THE ATHLETIC-ACADEMIC SPECTRUM IN
U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
NCAA STUDENT ATHLETE ADVISORS

Shaun E. McAlmont

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Supervisor of Dissertation:

__________________________
Laurence Moneta, Adjunct Professor of Education

Dean, Graduate School of Education:

__________________________
Pamela L. Grossman, Dean and Professor

Dissertation Committee:

Laurence Moneta, Adjunct Professor of Education

Karen Weaver, Associate Clinical Professor, Drexel University

John King, Higher Education Consultant
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family, friends, and colleagues who have been supportive throughout my career and specifically through this educational process. Without your support, understanding, and encouragement, this success would not have been possible. This accomplishment is a dream come true for a first-generation, former student athlete, and proves that hard work and dedication can pay off.
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ABSTRACT

THE ATHLETIC-ACADEMIC SPECTRUM IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NCAA STUDENT ATHLETE ADVISORS

Shaun E. McAlmont
Laurence Moneta

College athletics is a complex, revenue generating industry within the United States higher education system. This commercialized segment of education generated 9 billion dollars of income in 2015 from the efforts of 482,533 student athletes (Gains, 2016; NCAA, 2015). This system creates a unique spectrum characterized on one end by the insatiable desire for winning led by coaches, athletic departments, and alumni, resulting in athletic isolation to protect the ‘athlete investment.’ On the other end of the spectrum is the pursuit of a degree, academic success, and career development guided by faculty and an institution’s academic mission and reputation to protect the ‘student investment.’ Student athletes are caught between the strong pull of these two opposing pressures which requires advising to assist them in navigating this complex environment and calls for current research to better understand the student athlete advisor role, its evolution, and related impact on student athletes within this academic-athletic spectrum.

Qualitative research methods explored the lived experiences of 32 athletic academic advisors from mid-sized Division I NCAA institutions. Semi-structured interviews conducted over a two-month period explored how their role, experience, and approach influence student athletes. The study drew eight primary findings and analyzed them within three original research questions that covered: (a) the evolution of student
athlete advising in higher education; (b) how student athletes engage in the broader university; and (c) the range of advising from simply maintaining athletic eligibility to optimizing academic engagement.

The findings of this study illustrate the lived experiences of athletic academic advisors and unveils a mentorship role that exceeds academic advising. The findings also highlight the increasing numbers of advisors, their backgrounds, challenges, and the evolving role of student athlete advising along the athletic-academic spectrum. The results of this study can help guide institutional leaders in structuring advising and other support systems to benefit the academic and career prospects for student athletes.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Olympic motto is comprised of three Latin words: “Citius, Altius, Fortius,” which translated means “Faster, Higher, Stronger.” These words have exemplified athleticism from ancient Greek times through today. Those with athletic abilities can entertain while also leveraging their talents for career and financial gain. Performing at a world-class level requires intense focus, time, and effort. To earn a starting position with a collegiate team in the United States requires a level of skill that ranks these athletes among the world’s best.

The motivation to conduct this study arose from my own lived experience as a student athlete. At an early age, I aspired to be a world-class athlete. I excelled through high school in Canada, was recruited by Brigham Young University (BYU), and competed between 1985 and 1990 as a full scholarship track & field athlete. In 1988, I qualified for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championships among the best in my event in the NCAA, in addition to leading the Canadian rankings. The year 1988 was an Olympic year, and I was intensely focused on performing well at the NCAA Championships, the Canadian National Trials, and the Summer Olympics. There was not much mental or physical time left for anything else that year. Unfortunately, in an instant, I found myself lying on the track in severe pain after hitting a hurdle, falling and tearing a tendon during the preliminary heats of the NCAA championships at the University of Oregon’s famed Hayward Field. Lying on my back, while the competition carried on without me, was a surreal feeling. Mentally drained, physically injured, and disheartened, I used my remaining willpower to get up and limp across the finish line to a standing...
ovation. I would miss the NCAA finals and the Seoul Olympics that year.

Hours of practice, travel every week, mental preparation, physical therapy, and unwavering discipline characterized my experience as a BYU athlete. However, all of that was gone in a matter of seconds with the injury. In the weeks leading up to the NCAA meet, I competed in the conference championships, ran multiple races at institutions across the United States, ran team relays, and competed in Canada to ensure I qualified for the National Championships. During that time of intense preparation and competition, I was also a full-time college student, working toward my “other goal” of graduation. By age 21, despite missing my Olympic dream, I had matched a Canadian high school record, was a Western Athletic Conference champion, NCAA qualifier, Canadian national team member, and held the second and fifth fastest times in BYU history in my events. I felt like I had gone through a lifetime of physical wear and tear and emotional highs and lows. My experience was very different compared to my non-athlete student counterparts.

During my years at BYU, I was forced to make hourly and daily decisions that prioritized athletic, academic, or social pursuits. The need to maintain my athletic scholarship drove most of my decision-making. I found myself taking minimum course loads and easier courses that would allow me to maintain athletic eligibility and a manageable academic schedule during the competition season, which lasted most of the year. Many student athletes experienced similar circumstances; unfortunately, several did not graduate. The athletic scholarship was a means to achieve a higher education; however, this financial scholarship bond to athletics was also the reason many did not
achieve their academic dream. I graduated due to self-discipline and with the support of
many of the institution’s athletic and non-athletic resources.

Currently, there are almost half a million student athletes in the United States
higher education system, according to the NCAA (2017), some of whom would not be
able to attend college but for an athletic scholarship (Isidore, 2015). In 2015, the NCAA
voted to increase funds for student athletes related to other living expenses, including
additional food, as a large number of these students reported going to sleep hungry
without supplemental family financial means (Isidore, 2015). The NCAA (2017) reports
that less than 2% of these student athletes will become professional athletes, meaning
almost all of these students must rely on academic and career preparation to ensure a
long-term livelihood. The higher education athletics industry in the United States
generates revenue from student athlete participation in the form of ticket sales,
Division I schools with data available generated a total of $9.15 billion in revenue during
the 2015 fiscal year.” This commercialized aspect of the higher education system creates
the spectrum in which student athletes must perform both athletically and academically
despite the pressures, time commitments, and mental strain demanded at both ends of this
unique spectrum.

The spectrum is characterized on one end by the insatiable desire for winning and
revenue led by coaches, athletic departments, and alumni, resulting in athletic isolation to
protect the “athlete investment.” On the other end of the spectrum is the pursuit of a
higher education, academic success, and career development guided by faculty and an
institution’s academic mission and reputation to protect the “student investment.” Student athletes are caught within the spectrum between the strong pull of these two opposing pressures.

My personal experience characterized the realities of the athletic end of the spectrum, with movement toward the academic end necessary for me to graduate with a degree in Psychology. My son, who was also a track & field athlete at BYU, competed his freshman year, and found that after that year he was physically and mentally exhausted and sacrificed his typically perfect grades. His goal to become an investment banker required academic rigor and high grades to earn a coveted, paid summer banking internship. The advising he was receiving from the Business School made athletics appear to be more of a barrier than an aid in achieving his career goals. He ultimately made the difficult decision to leave college athletics to move toward the other end of the spectrum. Since that time, he attends classes and a local internship each semester, has achieved straight A grades, earned two paid summer internships with major firms in Los Angeles and New York, and is on the Business School Dean’s List for his academic performance. Moreover, he has leveraged faculty relationships, alumni networks and peer organizations within his chosen field. My son’s and my experiences reflect bookends of the student athlete experience and personify the athletic-academic spectrum in higher education.

Over the past ten years, athletic departments have hired student athlete advisors in increasing numbers to serve as mentors, academic coaches, and guidance counselors for their athletes in order to meet NCAA academic and graduation benchmarks, behavioral
standards, and long-term career success (Grasgreen, 2012). After significant thought about the student athlete experience and how to study it, I determined that one of the only roles purely focused on assisting student athletes at both ends of the spectrum is the role of the student athlete academic advisor. Thus, the role and impact of athletic advising was worthy of a study to understand its evolution and the advisors’ ability to support and guide student athletes along the spectrum between athletic and academic pressures.

Critics, who question the ability of college-age students to effectively operate at both ends of the spectrum, scrutinize university athletic programs and highlight the tension between the academic mission of the university and the role of college sports. Gurney, Lopiano, and Zimbalist (2017) state simply that “the NCAA must be replaced.” They also write, “The NCAA has placed commercial success above its responsibilities to protect the academic pursuits, and health and well-being of college athletes, thereby creating an educational, ethical and economic crisis.” The authors also cautioned that if college athletics resides within the higher education environment, it must remain subordinate to the educational mission of the institution, “and defendable from a not-for-profit organizational standpoint.” Furthermore, Gurney et al. (2017) asserted,

A new governance and regulatory structure should replace the NCAA with a goal of restoring academic integrity and providing athletes’ rights, which have been taken away by a professionalized athletic mentality that controls the cost of its athlete labor, while overpaying coaches and athletic directors.

It should be noted that the author is an assistant professor of education who has spent 31 years in athletic administration with several athletically prominent universities.

There are discernible tensions (a) within the academic and athletic structures of institutions, (b) between the athletes’ motivations for both academics and athletics, and
within the literature between fatalist and opportunistic views of college athletics (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Gayles, 2005; Suggs, 2003). Many of these authors report on the lowering of academic standards for the recruitment of student athletes in revenue-generating sports. Stories of recruiting violations have become commonplace in the news, highlighted by a *Sports Illustrated* article titled: *Three Dozen Programs Could Be Punished for Recruiting Violations After FBI Probe* (Rapaport, 2018). There are institutions that turn a blind eye to tactics that target young high school athletes, pay recruits, and provide illicit entertainment, travel, and clothing through boosters and staff, and create appealing living conditions, all with the goal of winning championships and generating revenues (Rapaport, 2018). Along with the best athletes, institutions recruit the best coaches and pay them seven-figure salaries to continue this recruitment trend and win championships (Brady, Berkowitz & Schnaars, 2018). Once the student is accepted into school, there are other reports of academic fraud including cheating, grade inflation, surrogate test takers, and assignment writers (Cole, 2017). The circumstances are made worse by evidence of athletes who are illiterate and can barely articulate their thoughts when appearing on camera following a game (Branch, 2011). Only a handful of student athletes go on to the professional level each year, thus a high percentage must finish their college athletic career and graduate in order to earn a living (NCAA, 2017). However, many do not graduate and leave without an education or, “with nothing to show for their time spent on the university campus” (Gurney, et al., 2017).

In this environment, the student athlete, who participates in a revenue sport, helps generate millions of dollars of revenue for their institution, increases school pride,
encourages alumni engagement, and aids in the recruitment of non-athlete students (Thelin, 1996). This circumstance defines the athletic end of the athletic academic spectrum. Although to a lesser degree, Olympic sports also recruit heavily and intentionally strive for the best team performances, which will earn revenues for their institutions by participating in NCAA championship events (NCAA, 2017). Because of athletics, standards are sometimes lowered to accept underperforming students who are good athletes and significant effort is made to maintain their athletic eligibility, even at elite athletic institutions (Cole, 2017). This reality helps further define the athletic end of the spectrum. Student athlete isolation is created on one side of the spectrum by maintaining eligibility, conditioning, training, and motivation, as well as locating living communities and support services close to the athletic training facilities. On the other hand, student engagement and involvement theory states that all students in higher education can achieve higher levels of academic success if they engage in the broader university experience (Kuh, 2008).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this inquiry is to study the lived experience of athletic academic advisors and understand the evolution and impact of their role on student athletes within the athletic-academic spectrum in higher education. The following research questions guided this study:

**Research Question 1:**
How do advisors describe the evolution of athletic academic advising in higher education?
Research Question 2:
How do advisors perceive their role in assisting student athletes’ engagement within the broader university for the benefit of their academic development and how do they define success?

Research Question 3:
How do advisors describe their role on the spectrum between optimizing academic engagement opportunities and simply maintaining eligibility for student athletes?

Significance of the Study

The constant scrutiny around NCAA commercialization, cheating scandals, low graduation rates, and easier courses and degrees highlights the risks within the athletic-academic spectrum in higher education. The direction and rate at which student athletes move along the spectrum, and the role of advisors, calls for a better understanding of how student athletes are advised. There is little research specifically focused on the assistance student athletes receive as they negotiate between athletic and academic pressures during their time in college.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Athletics and Academics in Higher Education

Student athletes in higher education are positioned precariously between their academic and athletic pursuits (Hyatt, 2003) and as such, they feel the tension between these motivations (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Athletic programs are continually disparaged for exploiting student athletes to produce huge revenues and improve institutional reputation and alumni loyalty (Williams, 2017; Knight Commission Reports, 1991, 2001, 2010). Student athletes typically spend 20 to 40 hours on athletics-related activity each week, which has been shown to have consequences for their academic performance (Wolverton, 2008), and because of their demanding schedules, student athletes are often physically alienated from the academic world around them (Hyatt, 2003).

In addition, the focus of the most athletically competitive institutions, including that of coaches and advisors, can lead student athletes, especially those with lower academic aptitudes, toward easier majors and courses to maintain grades and eligibility (Suggs, 2003). The NCAA (2017) states that less than 2% of college athletes become professional, making academic success and career preparation critical for life success. There is a natural tendency to isolate college athletes from the general institution population because of their special circumstances, which can lead to difficulty adjusting to academics (Bowen & Levin, 2003).

Alternatively, looking through the lens of student engagement, integration into the broader institution has proven beneficial for students’ academic performance (Kuh, 2008). Astin (1993) suggested that increased institutional integration improves student
athletes’ and non-athletes’ sense of belonging. The NCAA, and engagement theory researchers, such as Kuh and Astin, agreed that academic advising and support related to increased engagement and integration is necessary to help college athletes succeed academically (Gayles, 2014).

**Theoretical Framework**

There is tension found in the literature between the positive outlook of the student engagement theorists (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2008 Tinto, 1987) and the skepticism of student athlete research realists (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Gurney et al., 2017; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999; Suggs, 2003). The conceptual framework for this study places the student athlete between the two opposing forces of experiential reality and theoretical opportunity, while also positioning the student athlete between the divergent forces of their own academic and athletic motivations. Due to this conflict, Gaston (2002) developed the *Student Athletes’ Motivation toward Sports and Academics Questionnaire* (SAMSAQ) that uses achievement motivation theory to measure student athletes’ motivation toward academics and athletics (Quaye & Harper, 2014). The literature describes this conceptual view of disparate forces around the student athlete in higher education in terms of personal, educational, athletic, and environmental influences. McFarlane (2014) explained that, “student athletes are a special and unique population requiring support for their academic, personal, and athletic needs and issues.” Considering the opportunity to apply student engagement theory to improve the support offered to student athletes, Gaston-Gayles (2004) reminded us that increased engagement requires both the motivation of the student athlete and the commitment and support of the
institution to be successful. This study used phenomenological inquiry to examine the lived experiences of student athlete support personnel, specifically focusing on their perceptions of how student athlete support roles have evolved over time, the extent to which they assist student athletes in engaging for academic development versus simply advising to maintain athletic eligibility. The theoretical framework for this study can be further explained from the perspectives of the students’ integration (Astin, 1984), motivation (Gaston, 2009), purposeful educational experience (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), involvement (Tinto, 1987), and engagement (Kuh, 2009). Greater engagement, as generally defined by these theories, improves academic performance for both student athletes and non-athletes. This theoretical perspective helped guide the literature review and develop the methods used in this study.

The Problem – What We Know

In The New York Times article published in September 2003, Karen Arenson highlighted a Bowen and Levin (2003) study of Ivy League intercollegiate athletes which revealed that these athletes are so narrowly focused on athletics that they were far removed from their non-athlete classmates athletically, academically, and socially. Even though these institutions do not suffer low graduation rates, the athletes that were recruited with lower grades performed worse than would be expected while in school. William Bowen, former president of Princeton University, highlighted the underlying problem guiding this study, "There is a significant, serious, widening divide between the academic and the athletic sides of campus life." Vincent Tinto’s (1987) research on the
benefits of engaging college students directly challenged the problematic and hopeless findings of Bowen and Levin (2003). Tinto (1987) stated that student engagement and academic and social integration relate positively to persistence, and he asserted that engagement is the most important predictor of student persistence in higher education. Bowen and Levin’s (2003) definition of the problem was based on the strain between increasing institutional focus on athletics and decreased focus on academics, with student athletes caught between these divergent foci. This problem has solutions worth exploring, a premise underscored by the research from student engagement theorists showing that the more engaged students become in the institution, the better they will do academically, despite extracurricular or other distractions (Kuh, 2009).

Comparably, Astin’s (1993) theory of student involvement is defined by “the amount of physical and psychological energy that students apply to the academic experience.” Astin (1993) defined involvement as any activity on the college campus that motivates students to spend more time on campus, which includes increased academic interaction with non-athlete peers, faculty, and staff (Quaye & Harper, 2014). An important part of the problem evident in the literature is the ongoing conflict between optimism and skepticism around athletics in higher education. The tension is once again noted when Astin’s (1993) prescriptive and aspirational theory of involvement is compared with Gurney et al. (2017) who made a dire assessment of the student athletes’ long-term circumstances caused by the perpetual tensions between the educational mission of the university and the commercialization of college sports.

Student engagement research has increased over the past decade; however, the
research around student athlete isolation versus engagement is limited. Despite the lack of current research, these issues date back to the early years of the NCAA. Gurney et al. (2017), wrote *Unwinding Madness: What Went Wrong with College Sports and How to Fix It*, which, at the time of this study, is the most current publication highlighting the tension between athletics and academics in higher education. This publication reflected on the 1929 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s report on intercollegiate athletics that found that three quarters of the NCAA’s institutions that year violated its principles of amateur competition. The researchers also found that over 100 years ago, institutions were already separating into distinct academic and athletic divisions based on their athletic successes and related abilities to generate revenue. This was reflected in the first intercollegiate sporting event in the United States, which was the rowing match between Harvard and Yale in 1852 (Nast, 2001). The event was organized by local businesses to promote services to the wealthy residents of New York City and Boston. This historical moment is relevant today and to this study because it marks the beginning of the commercialization and separation of college sports from the educational mission of the university (Gurney et al., 2017).

