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What about NCAA Division II Athletes?

A Qualitative Inquiry into DII Student-Athletes' Experiences with Academic Support

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WHAT ABOUT NCAA DIVISION II ATHLETES? A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO DII STUDENT-ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES WITH ACADEMIC SUPPORT

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Abstract

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II provides opportunities for athletes from around the world to compete at a high level while pursuing higher education in the United States. However, the academic success rate of NCAA Division II student-athletes (77%) is considerably lower than that of their Division I (90%) and Division III (88%) counterparts. Previous research on student-athletes' academic experiences emphasize the importance of academic support in fostering success, yet much of this work has focused primarily on Division I athletes, leaving the experiences of Division II athletes relatively underexplored. The purpose of this study was to investigate how NCAA Division II student-athletes describe their experiences with academic support at their universities. Grounded in self-determination theory and utilizing phenomenological research design, this study investigated how student-athletes recounted their pathways to college athletics, college experiences, motivation for academic success, and the support they received in achieving that success. Semi-structured interviews (n=20) were conducted with student-athletes from 17 NCAA Division II institutions across 14 conferences in the United States, using purposive and convenience sampling methods. The findings revealed three overarching themes: (1) faculty and staff were central to academic support, with professors, advisors, and tutors serving as the most consistent and valued sources of assistance; (2) student-athletes demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation, often describing academic persistence as rooted in personal interest, accountability, and internalized family and cultural values; (3) balancing dual academic and athletic roles emerged as a defining challenge, as participants navigated demanding schedules and competing responsibilities while striving for both academic and athletic success. This study contributes to existing literature by amplifying the underrepresented voices of Division II student-athletes and extending the application of SDT to a

less-studied athletic context. The results underscore the importance of relational engagement between academic and athletic departments and highlight how fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness can promote academic success even in resource-limited environments.

Chapter One: Introduction

The journey through collegiate athletics is often depicted as a pathway to personal growth, academic achievement, and athletic success (Alder & Alder 1991; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gayles, 2009; NCAA, 2023; Umbach et al, 2011). However, for many student-athletes, particularly those competing at the NCAA Division II (DII) level, this journey is marked by adversity that extends beyond the playing field. Heaven (a pseudonym), a former student-athlete, navigated this landscape firsthand, experiencing both the triumphs and tribulations of intercollegiate athletics. Her story mirrors the experiences of countless other NCAA DII athletes, offering an intimate look into the complex interplay between social and personal life, academic persistence, and athletic performance.

Heaven's collegiate career began at a National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) institution in a small rural town in Alabama. The transition from high school sport to this level of competition was accompanied by significant challenges, including homesickness, limited resources, and the struggle to adapt to a new environment. Her team often faced logistical hardships, such as inadequate transportation for competitions and insufficient meal options during road trips. Despite these challenges, Heaven flourished both academically and athletically, largely due to the close-knit support system she found within her community. Her relationships with teammates, members of other sports teams, and local supporters provided a sense of belonging that counterbalanced the financial and structural limitations of the athletic program.

At her community college, the support she received played a critical role in her success. She and her teammates frequently attended non-mandatory outings, fostering a sense of camaraderie that extended beyond the basketball court. A local church provided meals and

regularly attended their games, reinforcing a sense of community investment in their well-being. After being named conference player of the week during her sophomore year, Heaven received a laminated newspaper clipping in the mail from a local bank, a small yet meaningful gesture of encouragement. These experiences exemplified the importance of relatedness in Heaven's journey, a fundamental component of self-determination theory (SDT), in maintaining motivation and resilience in the face of adversity. This strong foundation helped Heaven graduate with an associate's degree and advance to the next level of competition at an NCAA DII institution.

Transitioning to an NCAA DII university, however, presented a different experience. Moving to a larger city with a more competitive athletic and academic environment required significant adjustments. While Heaven had believed in her academic ability, the increased rigor of her coursework including chemistry, statistics, and calculus shook her confidence. At the same time, she had to acclimate to new teammates, coaches, and a higher level of athletic competition, all while managing the pressure of securing playing time and maintaining her athletic scholarship.

The social transition was equally challenging. Unlike her previous institution, where a strong sense of community was embedded in daily life, her new university lacked the same level of interpersonal connection. Assigned a non-teammate roommate, Heaven initially struggled to form meaningful relationships within her team. The demands of her schedule further isolated her from campus life. Early morning workouts, long academic days, and late-night labs often left little time for socialization. Many of the team's bonding activities conflicted with her academic obligations, preventing her from fully integrating into the team culture.

Despite the increased access to financial resources, athletic facilities, transportation, and academic support services at the NCAA DII institution, Heaven perceived a notable lack of community support. Unlike the strong sense of belonging she had previously experienced, the demands of the DII athletic and academic environment often left her feeling detached. The shift from a community-centered environment to a more transactional college-athlete experience highlighted the varying degrees of social connection and belongingness across these different athletic and academic settings. The initial struggle to integrate into her new environment and the uncertainty surrounding her role on the basketball court further intensified these feelings. It was only after a breakout performance during a home game in her junior season that she solidified her place on the team, reinforcing her sense of competence and security in maintaining her athletic scholarship.

Ultimately, Heaven excelled both academically and athletically, earning recognition as the Female Scholar-Athlete of the Year while maintaining a high GPA and securing both a bachelor's and master's degree. However, this success came at a cost. The sacrifices required to achieve academic and athletic excellence at the NCAA DII level often included social isolation, emotional strain, and mental fatigue, challenges that were mitigated at her community college due to the campus environment and strong support network and she had previously experienced.

Heaven's experience is not unique. Many NCAA student-athletes face similar obstacles, including the pressure to perform at a high level, the difficulties of transitioning to new academic and athletic environments, and the struggle to find a sense of belonging (Gayles, 2009; Otto et al., 2019; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007). While Heaven successfully navigated the challenges of being an NCAA DII student-athlete, her experience was not universal. Among the six teammates who transferred from her NJCAA program to NCAA institutions, only three, including Heaven

completed their athletic and academic careers as student-athlete graduates. Two of her teammates graduated from their respective universities but left their athletic careers prematurely, one due to difficulties adjusting to the new environment and team culture, the other due to health complications. Another teammate never enrolled at her NCAA institution, succumbing to external environmental pressures before making the transition. The final member of Heaven's cohort lost her athletic scholarship after her freshman year due to perceived shortcomings in performance, ultimately ending her collegiate career prematurely.

These individual experiences reflect broader trends in NCAA student-athlete graduation rates. The NCAA measures student-athlete success primarily through Academic Success Rates (ASR) and Graduation Success Rates (GSR), which claim to offer a more student-centered metric than federal graduation rates (NCAA, 2023). ASR, used for NCAA Division II and III institutions, controls for student-athlete transfers, mid-year enrollees, and non-scholarship students, while GSR, used for Division I, applies the same controls except for non-scholarship athletes. According to NCAA data, Division II athletes have an ASR of 77%, which is lower than both Division I athletes (90%) and Division III athletes (88%) (NCAA, 2024).

Heaven and her peer's collegiate athletic experience are a few of the thousands of tales of NCAA student-athletes. Filled with adversity to overcome, Heaven made her way through the DII student-athlete experience successfully. Yet, her journey and the reported GSR and ASR rates raises larger questions. Why are NCAA Division II athletes graduating at lower rates than those in Divisions I and III? How do student-athletes at this level perceive their support systems? What do they describe as their source of motivation to persevere? How do these athletes make sense of their college experiences and what can be learned from their perspectives? Guided by

these inquiries, this qualitative study examines the lived experiences of 20 NCAA Division II student-athletes and identifies themes emerging from their collegiate athletic journeys.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association Student-Athlete Experience

For student-athletes within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), member institutions are organized into three divisions, each governed by slightly different rules and regulations, particularly in how athletic scholarships are administered. These divisions are structured to offer distinct college experiences for athletes based on their level of athletic commitment. Division I and Division II athletes may receive athletic scholarships, while those in Division III do not. The levels of competition, financial investment by the NCAA and universities, and athletic rigor are often perceived to align with these divisions, with Division I suggested as the most rigorous, Division II less rigorous, and Division III the least rigorous (NCAA, 2021; NCSA, 2023). The lived experiences of collegiate student-athletes have been extensively studied, with researchers examining factors such as motivation for success, the balance between academic and athletic identities, academic support services, self-efficacy, and overall student-athlete experiences (Burn et al., 2013; Gayles, 2003; Harrison et al., 2015; Harry, 2022; Lu et al., 2018; Otto et al., 2013; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007). While this body of work has significantly advanced college sport research, scholars have primarily focused on the academic experiences of NCAA Division I athletes. A consistent finding across these studies is the critical role of academic support services in fostering student-athlete success. This focus has contributed to the development of a widely recognized conceptual model for student-athlete academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). However, both this model and much of the existing literature center on Division I athletes, leaving Division II student-athletes underrepresented in academic research. This gap is particularly concerning given

that the Academic Success Rate (ASR) for Division II student-athletes (77%) falls notably below the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) for Division I student-athletes (90%) (NCAA, 2024).

Although some scholars have investigated the experiences of Division II student-athletes, some of this research significant findings were developed from administrative and faculty perspectives rather than the perspectives of the athletes themselves. For example, Nite (2012) conducted a qualitative study examining the challenges of supporting Division II student-athlete development from the viewpoint of administrators and faculty members at a private Division II university. The study involved interviews with 13 administrators and faculty members and found that limited resources and institutional pressure to win were key barriers to effectively supporting Division II student-athletes. While academic support services were recognized as essential, limited resources made it difficult to adequately provide staff for ideal services. Although this study provides valuable insights, its case study design limits its generalizability. Furthermore, while the perspectives of administrators and faculty members are important, understanding the experiences of student-athletes themselves is equally important.

Other studies have explored the Division II student-athlete experience from the athlete perspective, particularly in relation to academic outcomes. One such study conducted 12 focus group interviews with 62 Division II athletes across six teams at a mid-sized Division II universities to explore student-athletes' perception of their grades (Brouwer et al., 2022). The findings suggested that student-athletes viewed grades as both a self-assessment tool to measure progress in class and an external indicator of learning. The study found that student-athletes did not perceive grades as a measure of intellectual ability but rather as a reflection of the effort put into coursework. The findings also indicated that student-athletes were motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors in their academic performance. Academic support services were

highlighted as essential to their success, with student-athletes emphasizing the importance of study spaces and communication with professors. However, they also noted concerns about the accessibility and location of academic support services. Ultimately, the study concluded that while academic support services play a crucial role, student-athletes believed that academic success ultimately depends on individual effort (Brouwer et al., 2022).

While this study provides valuable insights into student-athletes' perceptions of their grades, it does not explicitly focus on academic support services; rather, this emerged as a secondary theme. Previous research investigating NCAA DII student-athletes also lack a clearly stated theoretical framework to guide the study design, interpretation, and coding of findings.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2000), is a widely applied framework in the social sciences, education, and sport that examines human motivation. SDT identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs that foster optimal human motivation. According to self-determination theory, motivation may be intrinsic, stemming from internal drives, or extrinsic, influenced by external pressures. Integrated regulation occurs when externally driven goals are internalized and made personally meaningful. While other forms of motivation exist along the SDT continuum, this study emphasizes these three central types (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schemenauer & Chu, 2022). In this study, self-determination theory (SDT) served as the guiding framework for constructing the interview questionnaire and analyzing the data. Its central role was to provide a theoretical lens for examining NCAA Division II student-athletes' experiences and their perceptions of academic support.

Self-determination theory has been widely applied in educational research to predict and examine student outcomes. Scholars have found that students who exhibit higher levels of integration and intrinsic motivation are more likely to demonstrate academic persistence (Vallerand et al., 1992). Similarly, research suggests that intrinsic and integrated forms of motivation contribute to high-quality learning and deeper conceptual understanding (Deci et al., 1991). Both qualitative and quantitative studies investigating the academic experiences of NCAA athletes have employed self-determination theory as a framework for organizing their findings (Burns et al., 2012; Harrison et al., 2015; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007). This research suggests that student-athletes who are intrinsically motivated tend to achieve greater academic success. Furthermore, scholarly research and theoretical perspectives suggest that extrinsically motivated students can transition toward integrated motivation with appropriate support that nurtures autonomy, competence, and relatedness from athletic departments and colleges for optimal motivation and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Woodruff et al., 2007). While SDT has been a widely used framework for college athletics, scholars suggest that traditionally SDT assumes that the psychological needs autonomy, competence and relatedness operate apart from larger structures and power dynamics (Harry, 2025). When the rules and regulations of the NCAA and power dynamics such as those between coaches and players are not considered, this may be a limitation of SDT as a framework to examine academic support for student-athletes. Some scholars suggest that autonomy-supportive coaching behaviors can enhance the perceptions of psychological support for student-athletes (Bartholomew et al., 2011).

Academic support services are designed to assist student athletes in fulfilling their dual roles, ensuring their eligibility, and achieving both academic and career objectives (Watson et al, 2022). Academic support that nurtures psychological needs can take various forms. For example,

resources that promote autonomy include academic advising that empowers athletes to make informed educational decisions. Services that foster competence encompass tutoring, mentoring, and study skills workshops that help athletes build academic self-efficacy. Relatedness can be supported through strong networks of coaches, advisors, and peers that create a sense of belonging. Scholars suggest when student-athletes experience support that fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation, leading to increased academic engagement, persistence, and success (Harrison et al., 2015).

Despite this, existing literature on student-athletes' academic success has largely concentrated on NCAA Division I athletes, leaving a gap in understanding the unique experiences of Division II athletes, particularly in relation to academic support (Harrison et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2018; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007; Gayles, 2003; Otto et al., 2013; Burn et al., 2013; Harry, 2022; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). While existing studies have provided valuable insights into Division II student-athletes and academic support services (Brouwer et al., 2022; Nite, 2012), few have taken the approach of using one-on-one interviews to examine these experiences specifically through the lens of self-determination theory.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of NCAA Division II student-athletes and to understand how they describe their academic support through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT). This focus on academic support stems from its recurring significance in prior research on student-athlete success (Burns et al., 2013; Gayles, 2003; Harrison et al., 2015; Harry, 2022; Lu et al., 2018; Otto et al., 2013; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007). Although academic support has long been recognized as a key

factor in promoting student-athlete achievement, limited research has examined how Division II athletes themselves perceive these supports.

To address this gap, this study employed one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with NCAA Division II student-athletes (n = 20) representing 17 institutions across 14 athletic conferences. This study was guided by the following research question: How do NCAA Division II student-athletes describe their experience with academic support?

Research Design and Method of Analysis

This study employed a phenomenological research design (Neubauer, et. al, 2019; Patton & Broward, 2023; Saldaña, 2011; Watson, 2024) to explore NCAA Division II student-athletes' perceptions of academic support. Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, seeks to uncover the essence of lived experience by examining individuals who share a common phenomenon. The phenomenon under investigation was the lived experience of NCAA Division II student-athletes as they navigated academic support within their collegiate environments. By adopting a phenomenological lens, the researcher aimed to move beyond surface-level description toward a deeper understanding of how athletes make meaning of their academic support experiences. Within this study, self-determination theory (SDT) served as the guiding theoretical framework, shaping both the interview protocol and the analytic process.

