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**UNDERSTANDING THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT ATHLETE EXPERIENCE
AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH**

by
David Joseph Naphy

A Dissertation

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Doctor of Education
At
Rowan University
August 30, 2016

Dissertation Chair: Rory McElwee, Ph.D.

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Dedications

To my beautiful wife, Megan. This accomplishment is not possible without your constant encouragement and commitment to our family. I am forever grateful for your moral support through the hardships and challenges of this program. This degree is every bit of yours as it is mine.

To my two sons, Aaron and Austin. Your very existence forces me to push myself so that I may set a precedent and lead you toward the right path. Never underestimate the importance of an education and value in self-improvement. Let this serve as an example that with hard work and perseverance you can accomplish things you never thought possible.

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Abstract

David Joseph Naphy
UNDERSTANDING THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT ATHLETE EXPERIENCE AT
ROWAN UNIVERSITY: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH
2015-2016
Rory McElwee, Ph.D.
Doctor of Education

Retaining students in higher education is a continual process, in need of constant evaluation, to ensure best practices are being implemented to meet the needs of the students. When implementing retention and transition programs, colleges and universities must understand the varying needs, particularly for those who are members of a subgroup within the traditional population (Bean & Metzner, 1985). One subgroup, in particular, that could benefit from a more focused transitional experience during their first-year at college are student athletes (Crom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, & Gerber, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to better understand the first-year experience at Rowan University through the lens of the student athlete. The study was qualitative in nature and collected data through the use of open-ended interview questions. Currently, Rowan University does little to support the needs specific to the student athlete population and often groups them into transition programs offered to the traditional student body. Once analyzed, the data suggests that first-year student athletes struggle with time management, lack awareness of university resources, are socially disconnected from the campus community, and relate athletic success to retention. To better serve the needs of this population, Rowan University could develop and implement a summer workshop program specifically for incoming student athletes.

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Chapter I

Overview

The fall 2014 semester marked the beginning of the first-year college experience for an estimated 21 million students across America (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). These students, freshly recovered from high school graduation, will be tasked with leaving family, friends and a life they have become accustomed to, in order to join a world that stretches their comfort zone and leaves them feeling socially isolated. Although some students begin their first semester well-prepared for academic and social challenges, many more are not equipped to handle the expectations of higher education (Kidwell, 2005). Students transitioning from high school to college experience increased personal responsibility, increased workload, fewer class meetings, heavier academic responsibilities, and less teacher-initiated contact (DiYanni, 1997). More than ever, these students are entering college feeling depressed, under stress, and using psychiatric medication (Lewin, 2011). According to a 2010 survey involving more than 200,000 incoming full-time first-year students at four-year colleges, the percentage of those admitting poor emotional health has reached its highest point since the annual survey started twenty five years ago (Lewin, 2011). According to Lewin (2011), the decreased level of emotional health may stem from a poor economy, placing financial stress on both the parents' and students' long-term debt. First-year students are in need of support during the transition process and higher education must adapt in order to better accommodate their needs.

Earlier thoughts on student retention viewed dropouts as a reflection of a student's attributes, mainly the lack of skill or motivation inherent in the student to persist (Tinto,

2006). As more importance is placed on student retention, higher education has shifted, now understanding the important role that colleges and universities must play in making sure these students are given the proper support to persist. A successful transition can create a path toward a positive college experience, whereas an unsuccessful transition may affect a student's decision to persist (Tinto, 1998). Those involved in the academic process must work to gain a better understanding of the process of transformation directed by the first-year experience (Kidwell, 2005). Chaskes (1996) recognizes that the transition from high school to college can be challenging and suggests that the higher education system has failed to establish a model that acknowledges the social and psychological dimensions of the transition.

The topic of retention continues to be discussed as many higher education researchers set out to determine best practices and colleges and universities offer more support to the first-year population than ever. With that said, very little research exists on retention and support services aimed toward specific subgroups within the first-year population. Separating subgroups of students, rather than combining them, may prove effective as the needs of each student population may differ (Bean & Metzner, 1985). One subgroup, in particular, that could benefit from a more focused transitional experience during their first-year at college is student athletes (Crom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, & Gerber, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the first-year experience of student athletes at Rowan University. This population is often at a disadvantage as they are battling the transition process as well as the added athletic and time management

pressures. In addition, student athletes are often socially isolated from the rest of the campus with little time to engage outside of their sport. In order to improve retention of first-year students in this population, this research study sets out understand the lived experiences of first-year student athletes and provide suggestions to better support their success moving forward. Assessing institutional performance by use of retention rates, standardized tests, and other measurable outcomes may prove problematic as these measures do not take student inputs into consideration (Astin, 1997). For this reason, the study will focus on qualitative data to fully capture the first-year experience as perceived by those who have lived it.

Existing Practice: The First-Year Student Athlete

Currently, Rowan University does little to support the transition process of first-year student athletes, outside of what is offered for the general freshman population. In the fall 2014 semester, a pilot program offering the course *Rowan 101: College Success* was offered, but not required, for first-year student athletes. The course offering proved to have had a positive impact on first-year student athletes. Those enrolled in the course finished their first semester of college with a higher grade point average than those who were not enrolled, although their academic profiles entering college were lower. The table below will explain the results of the course.

Table 1

Outcomes of Rowan 101: College Success

Rowan 101	Non-Rowan 101
16 Students	25 Students
Average SAT: 900	Average SAT: 928
Average High School GPA: 2.87	Average High School GPA: 3.08
1 st Semester College GPA: 2.72	1 st Semester College GPA: 2.52

Although this course offering is progress, the opportunity only existed for a small portion of entering first-year student athletes and is not mandatory due to the pre-existing freshman instructional guides for each academic program.

Academic assistance coming from within the Athletic Department often consists of study hall sessions. First-year study halls exist for student athletes; however, they are offered on a team by team basis and are not mandatory to participate. These study halls are managed by the teams’ coaching staff that have little to no training regarding the first-year transition. Mandatory study halls for college athletes are the most commonly used form of support for student athletes; however, the lack of interest and training amongst personnel running them makes it difficult to assess their effectiveness on academic performance (Harney, 1986).

In addition to the lack of focused support for the transition process of first-year student athletes, the Office of Athletics does little to track retention. In 2014, Rowan University enrolled 105 first-year student athletes, admitted with an average Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) critical reading and math score of 1093 and an average high school

grade point average (GPA) of 3.23, both falling below the averages of non-athlete admitted students. The largest gap came from specially admitted student athletes who averaged an SAT score of only 929. The fall 2014 student athlete enrollment profiles can be seen in the following table.

Table 2

Fall 2014 student athlete enrollment profile

Population	Average GPA	Average SAT
Non-Athlete	3.38	1118
Student Athlete	3.23	1093
Athletic Special Admit	3.02	929

In addition to the challenges of first-year student athletes previously mentioned, this population will begin college academically below their first-year non athlete peers and can be perceived as less prepared for college coursework, impacting their ability to persist. Of the 66 first-year student athletes participating in a fall sport in 2013, 30 did not return for their sophomore year in 2014 (E. Barney, personal communication, October 9, 2014). This means that nearly half of all first-year student athletes participating in a fall sport did not return for their sophomore year. The lowest retention rate came from the football team who had 18 of 25 first-year student athletes fail to persist to their sophomore year (E. Barney, personal communication, October 9, 2014). First-year student athletes entering their freshman year during the fall 2014 semester finished the year with a combined 2.86 cumulative GPA with nearly 15 percent of first-year student athletes posting a cumulative GPA of less than a 2.0. The lowest team cumulative GPA

came from the football team, earning just a 2.27. The table below shows the breakdown of first-year student athlete GPA's per team.

Table 3

2014/2015 First-year student athlete cumulative grade point averages

Team	Grade Point Average
Football	2.27
Field Hockey	3.01
Men's Soccer	3.04
Women's Soccer	3.13
Women's Volleyball	3.10
Men's Cross Country	3.31
Women's Cross Country	3.10
Men's Basketball	3.54
Women's Basketball	2.68
Men's Swimming	2.54
Women's Swimming	3.13
Women's Track & Field	2.92
Men's Track & Field	3.09
Softball	2.73
Baseball	2.87
Women's Lacrosse	3.15

In sum, the need to develop programs in order to better support this population exists. Currently, Rowan University offers limited support services specific to student athletes, a population that has made up approximately 10 percent of the incoming freshman class. This study set out to better understand the first-year experience through the perspective of the student athlete. This will give student athletes an opportunity to voice their needs and help create support services that are effective to both their persistence and overall college

experience.