The continual commercialization within higher education has created a separate culture and continues to isolate athletic departments and their athletes with protective elements around them to ensure uninterrupted revenue generation and school pride (Thelin, 1994). Athletics was rarely mentioned with academics in a university mission statement, yet it quickly became central to university life (Thelin, 1994). Administrators searched for a proper balance between athletics and academics, which was supported in
Thelin’s (1994) assertion that “this peculiar institution [athletics] grows increasingly powerful and controversial.” Thelin found disturbing patterns of abuse that have long-term implications for college presidents, faculty, staff and students. In addition, even though college presidents knew of this growing divide on their campuses, based on pressure from students, alumni, and other donors, they did not dare intervene (Gurney et al., 2017).

Bok (2004) added to the identification of the problem underlying this study with research that described the general commercialization of the academy, and specifically noted that the conflict between the goals of intercollegiate athletic programs and the mission of higher education is significant. This problem is reflected in the imbalance of attention paid to athletic revenues and the related prominence given to athletic events, whether in celebration or controversy even though student athletes make up a relatively small percentage of a college population (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

**The Problem – What We Do Not Know**

Although student engagement research and related findings have increased over the past decade, the research around student athlete isolation versus engagement is less prominent (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Moreover, despite the fact that research shows student athlete engagement within the broader university is beneficial to their academic performance (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 1987), the extent to which academic athletic support personnel encourage student athletes toward integration and engagement is unknown. This is the issue and
question central to this study.

According to Gayles and Hu (2009) the preponderance of existing research and public scrutiny focuses on Division I men’s basketball and football, which involves high profile athletes generating millions in revenue. These authors stated that further study is needed on a wider variety of sports, gender, and ages; however, there is now increasing research focused on the impact of sport participation on student learning and development comparing athletes to their non-athlete peers across all institutional types (Gayles and Hu, 2009; Wolniak, Pierson & Pascarella, 2001). Further supporting the premise of this study, Gayles and Hu (2009) asserted, “There is a need to better articulate what contributes to engagement in educationally purposeful activities for student athletes who participate in different sports and how that in turn relates to desirable outcomes for this student population.”

The unknowns within the area of student athlete engagement can be addressed from the perspective of the lived experience of student athletes (McFarlane, 2014), or from the lived experience of those supporting the student athletes in their academic pursuits. Research questions relating to the perceptions of personnel tasked with supporting student athlete academics and engagement guided this qualitative study based on the lived experiences of those in the field (Patton, 1990).

Bowen and Levin (2003) proclaimed, "Increasingly, student athletes have become separated from the rest of the campus community." Figler and Griffiths (1982) found that sufficient institutional resources adequate to provide academic support in the form of advisors, facilities, and equipment are necessary to allow student athletes to achieve
academically in addition to their athletic pursuits. Related to the findings of Figler and Griffiths (1982), the NCAA realized in 2002 that the majority of institutions failing the newly developed Academic Progress Rate (APR) threshold were low-resource institutions (NCAA, 2011). The NCAA now mandates that institutions have sufficient advising and support resources to support the academic pursuits of student athletes (NCAA, 2011). Despite these recommendations and mandates, the definition of “sufficient” and the meaning of success in advising student athletes toward academic development remains unclear (Comeaux, 2007).

In addition to the problems of undefined success measures, levels of institutional support, and balance in attention between athletics and academics, are the operational issues of executing ground-level strategies and tactics focused on improving student athlete academic performance. Addressing this problem is a range of student engagement and involvement literature describing the benefits of student athlete integration versus isolation. That research proposed that the ability for these students to succeed may not only be subject to effective institutional academic support systems and adequate resources, but relies on engagement activities which are purposeful as well (Comeaux, 2007; Gayles & Hu, 2009; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006).

**Purposeful Engagement: A Framework for Student Athlete Academic Support**

LaForge and Hodge (2011) reported that in more recent years, the NCAA turned its attention and resources to academic support following a long period of bad press, poor athlete academic performance, athlete misconduct, grade scandals, recruiting violations, and overall student athlete non-engagement. The NCAA and federal government took...
steps to address academic integrity in college athletics via the *Student-Right-To-Know and Campus Security Act*, which required universities that received federal funds to report graduation rates for all students (LaForge & Hodge, 2011). It also required institutions to report the graduation rates for student athletes separately in the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) database. In addition, as a part of a significant academic reform effort, the NCAA created the APR and Graduate Success Rate (GSR) to measure student athlete academic success for those receiving athletic financial aid (NCAA, 2011). The emergence of stronger association oversight on its own does not necessarily drive purposeful engagement or support efforts (LaForge & Hodge, 2011). However, these quantitative measures were developed to keep institutions accountable for the academic progress of their student athletes (Moore, 2014). The APR is a metric that accounts for the eligibility and retention of each student athlete for each academic term and is aggregated into male and female team scores for each sport (NCAA, 2011). Only students receiving athletic financial aid are counted in the score calculation. The introduction of these measurements and public nature of the reporting forced institutions to add appropriate resources to support students and show progress in these national reports (LaForge & Hodge, 2011).

Researchers introduced several frameworks for providing purposeful engagement to encourage student academic achievement. Kuh (2001) stated “that one of the key factors in student learning and personal development is student engagement in educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes.” In addition, he proposed five principles that distinguish involvement from other activities,
similar to Kuh’s (2009) high impact engagement activities and Chickering’s (2003) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate higher education. All of these engagement principles have a few elements in common including (a) student-faculty interaction, (b) collaborative learning, (c) devoted time to activities on campus, (d) active learning, and (e) employment or internship opportunities. Kuh (2009) stated, “These types of activities are considered high-impact practices (HIPs) because undergraduate students who do them score much higher than their peers who have not had such experiences on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).” Differences are seen specifically in measures such as academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment (Kuh, 2009).

Student engagement frameworks proven to be beneficial for all students are also thought to be beneficial for student athletes (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 1987). One framework specific to student athlete engagement was developed in the form of five recommendations focused on increasing student athlete engagement (Gaston, 2002). This is one of the only theoretical frameworks based in broader engagement theory, but formulated specifically for the student athlete in higher education.

The Five Recommendations for Increasing Student Athlete Engagement

1. Assess academic and athletic motivation

An initial assessment of both academic and athletic motivation is important for a baseline measure and to avoid making assumptions about certain student athletes based on race, gender, or sport (Gayles, 2002).
2. **Encourage peer interaction**

Support programs should seek ways to have athletes engage with non-athlete peers. Peer interaction is an important way to integrate (Gayles, 2002; Tinto, 1987).

3. **Organize student affairs collaboration**

Support programs should work cross departmentally to avoid duplicate effort and engage student athletes, which will help bridge the divide described in the literature (Gayles, 2002).

4. **Encourage living on campus**

Support programs and staff should encourage student athletes to live on campus for a minimum of two years allowing them to spend more time on campus, which is a key engagement theory component (Gayles, 2002).

5. **Increase faculty interaction**

Support program staff should organize ways to involve faculty in athletics to offset some of the negative perceptions faculty have of athletes (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001).

The five recommendations provided by Gayles (2002) appear to be a synthesis of the major elements of the other theorists’ work, while identifying the elements most needed by student athletes. This specific engagement framework allows for the development of an assessment tool to measure current institutional student athlete engagement effectiveness, and specifically provides a basis for an interview instrument to assess the current efforts of student athlete support personnel. Thus, Gaston’s (2002) five recommendations for effectively engaging student athletes in the college experience will be used as the interview framework for this study.
An important distinction is made in the literature that engagement does not happen on its own and student athletes are sometimes not inclined to follow through on engagement activities based on their motivational leaning between athletics and academics (Gayles, 2002). Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) and Umbach et al. (2006) claimed that for the student athlete support practitioner, even with a detailed theoretical framework or set of recommendations to improve engagement, both the student and institution must have distinct responsibilities in the effort. From this perspective, effective engagement is predicated on the idea of dual effort. With a clarifying view, Quaye & Harper (2014) argued that students should not be primarily responsible for engaging themselves, since it is proven that many do not, but instead faculty and administration should create the conditions that enable diverse populations of students to be engaged. Considering both sides of this equation, engagement and integration for the student athlete depends on an environment that supports both student and practitioner.

The literature also addresses the terminology between researchers, which is generally congruent; however, using certain terms interchangeably may have some consequence. Gaston-Gayles (2004) argued a nuanced difference between the terms involvement and engagement. The researcher stated that it is possible to be involved but not engaged. For example, if a student attends an engagement event, but sits quietly in the back of the room, they would have a difficult time claiming they are engaged. Purposeful engagement and deep learning requires action, purpose, and inter-institutional collaboration (Kinzie & Kuh, 2008).
The Negative Perception of College Athletics

Lawrence, Hendricks, and Ott (2007) reported that 33% of faculty surveyed in 2007 believed that academic standards are lowered to achieve high levels of success in sports, specifically in football and basketball. Faculty perceptions of student athletes’ experiences are not always favorable (Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). In addition, NCAA rules infractions are continually evident in college sports reflecting the pressures to do well in athletics (Gurney, et al., 2017). Furthermore, there are circumstances now causing even more turmoil as athletes are suing to be paid for the use of their likeness and time (Waldron, 2016). Negative perceptions are constantly fortified due to rules violations regarding recruitment, student athlete financial and entertainment inducements, and coaches paid in the millions for winning (Knight Commission Report, 2001), without an equal balance on educational progress (Bowen & Levin, 2003).

Researchers have determined that student athletes as a defined demographic in a university setting fits the definition of a “non-traditional” or “special needs” student group, and as such, they require special support to assist them in the twofold quest of education and sport success (Hyatt, 2003). As a result, there can be strong perceptions that college athletics creates a non-intellectual atmosphere and consistently diverges from the academic culture (Simons, Van Rheenen & Covington, 1999). Moreover, in high revenue generating sports, student athletes experiencing subpar academic performance will divert attention away from their own academic shortcomings by complaining they were being exploited by the university to generate income according to Peltier et
These researchers also suggested that student athletes are used to bring status to institutions, but not provided enough support to be successful academically. Shulman and Bowen (2001) also asserted that despite efforts by the NCAA to avoid creating a separate culture defined by lower student athlete graduation rates, clustering in certain majors, and social isolation, suspicion about the role of intercollegiate athletics on the campus continues to exist. This complicated situation for student athletes can deny them an enriching college experience while also perpetuating stereotypes and negative perceptions from the broader university (Simons et al., 1999). The student athlete experience is unlike the non-athlete student experience and their differences can often be misunderstood by others in the university community (McFarlane, 2014).

These misunderstandings can also be driven by circumstances outside of the student athletes’ control. Oversight of most extracurricular activities in higher education, such as music, art, and other organizations, remains tied to the educational mission, requiring faculty leadership qualified by advanced degrees. The opposite is true in college athletics with coaches hired despite academic credentials. Coaches are hired at high salaries, further separating athletics from education (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Shulman and Bowen (2001) and Bowen and Levin (2003) have delivered some of the most scathing and influential critiques of college athletics (Umbach et al., 2006). Articles such as “Jock Majors” (Suggs, 2003) and the Knight Commission Reports (2001) also portray academics and athletics as out of balance, especially in Division I competitive institutions. Student athlete motivation is also a factor, and those who are more motivated toward their athletic pursuits, do not do as well academically: Division I football athletes
who have career aspirations outside of sports might do better than track and field athletes who have their sights on Olympic competition. Thus, these issues can exist across all levels and types of sports (Gayles, 2005).

Kuh (2001 referred to earlier research by Whitner and Meyers (1986) where the authors described student athletes as, “underprepared, unlikely to graduate, skewed and manipulated by the demands of their sport.” They also suggested that when institutions enroll student athletes, who are not well prepared, it is reasonable that they should deliver academic and other support services necessary to bolster the student athletes’ academic performance (Kuh, 2001; Sylwester & Witosky, 2004).

The continued separation of athletics from the educational mission, and related isolation of student athletes, preserves the perceptions and negative realities of a separate culture. These issues inform this study by depicting the current environment in which student athlete support practitioners must operate. It also confirms an understanding that student athletes require professional support at the institutional level to navigate within this environment. To reiterate, this study sought to gain a better understanding of the perceived impact of student athlete academic support on athlete engagement within higher education.

A History of Commercialization

To better understand the forces affecting the unique environment in which student athletes must also attend classes, study and take exams, it is important to consider the history of commercialization in US college athletics. While other countries have athletic programs and teams, they are club oriented and subservient to an educational mission,
and students are not tied to generating increasing and substantial revenues (Lewter, 2015). Early athletic competition goes back to ancient times and is foundational to important Greek philosophies, including the pursuit of excellence (*arete*), discipline (*askesis*), play (*paidia*), and power (*dynamis*). These powerful philosophical drivers are at the heart of competition between human beings, especially for the entertainment of others (Dombrowski, 2009). A key element to the commercialization of sports is related to the ability for all to participate through buying and selling entry to events. For the athletes, opportunities emerged to find new and lucrative professions, which also motivated them to be the best by any means necessary (Katz, 2008).

As sports flourished in the United States, it also grew in popularity within American higher education, where many young and developing athletes could be found in massive numbers. Thelin (1994) described, “a history of intercollegiate athletics from 1910 to 1990, from the early glory days to the modern era of big budgets, powerful coaches, and pampered players.” Earlier in higher education, the *Morrill Land Grant Act* was passed and states took advantage of the opportunity to start institutions, and also envisioned launching competitive college athletic teams (Gurney et al., 2017). Today, the commercial aspect of college sports has become so large it is literally referred to as “madness” during the month of March. A record 40 million NCAA basketball tournament brackets were submitted to ESPN and CBS, with 26 million viewers watching the championship game alone, and 100 million viewers watched livestreams for the 2017 tournament (NCAA, 2017).

This multi-billion-dollar revenue producing system has been criticized for
operating on the backs of 18- to 23-year-old student athletes (Knight Commission Report, 2001). Furthermore, other critics argued that sports on campus distort the mission of the institutions of higher learning (Brand, 2006). This addresses the reality that one talented college athlete can increase ticket sales, alumni donations, community involvement, and school pride; therefore, institutions have been accused of lowering academic standards to find that physical talent (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Knight Commissions Report, 2001). The circumstances around commercialization are currently at a peak, considering some of the revenues generated by college athletics. As an example, Texas A&M University generated almost $200 million in athletics revenue in 2015 (NCAA, 2017). Donations at this institution increased, athlete recruitment is a major focus for the institution, high profile athletes turn professional early, and misconduct issues continue. The aforementioned perceptions of separate, revenue driven and non-academic culture are maintained in a commercial atmosphere (Gurney et al., 2017).

Gladded, Milne, and Sutton (1998) argued that the brand equity developed from college athletic success results in marketplace consequences such as national exposure and increasing revenues. It also results in consequences for the student athlete, which are out of their control and require advice, support, and advocacy. Gladded, Milne and Sutton (1998) also contended this brand equity feeds into a debatably positive marketplace perception that can propel an institution’s brand further than educational reputation alone. For example, Stanford, Notre Dame, and Duke Universities are as well known for their elite education as they are for their athletic prowess.

The concept of student athlete academic support began to form in the days where
the image of the “dumb jock” flourished based on the imbalance of time and effort toward sport that forced an athlete to spend hours perfecting their athletic craft (Suggs, 2003). As Thelin (1994) noted, athletics created its own reality; and, the public accepted it. Athletic attention, school pride, and the related revenues had the public celebrating the “dumb jock” if they continued to produce positive externalities for the institution while their personal academic and career development was in peril (Suggs, 2003). The responsibility to continue improving the institutional economics related to sports, while also driving school spirit, alumni pride, and overall recruitment, continues to isolate the student athlete. Howard-Hamilton and Sina (2001) asserted that student athlete development can be hindered because of substantial time spent with teammates and fellow athletes. These isolated student athletes communicate solely through their sport or athleticism, which inhibits their engagement outside of athletics. This behavior creates difficulty developing and fostering relationships with other students and hinders success in other extracurricular engagement activities. Commercialization maintains the divergent forces between athletics and the educational mission while also putting stress on the student athlete that sits between these forces (Suggs, 2003).

In addition, the dark side of sports made its way into the United States’ higher education system as well. Problems relating to professional sports were now within universities and colleges. The pressures relating to revenue created an environment in college sports, which included cheating, gambling, drugs, and criminality. This negative trend encouraged a more intense focus on sport versus education within the university setting (Knight Commission Report, 1991; Thelin, 1994).
The Evolution of Regulations

This study focused on athlete support structures at mid-sized Division I institutions, and the extent to which they encourage student athlete engagement in the broader university. This inquiry also considered the environmental headwinds faced by institutions. In many ways, the regulations developed by the NCAA are intended to protect the student athlete and encourage the institution to create a supportive environment. According to the NCAA, it takes its role as advocate seriously and has implemented structure, policies, reporting, and penalties to ensure athletes are students first (NCAA Pilot Study Interview, 2016). Student athletes need advocacy in an environment driven by revenues. The triangulation between the NCAA, the institution, and the student can become misaligned if not monitored closely. Focusing on the student athlete and institutional support structure, the NCAA began concentrating on academic performance through a dedicated research effort to first assess student athlete academic and graduation rates. This was not as easy as expected because student athletes cannot easily be classified into simple categories (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). However, from the public view, despite the creation of academic performance and graduate success measures in 2003, the NCAA continued to suffer from a bad reputation. The NCAA has responded to this public criticism by regulating college athletics “by limiting the number of hours that student athletes spend on athletic activities (e.g., competition, practice, conditioning, etc.), restricting the number of student athletes who live together on campus, and requiring academic support services for student athletes at Division I institutions” (Gayles & Hu, 2016). This major step aligned the NCAA’s regulatory
policies with student engagement theories.