The researcher conducted twenty one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with NCAA Division II student-athletes. Interviews averaged 39 minutes in duration, ranging from 14 to 57 minutes. The semi-structured format provided consistency across participants while also creating space for individualized, narrative-driven responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Interview questions were designed to elicit reflections on participants' pathways into collegiate athletics,

their broader college experiences, sources of academic motivation, and perceptions of academic support (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Kallio et al., 2016).

Data analysis followed a multi-cycle coding process (Fletcher, 2017; Maxwell, 2012; Saldaña, 2011).The first cycle employed open coding to generate initial codes grounded in the participants' accounts. These codes were then examined through focused coding to identify patterns and condense data into broader categories. Finally, axial coding was conducted through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT), integrating categories across interview questions and highlighting relationships among them, ultimately resulting in three emergent themes.

Study Setting and Sample

The target population for this study consisted of NCAA Division II (DII) student-athletes (n = 20). A meaningful sample was generated through purposive and convenience sampling, with the goal of recruiting student-athletes from multiple DII institutions and NCAA conferences to capture insights from varied contexts. Representing diverse institutional settings was important for strengthening the knowledge claims made about the Division II student-athlete experience, as prior studies have often drawn findings from limited samples, typically one university (Brouwer et al., 2022; Nite, 2012). In contrast, many of the more comprehensive studies of Division I student-athletes have gathered responses from as many as 18 institutions (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007).

The researcher initially selected fifteen of the twenty-three NCAA Division II conferences at random. Student-athletes from these conferences were then recruited and contacted using the social networking platform LinkedIn (LinkedIn, 2002). To ensure a sufficient number of participants, recruitment was later expanded to include the remaining eight conferences. Ultimately, interviews were conducted with 20 student-athletes representing 17

NCAA Division II institutions across 14 conferences. This approach expanded the institutional diversity represented in this study and helped address a critical gap in the literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of how Division II student-athletes perceive and experience academic support.

Contributions

By investigating the lived experiences of NCAA Division II student-athletes, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature by centering their perspectives on academic support. Their narratives provide insight into academic support within the Division II context, student-athletes' motivation for academic success, and their broader collegiate experience. Moreover, this study advances self-determination theory (SDT) within the Division II context by illustrating how student-athletes' intrinsic and integrated motivations interact with the quality of academic and relational supports available to them. Collectively, these contributions may inform institutional policies and practices aimed at strengthening faculty and staff engagement, fostering greater collaboration between academic and athletic departments, enhancing academic support systems, and ultimately improving educational outcomes for Division II student-athletes.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The National Collegiate Athletic Association

Initiated by students, organized sports at the collegiate level became an integral part of campus life in U.S. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) during the late 19th century. Before the rise of collegiate athletics, college campuses were often described as dull, with limited extracurricular activities to foster camaraderie and enhance the educational experience. However, as students began organizing sports, these activities rapidly transformed the social and cultural landscapes of many institutions. After incorporating intercollegiate contests between schools, the increasing popularity of college sports led HEI stakeholders and students to take them more seriously, dedicating time to incorporating physical activity into curriculum and organizing frequent competitions. The growing emphasis on athletics eventually necessitated the establishment of associations to regulate and oversee intercollegiate athletic competitions (Lewis, 2013).

While various sports, such as rowing and track and field, gained popularity in the post-Civil War era, college football played a pivotal role in the establishment of the first governing athletic associations due to its widespread appeal, institutional drive for success, and mounting safety concerns. Among the earliest organizations dedicated to regulating intercollegiate athletics were the Intercollegiate Football Association (IFA) and the American Football Rules Committee (AFRC), with the latter focusing specifically on standardizing the sport's rules. However, these initial organizations were primarily student-led and proved largely ineffective in addressing the brutality and violence associated with football. In response, the U.S. federal government including President Theodore Roosevelt intervened, ultimately leading to the formation of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association (IAA) in the early 1900s, an organization that would later

evolve into the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (Lewis, 2013; Oriard, 2012; Satterfield, 2015).

By the 1970s, as the popularity and rigor of college athletics continued to grow, academic standards for student-athletes began to decline. The increasing emphasis on athletics over academics drew significant criticism from administrators and scholars (Mondello, 2000). In addition to addressing safety concerns, the NCAA assumed responsibility for regulating athlete eligibility and student status in intercollegiate competitions. Public concerns, along with pressures from higher education stakeholders, spurred ongoing reforms focused on academic standards, eligibility requirements, and the principles of amateurism (Oriard, 2012). In response to this evolving landscape, the NCAA refined its operational goals and fundamental purposes to emphasize education, physical fitness, athletic excellence, scholarship, sportsmanship, and amateurism. To uphold academic standards, the NCAA adopted a central mission of integrating athletic programs as essential components of the educational experience (Satterfield, 2015).

Yet, this integration has long been a source of tension within higher education. Critics argue that the commercial growth of college athletics often threatens to overshadow the educational mission, while supporters contend that athletics is embedded in institutional culture, increases admissions applications, and is instrumental to the academic mission (Collins, 2022). These ongoing debates illustrate why the NCAA continues to frame its mission around balancing academic integrity with athletic opportunity, positioning sport not as an extracurricular activity but as an integral part of the collegiate experience (Satterfield, 2015).

Today, the NCAA oversees college athletics through three divisions: Division I (DI), Division II (DII), and Division III (DIII). According to recent NCAA reports, Division I comprises about 361 schools with approximately 202,353 student-athletes competing in

championship sports, 57% of whom receive athletic aid. Division II includes 293 institutions with 141,067 champion sport participants, 62% of whom receive athletic aid. Division III consists of 422 institutions with 210,878 student-athletes competing in championship sports, none of whom receive athletic aid (NCAA, 2025a; NCAA, 2025b).

The NCAA governs its member institutions with some variation across divisions. Most notably, while both Division I (DI) and Division II (DII) are permitted to offer athletic scholarships, Division III (DIII) does not provide financial aid for athletics. Scholars and athletic recruiters have suggested that DI is the most athletically rigorous division, demanding the highest level of competition and commitment from student-athletes. In contrast, DII offers a competitive athletic environment with slightly less intensity, potentially allowing for a more balanced approach between academics and athletics. Division III is widely recognized for prioritizing academics, providing student-athletes with the greatest opportunity to focus on their studies while still participating in collegiate sports (NCSA, 2023; Nicholos, 2019; Satterfield, 2015).

Although governance structures, faculty and staff perceptions, and student-athlete circumstances vary across divisions, the NCAA has consistently maintained a stated goal of fostering academic success for all of its athletes (NCAA, 2023). This dual responsibility of balancing academic and athletic commitments makes student-athletes a distinct population within U.S. higher education institutions and sets the stage for examining the lived experience of student-athletes more broadly.

Student-Athlete College Experience

Scholars have found that collegiate experiences vary across divisions, shaped by student-athletes' individual characteristics as well as faculty and staff attitudes toward them (Baucom &

Lants, 2001; Comeaux, 2011; Umbach, 2011). At the Division I level, Comeaux (2011) reported that faculty characteristics such as race, gender, and collegiate affiliation significantly influenced attitudes toward students, noting that faculty often hold more negative views of Division I and II student-athletes compared to the general student body. Such perceptions, he argued, can shape the academic support climate and affect student-athlete integration. Baucom (2001) found that faculty at a NCAA Division II member institution harbored prejudicial attitudes toward student-athletes concerning out of class achievement, admission to the university, reception of scholarships, and expanded tutoring services for student-athletes. In contrast, Williams and other researchers (2019) found that NCAA Division III student-athletes generally reported positive views of their interactions with faculty though negative perceptions also did exist. Significant differences in these perceptions were linked to factors such as classification, gender, GPA, and the visibility of the sport played. Collectively, these findings suggest that the student-athlete experience is shaped by a complex interplay of contextual factors such as divisional context, faculty, and student-athlete characteristics.

While some critics argue that the student-athlete experience produces deficient academic outcomes and that student-athletes are treated primarily as athletes rather than students (Collins, 2022), much of the literature challenges this notion (Paule & Gilson, 2010; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Umbach, 2011). Umbach (2011) found that student-athletes across all three NCAA divisions are academically engaged, and in some cases more engaged than their non-athlete peers, particularly at the Division III level. He further noted that this claim is supported by the frequent outperformance of the general student body on measures such as graduation rates (Umbach, 2011; NCAA 2024). Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) similarly reported that although athletic time commitments often limited opportunities for deeper academic engagement, most of

the Division I student-athletes expressed high satisfaction with their collegiate experience. Over 90% of respondents provided favorable evaluations, and only a small minority regretted participation in athletics. Likewise, Paule and Gilson's (2010) qualitative interviews with 30 Division I student-athletes athletes revealed both challenges and benefits. Participants described limited social opportunities and stigmatization, yet they also highlighted advantages such as access to tutoring, priority course registration, personal development, and preparation for graduate school.

The literature portrays the student-athlete experience as multifaceted, shaped by both barriers and benefits, and influenced by institutional context, individual characteristics, and perceptions of treatment while enrolled. Although research exists on student-athletes across all NCAA divisions, the majority focuses on Division I athletes, leaving the perspectives of Division II athletes underrepresented. This gap is problematic given evidence that at both the Division I and II levels, faculty and staff biases can shape student-athletes' collegiate experiences.

Research further demonstrates that the time demands, and dual roles of academics and athletics often constrain opportunities for a holistic college experience (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Yet, despite these challenges and contrary to persistent stereotypes, student-athletes remain engaged in their academic pursuits (Umbach, 2011). This complexity has led scholars to highlight how student-athletes construct and negotiate their dual identities as both students and athletes, a focus that has become central to contemporary research on the student-athlete experience.

Student-Athlete Identity

Research examining the lived realities of student-athletes highlights the complex duality of their roles and the identity conflicts that often arise. These identity tensions have been associated with well-being, motivation, career development, and academic performance (Lu et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2020; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). Some student-athletes identify more strongly as students, while others primarily view themselves as athletes, and these orientations shape outcomes such as academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. For instance, Lu et al. (2007), in a mixed-methods study of 703 student-athletes across 17 Division I universities, found that those who identified primarily as students achieved higher GPAs and reported lower levels of identity conflict. In contrast, those who foregrounded their athletic identity were more likely to experience conflict between academic and athletic demands.

Woodruff and Schallert (2008) sought to understand how motivation and self-perceptions influenced student-athletes' emotions, cognitions, and behaviors. They specifically sampled NCAA student-athletes at a Research I university because of the dual nature of their roles. Using observations and interviews, the researchers found that the type of identity (student or athlete) a participant emphasized was correlated with their motivation for both academic and athletic endeavors. Notably, four of the nine participants fell into the "best of both" category, demonstrating an integrated form of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These student-athletes balanced their academic and athletic identities by enjoying their sport while also planning for graduation and exploring interests beyond athletics. This study illustrates how identity and motivation intersect to shape student-athletes' experiences.

Expanding on these themes, Steele et al. (2020) conducted a systematic literature review of 42 studies on academic and athletic identity across NCAA Divisions I, II, and III, though

Division I contexts dominated the literature. Their analysis revealed several patterns: most student-athletes identified more strongly as athletes than as students, athletic identity was more central for those competing at elite levels compared to sub-elite levels, and role conflict and career development were recurring concerns. Importantly, the review also found that student-athletes with stronger athletic identities were less likely to utilize academic support services and more likely to choose easier majors or courses. Conversely, supportive campus environments fostered stronger associations with academic roles, demonstrating the importance of institutional support and context.

However, English and Kruger (2020) complicate Steele et al.'s (2020) claim that athletic identity is more central at elite levels than at sub-elite levels by disputing the assumption that Division III student-athletes hold weaker athletic identities because they do not receive athletic scholarships. Their findings suggest that identity salience was not dependent on level of competition or scholarship opportunities.

The literature on student-athlete identity also reflects the underrepresentation of Division II contexts. While all NCAA divisions are represented in the scholarship, Division II athletes remain the minority, despite the unique positioning of their division between the most and least competitive levels of collegiate sport (NCSA, 2023). This makes Division II athletes a particularly important population for understanding the identity phenomenon.

Even so, broader literature consistently demonstrates that balancing student and athlete roles is a persistent challenge and a central theme in student-athlete research. This ongoing tension shapes individual outcomes such as academic performance, motivation, and well-being (Lu et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2020; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). Given these challenges,

understanding the forms of academic support available to student-athletes and how they perceive and use those supports, becomes a critical extension of identity-focused research.

Academic Support for Student-Athletes

Scholars exploring academic support for NCAA student-athletes emphasize that both the services themselves and the personnel who deliver them vary across settings and significantly influence student-athletes' college choices and experiences (Bell, 2009; Gabbert et al., 1999; Harrison, 2015; Harry, 2021). Bell (2009), for example, interviewed 41 Division I Football Bowl Subdivision student-athletes and found that nearly all participants relied on their athletic academic support services center when they encountered academic issues. His findings also highlighted the broader network of support—coaches, academic advisors, peers, faculty, and parents—all of whom shaped the student-athlete academic experience. Similarly, Gabbert et al. (1999), in a survey of 246 college freshmen from NCAA Divisions I and II as well as the NAIA, found that academic support services were among the most influential school choice factors for Division I student-athletes, while school location was the most important factor for those in Division II. Together, these studies highlight both the demand for academic support and the nuances in how its importance is perceived across NCAA divisions.

Other research highlights the role of coaches and advisors in shaping student-athletes' educational experiences. An analysis of exit surveys from 528 student-athletes across 17 FBS Division I institutions revealed that, despite some scholars' critiques, 90% of participants reported positive support from their coaches regarding educational efforts (Harry, 2021). Respondents also noted that academic advisors and related resources were invaluable to their success, further demonstrating the central role of support personnel. Yet tensions persist. Harrison et al. (2015), in a qualitative study of 27 high-achieving African American male

student-athletes at Research I institutions, found that while self-determination was key to academic success, campus environments could both facilitate and undermine that motivation. Some participants described athletic advisors who encouraged them to take easier courses to maintain eligibility, prompting them to take control of their own college experience. These studies illustrate the delicate balance between motivation, identity, and the institutional structures and personnel designed to support academic success.

As academic expectations for student-athletes have risen, the NCAA has formally mandated that all member institutions provide academic support services (Bell, 2009; Harry, 2021; NCAA, 2019). These initiatives often take the form of tutoring, structured study halls, and mentorship programs (Harry, 2021; Otto et al., 2019). While well intentioned, the literature suggests both benefits and drawbacks (Harrison, 2015). Some scholars argue that advising within athletic departments risks prioritizing eligibility over intellectual development, thereby constraining student-athletes' autonomy in course selection and major decisions (Bell, 2009; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Others, however, have found that student-athletes who are satisfied with their support services report better educational outcomes and more positive overall college experiences (Burns et al., 2012; Harry, 2021).

Collectively, the literature suggests that successful academic support programs extend beyond NCAA-mandated services. Coaches, faculty, peers, and fellow student-athletes all play vital roles in shaping motivation and achievement (Bell, 2009; Harrison et al., 2015). These findings illustrate both the promise and the limitations of academic support programs. While these services are intended to foster student-athlete success, their effectiveness depends not only on their availability but also on how they are experienced and perceived by student-athletes themselves.

