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Student-Athlete Retention: An Analysis of Student-Athlete Retention At A Small, Private, Highly Residential NCAA Division II Institution In The Southeast

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STUDENT-ATHLETE RETENTION: AN ANALYSIS OF

STUDENT-ATHLETE RETENTION AT A SMALL, PRIVATE, HIGHLY

RESIDENTIAL NCAA DIVISION II INSTITUTION IN THE

SOUTHEAST

by

Malcolm Kendrick Reed

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Education

Spadoni College of Education and Social Sciences

Coastal Carolina University

May 2022

Coastal Carolina University Graduate School

STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

Retaining students in higher education is ever-changing, requiring continual evaluation and institutional commitment to ensure measures are implemented to meet the varying demands of today's college students. Student-athletes make up a large percentage of the overall student population on many college campuses, thus, warranting further research to understand trends and factors that impact the retention of this key group of students. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contributed to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast.

The study focused on the experiences of student-athletes at an institution located in the Southeast region of the United States that is classified as a small, highly residential institution by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions in Higher Education, has private distinction, and is affiliated with an NCAA Division II conference. The study was qualitative in nature and collected data using six focus groups, observations, and document reviews. Once analyzed, the findings of this research study yielded six emergent themes of why student-athletes are retained: (1) college athletic participation, (2) personalized academic experience, (3) family atmosphere, (4) supportive teammates, (5) financial support, and (6) personal development. Implications from this research can be used by higher education institutions to increase student-athlete retention on campus.

Keywords: retention, national collegiate athletic association, division II, private institution, student-athlete, small college, intercollegiate sport, enrollment, social integration, transfer
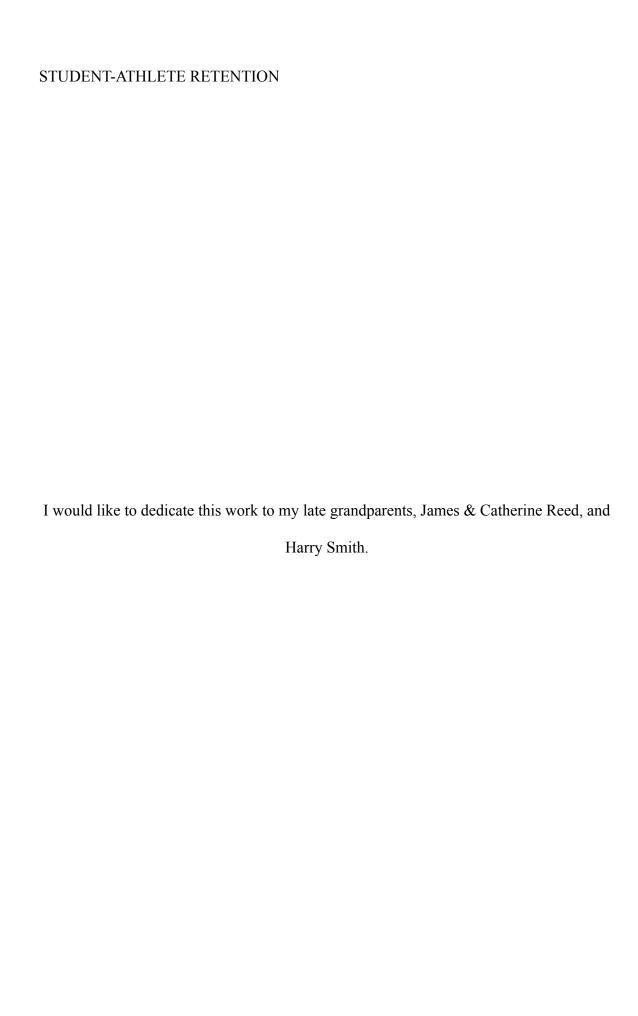
I would like to dedicate this work to my late grandparents, James & Catherine Reed, and

Harry Smith.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"I grabbed a pen and a napkin, and I wrote this down." -Morgan Wallen. This project would not have been possible without the support and guidance of many individuals. First, I would like to thank my dissertation committee for their guidance and support. Debbie, thanks for your support and investment in this project and for always being an encouraging and listening ear. We did it! Craig, your expertise and passion for students and research have been evident since the first day we met. Thank you for always answering all my questions and investing in me. Jason, where do I start? I knew you were special from the first time I met you at my new student orientation in June of 2011. Thanks for being the best mentor, friend, and joining me on this adventure. I continue to want to be like you when I grow up!

To my friends and family, thanks for your continued support and understanding when I "needed to stay home and write." Mom and dad, thanks for constantly pushing me to achieve my dreams and providing me with a foundation to reach for the stars. To my sisters, thanks for being the best support system I could ask for and pushing me when I felt like giving up. Jasmine, Cameron, Kaiden, Amarian, Jaron, and Oakleigh. I hope I made you all proud and set an example that you can accomplish anything.

This would not be possible without the best mentors and friends I could ever ask for; thank you. Jason, Brandi, Jeremy, Whitney, Andy, Tracy, and Tony, thanks for always being a call or text away, for your support of my academic and professional careers, and for substantially contributing to who I am today. Thank you! Finally, cohort one! Wow, what a journey it has been. Meaghan, thanks for being my support system since day one and pushing me through this program. I would not be here without you. Cindy, Amanda,

and Tonya, your support and friendship have meant the world to me, and I could not have

accomplished this without you all. Thanks for being the glue that kept our higher

education group together and ensuring we all made it to the finish line.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

With nearly half a million students competing in 24 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) affiliated sports at institutions across the country, student-athletes make up a large percentage of the overall student demographic on a college campus (NCAA, 2021c). For NCAA Division I institutions, 1 in 23 students are student-athletes, at the NCAA Division II level, 1 in 10 students compete in athletics, compared to 1 in 6 at the NCAA Division III level (NCAA, 2021c). Like other subgroups of the student population, student-athletes enter college with risks that can jeopardize their successful transition and integration into an institution (Melendez, 2006). Student-athletes often arrive at institutions with expectations of what the student-athlete experience will entail but become overwhelmed by the demands of college athletics once immersed fully into the institution (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). The demands of being a student-athlete can have adverse effects on the overall experience of a student-athlete.

Student-athletes are forced to balance numerous commitments while competing in collegiate athletics. In addition to remaining healthy to compete in their sport, student-athletes must maintain academic standards to be eligible to compete, attend study halls, meet demands set by the coaching staff, all while striving to enjoy the social aspects that come with being a college student (Gayles, 2009; Njororai, 2010). When coupling the pressure associated with competing as a college athlete with additional factors impacting the retention of all students including (e.g., institutional, environmental, interactional, and economic), institutions find themselves managing a student demographic with even higher risks as they navigate the college environment (Aljohani, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987). If institutions do not implement

measures to assist student-athletes with navigating their time as college athletes, they risk this key population having a negative experience and deciding to leave the institution.

The desire to understand and improve retention trends in higher education is not a modern trend (Aljohani, 2016). Seeking a better understanding of student transfer patterns, one study examined a fall 2011 cohort of 2.8 million first-time students, finding that 38% of all undergraduate students who initially enrolled in a four-year institution transferred institutions at least once (National Student Clearing House Research Center, 2018). With the financial health of an institution remaining a top priority of administrators across the country, retaining students becomes a critical component in meeting enrollment and budget goals.

Due to the complexities of retention, theorists such as Astin (1993), Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), and Bean (1980) have proposed numerous factors that contribute to the decision of a student to return to an institution for the second year and beyond. Bean (1980) focused on psychological, social, academic, and financial factors in a student's persistence decision. Astin (1993) contributed to the retention literature, introducing his student development theory, rooted in the belief that academic and social factors are essential for student retention. The work of Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), highly cited in the retention field and the foundation of this study, identified integration in both the academic and social structures of an institution as being paramount for student retention. While these theories provide the structure for understanding student retention, they do not fully account for all factors that impact student retention and pay little to no attention to the experiences of student population subgroups.

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Few peer-review studies have investigated the student-athlete population in terms of retention (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). Because student-athletes, by nature of their commitments while enrolled at an institution, have a different overall experience than their peers, it is essential to understand the unique factors that impact this population's decision to persist and retain. Weiss and Robinson (2013) identified six factors that contribute to the retention of student-athletes: 1) the relationship with the head coach, 2) satisfaction with the athletic department, 3) team success, 4) personal reasons, 5) academic concerns, and 6) player development.

Background and Conceptual Framework

The embedding of college athletics into the culture in the United States is significant, originating with the first intercollegiate rowing race between Harvard and Yale and growing into the billion-dollar market that many know today (Benford, 2007; Bowen et al., 2003). Though many institutional constituents criticize the role college athletics play in accomplishing the overall mission of higher education, numerous institutions continue to incorporate college athletics into their decision-making due to the financial benefits. For institutions both small and large, though the financial impacts of college athletics may vary, both have positively benefited from the presence of college athletics (Orszag & Orszag, 2005; Wright, 2017).

Small, private institutions have continued to adapt practices to ensure steady enrollment to support institutional operating costs. These institutions have diversified strategies to increase enrollment by promoting collegiate athletic participation to potential new students (Wright, 2017). While adding new sports teams creates additional expenses for the institution through added personnel, travel, and startup costs, revenue generated

from the additional new students support the college's financial goals. The increase in enrollment as a result of new sports teams increases the overall student population. The increase in revenue from enrollment supports the financial health of the institution and provides resources that allow for increased services for the entire student population. With the impact new athletic teams can have on enrollment and budgets, many small, private institutions see college athletics necessary for institutional stability (Goss et al., 2006).

This study focused on factors that contributed to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast. As previously stated, student-athletes have unique challenges they navigate during their enrollment which have the potential to impact their retention. Though retention in higher education has been well researched, few studies investigate retention of student-athletes (Mangold et al., 2003). Student-athletes, particularly at the NCAA Division II level, make up a large portion of the student population (NCAA, 2021c). The results of this study will fill a gap in the student-athlete retention literature. Additionally, this study will assist institutions, particularly small, private, highly residential ones, in making data-driven decisions to retain student-athletes at a higher rate.

This study used Tinto's (1975, 1993) student departure theory which suggests that students are retained in higher education when they are integrated into the academic and social environments of the institutions. Student-athletes are integrated into the social environment of the institution not only through participation in college athletics but through engagement in campus extracurricular activities, interactions with faculty, and interactions with peers other than their teammates (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Additionally, this study utilized the work of Braxton et al. (2004) and Braxton, Doyle et al., (2014) as a lens to explore the topic of student-athlete retention. Given the need to further explore student retention, researchers have created a pathway to investigate the topic on different residential college campuses (Braxton et al., 2004). Furthermore, Braxton et al. (2004) suggest that research be done on different subgroups of college students. This study utilized Braxton's revised theory to answer the research questions with a specific population and at an additional residential campus.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education institutions have prioritized college athletics on their campuses for numerous years. For many small, private institutions, the use of college athletic participation as a tool for increasing overall student enrollment is a practice that has been successful in the past (Alden, 2000). While many of these institutions have open admissions practices and are least selective, they have sought to diversify efforts to increase enrollment. For first-time, full-time degree-seeking undergraduate students who enrolled at private, nonprofit institutions with open admissions practices during the 2018-2019 academic year, 62% retained (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). With more than 100,000 student-athletes competing at the NCAA Division II level comprised of hundreds of small, private institutions, the ability for these institutions to retain student-athletes is vital for institutional and student-athlete success.

While researchers such as Tinto (1975) suggest that academic and social integration impacts student retention, there is a lack of understanding if this holds true for subpopulations such as student-athletes. Existing literature suggests student-athletes may leave for numerous reasons including a college experience different from expected, their

relationship with the head coach, or the team culture (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). Further

research is needed to substantiate these claims and explore other factors. This study seeks

to provide administrators with a better understanding of how to improve the retention of

student-athletes on their campus.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contributed to the

retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II

institution in the Southeast. The study focused on the experiences of student-athletes at an

institution located in the Southeast region of the United States classified as a small,

highly residential institution by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions in Higher

Education, have private distinction, and are affiliated with an NCAA Division II

conference. This study will add to the literature surrounding student-athlete retention by

focusing on a small, private, highly residential institution in the Southeast and

student-athletes retained at the institution. The qualitative research study identified:

RQ1: What factors contribute to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private,

highly residential NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast?

Significance of the Study

While many studies have explored retention patterns of various student

demographics, few have sought to understand more about the retention rates of

student-athletes (Mangold et al., 2003). Much of the literature surrounding

student-athletes on college and university campuses examined the relationship between

athletic participation and graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This study is

essential to contribute to the current knowledge surrounding retention as it focuses on a

subgroup with limited research related to retention. While student-athletes compete at numerous institution types, for small, private, highly residential institutions that enroll student-athletes as a mechanism to increase enrollment, the need to better understand student-athlete retention factors is apparent. The contributions of this research will provide these institutions and those looking to increase student-athlete retention with a better understanding of the experiences of this population and factors that impact their retention. As a result, institutions will be provided with resources to develop strategic and intentional plans to address retention needs of student-athletes.

