study also had prior experience dealing with some of the student-athletes in this study during his time coaching and recruiting for a prep school two of the student-athletes in this study attended. The researcher was instrumental in the recruitment of these two student-athletes to the prep school. However, before either of them enrolled in the school the researcher had left to coach at a different institution.

### *Subjects*

The participants in this study were all enrolled in the Intensive Learning Program (ILP), a program at the college where this research was conducted. ILP was designed to help student-athletes at-risk of not graduating from the college. Records indicating the prior graduation rates of student-athletes involved in the program display there is a realistic risk of these individuals not graduating from their

institution. In three recruiting classes from 2001 to 2003, thirty-seven of these recruits were placed in ILP. Of these 37 only 14, or 38%, managed to graduate from the college. This number is significantly lower than the 63% graduation rate for all student-athletes over a similar time period reported by the NCAA (2007). This number is also lower than the 79% graduation rate of student-athletes at the institution examined in this study as reported by the NCAA (2007). These statistics indicate graduation for these student-athletes is very much in question.

The student-athletes at-risk are placed in ILP based on a determination by the academic advisors for the athletic program. ILP is designed to provide an individual learning program for these student-athletes to teach the requisite skills to succeed in college. This program usually consists of extra academic support through both the development of time management and study skills and also through guided supervision and tutoring for academic coursework. Individuals can graduate from the program by succeeding academically.

At this particular university each enrolling student-athlete is required to take this battery of tests to provide further evidence of their academic ability and potential. Included in this battery are the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, the WRAT-III, a personal history questionnaire and a prompted writing sample. Those student-athletes who do not meet certain grade-level standards are considered at-risk. The results of these tests comprise only a few of the objective reasons for placement. Decisions about which student-athletes will be a part of ILP are made by academic staff members after review of each incoming student-athlete's scores on a battery of tests and other subjective analysis. Additional reasons for placement in ILP can include

relatively low high school grade-point averages, low scores on the College Board tests or the discretion of the academic support staff.

The advisors of ILP make decisions on each member of the program at the conclusion of each semester. Both objective and subjective measures are used to determine an individual's status in the program. The objective measures include sustaining a 2.5 GPA over an academic year and adequate progress towards graduation. Retention in the program is largely based on subjective reasons including; demonstrating the ability to take notes in a lecture, set academic goals, effectively writing a paper, adequately reading course texts and the ability to ask for help when needed.

For this study a representative sample taken from the current ILP roster comprised the sample, which closely resembled the population of the ILP roster. The ILP roster for this sport currently contains 30 student-athletes. Two of these individuals were eliminated from consideration for the study because they were first enrolled at the school during the semester in which the study began. Of the 28 remaining members of the roster 1 was a senior, 9 were juniors, 5 were sophomores and 13 were second semester freshmen.

Invitations to participate were sent to all 28 of the student-athletes for this study. Twenty-one of these student-athletes responded positively to the invitations. Due to time constraints only 15 of these student-athletes were able to find time to accommodate both their schedule and the researcher's schedule in order to complete a thirty to forty minute interview. Unfortunately, one of these individuals was the lone remaining senior in the ILP program. Of the seven individuals who chose not to

participate three cited a lack of time available to participate due to academic and athletic obligations, two did not respond to the invitation and two did not feel comfortable with the content of the questions that would be asked of them.

The individuals selected for this study consisted of four juniors, three sophomores and eight freshmen. The overrepresentation of underclassmen on the ILP roster and in the sample is due to two reasons. The first being as each individual student improves his grades he may be required to attend ILP sessions less frequently and may ultimately graduate from the program. Freshmen in this study have not yet had the opportunity to earn their way out of the program. Of the seniors with competitive eligibility remaining only four have even been in ILP and only one is currently in the program. The second reason is the gradual and eventual attrition of student athletes from the institution. The senior, junior and sophomore classes in this study have a combined 33 individuals who were in ILP at one time. Nine of these individuals withdrew from school early because they either chose to leave voluntarily or failed out. Also, any individual who is still on campus but has exhausted his athletic eligibility was not eligible for participation in this study because they were not current student-athletes. Also, many of them are not available because they left the school once they were no longer eligible to play.

Two other variables to consider in selecting the representative sample are sex and ethnicity. Unfortunately, each of the 28 members of the ILP roster are males because the sport involved in this study is a male-only sport. Additionally, 26 of the participants are African-American and 2 are Caucasian. One of the individuals in this study is Caucasian and the other 14 are African-American. The lone Caucasian in

this group was a freshman. The racial imbalance of the program is consistent with the racial makeup of the team in this study. However, the ILP roster has a slightly higher percentage of African-Americans than the team does. The team's roster contains 81% African American athletes while 93% of the students in ILP were African-American. The representative sample has the same percentage of African-Americans. The only other race represented on the team's roster is Hispanic and the lone Hispanic student-athlete was not enrolled in ILP.

The documents examined for this study provide insight into the academic profile of student-athletes at-risk of not graduating. The personal history questionnaire shows that there is relative balance regarding status as first-generation college students. Eight of the participants are first-generation students, while the other six are not with one student-athlete who did not answer the prompt. The student-athletes also self-reported a SAT score of the questionnaire. The average of these scores was 916. The median score was 900 with a mode of 930. The highest reported score was 1110 and the lowest was 820.

ILP uses the results from the Nelson-Denny Reading test and WRAT-III to provide objective information to base their subjective decisions on which student-athletes are placed in the program. A red flag is raised on any incoming recruit who scores below at least the 12<sup>th</sup> grade level on any portion of these tests. The WRAT-III examined the spelling, reading and mathematical skills of these individuals. The Nelson-Denny test is used by the ILP staff at this institution because they feel it is a better indicator of reading ability. The results of these scores will be detailed below in order to give the reader more information about the participants in this study.

Fourteen of the participants in this study displayed deficient performance in one or more aspects of the Nelson-Denny and WRAT-III tests. Additionally, only one participant preformed at a post-high school level on all tests. The Nelson-Denny test displayed that 11 of the 15 student-athletes in this study scored below the 12<sup>th</sup> grade level on reading.

The scores on the reading section of the WRAT-III scores are very similar to the Nelson-Denny scores. Ten of the 15 student-athletes scored below a 12<sup>th</sup> grade level with the same range in grade levels. The results of the Spelling section indicated that 12 of the participants scored below the required level with a skill range from 4<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Additionally, 14 of the 15 individuals scored below the 12<sup>th</sup> grade level on the Math section of the test. These scores showed a range in ability from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data were collected for this study in two major formats; face-to-face individual interviews and a records review. The interviews were conducted by the researcher during a one month period from March 1, 2008 until April 1, 2008. However, no interviews were conducted from March 14-23 because the student-athletes at this institution were on spring break and away from campus. Interviews were conducted at one of two times, either during the student-athlete's dinner break from approximately 6 to 7 PM on weeknights or at 9:30 PM once the student-athlete had finished his study hall requirements for the night. Each of the interviews took place in a classroom at the athletic complex on the student-athletes' campus. This building houses the athletic meeting rooms, offices, athletic training room, cafeteria,

weight room and locker room for that individual sport. The academic advising offices and study hall areas are also housed within this complex.