Although there is research addressing Division I and, to a lesser extent, Division II athletes, the latter remain underrepresented in the broader academic support literature. Some studies suggest that Division II athletes may place different value on available support compared to their Division I counterparts, making it particularly important to examine their perspectives. This complexity underscores the need to focus not only on the presence of academic support programs but also on how student-athletes in varying institutional contexts interpret and assess their effectiveness.

Perceptions and Effects of Academic Support for Student-Athletes

Scholars have also examined student-athlete satisfaction with academic support services and its relationship to academic and career-related outcomes (Burns et al., 2013; Nite, 2012; Otto et al., 2019; Brouwer et al., 2022). Burns et al. (2013) surveyed 158 Division I student-athletes from 11 teams across the Midwest and East to investigate the link between satisfaction with academic support services and career decision-making self-efficacy. Participation in the evaluated programs was mandatory for freshmen and sophomores, and findings revealed that student-athletes who were more satisfied with their support services demonstrated stronger career decision-making self-efficacy. Similarly, Otto et al. (2019) surveyed 103 Division I freshman athletes from 72 institutions across seven conferences and found that student-athletes' perceptions of supportive academic environments significantly shaped their satisfaction and adjustment to college. Together, these studies underscore that student-athletes' evaluations of support services are directly tied to both their college experience and career development outcomes.

Although this body of research highlights important connections, most studies have centered on Division I athletes, leaving Division II perspectives underexplored. Even when

Division II athletes are included, existing studies often face methodological or emphasis limitations that prevent them from fully capturing DII student-athletes' perceptions of academic support. Nite (2012), for example, conducted a qualitative case study at a private Division II university to investigate athletic department support for student-athlete development outside out sport. Findings from interviews with 13 administrators and faculty members indicated that limited resources and institutional pressure to win athletic competitions created barriers to providing robust academic support. While the study offered valuable insights, its small, single-site sample and focus on administrators' perspectives rather than student-athletes limit its broader applicability to the academic support experience.

Brouwer et al. (2022) expanded Division II research through 12 focus groups with 62 student-athletes from a mid-sized public university investigating student-athletes' perceptions of academic success. Participants described grades as both a self-assessment of classroom progress and an external marker of learning. They emphasized that grades reflected effort more than intellectual ability and reported being motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. While participants highlighted academic support services as essential, particularly study spaces and faculty communication, they also expressed concerns about accessibility and location. Notably, they concluded that although support services were important, academic success ultimately depended on individual effort. While the use of focus groups allowed for broad participation, the authors noted that this may have influenced individual responses. They also suggested that future research should include more institutional settings compared to their single site study.

The literature demonstrates that student-athletes' satisfaction with academic support services can shape their educational experiences and career outcomes (Burns, 2013; Otto et al., 2019). However, the overwhelming focus on Division I populations, coupled with

methodological limitations in Division II studies, reveals a persistent gap in understanding how Division II athletes themselves perceive and experience academic support.

Limitations of Current Research and Remaining Gaps

While substantial research has examined NCAA student-athletes—including their college experiences, athletic identities, and the academic support available to them the overwhelming majority of this scholarship has centered on Division I populations. Division II student-athletes remain comparatively underexamined, despite representing a distinct context within collegiate athletics (NCSA, 2023). This underrepresentation is particularly concerning given outcome disparities: the Academic Success Rate (ASR) for Division II athletes is 77%, compared to a Graduation Success Rate (GSR) of 90% for Division I and an ASR of 88% for Division III student-athletes (NCAA, 2024).

Moreover, existing studies on Division II athletics often emphasize resource limitations and importance of academic support structures of support rather than student-athletes' perceptions of these supports. As a result, little is known about how Division II student-athletes interpret and make meaning of the support available to them, or how those perceptions influence their motivation and broader college experiences. This is a significant gap given that research on student-athlete identity and academic engagement highlights the critical role of perception and context in shaping outcomes.

Taken together, these limitations highlight a persistent gap in the literature: although prior research has shed light on the importance and perceptions of academic support among Division I student-athletes, we know far less about how Division II athletes themselves perceive and navigate these supports. This study addresses that gap by centering the voices of Division II

student-athletes and investigating how Division II student-athletes describe their experience with academic support.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory

Theories of human motivation have evolved significantly over time. Early frameworks, such as McDougall's instinct theory and behavior-primacy theory (McDougall, 1932), emphasized external drivers of behavior, viewing human action as a direct response to external stimuli rather than as a function of innate instincts (Vansteenkiste et al., 2008). These perspectives laid the groundwork for the behaviorist movement, which recognized the role of basic human needs as motivational drivers. While still rooted in external influences, these early theories provided a conceptual pathway for later scholars, including Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, to develop self-determination theory (SDT). SDT marked a shift toward understanding motivation as a function of innate psychological needs rather than being solely determined by external control (Ryan et al., 2019; Vansteenkiste et al., 2008).

Self-determination theory, as articulated by Ryan and Deci, provides a comprehensive framework for examining human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Central to SDT are three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that are empirically linked to optimal motivation and well-being (Schemenauer & Chu, 2022). Autonomy refers to an individual's capacity to regulate behavior in alignment with personal interests and values. Competence pertains to confidence in one's ability to accomplish tasks effectively and proficiently. Relatedness involves the sense of belonging within one's environment, fostered through meaningful relationships and mutual care (Vansteenkiste et al., 2008).

SDT categorizes motivation into two primary forms: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation arises from inherent interest or personal satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation is driven by external pressures or incentives. Within extrinsic motivation, SDT further

distinguishes integrated motivation as an optimal form, wherein external influences are internalized and aligned with an individual's values and needs. Integrated motivation is particularly relevant in contexts where effort is directed toward achieving an external outcome rather than for inherent enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Unlike other motivational frameworks frequently applied in disciplines such as economics and psychology, SDT emphasizes well-being as a central outcome. The theory posits that externally controlled regulation of behavior is associated with diminished performance and persistence, whereas autonomous regulation fosters sustained motivation and enhanced well-being. Moreover, intrinsic motivation is considered the most desirable form, as it directly reflects the fulfillment of psychological needs and contributes to overall well-being (Vansteenkiste et al., 2008).

SDT provides an appropriate theoretical framework for this study because of its well-established application in both education and sport psychology research (Cronin et al., 2022; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Schemenauer & Chu, 2022). It offers a useful lens through which to examine Division II student-athletes' perceptions of academic support and its influence on motivation for academic success. Given that the NCAA commonly measures student-athlete success through academic success rates (ASR) and graduation success rates (GSR), SDT provides a relevant framework for exploring the motivational processes underlying these outcomes.

Self-Determination Theory in Education and Sport

Self-determination theory (SDT) has been widely applied in educational settings to predict and examine student outcomes (Guay et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vallerand & Fortier, 1997; Wang et al., 2024). Core concepts—intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the

three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—have been tested across diverse educational contexts (Bureau et al., 2021; Filak & Sheldon, 2003; Taylor et al., 2014). In 1992, Vallerand and colleagues developed the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) to measure diverse types of motivation based on SDT (Vallerand et al., 1992). Using this tool, Vallerand and Fortier (1997) conducted a quantitative study examining the influence of teachers, parents, and school administrators on students' perceptions of autonomy and competence. They found that students who perceived lower levels of autonomy and competence demonstrated decreased self-determination, which in turn predicted intentions to drop out of high school—intentions that were later linked to actual dropout rates. These findings highlight the importance of supporting students' psychological needs, as fostering self-determination can enhance persistence in education.

SDT scholars consistently emphasize the importance of cultivating students' innate interest and intrinsic motivation for learning (Howard et al., 2021). Within educational environments, researchers have examined how external controls can undermine autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In response, scholars have advanced frameworks that promote "need-supportive" teaching, coaching, and parenting—approaches that encourage support systems surrounding both students and athletes to actively foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness for improved performance and well-being (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Schemenauer & Chu, 2022).

The application of SDT extends beyond the classroom into athletics, where researchers have examined its implications for athlete motivation and well-being (Harrison et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schemenauer & Chu, 2022). For example, Schemenauer and Chu (2022) implemented an intervention with parents of young gymnasts, providing a handbook designed to

enhance motivation and prevent burnout through need-supportive parenting strategies. The results showed not only increased motivation and reduced burnout but also stronger parent-child relationships and healthier family dynamics.

Taken together, these studies provide empirical support for the relevance of SDT in both educational and athletic contexts. The research demonstrates that when students and athletes receive support that nurtures their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they are more likely to experience increased intrinsic motivation and improved outcomes. Conversely, when these needs are thwarted, negative consequences such as reduced motivation, disengagement, and dropout can occur (Harrison et al., 2015; Vallerand & Fortier, 1997). Given these findings, SDT provides a strong theoretical framework for examining how Division II student-athletes perceive their academic support and how these perceptions may influence their motivation and academic success.

Self-Determination Theory in Intercollegiate Athletics

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has been applied in research examining the athletic and academic experiences of NCAA student-athletes (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2008). Scholars have applied SDT as a theoretical framework to design qualitative interview protocols, structure research findings, and generate insights into student-athlete motivation and success (Harrison et al., 2015; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007), although the majority of these studies—whether qualitative or quantitative—have concentrated on NCAA Division I athletes. Consistent with SDT, the literature suggests that high-achieving and engaged student-athletes shared experiences that reflected strong intrinsic and integrated forms of motivation (Harrison et al., 2015; Woodruff & Schallert, 2015). Research further indicates that the structure of athletic and academic environments can either enhance or undermine student-athletes' self-determination,

thereby influencing their academic persistence and overall college experience (Brouwer et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The research also highlights that the structure of athletic and academic environments can either foster or undermine student-athletes' self-determination, ultimately shaping their academic persistence and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Harrison et al., 2015).

While prior studies have qualitatively explored the collegiate experiences of NCAA Division II athletes, they have not done so through the lens of SDT to assess student-athletes' perceptions of academic support (Brouwer et al., 2022). This gap in the literature emphasizes the need for further inquiry into how Division II athletes perceive the academic support provided by their institutions. Given the unique demands placed on Division II student-athletes—who often balance rigorous academic responsibilities with athletic commitments while navigating fewer institutional resources compared to their Division I counterparts—gaining insight into their experiences through the SDT framework can meaningfully advance the literature (NCSA, 2023; Nite, 2012). This study addresses this gap by applying SDT to examine how NCAA Division II student-athletes perceive the academic support available to them.

Application of Self-Determination Theory

Within the context of this study, self-determination theory (SDT) provided a valuable framework for examining the motivational processes of NCAA Division II student-athletes and their perceptions of psychological support. SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and the more autonomous form of extrinsic motivation known as integrated regulation. For example, intrinsic motivation may be reflected in a student-athlete who pursues excellence in their classes purely for the inherent joy and personal fulfillment it provides. In contrast, extrinsic motivation might be seen in a student-athlete who attends class solely to meet

eligibility requirements, with little personal interest in the academic experience itself. Integrated regulation, by comparison, occurs when a student-athlete actively participates in class because they recognize that earning a degree aligns with both their immediate eligibility needs and their long-term career aspirations. While they may not enjoy every class, they internalize the value of academic achievement as it supports both athletic and future professional goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Psychological support, as conceptualized through SDT, encompasses institutional and interpersonal resources that nurture student-athletes' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000); Harrison et al., 2015). Autonomy-supportive resources may include advising structures that empower athletes to make informed educational choices (Bartholomew et al., 2011). Competence can be fostered through tutoring, mentoring, and study skills workshops that build confidence in academic ability (Burns et al., 2013). Relatedness is strengthened through meaningful networks of support, including coaches, faculty, advisors, and peers, which create a sense of belonging and well-being. Team-building activities, leadership development opportunities, and peer mentorship programs further reinforce relatedness by cultivating camaraderie and social support within the athletic environment (Bell, 2009). Together, these forms of psychological support have the potential to shape student-athletes' college experiences and their motivation for academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2008).

By grounding this research in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and employing a phenomenological design (Neubauer, et. al, 2019; Patton & Broward, 2023; Saldaña, 2011; Watson, 2024), the study explored how Division II student-athletes describe their journeys through college athletics, their perceptions of academic support, and their sources of motivation.

In-depth interviews allowed for examination not only of current circumstances but also of experiences leading up to them, including recruitment processes and transfers between institutions. These narratives captured the academic, athletic, and social dimensions of student-athletes' lives. Central to the analysis was whether the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were perceived as supported or thwarted within these contexts, and whether student-athletes' motivation was experienced as intrinsic or extrinsic. SDT thus provided a coherent framework for organizing these lived experiences, offering a methodologically sound approach to answering how NCAA Division II student-athletes make meaning of the academic support available to them (Burns, 2018; Ferris-Crisafulli, 2022; Mulvaney, 2022).

Chapter Four: Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of NCAA Division II student-athletes to understand how they describe their academic support through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT). Academic support was selected as the focus of this study due to its recurring significance in previous research (Bell, 2009; Gabbert et al., 1999; Harrison, 2015; Harry, 2021). Despite being widely recognized as an essential factor in student-athlete success, prior studies have not directly examined academic support from the perspective of Division II student-athletes using one-on-one interviews informed by SDT. This is particularly important because research in education and sport has demonstrated that support, motivation, well-being, and academic outcomes can be effectively understood through SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Scholars examining Division II athletes have also recommended the use of one-on-one interviews of student-athletes from multiple backgrounds and institutional contexts to better capture their perceptions of academic success (Brouwer et al., 2022). Accordingly, this study employed semi-structured interviews with NCAA Division II student-athletes (n = 20) across 17 institutions and 14 conferences to address this gap. The guiding research question was: How do NCAA Division II student-athletes describe their experience with academic support?

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore NCAA Division II student-athletes' perceptions of academic support (Neubauer, et. al, 2019; Patton & Broward, 2023; Saldaña, 2011; Watson, 2024). Phenomenology is often discussed in two main ways: descriptive phenomenology and interpretative/hermeneutic phenomenology, which are influenced by the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Patton & Broward, 2023; Watson, 2024). From these pioneers, distinct movements have emerged, such as realistic phenomenology (Budd et al., 2010; Smith, 1997). While phenomenology paradigms are often

perceived as a distinct camp or team with devoted followers adhering to strict methodological guidelines, this study adopts a holistic approach to phenomenology. This approach is particularly suitable for scholars seeking an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, utilizing methods that are pertinent to this specific study. Drawing inspiration from the paradigms of the three aforementioned phenomenology types, this study leans heavily toward hermeneutic phenomenology (Budd et al., 2010; Patton & Broward, 2023; Smith, 1997; Watson, 2024).

Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences by examining individuals who share a common phenomenon, in this case, navigating academic support as NCAA Division II athletes. Phenomenology is an appropriate methodological approach for this study because it enables the researcher to delve deeper into the lived experiences of NCAA Division II student athletes navigating academic support, moving beyond surface-level descriptions (Fletcher, 2017). This research design allows the researcher to go beyond descriptive findings that might reveal what is already known about the Division II context, as evidenced by the divisional design of the organization and the financial investment in sports at the DII level. According to the NCAA's (2021) finance statement, only 4.32% of the non-profit organization's 600-million-dollar annual revenue was shared with Division II conferences and universities compared to the 60% shared with Division I. While most of these funds are used to fund championship competitions, they also contribute to funding scholarship and grants for the student athletes, including financial support for academic services. Previous research has also highlighted that DII universities often operate with fewer resources, creating barriers to providing comprehensive support for student athletes (Nite, 2012). This study, utilizing phenomenology, aims to explore how student athletes experience academic support within this contextual circumstance, moving beyond resource constraints.

While many of the methodological decisions stem from descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology paradigms, the researcher approached this study from a realist epistemology aligning with the realistic phenomenology movement (Maxwell, 2012; Smith, 1997). While qualitative research, especially descriptive phenomenology, is most often associated with interpretivism, which assumes reality is socially constructed and knowledge emerges from individuals' subjective interpretations (Dhobi, 2023), this study adopts a realist stance. Realism assumes that external realities exist, but our knowledge of those realities is mediated by perception, context, and interpretation (Maxwell, 2012). This position acknowledges universal truths while recognizing that individual perspectives are essential to understanding how those truths are experienced in specific contexts. The realist epistemological stance in phenomenology also aligns with the hermeneutic phenomenology with both realistic and hermeneutic phenomenology paradigms emphasizing the use of a priori knowledge (Watson, 2024). In this study, the researcher acknowledges the systemic context of Division II athletics, the accepted truths of self-determination theory, and the findings of previous literature (NCSA, 2023; Nite, 2012; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Together, the phenomenological research design and realist epistemology provide a philosophical foundation that is both methodologically sound and contextually sensitive, recognizing most single perspectives are unlikely to capture the whole truth, participants' accounts collectively can contribute to a more accurate understanding of the realities influencing academic support in Division II athletics.

To achieve this objective, interviews averaged 39 minutes in duration, ranging from 14 to 57 minutes, which allowed for both depth and flexibility in data collection A semi-structured protocol was used to ensure consistency across participants while also providing space for

individualized responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Interview questions were designed to elicit narratives about participants' pathways into collegiate athletics, their broader college experiences, their sources of academic motivation, and their perceptions of academic support (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Kallio et al., 2016).

Setting

This study focused on a distinct population in U.S. higher education institutions: National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes. Today, the NCAA oversees college athletics through three divisions: Division I (DI), Division II (DII), and Division III (DIII). According to recent NCAA reports (see Table 1), Division I comprises about 361 schools with approximately 202,353 student-athletes competing in championship sports, 57% of whom receive athletic (NCAA, 2025a; NCAA, 2025b). Division II includes 293 institutions with 141,067 champion sport participants, 62% of whom receive athletic aid (NCAA, 2025a; NCAA, 2025b). Division III consists of 422 institutions with 210,878 student-athletes competing in championship sports, none of whom receive athletic aid (NCAA, 2025a; NCAA, 2025b).

Table 1

NCAA Division Breakdown

Athletic Association	Number of Schools	Number of Athletes	Student-Athletes Receiving Athletic Aid
NCAA Division I	361	202,353	57%
NCAA Division II	293	141,067	62%
NCAA Division III	422	210,878	0%

This study centered on the Division II population because of the documented disparities in graduation and academic success rates between the divisions: Division I (90%), Division III (88%), and Division II (77%) (NCAA, 2024). Although scholars consistently emphasize the importance of academic support in the college experiences of student-athletes, Division II athletes remain underrepresented in the literature (Bell, 2009; Gabbert et al., 1999; Harrison, 2015; Harry, 2021).

To ensure a diverse and representative sample, the researcher initially selected 15 of the 23 NCAA Division II conferences at random. Student-athletes from these conferences were recruited using the professional networking platform LinkedIn (LinkedIn, 2002). Recruitment was later expanded to the remaining eight conferences to achieve the desired number of participants. In total, 20 student-athletes participated in interviews, representing 17 NCAA Division II universities across 14 conferences and 13 states. The sample included both public (n = 6) and private (n = 11) institutions.

Data Sources

The target population for this study consisted of male and female NCAA Division II (DII) student-athletes competing across a variety of sports (n = 20). Purposive and convenience sampling strategies were employed. Both men and women were intentionally included to capture diverse perspectives, as NCAA reports indicate considerable variation in Academic Success Rates (ASR) by gender: 69% for males and 88% for females, compared to the overall Division II average of 77% (see Table 2; NCAA, 2024).

Table 2

Academic Success Rate by Gender

Participant	Academic Success Rate (ASR)
Male	69%
Female	88%

Participants represented multiple sports to reflect the varying academic experiences and support structures that may be influenced by the timing of their competitive seasons (Scott et al., 2008). Some sports take place primarily in the fall or spring, while others, such as basketball, span both semesters. Travel schedules also vary by sport, which can further affect student-athletes' access to academic support (Choi & Smith, 2024). Including athletes from a range of sports ensured that the sample captured a breadth of perspectives on academic support in Division II settings.

The researcher initially planned to recruit only upperclassmen (i.e., juniors and seniors) to ensure participants had sufficient collegiate experience. This criterion helped mitigate the transitional challenges that disproportionately affect first- and second-year students as they adjust to the dual demands of academics and athletics (Bell, 2009; Otto et al., 2019). However, to reach the target number of participants, underclassmen and graduate student-athletes were later included. These remained a minority within the sample, as most participants were upperclassmen.

Ultimately, the sample included 20 NCAA Division II student-athletes representing 13 states and 14 athletic conferences, drawn from both public (n = 6) and private (n = 11)

institutions. The group consisted of 8 males and 12 females, with classifications ranging from freshmen (n = 2) to juniors (n = 8), seniors (n = 7), and graduate students (n = 3) (see Table 3). Athletes competed in eight sports, most commonly basketball (n = 6), soccer (n = 5), and football (n = 4), with additional representation from baseball, golf, lacrosse, softball, and track and field (see Table 3). On average, participants had attended their universities for 2.5 years, with representation across the full spectrum of classifications excluding sophomores (see Table 3). While the majority of participants (60%) had not transferred institutions prior to the study, 40% reported transferring at least once (see Table 3). Finally, the sample of student-athletes included three international students, while the remaining participants were U.S. citizens (see Table 3). Participants' pseudonyms and characteristics can be found in Table 4.

Table 3

Sample Characteristics

Sample	Count
University Type	
Private	11
Public	6
Sex	
Male	8
Female	12
Classification	
Freshman	2
Sophomore	0
Junior	8
Senior	7
Graduate Student	3
Sport	
Basketball	6
Soccer	5
Football	4
Golf	2
Baseball	1
Lacrosse	1

Softball	1
Track & Field	1
Years at Current University	
1 year	7
2 years	2
3 years	6
4 years	4
5 years	1
Transfer Status	
Non-transfer	12
Transfer	8
International Student	3

Table 4

Participant Characteristics

Participant Pseudonym	Sex	Classification	Sport	Years at Current University	Transfer Status
Joshua	Male	Senior	Soccer	3	Non-transfer
Samuel	Male	Junior	Baseball	2	Transfer
King	Male	Freshman	Soccer	1	Non-transfer
Ezra	Male	Junior	Football	3	Non-transfer
Genesis	Female	Senior	Golf	4	Non-transfer
Ruth	Female	Junior	Golf	3	Non-transfer
Nehemiah	Male	Freshman (International)	Basketball	1	Non-transfer
Esther	Female	Senior	Soccer	4	Non-transfer
Naomi	Female	Senior	Lacrosse	4	Non-transfer
Sarah	Female	Junior	Soccer	1	Transfer
Elizabeth	Female	Graduate Student	Softball	3	Transfer
Job	Male	Graduate Student	Football	4	Non-transfer
Solomon	Male	Graduate Student	Football	5	Non-transfer
Martha	Female	Junior (International)	Track & Field	3	Non-transfer

Priscilla	Female	Senior	Basketball	1	Transfer
Isaiah	Male	Senior	Football	2	Transfer
Jeremiah	Male	Junior (International)	Soccer	1	Transfer
Eve	Female	Senior	Basketball	1	Transfer
Hannah	Female	Junior	Basketball	3	Non-transfer
Leah	Female	Junior	Basketball	1	Transfer

Interviews

Self-determination theory (SDT) served as the guiding theoretical framework for constructing the semi-structured interview protocol (Harrison et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2008; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007). Previous studies have shown that high-achieving and engaged student-athletes often describe experiences reflecting strong intrinsic and integrated forms of motivation (Harrison et al., 2015; Woodruff & Schallert, 2015). Research also indicates that the structure of athletic and academic environments can either enhance or undermine self-determination, thereby influencing student-athletes' persistence and overall college experience (Brouwer et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2015; Otto et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schemenauer & Chu, 2022).

The interview questions were designed to elicit narratives of NCAA Division II student-athletes' pathways through college athletics, their sources of motivation for academic success, their overall college experience, and their experiences with academic support. This interview questionnaire design decision was made in light of previous research on a conceptual model of academic success for student athletes. This model suggests that to effectively support student athletes, it's crucial to explore their pre-college characteristics (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences with academic support services, advisors, faculty, coaching staff, and peers, as well as their overall perceptions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviews averaged 39 minutes in duration, with a range from 14 to 57 minutes. The interview questionnaire was informed by SDT and prior literature on student-athlete academic experiences, while remaining consistent with a phenomenological design (Harrison et al., 2015; Saldaña, 2011; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007). Questions were intentionally open-ended to allow participants to describe their lived experiences

in their own words. Core questions (e.g., *Why did you choose your university?*) were designed to explore SDT concepts such as autonomy and motivation type. Probes (e.g., *Tell me about your recruiting process*) encouraged elaboration and richer descriptions. This approach struck a balance between being guided by SDT and the literature, while maintaining the openness central to phenomenological inquiry and consistent with a realist epistemology (Maxwell, 2012; Saldaña, 2011). The final interview questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

To enhance the design of the interview protocol, the researcher conducted cognitive interviews (n = 5) with fellow doctoral students and a university professor to assess the clarity and effectiveness of the questions. In addition, a pilot study was conducted with three women's basketball players from two NCAA Division II universities. The pilot provided valuable insights that informed refinements to the interview guide, sampling strategy, and overall research design.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom. To ensure confidentiality, participants and their respective universities were de-identified prior to analysis. The researcher obtained IRB-approved informed consent from each participant, which included permission for recording and use of interview data for research purposes. Given the potential for participants to share sensitive information about their universities, teams, or scholarships, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were prioritized. Pseudonyms were assigned to both participants and institutions to protect identities. The IRB approval letter is included in Appendix B

Data Analysis

While realistic and hermeneutic phenomenology paradigms often rely on deductive coding strategies for data analysis, this study followed an inductive approach, aligning with descriptive phenomenological inquiry (Fletcher, 2017; Saldaña, 2011). All interviews were transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature and then processed through Otter AI to improve

accuracy (Liang, 2016; Zoom Communications & Qumu Corporations, 2012). The researcher reviewed the transcripts for errors and de-identified both participants and their universities. Interview transcripts were then organized by participant and separated by interview question in an Excel workbook (Bree & Gallagher, 2016; Meyer & Avery, 2009; Ose, 2016).

A three-stage coding process was employed (Fletcher, 2017; Maxwell, 2012; Saldaña, 2011), involving first inductive descriptive coding, followed by condensing data into categories, and finally, conducting axial thematic analysis. Inductive descriptive coding involved describing the raw responses from participants while preserving their accounts. For instance, when asked about the academic support available to them, the first stage inductive coding included phrases such as "professor is helpful," "office hours," and "teacher assistant."

After inductive descriptive coding to each participant response, the researcher condensed the data into broader categories within each interview question tab in the Excel workbook. This process helped determine the most salient topics described by the participants. For example, the interview question tab recording the participant responses to the academic support available to them was condensed into categories such as "faculty and staff," "athletic department," and "resource facilities." The salience of a category was determined by the number of codes within it.

It is important to note that the salience or code frequency of a category is not associated with the number of participants who mentioned a topic. The frequency of a code within a category indicated what participants spoke about the most and the level of detail they provided about the topic. For instance, a code count of 10 should not be interpreted as 10 of 20 participants mentioning a topic. Instead, it suggests that the sample discussed a topic in depth 10 times. Limitations to this approach include the potential overrepresentation of the perspectives

of individuals within the sample. However, phenomenology aims to understand the in-depth nature of a phenomenon, and this coding process prioritizes in-depth descriptions over quantification of participants' responses, which is more commonly seen in other research designs (Watson, 2024).

The table below illustrates instances of stage one descriptive codes and stage two corresponding categories, along with their salience. It presents examples of codes but is not an exhaustive list of codes within the Excel workbook tab dedicated to recording participant responses to the interview question about academic support (refer to Table 5).

Table 5

Stage One and Two Coding

General Dissatisfaction	General Satisfaction	Tutoring	Mental Health	Resource Facilities/Structures	Personal Responsibility	Faculty and staff	Athletic Department
class time not long enough	plenty of resources	peer tutoring	counselor	career services	chatGPT	office hours	coach available
would like more support	alumni support	class tutors	mental health days	tutoring center	up to student to take advantage	AA advisor	study hall
	scholarships	peer mentoring		library		TAs	team GPA
				math center			
3	10	17	3	21	10	48	39

Note. Below the stage two categories, which are presented as headers, are the stage one codes. Salience counts are located below both stage one and two codes.

Subsequently, stage three of the coding process, axial thematic analysis, was conducted. Axial thematic analysis involved identifying the most prominent categories from each interview question and examining their relationships with one another (Saldaña, 2011) (See Table 6). The researcher analyzed these categories and their connections through the lens of self-determination theory to develop overarching themes. During this process, contextual insights reflected in the categories, even if less salient, were referenced to ensure the authenticity of the in-depth insights sought in a phenomenological research design (Watson, 2024). The table below presents the most salient categories from each interview question (see Appendix A), which were subsequently used for the final stage of coding to generate three emergent themes.

Table 6

Axial Thematic Analysis

Interview Question	Salience 1	Salience 2	Salience 3
1	Adversity	Passion for sport	Youth recreational league
2	Athletic preference	Location	
3	Personal Interest		
4	Relationship oriented	Faculty and staff	
5	Intrinsic motivation	Extrinsic barriers	
6	Positive feelings	Depend on internal factors	
7	Faculty and staff	Athletic department	
8	Academics	Athletics	
9	Times demands	External rewards	
10	Faculty and staff	Academic (majority satisfied)	

Ultimately, each response was subjected to open coding, with codes applied to capture key ideas and experiences described by participants. Within each question tab, codes were refined into broader categories to identify recurring patterns. Following this within-question analysis, the most frequent and conceptually significant categories were compared across questions and participants to develop axial codes and overarching themes (Saldaña, 2021). The following section outlines the strategies employed to establish an audit trail. An audit trail is a strategy used to transparently and comprehensively track the data analysis process. These steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness and transparency of this study (Rodgers et al., 1993).