Significance of the Study

Extensive searching for division III literature will give very few results, clearly identifying the need for further study in this area (Bandre, 2011). Generally, research on student athlete retention has been reserved for division I and II athletic programs. Previous studies have indicated that the need for further discussion on the retention of student athletes exists. As previously mentioned, this population often enters college with added social, academic, time and athletic pressures, more so than their fellow non-athlete classmates. Therefore, better understanding their experience in order to provide effective support is necessary.

Recently, Rowan University has made a push to enhance the first-year experience and improve retention. Orientation and seminar programs provide campus familiarity and important skills such as time-management and study sessions. These programs have proven effective to first-year students' campus wide; however they may not address the needs specific to the student-athlete population.

Another significant factor that may affect student athletes is social isolation. Many studies have provided information on the impact of student involvement and persistence; however, student athletes at division III institutions spend an estimated 30 hours per week on their sport alone (Brown, 2012). Time spent on athletics combined with academic responsibilities leaves student athletes very little time to become involved in the campus community outside of their sport, a benefit often considered as a selling point for why student athletes should attend division III institutions. The findings of this research project, through the lens of student athletes at Rowan University, will allow us

to better understand the needs of this population. In doing so, the university will be able to provide the support necessary to not only improve retention but also the overall experience for student athletes.

Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature and used a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is used to establish a detailed understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative data are based on textual data as opposed to quantitative data, which are based on numbers. This allows the researcher to learn and focus on the participant's stories and experiences rather than statistics (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Although a considerable amount of literature exists on the division I student athlete, very few studies have been conducted regarding the personal experiences of first-year student athletes participating at the NCAA division III level. This study sets out to acquire data that will allow for a better understanding of the student athlete lived experience and therefore create different approaches on how best to support this population. Data collection for this study will include in-depth interviews and documentation. The overarching question of this study is how student athletes at Rowan University perceive their first-year experience. The following research questions were developed to help understand this phenomenon.

1. What are the student athletes' perceptions of first-year orientation and transition programs offered at Rowan University?
2. To what extent do first-year student athletes feel socially isolated or connected to the campus community?
3. To what extent did the first-year experience meet expectations?

4. How do student athletes relate athletic success to retention?

Context of the Study

This study will take place at Rowan University, a medium-sized public university located in Glassboro, NJ. Opened as a normal school, Rowan University has climbed the ranks to become a leading public institution in the Northeast. In 1992, Henry Rowan donated \$100 million to then Glassboro State College, the largest gift ever given to a public college or university in the history of higher education (Rowan University, 2014). With the help of this gift, the institution achieved university status and developed a nationally recognized College of Engineering.

Rowan University is growing at a rapid pace with the help of visionary leadership and political support. Recently, Rowan University opened Cooper Medical School of Rowan University and acquired a school of osteopathic medicine, forming Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine. This made Rowan University one of only two schools in the nation to offer both M.D. and D.O. degree granting programs, putting its health science programs on the map. In addition, Rowan was designated a research institution in 2012 and provided a \$117 million grant to expand the Colleges of Business and Engineering.

In the midst of rapid growth, Rowan University has not strayed from its roots as a normal school, offering students a personalized education in a small classroom environment. Currently, Rowan University offers 57 bachelors, 46 masters and four doctoral degree programs to its nearly 14,000 students (Rowan University, 2014). The university maintains a student to faculty ratio of 13 to 1 and an average class size of 20 students. This allows students the opportunity to engage with both faculty and peers in a

more personalized learning atmosphere. In addition to academics, Rowan University boasts many successful athletic programs. A member of the NCAA division III, Rowan University consists of ten women's and eight men's programs participating in the New Jersey Athletic Conference. The success of the athletic department is evidenced by its 11 national championships and more than 120 conference championships.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I of this study introduced the topic being studied, provides background information, and details the research questions to be answered. It indicates the importance for further study on the first-year student athlete population and the impact this group has on enrollment goals at Rowan University. Chapter II reviewed the literature relevant to the topic being researched. It provides a background on the NCAA as well as division III athletics. This chapter also stressed the importance of theory, giving reference to several student retention, persistence, and engagement models. Chapter III described the methodology being administered to carry out the research. For this study, qualitative data was collected using a phenomenological approach. Once the data were collected, chapter IV presented a report of the results, developing themes and theory. Chapter V, the final chapter, summarizes the study and provides recommendations as well as ideas for further discussion and study.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

This chapter provides an overview of past research relevant to this study. It gives background information regarding the history of the NCAA and division III athletics. The review of literature covers research relevant to the first-year college experience, student retention, retention programs, and the expectation gap. It also provides information on the theoretical framework used for this study, Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure.

History: National Collegiate Athletic Association

Intercollegiate athletics have impacted American culture since the first competitions between Harvard and Yale Universities back in the early 19th century. Since its beginning, commercialization of intercollegiate athletics existed, creating extreme pressure to win (Smith, 2000). For this reason, the need for a governing body to control regulations and ensure fairness and safety was essential. Intercollegiate athletics shifted from student to faculty oversight to conference development and the creation of the NCAA (Smith, 2000).

Created in 1906, the purpose of the NCAA was to protect student athletes from dangerous athletic practices (NCAA, 2014). This, just one year after eighteen collegiate football players lost their lives during competition (Smith, 2000). Today, the NCAA is an intercollegiate governing body made up of more than 440,000 student athletes (NCAA, 2014). The NCAA is broken up into three divisions, each comprising of separate rules, requirements and regulations. This research study will focus on division III.

National Collegiate Athletic Association: Division III

Division III athletics are governed by the NCAA and place importance on the student athlete's academic success and overall experience rather than just athletics. It

was created by the NCAA in 1973 and includes colleges and universities that do not wish to give out any athletically related financial aid to its student athletes, and view sports as an extracurricular activity rather than a revenue building business (NCAA, 2014).

Division III athletic departments find themselves having to be more creative in the recruitment process due to the NCAA policy prohibiting athletic scholarship.

There are many advantages to student athletes who wish to attend a division III institution. Division III student athletes are attending the institution for an educational experience that will assist them in obtaining a career upon graduation (Tobin, 2005). A key difference between division I and III institutions is the focus that is placed on the experience of the athlete as opposed to the spectator (Bandre, 2011). Often, division III schools view the athlete as a student first and the sport as a part of the educational experience.

The NCAA also prides its division III philosophies on the three “Ds,” which include discover, develop, and dedicate. Division III student athletes are encouraged to discover themselves while pursuing opportunities outside of the field of play. Division III institutions encourage an environment that allows for student athletes to develop into well-rounded adults through participation in activities outside of the classroom.

A good sports program at a college or university can improve the institution as a whole. Many college reputations rely heavily on their Athletic Department. Many division III institutions use intercollegiate athletics as a tool to meet enrollment goals and increase retention rates (Pennington, 2007). However, due to division III scholarship limitations and increased competition through the use of technology, recruiting student athletes has become more difficult than ever. Prospective students are now able to access

information about colleges without leaving the comfort of their homes by use of websites and virtual tours (Tyre, 2003), expanding the recruitment reach of division III coaching staffs. A student looking to attend a division III school can now gain knowledge about institutions nationwide, something not so easily done before the use of technology as a recruitment tool.

According to the NCAA, division III is the largest of the three divisions with 447 colleges participating (NCAA, 2011). Due to the lack of media coverage, bowl games, luxury suites, and professional athletes, division III schools are often looked at as the lesser of the divisions. According to Eugene M. Tobin, former president of Hamilton College, this is not the case. Tobin (2005) argues that athletics have a far greater effect on the student body and campus culture at a division III institution than division I and II schools. For example, the University of Illinois, a division I institution with roughly 29,000 students, offers 19 intercollegiate teams and 450 student athletes, while division III school Trinity College boasts 600 student athletes for 28 sports with an enrollment of just under 1,700 students (Tobin, 2005). At Nazareth College, a small division III institution in New York, approximately 25 percent of the undergraduate student body participates on an athletic team and over one third of the 2013 freshman class played an NCAA recognized sport (Braveman, 2014). Braveman (2014) also notes that the creation of a men's ice hockey team at Nazareth College attracted students from 10 states and four countries.

At many division III schools across the country, admissions and athletics, although two separate entities, must work together in order to benefit one another. Division III institutions find themselves needing athletic recruits as they often boost

enrollment (Kurz, Veeder, & Scannell, 2007). At Rowan University, the student athlete population makes up approximately five percent of the total enrollment. This illustrates that the role of the athletic department is crucial to the admissions office meeting their overall enrollment targets.

It is important to note that the college admissions process for a division III student athlete is just that, a college admissions process with an athletic component (NCAA, 2014). While some institutions may have a limited number for special admittances, the majority of student athletes coming into a division III school will have to meet the overall requirements set forth by the admissions office to be accepted into that particular institution. Schools that decide to use special admittances allow for each sports team to accept a certain number of recruits that would not necessarily qualify in the regular admissions process.