The classrooms within this building are only used at certain times during the day. Each interview was conducted during a time when the classrooms were not in use in order to ensure an undisturbed setting. Both the interviewer and interviewee sat in classroom-style chairs facing each other approximately five feet apart. The researcher collected data in two formats, audio-recording and note taking. Notes were taken during the interview in order to capture the key statements made by the subject in the moment that they were made. Notes were made about the delivery of the subject's answers and his body language. This method was backed up by a review of the audiotapes made of each interview. From the audiotapes the researcher could closely focus on the content of the answers obtained from the interview.

*Interviews.* Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a semi-standardized format as detailed by Berg (2007). The researcher allowed the subject to dictate the course of the interview while attempting to ensure that the main areas of research were covered within the dialogue. The main areas of interest in each interview included:

1. The subject's academic major and intended occupation.
2. A brief description of the subject's experiences in high school.
3. A brief description of the subject's postsecondary education experience.
4. The comfort level of the subject in the classroom.
5. The subject's relationship with professors, peers and staff members on campus.



6. Any history of a learning disability or placement in special education.
7. Any reluctance towards pursuing accommodations, if any are obtainable.
8. The subject's views on his ability to earn a degree from the institution.

The interviewer opened the interview by thanking the subject for agreeing to participate and assuring him of his anonymity in order to encourage full disclosure. The only scripted questions of the interview involved asking the interviewee to state his name, year in school, and major. From there the interview often turned to a discussion of career plans and goals but did not necessarily have to do so. The interviewer allowed the subject to openly discuss his experience at the institution. As previously noted, the researcher would make sure to steer the content of the interview to include a discussion of the eight areas listed above. Questions and prompts such as, "Tell me how you feel in the classroom" or "How does your college experience compare to your high school experience?" represent examples used to help steer the content of the interview. In accordance with methods described by Berg (2007) the interviewer might ask scheduled questions such as "Do you enjoy school?" If the subject answered with only a "Yes" or "No" the interviewer would use an unscheduled probe to draw more information from the subject such as "You do not like school, why not? What do you not like about it?"

The interview took the form of a dialogue. The interviewer was free to interject any of his past experience as an intercollegiate student-athlete in order to help the interviewee open up and share their experiences and often did so. However, the subjects were very willing to share their experiences without a great deal of prodding. This allowed for a free exchange of thoughts and ideas that ultimately

provided a description of the subject's academic career. The interview was concluded once the researcher had responses in all of the research areas described above. The interviewer ended the interview by again thanking the subject for participating and wished him well.

After each interview the researcher immediately copied the field notes into Microsoft Word in order to improve their legibility and also to reflect on the themes developing from the subject's comments. The audiotapes provided a tool to clarify and review either a portion or the entirety of the interviews. After conducting the final interview the researcher reviewed all of the notes and tapes of the interviews and began to create detailed outlines of the developing themes in order to answer the research questions.

*Document Review.* The records review portion of the data collection included an examination of test results and forms already completed by each subject upon his enrollment at the university. The documents taken into consideration were the scores on the Nelson-Denny Reading tests, the WRAT-III scores, a writing sample and a personal history questionnaire. The results of the tests are used by the academic support staff at their institution in conjunction with a transcript and academic history review in order to determine which student-athletes are at risk of not succeeding in the classroom. These results are a determinant in deciding which individuals will take part in ILP.

For the purposes of the study the most important document examined was the personal history questionnaire. This document contained a self-reported academic history, which included any past experiences with special education. This document

provided useful insight into the student-athlete's academic history that he may not disclose during the interview process. Valuable demographic information can also be derived from this document to help shed more light on exactly who comprises the student-athletes in this study as well as who are student-athletes at-risk in general.

### Chapter 3: Findings

A number of themes emerged from the interviews with student athletes and the document review. The themes included student-athletes' views on disability labels and ILP placement, perceived lowered academic expectations for student-athletes, the indirect path to postsecondary education for some of the interviewees, the inadequate high school preparation and confidence in ability to learn their sport are discussed in the sections below.

#### *Attitudes Towards Disability Labels*

Six of the student-athletes involved in this study made some direct mention about their feelings towards disability labels. While some views were similar to others, each one of these six individuals had different feelings towards the label. In an extension of these findings each one of the fifteen subjects shared their view of their placement in the ILP program, which can be viewed as a type of special education imposed by their athletic program.

Matt<sup>1</sup>, a sophomore, was the first subject interviewed to discuss his disability. He said that he has a reading disability which required him to have an IEP in high school. He attended all classes with his peers in high school but was part of a pull-out program one period a day that allotted him extra time to work on his reading skills with a teacher. In high school he tried to disassociate himself from the other students in special education. He felt shame for being a part of the program and fought to keep himself in the general classroom setting as much as possible. The jokes he

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<sup>1</sup> Please note pseudonyms were assigned to each student-athlete in this study in order to protect their anonymity.

heard his friends make about “those SPED kids” made him want to avoid disclosing his disability to them.

When Matt enrolled at his current university an academic advisor within the athletic department informed him about the accommodations he could receive through DSS and encouraged him to register. With a little trepidation he decided to register and received accommodations that allow for him to have a note taker in his classes and receive extra time on exams. When asked if he still feels shame about having services for his disability he said, “No, it’s what I got to do to get through.” He also said that he rarely hears his current teammates ridicule anyone for using services.

The other student-athlete to openly discuss a learning disability was Kevin, a freshman. Interestingly, Kevin and Matt were in the same graduating class at the same high school. However, their experiences with learning disabilities are drastically different. Kevin did not have an IEP in high school, nor was he diagnosed with a disability during most of his high school career. Only after Kevin signed scholarship papers with a university athletic program was the subject of a learning disability broached. The school Kevin signed scholarship papers with realized that he would most likely not be able to qualify academically immediately after high school. His outstanding ability as an athlete made his services desirable to the athletic program, even if he would not be able to enroll at the school directly from high school. The athletic program then created a contingency plan to have Kevin qualify through the Clearinghouse and ultimately end up competing for the program.

The assistant coach recruiting Kevin explained to him that he would need to attend prep school in order to raise his SAT scores and GPA in order to both qualify

with the Clearinghouse and gain admittance to the school. NCAA rules prohibit students who have graduated from high school from improving their core GPA unless they have a documented learning disability. The assistant coach also notified Kevin of this rule and suggested that he seek testing for a learning disability in order to improve his chances of qualifying. Kevin said that he had no problem with the request and sought testing. He received documentation for a learning disability, which ultimately led to his qualifying with the Clearinghouse.