Definition of Terms

Academic Integration. Academic integration is defined by students' academic performance, level of intellectual development, and perception of having a positive experience in academic settings (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Enrollment Size. Full-time equivalent enrollment is based on IPEDS Fall 2017 enrollment data, with FTE calculated as full-time headcount plus one-third part-time headcount. For four-year institutions, it is based on degree-seeking students at all levels (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2021).

Highly Residential. At least half of degree-seeking undergraduates live on campus and at least 80% attend full time (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2021).

Intercollegiate Sport. Sports played at the collegiate level for which eligibility requirements for participation by a student-athlete are established by a national association for the promotion or regulation of college athletics (Legal Information Institute, 2021).

NCAA. An acronym that represents the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The National Collegiate Athletic Association is a member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes (NCAA, 2021b).

NCAA Division II Athletics. NCAA Division II is a collection of more than 300 colleges and universities that conduct their athletics programs as part of the parent National Collegiate Athletic Association. The NCAA's mission is to govern athletics competition in a fair, safe, equitable and sportsmanlike manner; to integrate intercollegiate athletics as part of the educational experience; and to position athletics as a pathway to lifelong opportunity (NCAA, 2021b).

Private Institution. An independent school that sets its own policies and goals and is privately funded (Petersons, 2017).

Retention. Institutional measure whereby a student returns to the same institution for their second year (Hagedorn, 2006; Hewitt & Rose-Adams, 2013).

Retention Rate. Percentage of students who return to the same institution (National Student Clearing House Research Center, 2018).

Small College. A bachelor's or higher degree-granting institution whose fall enrollment data indicate full-time equivalent enrollment of 1,000–2,999 degree-seeking students (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2021).

Social Integration. Involvement in extracurricular activities and the presence of positive relationships with peers (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Student-Athlete. An individual who engages in, is eligible to engage in, or may be eligible in the future to engage in, any *intercollegiate* sport (Legal Information Institute, 2021).

Transfer Process. Student movement within higher education providers and the institutional processes supporting students who may move with credit applicable to a degree or certificate (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

An assumption of this study is that participants will respond to the open-ended questions with open and honest answers. Due to the personal nature of the questions being asked in the study, students may choose to respond with an answer that they think the interviewer would "prefer" to hear than provide an honest reflection of their experience at the institution. It is also an assumption within this study that all institutions host college athletics as an enrollment strategy. An additional assumption within this study is that data on reasons student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution were retained can be gathered from focus group interviews, observations, and document reviews and applied to theory to contribute to the field. A final assumption of this study is that the institution being studied will provide accurate and consistent retention data that is valid and trusted to enhance the data collection and validation process.

Delimitations

The researcher acknowledges delimitations to the scope of this study to include the exclusion of varied participants, the study only being limited to a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast, the selected institution and the exclusion of college students who are not student-athletes. Limiting the study to only student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution

in the Southeast is a delimitation because it does not open the study to all students that may have decided to retain at their institution. Not including student-athletes that attend small, private, highly residential NCAA Division I, III, or NAIA institutions is a delimitation because those students meet two of the three areas for inclusion in the study. Additionally, the selected research site due to a professional relationship with administration at the institution was a delimitation in this study.

Limitations

The study was conducted at one institution, and future researchers could replicate this study with a larger sample of institutions or students. Additionally, the lack of empirical data related to student-athlete retention at small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institutions in the Southeast is a potential limitation in this study. The researcher will utilize theories and best practices in retention to frame the qualitative data gathered through this research.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to determine the factors that contribute to the retention of student-athletes at small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institutions in the Southeast. Prior research on student retention has demonstrated various factors that influence a student's decision to retain but prior literature fails to fully explore the experiences of student-athletes. With an increased focus on institutional budgets and enrollment, small, private institutions have continued to adapt practices to ensure steady enrollment to support institutional operating costs, leveraging college athletics in many instances. The results of this study will provide stakeholders with a better understanding

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of the student-athlete experience and as a result, how to better retain student-athletes on their campuses.

This chapter introduces student-athlete retention and starts the discussion on its impact on higher education. Chapter II frames the discussion by reviewing the literature on college student retention, college athletics, and higher education. Chapter III explains the methodology used in the study. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study, with Chapter V drawing conclusions about the findings.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Student retention has been a critical issue since the establishment of formal education (Aljohani, 2016). The literature on student retention is rich, filled with decades of studies seeking to understand why students are retained and why they often choose to leave. While student retention is a top priority at institutions for various reasons, one key factor is its impact on college and university operating budgets. With student tuition dollars being a significant source of the operating budgets for many colleges and universities, continually meeting enrollment goals is vital for an institution's health. The present state of higher education enrollment has forced institutions to seek further understanding of factors that impact retention on campus. For institutions to accomplish this task, utilizing strategies based on scientific findings is paramount for leaders to understand the impact of the student retention phenomenon (Aljohani, 2016).

In examining student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential institution, this study explored the factors that contributed to their retention. The purpose of this chapter is to review the current and historical research on the topics of student retention, higher education, and college athletics. To fully understand the contexts of the various areas being studied, this chapter presents a review of relevant retention literature, including Tinto's integration theory (1975) and Braxton, Doyle et al. (2014) revision of Tinto's integration theory. Additionally, the chapter explores the current state of college athletics in America, the small, private institution, and the experiences of student-athletes. The study will further advance student-athlete retention research by providing college and

university administrators with the tools necessary to better serve and retain student-athletes.

Student Retention Theories

With the complexities of student retention in higher education, researchers explore the phenomenon to gain further information to enhance student retention literature (Sparkman et al., 2012). Many researchers have sought to understand factors that impact college students' desires to leave an institution. Astin (1993) significantly contributed to student retention literature in higher education when he introduced the development theory of student involvement. In Astin's student development theory, academic and social factors were identified as contributing to student retention (Astin, 1993; Sparkman et al., 2012). Astin (1993) found that the level of effort a student exerts both socially and academically directly influences the student to retain by their involvement.

Bean (1980) also contributed heavily to student retention and persistence in higher education literature. Bean developed the model of student departure based on organizational theory surrounding the attrition of employees (Bean, 1980; Sparkman et al., 2012). Bean's model incorporated various factors that impact a student's satisfaction with an institution. Those factors were both objective and subjective and included grade point average, belonging to campus organizations, as well as education and instruction quality (Sparkman et al., 2012). The noted factors impact a student's level of satisfaction at the college or university, which Bean states influence the degree to which the student is satisfied with the institution (Sparkman et al., 2012). Astin (1993) and Bean (1980) are

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among the most cited in student retention literature. Their work laid a foundation for future studies to further understand the complexities of student retention.

Tinto's Institutional Departure Model

Tinto first published his Institutional Departure Model, also known as student departure theory, in 1975. Since its inception, Tinto has reevaluated and adjusted his initial model of institutional departure, with many other researchers also expanding on his work (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto's Institutional Departure Model is built upon Spady's (1970, 1971) theoretical views of the interaction between students and their institution's academic and social systems. Spady's primary assumption in his initial work was that the outcome of this interaction determines the level of a student's integration within the institution's academic and social systems, which subsequently impacts their persistence (Aljohani, 2016). Spady later tested these assumptions through a longitudinal study of a sample of 683 new students in 1965 at the University of Chicago. This study influenced Spady's (1971) final Undergraduate Dropout Process Model.

Tinto's (1975) Institutional Departure Model was based on Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide. Durkheim (1951) stated that suicide could be attributed to an individual's lack of social and intellectual integration into the social life of society (Aljohani, 2016). This linking point between suicidal behavior and student attrition behavior appears early in Spady's (1970, 1971) and Tinto's (1975) retention models. Tinto (1993) would argue that while dropping out from a higher education institution is not necessarily equivalent to failing, familiarities exist with the process of suicide in that both behaviors can be thought of as a form of withdrawal. (Aljohani, 2016).

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Tinto's Institutional Departure Model hypothesized that a student's persistence or departure reflects their success or failure in being incorporated into the institution's community (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto's final version of the Institutional Departure Model stated that colleges consist of academic and social systems, and to persist at the academic institutions, students need to be integrated into both systems (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's Institutional Departure Model stated that students enter college with pre-entry attributes, including their family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling, which shape their initial goals and commitments (Aljohani, 2016). The model asserts that the student's academic and social integration at the institution will modify their initial goals and commitments, affecting their decision to stay or leave the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993).

Tinto (1975) noted that the social integration component is focused on the interaction between the student and their specific background and other characteristics within the college community. These connections can take place through student organizations, student/faculty interactions, or through friendships and conversations amongst peers. He stated that academic integration is a student's academic performance and perception of having a positive academic experience. This is accomplished through the student's ability to meet academic expectations at the university and to identify the norms and values of the institution. Tinto hypothesizes that the stronger the integration between the social and academic systems of the campus experience, the greater the likelihood the student persists, with lower integration resulting in the student departing (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Tinto declared that academic and social integration had to align for the student to be retained at the institution.

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Braxton's Revised Theory of Student Departure

For decades, researchers have sought to test and validate the work of Tinto. Though Tinto's Institutional Departure Model has been heavily cited, many scholars question the validity and relevance of Tinto's work (Braxton, Doyle et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 2004). Stating aspects of Tinto's work and assumptions were not fully supported, Berger and Braxton (1998) revised the student retention model of Tinto (1993) through a method they described as theory elaboration (Aljohani, 2016). Braxton et al. (1997) stated that Tinto's model needed a revision due to empirical inconsistency.

Braxton et al. (1997) tested 13 of Tinto's primary propositions using a box score method to determine the strength of support. For this study, strong empirical support was ascribed to a proposition if 66 percent or more of three or more tests of that proposition yielded statistically significant (Braxton, Doyle et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 1997). Moderate support was ascribed if 34 to 65 percent produced statistically significant backing, and weak if 33 percent or less of three or more tests of that proposition produced statistically significant and confirming results (Braxton, Daxton et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 1997). Braxton et al. (1997) concluded that there was evidence to support 5 of the propositions. Those five propositions include student entry characteristics, initial institutional commitment, subsequent institutional commitment, initial goal commitment, and subsequent goal commitment. Proposition 13, pivotal to the foundation of Tinto's model, received robust empirical confirmation; proposition 9, the key to validating the interactionalist component of Tinto's model, also received strong empirical backing (Braxton et al., 1997). Braxton et al. (2004) stated that four of the propositions are logically connected:

Students enter college with various characteristics that influence their initial level

of commitment to the college or university that they chose to attend (Proposition

1). This initial level of institutional commitment also affects their subsequent

commitment to the institution (Proposition 10). Social integration also affects

subsequent institutional commitment. The greater a student's degree of social

integration, the greater his or her subsequent commitment to the institution

(Proposition 9). The greater the degree of a student's subsequent commitment to

the institution, the greater his or her likelihood of persisting in college

(Proposition 13). (pp.13-14)

Other propositions received moderate or weak empirical backings in this study, thus

concluding that the use of academic integration in single-institutional studies was not

supported.

Furthermore, Braxton et al. (2004) proposed removing academic integration from

Tinto's institutional departure model and replacing it with propositions addressing social

integration. With influence from the noted studies above, Braxton et al. (2014) developed

the foundation for the revised theory of student departure in residential colleges and

universities to confirm the role of social integration in student retention and persistence.

Braxton et al. (2014) noted that the factors that directly impact social integration, which

influences persistence, include: commitment of the institution to student welfare,

communal potential, institutional integrity, positive social adjustment, psychological

engagement.

Braxton et al. (2014) utilized the Fall Collegiate Experience Survey (FCES) and

the Spring Collegiate Experiences Survey (SCES) to measure the influence on social

integration. Using a sample size of 408 first-time, full-time, first-year students in eight residential colleges, the study concluded that the revised theory of college student persistence provides robust empirical support in residential colleges (Braxton et al., 2014). The results from the study found that psychological engagement, the commitment of the institution to student welfare, and institutional integrity positively influences social integration. Study results also confirmed the positive and significant influence subsequent institutional commitment had on student persistence.

Review of the Literature

The Student-Athlete

Though the debate surrounding the commercialization of college athletics remains at the center of college athletics, student-athlete experiences remain a critical factor in the discussion. Student-athletes make up a large percentage of students attending college and universities across the country. The NCAA (2021c) reported that nearly half a million NCAA student-athletes compete at member institutions. Both student-athletes and their non-athlete peers come from diverse backgrounds and face a variety of obstacles while attending institutions. While these similar characteristics are present, student-athletes face unique challenges due to their athletic status (Njororai, 2010).

Student-athletes are expected to excel academically while spending several hours each week practicing their sport (Gayles, 2009). There are numerous demands associated with being a student-athlete, including attending classes, practices, workouts, and study halls. These demands create challenges for student-athletes as they navigate the college environment (Njororai, 2010). All divisional levels of NCAA athletes experience time constraints that can create additional challenges (Gayles, 2009). These demands are most

arduous for freshmen athletes as they struggle to balance their transition from high school into a college setting. These obstacles can negatively impact the overall perception of the student-athlete experience.