The impact of collegiate athletics at NCAA division III institutions stretches far beyond the ability to develop positive student engagement and community involvement opportunities. To many division III institutions it is a means to achieve enrollment goals. According to the 2011 NCAA membership report, student-athletes represent 20 percent of the total enrollment at division III institutions (NCAA, 2011). This is critical as several reporting bodies, including the U.S. Department of Education, indicate that the number of high school graduates is expected to decrease significantly by the year 2020 (NACAC, 2011). Another report shows that college enrollment fell two percent in 2012 and will continue to decline as the number of college aged students will drop after years of rapid growth (Perez-Pena, 2013). This will increase competition amongst colleges and intensify financial pressures on tuition driven institutions (Redden, 2008). Therefore, the

focus on retention programs in higher education are made more important as enrolling new students becomes increasingly difficult.

Student Retention

Retention rates became increasingly more important in higher education in 1991 after federal law required institutions to report the quality of their education to prospective students, parents, and guidance counselors. The Federal Student Right to Know Act was created in order to allow consumers to make a more informed college decision (Astin, 1997). Student retention is an issue facing many colleges and universities today and those struggling to improve often face closing their doors (Seidman, 2005). Research reveals that the largest proportion of institutional departure occurs during the first year and prior to the second (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Less than half of undergraduate students studying at four-year institutions actually attain a degree within four years; only 56 percent graduate within six years (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Whitmore, 2006).

Due to the number of variables, it is likely that researchers in higher education may never find a perfect process for predicting retention outcomes (Seidman, 2005). Although the process may never be perfect, institutions of higher education would be wise to implement strategies in order to develop programs to improve retention outcomes. Doing so would benefit both the institution and the student body. For one, it is cheaper for an institution to provide resources that help retain its current students than it would be to recruit a new student (Shinde, 2008). Secondly, a strong retention program would help students graduate, possibly at a quicker rate and with less student debt.

Institutions attempting to evaluate retention programs should keep in mind majors

offered, rates, and the academic profile of the students being enrolled (Astin, 1997). Umi Jenson (2011) recognizes several factors that may affect student retention. These factors are comprised of three levels: individual, institutional, and social external. The individual level consists of a student's academic performance, attitude, and satisfaction with the university. The institutional level includes student engagement opportunities offered while social external focus more on family support (Jenson, 2011). Jenson's (2011) levels indicate that students who were doing well academically, had opportunities for engagement, faculty and family support, and felt a sense of belonging were more likely to be satisfied with the institution and persist.

Tinto identifies three reasons that ultimately lead to student departure including academic performance, the failure to resolve educational and occupational goals, and an inability to incorporate with the social life of the institution (Tinto, 1993). Many researchers have found that a student's ability to engage with campus life is a leading factor in a student's decision to either stay or leave an institution. Students who are engaged both inside and outside of the classroom are more likely to graduate than those who are not (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). It is easy to assume that student athletes are engaged with the university through athletics; however, many student athletes who attend division III institutions do so hoping for the opportunity to expand their horizons outside of their sport (Ohle, 2012). Bowen and Levin (2003) argue that athletics create a subculture that isolates student athletes from the larger campus culture. Even in NCAA division III, student athletes report spending a minimum of 30 hours per week on their sport (Brown, 2012). The time demands of balancing athletics and academics in college have also been cited as a major reason for dropout from both sport and school

(Perrelli, 2004).

The premise of Astin's (1985) theory of involvement is that the more a student is involved in college the higher likelihood the student has of persisting. The importance of student engagement activities in higher education has become increasingly popular due to its correlation with a student's ability to learn and develop (Astin, 1993). Students with close friends who are doing well academically and like college life are more likely to persist (Kuh & Love, 2000). This environment is developed at institutions that fully engage their students in activities (Kuh, 2004), adding to the quality of the student athletes' first-year experience.

First-Year Experience

The transition from high school to college is often challenging to first-year college students. Many students lack academic awareness, study skills, and time management techniques needed to be successful at the post-secondary education level. Although the goal of any higher education institution is to retain all students, special importance must be placed when developing retention strategies for first-year students.

Research indicates that college students usually decide to drop out of college at the end of their freshman year (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). According to the U.S. News and World Report (2016), one in every three first-year students does not return for their sophomore year. This means that interventions must occur during the first year to be the most effective (Brown, 2012), leading to the importance of freshman transition programs to assist first-year students in getting better acclimated to the college and integrated into its culture.

Reasons for failed transitions may include lack of college instruction, home

sickness, failure to monitor behavior, lack of basic skills and an inability to become a member of the academic community (Johnston, 2010). In addition to academic hardships, students are often confronted with living on their own for the first time. Different from non-athletes, student athletes are faced with many stressors and expectations beginning freshman year including athletic performance, practice, heavy travel schedules, and academic performance (Le Crom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, & Gerber, 2009). Students transitioning from high school to college experience increased personal responsibility, increased workload, fewer class meetings, heavier academic responsibilities, and less teacher-initiated contact (Dearborn, 2005). Therefore, it is imperative that institutions of higher education develop transition programs to assist first-year students during this period. Failure to do so will significantly impact college and university retention rates.

NCAA division III student athletes are an important member of a campus community. They play solely for the love of the game, free from the pressures of scholarship and expectations of winning. The student athlete must be remarkable on the field and even more so in the classroom. Athletic programs are an essential piece of a university' campus environment and overall educational experience of its student body (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). Despite the importance of student athletes in higher education, many institutions fail to provide the resources needed in order to assist with the transition process and retention of first-year student athletes. Often, the student athlete population is grouped with the traditional first-year population, although their needs and circumstances are much different. Specific orientation programs greatly reduce anxiety for first-year student athletes associated with the transition to college (Kissinger & Miller, 2009). In addition to being faced with general transition challenges such as

social and academic adjustments, student athletes must also adapt to athletic challenges such as daily practices, travel, performance pressures, and obligations to coaches and teammates (Watt & Moore, 2001). Not engaging students during their first few weeks of college could be detrimental to student persistence and retention (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993).

A study following a men's basketball team found that the initial hope of succeeding in the classroom faded into the student athlete feeling overwhelmed by the demands of athletics and socially isolated from the rest of the campus (Adler & Adler, 1985). Through creating an environment that focuses on the needs of first-year student athletes during their transition, colleges and universities can adapt a style of education that fosters engagement in the campus community and promotes academic achievement amongst this population of students. Once identifying the challenges first-year student athletes face when entering college it's insightful to identify processes that have proven effective when supporting this population.

Retention Programs

The NCAA has approved strict legislation for division I institutions in order to improve student athlete success in the classroom, including the academic progress rate (APR) system and academic counseling requirement (NCAA, 2014). Although this legislation sets out to increase persistence amongst collegiate student athletes, no such requirements exist at the division III level. Therefore, it is on each individual institution to take it upon themselves to develop programs that foster a college experience that will engage student athletes both in the campus community and in the classroom. Like division I institutions, division III schools benefit from the representation of their student

athletes, making their persistence as beneficial to the institution as it is to the athletes themselves (Smith & Herman, 1996).

Understanding the need to constantly evaluate and improve transition programs for first-year student athletes exists, several institutions are providing support services to their students that have been beneficial to this population. The University of Toledo developed a program, the Athletes Educational Planning Program (AEPP), which classifies incoming student athletes by risk level (Pope & Miller, 1996). Incoming student athletes are placed in a category of high risk, low risk or moderate risk, using standardized test scores, high school grade point average, high school course load, and intended major of study (Pope & Miller, 1996). Student athletes placed in both high and moderate risk categories are required to meet with the university's counseling staff for one hour each week throughout their first year. These meetings consist of workshops to increase skills in areas such as study, time management, concentration, note-taking, reading methods and testing, with weekly updates given to the coaching staff and athletic director (Pope & Miller, 1996).

Similar to AEPP, many schools have implemented the Freshman Athlete Scholastic Testing program (FAST) as a way to evaluate and assist student athletes with their transition into college (Pope & Miller, 1996). This program requires mandatory round table study hall sessions throughout the fall semester with counseling professionals for first-year student athletes where they must discuss class notes and provide evidence of course attendance. Failure to accurately produce these requirements would result in punishments such as early morning conditioning drills (Harney, Brigham, & Sanders, 1986). Grand Valley State University uses the FAST program for incoming first year

student athletes participating on their football team. Their program consists of a two and a half week summer course, prior to the football season, teaching study, reading and time management skills as well as educating each student athlete on the various university resources available to them (“Grand Valley State University,” 2013).