Kevin's disability has also aided him now that he is in college. He is registered with DSS and receives accommodations. His accommodations include in-class note-takers, extra time on tests and the ability to take tests at the DSS office. Similar to Matt, Kevin feels no shame about his accommodations and was not offended in any manner when the assistant coach brought up the topic. When he approaches his professors about his accommodations they are more than willing to oblige. Kevin did not see any issue with any aspect of the path that has led to his arrival on a college campus. When discussing his past and his disability label he has a very confident look to him. The idea that he could possibly be ashamed or embarrassed because of his disability is foreign to him. He follows the same mantra of "whatever it takes" that Matt follows. When asked about his reaction to having a learning disability he brushes it off by saying, "I was like whatever, there's nothing wrong with it."

Even though they do not have a documented learning disability other student-athletes involved in this study have experiences with labeling. Most notable among these individuals was Bill, a junior. In elementary school Bill was diagnosed with

emotional disturbance. He stated that his disability caused him problems learning, which ultimately led to him not qualifying with the Clearinghouse and enrolling in a prep school. The military structure of the prep school taught him discipline and self-regulation, which are skills that he had not developed previously. When he enrolled in college an academic advisor in the athletic department encouraged him to register with DSS on campus in order to receive accommodations to help him with his studies. Bill described his reaction to this advice as such, “I planned to go over there but I just put it off. I never pursued it because I feel like I have grown out of it. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

Bill explained his comments by saying he did not feel the same anger that he used to feel and that he had matured. He admitted that he is close to failing out of school but has developed a better work ethic that should keep him in school. He shared that the way that he has learned how to succeed academically is by watching how his teammates study. For example, he saw one of his teammates making flash cards to study for a test. He now uses this tactic to aid his own study habits. He said, “I make flash cards for everything now, any test I make flash cards for. One time we was on the way to the movies and I brought them with me. Everyone got on me but I said I got to do what it takes.” The last line of Bill’s statement again echoes the “I got to do what I got to do” mentality of these student-athletes.

Carl, a junior, discussed experiences that reflected certain themes in those shared by Bill. Carl was diagnosed with ADHD in elementary school. His family contested the diagnosis after Carl was given a prescription for Ritalin. In regards to the diagnosis Carl is quick to explain, “I was misdiagnosed. They weren’t right, I

was just mad about certain things that were going on.” When asked if he thinks that there is anything wrong with a disability label he says:

I don’t think it is a big deal. I don’t care too much about it. But I am glad I don’t have the label because of how some people make fun of people with it or how they can be painted into a certain light because they have it.

Carl’s statements are similar to those made by Bill because they display a desire to avoid a label. The difference in their experiences can likely be traced to the attitudes of their parents. In his interview Bill made a mention of how his mother supported him and sent all of the necessary paperwork to the university in order to allow him to register with DSS even though he chose not to do so. In contrast, when Carl was diagnosed at a young age his parents fought to avoid the label. Even though Carl made no direct mention of why his parents fought the label besides “they just didn’t think I had it,” his parents’ influence is readily apparent.

As Bill and Carl struggled to avoid being stigmatized by the labels placed on them, albeit temporarily in Carl’s case, a freshman named Reggie fought to avoid being labeled altogether. Reggie’s time at the prep school he attended after his high school graduation was spent relentlessly trying to obtain a score on the SAT that would allow him to qualify with the NCAA Clearinghouse. Reggie’s coach at the prep school explained to him and a few other students struggling to qualify he could have them tested for a learning disability through a testing agency if they could pay for it. Receiving a diagnosis of a learning disability would allow Reggie to count the grades from the prep school courses he was taking. This would allow him raise his GPA to a level that would allow him to qualify with the previous high score that he achieved on the SAT.



Instead of feeling relieved that a contingency plan was available for him, Reggie became even more motivated to earn the necessary SAT score. He said that he did not “want to pay for a disability” and he wanted to “make it on my own without help.” Reggie stated that he did not want to have to “get a disability” and use accommodations in order to pass the SAT. He eventually reached the score he needed and felt a sense of accomplishment that he was able to do so without the use . Unfortunately, Reggie is struggling academically in college and feels very uncomfortable in the classroom. He still believes that he can succeed with the support of the academic staff and ILP.

These five accounts display the range of attitudes towards disability labels. Kevin never saw anything wrong with having a disability label and has embraced it in order to attempt to achieve in college. Matt originally felt shame about his disability in high school but has now seen how his accommodations help him in his college coursework and has lost the feeling of shame. Bill’s statements display that he does not want to have the label and because he avoids obtaining accommodations through DSS has to work very hard in order to just barely stay in school. Carl’s account shows the impact that parents can have on their children regarding attitudes towards disability labels. Finally, Reggie’s story is very similar to Bill’s. In order to gain a sense of self-worth and accomplishment he avoids even considering the notion that he might have a disability. Now that he has obtained acceptance into college he feels overmatched by the coursework and does not have the benefits of accommodations to assist his efforts.

### *Views of ILP Placement*

Each of the fifteen student-athletes participating in this study is involved with ILP at their institution. They are part of an ILP roster that contains 30 members of a 125 member team. The program is designed to help the student-athlete at-risk of not succeeding academically develop the necessary study skills to do well in college. The goal of the program is to eventually graduate the students from the program based on their ability to prove they can achieve academically in college. For some of these student-athletes their placement in the ILP program is not an issue. However, four of the individuals reported concerns over the nature of their placement.

Dorion, a freshman, felt so strongly about ILP he chose to attend the institution he enrolled at because of the quality of the program. During the recruitment process Dorion and his family were impressed by the athletic program's commitment to academics and the support available to student-athletes through the ILP program. His feelings about the program have not changed now that he has spent almost a full year in the program. When asked if he feels as if the program helps him he stated with the support he receives, "I can't fail and it's on me if I do."

Carl is another student-athlete describing strong positive feelings regarding his placement in the ILP program. In discussion with Carl he raved about the support he receives through the program. He commented on how the Learning Specialist assigned to him through the program is extremely helpful to him. With all of the distractions present on a college campus he is thankful he is involved in the program because it provides structure to his life. He went on to explain how the program is "great because without it I would probably be out chasing girls."

The theme of needing and appreciating structure is apparent in the narratives of many of these student-athletes. Ed, a junior, is another student-athlete who used the term “structure” to describe what ILP provides him. The structure provided by the program is opposite of the loose nature of their high school experiences, especially Ed. As a junior Ed has gradually reduced the amount of hours a week he is required to complete in the program. The ability to ultimately earn their way out of ILP requirements is a motivational tool for these student athletes.

The motivation to achieve their way out of ILP is enticing to these student-athletes not only because of the free time they will gain but also because exiting the program will remove that label from them. Riley, a freshman, best described this notion when he stated, “People in the program expect less out of the ILP kids.” When asked to clarify who he meant by “people in the program” he said, “Coaches, academic, everyone. They just don’t expect you to do as much.” He related a sense of lowered expectations not only in the classroom but on the field because of a perceived inability to learn.