At the institutional level, separate cultures developed where athletes were either selected or placed in courses that are non-rigorous, which allowed them to spend significant amounts of time practicing (Thelin, 1994). Injuries, lack of academic focus, and other psychological issues have also been realities for student athletes (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). The NCAA also mandated advising and academic support for student athletes (NCAA, 2017). Many of the struggling student athletes were minority students on predominately white campuses, specifically, high numbers of African-American students in football and basketball, who came from disadvantaged backgrounds, which impacted academic performance (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

In many cases, perceptions were reality in college athletics, based on wide spread incidences of lowered standards of admission, faculty turning their heads to pass certain failing elite athletes, low graduation rates, and lack of career progress for former college athletes (Umbach et al., 2006). The NCAA’s shift to increased focus on academic support is reinforced by Pope and Miller (1996) who found that academic support programs can create a positive counseling and mentoring environment for student athletes as they try to balance sports and school. It is no coincidence that the NCAA developed a comprehensive approach to student athlete academic tracking in 2003, which is within the same timeframe as many of the earlier mentioned scathing articles and published research reports. Umbach et al. (2006) stated,

It is incumbent on colleges and universities to learn more about the experiences of their student athletes and determine whether they are taking part in educationally sound activities and benefiting in desired ways from college at levels equal with their non-athlete peers. After all, we know a good deal about how student athletes
perform on the playing field. We should also keep score as to the quality of their educational activities elsewhere on campus.

In the absence of structured regulations, the NCAA and college athletic programs faced scrutiny in the earliest years of intercollegiate competition as the public determined whether the goals of sports aligned with the academic mission of the university (Smith, 2011). To manage these divergent goals, athletic departments were created (Smith, 2011). However, as revenues from sports competitions grew due to the popularity of competition, university athletic departments began to separate both literally and figuratively from the university. Although the drive to produce winning sports programs kept the tension between athletics and academics alive in higher education, the NCAA developed regulatory policies to manage this balance between the allure of sports revenue and academic responsibility for the student athlete (Smith, 2011).

It is important to note that student athlete support is a pervasive issue that is not exclusive to high-revenue institutions. Many institutions cannot generate the funds necessary to support their sports programs and run deficits that institutions cannot sustain. In 2013, the NCAA penalized 15 of 18 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) athletic teams for insufficient academic progress as measured by APR scores (New, 2015). Then, in 2015, 21 of 24 HBCUs faced the same fate (New, 2015). This illustrates the extent to which institutions that admit more first-generation and underprepared students, with fewer student athlete support resources, are struggling to support their student athletes. It also shows that they are disproportionately affected by the APR measurement. The NCAA, through research in its overseer function, found that many of the other penalized institutions and teams had limited athletic department
budgets without the resources necessary to improve academic support or encourage engagement for their student athletes (NCAA *AASP Program*, 2015).

Some limited-resource institutions operate in a lean fashion and sometimes have no designated student athlete academic services at all (Figler & Griffiths, 1982). The lack of resources at certain institutions forced the NCAA to determine how to support them from a distance without meddling in the institution’s affairs. In 2012, the NCAA implemented the Accelerating Academic Success Program (AASP), which provided $900,000 per institution over a three-year period to assist institutions with limited resources and poor scores (NCAA *AASP Program*, 2015).

The NCAA has a full research department, which tracks, analyzes, and publishes student athlete academic progress data. It does not collect or report grade information. One example of the difference in academic performance between athletes and non-athletes was seen in the Andrew Mellon Foundation longitudinal study, which showed that male student athletes had a mean GPA of 2.83 while male non-athletes had a mean GPA of 3.02. Female athletes had a GPA of 3.17 while female non-athletes had a GPA of 3.22. The data indicated that athletes generally have a lower GPA than non-athletes in the same institution (Emerson and Brooks, 2009). Despite the NCAA’s best regulatory intentions, conflicting reports over athlete academic success continues. The NCAA’s own GSR can be misleading when compared to the FGR. The NCAA reported that 79% of all Division I athletes who began college between 1999 and 2002 graduated within six years. The federal numbers for Division I athletes show that only 63% graduated in six years (Sander, 2009). In addition, the NCAA measures academic success in the form of
graduation rates, but they do not measure grade point average for student athletes (NCAA, 2017).

Despite ongoing criticism, the NCAA rules for continued participation have encouraged institutions to focus on student athlete retention and academic success for continued eligibility. Additional criticism has been made against the NCAA because their eligibility rules for continued sport participation sometimes force institutions to advise their athletes to pursue less academically challenging programs (Steeg, Upton, Bohn, and Berkowitz, 2008). Steeg et al. (2008) also stated that based on “APR penalties and potential loss of money for scholarships and ineligibility for postseason play, schools encourage athletes to pursue majors that are less difficult than others.” For example, Kansas State University has 34% of their football team major in the social sciences compared with 4% of the rest of the student population. Similarly, 51% of the athletes on the Baylor University football team majored in general studies compared with just 1% of all other undergraduates (Steeg et al., 2008). This example illustrates the tension and deepens the divide between athletics and academics with many student athletes who have been advised to maintain eligibility versus choosing majors to help prepare them for post sports careers (Hittle, 2012; Steeg et al., 2008).

Based on NCAA regulations, institutions are required to make academic counseling and tutoring available to athletes (NCAA, 2011). Institutions that provide extra academic support, career counseling, and personal development for student athletes provide a vital service to the students in balancing the various areas of their college experience (Figler and Griffith, 1982). Student athletes are more focused on the present
than a distant non-athletic future; therefore, it should not be a surprise that in many cases they will choose to disengage themselves from serious attachment to academics (Figler & Griffith, 1982). The NCAA, as regulator, can only do so much at the institutional level. With this in mind, Howard-Hamilton and Sina (2001) stated that it is the responsibility of the institution to work harder to provide student athletes with the necessary resources for healthy academic development. Success for the student athlete has a lot to do with commitment to the academic mission of the institution (Figler & Griffith, 1982).

**A Problem Worth Studying**

The problem central to this study is characterized by the separate culture that pulls the student athlete closer to the institution’s athletic interests and away from their academic interests. In addition, problems persist because of the power of commercialization and criticisms around student athletes, the NCAA, and athletic departments. Because of these criticisms, it would be reasonable for coaches, athletic directors, and institution administrators to fully commit the institution to developing the student athlete academically. Such action would help enhance the students’ personal commitment to degree attainment. Unfortunately, variables such as revenues, negative perceptions, and isolation can prohibit the development of student athlete academic performance (Hyatt, 2003; McFarlane, 2014).

Because of this sliding scale between academic and athletic risk and reward, the need for academic guidance and support is necessary for the student athlete to negotiate these activities (Figler & Griffith, 1982). Additionally, literature covering student athlete support initiatives suggests that student athletes’ academic performance relies on support
measures like academic advising and tutoring; however, it remains unclear whether there is a positive or negative relationship between the specific type of initiative and student athletes’ academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Nonetheless, Harrison and Moore (2002) found that student athletes’ academic performance in college increases when the institution has a dedicated and supportive faculty and staff.

Historically, athletic support and guidance services have come from coaching staff, academic advisors, tutors, and athletic academic advisors. This study intended to understand the department structure, roles, and perceptions of those who work at mid-sized institutions in assisting student athletes toward academic progress.

The extent, to which institutional student athlete support programs can evolve to assist in introducing student athletes to high impact engagement practices, is worth studying.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Phenomenological research helps describe a phenomenon and assists researchers in understanding the lived experiences of participants through interviews and other field observations (Patton, 1990). It is difficult to finalize phenomenological research strategies before beginning data collection because meaning is observed and interpreted within a context and based on the researcher’s assessment once the data is collected (Patton, 1990).

The researcher’s identity and subjectivity, which includes experience, background and biases, must be recognized and set aside to avoid influencing data collection and analysis.

Researcher Identity and Subjectivity

My interest in this topic is based on my personal experience as a former NCAA student athlete who has achieved career and life successes, despite the intense athletic pressures felt while attending university. I am also motivated to research student athlete support because of the many stories unlike my own, where former student athletes did not graduate, did not achieve professional or national team status, and suffered from a lack of career and life skills development.

I attended BYU, a predominantly white institution, and was one of a very small population of black, non-Mormon athletes at the mostly Mormon, religious institution. As a freshman, I relied on coaches and teammates for support, lived in dorms where other athletes were, and befriended an equal selection of athletes and non-athletes. I took advantage of opportunities to explore the many parts of the institution and surrounding
community with other non-athlete freshman groups, barely avoiding the natural
tendencies and institutional pressures to isolate with other minority students and student
athletes. My first semester athletic time commitment was moderate; however, I naturally
began feeling increased pressure as I transitioned from high school standout to collegiate
competitor racing against Olympians and accomplished upper-class athletes.

The athletic time commitment at BYU included ten hours of practice and five
hours of training room treatment per week, and competitions that would consume Fridays
and Saturdays most of the year for indoor and outdoor competitions. The NCAA
championships were held in June, requiring additional time on campus, and my choice to
enroll in non-essential short courses to maintain my eligibility through the extended time.
BYU encouraged integration to the broader institution, but it was informal and time
consuming. However, as a minority student, president of a minority students’ association,
and a team captain, I found it personally beneficial to spend time integrating to the larger
university. Engagement with the broader university was the only way to manage a
challenging social situation. Isolating would have provided only additional separation
from vital university academic services, faculty time, and study groups with non-athlete
students. Those actions provided support from a social and academic perspective that was
not fully possible from the athletic community. There were many examples of both
integration and isolation of student athletes of all types, and I witnessed the effects of
isolation on a number of teammates, many of whom did not continue at the institution. It
is important to note this researcher positionality and the need for objectivity through this
study.
The lived experiences of those being interviewed should reflect what is real to them, not the interviewer, at the time of the study and based on a set of research questions (Patton, 1990).

**Research Questions**

There is a need to better understand the extent to which student athletes are engaging in the broader institution for their academic benefit and the role athletic support personnel play in this effort. The following research questions relate to the lived experience of student athlete academic support personnel at mid-sized Division I institutions, and guided this qualitative study.

**Research Question 1:**
How do student athlete advisors describe the evolution of athletic academic support?

**Research Question 2:**
How do student athlete advisors perceive their role in assisting student athletes in engaging within the broader university for the benefit of their academic development?

**Sub Question:**
How do they identify success?

**Research Question 3:**
How do student athlete advisors describe their role on the spectrum between optimizing academic engagement opportunities and simply maintaining eligibility for student athletes?

**Research Approach**

A purposeful sample of 32 advisors were interviewed using Colaizzi’s (1978) phenomenological qualitative method. Hoepfl, (1997) also asserted that the predominant form of data collection related to qualitative inquiry is interviewing. Semi-structured
interviews were utilized to allow continuity between interviews based on the same
questions asked of every participant, in addition to allowing for discussion of broader
concepts related to student athlete support.

**Participant selection**

Study participants were selected from mid-sized Division I NCAA institutions.

The NCAA defines Division I institutions as:

Those that generally, have the biggest student bodies, manage the largest athletics budgets and offer the most generous number of scholarships. Schools who are members of Division I commit to maintaining a high academic standard for student-athletes in addition to a wide range of opportunities for athletics participation. With nearly 350 colleges and universities in its membership, Division I schools field more than 6,000 athletic teams, providing opportunities for more than 170,000 student athletes to compete in NCAA sports each year.

Participants at mid-sized institutions were selected to avoid capturing the smaller elite academic institutions or the larger land grant athletic powerhouses. Institutions on either extreme would skew the view of the advising role toward the institution’s strength. Mid-sized institutions are assumed to have a more balanced approach to athletic and academic pursuits, thereby providing a balanced spectrum in which student athletes operate.

Institution student populations were studied using public data to define them as mid-sized (10,000 to 15,000 students). Participants from institutions within the defined size were identified through membership records from the National Association for Academic Advisors of Athletics (N4A), which was recently rebranded to: The National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A). The N4A is the only national association for student athlete advisors and has member advisors
from every state and almost every Division I institution. The ideal participant group would include diversity in gender, race, tenure, sports advised, geography and position.

**Process**

Invitations to join a study exploring the lived experiences of student athlete advisors were sent via email to advisors from a wide selection of institutions via the N4A membership directory portal, which the researcher joined to become a member. In many cases images of the advisors were available in their profiles. As indications of interest in participating were received, the participant then received a consent form to be signed electronically via DocuSign (Consent form can be found in the Appendix). Consent forms were kept electronically in a private file with the researcher. In cases where participants wanted an idea of the types of questions that would be asked, a copy of the interview protocol was sent in advance of the interview (Interview protocol can be found in the appendix). After the original 25 participants agreed to join the study, a concerted effort was made to increase the diversity of the group in multiple areas. Ultimately 32 participants agreed to join the study (participant demographics outlined in Findings Chapter, Table 1).

**Interview question categories**

1. Participant background
   
i. Employment history
   
ii. Tenure

2. Relevant training in student athlete support or academic advising
   
i. Education
ii. Professional or association training (NCAA or N4A Association)

3. Structure of the department or athlete academic support system

4. Mentorship/mentee experience

5. Discussion of lived experience

6. Perceptions of evolution of position over time
   i. Causes of evolution
   ii. Rate of change in the evolution of the position

7. Knowledge of literature and research

8. Institutional practice – isolation vs integration
   i. Successes and failures.

9. Areas of collaboration with the university.

10. Checklist of Gaston’s *Five Recommendations for Effectively Engaging Student Athletes in the College Experience* to determine how many are used at the university for the integration and engagement of their student athletes.
   i. The five recommendations are as follows: assess the students’ academic and athletic motivation; encourage peer interaction; organize student affairs collaboration; encourage living on campus; and increase faculty interaction.

11. Perceptions of how the NCAA’s focus on student athlete academic performance has affected their role.

12. Where they see their role on the support spectrum between optimizing engagement and simply maintaining eligibility.

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Interviews

Interviews were conducted by phone using a semi-structured questioning approach. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were recorded using a small digital recorder, then transcribed online via MP3 file upload using Rev.com. All interviews were kept anonymous to protect participants, and saved with codes only known by the researcher. All interview audio files, consent forms and transcripts are kept confidentially and will be destroyed following the conclusion of the dissertation.

Data analysis

Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo software and identified by participant identification only known by the researcher. Themes were identified by reviewing each transcript for both similarity between interviews and unique comments and coding responses to capture both commonalities and differences across interviews. The original themes identified during this process are listed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Themes</th>
<th>Mental health - advisors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advising boundary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advisor background</td>
<td>Mentor model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campus collaboration</td>
<td>Misconceptions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>NCAA impact</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching relationship</td>
<td>Other issues not mentioned</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Plan A and B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Social media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evolution of roles</td>
<td>Sport specific issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future ideas</td>
<td>Spectrum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grad assistant role</td>
<td>Structure of department</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Success - definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideal advisor background</td>
<td>Tenure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job concerns</td>
<td>The role of advisor</td>
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<td>Literature familiarity</td>
<td>Titles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love of job</td>
<td>Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health - athletes</td>
<td>View of the industry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the 32 major themes identified above in the coding process, eight major themes emerged after analyzing the totality of the information. The eight themes represent the summarized and common thoughts, issues and opportunities identified by participants. Those themes are highlighted in the Findings chapter of the study.

**Data trustworthiness**

Following the interview process two qualified individuals who were identified as experts in the field were contacted and shared opinions on the evolution of the role, the efforts of the association, the role of the NCAA, and industry trends. Both have contributed to the field through research, industry training, and writing. Sandra Meyer is a past student athlete advisor at Pennsylvania State University and past president of the N4A, who wrote a history of the association. Dr. Lisa Rubin is a former advisor and current assistant professor of education at Kansas State University who wrote a summary of considerations for advising student athletes which can be found on the N4A website. Interviews with these two professionals corroborated many of the themes that emerged from the interviews for this study. Their deep knowledge of the evolution of academic advising, considering the athletic-academic spectrum and growing divergent pressures on the student athlete also enhanced the study. The lived experience of student athlete advisors hasn’t generated a large amount of research attention to date; however, based on the increased attention surrounding athletic revenue generation, athlete graduation rates, academic fraud, and recruiting violations, those who guide student athletes along the athletic spectrum become increasingly important.
Study limitations

There are several potential limitations to this study including the many differences in how the actual role of advising is carried out at each mid-sized NCAA institution based on different department structures, budgets, athletic department approaches, and staff composition. Further limitations are caused by differences in definition of student athlete support roles and the overlapping functions found at some institutions. This study focuses on advisors with at least two years of experience in their role; however, the span of tenure between two and 10 years within the study, provides a range of experience that could limit the findings.

Researcher bias is a potential limitation based on the researcher’s personal experience as an intercollegiate athlete. The researcher has connections with many former intercollegiate athletes. The researcher also has a son who was an intercollegiate athlete, but who chose to leave college sports as a sophomore because of time pressures, to pursue a career in investment banking.

Participant group

The support structures around revenue-generating and Olympic sports differs between institutions based on the institution’s primary sport and sports history, the resources allocated to each sport, the makeup of women’s and men’s sports and the philosophy of the coaches on staff. In addition, each sport can be advised differently with either single or multiple advisors per sport, or a team of sport-specific advisors. These differences between institutions can skew findings.
CHAPTER 4: STUDY FINDINGS

The purpose of this inquiry was to study the lived experience of athletic academic advisors to better understand the evolution of their role and related impact on student athlete engagement in higher education. The study was accomplished through confidential interviews conducted over a period of two months, with 32 athletic academic advisors representing mid-sized institutions in 18 different states across the country. The institutions were divided equally between the Eastern United States and the West, with all institutions offering athletic scholarships for both men’s and women’s teams. Participant demographics are provided in Table 2.
Table 2. Study Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Former Athlete</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
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<tr>
<td>8/17/17</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1 Sport</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8/17/17</td>
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<td>Multiple</td>
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<tr>
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<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
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<td>10/8/17</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<td>Multiple</td>
<td>2 yrs.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>72% Advisors</th>
<th>75% Former Athlete</th>
<th>75% White</th>
<th>63% Female</th>
<th>72% Multiple</th>
<th>4 yrs. avg.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>25% Non</td>
<td>25% Black</td>
<td>37% Male</td>
<td>28% Single</td>
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</table>

Tenure for the participant group spanned a minimum of two years to a maximum of 10 years advising student athletes, with an average tenure of four years of experience.