Another tactic used to support student athletes is a shift in the university’s reporting structure. The recent reporting structure at the University of Arizona has lifted the institutions overall scoring on the NCAA’s APR listing. The shift placed the university’s student athlete retention program under the direction of the student affairs department in order to place accountability of student athlete success on others outside of the Office of Athletics (Ruiz-McGill, 2011). This, combined with offering coaches bonus structures for team academic achievements, allows for increased collaboration between both departments (Ruiz-McGill, 2011). A trend amongst collegiate athletic departments, other institutions linking coaching staff bonuses to student athlete academic achievement include the University of Maryland, Colorado State University, Murray State University and the University of Southern Carolina (Berkowitz, Upton, & Schnaars, 2013). In another attempt to increase the retention amongst first-year student athletes, the Big Ten conference, a top conference in the NCAA’s division I system, has announced its interest of making freshman ineligible to participate. This move would allow first-year student athletes to seek the support they need and provide time to adjust to college life before jumping into their sport (Rittenberg, 2015).

As the importance of student athlete retention increases so will the development and implementation of many support services geared toward the success of the student athlete population. Although this review of literature provided examples of first-year

student athlete retention programs, many of these programs have been implemented at the division I level with very little information focusing on programs implemented at the division III level. The most successful student retention models for first year student athletes include the hiring of personnel to administer programs such as advising, counseling, mentoring, academic support services and summer programs (Kissinger & Miller, 2009). Division III athletic programs such as Springfield College and New Jersey City University have added student retention program coordinators to their athletic staff in an effort to provide personalized attention to their student athletes.

In addition to retention programs designed specifically for the first-year student athlete population, this review of literature will explore the idea of student athlete expectations and their impact on persistence.

Expectation Gap

While student engagement opportunities lead to persistence, student expectations of their first-year experience can ultimately impact their level of satisfaction. Many first-year students arrive to campus already having predetermined positive and negative expectations of what will happen to them (Schilling & Schilling, 1999). These expectations impact behavior and in turn affect academic performance and social transition (Kuh, 2005). One explanation of the gap between student expectations and actual behavior can be categorized as the freshman myth (Kuh, 2004). The freshman myth idealizes that students view their college experience as being interesting and exciting, making them look forward to taking advantage of everything that is offered. Although ambitious, what students actually do in the first year of college often falls short of what they expected to do (Kuh, 2005). For example, a student enters college excited to

take advantage of opportunities such as study abroad, athletics and student government, however, find out during their experience that their expectations for engagement may have been too farfetched. Most first-year students' state they will engage with the campus community more frequently than they actually report doing at the end of their first year (Kuh, 2004).

In addition to the expectation of college engagement during their first year, students often expect the campus environment to be friendlier and more supportive than they actually experience. According to a study on first year students (Kuh, 2004), 76 percent of students arriving at college expect administrators to be responsive and helpful; however, only 54 percent feel the same way at the end of the year. This result highlights an inability amongst colleges and universities to effectively evaluate the importance of faculty-student interaction, an agreed upon interaction that is vital to the success of first-year students (Kuh, 2004).

Several recommendations exist in order to assist colleges and universities in closing the gap between expectations and experiences. Kuh (2004) recommends institutions create structured time for first-year students to spend in the company of peers, limit the amount of non-first-year students on campus during welcome weekend, offer first-year seminar courses, emphasize the importance of advising and balance academic and social activities during orientation as all good ways to minimize expectations and increase the quality of the experience. In addition to the expectations previously mentioned for the general first-year population, student-athletes also face both personal and external expectations to perform well in their particular sport. It is important for universities to understand performance expectations of incoming first-year student

athletes and develop innovative programs to help make these expectations realistic (Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008).

Tinto's (1993) discusses expectations as pre-entry attributes and connects them as having an impact on a students' ability to persist as discussed in his theory of student departure. This theory is the theoretical framework of this study.

Theoretical Framework

Recently, higher education has evolved its philosophy from the power of recruitment to the power of retention. Several theories attempt to explain factors that influence student attrition both on the individual and institutional level. For the purposes of this study I will focus on Tinto's theory of student departure to help guide my research (See figure 1).

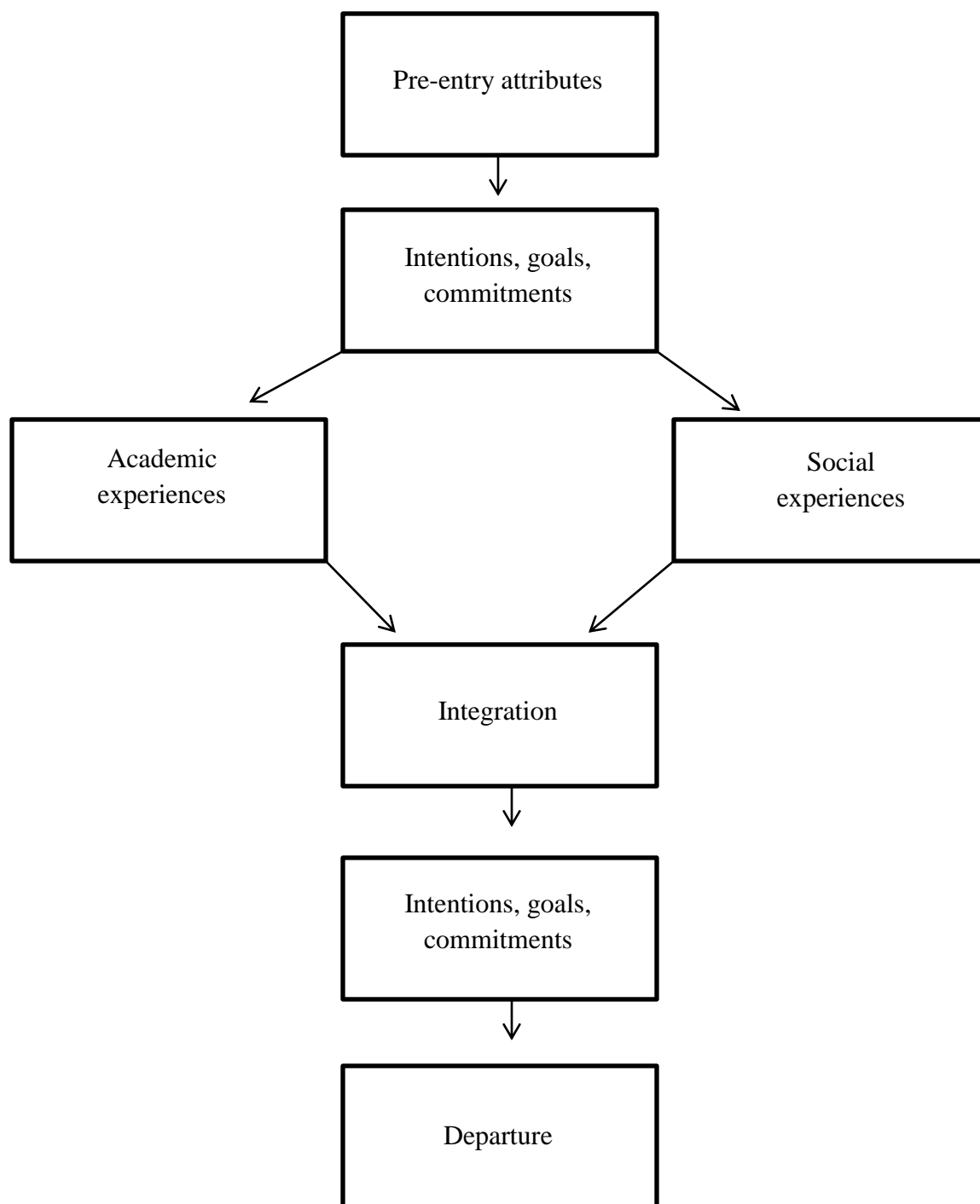


Figure 1. Model of student departure (simplified)

(Tinto, 1993)

The increased interest of student retention has certainly boosted research on the topic. Although student retention has been studied significantly as of late, the creation of theory to describe the phenomena has been lacking. One of the most notable retention theories is Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure (Yorke, 1999). Tinto's theory of student departure is based on the university's social characteristics integrating with a student's intellectual abilities (Tinto, 1975). Students attend college with a set of background characteristics, intentions and expectations, and their decision to persist is based on the ability to socially and academically integrate with the institution (Yorke, 1999). If the experience at the institution is negative, students may conclude that the benefits of departure outweigh the benefits to persist (Tinto, 1993). Students' commitment to persist relies on their motivation and academic ability to match the institution's academic and social characteristics (Cabrera & Castaneda, 1993).