Another one of the negatives of the program reported by these student-athletes is the issue of becoming dependent on the structure of the program to get work done. Each member of the program is assigned a certain number of mandatory study hours each week. Eight of the student-athletes reported they do not study or work on assignments outside of their mandatory hours. When asked if he feels student-athletes rely too heavily on their mandatory study hours Ty, a freshman, said he definitely sees his peers, and himself, doing so. He provided an example from his own experience towards doing work in his dorm room. He explained how he stopped

studying on his own in his room and went to spend time with his friends because he thought, “F\_\_\_ it, I won’t do this now I have study hall tomorrow.”

A student-athlete is pulled in many different directions during his collegiate careers. During his interview Don, a freshman, brought up an issue that displayed how the best efforts of the athletic program to provide academic support for student-athletes can heighten this strain. When asked if he has ever asked one of his professors for help or clarification on an assignment he explained they would be glad to help him during their office hours. He said he is unable to attend office hours because “between practice and study hall and everything I can never make it.”

The structure of ILP has also drawn criticism from student-athletes. They described how they are instructed as to which subject to study by the academic staff. This causes issues for the student-athletes when they feel they need to focus on a different subject or have a pending assignment due in another course. Receiving instructions on which subject to study is a major issue for some of the students. The consensus among these student-athletes was that they do not like being told what to do. Four of the subjects involved in this study used the term “babysitting” to describe their ILP experience. Adding to this feeling of resentment towards being told what to do is the perception of a lack of control over their studies. Scott, a sophomore, and Ty complained that their schedules “are pretty much made up for us,” to borrow Scott’s words. These student-athletes do not feel as if they have as much control over their lives as they would like.

The positive aspect of the mandatory hours assigned to each student-athlete through ILP was the guarantee they will spend that amount of hours each week

working on academics in a supervised setting. Many of these student-athletes admitted that would not spend nearly as many hours per week on their studies if they were not forced to do so. When asked if he would spend time in his room studying if he did not have ILP a sophomore named Art smiled, paused and then said, “No way.” He would later add, “I don’t like to be there but I need it and I got to get it done [academically].”

Similar sentiments were issued by Riley, who best described the love-hate relationship between these student-athletes and the academic support they receive. “We all complain about it but I know I need the structure.” Again, the theme of craving structure is readily apparent. Interestingly, Riley is one of the four subjects who used the term “babysitting” to describe ILP. This adds to the love-hate dynamic between needing and wanting structure to help with handling the academic load at the postsecondary level with the desire for personal freedom.

A parallel can be drawn between the experience of Matt with his disability label and Meyer’s ILP placement. Just as Matt said that he matured and became more comfortable with his disability when he enrolled in college and registered with DSS Meyer has grown to accept and appreciate his placement in ILP. Meyer, a junior, described his transition in these terms, “When I first got here, you know, I didn’t like [being in ILP] but now, you know, yeah I guess its ok. It has definitely helped me.”

The remarks made by these student-athletes regarding their participation in a program designed to help student-athletes at risk of not succeeding academically at the college level because of a real or perceived learning deficit are similar to the views of the student-athletes who commented on their experiences with disability

labels. There is a desire in these individuals to not have a label attached to their identity on top of the “athlete” label they feel stigmatizes them in certain instances academically. The positive side of being labeled ILP was displayed by Ed and Ty who commented that they have the ability to work hard and earn the removal of the label. This is different than a learning disabled or emotionally disturbed label that, try as Bill might, cannot be tested out of.

#### *Academic Expectations of Student-Athletes*

In conversation with each student-athlete some aspect of the how they are perceived in the academic setting came up. Eleven of the fifteen individuals interviewed directly commented on how they feel their professors, peers and/or other campus staff members with whom they have contact view them. One of the more troubling themes evident in the narratives provided by these student-athletes at-risk of not succeeding academically at the postsecondary level was the lowered expectations of their academically ability by faculty, staff and peers. Many of these student-athletes felt as if they are already at a disadvantage when they enter a postsecondary classroom because their professors did not expect the same level of effort and engagement in the course material as put forth by their non-athlete peers. In their view, this perception has a negative effect on how they are evaluated. They also feel that the other students in the classroom look down on them. This atmosphere even leads to some student-athletes attempting to hide their identity, which can often be difficult because of their physical stature.

The data collected from these student-athletes who are at risk of not succeeding academically show distance with the professors who teach them. A

common theme with the relationship between student and professor is that these student-athletes often feel a disconnect between themselves and the faculty. Seven of the fifteen interviewees mentioned an inability to relate to their professors and to clearly understand what is expected of their performance. Some student-athletes remarked that they believe that their professors have a preconceived notion that all student-athletes are only looking to do the bare minimum to get by academically. Art, noted that, “I do feel like I am treated differently than other students. I mean, the professors think that I am just there to get a C. I can put a lot of effort into something or I can really just not put a lot of effort into it at all and the best grade that I get is a C.” Dorion, seconded Art’s comments when he described how his professors are “surprised that I care about class.” When asked for clarification about his remark he explained how he can tell that his professors often show shock when he approaches them with a question.

Another common theme regarding the relationships between this group of student-athletes and their professors is the feeling that these individuals have difficulty determining what they are expected to learn. Five of the fifteen student-athletes spoken to discussed their inability to often understand exactly what their professors expect them to derive from each lecture. The student-athletes mentioned that they are able to follow along when an outline is provided for them. However, without a guide to the main points of the lectures they become distracted by, as two of the subjects put it, the discursive tangents that their professors often take.

Matt, a student-athlete with a diagnosed learning disability, shared one of the more interesting cases of professor-student relationships. He is registered with

Disability Support Services at his institution and is eligible to receive accommodations including extra time on exams and a note taker in class. He mentioned that when he needs extra help on an assignment or has a question for clarification he does not hesitate to bring it to his professor's attention. However, he admits that he is afraid to repeatedly seek assistance from his professors because he does not want to give them the impression that he "is trying to get over." He does not feel that professors will question his requests for help because they have an issue with his accommodations or disability status but rather because of his standing as a student-athlete.

Student-athletes claim that their professors have lowered expectations of them academically but also cite examples of when they have been held to higher, or different, standards than other students. Ed mentioned an incident when he arrived at a class "like a minute or something late" and the professor made a major issue of it. Ed was reprimanded heavily by the professor and told that his late arrival to class was not acceptable. In contrast to this Ed claims that other students will often arrive at class late without any mention from the professor. Perhaps Ed does not realize that other students might have a predetermined arrangement with the professor regarding their arrival to class. However, the important issue here is the feeling of student-athletes that they are treated differently than their peers because of their standing as an athlete.

Some of the student-athletes compared their college professors to the teachers they had in high school. Many of them commented on how their relationships with their high school teachers were much more amicable than the relationships with their



collegiate professors. This is also part of the larger theme of the high school experiences of these student-athletes, which will be discussed in detail later.

The information gathered from these student-athletes regarding their relationships with their professors was not entirely negative. Many examples of a good working relationship between teacher and pupil were provided. Dorion mentioned how he respects the professors he has because of their mastery of their field. He stated that, “the professors are passionate [about the courses they teach].” This makes him attempt to become more interested in his coursework because he feels motivated by this passion. Importantly, the two student-athletes interviewed who are registered with DSS described their interactions with their professors regarding their disclosure of their accommodations request to their professors. They both described the willingness of their professors to work with them and meet their needs. Kevin, explained how his professors are very easy to work with when he approaches them at the beginning of a semester so that he can explain his accommodations. He says that they are willing to oblige and often let him know that they will do whatever they can do to assist his needs.