The academic demands of being a student-athlete coupled with the pressure associated with eligibility requirements add to the stress experienced by student-athletes (Njororai, 2010). Student-athletes who compete at the NCAA level are governed under strict eligibility criteria that impact their ability to compete and substantially impact their college experience. Student-athletes are forced to meet specific GPA requirements to maintain scholarships while striving to excel athletically. The added stress to maintain eligibility and ensure student-athletes have the grades necessary to compete and maintain scholarships, impact the student-athletes' health and their overall institutional experience.

In addition to academic and eligibility pressures, student-athletes experience external pressures while competing in college athletics specific to their subpopulation that contributes to their overall experience at an institution. Demands and added pressure from the coaching staff are stressors that are unique to student-athletes. Coaches often control many aspects of a student athlete's life. Meals, housing, schedule, time usage, and team bonding activities are aspects of a student athlete's day and life governed mainly by their coach (Njororai, 2010). While student-athletes often develop a sense of self-sacrifice and a dedication to succeed, the added pressures can often create an environment where student-athletes experience burnout from their athletic commitments and requirements.

Furthermore, student-athletes deal with many experiences specific to their subpopulation while navigating their time competing in college athletics. Those

experiences include dealing with the physical demands of their sport, time constraints associated with being a student-athlete, the varying demands presented to them by their coaches, and concerns with remaining academically eligible (Njororai, 2010). These demands are in addition to numerous other pressures that impact their experience on college and university campuses. Though similar in some respects, student-athlete experiences are simply different from that of their non-athlete peers. Ensuring this subpopulation of students is accommodated and intentionally integrated into the institution's learning environment remains essential (Gayles, 2009; Njororai, 2010). Institutions must strive to ensure that mechanisms to support student-athletes academic and athletic success are developed and implemented to address the needs of this population.

Student-Athlete Retention Research

As researchers continue to seek understanding of the retention phenomenon and the numerous complexities that impact a student's desire to depart, many have emphasized the importance of focusing on subdivisions of the general student body within retention (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). As a subdivision of the general student body, student-athletes are a group that has not been a primary focus of retention investigation (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that much of the literature surrounding studies on student-athletes deals with graduation and less with persistence. Researchers such as Astin (1993) have highlighted the impact of involvement on student retention, while others such as Braxton et al. (2014) focused on integration related to student departure. More research is needed to understand the retention patterns of student-athletes.

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Few scholarly works have been published to understand why student-athletes are retained on their athletic team or the college or university they are attending (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). Additionally, few researchers have sought to understand the complexities of this student population (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). A 2020 Gallup study on the college experience and life outcomes of college graduates who competed in NCAA athletics found that 22% of participants transferred to the institution from which they had graduated (Gallup, 2020). Although this percentage is smaller than their non-athlete peers, a need to further understand why student-athletes depart from an institution still exists. In their research, Adler and Adler (1985) found that student-athletes enter college with high initial expectations and become overwhelmed by the demands of being a student and an athlete once they enroll. Once the optimism subsides, coupled with rigorous academics, student-athletes find themselves in academic demise and ultimately experience overall difficulties with college life (Adler & Adler, 1985).

The Le Crom et al. (2009) study is one of the first to contribute to the literature on student-athlete retention. This study was designed to determine the impact of scholarship support, gender, and sport-type (individual or team) have on student-athlete retention. The scholars utilized a sample of eight institutions and 12,980 participants. The researchers summarized:

a) scholarship support alone was not significantly related to retention; b) gender was a significant predictor of retention with female SA having higher rates of retention than their male counterparts; c) sport type was a significant predictor of retention with individual sport SA having higher rates of retention than team sport

SA; d) scholarship support, gender, and sport type were all significant predictors

of retention (Le Crom et al., 2009, p. 20).

Findings had numerous implications for athletic departments and the NCAA, such as

providing data to inform athletic department policies and decision-making (Le Crom et

al., 2009). Moreover, the study's results serve as a foundation for future researchers

exploring factors related to student-athlete retention. The limitations within this study

present a need for further understanding of the student-athlete retention phenomenon.

To extend earlier studies on student-athlete retention, Weiss and Robinson (2013)

identified factors involved in retaining student-athletes at NCAA Division II institutions.

Participants in this study were either active in athletics at the institution or had previously

competed in NCAA Division II athletics. This study used a Likert Scale survey designed

to understand college issues related to retention, the college environment, and the

student-athlete experience. Broadly defined areas related to the retention of

student-athletes were specified in this study, and those areas are further explained below.

The results from the Weiss and Robinson (2013) study revealed six key factors

that contributed to the retention of current and former student-athletes 1) the relationship

with the head coach, 2) satisfaction with the athletic department, 3) team success, 4)

personal reasons, 5) academic concerns, and 6) player development. Additionally, a

connection was made between how active student-athletes are during their time on a

college campus and the direct impact it has on their chances of overall retention and

graduation (Weiss & Robinson, 2013). Leaving a college athletic team often means

student-athletes lose the added academic resources and support system provided for

student-athletes initially received, which may increase academic difficulties and impact

their progression to graduation (Weiss & Robinson, 2013).

The Small, Private Institution

The founding of American higher education dates back almost 330 years. While

many components of higher education in the United States have changed, some of the

critical attributes of its foundations remain true. The advancements of college life

between 1870 to 1890 are critical to today's college and university campuses. During this

period, institutions relaxed rules and discipline governing student behavior, expansion to

on-campus living options were introduced, and students were gaining the ability to

choose activities to participate in during their free time with the introduction of physical

activity and numerous clubs (Geiger, 2014). The emergence of Greek life and athletics

further expanded opportunities for students on college campuses across the country

(Geiger, 2014). While widely accepted at many institutions, church-related campuses

opposed such activities while other institutions battled over modernization (Geiger,

2014).

As the higher education landscape continues to change, small, private institutions

have had to adapt practices to keep their doors open (Hartley, 2017). Small, private

institutions or independent colleges and universities have played a role in establishing the

American higher education system. Since their inception, independent colleges have

played a vital role in educating students and continue to fulfill that mission today

(Hartley, 2017). Hartley (2017) noted that these institutions are often members of the

Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). Additionally, these institutions make up a quarter

of four-year colleges and universities in the United States and account for 13% of total

four-year student enrollment (Hartley, 2017). Small, private institutions have similar

characteristics to traditional, residential, undergraduate institutions offering small class

sizes, supportive student-faculty relationships, and are often tuition-dependent (Hartley,

2017).

Independent colleges add value to the communities and students they serve

(Taylor & Weerts, 2017). Since their inception, these institutions have been rooted in the

desire to equip the public and graduate students with the tools and training necessary to

impact society (Taylor & Weerts, 2017). Continuing to enroll more students from diverse

backgrounds has also been a trend of independent colleges, expanding access and

inclusion efforts to more individuals who, in return, can positively impact their

communities. Schreiner (2017) noted that students who choose independent colleges

benefit from their time at their institutions. The author summarized:

> Students attending private colleges and universities are more likely to be engaged
>
> in educationally effective experiences than those attending public institutions. In
>
> addition, students attending private non-doctoral four-year institutions are more
>
> likely to engage in multiple high-impact practices, be academically challenged,
>
> and encounter effective teaching practices (Schreiner, 2017, p. 121).

Educating students has been a point of pride and celebration for independent institutions

and assists in solidifying their place in the American higher education system.

As the value of higher education and a college degree continues to be questioned,

so are independent institutions' educational quality and effectiveness. Since 2005, the

CIC has sought to research, market, and debunk myths relating to student experiences at

independent colleges in the United States. Composed of over 100 unique research studies

and data sets, the CIC's "Making the Case" research focuses on independent colleges'

finances, enrollment, and graduation rates (The Council of Independent Colleges, 2021).

One pivotal annual report from the Council of Independent Colleges is the average total

student loan debt study. Higher tuition and fee costs are often associated with

independent colleges. In its most recent study, the CIC found that the average debt level

of a bachelor's degree was $19,500, only $4,600 more than that of a public institution,

highlighting the affordability of independent colleges.

Concerns surrounding enrollment trends, increasing deficits, and the future of

higher education are not mutually exclusive to small colleges, as many institutions are

watching these trends (Eide, 2018). Though all institutions face pressures in today's

higher education climate, public institutions often are presented with deep applicant

pools, frequently limitless resources from endowments, alumni support, and government

funding, benefits many independent college administrators do not have available (Eide,

2018). In a 2017 study published by the Council of Independent Colleges, it was

identified that roughly one-third of the 560 private schools examined in the study fell

short of the benchmark standard for financial health, with institutions enrolling less than

1,000 students seeing weaker overall financial health compared to peers with larger

enrollment.

The linkage between financial health and college admissions selectivity has

emerged in discussions surrounding small private institutions. Eide's (2018) research

focused on 950 four-year private colleges utilizing 2016 comprehensive data from the

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Findings showed that private

institutions that are less selective have significantly lower endowments than their highly

selective peers and lower tuition prices but similar averages for net price for students receiving financial aid (Eide, 2018). Eide research highlights some of the issues facing less-selective private institutions regarding cost. Students and families may find a tuition discount at a highly selective institution more financially appealing due to the name recognition and competitiveness to gain admission, while the same offer at a less selective institution does not meet their expectations (Eide, 2018).

Many researchers have sought to understand the state of small private institutions, their challenges, and possible threats. Taylor and Weerts (2017) noted that providing the personalized experience that independent colleges pride themselves on is costly for institutions that already face financial troubles. Continued financial troubles, tuition discounting practices, competition with state schools, and enrollment and retention are concerns that many researchers raise for the future of independent institutions (Eide, 2018; Taylor & Weerts, 2017). Independent colleges are essential in higher education and articulating their value in society and their benefit to students who attend is critical (Taylor & Weerts, 2017).

Astin and Lee (1972) examined 491 private, nonselective, four-year institutions and deemed them invisible colleges due to their lack of popularity and concerns related to their financial well-being. Of the 491 institutions studied during the initial empirical examination, as of 2012, 354 remained in operation, 80 had closed, and 57 had either merged with another institution, lost accreditation, or converted to a different institutional type. Approximately 46 years later, 84% of the original institutions observed by Astin and Lee remained open. The ability for these institutions to remain open after being

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identified as at-risk highlighted how private, nonselective institutions adapt and evolve

(Tarrant et al., 2018).

College Athletics in America

The commercialization of college athletics has drawn critics from institutional

constituents who question how intercollegiate athletics contribute to an institution's

academic mission (Benford, 2007). Founded in 1906, the NCAA credits its founding on

the principles of regulating the rules of college sport and protecting young athletes

(National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2021d). The NCAA includes 1,908 colleges

and universities across the country; the NCAA is divided into 102 athletic conferences

and three legislative and competitive divisions (NCAA, 2021c). In 2019, NCAA athletic

departments accounted for over 18.9 billion dollars in reported revenue for the 2018-2019

academic year (NCAA, 2021a). With large portions of revenue from college athletic

departments being attributed to lucrative television deals, many have completed research

to understand what role college athletics play at institutions across the country, often

citing the phenomenon as "sorry" and "broken" (Benford, 2007; Bowen et al., 2003).

Calls to reform the state of college athletics continue to emerge from constituents

who question what role athletic participation has in an institution's student experience and

overall functions (Benford, 2007). Benford's 2007 study sheds light on the prominence of

the college sports reform movement and several problematic concerns surrounding the

phenomenon of college athletics (Benford, 2007). "The faculty-driven wing of the social

movement has identified several problems with intercollegiate athletics including (1)

commercialization; (2) university involvement in the entertainment industry; (3) damage

to the integrity of higher education; (4) exploitation of athletes; and (5) harm to

non-athletes" (Benford, 2007, p.1). With the concerns many critics have with college

athletics today, college administrators are placed in a position to choose between shifting

away from the focus of college athletics on their campus or continuing to invest in the

business that has transformed into college athletics.

College Athletics' Institutional Benefits

In the history of college athletics, many believed athletics were designed to build

character, teach participants life lessons outside of the classroom, and be an engagement

and entertainment tool for the campus community (Alexander & Kern, 2010). While

those core principles remain valid, college administrators are also integrating the business

aspects of college athletics into the purpose they serve on a college campus (Alexander &

Kern, 2010; Zimbalist, 2001). College athletics provides institutions an opportunity to

leverage intercollegiate competition as an avenue to support other programs.

There is a cost associated with implementing college athletics as a core

mechanism for supporting institutional operating budgets that institutions must justify.

During the fiscal year of 2019, more than 1,100 NCAA institutions spent over eighteen

billion dollars on athletics on their campus, with the majority of the cost being associated

with student-athlete scholarships and coaching compensation (NCAA, 2021a). College

athletic spending has forced university administrators to justify the reasons for these

spending practices doing so through highlighting the numerous added benefits associated

with college athletic participation for students and what success means for the institution

in return (Anderson, 2017).

Though few studies investigate the nature of college athletics on small college

campuses, the opportunity to leverage college athletics for institutional success is not an

exclusive benefit of large, Division I institutions with highly ranked and respected

athletic programs. While NCAA Division I football brings in the most revenue due to

lucrative television contracts and affiliations, there is still a market for smaller institutions

to benefit from intercollegiate athletics on their campus (NCAA, 2021a; Wright, 2017).