Prior to Tinto, researchers concluded that students would drop out because of personal reasons rather than institutional factors. A student's inability to persist was a result of the student's lack of skill or motivation (Tinto, 2006). Tinto's model described by Falcone (2011) explains that "institutional departure decisions arise out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual and members of the academic and social systems of the institution. The individual's experiences in those systems, which are indicated by their amount of academic and social integration into the institution, continually modify their intentions and commitments regarding future educational activities" (Falcone, 2011, p.11).

One flaw in Tinto's theory is the lack of information regarding external factors and student departure. Although successfully integrated with an institution, students may

be forced to depart due to external reasons such as medical conditions or financial problems. This is particularly relevant from an institutional perspective as programs to prevent attrition are continually developed and need to address external variables such as parental support and the ability to pay (Cabrera & Castaneda, 1993). Napoli and Wortman (1998) have worked together in expanding Tinto's theory and adding external factors and its impact on student departure.

Understanding Tinto's theory of departure, it is imperative that institutions of higher education look within themselves to better student retention. Unlike in the past, colleges and universities have to realize the importance of assisting students in becoming integrated with college life both socially and academically. More social support means fewer feelings of loneliness, but does not relate to academic achievement (Nicpon, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort, & Robinson-Kurpius, 2007). Programs such as orientation, seminars, and athletic transition courses are all ways in which a school can raise retention rates.

Summary

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the first-year experience of student athletes at Rowan University. Doing so will allow for the possible development of programs to support this population and increase persistence. The review of literature provided important insight into the challenges faced by many first-year student athletes and their transition into higher education. Further, this section gave background information on the history of the NCAA and explained the differences between its divisions. The chapter examined information on the importance of student retention as well as factors that influenced persistence such as engagement opportunities

and satisfying student expectations. Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure was introduced and will be used to guide the study. The following chapter will present the methods being used in order to collect and analyze data for this research study.

Chapter III

Methodology

This qualitative study is designed to assess, through student perceptions, the first-year experience of student athletes at Rowan University. Rowan University, a four-year public university in New Jersey, houses eighteen NCAA division III recognized athletic programs. Several data collection methods, including interviews and documents will be analyzed in order to better understand and improve the first-year experience of student athletes at Rowan University. This study seeks to understand how student athletes perceive their first-year experience. The following research question assist in answering the overarching question.

1. What are the perceptions of first-year orientation and transition programs offered at Rowan University?
2. To what extent did the first-year experience meet expectations?
3. To what extent do first-year student-athletes feel socially isolated or connected to Rowan University?
4. How do student athletes relate athletic success to retention?

Qualitative research is used to establish an in-depth understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2007). This method is used in order to empower individuals to share their stories and hear their voices. It is through their voices that the researcher can truly understand the experience and provide necessary change and improvements. The review of literature suggests that very few studies have been conducted regarding the personal experiences of first-year student athletes participating at the NCAA division III level. Creswell (2007) explains that “qualitative inquiry represents a legitimate mode of social

and human science exploration, without comparisons to quantitative research” (Creswell, 2007, pg. 11).

The idea of studying the first-year student athlete experience came to light after several discussions with current student athletes. The student athletes were able to remain both academically and athletically eligible to continue, however, explained their feelings of social isolation, stress, and struggle with time management as variables that could have impacted their ability to persist. Although these students successfully completed the school year, allowing them to share their experiences would indicate otherwise. Conducting in-depth interviews with these student athletes would lead to the collection of broad, descriptive answers or explanations (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) about the research topic.

Research Design

This study is qualitative in nature and takes on a phenomenological approach. Creswell (2007) describes qualitative research as the “process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 249). This method of research is performed when the researcher seeks information that will lead to an understanding of an experience from the perspective of those who have lived it (Merriam, 1998). For the purpose of this study, qualitative research helped illustrate the phenomena of the first-year student athlete experience at Rowan University through the lens of those who have experienced it.

It is important to understand that qualitative approaches must evolve throughout

the research process in order to present valid data. The researcher must continually assess the research design, making changes and adjustments throughout the process. According to Maxwell (2005), qualitative research has no predetermined starting point nor does it proceed through a fixed sequence of steps. The process is ongoing and cannot be implemented or borrowed from past research. Effective qualitative research studies will involve the process of “tacking” or going back and forth between the different components of the design, assessing goals, theories, research questions, methods, and validity (Maxwell, 2005, pg. 3). It is critical for the research design of this study to constantly adapt throughout the data collection process in order to retrieve effective data and produce a valid study. In order to do so, this study used Maxwell’s (2005) model for qualitative research design (Figure 2).

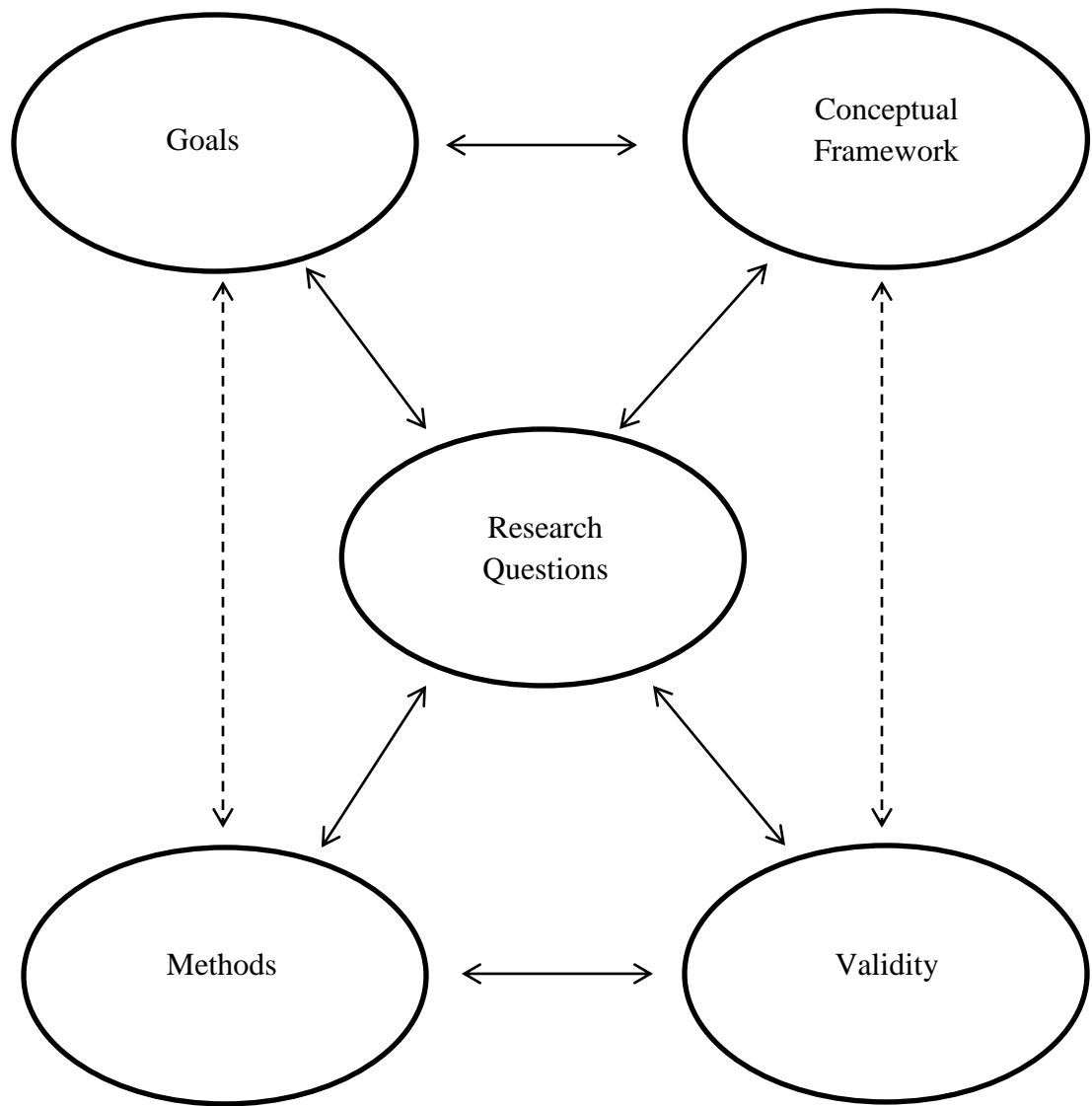


Figure 2. Model for qualitative research design

(Maxwell 2005)

The model for qualitative research design displays five components of research including goals, conceptual framework, research questions, methods, and validity, and how they connect with one another. The research questions serve as the focal point of the model, informing the other components throughout the study. Maxwell (2005) breaks the model up into two triangles, lower and upper, while also allowing for a certain amount of flexibility between the two. For example, the upper triangle in figure 2 indicates the integration of the research questions with both the goals of the study and its conceptual framework. The bottom triangle of the model integrates the method in which the study uses to answer the research questions as well as any threats to validity that may arise (Maxwell, 2005).