In addition to the perceptions of professors, student-athletes at risk also feel a strain in their relationships with their peers in the classroom. Statements regarding the unease felt by student-athletes in the classroom directly because of their relationships with their peers were made by four of the subjects. Ty shared a story illustrating how he feels his classmates look down upon his academic ability:

The professor put the up the exam grades for everyone in the class [projected on Powerpoint] and there was a lot of people who failed. The average grade was like a 60 or something like that. The people around me were talking about their grades and I said that I got an 88. None of them believed me. They all said, “No way, you probably got like a 60 or something.”

Other interviewees also made similar comments. Dorion mentioned how students who are not athletes “look at you like you are in a museum or something.” The majority of the student-athletes interviewed have body types that separate them from the general student population. Two student-athletes, Ed and Ty, discussed their attempts to not look like an athlete in order to fit in and avoid their perceived stigma of being an athlete with peers and professors. Ed summarized this point by saying, “I mean I try not to wear the clothes they give us [with athletic insignia] to class. But because of how big we are they all know who the athletes are.”

### *Indirect Path to College*

The consequences of attending a postsecondary institution prior to enrolling at a four-year university as a student-athlete are apparent throughout this study. Allusions to this theme are apparent throughout this report. This section is intended to give the reader some insight into these experiences.

For five of the student-athletes at-risk of not succeeding academically at the postsecondary level involved in this study, the four-year institution they currently attend is not the first postsecondary school in which they enrolled. These five student-athletes did not meet the initial-eligibility criteria set by the NCAA Clearinghouse. Four of the five attended two different military-style prep schools at the behest of the university with which they signed scholarship papers. Even though the scholarship that they signed would become null and void if they did not enroll at the college that fall the athletic program would still honor their commitment and allow them to attend that institution once they met the NCAA criteria for initial-eligibility.

Carl, the fifth student-athlete, was originally scheduled to attend a different university but did not meet the core-credit component of the criteria because he took college level courses while in high school. Even though these courses were college level they were not courses approved by the NCAA and could not be counted towards his core course total. The university that originally recruited Carl decided to no longer make a roster spot available for him once they found out he did not qualify. In order to become eligible to participate in athletics at an NCAA institution he would have to earn an Associate's Degree. In order to do so he enrolled at a junior college and would ultimately enroll at the institution involved in this study.

#### *Inadequate High School Preparation*

Each of the fifteen student-athletes spoken to during this study shared a similar experience. They felt that they "coasted through high school" due in large part to their status as a recruited athlete. Many of these student-athletes confided that they felt unprepared to succeed in their college studies once they arrived on campus. The academic expectations demanded of them in the postsecondary setting are dramatically different than those they experienced while in high school. The experience is best summarized by Matt's description of a college class. He states that "It's hard, you know, classes go so fast and the professors use big words and stuff."

All of the subjects in this study alluded to preferential treatment for recruited athletes in high school in some fashion. Many of them admitted to openly being given passing grades by at least some of their high school teachers. The damage this action can cause to a student's development is apparent in the case of Reggie. The strongest statements made regarding feelings of academic inadequacy were made by

this individual. He felt that being a highly recruited athlete at a small high school in a small town granted him status that influenced his teachers into giving him passing grades in exchange for very little effort. He also admits that because of this treatment he feels very intimidated by college coursework. This preferential treatment also affected him negatively in another manner. Reggie reported earning a 2.1 core GPA in high school, only a slim margin above the NCAA Clearinghouse requirement of a 2.0. However, because he did not meet the requisite SAT score according the NCAA's sliding scale he did not qualify. Reggie is one of the four student-athletes in this study who needed to attend a prep school in order to raise his SAT to a score of a 970 to qualify. Fortunately, he earned the required score after almost a full year of retaking the test and enrolled in a for-year postsecondary institution on an athletic scholarship.

Difficulty taking the College Board tests is another theme that appears in five of the fifteen narratives provided by these student-athletes. Four of these individuals achieved their test score only after attending a prep school. Ty is the only one of these five to report major difficulties with the SAT. He enrolled in college immediately following high school. Although, he did report having to take the SAT six times before scoring an 820 on the test, which is the required score for the 2.5 core GPA reported by Ty. His description of his high school experience is the most troubling of all of the ones provided by these student-athletes. He explained how the teachers in his school had very little control over the student body. For example, if a teacher assigned a project that that the students felt was unfair or too difficult they

would band together and not do the work. He explained the rationale of the students by saying, “Hey, they couldn’t fail everybody.”

As could be expected Ty said that he had eight math teachers over a three year period because of a high rate of faculty turnover. He explained this rate by saying that these teachers “either quit or got fired.” The only academic structure provided for him in high school was through his athletic coaches. He and his teammates were required to attend a study hall session for an hour before each practice session. These sessions did not provide direct instruction related to course material but they did provide a setting where students were forced to study quietly. These coaches stressed the importance of academics in relation to qualifying academically through the NCAA Clearinghouse. This was an effective motivational tool at this particular high school because of the relatively high number of scholarship athletes who attend the school.

Participation in athletics not only provides athletes with scholarship potential preferential treatment while in high school but can also provide them with additional choices on which secondary school they attend. Hank, a freshman, described how he was recruited to attend a public school different from the one that he should have attended based on where he lived. He enrolled in a magnet program for Animal Science study in order to attend a high school with a better athletic reputation. He described this school as “a real good academic high school” that exceeded his local high school. He quickly dropped the Animal Studies program once he started taking classes at the school; his interest in the specialty program was merely a charade to get him into the school.

Even though Hank reported that his high school has a good academic reputation he said that he was never afraid of failing because he knew his teachers would give him passing grades. Similar to Ty's experience, Hank reported the only substantial academic structure provided to him was through the athletic program. His high school is a participant in the National Football League's Play it Smart program designed to aid the academics of urban schools. As a part of this program the school had three academic coaches that worked with athletes to help them achieve academically. Hank reported that his involvement in this program included study hall and tutoring sessions with the academic coaches before athletic practices.

Even with the study hall experiences in high school Hank contends, "Hell no, I don't belong here" when asked if he fits in academically at his postsecondary institution. His feelings are similar to other student-athletes involved in this study. However, Hank's feelings are different because he is the student-athlete who has the greatest amount of doubt regarding his ability to graduate from the university. His comments contrast greatly with Reggie's, who is the other subject in this study with a heightened sense of doubt regarding his academic abilities. Reggie appreciates the academic opportunity that he has been granted because of his athletic ability and is attempting to work hard in order graduate. He says that he "came in the back door and I am going to get a degree from this school." This statement is consistent with the overall outlook of these student-athletes regarding their ability to graduate: Even though they are at risk of not succeeding academically, they relate to Ed's belief that "if I work, I'll graduate."