Positionality

As a former NCAA Division II student-athlete, I recognize that my personal experiences have the potential to shape how I interpret participants' narratives. To address this, I engaged in bracketing throughout the study (Moustakas, 1994). Specifically, I maintained a reflexive notebook where I recorded notes during and after each interview. These notes helped me identify assumptions, document initial impressions, and reflect on how my thinking evolved over time. I also maintained an audit trail within my coding workbook, which documented the progression from raw transcripts to open codes, categories, and eventual themes. This combination of reflexive journaling and systematic coding records enhanced transparency and supported interpretations grounded in participant's lived experiences rather than my own preconceptions (Ortlipp, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

At the same time, I acknowledge that my background informed the interview process itself. My familiarity with the NCAA Division II context allowed me to ask more meaningful follow-up questions and provided a shared frame of reference that appeared to make participants feel more comfortable. While my role as an insider may have enhanced rapport, my systematic

use of bracketing was an intentional effort to keep interpretations faithful to the voices of participants rather than my own assumptions.

Limitations

As the researcher is a former NCAA Division II student-athlete, personal experiences may have influenced both the development of the interview questionnaire (Appendix A) and the interpretation of participant narratives. While bracketing was employed to minimize bias, complete neutrality is often not possible in qualitative research (Dohbi, 2023; Maxwell, 2012). Another consideration involves data analysis. Intra-coder reliability is a potential concern since the researcher served as the sole coder. Although systematic coding procedures, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling were used to enhance dependability, the absence of a second coder may limit confirmability (Ortlipp, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant responses may also have been shaped by social desirability bias, as student-athletes could have tailored answers to reflect positively on themselves, their teams, or their institutions. While emphasizing confidentiality and maintaining clear objectives helped to minimize this risk, some degree of social desirability bias may have persisted (Júnior, 2022).

The sampling strategy may have introduced additional limitations. Because participants were recruited via LinkedIn, a social networking site, the sample may be skewed toward student-athletes who are more career-oriented and outward-looking beyond their athletic identity. LinkedIn may attract individuals preparing for life after sport, which could mean these participants already held stronger or more developed non-athletic identities compared to peers not active on the platform. The sample also contained more participants from private (n=11) than public institutions (n=6), as well as more females (n=12) than men (n=8). While this diversity was intentional and enriched the dataset, it does not reflect an ideal balanced 50/50 split. This

imbalance is notable given that NCAA reports show differences in Academic Success Rates (ASR) by gender, with women consistently reporting higher ASR (NCAA, 2024). In addition, although literature is limited, some work suggests that institutional type (public vs. private) can moderate student-athlete persistence and retention, raising the possibility that academic support may be experienced differently across institutional contexts (Lee, 2021).

Despite these limitations, the study employed a rigorous methodology grounded in self-determination theory and phenomenological inquiry, supported by reflexive practices, an audit trail, and transparency in data analysis. These steps helped mitigate potential biases and strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Chapter Five: Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of NCAA Division II student-athletes in order to understand how they describe their experiences with academic support through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT). Academic support was the focus of this study because of its recurring significance in prior research (Burns et al., 2013; Gayles, 2003; Harrison et al., 2015; Harry, 2022; Lu et al., 2018; Otto et al., 2013; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Woodruff & Schallert, 2007). Although academic support has long been recognized as a critical factor in student-athlete success, limited research has explored it from the perspective of Division II student-athletes. Through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with NCAA Division II student-athletes (n = 20) across 17 institutional contexts, this study aimed to address this gap by centering the student-athlete perspective. The following research question guided the study: How do NCAA Division II student-athletes describe their experience with academic support?

The researcher employed a phenomenological research design, informed by a realist epistemological stance (Maxwell, 2012; Neubauer, et. al, 2019; Patton & Broward, 2023; Saldaña, 2011; Watson, 2024). Data analysis followed a multi-cycle coding process (Fletcher, 2017; Maxwell, 2012; Saldaña, 2011). The first cycle involved open coding to generate initial codes grounded in participants' accounts. These codes were then refined through focused coding to identify patterns and condense data into broader categories. Finally, axial coding was conducted with reference to SDT, integrating categories and highlighting cross-cutting themes.

The presentation of the findings begins by highlighting student-athletes' accounts of their lived experiences, honoring a descriptive phenomenological design by presenting the key patterns identified in the second stage of analysis with minimal interpretation. The major sections

illustrate these narratives and are organized around four focal areas: (1) the student-athlete's journey to college athletics, (2) reflections on their overall college experience, (3) their motivation for academic success, and (4) how they navigate academic support at their universities. These focal areas are based on previous literature and self-determination theory, designed to explore autonomy, competence, relatedness, motivation type, and pre-college characteristics (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The descriptive findings presented are derived from the most prominent categories identified during the second phase of the three-step coding process. Instead of simply listing the most salient categories for each focal area, the researcher presents the findings by sharing the collective narrative of the sample in a chronological manner. This approach allows the reader to follow the journey of the student athletes.

Following this descriptive phenomenological narrative, the chapter delves into the emergent themes identified through axial thematic analysis, adhering to a hermeneutic phenomenology design that encourages researcher interpretation. Three themes emerged from this analysis: faculty and staff as central to academic support, student-athletes' strong intrinsic motivation, and the challenges of balancing dual roles.

The Student-Athlete's Journey to College Athletics

When reflecting on their pathways to collegiate athletics, NCAA Division II student-athletes described a trajectory that began in early childhood, was sustained by personal passion for sport and a desire to participate in college athletics. The journey was often marked by family influences, support and the need to overcome adversity. Together, these narratives highlight how athletic aspirations shaped participants' educational choices and identities long before entering college.

Early Recreational Beginnings and Family Influence

When asked about their involvement in sports in their youth, participants described entering sports at a young age, often through recreational leagues. Parents often served as the initial motivators. This was evident in the category "youth recreational start," which was particularly salient (n=17)[1]. Although less prominent, the category family influence (n=7) into sports provided contextual insight. While parents were mentioned in the most depth as contributors to a youthful start to sport, other family members such as siblings and grandparents also influenced the student athletes' youthful start to athletics. Athletics was not only framed as a hobby but also as a structured extracurricular activity that parents often desired for their children to participate in. Elizabeth noted,

> When I was a kid, my parents pretty much were like, we don't want you out doing a bunch of crazy stuff. So, they were like, it's either sports, arts, whatever it is you're doing something. And then they put me in softball. - Elizabeth

Many of the participants' accounts expressed similar sentiments about their initial engagement in athletic activities, which was heavily influenced by parents and their willingness to support youth sport participation. Solomon shared,

> My dad and brother always played football, so I kind of just got put in, like, it's a family thing, really. – Solomon

Other participants mentioned that their siblings and other family members guided their participation in sports during their youth. Even if they didn't continue with the initial sport that sparked their athletic development, they consistently emphasized the significant role of family influences in initiating their athletic journeys during their youth. Martha recounted,

[1] *n represents the number of codes within a category.

> My older brother, he played football, and I was always around my dad and my older brother, so that's kind of how I got involved with sports. I started off playing football at a young age, and up until I couldn't anymore, because my mom stopped me from doing it, I just turned to basketball from there. - Martha

These narratives illustrate how family involvement not only acted as the catalyst for athletic participation but also helped foster the early development of an athletic identity, a foundation that shaped participants' eventual pursuit of collegiate athletics. Naomi captured this experience perfectly,

> I've grew up with lacrosse my entire life. So my dad has coached at all levels. So Lacrosse is a family affair for my family. I came out of the womb with a stick in my hand. -Naomi

Personal Passion and Commitment to Sport

As participants moved into middle and high school, their recreational involvement evolved into more serious commitments such as travel leagues and participation in recruitment showcases. The transition reflected a deepening passion for sport and a growing recognition of college athletics as an attainable goal. During the data analysis, a personal passion that was evolving beyond familial influences became evident. The category ranked second in terms of salience (n=18) when reflecting on their trajectories from youth to college athletics. Adversity emerged as the most prominent category (n=19) when student-athletes recounted their experiences in transitioning to college athletics. These patterns indicate that student athletes' family influence and personal passion for sports ultimately prepared them to endure the challenges they faced when pursuing college athletics.

Of all the challenges mentioned, participants frequently highlighted the disruption caused by COVID-19. This disruption limited their exposure opportunities and created uncertainty about

their prospects. For instance, Hannah made a commitment to her current college early in her recruiting process, driven by the fear of not finding any other suitable opportunities.

> Honestly, at the moment, being a senior in high school recruiting was kind of different, especially right out of covid… I was just scared so that no other school would look at me or no other school would like, want to pick me up.. - Hannah

Beyond pandemic-related challenges, athletes also highlighted adversity during the recruitment process, including injuries and perceived struggles with athletic performance. To further elucidate the intricacies of recruitment challenges, participants underscored that the process encompassed not only external influences but also a substantial degree of personal initiative (n=9). This contextual insight revealed that their recruiting process involved not only enduring external obstacles but also personal efforts to increase their chances of participating in college athletics. This finding highlights the challenges and perseverance exhibited by the participants. Proactive outreach through emails, profiles on recruiting platforms, and direct contact at tournaments was far more common than unsolicited outreach from coaches. For instance, Ruth described her recruiting process starting with personal efforts to create a recruiting profile, contact college coaches, and attend local golf tournaments where she anticipated the presence of college coaches to introduce herself and potentially initiate further recruitment from the institutions.

> When I figured out I want[ed] to play in college, my parents made me an NCSA profile… Also, a lot of schools come to [state] and play golf tournaments for their season. So I would show up and try to talk to coaches.. then I would send an email to the coach afterwards, and that would get their attention as well. – Ruth

The resilience exhibited by Division II athletes in overcoming external challenges, including the disruptions caused by COVID-19 and a competitive recruitment environment that encouraged

them to initiate contact with coaches, underscores the significant responsibility they often assumed in securing their future in college athletics. This process exemplifies both resilience and self-determination.

College Choice Factors

After navigating high school and club sports, as well as the recruiting process, student-athletes were ultimately tasked with deciding where to attend college. For some, options were limited and the decision hinged almost entirely on available roster spots or scholarship opportunities. Others described having a wider range of choices, with the ability to select from multiple universities offering opportunities to compete in collegiate athletics. Not all participants landed at their final institutions on their first attempt; several described transferring, in some cases more than once, before finding the right fit. When asked why they ultimately chose their current universities, participants most frequently cited athletic preferences (n=25) and location (n=18) as decisive factors. Relationships with coaches, scholarship availability, and potential playing time often outweighed purely academic considerations. For example, Martha, an international student, recounted how she chose her college based on the connection she formed with the coach during her recruiting process. Despite the fact that her prospective college was overseas and she had never visited it, the coach of her potential athletic team was enough to convince her to attend her current college.

> I decided to go to the school I'm going [to] specifically for the coach, because I felt like the coach was a very, very good person. I felt that [I] was like having a connection with her.- Martha

Samuel provided an explanation for his decision to transfer to a different school. He stated that his limited playing time on his previous team prompted him to seek a transfer portal opportunity. Additionally, he emphasized that his choice to attend his current institution was solely driven by the availability of a scholarship and roster space.

> I mean, in the portal, I just kind of followed the money. That's kind of what I deemed the best opportunity to play was the most amount of money that a school would give me. That's how invested, they would be. And so, yeah, just for the money. Just scholarship. - Samuel

Location also influenced decision-making, with athletes noting the appeal of proximity to home, beaches, prominent cities, or smaller campus settings. When asked about her choice of college, Ruth recounted her experience of an unofficial visit and the factors that drew her to the campus.

> I did like the campus. I thought it was nice. It's smaller, but it's not too small. And then it's like, it's a great location. We're just south of [city], so the beach isn't too far, the city's not too far. So a lot of cool things. Even if I'm not playing, I can go do all these amazing things. - Ruth

Overall, participants described their journey to college athletics as beginning early in their childhood, requiring significant personal and family investment, and culminating in intentional and persistent recruitment efforts. While academic considerations were occasionally mentioned, the dominant narrative centered on athletic opportunities, signaling that for these Division II student-athletes, the pursuit of sport was the primary driver shaping their college pathways.

NCAA Division II Student-Athlete College Experience

On average, participants reported attending their current universities for approximately 2.5 years, though some had shorter or longer tenures (see Table 5). Most participants were upperclassmen, with a smaller proportion of underclassmen represented (see Table 3). Several student-athletes also transferred institutions prior to their current enrollment, including experiences in NCAA Division I athletics and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) (see Table 6).

When reflecting holistically on their collegiate experiences, Division II student-athletes described their time in higher education as shaped by navigating trade-offs tied to rigorous schedules and dual roles (=26), cultivating relationships as a central part of their experience

(n=55), and negotiating shifts in their athletic and academic identities (n=26). Taken together, these reflections reveal how student-athletes perceive both the benefits and the sacrifices of their roles, which they often described in terms of balancing pros and cons.

Navigating Tradeoffs

Participants acknowledged that being a student-athlete requires prioritization, with the balance between academics, athletics, and social life often forcing difficult choices. For some, athletic demands took precedence; for others, academic or extracurricular priorities required sacrifices in sport. For instance, Ruth explained that she comprehended that her academic major necessitated a demanding schedule, which her peers discouraged her from pursuing due to the potential impact on her ability to participate in her sport. Despite the risks of compromising her athletic commitment, Ruth chose to prioritize her academic passions.

> It has been hard to balance my major and in season, I it think even kind of contributed whether she [coach] plays me or not sometimes, because when I miss classes, it's a little bit harder than a lot of my teammates [but] this is what I want to do. I'll figure it out, and I'll have to make sacrifices. And I knew that, and I've had to make lots of sacrifices. – Ruth

In contrast, Jeremiah describes a decline in his GPA during the competition season. As an international student, his primary motivation for enrolling in a U.S. college was to pursue athletic activities, specifically soccer. He explains that maintaining his academic performance served as a means to sustain his pursuit of his athletic goals.

> The most challenging part is in season to keep the academics high and keep your mind focused on the sport too. That's when my GPA drops a little bit, because I take soccer seriously. Of course, we are student athletes, but I came in the US to play soccer. - Jeremiah

While some student-athletes described their coaches as tolerant of academic autonomy and extracurricular involvement, but not necessarily supportive, others recounted genuine

encouragement from coaches who valued their engagement in college life beyond athletics. Yet even with this encouragement, the reality of trade-offs persisted, as time constraints and scheduling conflicts remained a constant challenge. Joshua noted,

> Sometimes, whenever I had SGA meetings, that conflicted over practice that I was gonna show up, like, 15 to 30 minutes late. I would just text them, let them know, and they would be really, really lenient about it. They'll just say, it's all good. Like, just focus on that, and it was just overall, really supportive, and they were just really happy. - Joshua

Relationships as Central to Experience

When asked directly to describe their college experiences, participants overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of relationships (n=55). Professors, coaches, teammates, and peers were described as pivotal influences, with many noting that Division II's smaller campus sizes fostered stronger interpersonal connections. When asked to describe her college experience so far, Genesis recounted the significant impact of her relationship with her professors. As a student athlete, she understood the effort required to build relationships with her professors to maintain academic good standing. However, she appreciated the professors' intention, reciprocity, and the personal relationships they fostered with her.