- The *goal* of this study is to better understand the lived experiences of first-year student athletes in order to provide better support and improve retention.
- The *conceptual framework* used in this study is Tinto's (1975) theory of student departure.
- The *method* used in this study is qualitative, and will draw upon the experiences and perceptions of first-year student athletes at Rowan University.
- *Validity* will be tested throughout the study through collecting rich data, member checking, triangulation, and the use of several coding techniques.

Phenomenology

Creswell (2007) indicates five qualitative approaches to inquiry, including narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. For the purpose of this

study, a phenomenological approach of inquiry is used. A phenomenological study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p.57), allowing the researcher to focus on the commonalities of the experience. Using the phenomenological method on a sample of participants with similar experiences provides power to the data collected from a small number of participants (Seidman, 1998). The researcher collects data from those who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a description of the meaning of the experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994), understanding that common experiences are important for developing practices or policies (Creswell, 2007). For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon consists of the first-year experience of student athletes at Rowan University. For this study, transcendental phenomenology is used so as to focus less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on the description of the experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). This approach allowed the researcher to put aside assumptions and focus on the phenomenon with a fresh perspective.

Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a set of beliefs that guide action (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Mertens, 1998). Research paradigms shape the study and guide methodology, literature and research design. The paradigm influences the study, is interpreted, and sets the tone for the intent, motivation and expectations of the research project (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Creswell (2003) describes the four research paradigms for qualitative research as post positivism, social constructivism, advocacy and participatory, and pragmatism. For the purposes of this research study, the social constructivism research paradigm will be used.

Social constructivists indicate that truth is relative and that it is dependent on

one's perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Social constructivists set out to better understand the world in which they live and believe it is done through the use of language and examining social realities as opposed to materials or objects (Creswell, 2003). As the Assistant Athletic Director with a primary responsibility of academic support, I have a vested interest in the success and persistence of student athletes. Following a social constructivist approach allowed for the development of meaning for student athlete persistence through the participant's view of the situation.

Data Collection

The basic concept of collecting data in a research study is to gather information that addresses the questions being asked in the study (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The data collection in qualitative research is typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials. In qualitative research, the results are presented as discussions of trends and themes based on words, not statistics (Patten, 2005). Instruments commonly used in a qualitative study include structured interviews, focus groups, and free form questionnaires (Shields & Tajalli, 2006). Conducting interviews is one of the most important methods of data collection in qualitative research (Yin, 1994). For the purpose of this study, interviewing was the primary form of data collection. Using the research as a guide (Jacob & Fergersun, 2012), an interview protocol was designed (Appendix A) to answer the research questions. The protocol consists of open-ended questions and will be tested on a small sample size of student-athletes to ensure quality.

Many qualitative studies combine several data collection methods over the course of the study (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Qualitative research requires a human instrument, the researcher, to collect and analyze data (Whitt, 1991). Decisions about

whom to interview or what to observe should be based on the potential of the person or event to help provide the researcher with information and insight about the phenomena (Merriam, 1988).

The purpose of conducting interviews is to gain an understanding of the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Siedman, 2006). To assist in answering my research questions, I conducted one on one interviews using current and former Rowan University student athletes. While working with the participants, qualitative researchers would be open to the possibility of making adjustments in the instrumentations, such as rewording or adding questions (Patten, 2005). The interview protocol consists of broad, open-ended questions allowing for the collection of data that will lead to both textural and structural descriptions of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Creating a protocol full of open-ended questions enables the researcher to better tune in to the life experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Open-ended questions are especially important when using a phenomenological approach. An open-ended question will build upon and explore the participant's responses to the questions, allowing the participant to reconstruct the experience within the topic of study (Seidman, 2006).

For the purpose of this study, a variation of Dolbeare and Schuman's (1982) model of in-depth phenomenological interviewing was used. Using this model, I focused on the life history, details of the experience, and reflection on the meaning of the experience for each of the participants. This method allows the researcher and participant to build the experience and place it into context (Siedman, 2006). The focus on life history allowed me to collect and analyze data on the participant's experiences leading up

to the phenomena being studied. This gave me a better understanding of how they became to be student athletes studying at Rowan University. By asking “how” I had the participant reconstruct past events including family, school, and work experience that place their participation as student athletes in the context of their lives (Siedman, 2006). The second focus is on the details of the experience. The purpose of this was to concentrate on the details of the participant’s experiences in the area of the topic being studied. In this case, the focus was on their perceived first-year experiences as student athletes at Rowan University. The third focus incorporated their reflection on the meaning of their experience. This method of bringing meaning to the experience allowed participants to reflect on their past in order to make better sense of their current situation. The process of exploring the past to clarify events of the present, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives (Siedman, 2006).

In addition to interviews, documents were also used as methods of data collection to validate what was learned through the interview process. Documentation contains written, auditory or visual materials including media reports, memos, videos, scripts, photographs and maps (Raptis, 2010). Researchers often use documentation as a supplement to observation and interviewing data collection methods (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Documentation in this research study included academic transcripts.

Sampling and Participants

Sampling is a necessary process when conducting qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). It is the process of choosing participants from a group of people that represents the population being studied (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). It is important that the participants being selected for this study be willing to answer questions

truthfully (Creswell, 2007). These participants are generally selected from the population that is going to provide the most meaningful data (Morgan, 1988). Many researchers will argue that random sampling is to be used for quantitative purposes and qualitative research should focus their efforts on non-random sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Purposeful sampling will be used in order to select participants for this study.

Purposeful sampling is the process of intentionally selecting participants that will fit the scope of the research being conducted (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The sample size for a phenomenological qualitative research study is generally 8 to 10 participants (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Polkinghorne (1989) recommends the quantity of interviews conducted in a qualitative, phenomenological research study be between 5-25. This study did not limit the number of interviews and instead conducted them until data saturation was met. Data saturation occurs when the researcher collects data containing the same information and is no longer learning anything new (Creswell, 2007; Douglas, 1976; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants consisted of both current and former student athletes who participated on an NCAA recognized sport team at Rowan University. These student athletes were in their sophomore year, having just completed their first-year experience. Participants were interviewed using the same protocol (Appendix A) regardless of whether they were still members of a varsity team. Solicitation of participants was done through email and outreach to individual team coaching staffs. Emails were sent twice, to all 105 first-year student athletes, that participated on a varsity team during the Fall 2014 – Spring 2015 academic year. Of the 105 emails, 17 students responded with interest and 13 interviews were conducted.

Setting

The setting of the study took place at Rowan University. The interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon location and at a time and date that were convenient for both the researcher and interviewee. The interviews were face to face and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length.

Data Analysis

This study used the constant comparative analysis method for data analysis. Constant comparative data analysis is the process by which the researcher gathers data to be coded into categories, properties, and hypotheses (Putten & Nolen, 2008). This method allowed the researcher to compare new data to existing data in order to develop categories and themes. A researcher can identify themes throughout the study by organizing similar ideas that appear throughout the data (Auerbach & Silverstien, 2003). Using four stages, the constant comparative analysis approach includes comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories, delimiting the theory and writing the theory (Glaser, 1965). In order to organize the data and create themes, this study used the process of coding and triangulation.

Triangulation allows the researcher to use multiple methods for obtaining data on the research topic (Patten, 2005). In addition to comparing data across multiple sources for enriched theory, triangulation is also used to increase the validity of a study (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2002). In this study, data collection methods included interviews and documents.

Data analysis included the process of coding using the in-vivo coding technique. This is the process of assigning words or short phrases to different sections of the data

(Saldana, 2009). Using this method, I was able to select certain words or phrases that were consistent throughout my data. After better understanding consistency throughout my data I was able to take what I found through in vivo coding, generate themes, and create a code book. The code book served as a way to better organize my data, assist in the development of the findings presented through the data and ensure the data collected are valid.

Validity and Credibility

It is essential that researchers understand the importance of validity and credibility throughout my research. Validity in qualitative research can be described as “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (Maxwell, 2005, p.106). In order to create a valid and credible study, the researcher must not impose their own subjectivity when collecting and analyzing data. In order to combat issues of validity and credibility, this study will use processes such as member checking and data triangulation. Triangulation is where researchers converge multiple data sources in order to form themes or categories in a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Throughout this study, I will search for themes in all data points in order to find commonality and enhance validity. Data sources included interviews and documentation .