Nine of the participants served as managers over the advising function at their institutions, while 20 were pure advisors, and another three were senior advisors. The
group was comprised of 12 men and 20 women, of which eight were African-American, and 24 were White. Seventy two percent of the group advised athletes in multiple sports, with 28% advising a single sport. Of the entire group, approximately 75% were former NCAA athletes (see Table 2).

From 32 verbatim transcripts, noteworthy statements were extracted. Table 3 includes examples of such statements with their formulated meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noteworthy Statement</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“One of the things that everybody seems to be struggling with is athlete mental health and where is the line in advising when you are like, this is probably too much outside of my expertise.”</td>
<td>Advisors are challenged by student athlete mental health issues and must decide, without formal training, when to advise or refer them to a professional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It's definitely evolving. These departments are now everywhere at many schools. Life skills is now big because the NCAA just mandated it, but over the past couple years it's really blown up into full-on student athlete development, enhancement, engagement, whatever you want to call it.”</td>
<td>The increase in roles, titles, and number of advising positions reflects the evolution of student athlete support in higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There's definitely not a lot of training. I think everything that I learned was from my grad assistantship. Then I was just thrown into the fire there. We were all learning from each other and trying to figure things out as we went along.”</td>
<td>There is a lack of professional and standardized training or certification for these positions, considering the myriad of issues student athletes face in higher education.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Contextual terminology are listed below in Table 4 with their associated meaning.

**Table 4. Contextual Terminology and Meaning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terminology</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revenue Sports</td>
<td>College level sports that generate revenues from game-day ticket sales. Football, basketball, and baseball are the top three revenue generating sports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olympic Sports</td>
<td>College-level sports that represent Olympic sports and events that do not generate significant revenues. Track and field, swimming, wrestling, and tennis are examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCAA</td>
<td>National Collegiate Athletic Association: the governing board for intercollegiate athletics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APR</td>
<td>Academic Progress Rate: a measure of team academic performance calculated by the NCAA that dictates minimum levels required to avoid penalties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSR</td>
<td>Graduate Success Rate: a measure of graduation rate calculated by the NCAA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N4A</td>
<td>National Association for Academic Advisors of Athletics. The association recently rebranded to, N4A: The National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals to reflect the evolution of the practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division 1</td>
<td>The NCAA’s top division defined by size, sports, scholarships, and revenues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-sized</td>
<td>10,000 to 15,000 student institutions fielding both men’s and women’s sports.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**General Findings**

Participants in the study generally described athletic academic advising as a broader role than the title suggests. Various descriptions of the role also portrayed mentorship, advocacy, life planning, and counseling support; however, advisors claim that their job descriptions rarely reflect these broader components of their lived experiences. One participant stated, “The role is an odd balance between mentor, academic advisor, and eligibility specialist.” Participants perceived their roles differing from advisors of non-athlete students based on the unique circumstances related to high pressure team sports participation, in addition to the academic requirements necessary for
athletes to remain in school and eligible to compete. Participants described a natural formation of close, trust-based relationships between advisor and student athlete, positioning both precariously between an institution’s athletic and academic pursuits. Many of the participants also explained their roles in helping decipher messages from coaches, faculty, and others to keep student athletes motivated, both athletically and academically.

You pretty much hit the nail on the head as far as what it tells you in your job description, as far as overseeing academics and helping student athletes be successful in the classroom. That just seems like such a minimal part of what you do because you wear so many hats serving as a mentor, preparing them for life after sports. What are they going to do? What are some careers that they're interested in? They come and they talk to you about anything. I've been there when a student athlete gets kicked out of practice, and I'm the first person that they come and talk to. And they're angry and expressing how they feel and going through high emotions. When family issues come up, I think that they come to their academic advisors a lot. I've known some student athletes losing family members due to cancer. They really rely on you to be there for them. It becomes a part of the job, it's not just built around academics, but, also developing that positive relationship with them. They know that you're going to oversee their academics and help them be successful, but, at the same time, you're there to serve as a mentor, a counselor, for guidance. Or, just somebody that they can talk to at any time. I continue to talk with a lot of academic advisors, and directors around the country and I think this is becoming a huge part of it, because they do rely on you to be, their friend at the same time. (Participant interview, 2017)

All participants acknowledged varied approaches to advising between advisors within their own departments, between certain sports, seasonal differences in approach, and differences between institutions.

Despite these differences in approach, most participants stated that success in advising was relative to the starting point of a student athlete, because they arrive with such diverse backgrounds, abilities, and motivations. Advisors admit that many student athletes are admitted based on their athletic capabilities and may be marginally qualified.
academically. Participants assert that this reality can make their role more difficult because marginal academic admits will continue to struggle academically based on the time commitment and distractions of the sport. Several participants also perceived that lagging educational outcomes in K-12 and junior colleges affects their ability to be successful in advising underprepared student athletes. Despite some of the frustrations related to student athlete capabilities, advisors build relationships of trust and support, causing many advisors to refer to the student athletes as being like their younger siblings or like their own kids.

Advisors admit they struggle with the bad news and scrutiny that plagues college athletics around the country and within many of their own institutions. They often hear negative statements from their academic community. One participated shared an anecdote that when they were introduced at a function, a faculty member said, “Oh, you’re the people who get and keep unqualified student athletes in school!” Many mentioned the existence of new shows like Netflix’s Last Chance U, as helping improve perceptions about their jobs, but just as many felt they were still far away from being considered professionals. There was also a perception that they are not respected, and thus not involved in the recruiting, orientation, or onboarding process for new student athletes, but as one participant reflected, “We’re responsible for picking up the pieces if a student athlete’s transition was unsuccessful.”

In addition to these general findings, eight distinct findings, including several subthemes, emerged from the interviews and are described in the findings sections that follow.
**Finding 1: A Deep Passion for the Role**

Participants perceive their role as being critical to the success of student athletes, yet misunderstood by the higher education community. A distinct element of this finding was the eager willingness of participants to contribute to the study. One participant said, 

Oh, my gosh, I probably wouldn't be doing this interview if I hated my job. I hear about burnout; and I don’t see myself ever not loving this. It’s too rewarding and you get so much out of it. And from what the students get out of it, it’s just amazing.

All who participated did so enthusiastically and many referred others who they felt would also want to participate. All of those who participated shared their passion for the role they play in the lives of student athletes: many added that they do not do the job for the pay, but for the satisfaction of helping student athletes navigate the pressures of their circumstances. There were many comments relating to their appreciation for this study. One stated, “There isn’t a lot written about the experiences of athletic academic advising for athletes.” That participant went on to state that, “the news is primarily about the negatives around student athletes and the misconceptions continue.” Participants asked if these findings would be presented with best practices, and if there would be opportunities to be involved with future studies, opportunities for training, or speaking events. Several participants reflected on the need for more positive exposure of the role they play.

**Perceptions of being misunderstood**

The most seasoned advisor interviewed stated that “no one knows, or perceives the depth and complexity of these roles, even after a 30 or so year history for the
A basic lack of understanding and misconceptions of their role serving student athletes was a consistent comment among the participants. One advisor stated, 

There’s a 100%, 150% agreement, that there is a misconception of what we do. And it's so funny. When you advise, or when you just tell a student you're an advisor, or tell a faculty member, they say, ‘Oh, so you tutor?’ Or, ‘That's great, you're a tutor.’ No! I'm absolutely not. I'm, anything but. But you don't want to seem like the biggest jerk ever and you don't want to spend ten minutes telling them about your position, right?

Participants stated that sometimes misconceptions are so blatant, that most find humor in the types of comments they receive. Because of the misconceptions, participants reiterated the need for more positive exposure.

Another advisor commented, 

A lot of the research that’s been done is of a broader theoretical perspective. Like student engagement or student success, and they wrap advising into it. I’m hoping that the research and study of what we do increases. I think this is an extremely critical role that’s been hidden away. People don’t really understand what the role is. Hopefully there will be a lot of positive exposure over time.

**Perceptions of success in the role**

Most participants related success in the advising role to broadly maintaining a relationship of trust in order to support and motivate student athletes through athletic and academic pursuits. Participants who managed advisors attributed success in their roles similarly, but also mentioned actual GPA, APR, and GSR goal accomplishments as contributing to their success as well. Other elements of success related to faculty interaction, student involvement in the broader university, and long-term career successes, despite not having the data to validate longer term success. Many of the advisors focused on their moment in time with the student athlete and the ability to help the athlete on personal, athletic, social, and academic goals. Participants felt failure
universally when students either withdrew from the institution for academic, behavioral, or coping reasons, or were unable to continue competing in their sport because of academic issues or the inability to manage more than one pursuit.

Some advisors equated success to the extent to which they could build advocacy relationships on behalf of their students around the university and in the community to pave a way for student athlete academic and career success. Advisors consistently mentioned coaches and faculty as the key influencers of student athlete success and therefore tied to their own successes similarly. Specifically mentioned, was the ability to advocate with coaches when athletes faced academic, behavioral, or coping issues. Similarly, advocating with faculty for the same reasons. From the perspective of participants, success in this regard related to aiding the students in achieving along the entire spectrum between athletic and academic pursuits.

**Finding 2: A Trust-Based Relationship Between Advisor and Student**

Each of the participants described the relationship of trust that is built when advising student athletes and the continual blurring of the lines between job description and actual daily duties. There was a described emotional connection between student athlete and advisor, which was explained by one participant as, “eclipsing academics and entering social, personal, and motivational support.” Advisors described serving as liaisons to student affairs, faculty groups, athletics, and community organizations on behalf of the student athletes in their care. Many asserted that the relationship of trust motivates them to advocate emotionally and powerfully on behalf of the student. The participant with the most experience inferred that this trend of close bonding between
advisor and student athlete is occurring because many of the new advisors are younger and former athletes, “causing an immediate bond.”

**The actual role vs. the job description**

There was unanimous agreement from participants that the position as described in job descriptions and presented in the job interview process is markedly different than their lived experience as a student athlete advisor. When this question was posed in the interviews, responses such as “absolutely,” “definitely,” and “1,000% true” were used to confirm the finding. An advisor stated that, “the job description in retrospect doesn’t consider even half of the role they play in the lives of student athletes.”

In addition to the 20- to 40-hour time commitment dedicated to sports and its related impact on academics, advisors described mentoring and advising students on a range of issues including homesickness, teammate issues, dating and relationship issues, legal matters, social media and online trolling, death of a family member, faculty and coach liaison, and suicidal ideation, all of which are not tasks typically described in a written job description. Advisors also commented that they have advised regarding issues like sexual identity; and helped avert a student athlete’s suicidal thoughts. One advisor stated, “Personally, to be honest with you, I didn't pay much attention to my job description, I just love advising and assisting with anything my students need to be successful in college.”

**A new conceptual framework**

The original conceptual framework for this study, illustrated in Figure 1 and titled, *The Athletic Academic Paradox in Higher Education*, placed the student athlete
directly between two divergent pressures, one pulling them toward athletic pursuits and the other pulling them toward academic and career pursuits.

*Figure 1. Athletic Academic Paradox in Higher Education*

The realities described by participants of how the academic advising role is actually performed is illustrated in Figure 2 and titled, *The Mentor Model of Student Athlete Advising*. This portrays student athlete and advisor together managing three pressures versus the original two.
The mentor relationship as described by participants is characterized by a feeling of oneness with the student athlete, driven by a similar background and alignment with the student athletes’ plight.

**Advisors pulled between the forces of athletic and academic pressures**

Due to this mentor relationship, participants stated that they also feel the pressure between athletic and academic responsibilities as the student athletes do. Many report that they must support eligibility on one end of the spectrum, help the student adjust, do well athletically as well as academically, and help them prepare for a career through high-impact engagement activities. Most of the participants had difficulty assessing where they were on the spectrum between advising for eligibility and engagement, but the majority described being in the middle and pulled in either direction at different times of the year by an individual coach or sport.
Finding 3: Descriptions of the Evolution of the Role

Over the course of five years, we've been able to increase our staff considerably, which then lowers our case load. So now we have an average of 60 student athletes per advisor. And now these advisors are really able to hone in and fill the relationships. Though, again, at the heart of it, I think it has to do with resources. I don't think the nature of the job changes. I think just our ability to focus on one student for longer is what changes. (Participant interview, 2017)

Increased numbers and decreasing age

Participants who are younger in tenure and those with athletic backgrounds, which amounts to nearly 80% of the study group, embrace the concept of a new advising environment that requires mentoring and all-inclusive support instead of purely academic focused advising. Most participants stated that perpetual social media attention and a 24 hour news cycle requires a new approach to advising. The newer advisors come ready for these contemporary challenges because they now come out of graduate assistantships, are former athletes, and understand the impact of social media and technology. However, even with this contemporary advising, there is a described lack of training, which is compounded by the higher numbers of advisors now employed by mid-sized Division I institutions. These trends capture some of the evolution occurring in student athlete advising.

Former advisors interviewed for context, and participants with longer tenure stated that ten to 15 years ago there was more structure and professionalism in the field, fewer advisors per campus, and the training went deeper based on student developmental theory. Backgrounds of former advisors were less athletic and more closely related to counseling. A conflicting finding relates to younger advisors who feel the role is more professionalized, while longer tenured advisors feel the role is less professional.
Several of the long tenured participants mentioned that five to ten years ago, advising staff could have comprised of one or two tutors with one or two advisors for a total student athlete group of approximately 400 athletes. Today, some mid-sized athlete advising offices have a ratio of one advisor to 20-30 students or five to ten advisors per team.

**Expansion of the industry association**

Indicative of the evolution, the association for student athlete advisors has grown and recently changed its name to include advisors, life skills, and development, which was referenced by a number of the participants. The N4A celebrated its 30-year history a few years ago by producing a document to highlight its accomplishments. The history reflects a membership of about 700 advisors in 2005, which today totals more than 4,000. The industry association is almost the sole source for training and once certified advisors. Today, the association hosts national conferences, produces articles, and provides a repository for information on advising. It should be noted that participants for this study were recruited via the association’s membership roster. A past president of the association mentioned that the large numbers of current advisors attending the national conferences makes it difficult to offer training and certifications.

Typically, training is achieved from a peer to peer basis facilitated through the organization. Long tenured participants felt that the large influx of younger advisors is affecting the quality of advising because they are not as well trained. This perception is validated in the comments of one advisor who stated, “There definitely was not in-depth training in my case. I think everything that I learned was from my time as a GA. Then I
was just thrown into the fire there. The guy who hired me left for another job. It was a small staff and the assistant was new too. She became the director. We were all in our early twenties. We were all learning from each other and trying to figure things out as we went along. Yeah, my training for this was my grad assistantship.”

**Expanding functions, titles, and structures**

The second area of evolution commonly mentioned involved the expansion of functions and titles under the umbrella of student athlete support. Titles such as advisor, counselor, athlete development, engagement, success, enhancement, and mentor described many of the new positions that are now in operation at many of these mid-sized institutions. Sport-specific advising continues to evolve, as reflected by one participant who was an advisor for the offensive linemen of the football team, and another who worked only with the defensive backs and receivers. Sport-specific advising was prevalent at institutions where revenue sports had advisors assigned specifically to them.

**The graduate assistant role**

Another evidence of evolution relates to the graduate assistant role that was prevalent in almost all of the institutions that participated. Graduate assistants are lower paid interns attending master’s degree programs in athletic development areas. Many are former athletes, who are keenly interested in pursuing a career path in student athlete support services. They represent an expansion of the reach of student advising offices.

The graduate assistant role also facilitates a base level of training for the industry that did not exist a number of years ago. Although this training is a part of the graduate assistant program, they are being trained on the job, versus a professional training
program or environment, perpetuating a lack of formal training and certification. In addition, a manager mentioned that in order to find permanent positions within this field, many graduate assistants will have to move to new institutions that are seeking new advisors.

**Increased technical and physical resources**

In addition to increased staff, facilities are also expanding and becoming highly technical in order to support student athletes in their academic goals. A few participants reported that their teams travel on buses with Wi-Fi access and offer laptops that can be loaned to other student athletes who travel in addition to librarians and reference materials available within the expanded athletic facilities.

A participant stated,

> So, when I was a student athlete, I graduated in 2010; and, we didn't have anyone doing this type of advising. We had our coaches staying on us, but these services and facilities didn’t exist at our institution and weren't available to us.

Another commented that the resources are “definitely growing. It's definitely evolving. Our department is everywhere at many schools. Life skills is now big because the NCAA just mandated it, but over the past couple years it's really blown up into full-on student athlete development, enhancement, engagement, whatever you want to call it.”

**Finding 4: The Growing Risks of Dealing with Student Athlete Mental Health**

Another unanimous and noteworthy finding relates to the prevalence of mental health issues that can plague student athletes. It was described as the breaking point between personal issues; the competitive requirements and mental toughness necessary to excel in sports; and the study time and effort required for academic rigor. This balance is
described by one participant as, “a tenuous balance that must be maintained, but which is swayed by coaches on one side, faculty on the other and personal life issues on yet another.” Mental issues described by participants include depression based on poor athletic or athletic performance and injuries, competition anxiety, and adjustment disorders related to moving away from home. In addition, participants mentioned that student athletes struggled at times with social media issues that were either personal to them, friends and family, or broader social issues. Two participants mentioned their involvement with athletes who suffered mental anguish over tragedy within their families.

The revised conceptual framework for this study in Figure 3 depicts the described influence of personal pressures and the potential strain on mental health that can come from an inability to cope with multiple pressures while away from home, in addition to the compounding effects of sports-related commitments.