The average operating budget, athletic spending and overall revenue are significantly

lower in Division II athletics compared to Division I (Orszag & Orszag, 2005). With the

operating cost averaging more than the revenue gained in Division II athletics each year,

understanding the added value Division II athletics contributes outside of the athletic

department's bottom line is how many administrators justify athletic competition (Orszag

& Orszag, 2005).

Depending on the competition level, numerous small colleges award little

scholarship money to student-athletes allowing athletic departments at small institutions

to create a profit for student-athlete enrollment (Goss et al., 2006). College athletics can

create name recognition and publicity for small colleges and universities that they

otherwise may not receive (Wright, 2017). Local news coverage and media create name

recognition for many college athletics programs on the local and regional levels. For

programs that find success, national coverage is placed on small college athletics teams

and programs. The publicity gained from coverage of athletic programs can generate the

interest of new students and potential donors who would otherwise have not been familiar

with the institution.

College athletics has a direct impact on student life at an institution (Wright,

2017). For student-athletes, it gives them the ability to continue competing in their

chosen sport and be engaged at the college level (Feezell, 2009). College athletic

programs create numerous home events for students, faculty, staff, and community members to participate and gather in support of the institution (Wright, 2017). Spectator support builds culture and pride in the institution that assists with creating a vibrant campus while also assisting with financial growth through ticket sales (Feezell, 2009). In return, this creates a desire among spectators to invest in the institution and return regularly to athletic events. The enhancement to student life as a direct result of intercollegiate athletics allows students to feel connected to the institution and contributes to the overall student college experience that institutions hope translates into increased student pride for the institution and higher retention rates (Wright, 2017).

Small colleges and universities have begun to rely on the recruitment of student-athletes to ensure enrollment goals are met for institutional operating budgets (Alden, 2000). For decades, colleges and universities have utilized campus services such as extracurricular activities (student government, intramurals, drama) as a recruitment tool to attract students to the institution (Goss et al., 2006). These factors, added with the ability to promote college athletic participation, have been a prominent marketing tool for small colleges that may not have spectacular athletic programs but desire to attract students to the institution (Goss et al., 2006).

Numerous small colleges and universities have successfully marketed college athletics to potential new students and utilized this method to build enrollment (Wright, 2017). For small colleges, which are often tuition-driven, this practice is essential for keeping the institution open (Feezell, 2009; Wright, 2017). Gabert et al. (1999) examined factors contributing to college choice among first-year student-athletes. This study found that participation in college athletics and the reputation of the head coach were two

crucial components for student-athletes when selecting an institution. Other noted athletic-related factors that impacted the college choice of potential student-athletes in the study included the opportunity to play immediately, athletic traditions, and athletic facilities (Gabert et al., 1999).

While numerous academic and institutional characteristics factored into the college selection process for many student-athletes studied in the Gabert et al. (1999) research, the main factor that continued to emerge throughout was the importance of college athletics in the college selection process. Colleges and universities continue to recruit future student-athletes with similar selection factors and the desire to compete in college athletics for their institution through the marketing of college athletics. Which, in return, continues to positively impact institution enrollment, budgets, and the overall student experience.

Summary of Literature Review

Numerous researchers have sought to understand how institutions can improve retention practices (Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980; Braxton, Doyle et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993). While many theories have emerged to assist institutions with better understanding the factors that impact a student's decision to leave an institution, the complexity of the topic makes it nearly impossible to identify every critical component. Student retention becomes even more complex when factoring in the unique student experience at private institutions with student-athletes as a subgroup of the population. Expanding on Tinto's (1975) student departure theory, Braxton et al. (2014) believed in the importance of social integration as key to a student's commitment and intent to persist and provide a foundation for institutions to develop strategic retention practices. With the

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current landscape of higher education, retention plays a critical role in the institution's

operation. As colleges continue to increase enrollment through student recruitment, there

is added pressure to retain current students at higher rates.

Braxton et al. (2004) noted the need to conduct more research on subgroups of

college students and various residential campuses to understand the retention

phenomenon in a comprehensive manner. Though small colleges have been rooted into

the foundation of American higher education for decades, they continue to adapt

institutional practices to remain competitive and to fulfill the mission of their institutions.

As student-athletes, based on their contributions to institutions, have become a key

subpopulation, various researchers and institutions have attempted to better understand

the experiences of student-athletes and improve their retention. Although gaps remain in

the literature, student-athlete retention literature shows that the experiences and factors

impacting retention for student-athletes vary from that of a non-student-athlete. The

limited published studies on student-athlete retention justify further exploration of this

topic to provide institutions with strategies to retain this student population.

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a review of relevant literature

regarding retention in higher education, athletics in America, and student-athletes. Tinto's

theory of integration and Braxton's revised theory were reviewed. Current and historical

research was examined, and a gap in the literature surrounding student-athlete retention

in higher education was found.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Literature on retention in higher education is plentiful as the phenomenon remains a top priority for many institutions. Existing retention literature fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of various subgroups of the student population and factors that impact their retention at an institution. When studying student-athletes as a subgroup of a student population, much of the literature focuses on graduation rates. Few studies investigate why student-athletes persist at institutions. This study seeks to contribute to the current gap in the literature surrounding student-athlete retention by examining student-athlete experiences at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast.

The following research question guided this study:

RQ1: What factors contribute to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast?

Qualitative Research Design

Due to the nature of the study and the desire to contribute to the existing literature gap, a qualitative approach was implemented to adequately evaluate the individual student-athlete perspectives on factors that impacted their retention. Qualitative research is defined by Creswell (2007) as educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes. The key to qualitative research is learning about the issues from participants and engaging in best practices to obtain that information (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is appropriate

for this research study because it will help the researcher understand the experiences of student-athletes and factors that contribute to their retention through their own words. This will create a comprehensive assessment of factors that impact the retention of student-athletes on a small, private campus.

A case study design was used to execute the qualitative research for this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) define case study research as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes. Case study research can be on a single person, program, institution, community, or specific person (Patton, 2002). This study focused on a single phenomenon, student-athlete retention, and sought to identify factors of the phenomenon through a case study research design.

Stake (1995) noted three types of case studies: historical, observational, and life history. This case study utilized an observational design due to the nature of the participant's role in the data collection process. In an observation case study, participant interview is a major data collection technique. This approach allowed the researcher to create a new understanding of the factors that impacted the retention of student-athletes, which in return could provide higher education institutions with data to improve retention rates of student-athletes on their campuses.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research studies, the role of the researcher is quite different than that of a quantitative study, as the researcher serves as a human instrument during the data

collection process (Simon, 2011). Greenbank (2003) stated that it is critical for the researcher to describe relevant aspects of self, including any biases and assumptions, any expectations, and experiences to qualify his or her ability to conduct the research. Additionally, in a qualitative study, the researcher accepts the role their values have on the research and explicitly acknowledges their biases in the research process.

As the researcher, my experience working at small, private, institutions in the Southeast and directly with the retention of specific student populations including college athletes, makes the topic of student-athlete retention an interest of mine. In my role as Director of Student Success Programs and the First-Year Experience at a small, private institution, I was directly responsible for identifying factors that impacted student retention and I worked directly with campus constituents and departments to address barriers that impacted student retention. Working directly with student-athletes in this role to ensure they were positioned to be retained while building personal relationships makes this topic connected to my professional career. As a qualitative researcher, these personal experiences allowed me to build rapport with participants and to create an environment where students felt comfortable to reflect on their experiences and to allow me to obtain and reflect on those experiences. I then allowed the thematic analysis and development process to occur with no influences from my personal experiences.

Site Selection

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that for a case study, researchers need to select a site or sites to study, such as programs, events, processes, activities, individuals, or several individuals. For this study, a small, private institution located in the Southeast was selected. The institution was selected due to its classification and NCAA Division II

affiliation. Additionally, the institution is located in the Southeast region of the United States. Due to convenience, campus location, and the researcher having a relationship with current administrators at the institution, the selected institution allowed for easy access for data collection.

A Small, Private NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast

The selected institution for this study is a private, four-year liberal arts institution located in the Southeast. Founded in the mid-1800s, the institution is one of the oldest in the Southeast and is accredited by the Commission on College of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The institution is approved to award bachelor's and master's degrees. With a student population of roughly 1,000 students, 52% are male, and 48% are female. Additionally, 34% of students identify as persons of color and 66% as white (Anonymous, 2022). Intercollegiate athletics has a strong presence at the institution, with 57% of all students competing in NCAA-sponsored athletics. Student-athletes at the institution compete for championships in 11 men's sports (baseball, basketball, cross country, Esports, football, golf, lacrosse, soccer, swimming, tennis, & track and field) and 12 women's sports (acrobatics and tumbling, basketball, cross country, Esports, golf, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming, tennis, track and field, and volleyball).

The institution has emphasized increasing retention and degree completion for all its students. The institution has increasingly seen retention rates for fall to fall, first-time, full-time students increase. In a four-year timeframe, the institution saw overall student retention increase by 16 percentage points to 73%, demonstrating its commitment to increasing its student retention rate and experience. Female student-athlete fall to fall

retention was 76%, while the retention rate for male student-athletes was 73%. While increasing the retention rate at the institutions remains the university's priority, the rate is comparable to peer institutions and serves as a benchmark for assessing efforts.

Participants

To have an in-depth understanding of factors that impact student-athlete retention at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast, it was important to gather data from participants that would provide insight into the student-athlete experience and its impact on retention. Case studies are often small in size, and thus with this study, purposeful sampling will be used to identify participants that can contribute insight into the specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants (n=28) in this study consisted of student-athletes who started at the institution as first-time freshman and returned for their second year and have competed in official NCAA intercollegiate athletics the entire time enrolled at the institution. The names of eligible student-athlete participants were provided by the institution's institutional research department.

The participants in this study were reflective of the overall student and student-athlete population at the institution. As previously stated, the overall institution has a student population that is 52% male and 48% female. Of the nearly 1,000 students enrolled at the institution, 34% identify as persons of color while 66% identify as white. When focusing on the 57% of the student population that compete in athletics, 60% are male with 40% being female. 65% of the student-athletes at the institution identify as white, while 35% identify as persons of color. Of the study participants, 57% were male and 43% were female, while 64% identified as white and 36% as persons of color. The

noted demographic of study participants was reflective of the student-athlete population at the institution providing future reliability of study results and strengthening the overall validity of the study.

Data Collection

Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that the hallmark of a good qualitative case study is that it presents an in-depth understanding of the case. This is accomplished by the researcher collecting and integrating many forms of qualitative data, including interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Various forms of data were collected for this case study. The primary data collection method in this study was six focus group interviews of student-athlete participants, observations and examination of documents by the researcher. Prior to submitting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, the researcher contacted the Office of the Provost at the research site to seek formal approval to complete the study at the institution. Following site approval and with a letter of support, the IRB application was submitted and approved by Coastal Carolina University (see Appendix D).

After receiving approval, the researcher was provided a list of student-athletes who fit the research criteria from the Office of Institutional Research at the research site. The researcher then emailed the participants asking for their participation and consent for the study (see Appendix A). The focus group interviews were scheduled and consisted of open-ended questions surrounding the student-athlete experience at the institution and its impact on retention (see Appendix B). All interviews took place in a group format, with 4-7 participants being interviewed at one time. A total of 6 focus group interviews were completed. A script was developed to assist the researcher in guiding the interviews, with

each interview lasting between 60-90 minutes. Participants completed an informed

consent form prior (see Appendix C) to the interview permitting the researcher to record

and transcribe the interview for data analysis. Transcribed audio was then gathered into a

written document for coding.

In addition to interviews, observations using field notes and reflective journaling

were utilized to gather additional data with an established protocol for notetaking being

developed that included descriptive and reflective notes being collected. Observations

included inspecting student-athletes interacting in practice, athletic competition, study

halls, and social spaces. Documents reviewed included a review of the institution's

website, student-athlete participant manuals, student handbook, institutional and

student-athlete retention data to better understand retention efforts currently in place at

the institution.

Data Analysis

Groenewald (2004) described a five-step process for analyzing qualitative data.

Those steps include bracketing, delineating, clustering, summarizing, and extracting

various themes to determine the phenomenon being explored in a study. The data

collection process was continuous in this study due to the multiple data collection

methods utilized to ensure triangulation in the study. The steps completed in the data

analysis process are to give meaning to the collected data and report the information

gathered to address the research questions identified for the study (Creswell & Poth,

2018). With assistance from the administration at the institution, the researcher analyzed

applicable documents that benefited the study and provided a better understanding of

retention efforts currently in place for student-athletes. All documents, field notes, and

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reflective journaling gathered from observing student-athletes interacting in practice,

athletic competition, study hall, and social spaces during the study were reviewed and

coded to ensure easy accessibility.

Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and laptop as backup. Reordered

interviews were transcribed verbatim after interviews, ensuring participants remained

anonymous in the study. Following transcription, the coding process began. Creswell and

Poth (2018) define coding as the process of grouping evidence and labeling ideas so that

they reflect increasingly broader perspectives. For the purposes of coding, the researcher

utilized Dedoose analysis software to apply codes to the transcriptions. Similar

statements from the interviews were coded to allow for data to be assembled in a

meaningful way.