The idea of member checking was suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and consists of taking data back to the participants in the study for confirmation on the credibility of the narrative account (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that member checking is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p 314). Member checking was

completed throughout this study as participants were shown interview transcripts and other data collected in order to confirm credibility throughout the study.

Limitations

As is the case with any study, limitations existed and need to be addressed. These limitations include both methodological and researcher. One methodological limitation pertains to the context of the study. This research study is limited to student athletes attending Rowan University. Therefore, the results and recommendations found may not be applicable to all colleges. In addition, limitations to the sample population also existed. The participants in this study consisted of only student athletes who persisted onto their sophomore year at Rowan University, despite several attempts at reaching out to students no longer enrolled. This was done through email and additional outreach from their former coach.

The researcher limitation to this study is my position on Rowan University's campus. As the Assistant Director of Athletics, student athletes may view me as an authority figure and answer questions based on what they perceive I want to hear rather than their true feelings. This limitation was handled by building a rapport with the participant, controlling non-verbal expressions and conducting the interview in a neutral location.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted various data collection and data analysis methods that will be used throughout this research study. It addressed the rationale for the methodology being used and described the process of choosing participants and providing valid and credible data. The next chapter of this research study will be used to

present and analyze the data collected using the methodology, research paradigm and data collection processes previously mentioned.

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this study is to better understand the first-year experience of student-athletes at Rowan University. The study was conducted using a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design. This methodology allowed for first-year student-athletes to share their experiences through conversation, creating data that did not rely on quantitative research alone (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003). The overarching research question is to determine how student athletes at Rowan University perceive their first-year experience. In order to help answer this question, four research questions were developed.

1. What are the student athletes' perceptions of first-year orientation and transition programs offered at Rowan University?
2. To what extent did the first-year experience meet expectations?
3. To what extent do first-year student athletes feel socially isolated or connected to the campus community?
4. How do student athletes relate athletic success to retention?

The main source of data collection for this research study consisted of one-on-one interviews. An interview protocol (Appendix A) was developed containing open-ended questions with the purpose of obtaining data to best answer the research questions.

This research is significant due to the lack of research regarding first-year student athletes at the division III level as well as Rowan University's push to enhance retention rates. The student athlete population is continually growing, therefore making this subgroup of the traditional student population important to better understand. The

findings of this study will be used to develop programs and enhance support for the student athlete population.

Sample Profile

The process of selecting participants for this research study was done using purposeful sampling. The use of purposeful sampling allowed for the intentional selection of participants that would fit the scope of this research project (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The participants were selected to best represent the population being studied (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) and provide the most meaningful data (Morgan, 1988). The participants interviewed were sophomore students at Rowan University, entering during the fall 2014 semester, who participated on an intercollegiate athletic team. To solicit participation, an email was sent to 105 Rowan University sophomores who either currently participate on an NCAA recognized team or who participated during their first year only. In addition, each coach was also contacted via email to seek interest amongst their team in participating in this research study. A total of 13 open-ended interviews were conducted as it was concluded that data saturation had been met (Creswell, 2007).

Of the first-year student-athletes interviewed, 57% were female ($n = 8$) and 38% were male ($n = 5$). The majority of participants were White/Caucasian ($n = 10$) with the remainder Black/African American ($n = 3$). The participants represented 67% of the varsity intercollegiate teams offered at Rowan University. Of the participants, 92% ($n = 12$) played a single sport while 8% ($n = 1$) played on multiple teams. Demographic information regarding the participants can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Demographic information of participants

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	5	38
Female	8	57
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	10	77
Black/African American	3	21
Sport		
Baseball	2	14
Basketball (women)	0	0
Basketball (men)	1	7
Cross Country (women)	0	0
Cross Country (men)	0	0
Field Hockey	1	7
Football	1	7
Women's Lacrosse	2	14
Softball	3	21
Soccer (men)	1	7
Soccer (women)	0	0
Swimming (women)	1	7
Swimming (men)	0	0
Track & Field (outdoor -men)	1	7
Track & Field (outdoor-women)	0	0
Track & Field (indoor-men)	1	7
Track & Field (indoor-women)	0	0
Women's Volleyball	1	7

The participants entered Rowan University pursuing degrees in various academic programs. Of the 13 participants, 23% ($n = 3$) decided to change their major during their first year. Information regarding academic programs can be found in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Academic program information of participants

<u>Academic Program</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Accounting	1	7
Athletic Training	1	7
Biology	1	7
Biophysics	1	7
Education	1	7
Environmental Studies	1	7
Exploratory Studies	1	7
Finance	2	14
Health & Exercise Science	2	14
Public Relations	1	7
Physics	1	7

The participants completed their first year at Rowan University with a combined cumulative grade point average of 3.21, ranging between 2.46 and 4.00. Out of the 13 participants, 11 competed in a sport whose regular season fell in either the fall or spring semester only. Of those 11 participants, seven had their best academic grade point average in the semester in which their sport was not in season. The average grade point average for these 11 participants while in season was 3.12 and out of season was 3.44. Table 5 below provides further information regarding the grade point averages of each participant during their first-year.

Table 6

Participant grade point averages

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Cumulative</u>	<u>In-season</u>	<u>Out-of-Season</u>
Participant 1	3.67	3.54	3.79
Participant 2	2.91	2.50	3.26
Participant 3	2.29	N/A	N/A
Participant 4	4.00	4.00	4.00
Participant 5	3.26	3.25	3.28
Participant 6	2.46	2.11	3.00
Participant 7	2.96	2.75	3.18
Participant 8	2.92	2.53	3.45
Participant 9	3.40	3.53	3.26
Participant 10	3.16	2.86	3.46
Participant 11	3.46	N/A	N/A
Participant 12	4.00	4.00	4.00
Participant 13	3.21	3.33	3.13
Total	3.21	3.12	3.44

Data Interpretation

The 13 one-on-one interviews were completed using an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions designed to obtain data that would provide answers to the previously listed research questions. Each interview was audio recorded, with permission from the interviewee, and consent forms were signed detailing the specifics of the research study. Once the interviews were complete, each audio recording was transcribed and shared with the interviewee for member checking.

Using the constant comparative analysis method, each interview transcription was analyzed and coded, using the in-vivo coding technique. This is the process of selecting

words and phrases throughout the data to generate categories and themes (Saldana, 2009). A code book was created to keep record of new and existing themes and phrases (Saldana, 2009) and each theme and phrase was compared to previous data collected on the research topic. The themes and phrases were then linked to the research questions of this study to provide clarity on the phenomenon in question.

To validate the data further, the process of triangulation was used by analyzing what was collected through interviews and comparing it to documents relevant to this study and the participants (Patten, 2005). In this case, triangulation was done through validating interview content by reviewing educational documents such as transcripts and graduation reports.

Findings

The intent of the study is to understand how student athletes perceive their first-year college experience at Rowan University. Following Dolbeare and Schuman's (1982) model, the interview protocol (Appendix A) began by focusing on life history and experiences leading up to the phenomenon which was the first-year experience. To answer the overarching question, in-depth questions were asked relating to expectations, social connectivity, transition programs and correlations between athletic and academic success. The themes generated throughout the study included time management, campus resource awareness, transitional support and social isolation.

Past Experiences

The beginning of each interview began by diving into the past history of who the participants were before enrolling at Rowan University. Interestingly, all 13 participants spoke mainly of their sport, almost as if their whole lives have been defined by who they

are on the playing field. They identify with their sport as it has helped shape them into who they have become. Although several of the participants decided to attend college because of educational values instilled in them by their parents, the majority were looking to continue their athletic career while earning a degree. One participant states, “I went to college because of softball and I wanted to be the first in my family to attend college.” Another participant spoke about being diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD) and its impact on his childhood and college experience.

I started getting serious about my life around 6th grade. I have OCD and ADD and was always a little goofy. I’m serious about my grades and played baseball in high school. I always try my best. Rowan, all my family went there. My dad provided for us all and my three brothers attended college at Rowan. Playing helped me socially because I wouldn’t have gotten to know anyone otherwise. I don’t like to be social or hang out with people.

When asked why they decided to attend Rowan University, nine (69%) of the participants indicated that playing their sport and relationship with coach as the main reasons for enrolling. Other reasons for enrolling at Rowan included finances, family legacy, location and academic programs. Clearly, playing their sport has played a large role in their life and was one of the contributing factors of why they wanted to continue their education and enroll at Rowan University. Therefore, much of their perception of their first-year experience will rely on performance on the field and support they get directly from the Office of Athletics.