*Figure 3. Mentor Model of Student Athlete Advising*
The lack of mental health training

Noteworthy in the discussions regarding mental health was the reality that none of the advisors were skilled in dealing with these issues, nor trained in mental health counseling. An advisor confided, “one of the things that everybody seems to be struggling with is mental health and where is the line in advising when you are like, this is probably too much outside of my expertise.” Many understood their limitations and knew when to refer an athlete to counseling services, while others felt inclined to maintain relationships of trust and work with the student through the issue until a time that required more professional intervention. At the time of this study, many institutions were in the process of adding counseling services to their athletic departments as mental health issues continued to emerge within this population of students. An advisor mentioned, “We definitely make referrals to the counseling center. I know that we're working on putting in place more access and more ways to track students’ mental health and identify those who may be at-risk and get them in preventatively.” There was a definite awareness of the prevalence of these issues across all interviews; however, the approach to dealing with them varied widely.

Increased dialogue around the issue

Advisors commented that the dialogue around this issue has increased because many are seeing an uptick in mental health issues, or at least a higher level of awareness of such issues, and the related impact on both athletic and academic performance.
One of the managers stated, “We definitely need to be on the lookout for mental health issues, and things like that. Understanding all of those pieces and how they fit into a student athlete's success athletically and academically is very important.”

Many of the advisors described a stigma attached to discussing mental wellness, but agree that if the student athlete can open up about it, there’s a chance to help. An advisor commented,

The whole stigma about mental health makes a lot of the kids afraid to talk to a coach or faculty; and so, they talk to us in confidence. We refer them confidentially; and, once they've gone to the professionals, every one of the ones I've ever referred, all come back to me and said, ‘Thank you so much for sending me.’

This noble approach on the part of advisors has its pitfalls if the issue is not handled correctly, referred at the right time, or kept away from coaches and has an impact on athletic performance. The advisors know they are on shaky ground when it comes to mental health issues, but many continue to work as confidant. Some advisors mentioned that if there are issues like depression and the student athlete goes to a coach first, they are usually referred directly to the sports psychologist. Regarding this approach, an advisor stated,

So, if I needed to be, I would be the middle man, but typically it goes from coach right to the sports psychologist if there's some kind of issue there that needs to be handled, it's, ‘You need to go talk to Mary, immediately.’ That’s it.

**Mental health and wellness vs. sports psychology**

Sports psychologists are employed by athletic departments and teams to assist student athletes in achieving maximum athletic performance by employing techniques that help the student athlete relax, focus and reduce outside distractions. A number of
participants mentioned coaches sending student athletes with personal or mental health issues directly to the sports psychologist. The advisors, on the other hand, refer the student athlete to campus counseling services. Many reflected on this being an area of risk for student athletes and the institutions. Several advisors mentioned that counseling services were now beginning to move within the athletic departments of these mid-sized institutions, so athletes can take advantage of mental health services without having to be conspicuous on campus. Only a few participants elaborated on the inherent risks of misdiagnosing mental health issues, while most generally discussed the responsibility they felt to know when to refer a student athlete to a counselor. Some stated that they immediately refer when certain issues arise in their conversations. Others mentioned keeping the student athletes in their care under the relationship of trust until they could no longer be helpful. This was clearly noted as an area of growing concern and awareness for all of the participants; however, differing levels of concern and preparation were noted in the interviews.

**Finding 5: Perceptions of a Lack of Training and Certification**

**Typical training for advisors**

When asked about formalized, professional training for their role in advising, many of the advisors looked retrospectively at their actual role in holistically mentoring student athletes and the growing mental health issues, and stated unanimously that formalized and professionally packaged training programs do not exist. The concept of training was highlighted in every interview; however, there was no consensus on what is considered adequate training or how it is or should be conducted. Many felt like they
were trained, but by being thrown into the job, or gaining experience as a graduate assistant. All were trained in the technical elements of course loads, required courses, majors, add/drop processes, APR, and the eligibility aspects of the job. There was very little formal training in life advising, engagement, developmental theory, or mental health, yet advisors are conducting this type of broad advising every day. This said, the level of awareness of the importance of training was well asserted, especially by managers. One of the findings on training relates back to the mental health issue, and although very well aware of the importance of the issue for athletes, when pressed on the basic training of how to know when and whom to hand off a mental health issue, there was definite lack of training, preparation, or comfort.

Eighty percent of those interviewed were former student athletes who understand the time commitments, pressures, and motivations of college athletics, and advise from that foundational knowledge and experience base. Several advisors commented that they feel there is a problem and potential liability in not being trained in the variety of issues that fall outside pure academic needs of the student athlete. Another mentioned the fact that there is an informal communication network among advisors at various institutions that serves as an experiential training organization. In addition, the N4A has emerged as the professional association for this field and provides training sessions at its national conference, and offers additional resources available through the member website. This training resource is limited to high-level training that meets only the basic needs for student athlete advising. Consistently, participants expressed that there are distinct
differences between institutions, sports teams, attitudes, and institutional support,
requiring very specific types of training at each institution.

**Thrown into the fire**

An advisor mentioned, “I think you can't emphasize enough the importance of the
skillset, of really developing your skills, because I know as a GA, you're thrown into it,
so maybe you didn't necessarily have the training. But, you also have a huge
responsibility.” Another asserted,

I think it's great that you're doing this study. I think you are absolutely right; there
is a lot of broad literature that kind of relates, but if you're looking specifically at
intercollegiate athlete advising, and if you're an incoming advisor, there's not a lot
of training material out there.

One institution addresses the training issue locally and is developing graduate
assistants to prepare for their long-term staffing needs. The manager stated,

One thing that we like to do, working with our GAs is, we take one semester to
train them. We have them sit in on our meetings. Sit in on working one-on-one
with student athletes. They attend coaching meetings, as well. So, by that second
semester, what we're able to do, is give them a small group of the more motivated
student athletes that they can work with and train.

Despite the local attempts at training, there is no up-to-date national standard or
validated training process requiring mastery or certification. Institutions are using their
own best practices and those shared in presentations at N4A conferences.

**Finding 6: Advising for Engagement Amidst Pressures for Athletic Isolation**

As a point of background, it is important to note that institutions continue to build
structures and services that isolate student athletes. As an example, a southern, land grant
Division I, highly athletically competitive institution recently built a football complex
that is truly impressive. A billion-dollar facility built away from campus, separated by
water and a large parking lot, and requiring biometric scanning to enter, symbolizing the isolation of college athletes from the broader university. Even though there is nutritious food, study centers, relaxation areas, and technology for accessing academic resources, these facilities miss the benefits of engagement activities like faculty interaction, non-athlete peer collaboration, community service opportunities, and other campus-wide events.

**Athletic isolation continues and is antithetical to student athlete engagement**

Several participants reflected on their mid-sized institutions also building athletic facilities separated and isolated from the campus. A long tenured advisor stated, “advising student athletes is one of the toughest roles in education because of the constant pull between athletic interests and incentives and what seems like a secondary academic mission.” The question posed to study participants relating to their advising approach on the spectrum between engagement and eligibility elicited much dialogue. Although student engagement theorists have lent their thoughts to student athlete academic success, the literature specifically related to athlete advising and engagement in higher education is sparse. Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles’ work is the most specific theoretical and practical guide to this field. A long-tenured advisor and manager shared that, in their opinion,

Athletic isolation is driven by efforts to protect revenues generated by athletic team participation. Isolation is also encouraged in order to keep control and protect student athletes from potential issues on the campus or in the community. These motivations isolate student athletes and hinder their academic and career potential. (Gurney et al., 2017)
Advisors understand the benefits of student athlete engagement

Despite the institutional pull of sports and related revenue and allegiance benefits, advisors were well aware of the benefits of involving student athletes in the broader university. Many of the managers were aware of engagement and involvement theories; however, not always directly from research literature. The inclusion of life skills, career preparation, and student athlete development positions reflects a commitment to preparing student athletes for non-athletic career success. As such, managers understood the importance of activities that get the athletes out of the athletic facilities in preparation for life outside of sports. Many of the conversations reflected a general awareness that involving student athletes in the broader university was good academically and helped the athletes adjust socially. A manager stated,

Sometimes life happens and you run into eligibility issues. But I really, really do believe and I've experienced that when you have the inverse relationship of focus on student engagement and student success, the eligibility issues do decrease. But, it takes a lot of work to do that.

Others have read articles about student advising in general, and some were trained in a non-athletic advising environment and learned about developmental theory, engagement, and involvement. Many understood the downfalls of athletic isolation as opposed to the benefits of high-impact engagement; however, they came to similar conclusions. As mentioned earlier, when asked where they were on the spectrum between engagement and eligibility advising, many stated they were somewhere in the middle, with opportunities to move more toward engagement, while experiencing the constant pull toward eligibility-only advising. Many were advising for engagement on their own accord, again despite the job description. One participant stated,
Different schools have different pressures. But to me you're going to have to be selective about where you choose to work because I wouldn't do well in a place that was asking me to put eligibility before a student’s overall wellbeing and academic and life success.

There were some advisors whose departments bought into the benefits of engagement and provided structured programming opportunities for student athletes to engage in campus-wide events, live with non-athletes, participate in peer study groups, interact with faculty proactively, and work in the communities surrounding the institutions or overseas.

**Differences in advising Revenue vs Olympic sports**

The 35% who advised for a specific sport were typically assigned to a sport which generates revenue for the institution, which includes football, basketball, and baseball.

One advisor stated,

I try to help my athletes figure out what their non-athletic passion is, while they are still in college, but revenue sport athletes think they are here just temporarily, until they get to the league. We know how unrealistic that is, but I'm definitely not a dream killer, so I try to motivate them in all areas.

A conflict was described between athletic interest and academic engagement in two distinct ways. First, athletic department and coaching interests pull the student athlete toward athlete-only activities to manage their behaviors and time, and also focus primarily on eligibility and APR scores. Some participants reported that coaches are conflicted because they want the best for student athletes but some are earning seven figure salaries and must win at all cost to maintain their jobs. This pressure is in direct conflict with attempts to help student athletes engage in the broader universities activities and develop non-athletic career skills. This pressure was described as related primarily to
revenue generating sports. Despite attempts to involve these students, advisors report some coaching and elite athlete attitudes that reflect a low value in engaging with the broader university when there is motivation and perceived opportunity to compete at a professional level.

In general, participants felt that revenue sports exhibited the greatest pull toward athletics isolation, the least student athlete engagement, the most coaching intervention and lower academic readiness and performance. Also contributing to these general findings is a specific perception among participants that negative faculty attitudes and related stereotypes are greatest toward revenue athletes. Participants also reported that most scandals on campuses involve revenue athletics. It was reported that many revenue student athletes comment that they want to go to the professional level and would consider leaving college early to do so.

Olympic sports had a more realistic vision of the future, less coaching oversight and more of a tendency to engage in the broader university. Despite this difference there remained other athlete specific pressures on Olympic sports like team time commitment, playing time, injury, pull between athletics and academics, in addition to the strains of fewer scholarships, less resources, and more strenuous and lower budget travel to competitions.

Attempts at engagement.

Sometimes life happens and you run into eligibility issues. But I really, really do believe and I've experienced that when you have the inverse relationship of focus on student engagement and student success, the eligibility issues do decrease. It takes a lot of work to do that. You're running programs, and you're doing workshops, and you're building relationships, and you're going out to practices, and you're going to games,
talking to faculty, and building all of those pieces of the puzzle together that are going to help your students feel supported and feel like they can be successful. (Participant interview, 2017)

Advisors described examples of high-impact engagement activities at their institutions, including community work, faculty interaction, living with non-athletes, mandatory campus integration activities, peer groups of non-athletes, and encouragement to participate in campus activities and associations. One participant mentioned that their institution makes it mandatory for each student athlete to plan five engagement activities in which they will participate during the school year. Because of competition season conflicts, many of the athletes complete the requirement in their off season. Another described a very integrated approach to engagement at their institution, where student athletes do not live with other athletes, athletic academic advisors report to student affairs, they study in all-student learning and tutoring centers, and they participate in mandatory community service events with non-athletic student organizations. Many others had varying degrees of the same opportunities for their student athletes. One stated, “I really do like working with the student athletes in student engagement. I always kind of kid and say an ideal role for me would be associate athletic director for student athlete development.” There was a distinct sense of personal commitment to student engagement on the part of advisors and their managers, despite the institutional tendency to separate athletes.

Finding 7: The Ideal Advisor Profile

The evolutionary aspects of supporting student athletes, including the establishment of life skills coordinators, counselors, and student development advisors,
has produced a matrix organization that reflects several overlapping efforts between these functions. One experienced advisor felt that institutions have gone too far in staffing these offices, with so many different titles, forcing an inevitable assessment of which functions perform which roles best.

**View of the ideal is based on positionality**

Many of the former athletes stated that it was absolutely critical to be a former athlete to understand student athlete support; however, that it was also possible to be effective through lots of experience on the job, if you were not a former athlete. Contrary to this view, the non-athletes felt it was not necessary to be a former athlete to be successful, although they admitted the majority of their peers were former athletes. Most participants felt that despite background, some counseling and higher education advising experience would be ideal, or at least receive some sort of training in counseling over time on the job. One advisor mentioned,

I'm really looking for somebody that has emotional intelligence - I am not opposed to going with people that weren't student athletes, because like I said, my boss at a former institution was one of the best in the business, and she wasn't a student athlete.

**Commonly mentioned skillset for the ideal advisor**

Despite the opposing values of those with and without athletic backgrounds, there were also common traits that were described as being ideal from the perspective of current advisors. Somebody with the ability to connect with and motivate people in the age range of 18 to 25 was described as being important. In addition, someone that can take feedback and implement changes to their approach when necessary would be deemed ideal. Someone who is passionate and can convey deep caring are also important
traits to characterize the ideal profile. One advisor stated, “You really have to want to make a dent or make an impact in someone’s life.” Another thought that patience is critical because they’re working with a lot of different people, including students, parents, athletics staff, faculty, and the community.

A participant mentioned, 

Hindsight is 20/20, and if I were to go back to undergrad, and wanted to do something successfully in this field, I would either do psychology or a counseling degree. And I would go on to get a psychology master’s. I don't regret my sports leadership master’s, it taught what college athletics is all about; however, I would want to know everything from mental health counseling or advising, best practices, tools, and techniques that are used. I had to learn it all from scratch. I had no idea.

One manager stated, “The more diverse a department can be, with multiple advisor profiles, the stronger it is because they can rely on each other and their diverse backgrounds particularly when there is an issue.”

Another reflected on the benefits of having higher education experience because it is a unique environment to guide a student through. Student centeredness was a common trait shared by participants. A manager mentioned, “I want people who are all about the students on my team. You could be from whatever walk of life, but I would need you to be student centered.” A number of the managers mentioned that it is beneficial for an advisor to have experienced what the students they advise are experiencing, whether it is balancing athletics and academics, or having struggled in a certain area, or personally engaging in campus and community involvement activities, and experiencing the related benefits.
Race and gender dynamics

Dr. Lisa Rubin (2015), Assistant Professor of Education at Kansas State University wrote a summary of considerations for advising student athletes which can be found on the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) website. Dr. Rubin mentions race and gender as major factors in student-athlete identity and performance. While female student athletes receive less overall attention, they are more team oriented, receive team support and perform better academically. Many of the negative stereotypes surrounding race, relate to football and men’s basketball, the revenue sports which are dominated by Black male students, at predominantly white institutions. There wasn’t a specific interview protocol question based on the racial or gender identity of students or advisors; however, race was not even commented on by participants in the study relating to either social adjustment challenges, or stereotypes they might face in advising student athletes.

Finding 8: Pressure on Advisors from the NCAA’s Policies

The NCAA continues to find itself dealing with public intercollegiate athletic controversies, involving grades, money, or criminal behavior within institutions. As a revenue-generating association it also benefits from athletic success and struggles between regulating and promoting intercollegiate athletics.

Academic Progress Rate: Publicly reported statistics

The publicly reported APR and GSR statistics have forced institutions to manage their team academic outcomes, which is a positive. The opposite view is that this program still puts focus on maintaining basic eligibility versus engagement, and because it is team
based reporting, many institutions have added rewards for coaches achieving these
particular measures. Some participants mentioned, reluctantly, that the coaching incentive
for APR is a misaligned incentive, and felt that either a portion should go to the advisors,
or it should be eliminated because it only forces coaches to add additional pressures to
their roles to focus primarily on eligibility. One shorter tenured participant lamented,

I don't necessarily think that the APR and GSR measures are positive for the
advisors. The things I hear about them are mostly about coaches getting a large
bonus. The coaches benefit from those statistics. We're doing all the work on the
back end, and then they benefit.

A long-tenured advisor and manager mentioned that because of the potential
penalties associated with failing on APR scores, it would definitely be important for all
academic advisors to understand the APR methodology. This advisor stated,

Despite all of the other things we do for students and the university, we can’t
forget it is the most important aspect in our job. A lot of people will say, even if
you have a great team GPA, APR goes a lot further than that. I think the NCAA
has put so much pressure on that advisors know what they have to do, year in and
year out, to protect the APR for coaches and for their student athletes, as well.

Another participant commented,

If they're an APR factor, in other words, if they're a scholarship player, then the
coaches are concerned that they stay in school, so they don't lose a point. I also
have a lot of kids that are walk-ons, so there's no financial value or interest for the
coaches. So, once they are off roster, whether they got cut or they are medically
retired, or didn't get along with the coach, I still maintain a relationship with them,
as long as they remain at this university. I want them to know that they can count
on me.

This comment reflects not only the pressures that NCAA APR regulations puts on
advisors now, but also the internal, personal pressure to also advise for the benefit of the
students in their care. An advisor explained,
In the last couple of years the NCAA has really started to make some financial incentives available to universities based on APR and based on graduation success rates. So, with that, I think schools are seeing if they haven't already, they need to get on board and bring on an academic support staff, or bring on student athlete development, or career development staff, specifically toward their athletic department.