> The professors here are very intentional. I feel like just with their being smaller class sizes, they really get to know you and like who you are. And I think also being an athlete like you have to be very proactive with communicating with your professors. And so I think that kind of in a way, forced me to, like, form relationships with them. - Genesis

While many described positive faculty relationships, others recounted negative or disheartening experiences particularly when they felt undervalued or unsupported by coaches or staff. Ruth recounted how the perceived biased treatment she received from her coach negatively impacted her college experience. This exemplifies that, regardless of whether positive or negative, the

relationships fostered within their college academic and athletic environments significantly influenced their overall college experience.

> I just felt constantly disrespected and not valued and I knew I was playing certain ways, and she didn't care. She just was going to pick who she wanted based on whose parents were donating the most money to the program and stuff like that… I feel like that's just kind of the personality of my coach. And so I definitely was heavily considering leaving. - Ruth

Participants' narratives emphasized not just the presence of relationships at their universities, but the quality of those relationships. Although relationships function as an informal form of support, they emerged as the most salient category when student-athletes were asked about their overall college experiences. Their accounts illustrated that the sense of community and the nature of interpersonal connections were deeply valued—and, importantly, that such experiences were perceived as a privilege not guaranteed at all universities. Priscilla, a Division I transfer student, expressed her sincere gratitude for the relational nature of her current university, a characteristic that was not present at her previous institution. She emphasized that her preference for her current Division II university over her Division I college was solely based on this relational aspect.

> I feel like I didn't really open up, and I didn't really feel like a sense of community until I got to the school that I was at now. I don't really talk too much to many people, but I feel like when I got to [current university], everyone welcomed me, with open arms like everyone just talks to you. It was a community. The classes were smaller, so it was easier for me to learn, and teachers know you by name, face, especially if you like, you're an athlete. So that was definitely easier. - Priscillia

Academic and Athletic Identity

Although participants often framed their college choice in athletic terms, their reflections on success and struggle within college frequently emphasized academics. For many, academic performance (n=23) was more salient than athletic achievements (n=10) in shaping feelings of accomplishment or failure. For instance, when asked about a time he felt unsuccessful during his college experience, Isaiah recounted being placed on academic probation due to insufficient grades that not only affected his athletic eligibility but also his financial aid. He reflected that this experience fueled his determination to excel academically throughout the rest of his college journey.

> The early stages of junior college, I was on academic probation… I probably lacked off a little bit, and it caught up to me, but luckily I realized, alright, let me get right before I get left. – Isaiah

Further illustrating the transition from athletic to academic identities, Jeremiah, who had noted his primary motivation for attending a U.S. college was participation in college athletics, described feeling most successful when passing a challenging academic course.

> I felt very successful, probably the end of this semester when I passed this class. It was very hard, but I passed it. It was business law. - Jeremiah

The narratives of participants illustrate how, once enrolled, many Division II student-athletes recalibrate their priorities, highlighting the centrality of educational progress to their sense of identity and success. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of academics at the NCAA Division II level, coupled with an awareness that few will go on to professional sports. As Ezra put it,

> I would always say d2 is the best place to find yourself, because you're able to play the sport that you love, but also have the support of knowing that you may or may not go pro. pretty much all athletic departments across the division know that. So that's a huge thing… we do a lot of

> programming about the importance of finding life after the game. Because, like I said, most of us are not going pro."- Ezra

Balancing Pros and Cons

Ultimately, participants described their college experience as a blend of challenges and rewards. When asked about the most rewarding and challenging aspects, the time demands of being a student athlete were the most prominent and challenging (n=26). Relationships were the second most significant category, particularly because they were a rewarding aspect of their experience (n=17). External rewards, primarily associated with sports, were also mentioned as a reward (n=16). Despite the sacrifices required to navigate the responsibilities of being a student athlete, most participants found the overall trade-off worthwhile, citing the unique opportunities and benefits that came from athletic participation. Genesis, a senior, reflected on her senior season and year. She realized that the culmination of her year represented the experience of balancing the pros and cons of playing sports. She had to sacrifice time for athletics and miss out on time with friends, but she found that the sacrifice was worthwhile.

> I walk [for graduation] on Saturday. So I think just missing out, like my whole experience with my last week of college, being a student and being with my friends and having to take my finals early, that definitely is a sacrifice… but then I've also been given really cool experiences through being able to travel. So that's kind of what I keep in mind. Yes, I've had to sacrifice these things, but I've also had really, really amazing opportunities that I wouldn't have if I weren't a student-athlete. – Genesis

Samuel revealed that, like most athletes, time management was the most challenging aspect of his experience. However, he emphasized that the most rewarding parts of his experience were things he couldn't achieve any other way besides participating in sports. When discussing the most rewarding aspect of being a student athlete, he shared his thoughts.

> Just the experiences that you get, throughout the friendships, just the people you meet. I don't think you can attain it like any other way besides sport. -Samuel

Collectively, participants' reflections suggest that Division II student-athletes' college experiences are shaped most strongly by the quality of their relationships, the tension of balancing dual responsibilities, and the awareness of their finite time left in sport. While negative experiences with coaches or faculty occasionally constrained their sense of belonging, supportive relationships and the rewards of athletic participation often outweighed these challenges. Overall, participants described their college experience as one of trade-offs yet ultimately framed the opportunity to be a student-athlete as a privilege that fostered both meaning and personal growth. Genesis's reflection captured this finding excellently,

> I think even looking back and seeing all the characteristics, or all the skills that have been developed in me through being a student athlete, I think that's really rewarding. Even without realizing it, over the past four years, I'm so shaped by how much I've dedicated to my sport. Those are things are going to serve me really well in my future. - Genesis

Student-Athlete Motivation for Academic Success

After the journey into college athletics, participants described motivations for academic success that were primarily intrinsic (n=23), supplemented by some extrinsic (n=9) and integrated influences (n=7). Division II student-athletes frequently emphasized that choosing their academic major was personal decision, reflecting intrinsic motivation and autonomy (n=30), while also acknowledging the role of faculty (n=9), peers (n=6), and family influences and expectations (n=7) as supportive factors. In this way, external influences were often internalized, signaling integrated forms of extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation was also evident in participants' emphasis on personal accountability for their academic performance, with many attributing their success or setbacks to their own preparation, effort, and planning.

These accounts suggest that while external factors such as athletics or family expectations shaped their environments, participants largely emphasized internal drives as the foundation of their academic motivation.

Academic Major: Personal Choice

Many participants described selecting their academic majors based primarily on personal interests and aspirations, even while acknowledging some influence from family members or faculty. These accounts highlight the role of autonomy in their academic decision-making and the intrinsic value they placed on pursuing an education aligned with their passions. In several cases, the influence of family members who introduced them to athletics or education early in life appeared to persist into college, yet students consistently framed the final decision as their own. In Job's case, his father and grandfather's involvement in football encouraged his participation in sports during his youth. This family influence also played a significant role in shaping his decision to pursue an academic major that would lead him to a career in sports, similar to his grandfather's.

> My granddad with him being a coach, he actually majored in physical education. That was just something I always wanted to do, is just work in sports, regardless how football went and my career. I just want to be able to give back to the community and work in sports. - Job

Even when outside voices played a role in shaping possibilities, participants emphasized their agency in choosing majors, underscoring the intrinsic quality of their academic motivation. Naomi recounted her college experience, including her decision to change her major. When asked about the influences behind this change, she maintained that it was a personal choice. She

further emphasized that an internship experience had validated her decision and confirmed that it was the right choice for her.

> It was more of a, like a personal decision. I will say that once I did an internship that really divvied up, like, exactly where I wanted to go into finance, so I didn't know that, but I knew the direction. - Naomi

Self-Determination

When asked about their motivation for academic success, participants overwhelmingly emphasized intrinsic drivers such as self-expectations, personal determination, and passion for learning. Many described themselves as highly self-motivated, highlighting the importance of setting high standards and holding themselves accountable for their academic performance. Sarah refuted the stereotype that student athletes prioritize their sports over their academic pursuits, asserting her unwavering passion and motivation in her academic endeavors.

> I know student athletes have, like, a bad reputation of just kind of wanting to be, like, a student athlete, like, care about your sport that's it. But I'm very self-motivated. I'm very self-driven, and I'm very passionate about my major and like my education. - Sarah

Although less prominent as a category when discussing academic motivation compared to motivation for sports during their youth, the pattern of family involvement in participants' journeys was mirrored when they described their motivation for academic success. This pattern underscores that student athletes' self-determination is predominantly shaped by intrinsic factors, while familial influence should be acknowledged as personalized and integrated into their personal motivation for academic success. Even in college, family influence continued to serve as a motivational anchor. Participants frequently framed academic achievement as a means of honoring their parents and relatives, and the sacrifices made on their behalf. Joshua articulates his profound gratitude for his parents as an intrinsic motivator for academic achievement.

> My parents are immigrants from Mexico, so it really was a lot of sacrifices for them, for me to get here. So especially when I got to college, I felt really fortunate that I had the amount of support that I had. I just felt like, I kind of have an obligation for myself to do my best and make the most out of the opportunity that's given to me. - Joshua

Here, family influence became less about external pressure and more about internalized values, demonstrating the interaction between intrinsic and integrated forms of motivation for these NCAA Division II student-athletes.

Accountability for Academic Performance

A recurring pattern in the data was that participants attributed their academic performance, whether strong or weak, to their own preparation, effort, and planning. This emphasis on personal responsibility highlights the salience of intrinsic motivation for academic success. Joshua elaborated,

> I feel like it [academic performance] was pretty good overall. I feel like majority of the slip ups I've had is more or less just like, you know, poor planning. - Joshua

Even when acknowledging external challenges (such as conflicts with athletic demands), participants often framed their motivation and outcomes in terms of internal accountability rather than external barriers. Martha shared,

> Sometimes I find myself struggling when I had like, three exams and a lot of assignments, and my coach kept changing time for practice. But I wouldn't say that is something that, like, decreases my motivation. My motivation remains. I want to still try to do my best. - Martha

Overall, participants' accounts reveal these Division II student-athletes tended to be more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated in their pursuit of academic success. While family expectations and external factors such as athletic schedules shaped their environments, most emphasized personal interest, effort, and responsibility as the primary drivers of their academic

motivation. This balance illustrates how intrinsic values dominate while being reinforced by integrated forms of extrinsic motivation and autonomy in academic decisions, aligning with the core concepts of self-determination theory.

Student-Athlete Navigation of Academic Support

While intrinsic and integrated forms of motivation—the most optimal according to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)—were reflected in student-athletes' accounts, participants consistently emphasized that successfully balancing their dual roles required meaningful academic support. They described drawing on a wide range of resources and experiences, but across the data faculty and staff emerged as the most central source of academic support (n=48). Faculty primarily included professors, while staff encompassed advisors, athletic faculty liaisons, tutors, and other personnel in campus resource centers and athletic departments.

Although some athletic departments offered structures such as study hall or team-specific advisors (n=30), many participants reported limited resources within athletics. As a result, they often relied on campus-wide services (e.g., tutoring centers, libraries, writing labs) to meet their academic needs.

In alignment with their intrinsic motivation, student-athletes often expressed satisfaction with these available supports and a willingness to maximize the resources at hand, even when ideal support services were not present.

Faculty, Staff and Campus-Wide Resources as Primary Support

Faculty and staff were the most frequently mentioned sources of academic support. Participants especially valued professors' understanding of their dual roles as students and athletes, particularly when competition-related travel required them to miss class. Office hours and open communication were frequently cited as indispensable supports. Although some

participants described negative experiences with professors who were less accommodating, the overwhelming pattern was one of faculty who were flexible, approachable, and invested in student success. Ruth expressed gratitude for her professors' understanding and support, acknowledging the challenges posed by her dual role as a student athlete and the time constraints that may arise.

> I feel like my instructors, especially at my school, have been very understanding… I obviously had to make a bigger effort with going to office hours… but they've been very, very understanding and willing to help me no matter where I'm at. I feel like they also just really kind of pour into you. – Ruth

Nehemiah's account further underscored that while most professors were perceived as supportive of the dual roles of student athletes, those who are not have a negative impact on their perception of the academic support available to them.

> Most of the experience I had, like, professors were really helpful, but I had this one experience that wasn't that helpful. I think that would be the case [for] professors to be more understandable with times, time conflicts and stuff like that. - Nehemiah

Staff such as advisors and tutors also played key roles in student-athletes' academic success. Participants emphasized the importance of both professional and peer tutoring, and many described their advisors as crucial to navigating coursework and academic planning. Eve characterized her athletic academic advisor as a significant resource for academic assistance.

> Our academic advisor, she's really great, because I was struggling, and we have these meetings, and she's very helpful. - Eve

At the same time, participants' accounts revealed inconsistencies in staffing quality across institutions. Some participants like Eve praised their advisors as highly supportive, while others such as King described uncertainty about staff roles or limited access to specialized support.

> I think there is a woman she just sent out emails and stuff, and I know one of my friends had just a conflict with academics, and her and the coach had meetings, but I'm not really sure if she's an advisor, but she could be. – King

Other participants noted the complete absence of athletic academic advisors at their schools, highlighting the varying roles of faculty and staff in the Division II context. Naomi specifically mentioned that their athletic department lacked academic personnel, and financially, it was not a realistic expectation.

> I just know it's not realistic for us to have the funding to have an athletic, specific academic advisor or academic anything. - Naomi

Participants also frequently highlighted campus-wide resources such as libraries, tutoring centers, and writing labs as central to their academic success. These facilities were not simply valued for their availability, but also for the staff who staffed them and made them effective. The presence of tutors, writing coaches, and other support personnel within these structures was repeatedly described as crucial to students' academic experience. Eve described a system where her athletic academic advisor would direct her to broader academic support structures offered by the university. She indicated that this system and the lab center tutors in particular were beneficial academic support.

> Everybody there is there to help you. They're super nice, and they're always available. And especially there's this tutoring lab center... and those tutors are amazing. They actually helped me pass one of my classes that I was really struggling with. – Eve

In contrast, Hannah described a more disorganized system of locating academic support and variability in the quality of tutors by subject. These findings further demonstrated that faculty and staff within academic and athletic departments are considered primary and significant resources for academic support, although these resources vary by institution.,

> At [university] they offer they offer tutoring services, but it's so much harder to look for a tutor in like a certain subject you're looking for. If you're looking for Spanish or one of the harder pychs it's harder to come across a tutor. You'll have to actually do some research, maybe go talk to the advisor about it, and then you may have to go talk to the business office about it. - Hannah

In essence, these accounts suggest that while staffing gaps and inconsistencies may limit the quality of support at some Division II universities, meaningful relationships with faculty, and campus wide-resources, particularly at smaller institutions, often provided student-athletes with a sense of relatedness and competence that was central to their academic success.

Athletic Department Resources

Participants generally described athletic departments as supplemental sources of academic support, with quality varying by institutional resources and team culture. Participants mentioned coaches, study hall requirements, and team GPA standards as resources provided by the athletic department to support academic performance. Study hall requirements were the most common form of support, typically mandated for newer or lower-performing athletes and optional for others. Coaches played a mixed role: some were supportive of academics and flexible with scheduling, while others were perceived as more concerned with athletic eligibility than academic development. Although Ruth was not entirely satisfied with the academic support and relationship with her coach in general, she acknowledged the efforts made by her coach to schedule academic time during travel trips for golf competitions.