Transcriptions were analyzed multiple times until all codes were identified and

grouped to represent the data identified accurately. The data collected from interviews

were cross-checked with field notes and reflective journaling from observations and

documents analyzed. Data collected from interviews, observations, and document

analyses were utilized until data saturation had been achieved.

Ethical Considerations

A researcher may encounter ethical issues in qualitative research when

implementing the study's data collection and analysis. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The

researcher ensured the risk of participating in this study is minimal for all participants.

Before data collection, the researcher obtained permission and approval from the

institutional review board at Coastal Carolina University (see Appendix D). This step was

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key in ensuring protection for the researcher, participants in the study, and both institutions and was an essential step in the ethical consideration process.

Written documents fully informed the participants about the nature and purpose of the study before interviews began. During initial conversations with participants, each was informed about their ability to remove themselves from the study at any time without any penalties or repercussions (See Appendix C). Each participant completed a consent form confirming their voluntary agreement to participate in this study. Additionally, protecting the privacy of participants was essential to the researcher. While data such as sport played was shared during the data analysis phase of the study, a code will be created for each participant to maintain their confidentiality.

Steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality of all participant data. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity in the study. The device used to record interviews, audio files, paper transcript of the interview, and field notes was stored in a locked cabinet. Data collected in electronic format is password protected on the researcher's computer as the researcher. Additionally, the researcher reported all data honestly from multiple perspectives to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. The noted steps above were taken to ensure ethical issues did not arise during the data collection portion of the study, jeopardizing the researcher's credibility and the overall study results.

Reliability and Validity

Yin (2018) stated that case study research should rely on multiple sources of data. The use of multiple sources of data such as interviews, observations, and document reviews assisted with ensuring validity in this study. Validity was accomplished using

triangulation. Triangulation is defined as the process a researcher uses to compare findings among different sources to determine if the findings are consistent among the sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A key factor to triangulation in this study was the ability to collect data that is both credible and dependable. The researcher sought to ensure credibility in all data collected. As interviews are vital to this study, confirming the credibility and dependability of interview questions is essential. Interview question credibility was done through voice recordings and written notes of interviews that will verify the content. This will provide a level of transparency to the study.

Findings from the highly cited Weiss and Robinson (2013) study were used as a foundation for the creation of interview questions due to the study's focus on student-athlete retention and the work of Tinto (1987,1993). Additionally, the dissertation committee, particularly committee members with a professional background in college student retention reviewed and analyzed the interview script to ensure it was free of error and clear language had been used, serving as a key peer examination component. Member checks, allowing the researcher to present the transcriptions and findings to participants, were utilized to ensure the opinions and thoughts were captured effectively and correctly. These confirmation measures will increase the credibility and reliability of the interview questions and findings.

Summary

The primary focus of this study was to examine the factors that contributed to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast. The use of a qualitative case study approach was appropriate for this study as all participants have had a similar experience being an NCAA Division

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II student-athlete at a private institution in the Southeast. The researcher acknowledged

and responded to ethical considerations throughout the research process and followed all

appropriate methods of data collection and analysis to gain a deeper understanding of

student-athlete retention.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the factors that contributed to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast. The research question that guided this study was: (1) What factors contribute to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast? Chapter IV begins with detailed information about the participants interviewed in the study. The findings are then clearly reported according to themes and patterns that emerged during the data analysis process and explained.

Participants

28 student-athletes were purposefully selected to participate in this study. The Office of the Provost at the research institution was contacted and asked for permission to interview student-athletes. Participants were given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity (i.e., Student-athlete one, Student-athlete two), and all information provided for this study will remain confidential. All participants in the study were student-athletes who started at the institution as first-year students and were retained for their second year. Of the 28 participants, there were eight sports teams represented. A breakdown of participants and their respective athletic teams is outlined below in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Sport	Focus Group
Student-Athlete 1	Male	Football	1
Student-Athlete 2	Male	Baseball	1
Student-Athlete 3	Male	Football	1
Student-Athlete 4	Male	Men's Lacrosse	1
Student-Athlete 5	Male	Men's Lacrosse	1

Student-athlete 6	Female	Softball	2
Student-athlete 7	Female	Softball	2
Student-athlete 8	Female	Softball	2
Student-athlete 9	Female	Softball	2
Student-athlete 10	Male	Football	3
Student-athlete 11	Male	Football	3
Student-athlete 12	Male	Football	3
Student-athlete 13	Male	Baseball	3
Student-athlete 14	Female	Acrobatics & Tumbling	4
Student-athlete 15	Female	Acrobatics & Tumbling	4
Student-athlete 16	Female	Women's Soccer	4
Student-athlete 17	Female	Women's Soccer	4
Student-athlete 18	Female	Women's Lacrosse	5
Student-athlete 19	Female	Women's Soccer	5
Student-athlete 20	Female	Women's Lacrosse	5
Student-athlete 21	Female	Women's Soccer	5
Student-athlete 22	Male	Football	6
Student-athlete 23	Male	Football	6
Student-athlete 24	Male	Football	6
Student-athlete 25	Male	Baseball	6
Student-athlete 26	Male	Men's Soccer	6
Student-athlete 27	Male	Men's Soccer	6
Student-athlete 28	Male	Men's Soccer	6

Emergent Themes

The findings from this research study are presented in this chapter. Focus group-style interviews were a key source of data collected in this research study. After collecting and transcribing interview data, the researcher began reading through the transcription to become familiar with the data. Dedoose, a software program, was used to analyze and code participants' responses. All interview responses were compared to identify emerging themes throughout the participant responses. After all the focus group interviews were analyzed, theoretical saturation for this study was reached after five focus group sessions. After analyzing five of the focus group interviews, there were no

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new emerging themes, and enough data had been collected to analyze study theories and the research question. Six relevant themes emerged from data analysis, as listed in Table 2. Member checks were completed with study participants allowing the researcher to present study findings to participants, ensuring the opinions and thoughts were captured effectively and correctly. Member checks confirmed the emergent themes in the study.

Observations were completed before and after interviews to view student-athletes interacting in practice, athletic competition, study halls, and social spaces. Observations included participants from the focus groups and fellow students, faculty, and staff interacting. Interactions between student-athletes and fellow students, faculty, and staff in various environments were observed. These verbal and nonverbal interactions were written down as part of the field notes. Notes were then gathered, analyzed, and placed with themes and or/patterns that emerged from interview transcriptions.

Documentations included a review of the institution's website, student-athlete participant manuals, student handbook, institutional and student-athlete retention data. Document reviews were completed on-site at the institution before the start of focus group interviews. After a review of documents, following the completion of observations and interviews, notes were compared to what was witnessed in focus groups and observations to identify any similarities or differences and to add confirmation to the themes that had emerged during the research study.

Table 2.

Emergent Themes from Data Analysis

Theme	Definition of Theme	Relevant Phrases from Participants
College Athletic Participation	The ability to compete in college athletics at the institution.	"Well, I'm from Canada, so because of that, I mean, I'm pretty far from home, so if it wasn't for my sport, I wouldn't be here." "I mean, it's one of those places where you step on campus, and you're like, Wow!

		This is really special, but if it wasn't for sports, I don't see myself here."
Personalized Academic Experience	An academic environment with small class sizes, low student-to-faculty ratios, and where personalized attention related to academic progression is provided.	"There's a lot of experienced professors…It's a lot easier than to network outside for like job opportunities and internships and everything than it would be if you were in a class with like 300 other people." "Yeah, they definitely try to connect with you on a personal level, and that's it again with the class sizes being so small."
Family Atmosphere	The perceived culture at the institution where members of the campus community know and support each other similar to that of a family.	"A lot of the people here care about you personally, like they remember you and make sure like you're doing OK." "Yeah, I guess just the family environment, really. It's like a full sense of camaraderie all around here where everybody loves each other, everybody cares about each other, everybody wants to see each other succeed."
Supportive Teammates	The close relationships formed with teammates at the institution.	"Obviously, you know you're best friends with all your teammates" "It is kind of like a different level of friendship though, because of I mean, we're with each other 24/7. You know, as a team and so like we definitely know each other better than, you know, better than I know anyone else, and they make me enjoy being here."
Financial Support	Financial support provided to the student-athlete via the institution in the form of academic and athletic scholarships.	"I'd say I stay here because of the scholarship money. It helps." "My scholarships is why I'm here and stay, besides that, my dad went here for a brief time… But I mean, if he hadn't said anything about this place I would have had no idea about it."
Personal Development	How the student-athlete perceives they have changed from their first year at the institution to the present moment.	"Ah, yeah, I think a lot of my experience and like growth has been because of it being a small school. Like I've gained a lot of confidence and there's so many opportunities to get more involved on campus." "As like an upperclassman you see, I've matured a lot since I've been at [research site name] and now that like I'm an upperclassman, you see the, the sophomores kind of figuring it out and they're maturing and it's, it's, it's like a cool thing to watch."

Themes Emerged from Data Analysis

Six themes emerged from the data analysis process that include college athletic participation, personalized academic experience, family atmosphere, supportive teammates, financial support, and personal development. Themes are listed in order as they most frequently appeared.

Theme One: College Athletic Participation

The first major theme from the research questions was college athletic participation. Throughout the interview process, college athletic participation as the top factor for retention at the institution continued to emerge. Participants made it clear in their narratives that the ability to compete in their sport of choice is why they not only enrolled at the institution but retained from their first year at the institution. Student-Athlete two stated, "Well I'm from Canada, so because of that, I mean, I'm pretty far from home, so if it wasn't for my sport, I wouldn't be here." Furthermore, Student-athlete two noted that if not for his athletic team, he would have never known about the institution or considered it an option for his academic and athletic college experience due to a desire to continue to compete in his chosen sport at the college level. He noted "oh yea I wouldn't stay here if not for my sport." Student-athlete three would add "oh heck yea what he said, I would not be here and go somewhere else if they took sports or I couldn't do it" followed by student-athlete four adding "yea I would be gone if I couldn't compete."

Student-athlete one noted that being a college athlete is and remains his top priority and why he continues to remain in college, particularly at the current institution. Student-athlete one stated, "like I said earlier, I only know about this school because of football, especially from being out of state, I didn't never heard of this school before." College athletic participation at the institution was noted as a top priority for all participants and remains essential to their experience at the institution. Student-athlete 20 stated, "college athletics is why I'm here. Outside of academics, my time is dedicated to lacrosse and being the best athlete I can be." This theme continued to emerge during the

data analysis process as student-athletes felt strongly about the role college athletic

participation had in their decision to remain at the institution.

The researcher's on-site observations identified a commitment to athletics as a

priority for student-athletes. During observations as student-athletes entered the building

where focus group interviews were held, two student-athletes greeted the researcher with

one student-athlete stating "sorry we were almost late, we were running over from

weights. We couldn't leave early, and we plan this meeting around morning weights."

Two additional participants asked the researcher if the interviews would end at

60-minutes as they had practice to attend after and couldn't be late for it. Study

participants were observed carrying athletic equipment to the dining hall and were

overheard stating that they must rush to eat because they only had a few minutes before

afternoon practice.

Additionally, the researcher reviewed several documents that highlighted the

commitment level of student-athletes at the institution to their chosen sport. A

student-athlete pre-season schedule showed the full-day commitment that student-athletes

manage before the academic year to train for their sport. The researcher also witnessed

student-athletes in practice, study hall, and individual training sessions throughout the

day. When asked by the researcher during focus group interviews about how managing

the demands of athletics and school impacts them, Student-athlete 16 stated:

> I think for me, if anything, it just kept me more organized like I found myself
>
> when I was busy with soccer, I was much more productive with schoolwork,
>
> anything outside of school too. And then we had like a 2–3-week period where we
>
> had no practice, and I was doing nothing. I was not motivated at all like I was

super behind on my schoolwork, so I think if anything soccer keeps me here, but

it also helps me stay motivated and active in aspects of school.

When asked why student-athletes choose to take on the added demands that come

with being a student-athlete compared to not, Student-athlete 13 stated:

I know I speak for a lot of us here when I say we do it cause we love the sport that

we play. That keeps us here when there isn't much to do outside of school and our

sport. It kinda is all some of us have here so we do everything that is needed to

play the sport we love. The sport that a lot of us came here for. The sport that

keeps us here if that makes any sense.

The ability to compete in college athletics and for the sport to remain a key component

for participants' college experience was a major reason why the participants chose to

remain at the institution following the completion of their first year.

Theme Two: Personalized Academics Experience

The second emergent theme was a personalized academic experience. Academics

at the institutions continued to emerge during focus group interviews and was observed

during the researchers' observations and review of documents. During the focus group

interviews, participants described the personalized academic experience at the institution

as being a reason they chose to retain. Student-athlete six stated:

It's like the classes, the classes aren't big, so like you, your teacher actually knows

who you are, and they can connect with you and help you out. It's not. They know

your name. You're not a number. Like in some schools you are a number, but here

it's. I have a class where I have four people in that class. So, I mean we actually

get into deep conversations and, I, we learn stuff that you wouldn't typically learn

in a big classroom setting.