**Summary of Findings**

Dr. Carol Gruber, the Director of Academic Counseling and Student Services for Intercollegiate Athletics, and a member of the graduate faculty in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Minnesota, wrote of intercollegiate sports as a cultural phenomenon. She quoted John Parham (1993) in her work, who stated,

> Collegiate student athletes move through the same various stages of development as other students in their age group. However, unlike the general college student, student athletes must also deal with issues that pertain to balancing academics and athletics, social isolation, athletic success and failure, the expectations of coaches, parents, and the community, and injury or loss of athletic careers. Because of these additional stressors, the student athlete sometimes has difficulty focusing clearly or moving quickly toward academic and career goals. The academic advisor plays a key role in assisting these students as they formulate ideas, goals, and specific strategies for reaching goals.

The eight findings of this study can be summarized as follows: (1) All advisors interviewed expressed a deep passion for their role; although, they often felt their role was misunderstood and found success in maintaining relationships of trust with student athletes. (2) The relationships between advisors and students is rooted in trust; this relationship means the job often includes broad counseling outside the typical job description; the support required for student athletes includes providing support personally as well as academically and athletically; advisors, like athletes, feel both athletic and academic pressure to succeed. (3) The role of student athlete advisors has evolved over the years; there has been an increase in hiring on staff at mid-sized Division
I colleges and universities; however, these advisors are often much younger; this change can be seen by observing the membership of N4A; over time, the function, job titles, and structure of this role has expanded; part of the increase in staff has been fueled by the influx of graduate assistants on athletic staff; there has also been an increase in the amount of technical and physical resources to student athletes. (4) There is a growing focus on mental wellness; many advisors cited a lack of mental health training as a weakness; there is increasing dialogue about mental wellness; mental health and wellness counseling is different from sport psychology. (5) Participants in this study believe there is a lack of adequate training and certification in the field; typical training consists of working with student athletes right away and learning by experience. (6) Advising for engagement amidst pressures for athletic isolation; athletic isolation continues at campuses across the United States yet it’s antithetical to student athlete engagement; advisors understand the benefits of high-impact engagement; differences in revenue and Olympic sports result in different advising models. (7) The ideal advisor profile; the ideal differs depending on the position of the participant; however, common traits mentioned included passion, compassion, patience, and experience. (8) Pressure on advisors due to NCAA policies; publicly reported statistics such as the academic progress rates put additional pressure on advisors to support student athletes. However, coaches, not advisors, often benefit from the success of student athletes.
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

This study considered a rare look into the lived experiences of those who advise intercollegiate athletes. Guiding the inquiry were research questions designed to uncover the nature of the role, its evolution, and ways in which the advisors guide student athletes along the spectrum between advising simply for athletic eligibility and advising for involvement and engagement for the benefit of academic success as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Athletic Academic Spectrum: The Role of Advising

This spectrum is a critical component of the student athletes’ experience and supported by research that shows student athlete engagement within the broader university is beneficial to their academic performance (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 1987;). However, existing literature regarding the extent to which academic athletic support personnel encourage student athletes toward integration and engagement is unknown (Gaston-Gayles, 2004).
This was the issue and question central to this qualitative study.

Gayles and Hu (2009) stated that the preponderance of existing student athlete research is driven equally by the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics and public scrutiny of these programs and athletes. Much of the research focuses on Division I men’s basketball and football, which involves high profile athletes generating millions in revenue, student recruitment, and school and community pride for an institution. The characteristics of revenue sports is not the central focus of this study; however, the participants in this particular study explained that many of their athletics departments are now dividing advisors by type of sport, to ensure revenue sport athletes in football and basketball maintain academic eligibility to continue driving revenues, and staying out of trouble (Schroeder, 2000). These structural changes in advising reflect part of the evolution of student athlete support and highlight the importance placed on revenue sports as seen in Figure 5.

*Figure 5. Athletic Academic Spectrum: Revenue and Olympic Sports*
Bowen and Levin (2003), Bok (2004), Knight Commissions (2001-2011), and Gurney et al. (2017) all agreed that the pull of athletics, driven by commercialization and uncontrolled by the NCAA, puts undue pressure on the student athlete who must also prepare for a non-athletic career after graduation. Advisors in this study confirmed that the pressures of revenue sports participation force students away from majors like engineering and medicine that require difficult courses and higher time commitments. Similarly, but to a lesser degree, non-revenue or Olympic sports also pressure student athletes’ time and energy, taking away from academic pursuits. Based on these pressures on the student athlete, most surprising in the study was the strong trust-based relationship formed between advisor and athlete, which provides support in athletic, personal, and academic areas, despite a job description which is much more limited to academic support. Misconceptions of the athletic academic advising role continually plague the participants, but they work with an internal confidence of the benefits they provide. One participant lamented, ‘I know people looking from the outside aren’t familiar with this business. They say, ‘Oh, you're the ones that help them pass their classes.’ And I respond, ‘Well, it's a little more than that.’ I mean we're actually trying to keep the integrity of our institution.” Another stated,

I try to explain to people that we're the middle person between the student and the faculty, the coaches, the administration, and all of our partners on campus. We're trying to connect the dots, and I also tell people I'm part of the teams that I represent.

Despite the outside misconceptions, the participants in this study understand the spectrum between advising for eligibility and advising for engagement and, based on department structure, play varying roles in assisting student athletes at various points on
their journey on this spectrum. This analysis of findings is based on a review of the research questions.

**Research Question 1: Analysis**

*How do student athlete advisors describe the evolution of athletic academic advising in higher education?*

The evolution of the role of advising student athletes has been dramatic according to participants, yet the position continues to be somewhat understated and enigmatic. Despite the low-key nature of the role externally, institutions are hiring an increasing number of these positions to ensure their student athletes remain eligible and progress in academic performance and graduation rate. This is due, primarily, to NCAA regulations, and for the benefit of the student athlete as well. Advisors in the study were in full agreement that through their constant interactions, relationships of trust are built with the student athletes in their care. These relationships built rapidly in many cases because of the increasing numbers of progressively younger, former athletes who are becoming advisors. Many participants mentioned that they were unaware that advising was a career option until they interacted with their own advisors while they were student athletes. It is important to note that the increasing numbers of former-athlete advisors is continuing to develop this career path for future student athlete graduates. The relationship of trust between advisor and student is based on a shared experience, familiarity of circumstances, and related camaraderie formed between student athlete and former-athlete advisor. The former-athlete advisors’ prior lived experience as student athletes ultimately allows them to motivate the student along the spectrum because they have
been on that same spectrum, thus allowing the student to feel immediate trust. One participant confided,

I was a minority in distance running at a predominantly white institution, but I was also the student athlete who would venture out to meet people outside of my sport. When I originally moved to college, a lot of other teammates lived with each other. I thought, if I'm going to see you at practice, then I don't need to see you at home. I advise my students to branch out like I did.

The advisors that weren’t former athletes also built relationships of trust, but from a different perspective. They gained respect for the athletes and their unique situation through spending time with the athletes. One advisor who wasn’t a former athlete stated,

I was a certified athletic trainer at Cornell for my first seven years and the position in athlete student services opened up suddenly when my daughter was one-year old and my hours in athletic training were from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. every day. I was the athletic trainer for men's and women's cross country and track and field. So, I was on the road with the team every weekend from September through June; and I loved being with the athletes. I never thought I wouldn't be an athletic trainer, but due to the work that I was doing with the student athletes, I realized when I saw the advisor position open, that it's the same type of work supporting the athletes in their athletic mission, and I can also help academically. I just don't have to touch feet every day anymore!

In contrast to the benefits of familiarity and trust, there are drawbacks to the rapid expansion of staff. The relationship of trust is limited by the lack of adequate and scalable professionalized or industry best practice training, inadequate counseling experience, and little training or experience in dealing with mental health issues. This finding is verified by a personal conversation with Sandy Meyer (2017), a former president of the N4A industry association, who stated that the profile of the advisor has changed dramatically. The role remains a challenging one; however, the new profile is a younger, former athlete who is trained on the job or relies on their experience as a successful student athlete. This is in comparison to 20 years ago when there were many fewer advisors, who were well
trained either as academic tutors or counselors; each with long tenure who acted as a
specialist in their area, able to assist student athletes in a deeper way instead of more
broadly. The few participants in this study who were trained counselors or educators had
a distinct confidence in their abilities to advise naturally.

Well, quite honestly, I'm not trained because of my background, and I've also got
my master's in teaching. So, I think that my skills, just from my previous
positions, and my education has already prepared me. I feel like I didn't really
need training going into this position. A lot of the job is trial and error, figuring
things out, and being patient, and just taking time to learn. I hate to say it, but part
of the process is also learning on the job. (Participant Interview, 2017)

The evolution of the role also reflects the move away from distinct counselor and
academic advisor functions to motivator along the entire spectrum between athletic
eligibility, personal advice, academic success, and institutional engagement. Meyer
(2017) stated that the historical roles of advisor and counselor were separate and had very
distinct student support and success outcomes for a broad range of student athletes.

Today, the new advisor motivates in a more holistic and empathetic way. Almost all of
the participants in this study stated that it is impossible to predict what issues will come
out in a given session and that the issues in all areas (athletic, personal, and academic)
can overlap and compound for a student athlete. Participants often shared examples of
how injury, loss of playing time, and problems with a coach, affected athlete
discouragement, which can affect personal relationships and also academic performance.
Likewise, personal issues, like relationships or situations at home, can affect athletics and
academics, while academic issues can have dire impact on athletic participation and
scholarships and cause depression, affecting the student athlete personally. These
inextricable ties between areas along the advising spectrum have created this need for a
more holistic mentor, and different types of student athlete support systems based on particular circumstances.

Also reflective of the evolution is the complexity and paradoxical nature of athletic resources for the higher profile revenue sports. While still isolating their athletes, the revenue sports also provide significantly more resources than in the past and outspend the Olympic sports. Impressive physical facilities, opportunities for team community service, international travel, nutritionists, contemporary learning technologies, and the increased number of sport-specific advisors illustrate this evolution. In addition, revenue sports are using new titles such as, athlete success coach, life skills coach, mentor, athlete development advisors, counselor, career advisor, and engagement advisors, which are also representative of the levels of specificity and funding being applied to revenue student athlete support (N4A, *Website Position Search*, 2017).

Despite the increasing resources, titles, and focus on student athlete support, detractors contend that the basic nature of commercialization will always apply undue pressure and burden on revenue-sport student athletes. The need to win drives school pride, conference membership, recruitment for the general student body, and additional revenue streams. This basic and unique element will always pull the student athlete away from the academic mission. Non-athlete students can participate in extracurricular activity and part-time work, which will not apply the same weight of opposing pressure as the need to win in athletics (Gurney et al., 2017).

The evolution of advising seems to also be driving the growth of the industry association. Membership has grown approximately 500% since 2010, which also
illustrates the evolution of student athlete advising from a communication and organizational perspective. In addition, the topics covered during the industry conference sessions recognize the broad training needs of a growing industry of new advisors. The expansion from purely academics and counseling into development, mentoring, and life skills is also reflected in the recent change in the organization’s name from the National Association for Academic Advisors of Athletics to The National Association for Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals.

In summary, the evolution of this role has been directed in a variety of ways by the evolving needs of college athletics departments. Participants felt the growth in student-athlete support will continue as the pressure to win remains at the forefront; and, institutional pride and recruitment relies on strong athletic programs. Participants mention that administrators, including university presidents, are aware of the pull of athletics pursuits from the academic mission; however, very few are willing to take on this influential organization within an institution. And, even though college presidents knew of this growing divide on their campuses, based on pressure from students, alumni and other donors, they didn’t dare intervene (Gurney et al., 2017). In 1991, the first Knight Commission report, *Keeping Faith With the Student Athlete*, was published, and stated,

> The commission’s “bedrock conviction” was that university presidents must seize control of the NCAA from athletic directors in order to restore the preeminence of academic values over athletic or commercial ones. In response, college presidents did take over the NCAA’s governance. But by 2001, when the second Knight Commission report, *A Call to Action: Reconnecting College Sports and Higher Education*, was issued, a new generation of reformers were admitting that problems of corruption and commercialism had “grown rather than diminished” since the first report. (Branch, 2011)
A striking example of presidential timidity occurred in a 2014 moment of unusual candor. Mark Schlissel, president of the University of Michigan, speaking before a faculty senate governance group, said, “We admit students who aren’t as qualified, and it’s probably the kids that we admit that can’t honestly, even with lots of help, do the amount of work and the quality of work it takes to make progression from year to year.” (Kingkade, 2014)

He also noted an individual’s academic deficiencies were often overlooked to fill competitive rosters. Two days later, President Schlissel crafted a hastily worded apology to the football coach for his comments on the academic shortcomings of football players.

Additional drivers of this evolution include the constant flow of bad news around athlete criminality, cheating, and grade scandals; coaches making more than five times university presidents; the influence of social media; and the rapid nature of information spreading via the media. These issues compound the natural pressure and pull of athletics programs that impact student athletes and require more attention from advisors to ensure student athlete wellbeing. One participant shared that they’ve had to work a lot harder lately in connecting student athletes to resources and working on their behalf around the campus and community. The evolution in numbers might seem like institutions are now simply seeking babysitters for the athletes to keep them out of trouble, connected to resources, and to keep them eligible; however, participants hear the term “athlete babysitter” a lot, but reject the label and understand the true value they offer to the student and institution. Another participant complained, “I guess even we use the terms
babying, babysitting, or hand-holding, but it all depends on the type of students we're getting, where some can't navigate campus without a lot of help.”

**Research Question 2: Analysis**

*How do student athlete advisors perceive their role in assisting student athletes to engage within the broader university for the benefit of their academic development?*  
And, *how do they define success?*

The second research question was reflected in protocol questions #12, #13 and #16, which related to ways in which participants felt they helped student athletes engage in the broader university. Most participants were generally aware of the benefits of engagement and many felt success in their abilities to help the students have a broader experience during their time in higher education through activities that were non-athletic. Some were aware of the literature around involvement and engagement, and others worked in athletic environments that believed in the philosophy of student development, and high-impact engagement. Some of this awareness reflects the overlap of student affairs influence on athletic advising programs. The primary theoretical framework for the study references the work of Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles and specifically her five recommendations for student athlete engagement. The five recommendations, cross referenced with participant responses, are summarized below:

1. **Assess academic and athletic motivation**: The theory’s author states that an initial assessment of both academic and athletic motivation is important for a baseline measure and to avoid making assumptions about certain student athletes based on race, gender, or sport (Gaston, 2002).
Gaston (2002) developed an assessment tool for athletic versus academic motivation called the SAMSAQ. There were two participants in this study that have used this tool to understand the starting point for advising student athletes based on their level of athletic and academic motivations. The SAMSAQ is an assessment tool that could be directly overlaid on the spectrum described by this study. In the absence of such an assessment, advisors must assess student athletes’ motivations. Many of the participants mentioned the traditional athletic advising process of discussing a Plan A and Plan B, where Plan A has typically represented the athletic plan, and Plan B is an academic fallback or secondary plan if athletics does not work. This concept has been utilized in advising revenue-sport athletes for years, and based on the premise that the revenue athlete is naturally more motivated toward pursuing a professional career in their sport. A New York Times article titled, “Even a Player Who Made It Knows the Value of a Backup Plan,” states that “the pull to become engaged in big-time sports is stronger than ever. Many young athletes focus on their sport to the exclusion of anything else, with no backup plan, or no Plan B for their future (Rhoden, 2012).” The article utilizes this well-known terminology that almost every participant mentioned in relation to their advising approach. However, the difference is in the fact that many of the advisors mentioned they now advise the student that both athletics and academics are important and drive one another, so they do not necessarily have to be separated, ranked, or prioritized; one over another. One participant stated,

When you read a lot of traditional student athlete development literature, they explain it in terms of going pro being Plan A and then getting a degree, and getting a “regular job” is Plan B. I was talking to a student athlete and he said,
“No, I'm not going to entertain Plan B because anytime that I spend on plan B takes away from time I should be investing in plan A.”

Another participant mentioned, "I believe that their belief and drive to fulfill Plan A is what brought them here to university." This participant was referring to the reality that Plan A motivates them, and to dampen it might affect other areas of motivation, including academics. Most advisors mentioned Plan A/Plan B advising, but interestingly most stated that they present them as equally important and dependent on one another. For example, an NBA player needs to understand legal contracts, communicate effectively, manage an agent, and manage their finances and other long-term business interests. This set of non-athletic skills is developed as a part of their academic training in higher education.

Many advisors mentioned that their ability to measure motivation between athletics and academics is an important starting point for advising a student athlete. One advisor mentioned that the level of advising that a student athlete requires, depends on their starting point, or what the athlete brings to the advising session. This is what differentiates all of the student athletes from one another, requiring the building of a relationship of trust that allows the assessment to unfold over a series of conversations. Some of the comments made by participants touched on student athlete demographics and background in terms of their preparedness for college, which many feel has gone downhill in the past ten years.