> I think my coach, she wants us to do well. She wants us to make sure that we as a team have a 3.5 GPA. But as for like, making sure we have that support, I don't know if she does that good of a job. She kind of gives us time to do homework when we're on the road a little bit more, or she'd like send a text, [to] make sure you're catching up and talking to your professors. - Ruth

This significantly diverged from Samuel's experience with his coaches. When inquired about the support he receives from them he stated,

> Zero. Zero. Zero. yeah, All they care is if we're eligible. - Samuel

Beyond coaches, occasional supports such as access to sports psychologists, alumni connections, and career speakers were mentioned, though these appeared infrequently and were not consistent across institutions. Only a minority of participants described experiences with athlete-specific programming, underscoring how athletic department resources also vary greatly across Division II contexts. Ezra, a student at a historically black college or university (HBCU), highlighted one of the most extensive athletic department resources.

> Every semester we do a student-athlete specific career fair. A lot of different employers come in from various different career paths, and those are designed pretty much for athletes only. Then we also have our [Mascot] Athletic Awards. Our student-athletes are trained on etiquette, and we kind of put it in place at the banquet. It's pretty cool that we do that. - Ezra

Participants also pointed to structural gaps and staffing shortages as major barriers to robust support. High turnover, funding issues, and limited staff capacity were seen as typical of the Division II environment. Esther expressed her frustrations with the athletic academic department, highlighting the lack of resources that prevented them from providing the necessary support to their student athletes.

> There's a very high turnover rate in the athletic department. Everybody seems really overworked and underpaid. They just don't have the budgets. - Esther

While many acknowledged these financial and resource constraints as realities of their institutions, they also expressed a desire for more tailored resources, such as team-specific tutors or dedicated academic advisors within athletics. Ruth stated,

> I think, like a lot of D1 schools, they have tutors for their teams… I think academic advisor on each team, which is really hard to get, or, like, one academic advisor for the whole athletics department would make a big difference. - Ruth

Participant accounts reveal that Division II athletic departments exhibit significant variations in resources. They are often perceived as facilitators rather than direct providers of academic support. This is primarily because they guide student-athletes to campus-wide resources and encourage communication with professors. While some universities have established effective systems to maximize campus resources, others lack this crucial communication system. This positioning reflects both the structural resource constraints of Division II institutions and the pivotal role of faculty and broader university staff in supporting athletes' academic success.

Student-Athletes' Perceptions of Current Supports

Despite recurring concerns about resource limitations, many participants expressed overall satisfaction with the academic support available to them. For these student-athletes, support was often perceived as effective not only because of the resources themselves, but also because of their own intrinsic motivation to seek help when needed. In this way, satisfaction reflected both the availability of structures and the athletes' proactive engagement with them. Priscillia reflected,

> I think they were perfect. They were just enough. You have whatever you need. It's right there. You just have to open your mouth. So I think the support was perfect. - Priscillia

Participants emphasized that their needs extended beyond individual academic supports to broader systemic resources. They not only wanted staff who cared for them personally but also additional investment in the infrastructure of Division II athletics. As Esther noted,

> I would like to see more people working in the athletic department to take some of the weight off of the people that are already there and make the student athlete voices maybe more heard. - Esther

Naomi voiced similar frustrations more directly in terms of underfunding and a lack of basic resources such as trainers and facilities:

> As I said before, our team… is severely underfunded. I wish we had more trainers… No locker room, one trainer for over 50 girls. We work just as hard, we just won a championship, and we're going to the NCAA tournament. It's beating adversity right now. - Naomi

Overall, these accounts reveal that Division II student-athletes rely primarily on faculty, staff, and campus-wide resources for their academic support. Professors, advisors, and tutors were consistently described as the most central and dependable sources of guidance, while libraries and resource centers filled many of the practical gaps. In contrast, athletic departments were generally viewed as supplemental, with the level of support varying considerably across institutions. While some participants noted helpful initiatives such as study halls or career programming, others pointed to persistent shortages in staff and funding that limited what athletic departments could provide.

Despite these disparities, student-athletes largely expressed satisfaction with the academic support available to them, aligning with their strong intrinsic motivation and willingness to take responsibility for seeking help. Suggestions for improvement often emphasized strengthening faculty and staff resources but also extended to broader investments in athletic facilities, trainers, and personnel. Ultimately, the effectiveness of support was understood not simply in terms of quantity, but as a balance between available resources, the relational quality of faculty and staff, and the athletes' own self-driven engagement.

Emergent Themes

Each interview response was first subjected to open coding, with codes applied to capture key ideas and experiences described by participants. Within each question, these initial codes were refined into broader categories to identify recurring patterns. Following this within-question analysis, the most frequent and conceptually significant categories (see Table 6) were compared across questions and participants to develop axial codes and overarching themes, interpreted through the lens of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Saldaña, 2021). Three themes emerged from this analysis: (1) faculty and staff as central to academic support, (2) student-athletes' strong intrinsic motivation, and (3) the challenges of balancing dual roles. The following sections explore the axial thematic analysis, adhering to a hermeneutic phenomenology design that encourages researcher interpretation.

Faculty and Staff as Central to Academic Support

Across questions related to overall college experience, motivation, and academic support, faculty and staff consistently emerged as central figures in NCAA Division II student-athletes' accounts. Participants frequently described leaning on professors for academic support, noting that the smaller campus and class size environments typical of many Division II institutions fostered more personal relationships. Professors' willingness to accommodate missed classes due to athletic travel was described as pivotal. While participants expressed high levels of accountability for their academic performance, they emphasized the importance of professor communication, flexibility, and availability during office hours. These relationships reinforced the role of faculty in nurturing student-athletes' sense of relatedness and competence.

Staff members, including advisors, tutors, and staff within resource centers, also played key roles in academic support. Academic resource centers themselves were frequently

mentioned, but participants' accounts revealed variation in how these resources were experienced. Some student-athletes acknowledged the availability of centers and facilities but chose not to use them because they felt they did not need additional help, while others perceived tutors and staff as not particularly helpful. In contrast, those who did engage with these resources often emphasized the importance of the staff within them, describing tutors and support personnel as central to their success. This pattern underscores how student-athletes experienced academic support not simply as access to structures, but as a combination of facilities and the people who brought them to life.

Academic advisors for majors were frequently described as central to students' academic navigation, with positive experiences often tied to advisors' ability to build personal, supportive relationships. Conversely, participants identified gaps in the number and quality of advisors, particularly within athletic departments, where the absence of athletic-specific academic advisors was commonly noted. Coaches were mentioned less consistently: while some were seen as encouraging academic pursuits, others were described as focusing primarily on athletic performance and eligibility standards.

Overall, these findings suggest that faculty members, advisors, and campus-wide resource center staff form the backbone of academic support for NCAA Division II student-athletes. Coaches may contribute by creating environments supportive of academic success, but they were not perceived as the primary agents of support. More broadly, participants' accounts indicate that academic and athletic departments work together to foster relatedness and autonomy, while academic departments assume the greatest responsibility for cultivating student-athletes' competence in their academic endeavors.

> Our teachers, professors and even our coaches, advise all the students to go to this Tutoring Center. I really do appreciate that they have a student tutoring center, and it's very [helpful]

> because sometimes even your professor… might not have office hours when you're available. - King

Student-Athletes Intrinsic Motivation

From their initial journeys into sport through their motivation for academic success, participants' narratives consistently reflected strong intrinsic motivation. Many student-athletes described an early passion for athletics and a willingness to overcome adversity in pursuit of their goals. This sense of persistence carried into their academic lives. Upon arriving at their universities, participants often selected majors based on personal interest rather than external pressures, reflecting autonomy in their academic decision-making.

When asked specifically about their motivation for academic success, intrinsic factors emerged as the most salient category (n = 23), including personal drive, self-discipline, and an interest in learning. Family influences (n = 11) were also cited, often framed as cultural high expectations. While these influences are external in nature, participants frequently described them in ways that reflected internalization. Integrated regulation (n = 7) was also identified, as student-athletes described aligning academic choices with long-term goals and values and team standards for academic success. Taken together, these accounts suggest that while external and integrated influences shaped participants' environments, intrinsic motivation remained the dominant driver of academic success. This pattern aligns with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that intrinsic and integrated forms of motivation foster persistence and well-being.

> I always have this saying for myself, like, when I'm not wanting to do homework or go to a certain event, I say, *Do it for your future self.* And so that kind of pushed me, like, propelled me forward through these past couple years—doing the things that maybe I was too tired to do or didn't feel like doing—for my future self to better set me up for my future success. - Naomi

Balancing Dual Roles

Weaved through participants' responses was the ongoing tension of balancing the dual roles of being both a student and an athlete. When asked about the most challenging aspect of their experience, the most frequently cited response was the time demands inherent to life as a student-athlete. Participants described these demands as placing significant pressure on their ability to devote full effort to academics. Those who prioritized academics sometimes noted a decline in athletic opportunities, while others described the reverse—emphasizing athletics often came at the cost of academic engagement. In addition, participants acknowledged the difficulty of incorporating a social life or extracurricular activities into their schedules. To prioritize academics, athletics, or social life almost always required tradeoffs in another area of their collegiate experience.

Because of these tensions, participants underscored the need for relational support from professors, advisors, coaches, and administrators. They described how pressures associated with student-athlete life made it easy to conflate personal identity with athletic performance, underscoring the importance of support systems that acknowledged them as whole students. When asked what they wanted others to know about their experience, participants often emphasized the unique opportunities Division II athletics provided, competitive play paired with the benefits of an academic experience, but also conveyed a desire for recognition that their identities extend beyond athletics:

> There's so much more to life than being an athlete. Like, don't let your sport be your identity. You are more than your sport. Life is so much bigger than wins and losses… life is so much bigger than the sport. - Priscillia

Conjointly, these accounts highlight the complexity of balancing academic and athletic responsibilities while striving to maintain personal well-being and a broader sense of identity.

They also point to the ways NCAA Division II student-athletes seek and benefit academic support aligned with SDT's core needs, particularly autonomy and relatedness. Participants' narratives reflected an appreciation for autonomy in academic decision making, a strong sense of competence in achieving academic success, and relatedness fostered through supportive relationships with faculty, staff, coaches, family, and peers that helped them navigate the tradeoffs of their dual roles.

The three emergent themes: faculty and staff as central to academic support, strong intrinsic motivation, and the ongoing balancing of dual roles, provide a holistic picture of the NCAA Division II student-athlete experience. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of supportive relationships with professors, advisors, and resource staff in meeting their academic needs. At the same time, their narratives reflected high levels of intrinsic motivation, with students largely attributing academic persistence to personal drive, accountability, and integrated values shaped by family and institutional influences. Finally, participants underscored the unique challenges of balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, describing the sacrifices, tradeoffs, and identity tensions that shaped their collegiate experiences.

These themes highlight the interplay between institutional support structures and the self-determined motivation of student-athletes. They also underscore the relevance of SDT in understanding how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported, or constrained. within Division II contexts. Collectively, the findings provide a foundation for the subsequent discussion, where these results are interpreted in relation to existing literature, theoretical perspectives, and implications for policy and practice.

Chapter Six: Discussion

Intercollegiate athletics has, over time, become a central feature of campus life within U.S. higher education (Lewis, 2013). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) governs athletic programs at many of these institutions across three divisions, Division I (DI), Division II (DII), and Division III (DIII), each with distinct rules, regulations, and levels of competition (Lewis, 2013; NCSA, 2023; Nichols, 2019; Satterfield, 2015). A core component of the NCAA's mission is to integrate athletics into the educational experience, requiring student-athletes to maintain academic eligibility through progress toward degree completion and minimum GPA standards (Oriard, 2012). In alignment with this mission, the NCAA annually reports graduation and academic success rates. In 2024, the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) for Division I student-athletes was 90%, compared to an Academic Success Rate (ASR) of 77% in Division II and 88% in Division III (NCAA, 2024). The distinct nature of the Division II context, combined with comparatively lower academic outcomes, underscores the need to better understand the experiences of Division II student-athletes.

Despite extensive research on the importance of academic support in shaping student-athletes' college experiences and outcomes, most scholarship has concentrated on Division I populations, leaving Division II athletes comparatively underrepresented (Bell, 2009; Brouwer et al., 2022; Burns et al., 2013; Gabbert et al., 1999; Harrison, 2015; Harry, 2021; Nite, 2012; Otto et al., 2019). This gap is especially notable given the NCAA's stated goal of integrating athletics into the educational mission of all divisions and the documented disparities in academic success across divisions (Oriard, 2012; Satterfield, 2015). To address this need, the present study sought to answer the following question: How do NCAA Division II student-athletes describe their experiences with academic support?

This study employed a phenomenological design guided by self-determination theory (SDT) and a realist epistemological stance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty NCAA Division II student-athletes across seventeen institutions, and data were analyzed using multi-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2011). Three themes emerged from the analysis: (1) faculty and staff as central to academic support, (2) strong intrinsic motivation among student-athletes, and (3) challenges of balancing dual roles. This discussion chapter interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and SDT, explores their implications, and suggests directions for future research.

Faculty and Staff as Central to Academic Support

This study found that faculty and staff played a pivotal role in the academic support of Division II student-athletes, with professors, advisors, and tutors consistently identified as indispensable to navigating academic responsibilities alongside athletic demands. These findings align with previous research highlighting the centrality of faculty and staff in shaping the student-athlete experience (Bell, 2009; Harrison et al., 2015). Participants' descriptions of supportive professors, particularly those who demonstrated understanding of athletic travel and scheduling conflicts, highlight the importance of relatedness and competence as outlined in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While some studies suggest that Division I and II student-athletes experience prejudice and stereotypes from faculty, the findings of this study indicate that Division II student-athletes largely had positive experiences and relationships with professors (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Comeaux, 2011). These relationships were not only perceived as instrumental to academic success but also contributed to student-athletes' sense of belonging within their institutions. The study's findings also indicate that Division II student athletes may have greater academic autonomy compared to those at the Division I level. Previous

research revealed that some Division I student athletes perceived academic support services within their athletic departments as limiting, prioritizing eligibility, suggesting easier classes, and focusing on specific academic majors (Harrison et al., 2015). While the academic support services within athletic departments may not be as comprehensive at the Division II level, this could inadvertently empower student athletes and foster a stronger sense of academic identity.

Participants' narratives also depicted a strong reliance on academic advisors and tutors, further illustrating how staff function as a cornerstone of academic support for student-athletes. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of academic advising within athletic departments (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007); however, the current findings suggest that at the Division II level, campus-wide resources are often more central than athletic-specific supports. This distinction highlights a key structural difference between Division I and Division II contexts: whereas Division I athletes often benefit from specialized staff and dedicated support units, Division II athletes depend heavily on broader university systems. Participants commonly noted staffing shortages and the absence of athletic-specific advisors but nonetheless valued the relationships they formed with general advisors and tutors. These findings suggest that quality interpersonal interactions with staff may compensate for structural or resource limitations, reinforcing the importance of relationships over sheer availability of services.