"Likewise," stated Student-athlete 24. He would also add, "I would say every class has

been relatively easy just because of how much professors do help you, and they're also

always really flexible with schedules and everything too. So, I would agree with [focus

group participant] that it's been easier than high school for me here."

Academics was a significant factor for Student-athlete 28's retention at the

institution. He stated that he chose the institution due to athletics and the ability to

compete at the collegiate level but continues to stay because of the one-on-one academic

attention he has received, and the resources provided by the institution to ensure that all

students are successful. The balanced approach and the support received for athletes have

been significant. Further adding, "The environment here is super supportive, the teachers

really care about you, especially if you're an athlete, they want to see you succeed in

academics and in sports." Student-athlete 25 also described the academic environment as

personalized and critical for his retention and success at the institution.

You get to know your professors when you are here if you communicate with the

professors they like, they gonna most definitely make sure that you understand.

They're not just going to like if you don't get it, you just don't get it. They're

going to make sure you get it and work with you individually to make sure. That's

what I really like about this school.

This idea of a personalized academic experience directly correlates with field

notes collected during observations while the researcher was at the institution. During a

tour of the academic buildings on the campus, the researchers observed a faculty

members' office door that included a personal cell phone number so that students could contact the faculty member should they have questions after hours. This faculty member also included a picture of students engaging in a group photo outside of the airport with luggage on what appeared to be a student travel opportunity. A document was also viewed outside of a faculty member's office within the same building on a separate floor soliciting interested students to sign up for a new book club led by the individual faculty member at a local coffee shop. These observations align with the overwhelming amount of data collected from focus group interviews where participants equated professors who care about their successful academic performance and intentionally provide opportunities to connect to create a personalized academic experience that influences their retention at the institution. When asked to describe faculty members at the institution, Student-athlete 21 stated:

> They really are super cool, and it doesn't feel like college at times. I came here thinking that college instructors were mean, and I would be scared. That hasn't been the case. I changed my major and fell in love with my new one and really like what I'm doing now. We had a tough soccer season so I would say if I had to pick why I stay here it would be because my teachers have been like what I would say good to me, and I like the class sizes, one of my classes only has 5 people in it. That's cool.

Student-athlete 10 explained:

> Kinda as others have said they are cool. They make class personable and really try to help you. My friends that go to big schools have like teacher assistant that teach some of the classes and who they go to for help. That's not the case here.

They really connect to make sure you're understanding and with the tiny classes

you get that personal attention. I wouldn't say that's the main reason I stay here

but it does help for sure to make sure I have the grades to play sports."

Others mentioned that the academic environment is different at the institution than what

they have heard from their friends at other schools and the personalized attention

provided helps them be successful and also keeps them at the institution.

Theme Three: Family Atmosphere

The third emergent theme was the family atmosphere experienced at the

institution. Participants referenced that the family atmosphere directly impacted their

decision to retain at the institution. Student-athlete 23 stated

It's crazy cause like you see things around the athletic department and school that

says like year this your family here. I heard that when I visited. It's wild cause it's

true. I feel that family atmosphere here and around this school. I would agree

when people say we all one big family.

He also felt that a family atmosphere was vital in any school that he was looking at due to

his high school being small and an environment where everyone knew each other. He

explained:

It was important for me to find a place that was like a family. When I stepped on

campus, I felt that vibe and was hoping it would be reality. It has been. Everyone

here is family, and I love that about this place and one of the reasons I keep

coming back.

Student-athlete 20 added, "Like I feel like everybody is like very interactive with each

other, so it just goes back to being like the family-oriented environment."

Student-athlete six recalled a time of being new to the institution and the moment she realized that this institution was different from the others she had toured. She stated:

I remember walking across campus on my tour and thinking wow these people are nice will it actually be like this if I come here. A year later I know the people are actually nice and they treat you like family. Southern hospitality is definitely real here.

She also added the family environment at the institution made her never question if she would return for her sophomore year at the institution because, in her opinion, the institution is her home away from home. She feels so supported by the individuals on this campus. Student-athlete six stated that the unique family environment keeps many students at the institution.

A review of documents of the institution revealed similar brand messaging from the institution related to the family atmosphere experienced, in their opinion, by all members of the campus community. The institution's website featured a social media account linked post that features the statement, "Welcome to the family" to various incoming students who had paid their admission deposit to enroll at the institution. These posts featured faculty, staff, and current student comments welcoming the new students to the campus and volunteering to be a resource should students have any questions. Additionally, during a campus tour, the researcher observed a photo featuring a faculty member and students with a printed caption of "I'm happy to call these people family." Data collected through observations and document reviews directly aligned with responses collected in focus group interviews that the institution is creating an

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environment that participants feel represents that of a family and, in return, participants

choose to retain.

Theme Four: Supportive Teammates

The fourth emergent theme was supportive teammates and their direct impact on

the retention of student-athletes. Participants mentioned a direct connection with the

teammates on their athletic team and the profound impact they have had on shaping their

entire college experience both inside and outside of the classroom. Participants directly

attributed their desire to retain at the institution because of their relationships with their

teammates. Student-athlete 17 stated:

> If I'm being honest, what kept me here, what kept me playing my sport, and what
>
> motivated me was my teammates. They were my rock during all of the hard times
>
> I had since coming here. They are my people and without them I probably would
>
> have left the school my freshman year because I got super overwhelmed trying to
>
> balance everything, I needed to with me being away from home for the first time.

She would add that while she chose the institution to continue to play the sport that she

loved, her experience with her first coach was not the best. Adding:

> There was a lot of negativity in like my first 2 1/2 years here when I came. I think
>
> that stems directly from the coach. Like, I don't want to blame our old coach for
>
> everything, but he was a major issue. That whole time I stayed because of my
>
> team and played because I knew they needed me.

Student-athlete 16 would add:

> Yea, I totally agree I stayed because of [teammates name] and the other girls on
>
> the team. It was really hard going out there every day and working hard at your

sport and then not finding success in it and not having the best environment. I

continued soccer and stayed at this school because of my teammates. They are my

friends, who I lived with, who I do everything with. They push me daily. So, yea,

I kinda did it for them. I wanted to be here for them.

Reflecting on his experience as a member of a highly successful team and the

impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Student-athlete 24 knows that he would not

have been retained at the institution if not for his teammates. He stated:

Those are my brothers on and off the field and I will do whatever and anything for

them. We have created that brotherhood amongst the football team that couldn't

be broken. I would never leave them; they mean too much and we're strong as a

unit. You see these guys here; these are my brothers and why I'm here.

Student-athlete 24 would agree with that statement, saying:

Yea I agree with everything he said, yea my teammates, them boys, they keep me

here and why all the extra practices during covid when we couldn't play and early

mornings, being away from my family, yea that makes everything worth it.

The researcher observed over a dozen athletic events and practices featuring all

participants in the research study. During the women's lacrosse athletic competition, the

researcher observed all players running on the field following the completion of the

match, smiling, jumping up and down, and screaming as they celebrated their victory

over the opposing team. After each goal scored, teammates would hug one another in

celebration with other teammates. More so, those who were not in the game cheered on in

support as well. While watching a baseball competition, the researcher observed all

members of the team gathering at home plate cheering, screaming, and hitting the helmet

of the player that had just hit a home run during one of the innings. Celebrations, cheering, and positive support was witnessed during all athletic competitions and practices directly aligning with data collected from focus group interviews.

The researcher also visited the institution's dining hall during a campus tour and identified teammates sitting together at meals, further confirming the relationships teammates have outside of their sport and their role in retaining fellow teammates. When asked about friendships outside of their teammates, Student-athlete 28 stated:

> Hmmm, I would say I have a few friends that might be on other teams or are non-athletes but for the most part, I hang out with my team. We do everything together, eat together, you know cause we're teammates. You have asked like does those friendships and bonds with our team keep us here and I would say yea. Like most of my best memories here are with my teammates and the memories we have made on and off the field.

Participants would further confirm that while they do have interactions and have created memories and bonds with other students at the institution, the lasting friendships that they find the most value in, mostly come from their teammates who have a substantial influence on their retention at the institution.

Theme Five: Financial Support

The fifth emergent theme in this research study related to the retention of student-athletes was financial support. During a review of the institution's website and marketing materials, a focus and commitment to financially supporting students during their academic experience at the institution was a major focal point. On the institution's financial aid website homepage, the first sentence highlights how the institution provides

financial aid through scholarships and grants to more than 95% of all enrolled students. Additionally, the institution's website promotes how financial aid packages are customized per student and how interested students can sit down with a financial aid advisor to discuss their available financial aid and how to make college affordable for students and their families. The institution has made an effort to promote to potential and current students that they have made an intentional effort to ensure students can afford to attend the institution.

During a review of relevant documents, the researcher also examined the institution's financial aid website, highlighting scholarship opportunities that students may qualify for or be awarded. Information related to scholarship requirements is also featured on the website and provides students with contact information for each scholarship. During the researcher's tour of the financial aid office on campus, handouts and flyers were observed that marketed the financial aid available to all students and how the institution seeks to be affordable for all students. Additionally, marketing materials were observed directly focusing on student-athletes and the various athletic funding available to student-athletes who compete in sports at the intuition. The institution emphasizes providing scholarships and grants to make attending affordable, which was observed during the researcher's observations and document reviews.

Participants who participated in the focus group interviews would also confirm themes that emerged from field notes collected from observations and document reviews related to the institution's emphasis on scholarships and supporting students financially to attend the institution. Student-athlete 28 stated:

I would have to say this school does a great job at providing scholarships and making sure you can afford to be here. When I was getting recruited here, I got the best financial aid package of all the schools and had to pay the least amount. The school has continued to give me those scholarships and I even picked up another grant since being here. It has definitely helped me, and my family be able to afford school. While I like it here and playing, I definitely stay for the money cause it helps me get my degree without going into debt. You know?

Student-athlete 27 agreed with that statement, stating:

I would have to agree. I am out of state and came here paying less than I would have at another school closer back home. Between the scholarships I got for academics and for sports, it made it worth it. It makes me work hard to keep the scholarships because without them I wouldn't be here and would not be able to stay. It keeps me motivated and why I stay here.

All participants in the study would confirm that they receive at least one scholarship from the institution that helps supplement the cost of attending the institution thus assisting with their ability and desire to remain enrolled at the institution.

Theme Six: Personal Development

The sixth and final theme that emerged in this research study as a contributing factor to the retention of student-athletes was personal development. Participants described personal development as how the student perceived they had changed from the moment they arrived at the institution as freshmen to present. Participants noted that during their time at the institution, they have experienced personal development and have positively changed due to being at the institution. Student-athlete 22 stated:

I think one of, one of the biggest reasons, actually, that I came here was

something that [Coaches Name] told me on my recruiting visit. He said, when you

come out of here, I want you to be a better man, a better husband, a better father.

For me that has been very true. I've changed in more ways than I can explain, and

this school has given me so much to help me get there. I stay because I really

found myself here and I have this school to thank for that.

Student-athlete nine also noted the personal development she has experienced

while at the institution. She stated:

Oh, I would agree with what they said. I changed a lot and grew to learn more

about me and what I wanted out of college. That helped me realize this was where

I wanted to be and stay here cause I'm from far and didn't know anyone when I

came. I stayed because I like my sport but also because they gave me lots of

opportunities to be better in life. Yea growing and developing is what changed me

cause I would not be able to do this interview if I was the same person I came

here as my first year.

Student-athlete 14 would go on to further discuss the impact the growth she has

experienced has had on her decision to remain at the institution. She stated:

I will be honest, there were points where I thought about leaving but I knew how

much the people here wanted me to succeed. When I started to see how much I

was growing and how they were supporting me in that growth I knew this was the

place to be. I grew and I'm thankful this place helped me do that. I now help

younger students to stay on track and not make my mistakes."

When speaking of their growth and personal development, Student-athlete 15 stated:

ohh my, yea growth, development, and change, have definitely been the biggest

for me at this school. I came in a little behind and have grown in my academics

and have gotten better since. I changed big time. Coming into myself as an adult

is something I can thank this school for and why I like being here. They have

helped me prepare for the real word. That's why of all the reasons that is the

biggest one why I'm here.

During a review of the documents, the researcher observed the institution's

strategic plan first developed in 2017 and runs through the end of the year 2022. This

strategic plan currently guides the goals and priorities of the institution, as stated by the

university president. One goal of the strategic plan that the researcher reviewed states that

it is a goal of the institution to strengthen the existing life skills program to assist the

personal development of student-athletes at the institution. Student-athlete 23 would

mention the life skills program during the focus group interviews. He stated:

Oh yea, the life skills program, that has definitely been a benefit for me since

coming here. I did and got involved with lots of things I wouldn't have otherwise.