Contrarily, Hank views his chances of graduating from the institution he is currently enrolled in at 45%, which makes him the only subject in this study to severely doubt his ability to graduate. When asked to explain why he choose such a low percentage he said, "I want to graduate but this school is just too hard." His major worry about his university is that he feels that there are not enough people available to help him with his studies. He often feels that when he needs assistance the academic staff members are not available to offer him the one-on-one attention that he feels he needs. He became accustomed to this style of academic assistance in high school where the Play it Smart academic coaches were often available to help tutor him during lunch and after school.

Hank is the only student-athlete participating in this study who did not believe the institution provided enough support to its student-athletes. He mentioned his friends who are student-athletes at other Division I institutions receive much more support than he feels he does. According to Hank, the support these other institutions provide includes note-takers in all courses for all student-athletes in major-revenue sports. Other supports include group study sessions with tutors for student-athletes who are taking the same course. He describes the atmosphere at these schools as similar to the high school experiences reported by these student-athletes. Referring to his friends' comments Hank says, "My boys tell me they just breeze through school."

Hank is the also the only student-athlete in this study who reports an inability to obtain tutors for his courses. Of the fifteen individuals involved in this study thirteen report the use of individual tutors for their studies. Ty is the only other student-athlete who does not use tutors. However, this is because he has not

requested one. When asked why his requests were not met Hank simply replies, “I don’t know.”

Another factor these student-athletes stated regarding their high school experience is how they felt more at ease with the smaller class sizes at the high school level. As college underclassmen these individuals face the difficult learning environment of registering for classes with over 100 other students enrolled. Excluding the independent study in which one of the upperclassman subjects is enrolled, students reported the majority of their classes have rosters over 100 students with no other class having less than 20. Even the non-credit math course required for students who do not pass the entrance exam has over twenty students in it. These numbers are a stark contrast to the twenty to thirty students that comprised their high school courses. These large figures prevent student-athletes from developing the same relationships with their college professors as they did with their high school teachers.

Relief for these student-athletes is provided in two venues. First, student-athletes reported a reliance on breakout discussion sessions for the larger course sections. In these sessions students gain a better feel for the material because they are with fewer students and have easier access to the teacher, who is often a Teacher’s Assistant. The second venue in which student-athletes find assistance is through the academic support programs supported by their institution’s athletic program. Through this program student-athletes are able to gain access to peer tutors, full-time and intern learning specialists and ILP for those who qualify.



### *Athletic Learning*

Competing successfully in intercollegiate athletics requires both superior athletic ability and an understanding of the assignments required to execute the gameplan created by the coaching staff. The classroom learning required of student-athletes in order to compete athletically can be quite substantial. An inability to successfully learn athletic assignments will most likely result in a student-athlete being relegated to a substitute role on the team regardless of his athletic skill. Only one of the student-athletes involved in this study reported difficulty learning his athletic assignments.

The common theme among the student-athletes who reported no difficulty learning their athletic assignments was the ability that athletic coaches have to teach their players in a physical manner. Four of the student-athletes involved spoke directly about the practice of “walking through” their assignments. This practice is a teaching progression in a slow-paced learning environment in which the coach takes a player through his assignments on the field. Coaches also have the ability to show their players video of other players executing assignments correctly. This film is used to help players emulate what they see on film. Coaches also use the practice of filming players on the field and then teaching their players in the classroom using film.

Bill is an advocate of these methods. He described how he learns his assignments by saying, “I’m a rep[etition] guy” and “if I can see it, I can do it.” The ability to physically practice his assignments and imitating what he sees others do are the keys for teaching Bill his assignments. Similarly, Bill states that he learns best in

the classroom when he has a peer model to emulate. He feels he does best in classes where he has a teammate in the class from whom can learn. The practice of making flash cards mentioned previously is something Bill learned from a peer model.

Two of the student-athletes, Ty and Scott, were coached by the same position coach in their sport. Head coaches often delegate the assignment of teaching the minute details of each position in a sport to their assistants. They shared similar views about how they found the methods their position coach employs to teach them particularly effective. In their position meetings with the coach they are in a classroom setting with a total of ten players. The low coach-to-player ratio of these position meetings allows for a better learning environment than the large academic classes these student-athletes are enrolled in. During these meetings the position coach will “call on you just like that,” Scott described. He added, “[The coach] keeps you real involved.” Ty’s comments echoed the same sentiment of involvement detailed in Scott’s remarks.

The small sizes of the athletic position meetings also allows for each coach to learn the attributes of their players and develop a relationship with them. Carl describes his position coach as an effective teacher because his coach “forms a bond with his players.” These bonds can be formed with the small group of players that each coach is responsible for. These student-athletes do not describe the same type of relationships with their professors. However, a few did mention particular professors and TA’s who have performed beyond their responsibilities and form relationships with these student-athletes.

There are some clear examples of student-athletes exceeding athletically who have difficulty learning in the academic setting. Matt reports a documented reading disability as well as difficulty learning in a classroom setting. However, he performed well athletically in only his second season in the program because of his ability to quickly learn his assignments. When asked why he has difficulty learning academically but not athletically he explained, “I don’t know. [My sport] just comes easy. It makes sense to me when I’m out there.”

Only one of the student-athletes involved in this study reported difficulty learning his athletic assignments also mentioned difficulty understanding his position coach’s instructions. Dorion related an inability to focus in the academic classroom, which carries over into the athletic position meetings. When asked to describe the atmosphere in the position meetings he detailed how his coach “just yells about stuff” and “doesn’t really look at us.” Dorion also described his position coach as someone who “talks at us,” meaning he does not try to relate the material to his players. This is the opposite of Ty and Scott who described their coach’s effective method of keeping them involved in the classroom. Dorion’s comments also contrast another one of his teammate’s remarks: Matt’s description of athletics making sense to him. Dorion describes a sense of confusion while on the field. He described competitive situations in the following manner, “It just goes so fast. Everything seems backwards sometimes.”

The most common reason student-athletes listed to explain their ability to learn their athletic assignments is because they are interested in the sport and want to do well. They also have coaches who are employed because they have the ability to

motivate these individuals to do well academically. The student-athletes in this study do not report the same level of interest and involvement in their success from their professors. However, student-athletes did report an understanding of their professors' workload. As Carl described the positive impact of his relationship with his coach he did also admit his professors "have a lot more to deal with" in terms of the numbers of students they must deal with.

## Chapter 4: Analysis

### *Discussion and Implications*

The findings of this study show that student-athletes at-risk of not graduating generally feel their institutions and athletic programs provide them with enough support to succeed academically. The only participant whose narrative is inconsistent with the others is Hank. He described his institution's academic support as insufficient to allow him to graduate. Otherwise, these student-athletes were content with the services provided to them. The most popular service used by student-athletes was the one-on-one peer tutor. The comfort level with a peer tutor is evident from the student-athlete's narratives. Individuals selected to serve as peer tutors should receive training on how to effectively teach individuals with learning disabilities. This is a burden to put on college students but the knowledge of skills that will be effective in helping individuals with disabilities learn will help everyone who uses a peer tutor learn better.