2. **Encourage non-athlete peer interaction**: Support programs should seek ways to have student athletes engage with non-athlete peers. Peer interaction is an important way to integrate and engage (Gaston, 2002; Tinto, 1987).
Gaston’s (2002) second recommendation relates to the peer group that a student athlete maintains. We know traditionally that the natural position of an athletics department is to isolate their student athletes for the benefit of maximizing athletic preparation, training, nutrition, and competition. This focus on athletic participation and success, limits the student athletes’ ability to engage with the broader institution. One of the ways to break out of this is to link the student athlete with non-athletes in ways that will pull the student athlete out of their athletic isolation. A few of the participants in the study stated that their institutions use this type of interaction between student athlete and non-athlete. It is reflected in the physical location of resources, such as a shared tutoring and learning center at one participant’s institution, or in mandating that athletes live with non-athletes and stay in the dorms longer than just the first year at another participant’s institution. It is reflected when student athletes must travel to the main campus for other services and resources, despite athletics department bringing resources into the athletic environment for convenience. One participant described the positioning of their student athlete center within the student life area of the university for the explicit purpose of interaction with non-athlete student peers. As an example of the ideal model for this recommendation, consider this participant’s description of their efforts:

Although we have the segregated tutoring, almost everything else is integrated into the rest of campus. So we make sure that athletes are going to events on campus. Our community service is fully integrated into what the campus is doing. We have faculty, staff, and community members coming in and mentoring our students. The women's group that we have on campus for our female student athletes works with faculty, staff, and community members as well. Also, bringing the outside student population into the athlete center. And then, lastly, we have several athletics-sponsored events throughout the year that are open to all students, like writing workshops and late-night study hall. We have other academic workshops that we open to everyone on campus.
Outside of these positive examples, and considering the practice and competition time requirements for student athletes, in addition to the continued development of substantial and segregated athletic facilities and resources, this recommendation appears to be a challenge for institutions. Most participants describe the efforts of their athletic departments continuing along the path of student athlete isolation. They described the constant building of athlete-only facilities and a basic need to keep athletic facilities close to practice fields, which forces teams to also keep their athletes in close proximity to these areas. This need to provide efficiency for athletes and coaches is creating part of the pull away from student athlete to non-student athlete engagement.

3. Organize student affairs collaboration: Support programs should work cross departmentally to avoid duplicative effort and engage student athletes, which will help bridge the divide described in the literature (Gaston, 2002).

Several participants mentioned that they work across the campus on behalf of student athletes. One participant mentioned organized processes their institution uses to inform student athletes about campus events and related opportunities to participate in student affairs programming for leadership development. There were distinct efforts described on the part of organizations, student government, clubs, and national student associations to involve student athletes. The collaboration with student affairs on behalf of the student athlete is much more evident in cases where the advisors are a part of the larger student affairs effort, sometimes reporting outside of athletics directly to student affairs. In some cases, athletes in certain sports have the approval and time for more integration outside of their sport’s specific activities. Outside of these basic
collaborations with student affairs, the participants did not feel that their main focus involved collaborating with student affairs, even though they understood the importance of student athletes participating in campus-wide activities. Some found that the collaboration created a natural pathway for student engagement, while others did not work to foster relationships, or feel the door was open for collaboration between student-athlete advising and campus student affairs. This is an area of opportunity for future relations between athletics and the university for the benefit of student academic performance. The extent to which athletic departments can use student support staff to collaborate with student affairs for the benefit of involvement and engagement of the student athlete will help move them along the spectrum from eligibility thinking to engagement advising. Participant comments did not indicate a trend of this type of interaction, only isolated examples.

4. Encourage living on campus: Support programs and staff should encourage student athletes to live on campus for a minimum of two years allowing them to spend more time on campus, which is a key engagement theory component (Gaston, 2002).

A participant proudly commented that, “not living with my teammates was probably one of the most mentally enriching things that I could have done that helped me get the most out of my collegiate experience and not just my collegiate student athlete experience.” The NCAA banned predominantly athletic dorms in 1996, but left workarounds if more than half the residents are non-athletes (Rowland, 2014). Some large institutions are building athlete-friendly apartment complexes on and off campus at considerable cost (Dodd, 2014). Amy Perko, executive director of the Knight
Commission on Intercollegiate Athletes, asserted that luxury locker rooms and luxury dorms may help an institution win a recruiting battle, but they have more potential to hurt college sports over the long run, and went on to state, “Athletic spending is rising rapidly while academic spending is stagnating. This pattern is inappropriate and unsustainable.” Fancy residence halls with elaborate amenities for athletes were not that common in college sports, reflected in elite athletic institutions’ players living off campus or in dorms across from athletic facilities with non-athletes (Dodd, 2014). That said, there is now a growing trend toward high-end residence halls and athletic facilities that cater to athletes (Dodd, 2014). One of the participants in the study recollected,

When I found out that my coach wanted all the freshmen to live together, I humbly declined. That was probably the best decision I made in terms of being able to take advantage of my student athlete experience. My quad-mates my freshmen year were not athletes at all, no athletic affiliation, not managers, not trainers, none of that.

Only one participant out of the entire study was at an institution that required student athletes to live with non-student athletes, and also required scholarship athletes to live in the dorms both freshman and sophomore years. This advisor’s institution was familiar with Gayles’ research, and believed in student engagement theory. They found that the more student athletes spent time with non-athletes, the better they adjusted to college, which also fostered academic success. Unfortunately, this was not an area that was evolving quickly among the other institutions.
5. **Increase faculty interaction:** Support program staff should organize ways to involve faculty in athletics to offset some of the negative perceptions faculty have of athletes (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001).

Some participants communicated with faculty on behalf of an athlete, not to get something they did not earn, but to advocate in cases of schedules and to make up missed work, and plan for future absences for sports events participation. All participants agreed that negative perceptions about student athletes permeated the faculty at their institutions. One participant said,

I think they’re not even aware sometimes, but there's definitely some faculty and staff who say they have an issue with our student athletes. We spend a lot of time working with them to resolve it, and then they get it. They say, ‘Oh, wow. I didn't realize what you do, and the pressure they’re under.’ I think it's a lack of awareness because the more we interact with faculty and staff, the more they have more of a respect for what we do, and for the student athletes and their situation.

Another participant stated, “We’re definitely integrating with the campus community and faculty. Our athletics complex is on south campus and the rest of the campus is pretty much everywhere else, so getting faculty to come down here is big.”

A participant commented that they work with the faculty when a student sustains a concussion or other injuries. They work with faculty and try to figure out how to bring these students back into the classroom because some of them sustain some pretty severe side effects that make just sitting in a room, or looking at a computer screen difficult for the injured student athlete. One participant described a program their athletic department initiated that created a way for faculty to get involved with various teams. They encourage professors to see the athletic center, meet with advisors, meet different people in the athletic department, from the athletic director to the athletic trainer, to the strength
and conditioning coach, and the other coaches. After a game, one of these visiting faculty members sent a detailed email to this participant’s director, which reflected a completely new appreciation and understanding of what athletics and athletes do. This faculty member promised to start talking to other faculty and people who criticized and scrutinized athletics to share what he saw and learned and to generate assistance. This same participant stated,

That's kind of an extreme example, where we turned someone from being an enemy of athletics into a fan, who with a better understanding, became an advocate of our department. So that's one way we try to help out with getting faculty to understand what we do.

A number of participants mentioned times when there are disputes with faulty because of misunderstandings, unfair action, or hardline process adherence despite impossible timing due to athlete travel and competition. One participant stated,

In situations where we have disputes with faculty, instead of picking up the phone and calling like we did in the past, we now help advise the student athlete to communicate and interact with their faculty, regularly. When we did it on their behalf, it was like we were kicking the door down and demanding action for athletes, and the response from faculty was - athletics is pressuring us.

Another participant stated,

We will do more, if it gets to a point where we feel the student's being treated unfairly; we'll go through our faculty athletics rep. We usually will not go and get too involved, again, because it could create that perception that we're trying to throw our influence around and influence them to change grades or something like that.

Ultimately, participants understood the importance of faculty interaction, and the trend seemed to be advocacy through advising the student athlete in ways to engage their faculty professionally, proactively, and often.
Research Question 3: Analysis

How do student athlete advisors describe their role on the spectrum between optimizing academic engagement opportunities and simply maintaining eligibility for student athletes?

Dr. Carol Gruber stated, “More than ever, those who work with student athletes must understand the compromise and conflict that befall many 18- to 22-year-old [athletes] who have been promised a college education.” She asserted that academic advisors can be familiar with the tremendous pressures put upon student athletes to stay in peak physical condition, to win, and to address the media with poise, and must also be aware of the pressures of maintaining academic progress more intense for student athletes than for non-athletes (Gruber, 2003). The results of this study agree with Dr. Gruber’s assertions and reflect the evolved role of the advisor since her comments in 2003. Furthermore, almost every participant in this study described themselves as being somewhere in the middle of the scale between advising for athletic eligibility and advising for academic and social engagement. This also reflects some of the evolution of the role, as there is more of an understanding of engagement and its benefits to the student.

When compared to the theoretical framework of student athlete engagement, even though advisor positions have evolved tremendously in terms of numbers, support, relationships of trust etc., the evolution has not moved the student athlete experience significantly along the spectrum from eligibility to engagement. They have moved from simple eligibility advising to involvement; however, Gaston-Gayles (2004) made a
distinction between involvement and engagement and argued a nuanced difference between the terms. She states that it is possible to be involved, but not engaged. For example, if a student athlete attends an event designed for engagement or leadership development and sits quietly in the back of the room, they might not be engaged. Purposeful engagement and deep learning requires action, purpose, and cross-institutional collaboration (Gaston-Gayles, 2004).

Formally, advisors are to keep student athletes eligible, and assist them in scheduling classes, balancing course loads, and maintaining certain grades, especially against the NCAA APR standards. Informally, advisors are assisting student athletes and dealing with some of the issues that can arise with multiple areas of intense focus for student athletes. This informal support, although helpful for the athletes psyche and sustainability, does not immediately or fully translate to involvement or engagement.

An important realization within this study shows that advisors in their current form along with other student athletes support positions are still focused on keeping athletes eligible, and helping them become more involved in the broader institution; however, there is no mechanism to track whether that involvement is turning into active engagement. This is a personification of the cliché that states you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. Figure 6 illustrates the circumstances that show the participants’ reflections of being somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, which agrees with Gaston-Gayles’ (2004) assertion that involvement, although a step in the right direction, cannot be construed as engagement. The impact of advisors can push a student athlete toward the middle of the spectrum, but full academic engagement in the
institution requires the student athlete’s motivation to succeed scholastically, in addition to student athletes and faculty collaborating for academic success.

Figure 6. Athletic Academic Spectrum: Advisor, Athlete and Faculty Impact

A participant mentioned that sometimes their administration and coaches do not like it when they tell the students to consider internships, studying abroad, or other high-impact engagement activities. Despite the fact that this participant was told not to encourage certain activities, they still advised student athletes that it was in their best interest to become engaged in activities outside of athletics.

Many participants shared that their athletic departments want them to recreate everything that they do on campus within athletics, including career services, learning disability support services, registrars, and leadership development. One participant shared their response to these types of requests as, "No, we have a campus, and university activities for a reason. I want students to branch out and reach out to people outside of athletics, especially the faculty." They went on to say, “I think it would be hard to define engagement on a scale, and I think I’m probably somewhere in the middle.”
Rankin (2016) states that ultimately the climate of the institution matters and in the case of this study, can define where student athletes exist on the spectrum between athletics and academics on a college campus. Performance ratings in athletic sport participation and academics were more salient when climate was taken into account (Rankin, 2016).

**Study’s results compared to relevant literature**

Martin and James (2012) listed 15 tips for advising student athletes on the NACADA website. They recommended advisors be knowledgeable of basic NCAA regulations, even if NCAA compliance is not a part of their formal duties, offer understanding and support, and give relevant advice based on their students’ situation. Participants in the study mentioned that understanding these rules was a standard element of their roles mainly due to the impact of APR and GSR standards and the importance of such measures to eligibility, team sanctions, and coaching incentives. Martin and James (2012) state,

To be effective, advisors need to know the details of their student-athletes’ typical day: when does it begin, how much conditioning occurs and when, what kinds of meetings and practices are part of a normal week? Are they hurt or injured and how much time is rehab taking? When do they have time to do their academic work, meet with professors, work in groups with other students, etc.? Keeping up with this information is essential to being effective as an advisor.

Almost all of the participants in this study made it clear that their effectiveness in advising student athletes along the athletic academic spectrum required an in-depth relationship of trust which encompassed much of what Martin and James (2012) recommend.

Martin and James (2012) also assert that advisors should be respectful and value
both students’ athletic talents and efforts and their intellectual progress and opportunities, taking students’ athletic hopes seriously, and taking them seriously as people with careers and lives beyond athletics. Participants in the study agreed with this position.

Martin and James (2012) finish their recommendations by endorsing patience with student athletes, helping them identify their goals, advising them to make the right choice in friends, and teaching them how to communicate appropriately with professors and other staff members. They close by stating, “Advisors have an opportunity to be a lifelong mentor as well as an advisor. Advisors should demonstrate to student athletes that they are an advisor outside of the office as well as within it.” The crux of this study and related participant comments agree with this sentiment, as outlined in the findings chapter. Because Martin and James’ (2012) recommendations are based on their own work experience, it lacks the depth of this study’s research structure and volumes of interviews focused on the evolution of student-athlete advising and issues like the need for training and certification and mental health as pertinent components of advising.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Athletics in America is an impressive institution that influences athletes and their families from an early age. For some, this influence can be positive if they use sport to develop skills around motivation, goal setting, teamwork, and leadership. For others, sport is a way out of challenging socioeconomic situations and has become a potential career in some revenue-generating sports. The athletic academic spectrum is exhibited in the difference between sport as a career and sport as a means to an education, and has evolved over years as sports professionalism and related revenues have exploded. This commercial evolution continues, as we see athletes opting out of an education, or leaving early to become professionals, in addition to families leveraging their own brands and taking children out of school to play professionally.

Driving this research was my personal experience as an intercollegiate athlete in the United States. At an early age, I aspired to be a world-class athlete, excelled through high school sports, was recruited by several institutions and competed between 1985 and 1990 as a full scholarship NCAA track athlete. In 1988, I qualified for the NCAA championships with one of the ten fastest hurdle times in the US, in addition to leading the Canadian rankings. In the Olympic year of 1988, I was intensely focused on performing well at the NCAA Championships, the Canadian National Trials and the Summer Olympics. There was not much mental or physical time left for anything else that year. Hours of practice, travel every week, mental preparation, physical therapy, and unwavering discipline characterized my athletic experience as a BYU athlete. During that time of intense preparation and competition, I was also a full-time college student,
working toward my “other goal” of graduation. My experience was very different than my non-athlete student counterparts. I was forced to make hourly and daily decisions that prioritized athletic, academic, or social pursuits. Due to the need to maintain my scholarship, athletics was the driving force in my decision-making. To maintain athletic eligibility, I found myself taking minimum academic loads and easier courses that would allow me to maintain a manageable academic schedule during the competition season, which lasted most of the year.

Participants in this study confirmed that my student-athlete experience is indicative of the experience of many student athletes under their advisement even 30 years later, with revenue-sport athletes experiencing an even more athletically aggressive experience. The study reflected that the athletic scholarship is a means to achieve a higher education, but ironically it can also become the reason many do not achieve their academic dream. I graduated due to self-discipline and utilizing many of the institution’s athletic and non-athletic support resources. Academic advisors must assist student athletes in doing the same, against the pull of powerful athletic systems. Participants in the study agree that the focus of the most athletically competitive institutions, including that of coaches and advisors, can lead student athletes, especially those with lower academic aptitudes, toward easier majors and courses to maintain grades and eligibility (Suggs, 2003). The NCAA reports that less than 2% of college athletes turn professional, making academic success and career preparation critical for life success. The NCAA has developed metrics such as APR and GSR to track student athlete academic performance; however, Gurney (2017) stated,
These metrics are fundamentally nothing more than measures of how successful athletics departments are at keeping athletes eligible, and they have increasingly fostered acts of academic dishonesty and devalued higher education in the frantic search for eligibility and retention points.

There are demonstrable tensions within the academic and athletic structures of institutions between the athletes’ motivation for academics and athletics and within the literature between fatalist and opportunistic views of college athletics. Student athletes in higher education are positioned precariously between their academic and athletic pursuits (Hyatt, 2003) and as such, they feel the tension between these motivations (Gaston, 2002). Athletic programs are continually disparaged for exploiting student athletes to produce huge revenues and improve institutional reputation and alumni loyalty (Knight Commission Reports 1991, 2001, 2010). Student athletes typically spend 20 to 40 hours on athletics-related activity each week, which has been shown to have consequences for their academic performance (Bowen & Levin, 2003). Due to their demanding schedules, student athletes are often physically alienated from the academic world around them (Hyatt, 2003). Advisors are the guides that assist young student athletes along this precarious spectrum and between the contentious relationships of athletic and academic departments. Success for student athlete advisors can be reflected in student athletes reaping the benefits of an athletic experience, including the leadership skills of being team captain and the skills of motivation, determination, and practice from team participation. When aligned with good academic performance and career development, these athletic skills should be additive and produce an elite member of society with a unique and coveted skillset.

Looking through the lens of student engagement, integration into the broader
institution has proven beneficial for students’ academic performance (Kuh, 2008). Astin (1993) suggests that increased institutional integration improves student athletes’ and non-athletes’ sense of belonging. The NCAA, and engagement theory researchers such as Kuh and Astin, agree that academic advising and support related to increasing engagement and integration is necessary to help college athletes succeed academically (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). The conceptual framework for this study places the student athlete between the two opposing forces of experiential reality and theoretical opportunity, while also positioning the student athlete between the divergent forces of their own academic and athletic motivations. Due to this conflict, Gaston (2002) developed SAMSAQ, using achievement motivation theory to measure student athletes’ motivation toward academics and athletics (Quaye & Harper, 2014). The literature describes this conceptual view of disparate forces around the student athlete in higher education in term of personal, educational, athletic, and environmental influences. McFarlane (2014) explains that student athletes are a special population requiring support for their academic, personal, and athletic needs. Considering the opportunity to apply student engagement theory to improve the support offered to student athletes, Gaston-Gayles (2004) reminds us that increased engagement requires both the motivation of the student athlete and the commitment and support of the institution to be successful.