Like going to dance concerts, we had to support other teams, also I remember my

team did community service at the elementary school here. While I didn't realize

it at the moment that program and having to do those things made me grow and

learn things about others. "

The researcher came across the life skills program when reviewing the

institution's website. Managed and operated by the athletic department and designed with

student-athletes in mind, the life skills program is intended to support student-athletes

and provide them with skills to make them well-rounded and help them be more prepared

for the real world (Anonymous, 2022). The program focuses on six categories including (1) commitment to academic excellence to support academic progress, (2) commitment to athletic excellence to build philosophical foundations for development, (3) commitment to personal development, (4) commitment to career development, (5) commitment to service, and (6) commitment to diversity (Anonymous, 2022). When asked to talk a little more about the life skills program during focus group interviews, student-athlete one stated:

> I would say it's a type of program where they try to get you involved and see there is more to college than just your sport. I think it was good, it made me explore service and other things that I would have never done. It talks about growth, and I will say I grew for sure. Honestly the schools gives you lots of opportunities to grow so that is cool. You don't notice it until after your first year and you are like dang, I have changed. I have liked the person I have grown to be here so that has been nice and a reason why I like the school and stay.

While completing a campus tour, the researcher observed a tour guide speaking with two families about the life skills program and how much it has impacted him during his time at the institution as a student-athlete. The tour guide noted that he had gotten involved with the program because it is a team requirement and it allows him to attend events, service opportunities, and various other programs that he would not have otherwise attended. The tour guide stated how much the program has made him grow and not solely focus on athletics during his time at the institution. Thus, supporting and confirming the data collected through focus group interviews and document reviews.

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Summary

This chapter presented the results related to understanding factors contributing to student-athlete retention at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast. Student-athletes have varied experiences during their collegiate careers, leading them to retain for various reasons than their non-athlete peers. Reasons for remaining at the institution included college athletic participation, personalized academic experience, family atmosphere, supportive teammates, financial support, and personal development. Data collected via focus group interviews, observations, and document review shed light on factors that contribute to the retention of student-athletes and how institutions can improve moving forward to retain these students at higher rates. Chapter V will discuss the conclusions and implications for the future based on the results of this study.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Student-athletes face challenges that differ from their non-athlete peers. Student-athletes are forced to balance numerous commitments related to their sport, in addition to the normal academic and social pressures that arise during a student's college experience. Due to the associated pressures and added risks student-athletes face, institutions must implement measures to assist student-athletes during their time as college athletes and better understand why these students retain at an institution. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contributed to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast. To achieve this purpose, this study sought to answer the following research question: (RQ1) What factors contribute to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast?

This research study used a case study qualitative approach. Creswell and Poth (2018) define case study research as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes. Case study research can be on a single person, program, institution, community, or specific person (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling yielded 28 participants from the selected institution. Each participant took part in one of six focus group interviews, which allowed each participant to share about their experience as a student-athlete at the institution and factors that influence their retention. The researcher also participated in observations on the selected

campus and reviewed various documents to gain additional insight into the experiences of student-athletes at the institution. Through data collection and analysis, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the participants and the student-athlete experience related to retention at the institution. This chapter will provide the findings of the study, linking the frameworks of Tinto's (1975, 1993) Institutional Departure Model and the work of Braxton et al. (2004, 2014) to the study and implications for future research and practice.

Discussion of the Findings

Before the start of this study, the researcher stated that there were numerous reasons why student-athletes chose to retain at an institution based on prior retention literature and studies. Based upon the results of this study, six major themes emerged and were discussed in detail in Chapter IV. The emergent themes were college athletic participation, personalized academic experience, family atmosphere, supportive teammates, financial support, and personal development. The findings will now be expanded related to the emergent themes.

College Athletic Participation

Institutions, particularly those classified as small, have relied on the recruitment of student-athletes to meet enrollment and operating budget goals (Alden, 2000). A theme generated in this study was the importance of college athletic participation and how it is a critical factor in the retention of student-athletes. Overall, the participants viewed college athletic participation as a major factor in their decision to choose the institution. They felt their athletic team first connected them to campus and helped them transition into the institution. None of the participants who participated in the study were originally from

the institution's area. The data suggested that college athletic participation has a substantial impact on the retention of student-athletes, and should the opportunity to compete be taken away, some student-athletes may be at risk of not retaining. This finding supports Tinto's (1975, 1993) findings that emphasized the importance of students connecting with a subculture within the campus to be retained. Additionally, Bean's (1980) model would be further validated by the results of this study, specifically the influence involvement in student organizations has on student retention.

Perhaps the most interesting concept revealed in the findings is that many participants viewed college athletic participation as their main priority during their time as a student. Student-athlete 20 stated, "I wouldn't be here without my sport. It's why I go to class, do all the extra, so I can have the sport I love always be there and for me be able to participate in it. That's why I do all the extra for sports." Participants alluded to feeling that their sport is "their life," the "thing they love," and, for many, their purpose. This strong connection to the sport emerged continually throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Observations and documents reviewed in the study revealed that many student-athletes view participation in college athletics as a priority for their decision to remain at an institution and factor their sport into their daily lives and schedules. The researcher observed student-athletes discussing how they only had a "few" minutes to eat as they could not be late to weights or that would "not be good," as they stated. When reviewing a team manual for a particular sport at the institution, the researcher observed language that encouraged student-athletes to avoid certain class times as those would interfere with practice schedules and impact team travel for games. It was interesting for

the researcher to discover the influence that college athletics and the ability to compete

has on the student-athlete and their college experience and retention.

Personalized Academic Experience

A theme developed through the data collection of this study is a personalized

academic experience. Participants felt as though the personalized academic experience at

the institution was a factor that impacted their decision to retain at the institution.

Participants in the study equated a personalized academic experience where classes are

small, meaning less than 15, an environment where individualized support and attention

is encouraged, one where they know their faculty members, and where resources are

promoted and encouraged for students to utilize. For Student-athlete 11, even though

football is how he found the institution, the personalized academic experience at the

institution is what keeps him there. He stated, "if I'm being honest, I chose this school for

sports, but my major and the academics here is what keeps me. Professors are cool, they

know you, and they work with you to make sure you are on track and learning the

materials for class." Because of this experience with academics, Student-athlete 11 stated

that if athletics were taken out of the picture, he would consider remaining at the

institution to finish his degree and then look for another institution to use his remaining

eligibility.

Participants in the study made it known that the institution has a commitment to

personalized academics and making sure students are successful. While completing

observations, the researcher witnessed faculty members at women's lacrosse, baseball,

and tennis athletic competition with what appeared to be family members cheering on

competing student-athletes. During focus group interviews, student-athlete 10 stated, "it's

cool seeing our professors at our games and then helping us in class, that goes back to the academic environment here that everyone talked about. It's cool."

For those participants who did not feel the personalized academic experience was the number one factor that impacted their retention, they credited having an experience that was not as memorable as it related to faculty interactions or their emphasis on academics. The researcher found it interesting that for a population that places a high priority on their athletic commitments while at the institution, an overwhelming percentage view academics as important and key to their retention. Participants who felt that a personalized academic experience was the key factor that influenced their decision to retain at the institution attributed moments of witnessing their professors at their athletic events, staying after class to help them, and impacting their academic journey as important and why they view the academics at the institution in such high regards. Tinto (1975) noted that the positive faculty-student interaction influences a student's time at the institution thus impacting their retention, while the Weiss & Robinson (2013) study would further confirm the influence a positive academic experience has on student-athlete retention. This theme further supports the previous literature surrounding positive interactions and social and academic integration's impact on student retention.

Family Atmosphere

Participants in the study viewed a family atmosphere as representative of the institution's overall culture. Participants confirmed that a family atmosphere described the institution and contributed to their retention decision. The participants described the family atmosphere at the institution as one where everyone knows and supports one another. Student-athlete 10 stated that "everyone is family here, and we all know it and

love it." Perhaps the most glaring data regarding the family atmosphere theme is that all 28 participants in the study agreed it contributed to their retention at the institution. The participants alluded to sensing the family environment from the moment they walked on campus during their initial visit to the campus or during their first year at the institution.

Participants in the study credited the family atmosphere felt at the institution as being created by their peers and a group they referenced as the adults on campus. When asked by the researcher to define the family atmosphere, overwhelmingly, the students responded with "if you stay here long enough you will experience it" and "people are just nice." The researcher observed students entering before the start of focus group interviews and watched many student-athletes enter with individuals not on the same team while engaging in conversations and laughs. This concept of family developed at the institution is one that students find value in, and what participants in the study find as a key reason for why they retain. This data further validates the work of Tinto (1975, 1993), Braxton et al. (2004, 2014), and Astin (1993) which emphasizes social integration as key for student retention.

Supportive Teammates

Supportive teammates emerged as a theme in the study that participants stated influenced their decision to retain at the institution. Supportive teammates were described as close relationships formed with teammates at the institution. Student-athlete 26 stated that "if it was not for my teammates I would not be here. They are my brothers, what helps me get through the day." This common message emerged throughout the focus group interviews with participants. When asked to explain further how those relationships formed, participants credited their athletic coaches for assisting in providing

opportunities for those relationships to develop. Student-athlete 17 stated, "oh coach definitely made us get this close. We have opportunities to bond as a team and we take advantage of those moments." Participants stated that having those positive relationships with teammates is ideal since they have to be together for meals, practices, games, travel, and other team-related activities.

For those participants that did not credit supportive teammates as being a top factor that influenced their retention, contributed having a support system and friends at the institution other than their teammates that they turn to when in need. These participants would add that they have strong connections with teammates and that the connection is meaningful. Participants who contributed supportive teammates as being the top factor that influenced their retention at the institution credited teammates as supporting them within the team environment and being a support system in their personal life. Participants felt as though their teammates were the first individuals they met when they arrived on campus and had been there to support them with academic, personal, and social issues. They also referenced that their teammates are their friends on campus and who they engage with when not in practice or doing schoolwork. This theme directly aligns with a critical factor of social integration defined by Tinto (1975, 1993) and Astin (1993) as a presence of positive relationships with peers existing and the subsequent impact it has on student retention.

Financial Support

A theme generated in this study that participants credited as contributing to their retention is financial support offered by the institution. Participants in the study defined financial support as the athletic and academic scholarships offered by the institution to

students. Overall, the participants viewed financial support as a key influence in their retention and credit the financial support offered by the institution as being a factor in why they retained at the institution and why they chose the institution for their college destination. Student-athlete one stated, "the scholarship offered here is not only why I stay but how I found the institution. It's why I'm here." Overall, the participants agree that the institution would not be where they retain without their scholarship due to their athletic and academic ability being at a level that justifies a scholarship.

The institution has committed to providing scholarships and strives to make the institution affordable for all its students. For participants who did not contribute financial support as the top factor for their retention at the institution, many stated that they would exhaust all options to remain at the institution. Student-athlete 18 stated, "while the scholarship is nice that I get here I wouldn't say it is the only thing that keeps me here. There are so many reasons why I love this school so if the scholarship went away, I would find other ways to make sure I can stay here." With financial support being a major contributing factor to the retention of the overwhelming amount of study participants, the institution's focus on athletic and academic scholarships as a mechanism for making college affordable aligns with Braxton et al. (2014) definition of a commitment by the institution to student welfare which leads to social integration and subsequent student retention which was tested and confirmed by the Le Crom et al. (2009) study.

Personal Development

In this study, participants were asked to reflect on their time at the institution and how they have grown and changed since enrolling as first-year students. All participants interviewed stated that they had grown and experienced personal development during

their time at the institution. Participants felt that their personal development while at the institution contributed to their retention. Student-athlete 19 stated, "I have changed so much. Like so so much. This place helped me do that. It helped me become an adult. That's why I stay cause it gave me so much." The institution has emphasized opportunities for student-athletes to develop skills necessary to be successful during their time at the institution and following graduation and has invested funds in this initiative based on its strategic plan. Participants who felt their growth while enrolled in college met their expectations discussed the time and opportunities provided by the institution to gain outside experiences that led to their development as being a leading factor of why they retained.

The commitment by the administrators and staff at the institution to the development of programs designed to assist with the personal development of student-athletes based on institutional goals directly aligns with the Braxton et al. (2014) study's organizational factors, specifically student perception of institutional integrity. "Institutional integrity demonstrates itself when the actions of a college or university's administrators, faculty, and staff are compatible with the mission and goals proclaimed by a given college or university" (Braxton et al., 2014). Students believe that the institution has invested so much into them that they remain at the institution, thus supporting the findings from the Braxton et al. (2014) and Weiss & Robinson (2013) studies and further validating the findings.

Table 3.

Emergent Themes Connection to Relevant Literature

Emergent Themes	Connection to Literature
College Athletic Participation	Tinto (1975, 1993) emphasizes the importance of students connecting with a subculture within the campus to be retained.