While many participants expressed satisfaction with their academic support from faculty, staff, and campus-wide resources, comments about inconsistencies in resource availability point to a broader challenge within Division II athletics. As Nite (2012) observed, Division II institutions often operate with fewer resources, limiting their capacity to staff academic support services at the level of their Division I counterparts. This study's findings confirm that such disparities persist, yet they also reveal that student-athletes' satisfaction with academic support

hinges less on the number of available resources and more on the relational quality and engagement of faculty and staff. From an SDT perspective, these findings demonstrate that competence and relatedness can be effectively fostered even in resource-constrained environments when faculty and staff intentionally support student-athletes' academic engagement.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that faculty and staff are the true foundation of academic support for Division II student-athletes, more so than athletic departments resources. The relational and instructional support they provide fulfills critical psychological needs and plays a decisive role in shaping student-athletes' academic experiences. These results call attention to the importance of institutional investment not only in expanding resources but also in cultivating faculty and staff who foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness while challenging lingering biases toward student-athletes and recognizing intercollegiate athletics as an integral component of the educational process.

Student-Athletes' Strong Intrinsic Motivation

The findings of this study revealed that Division II student-athletes were primarily motivated by intrinsic factors in their pursuit of academic success, with integrated forms of extrinsic motivation, such as family expectations and cultural values, serving as supplementary influences. This echoes broader scholarship in sport and education that highlights the central role of intrinsic motivation in sustaining persistence and achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand & Fortier, 1997). Participants consistently described their athletic and academic choices, including major selection and college choice, as grounded in personal interests and long-term goals rather than external pressures. When it came to college choice, athletic preferences and university location were the most salient factors. This supports findings by Gabbert et al. (1999),

who similarly noted that Division II athletes prioritized location, while Division I athletes placed greater emphasis on academic support. Such autonomy-driven decision-making supports SDT's proposition that individuals thrive when their educational and athletic paths align with their personal values and aspirations.

While participants' narratives strongly reflected intrinsic motivation overall, the study also highlights the role of integrated regulation woven throughout their accounts. Family influence and expectations served as powerful supplementary motivators. Although these influences were extrinsic in origin, participants described internalizing them—transforming family expectations into personally meaningful values that guided their motivation. This aligns with SDT's continuum of motivation, where external influences may become self-endorsed and functionally indistinguishable from intrinsic drivers (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For Division II student-athletes, this interplay between intrinsic and integrated regulation suggests that academic motivation is sustained not only by personal interest but also by the internalization of relational commitments to family and community.

These findings both confirm and extend prior research. For instance, Harrison et al. (2015) and Woodruff and Schallert (2007) identified intrinsic and integrated motivation as predictors of persistence among Division I athletes. However, the present study adds nuance by showing that Division II student-athletes—despite operating within resource-limited institutional environments—demonstrate similar motivational patterns. Participants frequently framed academic achievement as both a personal responsibility and a means of honoring familial or community sacrifices. This suggests that, within the DII context, intrinsic and integrated motivation coalesce into a deeply relational form of self-determination.

From the lens of SDT, the predominance of intrinsic motivation among participants reflects the fulfillment of the psychological needs of autonomy and competence. Although some acknowledged that external factors, particularly the demands of athletics, could occasionally hinder academic motivation, participants overwhelmingly emphasized personal accountability for their performance. They attributed setbacks to poor planning, preparation, or effort, rather than to external constraints. This self-regulatory mindset illustrates a strong sense of competence and resilience, qualities many traced back to lessons learned through sport participation and the recruiting process.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that Division II student-athletes' motivation is deeply self-determined, rooted in intrinsic drives and reinforced by internalized family and cultural values. This motivational structure allows them to sustain persistence and engagement despite limited institutional resources, underscoring how the DII context cultivates a unique balance between personal agency and relational influence.

Balancing Dual Roles

A central finding of this study was the ongoing tension student-athletes described in balancing their dual responsibilities as both students and athletes. Participants consistently emphasized the time demands of Division II athletics as the most challenging aspect of their experience, noting how the structure of athletic schedules often constrained the time and energy they could devote to academics. This finding aligns with long-standing literature documenting the strain of managing competing athletic and academic obligations across NCAA divisions (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Umbach, 2011). However, what emerged uniquely in this study was the nuanced way Division II athletes described negotiating these tradeoffs. Some participants willingly prioritized their academic commitments, even when doing so limited athletic

opportunities or social engagement. These findings echo Umbach's (2011) argument that, contrary to common stereotypes, student-athletes are often deeply engaged in the academic process despite the challenges of balancing dual roles.

These narratives highlight the complex role of autonomy within the student-athlete experience. From a self-determination theory (SDT) perspective, autonomy represents the ability to make self-endorsed choices (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For participants in this study, autonomy often manifested as the conscious decision to prioritize one life domain, academics, athletics, or social life, at the expense of another. Many viewed these sacrifices as an inevitable feature of college athletics, sustaining motivation through acceptance and meaning-making. This balancing act underscores SDT's assertion that the satisfaction of psychological needs depends heavily on one's environment and whether it supports or constrains autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

While these findings align with prior research on the "dual-role strain" faced by student-athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Paule & Gilson, 2010), this study extends the conversation by illustrating how Division II athletes experience and interpret these tensions within under-resourced contexts. Participants frequently described support from faculty, advisors, and coaches as critical to managing their dual responsibilities, whereas unsupportive or indifferent relationships heightened the strain. This variability underscores the importance of institutional and interpersonal contexts in shaping how manageable or overwhelming the dual-role tension becomes.

Participants also reflected on the finite nature of their athletic careers, acknowledging that Division II athletics rarely leads to professional opportunities. This awareness often prompted a shift in priorities, with many student-athletes choosing to emphasize academics and future career

preparation. In this way, the process of balancing dual roles became more than a logistical challenge, it evolved into a developmental experience through which athletes redefined success and cultivated broader identities beyond sport.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that balancing the dual roles of student and athlete is both a challenge and a growth opportunity for Division II athletes. Institutional context, faculty and staff relationships, and self-regulatory processes all interact to shape how athletes navigate these demands. Despite structural limitations, participants demonstrated resilience and agency in maintaining academic persistence, reflecting the self-determined capacity to adapt and find meaning in the tradeoffs inherent to their dual identities.

Implications

Practical Implications

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for improving the academic experiences of NCAA Division II student-athletes. First, because Division II student-athletes primarily depend on faculty, staff, and campus-wide resources such as general tutors and advisors for academic support, effective communication and collaboration between athletic and academic departments are essential. Strengthening relationships between faculty and athletic departments can help faculty feel more included in, and understanding of, the role intercollegiate athletics plays within higher education institutions. Likewise, athletic staff who become more engaged with the academic side of the university may be better equipped to support student-athletes holistically—as students first, rather than solely as athletes.

Increased investment in Division II athletic departments could also enhance the quality and accessibility of support. Participants' narratives revealed a consistent need for additional academic advisors, tutors, and essential athletic personnel such as trainers. Expanding these

roles—even modestly—could ease the burden on overextended staff and foster an environment where academic and athletic success are equally prioritized. Beyond financial investment, fostering relational dynamics among faculty, staff, coaches, and student-athletes is a cost-effective strategy to enhance student-athlete well-being and academic persistence. The findings underscore that meaningful relationships, open communication, and mutual respect between departments can significantly improve the college experience of Division II student-athletes, even in the absence of Division I–level resources.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the findings of this study reaffirm self-determination theory (SDT) as a valuable framework for understanding motivation and academic engagement within collegiate athletics (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2008). SDT's continuum of motivation, ranging from extrinsic to intrinsic regulation, proved particularly effective in capturing the nuanced ways Division II student-athletes internalized both personal and relational influences. Participants' accounts demonstrated how external expectations, such as family influence, could be internalized and transformed into self-determined motivation, aligning with integrated regulation as described by Ryan and Deci (2017).

This study also reinforces SDT as a human-centered approach to motivation, moving beyond earlier frameworks that emphasized behavior primarily as a response to external rewards or constraints (McDougall, 1932; Vansteenkiste et al., 2008). The integration of SDT with the Division II context expands its theoretical application by illustrating how autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be cultivated even in resource-limited environments. Together, these findings affirm SDT's versatility and suggest its continued relevance for future research exploring student-athlete motivation, academic engagement, and well-being.

Finally, this study elucidates that phenomenology, as a theoretical framework and research methodology for qualitative researchers, can be approached from a holistic perspective. Researchers may derive significant benefits from abandoning rigid adherence to the various forms of denomination like wars, inherent in the research design. The philosophical pioneers of the phenomenology movement share a consensus that transcends their disagreements (Neubauer et al., 2019; Patton & Broward, 2023; Watson, 2024). Methodological decisions, including epistemology and the choice between inductive and deductive coding, should be guided by the specific research study and the problem being investigated rather than adhering to a paradigm without regard for practical considerations. This approach is particularly advantageous for research practitioners who aspire to effect meaningful changes within their respective fields, a goal that is often obscured during philosophical debates.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. As a former Division II student-athlete, my personal background may have influenced data collection and interpretation; however, reflexive journaling, bracketing, and audit trail practices were employed to mitigate potential bias and enhance transparency. Recruitment via LinkedIn may have attracted participants who were more career-oriented or outward-facing than the broader Division II population. The sample also included a higher proportion of participants from private institutions and women compared to men. While these imbalances enriched the diversity of perspectives, they do not represent a perfectly balanced cross-section of the Division II landscape.

Additionally, social desirability bias may have influenced participants' responses, as student-athletes may have felt pressure to present themselves or their universities favorably. The

use of a single coder presents another limitation, as intra-coder reliability could not be verified through comparison. Although efforts were made to ensure accuracy and consistency through multiple coding cycles and bracketing practices these limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

Future Research

Future research should seek to expand upon these findings through mixed-method or large-scale quantitative studies examining Division II student-athletes' experiences across a broader sample of institutions. Comparative studies between NCAA divisions would also offer insight into how institutional resources, culture, and academic support structures shape student-athlete experiences differently. Large-scale surveys similar to those conducted for Division I athletes (Harry, 2021; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007) would help establish generalizable findings for the Division II context.

Building on this study, future qualitative or longitudinal work might also examine the relationship between academic motivation and athletic or academic identity among Division II student-athletes. The findings of this study suggest that motivation and identity are intertwined, but these connections were not explicitly explored through an identity framework or tested against academic outcomes. Future work could integrate frameworks such as athletic identity theory or role conflict theory to explore how motivation interacts with identity formation, persistence, and well-being over time (Woodruff & Schallert, 2008).

Finally, future studies could also investigate institutional strategies that strengthen collaboration between athletic and academic departments. Understanding the practices of institutions that have successfully fostered supportive academic environments for student-athletes may help identify scalable, cost-effective models for other Division II programs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of NCAA Division II student-athletes to better understand how they describe their experiences with academic support through the lens of self-determination theory. Guided by a phenomenological research design, this study sought to elevate the voices of Division II student-athletes, an often underrepresented population in the literature. Through interviews with twenty student-athletes across seventeen institutions, and fourteen athletic conferences three major themes emerged: (1) faculty and staff are central to academic support, (2) student-athletes demonstrate strong intrinsic motivation, and (3) the ongoing challenge of balancing dual roles.

Taken together, these findings provide new insight into the academic experiences of Division II student-athletes and the factors that support or hinder their success. While prior research has largely focused on Division I contexts, this study demonstrates that Division II student-athletes draw heavily on faculty, staff, and campus-wide resources as their primary form of academic support, often compensating for limited athletic-specific resources. Their narratives underscore the importance of relational quality and institutional culture in shaping a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, core psychological needs identified within self-determination theory.

The findings also suggest that Division II student-athletes are deeply self-determined in their pursuit of academic and athletic success. Their motivations are not solely intrinsic but also reflect the internalization of familial values, cultural expectations, and personal responsibility. This interplay between intrinsic and integrated forms of motivation illustrates the flexibility and relevance of SDT for understanding human motivation within collegiate athletics, particularly in settings with fewer external rewards and resources.

Finally, this study highlights the balancing act that defines the Division II student-athlete experience. Participants described navigating competing demands while maintaining accountability and persistence, a testament to their resilience and adaptability. Their experiences suggest that success in Division II athletics is not solely a product of institutional resources but of the relationships and motivations that sustain them through the challenges of dual roles.

In closing, this study contributes to both the scholarship on college athletics and the application of self-determination theory by centering the perspectives of NCAA Division II student-athletes. It highlights the importance of faculty and staff engagement, relational environments that foster competence and belonging, and institutional collaboration between athletic and academic departments. As higher education continues to evolve, understanding and supporting the holistic development of student-athletes, particularly within resource-constrained contexts, remains essential to fulfilling the NCAA's mission of integrating athletics and education.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

A) Introduction – My name is Catlin. I am a PhD student at The University of Oklahoma and former NCAA Division II Student-Athlete. Thank you for participating in this study.

B) Brief Description/Purpose of Project – This study is all about understanding the academic experiences of NCAA Division II student-athletes, a group that hasn't been studied as much as others. I want to give DII athletes a chance to share their experiences so we can better understand the kind of support they need. I'm really interested in hearing about what your journey has been like as a college athlete.

C) This interview will help me understand your experience being a NCAA Division II student-athlete along.

D) Administrative Details – This interview should last between 30 minutes to one hour. You and your university will not be identified in this study. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

E) Questions- Do you have any questions or concerns before we start?

1. Warm Up Question
    a. How did you become involved in sports in your youth? How did that lead to your involvement in college sports?
    b. How long have you been at your college?
    c. What made you choose this University?
2. Central Questions
    a. What is your major? Why did you choose it?

b. How would you describe your college experience so far? (academics, athletics, socially)?
    i. How are your relationships with your peers, instructors, and advisors?
    ii. Do you feel you are treated differently than other students as a student-athlete? In what ways? (probe negative/positive experiences)
c. Do you feel motivated you to perform well academically? Why or why not?
    i. Who/what helps?
    ii. Who/what hinders?
d. How do you usually feel when completing test and assignments?
    i. Can you tell me more about that?
    ii. How do you feel about academic performance?
e. Can you tell me about the academic support available to you?
    i. What kind?
    ii. Who Provides?
    iii. When do they provide them?
    iv. Would you like more/less?
    v. Are they mandatory?
    vi. What staff are involved in these support services?
    vii. Do you have an athletic academic advisor?
        1. What role does he/she play?
    viii. What role do your coaches play in supporting you academically?
f. Can you tell me about a time where you felt really successful at a student here?

        i. Can you tell me about a time when you felt less successful?

3. Cool Down Questions

    a. In your view what is the most challenging part about being a student-athlete?

        i. The most rewarding?

    b. What could be done to better support you as a student-athlete?

        i. What could be done specific to academics?

    c. Thank you again for participating in this study! Good luck with the rest of the semester and your season.

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: November 04, 2024 **IRB#:** 17900

Principal Investigator: Catlin N Carter

Approval Date: 11/04/2024

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: What about NCAA Division II Athletes? A Qualitative Inquiry

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board