These individuals' status as a student-athlete at risk may be in part due to the lack of academic pressure placed on them in high school. This led to inadequate preparation to deal with the academic rigors of postsecondary education. Another display of the inadequate preparation these student-athletes receive in high school is in the fact five of the student-athletes in this study were not able to meet the NCAA's initial eligibility requirements and instead enrolled at a prep school or a junior college to meet the criteria.

The student-athletes who attempt to avoid the disability labels, such as Bill and Reggie, struggle academically even though they state they work hard to stay

eligible. Both of these student-athletes show signs of struggling academically. Bill admits he has come dangerously close to failing out of school and is still very much at-risk of doing so. Likewise, Reggie doubts his ability to achieve in the classroom. Each of these student-athletes fought to avoid a label. Each of these individuals made an important statement that should be discredited. Reggie said that he wanted to feel like he qualified on his own without the aid of a disability label. Reggie believed being tagged with a label that could either provide him with accommodations on the SAT or allow his prep school grades to count towards the NCAA's criteria would be not achieving on his own merits. While this attitude is commendable for his desire to work hard to complete goals and objectives on his own is somewhat misguided. One of ILP's goals is to teach its students how to self-advocate and ask for help, which is a skill Reggie needs to learn. Individuals with disabilities, or when testing for a disability is being discussed, should be informed that their achievements are their own. Disability status does not discredit an achievement. This statement is also true for student-athletes in ILP without a disability. The ability to ask for help when needed is critical towards their academic success.

Unlike Reggie, Bill is diagnosed with a disability. When he enrolled in college he did not register with DSS because of this feeling there is nothing wrong with him so that must mean he does not have a disability. Individuals with disabilities must be informed by athletic and academic support staff that there is nothing wrong with them or with having a disability. The accounts of student-athletes show that there is not enough open discussion about disabilities in the culture of college athletics. As tight-knit of a community as a college athletic team is, the

custom of the team unit should be open, honest and understanding. This will allow for more student-athletes with disabilities to come forward and feel comfortable with their identity. Student-athletes who are registered with DSS should be encouraged by athletic and academic staff to be open about their disability in order to help others feel secure with their disability. This finding is consistent with the assertion of Clark (2002) that when it comes to student-athletes with learning disabilities there should be collaboration among all parties involved with the instruction and development of the individual.

These notions show that the most important implication from this research is the necessity of disabusing student-athletes of the stigma associated with labels as soon as they arrive on campus or sooner, if possible. Student-athletes at the college level need to self-advocate in order to obtain accommodations available to them. Therefore, they need to be assured their disability status will not carry any negative implications. The case of Kevin displays how the college coach recruiting him introduced the idea of getting tested for a learning disability as a method to achieve his goal of earning a Division-I athletic scholarship. Any belief that the coaches would be discouraged by the disability label is obviously negated when they are the ones introducing the idea. Comparing Kevin's experience to Reggie's is very interesting because they are following identical paths. In fact, they attended the same prep school in addition to now being teammates at the college level. However, now in college Reggie reports having a much more difficult experience than Kevin. The accommodations afforded to Kevin allow him to feel certain he can succeed academically, while Reggie still has doubts about his abilities.

These instances show the importance of the coaching staff at an institution letting their recruits know disability status will not impact their ability to succeed both in academics and athletics at their institution. When the fact Kevin was going to have a hard time qualifying became apparent to his recruiting coach he intervened and suggested a method to gain qualification. In Reggie's case the idea of a learning disability was presented to him by his prep school coach. In one instance the topic of disability is brought up by the coach at the school the recruit is looking to enter. In the other the topic is approached by the school the recruit is trying to leave. This displays the necessity for high school (and prep school) staff and college recruiters to work in cohesion and have clear communication about the possible or actualized learning disabilities of recruits. The open communication will help the recruit understand better the options available to obtain a scholarship and succeed academically in college. Borrowing the mantra of many of the student-athletes in this study, the sooner an individual realizes "you got to do what you got to do" to be successful the more willing they will be to discussing their disability label.

Speaking in specific terms of learning disabilities both Reggie and Kevin with this label were willing to register with DSS and obtain accommodations. The student-athlete with the emotional disturbance label is the one who chose not to seek accommodations. Further research should look further into this finding to see if there is a trend regarding the disability categories that receive accommodations the most frequently. The idea that student-athletes see the ED label as more stigmatizing than the LD label is quite possible. Even though the research is at a different age level this finding would be consistent with the findings of Harry and Klinger (2006) that



psychologists attempt to shield elementary children from the stigma of the ED label by diagnosing them with an LD label.

The importance of recruiting is paramount in college athletics. Obtaining individuals with the ability to succeed on the playing field and in the classroom is the key to a winning program. The academic support system in place at an institution can be a major selling point for recruits. This notion is evident in the case of Dorion, who chose to attend a particular institution because of their ILP program. When recruiting potential student-athletes coaches should make sure they let their recruits know about the academic support system in place for athletes. If an academic support system is not in place for athletes measures should be taken to create one. Doing so will assist in both catering to the needs of student-athletes already enrolled in the school and as an enticement to potential student-athletes. The institution in this study beat out other schools for Dorion in the recruiting competition because both he and his parents realized the benefits of ILP. Dorion is from a different geographic region of the country than the college he chose to attend and had scholarship offers from schools in his home state. Athletic staff should take note of this case, as any edge in recruiting can help the school lure prospects.

The findings of this research are consistent with those of Bourke, Strenhorn and Silver (2000), who reported that college faculty members are generally willing to provide accommodations to students who request them. The two student-athletes in this study who requested accommodations from their professors, Matt and Kevin, described their experiences as very positive. This is important information for athletic academic support staff to know. Any staff member who encourages a

student-athlete to register with DSS should have information available about the attitudes of the institutions faculty towards providing accommodations. They should let student-athletes know that research has shown faculty members to be very willing to assist their students with disabilities in any way possible. This information will help ease concerns like Matt's, who thought the professors might perceive him to be trying to get over on them.

In contrast to the willingness of faculty members to provide accommodation to student registered with DSS, the findings of this study display that student-athletes feel looked down upon by their professors. This may be the result of how student-athletes perceive they are viewed or it may very well be that faculty members have a preconceived notion of student-athletes. The method to alleviate these tensions is communication. Kevin provided an example of how his professors are willing to help him because he talks to them and explains his accommodations. Examples like this one should ease Matt's fear that his professors might think he is "trying to get over" because of his status as an athlete. Kevin's experience should also be an example to Dorion, who stated that he feels his professors are shocked when he asks them a question. The more often student-athletes can show their professors that they are interested in their studies the more they will find their professors willing to both help them and have a working relationship with them. These student-athletes will not find the same experiences that they had in high school, where teachers helped them get by. They will find they can overcome any real or imagined perception of their academic interest by professors by communicating their interest in succeeding in college. This can be performed through both verbal interaction and effort in their studies.