	Astin (1993) found that the effort exerted by a student socially has a direct influence on student retention. Bean (1980) focused on involvement with campus organizations and the impact it has on student satisfaction and subsequent retention. The emergence of this theme directly supports the noted assertions that integration into subcultures at the institution and social integration have an impact on student retention.
Personalized Academic Experience	Results from the Weiss & Robinson (2013) study show the impact the academic experience has on student-athlete retention at an institution. Tinto (1975) noted that the interaction between the student and their specific background and other characteristics within the college community and positive faculty-student interactions influences a significant part in a student's time at the institution. Thus, impacting their retention at the institution. This theme supports the statement by Tinto and the results of the Weiss & Robinson study on how a positive academic experience has an impact on student-athlete retention.
Family Atmosphere	This theme further validates the work of Tinto (1975, 1993), Braxton et al. (2004, 2014), and Astin (1993) which places emphasis on positive relationships and the subsequent impact on social integration as key for student retention.
Supportive Teammates	Tinto (1975, 1993) as a presence of positive relationships with peers existing and Astin (1993) and the importance of the student socially acclimating at the institution and the subsequent impact it has on student retention is supported through the emergence of this theme.
Financial Support	Braxton et al. (2014) definition of a commitment by the institution to student welfare which leads to social integration, and subsequent student retention is supported through this theme. The findings from the Le Crom et al. (2009) study identifies scholarships as a key factor for student-athlete retention further validating this theme.
Personal Development	Braxton et al. (2014) & Institutional Integrity as a mechanism for students being socially integrated into an institution thus retaining is supported through the emergence of this theme in the data analysis process. Weiss & Robinson (2013) and the significant impact personal reasons and development have on student-athlete retention aligns with the findings represented in this theme.

Implications for Practice

This study provides empirical evidence to higher education administrators that a financial investment in college athletics benefits the institution. Benford, 2007, noted the concerns many institutional constituents raise surrounding college athletics and how they align with institutional missions and goals. The results of this study provide athletic departments and their leadership with empirical data to support the role college athletics plays in integrating students into the social environment of the institution and the direct

impact it has on student retention. As it relates to budget implications for the overall institution, higher education administrators could use the results of this study to validate budget requests and spending on college athletics based on its influence on student-athlete retention. As the results of this study indicate, one key factor that contributes to student-athletes remaining at their institution is due to their involvement and connection to their sport. This affinity to the sport and subsequent persistence at the institution justifies continual financial support.

When focusing on other key implications this study provides for higher education administrators, institutional financial aid practices and academic resources are two main focal areas. Results from this study indicate how critical financial support from the institution was for student-athletes to retain at the institution. As institutions review the financial support they provide students, the results of this study articulate the importance for administrators to strive to ensure students have the best financial aid packages available to feel financially comfortable remaining at the institution. In collaboration with overall campus administrators, alumni and fundraising professionals could utilize the results of this study to solicit fundraising dollars for scholarship funding from current and future donors as the importance it plays in student retention and progression towards graduation.

This study justifies small class sizes and the institutional commitment to a personalized academic experience for students as it relates to the institution's academic environment. Though small class sizes are a standard practice at many small, private institutions, as budgets become a concern, many administrators consider changing course sizes and faculty teaching loads to impact the overall institution budget. When

considering course sizes and faculty loads, the results of this study provide campus administrators with results that highlight the importance of a personalized academic experience and the subsequent impact it has on student-athlete retention. However, increasing faculty teaching loads and class sizes may give institutions an opportunity for temporary financial and budget relief. The results of this study highlight the negative impact that could have on student-athlete retention.

The research highlighted in Chapter II, specifically the work of Tinto's (1975, 1993) institutional departure model and the work of Braxton et al. (2004, 2014), mirrors findings from the current study when addressing social integration and the impact it has on student retention. This study provides empirical evidence to student affairs professionals, particularly those with roles in retention, with qualitative data to inform retention practices. Practitioners working directly with retention programs should feel justified in assessing retention practices currently in place and work to ensure that social integration is intentionally integrated into the institution's retention model as prior research and the current study shows the impact it has on student-athlete retention. Additionally, the results of this study indicate how essential it is to hear the student's voice as it relates to their experience and subsequent retention at the institution. Retention professionals should continually incorporate student voices into their program design, programming, and assessment to understand why students retain.

Recommendations for Future Research & Practice

While the findings from this study are significant to better-understanding factors that contribute to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast, it also provides a basis from which other

research studies could be conducted. First, to obtain a better understanding of factors that contribute to the retention of student-athletes, future research studies should look at additional institution types. This study was conducted at an institution that was designated as small in enrollment size. Study results highlighted that the institution's size had a significant impact on the decision of student-athletes to be retained at the institution. A replication of this study at a mid-size or large institution could be useful and substantially contribute to student-athlete retention literature.

Lastly, only NCAA Division II student-athletes were considered in the population for this study. Student-athlete retention and the factors that contribute to the retention of student-athletes are not limited to this population, however. As enrollment at NCAA Division I, III, and NAIA institutions continue to rise, a replication of this study with student-athletes in these populations could be useful for higher education administrators. Third, as this study was limited to current student-athletes, a similar study could be conducted on former student-athletes retained at the institution they initially enrolled at to understand student-athlete retention factors through graduation better.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contributed to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast. Findings from the study revealed six themes that contributed to the retention of student-athletes. Those themes include (1) college athletic participation, (2) personalized academic experience, (3) family atmosphere, (4) supportive teammates, (5) financial support, and (6) personal development. Using the information produced from this study in collaboration with prior research, institutions

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must continue to work to ensure that student-athletes are supported and provided with opportunities to develop meaningful relationships and be socially integrated into the institution when they arrive. Doing so will improve student-athlete retention and enhance the overall experience of student-athletes at the institution, thus having a substantial impact on overall institutional enrollment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Good afternoon _____,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Malcolm Kendrick Reed, and I am a doctoral student at Coastal Carolina University. I am contacting you today to request your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting titled: Student-Athlete Retention: An Analysis of Student-Athlete Retention at a Small, Private, Highly Residential NCAA Division II Institution in the Southeast. The intention of this study is to assess factors that influence the retention of student-athletes at the institution.

The study involves participating in a 60-minute group style interview with other second-year, student-athletes at the institution. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is confidential; therefore, names will not be associated with any of the data collected throughout this study.

If you would like to participate in the study, please read the Informed Consent letter by clicking here and express your desire to participate in the study. I will follow up with you individually to coordinate your interview time.

Your participation in the research will be of great importance to assist in ensuring that student-athletes are receiving the adequate and effective support needed to be retained at the institution and to ultimately graduate.

Thank you for your time and consideration

Thanks,

Malcolm Kendrick Reed

Doctoral Student

Coastal Carolina University

Mkreed1@coastal.edu

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Appendix B: Potential Interview Questions

- **College Issues/Academic Experience**
  - o Lead Question 1- If I were an incoming freshman, how would you describe Mars Hill to me?
  - o Lead Question 2-What is Mars Hill like academically?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question- Do you find Mars Hill challenging academically?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-What academic resources have you used that are available to you at the institution?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-What are professors like?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-Have any of these factors contributed to your decision to stay at Mars Hill? If so, how?
- **College Culture/Environment**
  - o Lead Question 1-Describe Mars Hill University's culture for me.
  - o Lead Question 2- Describe the culture off-campus and in the community.
  - o Lead Question 3- What is campus life like at Mars Hill?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question- Have you gotten involved any? If so, in what?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-How has the local culture influenced your decision to stay at Mars Hill?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-How has campus life influenced your decision to stay at Mars Hill?
- **College Life Specific to Student-Athletes**
  - o Lead Question-As a student-athlete, how has managing the demands that come with athletics impacted your ability to have a social life outside of your sport?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-Would you say that most of your friends are teammates?
      - ● Additional Follow-Up Question-Do you have a balance of friends who are both athletes and non-athletes?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-How much has your decision to be a student-athlete contributed to your decision to stay at Mars Hill?
- **Athletic Department**
  - o Lead Question-What has your experience with the athletic department at Mars Hill University been like?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-How has this experience contributed to your decision to stay at the institution?
- **Personal Reasons**
  - o Lead Question-What personal reasons, if any, have contributed to you remaining at Mars Hill University?
- **Team Factor**
  - o Lead Question-How has being on a team influenced your experience at Mars Hill University?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-What do you enjoy most about the team you are currently on at Mars Hill?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-How have your coaches influenced your experience on your athletic team?
    - ▪ Possible Follow-Up Question-How has this experience contributed your decision to stay at the institution?
- **Player Development**

- o Lead Question-Would you say you've grown as a person since being here? How and what has influenced this?
    - ▪ Follow-Up Question-How have you grown as a student-athlete?
    - ▪ Follow-Up Question-How has this influenced your overall experience at the institution?
- **Wrap-Up Questions**
    - o Lead Question-Of the topics covered today, which would you say has had the most impact on your decision to stay at Mars Hill?
    - o Lead Question-Are there any additional reasons not covered today that you would attribute as being a key factor in your decision to remain at Mars Hill and compete in athletics for your second year of college?

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Appendix C: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FOR HUMAN
SUBJECT RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Purpose

You are invited to be in a research study about factors that influence the retention of student-athletes. You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as a second-year student-athlete at your current institution that returned following the end of your freshman year in 2020-2021. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that contribute to the retention of student-athletes at a small, private, highly residential NCAA Division II institution in the Southeast. Participants in this study are from the same institution and were chosen through purposeful sampling.

Procedure

As part of this study, you will be placed in a group of 4-7 fellow student-athletes. The researcher will ask you several questions while facilitating discussion. Your responses will remain confidential, and no names will be included in any final reports or publications. You can choose whether or not to participate in the group, and you may stop at any time during the course of the study.

Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to group interview questions. The purpose of the research study is to hear the many varying viewpoints and would like for everyone to contribute their thoughts. Out of respect, please refrain from interrupting others. However, feel free to be honest even when your responses counter those of other group members. The focus group is expected to last about 60 minutes.

Benefits and Risks

The study has no foreseeable (or expected) risks. There may be unknown risks. The benefit of this study includes the ability to impact future decisions at the institution and to contribute your thoughts to the literature surrounding the experiences of student-athletes.

Rights
You do not have to agree to participate in this research study. If you do choose to participate, you may choose not to at any time once the study begins. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing from the study at any time. As a Mars Hill University student, your decision to participate or not will have no affect your grade.

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Confidentiality

Should you choose to participate; you will be asked to respect the privacy of other group members by not disclosing any content discussed during the interview. The researcher will analyze data, but your responses will remain confidential, and no names will be included any reports or publications. Information that you provide during the study will be kept confidential. Additionally, researcher records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Note that confidentiality will only be violated when required by law or the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association. This usually includes, but may not be limited to, situations when your responses indicate that you, or another clearly identified individual, is at risk of imminent harm or situations in which faculty are mandated reporters, such as instances of child abuse or issues covered under Title IX regulations. For more information about Title IX, please see the University's webpage at: https://www.coastal.edu/titleix/.

Sharing the Results

As the Principal Investigator on this research study, I plan to share the results of this study in my completed dissertation and professional publications, and presentations both on and off-campus.

Contact

If you have questions now or later, you are encouraged to contact Kendrick Reed at 843-289-0467 or mkreed1@coastal.edu or Dr. Debbie Conner at (843) 349-6697 or dconner@coastal.edu.

The Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services is responsible for the oversight of all human subject research conducted at Coastal Carolina University. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact this office by calling (843) 349-2978 or emailing OSPRS@coastal.edu.

This research study has been approved by the IRB on 1/18/22. This approval will expire on 1/18/23 unless the IRB renews the approval prior to this date.

Please print or save this consent form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

_____I consent to participate in the study after reading the above information.
_____I do NOT consent to participate

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Appendix D: Coastal Carolina University IRB Approval

January 19, 2022

Malcolm Kendrick Reed- Coastal Carolina University
Conway, SC 29528

RE: Student Athlete Retention: An Analysis of Student-Athlete Retention at a Small, Private, NCAA Division Institution

Malcolm,

It has been determined that your protocol **#2022.83** is approved as **EXPEDITED** by the Coastal Carolina University Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Federal Policy for the Protection of **Human Research Subjects Category #7**, Research on individual or group characteristics, behavior, or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

This approval is good for one calendar year commencing with the date of approval and concludes on **1/18/2023**. If your work continues beyond this date, it will be necessary to seek a continuation from the IRB. If your work concludes prior to this date, please inform the IRB.

Approval of this protocol does not provide permission or consent for faculty, staff or students to use university communication channels for contacting or obtaining information from research subjects or participants. Faculty, staff and students are responsible for obtaining appropriate permission to use university communications to contact research participants. For use of university email to groups such as <u>all</u> faculty/staff or <u>all</u> students, requests should be made to the Provost's Office after the research protocol has been approved by the IRB. Please allow at least one week to receive approval.

Please note, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to report immediately to the IRB any changes in procedures involving human subjects and any unexpected risks to human subjects, any detrimental effects to the rights or welfare of any human subjects participating in the project, giving names of persons, dates of occurrences, details of harmful effects, and any remedial actions. Such changes may affect the status of your approved research.

Be advised that study materials and documentation, including signed informed consent documents, must be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the research and shall be accessible for purposes of audit.

If you have any questions concerning this review, please contact Patty Carter, IRB Coordinator, at pcarter@coastal.edu or extension 2978.

Thank you,

Stephanie Cassavaugh
Director, Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services
IRB Administrator
cc: Debbie Conner