This study examined the lived experiences of student athlete support personnel, specifically focusing on their perceptions of how student athlete support roles have evolved over time, and the extent to which they assist student athletes in engaging for academic development versus simply advising to maintain athletic eligibility. The lived
experience of the student athlete advisor is one that reflects an important relationship that is built quietly, and on a foundation of trust, that helps the student on all parts of the athletic academic spectrum. The academic advisor works tirelessly to help student athletes succeed, many times because of their own experience as student athletes and having lived on the same spectrum. Dealing with issues such as injuries and playing time, coaching relationships, practice and competition recovery time, classes and faculty relationships, test anxiety and adjustment issues, roommate problems, relationship issues and sometimes family issues while away from home, are all elements with which the academic advisor must assist the student athlete. Their perceptions of their role are important, and although they feel misunderstood and sometimes disrespected they know the value they bring to the athletic department, the institution, and the student. The role has changed over time, and it is not as much an academic advisor who schedules courses and advises on majors, nor is it a counselor who talks to student athletes about their depression or how to increase their motivation, nor is it a sports psychologist that helps them have peak performance through mental imagery. The role has evolved to become a holistic mentor, who sits with the students on the spectrum between athletic and academic pressures. They are an advocate, advisor, counselor, life skills coach, and friend.

Despite their important role, many of them learn on the job. There is an industry association that is developing quickly to handle the many issues that student-athlete advisors face. Some consider them babysitters for the student athlete to make sure that they are on track for eligibility, and do not get into trouble, but the advisors reject the label of “a babysitter” and understand that they play a critical role in motivating the
students on all aspects of their college existence. They build fast relationships of trust because they understand what the student athlete is experiencing. They are younger; and they are more numerous than 20 years ago; and they are adamant that they are not simply tutors.

The main research question asked whether they are helping students to move from eligibility and athletic isolation toward academic success and engagement in the broader university. Although they are helping student athletes become more involved in such areas, true engagement requires an equal effort and interest on the part of the student. Some felt they were seeing athletes engage through faculty interaction, non-athlete peer collaboration, internships, and community service. The majority felt they were somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, assisting student athletes with both athletic and academic motivation and advocating with coaches and faculty to ensure the student was cared for. Moving student athletes along the spectrum to academic involvement is where the advisors are helping and succeeding. Getting the student fully engaged in the academic mission relies on student-athlete motivation and will require assistance from athletic and student services areas. This is a student-athlete development opportunity for institutions.

In the future, these positions will become more professionalized as techniques are developed to push student athletes even closer to full academic engagement through assistance from the industry association. The average tenure was four years for advisors in this study, and there are many more with only one to two years of experience behind them. The need for training is critical. Professional certification is important in addition
to mental health awareness and processes to deal with a growing set of these issues. Athletic departments have the opportunity to create amazing success stories, but they can also crush a young person if they are not balanced or fail to help a student move on the spectrum toward academic and career success. The role of the advisor is a critical one for student athletes: The current trend appears to be positive in the increasing numbers and diversification of roles.

The theoretical framework for this study is a good guide for developing an engagement plan for student athletes. It is described in the form of five recommendations focused on increasing student athlete engagement (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). This is one of the only theoretical frameworks for student athletes based in broader student engagement theory, but formulated specifically for intercollegiate athletics.

The five recommendations are summarized below:

1. Assess academic and athletic motivation.
2. Encourage peer interaction.
3. Organize student affairs collaboration.
4. Encourage living on campus.
5. Increase faculty interaction.

The recommendations appear to be a synthesis of the major elements of the other theorists’ work, while identifying the elements most needed by student athletes. This specific engagement framework allows for the development of an assessment tool to measure current institutional student athlete engagement effectiveness, and specifically provides a basis for an interview instrument to assess the current efforts of student athlete support personnel.
This study illuminated a student support role that was otherwise misunderstood and hidden within the athletic machinery of Division I institutions. A group consisting largely of former student athletes take pride in building relationships of trust and mentoring along a path they once traveled. Working between coaches, athletic administrators, faculty, students, and university leaders, takes skill and a keen understanding of the role to advocate for the student athlete while assisting them in their own development. The athletic-academic spectrum is not easily seen by those who have not traveled on it, but when visible is daunting. The pull of the athletic side of the spectrum brought many of the student athletes to that point, but it is the challenge of the academic side of the spectrum that will provide a sustainable career over a lifetime. Advising on the spectrum requires an ability to harness the athletic motivation, while also using it to encourage movement toward the academic success through involvement and engagement.

A summary of the study’s findings:

1. A deep passion for the role.
   i. Perceptions of being misunderstood.
   ii. Perceptions of success in the role.

2. A trust-based relationship between advisor and students.
   i. The actual role versus the job description.
   ii. A new conceptual framework.
   iii. Advisors pulled between the forces of athletic and academic pressure, alike the athletes.

3. Descriptions of the evolution of the role.
   i. Increased numbers and decreasing age.
   ii. Expansion of the industry association.
   iii. Expanding functions titles and structures.
iv. The graduate assistant role.
v. Increased technical and physical resources.

4. The growing risks of dealing with student athlete mental health.
   i. The lack of mental health training.
   ii. Increased dialogue around the issue.
   iii. Mental health and wellness versus sport psychology.

5. Perceptions of a lack of training and certification.
   i. The typical training for advisors.
   ii. Thrown into the fire.

6. Advising for engagement amidst pressures for athletic isolation.
   i. Athletic isolation continues and is antithetical to student athlete engagement.
   ii. Advisors understand the benefits of student athlete engagement.
   iii. Differences in advising Revenue vs. Olympic sports.
   iv. Attempts at engagement.

7. The ideal advisor profile.
   i. View of the ideal is based on positionality
   ii. Commonly mentioned skill sets for the ideal advisor

8. Pressures on advisors from the NCAA’s policies.
   i. Academic Progress Rate: publicly reported statistics.

The dynamic nature of the athletic academic spectrum

In summary, after analyzing a series of phenomenological conversations, this study sought to understand the role of athlete academic support in engaging student athletes in the broader institution for the benefit of academic improvement. After considering the comments from participants, and overlaying what we know about student athletes, athletic departments, and academics structures around athletes, it is evident that at any given time, a student athlete can fall anywhere on the spectrum between athletic
isolation and academic engagement. The role of the advisor must be flexible enough to meet the student where they are on the spectrum, and help them move in either direction based on the needs of that moment. Understanding that a student athlete might need to compete in order to keep their scholarship, will move the student-athlete advisor to help the student athlete strengthen their confidence, and perhaps give them cover for course assignments while they are traveling, in order for them to have a clear mind for competition. Likewise, the advisor may need to assist the student athlete when they are between athletics and academics, and perhaps trying to become more involved in the university, or while dealing with personal issues. The advisors also seem to constantly work toward moving the student athlete to academic achievement, and do this continually while the student moves back-and-forth on the spectrum based on the circumstances of the moment. This dynamic nature of the spectrum, illustrates a need for an equally dynamic relationship between student-athlete advisor and the student athlete.

**Ideas for Future Research**

Future research opportunities include a quantitative analysis of GPA, academic progress rate (APR), and graduation success rate (GSR) measured against advisor tenure, single or multi-sport advisor, and advising structure of an institution to determine which model is best. If APR and GSR measures are truly indicative of athlete academic engagement and performance, then advising structures should be measured against this performance to determine which produces the best results for student athletes.

Additionally, an effective study could consider the effectiveness of the first-year advisor and who they typically advise. If early identification of risk factors is important
in developing good coping skills in student athletes, it could be assumed that first-year advising methods would play a significant role in this development process.

Another effective study would assess the lived experience of the student athlete and their impressions of where they are on the spectrum and their impression of the role of advisor, faculty, and coaches in helping them move along the spectrum between athletics and academics. It could be assumed that the student athlete may have as similar impression of the spectrum and the importance of building a relationship of trust with an advisor to assist them in navigating the spectrum between athletic pursuits and academic engagement.
APPENDIX

Study Consent Form

Shaun McAlmont, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (eshaun@gse.upenn.edu, 801.803.1614)

INVITATION:
You are invited to participate in a research study focusing on athletic academic support in higher education. You will be asked to participate in a 30-60 minute phone interview which will focus on your experiences in student athlete academic advising. This research is being conducted as part of the requirement for the Executive Doctoral Program at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:
As a participant in this study, you may request to receive a copy of the summary findings upon completion of this project. Upon your consent, this interview will be audio taped. The audiotape will later be transcribed for research purposes, but will never be played for any audience other than the researcher directly involved in the project. Upon completion of the project audiotapes will be erased. All audio tapes and transcriptions will be kept in a secure location with the researcher. Although breaches of confidentiality are possible, the proper precautions will be in place to prevent a breach.

TIME INVOLVEMENT:
Your participation in this experiment will involve a phone interview which will take approximately no more than sixty minutes. It is not anticipated that follow-up calls will be necessary.

PAYMENTS:
There will be no payment for participation.

SUBJECT'S RIGHTS:
If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer questions. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614.

Your electronic signature below indicates your willingness to participate in the study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: _______________
Interview Protocol

THE ATHLETIC ACADEMIC SPECTRUM IN
HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
STUDENT ATHLETE ADVISORS

1. What is your tenure in your current role and any past academic advising roles?
2. Have you engaged in training specific to student athlete support or academic advising?
3. Is your formal education is related to advising or unrelated?
4. Are you a member of a professional association for your field?
5. Describe the structure of your athlete academic support system at your institution.
6. Please describe your experience as an academic advisor working with student athletes.
7. What is your perception of the evolution of this position over time?
8. What is your opinion of the rate of change in the evolution of the position?
9. How familiar are you with literature and research on athlete advising?
10. How do you describe your advising approach... on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being only performing job duties as outlined in the position description, and 5 being mentoring student athletes in all areas necessary for their success?
11. How would you describe your institution’s successes and challenges in student athlete advising?
12. Can you describe areas of collaboration between athletics and the broader university?
13. Can you describe how many of the following are used at your institution for the integration and engagement of student athletes:
   a. Assessment of the balance between student athletes’ academic and athletic motivation
   b. Encouraging interaction with non-athlete student peers
   c. Encouraging broader university student activities collaboration
   d. Encouraging (post-freshman) living on campus, in non-athlete housing
   e. Increasing student-faculty interaction
   f. Encouraging Internships or other career, industry and community interaction
14. What are your thoughts regarding ways to improve the role of student athlete academic support?
15. Where do you see your role on the support spectrum between optimizing engagement and simply maintaining eligibility?
Athletic Academic Advisor Job Description – Institution 1

Position Overview

This position is within the athletic department and reports to the Athletic Director. This position serves as an ad hoc member of the Athletic Compliance Council. It is the responsibility of the Athletic Academic Coordinator/Advisor to organize, implement, facilitate, oversee and evaluate all facets of the Athletic Academic program. This position works closely with the University Academic Support efforts and provides insight for academic issues surrounding student-athletes. Position also works collaboratively with relevant constituent groups and individuals, including academic counselors, faculty, disability support services, psychological and testing services, University Honors and coaches to enhance the academic success of student-athletes. This position attends departmental meetings of the University Academic Support Services providing consultation regarding student-athletes. The Athletic Academic Coordinator/Advisor also has supervisory duties.

Description of Duties

Academic Advising: (55%)

- Design and implement a complete advising program for student-athletes.
- Continue to develop current practices for freshman and sophomore advising and design/enhance advising support program for juniors, seniors and fifth year seniors.
- Design, implement and enhance advising program for non-qualifiers.
- Apply NCAA and conference rules as they apply to degree progress and completion.
- Liaison to faculty members regarding missed course time due to athletic travel.
- Design the caseload system to track and monitor student-athlete academic records.
- Develop tool for annual review of student-athlete advising to note good practices and evoke changes as needed.
- Work collaboratively with the DAC to monitor the degree progress of student-athletes per NCAA rules and assist student-athletes in declaring a major suitable to their career goals.
- Plan, implement and evaluate several programs in conjunction with Career Services to help determine and/or meet the career opportunities for student-athletes.
- Coordinate summer orientation with university Admissions for all first year student-athletes and determine the notification strategy to be used.
- Communicate issues and concerns involving athletic academic advising and student-athlete success to the athletic administration, university administration and campus committees as assigned or as appropriate.
- Keep accurate academic records, develop statistical analysis of academic success or challenges, provide data as requested and speak to the academic progress of student-athletes on an on-going basis.
- Supervise part-time Athletic Academic Advisor and encourage involvement with university graduate programs and work study.
- Thorough knowledge of university, conference and NCAA academic requirements.

Development of Study Skills and Tutoring Program: (30%)

- Design, monitor and evaluate the academic support elements for student-athlete academic success.
• Institute study skills and time management workshops with first year student-athletes. Coordinate efforts with Life Skills Coach and Academic Support Services.
• Work with campus resources to design and implement a thorough academic support network for non-qualifiers and high risk student-athletes.
• Begin design of small group specialty sessions.
• Review and edit current tutor job descriptions and rates of pay.
• Work collaboratively with university resources to obtain qualified tutors for study table and for individuals or small groups as needed.
• Supervise the athletic department study table and design the individual sport study sessions when space becomes available.
• Provide written policies and procedures for Student-Athlete Manual and Department Policies and Procedures Manual.
• Promotion of the overall athletic academic support programming for all student-athletes.

**Departmental Support: (15%)**

The Athletic Academic Coordinator/Advisor may also have responsibilities in the following areas: Direct the Student Athlete Advisory Council

**Required Qualifications**

Position requires a Bachelor’s Degree with a minimum of five years’ related experience in a Division I academic support program. Strong organizational, interpersonal and communication skills with the ability to work with people in a fast-paced environment is necessary. Desire to work with a culturally diverse population. Thorough knowledge of NCAA and Eastern Washington University academic requirements.

Must have an understanding of special demands in the student-athlete academic environment with the ability to establish and maintain effective working relationships with student-athletes, coaches, athletic department staff, university administration and university academic programs and support services. Experience in development of tutoring and advising programs and knowledge of the theory of learning and study skills improvement strategies.

Requires excellent verbal and written communication skills. Ability to prepare, compile, write and review reports. Must have critical thinking to ascertain needs and develop programs and strategies to enhance student learning. Excellent computer skills.

**Preferred Qualifications**

Master’s Degree in a related field with 3 years of experience in a Division I academic support program.

**Conditions of Employment**

Student-athlete degree completion and degree satisfaction is of primary importance to this position. With NCAA reports on student-athlete academic success in national publications, it is important that this position holds the student-athletes to the highest academic standards possible.
Athletic Academic Advisor Job Description – Institution 2

MAJOR PURPOSE: The Athletic Academic Advisor is responsible to provide advising in a manner that supports and encourages students to make informed academic decisions, understand and communicate student athlete eligibility requirements and student responsibility, and development of successful academic and life skills. This position provides support to students during the registration process; explores various major and career options and works to improve the academic performance of University students with a special focus on student athletes. Additionally, this person will act as a liaison between the Athletic Department and the Registrar’s office and maintain eligibility regulations.

POSITION RESPONSIBILITIES
• Advises students, individually and in groups, regarding academic requirements toward graduation and selection of courses.
• In conjunction with the Athletic Department, conducts student athlete orientation each academic year.
• Analyze student records in preparation for appointments.
• Receive and provide referrals to and from faculty and other University offices for students' major considerations, academic issues, financial assistance, or personal concerns.
• Disseminate information on institutional policies and procedures.
• Understand the institution’s interpretation of Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) rules for the release of student information to faculty, parents, and students.
• Maintain and update advisee records through regular review of academic files and transcript evaluations.
• Participate in office staff development, workshops, programs, and administrative functions; attends meetings.
• Performs other duties as assigned.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENTS
• Student Athlete retention and degree completion rate in relationship to the average traditional student rate. Advisee degree completion rate within 1.5 semesters of projected date.
• NAIA athletic eligibility processing, integrity, and accuracy within reasonable timeframes.

QUALIFICATIONS
EDUCATION/CERTIFICATIONS:
• Bachelor Degree and experience working with college students or adolescents in an academic counseling capacity. Preferred: Directly related academic advising and teaching experience in a college or university setting.
• Understand and interpret the requirements and academic options for graduation in relation to all areas and departments of the University.
• Advise students about the development of educational plan options and resources available.
• Work closely with other advisors, faculty, and staff in understanding, preparing, and providing advising sessions for individuals and groups of students.
• Review student records to determine athletic eligibility and assess necessary action steps for students to maintain athletic eligibility.

SKILLS/ABILITIES:
• Knowledge of University policies and procedures, academic requirements, campus resources, student life, and support services.
• Excellent interpersonal and communication skills; teaching or public speaking experience preferred.
• Ability to build good rapport with a variety of constituents.
• Attention to detail and successful organizational skills.
• Problem solving skills, dependable, cooperative, multi-tasking, responsible, and patient.
• Computer proficiency and student integrated management system experience preferred.
• Ability to encourage and empower students to make their own decisions.
• Ability to maintain confidentiality.
• Ability to work a flexible schedule—possible weekend and evening meetings.
• Sensitivity to the needs of a diverse student population, including minority and international students.

WORKING ENVIRONMENT: The employee agrees to promote the values and mission of WJU as a private Christ-centered University and live a life consistent with biblical principles. All employees of the University are expected to firmly support without reservations the William Jessup University doctrinal statement of personal Christian faith.

WORKING CONDITIONS: The employee is regularly in a typical office environment with adequate light and moderate noise levels. No hazardous or significantly unpleasant conditions. Air-conditioned buildings; tile, concrete and carpeted floors; adjustable workstation with ergonomic keyboard is provided.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES AND REQUIREMENTS OF THIS POSITION: While performing the duties of this job, the employee is regularly required to talk or hear and frequently required to stand, walk, sit, and use hands to handle files, computers, and phones; reach with hands and arms; stoop, and kneel. Frequent and regular repetitive movements required using the wrists, hands, and/or fingers. The employee will occasionally lift and/or move up to 40 pounds. Specific vision abilities include close vision, distance vision, color vision, peripheral vision, depth perception, and the ability to adjust focus. The above statements and job description is intended to describe the nature and level of work being performed within this job. They are not intended to be an exhaustive list of all responsibilities, duties and tasks. Other similar or additional duties are to be performed or assigned. Job descriptions are not intended as and do not create employment contracts. William Jessup University maintains its status as an at-will employer. Employees may be terminated for any reason not prohibited by law. I acknowledge I have reviewed the content of this job description and understand that if I have any physical limitations or require any reasonable accommodations in order to perform my job, I must immediately inform administration.
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