The discussion of these student-athletes regarding their ability to learn their athletic assignments more readily than academic material is mainly due to three main factors. The first of these is an interest in the topic. These student-athletes want to learn their assignments so that they will receive playing time in the games. The second factor is the small class size that they are in, which allows them to be able to ask questions and enjoy a more personalized learning experience. The third factor is the bond formed between player and coach. This is due in large part to the smaller class size but also due to the nature of sport. Both player and coach should feel that they are working with each other towards a common goal. A college education setting that can mimic these traits will help student-athletes at-risk succeed in the classroom.

In addition to the student-athletes who participated in this study the seven student-athletes who did not respond positively to the invitation to participate may also provide insight into the experiences of student-athletes at-risk. These student-athletes may have declined or not responded to the invitation to participate because of many reasons. For example, the two student-athletes who cited a lack of time to dedicate to participating in the study may have been forthright in their response. However, there is the possibility that these individuals chose not to make the time to participate because of a possible sense of shame or embarrassment regarding a disability. Those student-athletes who chose not to participate because they felt uncomfortable with the content of the interview questions may also share these feelings.

The findings of this study also comment on the importance of athletics in today's society. The student-athletes in this study were able to coast through their academic obligations in high school and now face the consequences of that leniency in their college studies. In high school the emphasis was placed on their athletic abilities and not on preparing them to succeed academically in college. This phenomenon is becoming even more apparent in today's society and is encroaching America's youth at earlier ages. America's youth are asked to make athletics their focus while the attention paid to their studies often wanes. Parents can push their children athletically while not allowing for the appropriate balance between athletics, academics and being a child.

Programs like the Play it Smart program try to balance the commitment asked of America's youth in athletics at the high school level with their studies. However, Hank's college experiences show that even this program may not provide the necessary emphasis. The program might also be placing the emphasis on academics too late in life. As the demands of year-round athletics become more readily apparent for America's youth at younger ages the role of academics must also be stressed at earlier ages. Parents and educators must work together to ensure that children understand the necessity for them to develop a good academic foundation early in life. The student-athletes who fail out of colleges or who do not qualify through the NCAA Clearinghouse are prime examples of why academics are so important even for those individuals who are academically gifted. These individuals show that even with support and accommodations if a student-athlete falls too far behind his peers in terms of academic skill level he may never be able to recover.

Overall, these findings outline methods by which college athletic programs can direct their recruiting efforts to help widen the pool of potential recruits they can target while providing a positive academic and athletic experience for them. By being open with a recruit about a disability label early in the recruiting process the student-athlete will feel empowered once on campus to self-advocate and seek accommodations. Coaches, faculty and academic support should work together to support those individuals once they are on campus. Academic support staff can encourage student-athletes with disabilities to register with DSS and can gain extra support by asking those who have already done so to voluntarily share their experiences by being open about their exceptionality. The key is to provide a culture within the athletic department that embraces the struggle of student-athletes who are at-risk of not graduating. Those who might have a disability should be encouraged to seek assessment so that they can receive the accommodations that may allow them to graduate.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

The research reported here was designed to provide insight into the academic experiences of a specific group of student-athletes. However, there are a number of limitations to this study. First of all, the sample of student-athletes studied was not diverse. This limitation hinders the ability of the findings to be generalized to the population other student-athletes at-risk of not graduating. The findings of this study are not clear as to the extent they are applicable across differing institutional, racial, and gender contexts. Another limitation is the reliance upon interview methods, which limits the both the type and source of the information. Replications of this

study with participants of various ethnicities, institutions, divisions, sports and members of each sex can provide greater insight into the experiences of student-athletes at-risk of not succeeding academically at the postsecondary level.

Another limitation to this study is that the student-athletes consist solely of participants in one major revenue producing intercollegiate sport at a single Division I institution. To provide greater insight into the academic experiences of student-athletes researchers should examine individuals participating in a variety of sports at different levels of competition. The NCAA has three different divisions (I, II and III) that can be examined. Each division has its own set of requirements for its members regarding scholarship limits. At the Division III level athletic scholarships are not awarded to student-athletes. Examining the experiences of student-athletes at the scholarship and non-scholarship levels is an important distinction that should be made. Similarly, this study only examined student-athletes who were on scholarship at their institution. Even at the Division I level there are walk-ons to the athletic programs participating in these sports without a scholarship. The level of academic support that they receive can also provide insight into the total picture of academic support for intercollegiate student-athletes at-risk on not succeeding academically.

All of the subjects involved in this study were male and fourteen of the fifteen subjects were African-American and the other one is Caucasian. Further study should examine the experiences of female athletes and should take precautions to create a sample that matches the racial composition of intercollegiate athletes. The racial makeup of this sample is reflective of the population of student-athletes of the ILP

roster for the sport in question at the institution involved in the study. However, it is not reflective of the racial composition of all NCAA student-athletes.

The racial composition of this study is a major limitation because of the possibility of the impact of racial biases. Some of the perceived stigma these student-athletes feel may not be because of their student-athlete status, disability status or participation in the ILP program but because of their race. Future study should be sure to include greater racial diversity to account for any overt or unconscious racial biases.

Another limitation of this study is the imbalance in class present in the sample. No seniors were interviewed and only four juniors participated in the study. A majority of the subjects, eight, were freshmen. Future studies in this subject should seek to obtain information from upper-class student-athletes at-risk of not graduating. The information that they can provide will be very helpful because they have the most experience surviving in postsecondary education.

There is some difficulty in effectively establishing criteria to determine which student-athletes should be included in this study. One of the primary goals of this research was to determine if student-athletes who were eligible to receive services through DSS at their institution choose to do so. As a corollary to this goal the experiences of student-athletes at-risk are also documented. This study chose to use the criteria of the particular institution involved in the study for determining which student-athletes are placed in the ILP program to create a pool of subjects to interview. This method limited the population to approximately twenty-five percent of the team's roster from which to draw a sample. Using criteria established by the

researcher can allow for more control of the population size to help find additional student-athletes who may be eligible for accommodations through DSS.

Another limitation of this study is that the research was conducted solely from the vantage point of the student-athlete. By design this study intended to feature the views of student-athletes but important information can be gained by including interviews with faculty members. These interviews can help clarify some of the claims made by the student-athletes regarding their perception about how their professors view them. Faculty members can also provide examples of occasions when student-athletes with accommodations have approached them in their classes. Obtaining information from both perspectives will provide evidence that can help explain the experiences of student-athletes in further detail.

This study is also limited by its reliance on information self-reported by the student-athletes. The two major sources of information, the interviews and the personal history questionnaire are both products created by information freely provided by the subjects. There is no method to determine if a subject is being completely honest in either format from the materials involved in this study. Future studies should rectify this issue by attempting to obtain permission to view records that can provide evidence of any history of involvement with special education by the student-athlete. High school personnel should also be contacted to provide clarification of the claims made by the student-athletes about their academic experiences in high school.



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