RQ#1: Orientation and Transition Programs

Several open-ended investigative questions were asked during the interview regarding first-year orientation and transition programs offered at Rowan University. The questions being analyzed for the first research question of this study include the following: What are your perceptions of first-year orientation programs at Rowan University? Did Rowan University assist you during the transition process? What could Rowan University have done better to assist you with the transition process? What could the athletic department have done better to assist your transition process?

First-Year Orientation

Overall, the participants in this research study had a positive and beneficial experience when it came to the first-year orientation program. All student-athletes who participated in this study attended the orientation program, prior to beginning their first year, and the majority found that it was a helpful experience. Of the 13 participants, eight found the orientation program very useful, three found it moderately useful and two thought it was a “waste of time.” One participant expressed a positive experience when discussing the first-year orientation program and accredited it to playing an impactful role in her first-year experience.

It was helpful, like the Pros (student orientation leaders) were really helpful and I was able to schedule classes, which I would have had no idea what I was doing.

Without orientation it would have been terrible.

Another participant spoke about the content offered as being beneficial to him.

They told us how it is living on campus. They also told us about time management and making good study habits. College is meant for a degree but also

social aspects. It's easy to get lost in the fun and not take care of your responsibilities.

Several participants indicated the impact that the first-year orientation program had on them socially during their first year, explaining that the relationships formed at orientation continued into their first year. They also indicated that the orientation program made them feel excited about attending Rowan University. Participant 3 said, "I loved orientation. I met so many friends that I was friends with when I came here," while Participant 7 added "It was fun, I actually really liked it. My best friends here I met at orientation."

In addition to adding excitement and helping create social relationships, a handful of participants indicated the act of becoming more familiar with campus as one of the program's strong points. Having an idea of where things were located once classes started seemed to be important to them during their first few weeks of class. "I came here and felt like I knew the campus already. Even going to class I was like, oh I already know where that building is, they showed me that!"

Although the majority of student athletes found orientation to be useful, five felt the program to be moderately useful to not useful at all. They expressed feelings of boredom and lack of interest in the content. Phrases such as "miserable," "rushed" and "it wasn't necessary" were found scattered throughout the data. Participant 11 said of orientation, "Honestly, I was like why am I even here," while Participant 5 went on to say "I don't want to say it was a waste of time but it wasn't necessary to me." Participant 13 mentioned "It was alright but kind of annoying to have to go through, and hot. It was helpful to get the tour of campus but the other stuff I don't know."

Throughout the data, only one participant mentioned the idea of having a separate orientation program for student athletes. Although the participant thought that student athletes would benefit from information more in line with their needs, she did not feel as though it should take the place of the traditional first-year orientation program.

Maybe having a separate orientation for athletes in pre-season would be good. I don't think it should replace the regular orientation though because that could just isolate the athletes even more.

According to the data, the current first-year orientation program was beneficial to most. The participants found the ability to create social relationships and get familiar with campus before the start of the academic year to be useful. Although the participants did not overwhelmingly indicate the need for a separate student athlete orientation, it would be in the best interest of the student athletes to provide such support as this population has different needs than the general student body. In addition to orientation, it was important to better understand how well the university is doing at supporting first-year student athletes during their transition process.

Transitional Support

Aside from inquiring about first-year orientation, the purpose of this research question is also to answer how student athletes perceived the support from the athletic department and university during their transition into college. Participants were asked to describe their transition from high school to college and explain how they were supported during this process. Overall, the data indicate that the participants viewed their transition into college as being successful but recognized more could have been done to enhance the process. The majority of participants shared the importance of being a part of a team

and having support systems already in place during their first semester. Participant 5 said, “It was nice being on a team because someone was always there to help you.”

Although the participants felt their transitions were successful, several mentioned an adjustment having to be made academically. Participant 10 said, “It was a lot thrown at me at once. I didn’t expect that much to be thrown at me. Everything was just different. Professors give you assignments the first day of class and just expect you to do it.”

Participant 6 said the following:

I had a 3.5 GPA in high school. It’s not that I didn’t study but I understood the material so much I didn’t have to put that much time into it. Now, in college, you have 3 or 4 assignments due in one week and that was a big transition for me.

In an exercise conducted to put a value number on their transition, each participant was asked to rank their level of transitional success on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being a poor transition and 10 being a successful transition. In addition, they were also asked to rank a peer, who did not have a good transition, on the same scale.

Of the 13 participants, the average level of success on the scale of 1-10 was 7.61, with 6.5 being the lowest and 9 being the highest. Their peers were ranked with an average of 3.11, 2 being the lowest and 4 being the highest. To conclude the exercise, participants were then asked to explain the difference between their transition and the transition of their peer.

Keywords used to describe the differences in transitions from the participants to their peers included “work ethic,” “partying,” “socialization,” and “playing time.” The participants put a heavy value on being a part of the team and having a support group

from the beginning. Participant 3 spoke about a teammate who left the team and Rowan during her first-year.

I roomed with a teammate who quit after the first few weeks. She was doing well in school at first and then it went downhill. The people you surround yourself with helps the transition. Having the support of your teammates all the time gives you that boost and extra confidence. I think not having that may have made her lost and not knowing where to go. I think she would have done better had she remained with the team.

Another difference between those who had a good transition compared to their peers was the amount of on-field playing time. Participants indicated that getting playing time during your freshman year made them feel “focused,” “involved,” and wanting to work harder so they did not “disappoint coaches and teammates.” Participant 6 spoke about how he believes being a part of the team and seeing playing time gave him an edge over his peers.

A couple of other guys in my class got grey-shirted and it really hurt them because they wanted to play baseball. I don't know if it was because of not seeing playing time, but they did not have as good a transition as I did. School was not their top priority and because of this their grades did not meet the requirements to play.

Participant 12 had a different take on why her level of transitional success was different than her peer. It is her belief that how students are challenged prior to college will predict how well they transition, valuing the concept of being independent.

I think what you do in high school has a big impact. If you are challenged in high school you will be better off academically in college. I was also raised to be independent and do things for myself but I don't think it was the same for my friend. If you haven't had to deal with things like this and now you are dealing with it for the first time it's hard.

Although the data collected from this exercise placed importance on being a part of a team and having the support of players and coaches, very little was discussed regarding transition programs offered at Rowan University. To better understand how the participants valued support programs at Rowan, the interviews included questions asking how both the athletic department and Rowan University assisted them during the transition process.

When asking the question "Did Rowan University assist you during your transition," 10 out of 13 participants did not feel Rowan University assisted them at all. Of the participants who did not feel Rowan University assisted them, the majority claimed to either not know the resources existed or admitted to not actively seeking any help. One participant says of campus resources, "I didn't really even know about them until second semester." Participant 11 would have liked more information regarding resources that could have helped with his transition.

I think that just making us aware of programs probably would be the best thing. Just letting us know that we have these resources to use. Have people come and speak to us on behalf of these programs to make us aware of where they actually are and what they actually do, stuff like that.

Several participants mentioned the idea of having a mentoring program with upper classmen or the option to speak with someone during their transition. One participant said, “Your advisor isn’t like a guidance counselor for one on one time, I needed someone I could talk to when I was confused,” while another mentioned, “ I feel like there could have been more things like, if you are confused about majors and programs, you can talk to someone.” Participant 2 spoke about the idea of having mentoring programs for new students and discussed the importance of being able to speak with someone who has already gone through the process.

I think they just expect you to know how to handle your transition. No one came to me and was like you need to do this. I would have benefited from a mentor program. I think having a mentor would just allow us to know who to go to with questions and to see what they need to do and how to get there. It should also be with an athlete perspective because it is someone who knows what you are going through.

Participant 4, diagnosed with OCD and ADD, decided not to seek any help as he viewed using university resources such as the tutoring center or disability services as making him a “charity case.”

I did not use any resources. I was told that I am able to use the resources but I wanted to use my disability as an advantage. I’m competent and I’m not a charity case and don’t need the help.

The participants who agreed that Rowan University did assist them in their transition process indicated first-year orientation, the Rowan Select program and campus

events as being the main contributor to their success. Rowan Select is an academic transition program offered to incoming students who fell slightly below the general admission criteria. This program enrolls incoming students into a pre-college transitional course and offers extra support throughout their first semester. Participant 6 said this of the Rowan Select program.

The Rowan Select program really helped me like see the campus and everything that is offered to help like tutoring and extracurricular activities. Basically showed me how everything works around here.

While the data indicate that the participants felt their transitions were successful, it also highlighted many challenges that they needed to overcome throughout their first-year. The next section will provide information regarding what challenges first-year student athletes face at Rowan University.

Transitional Challenges

To better understand challenges faced by first-year student athletes, the participants were asked to describe the biggest challenge encountered during their freshman year. One of the themes generated throughout the data and perhaps the biggest challenge faced amongst the participants was time management. Other challenges included adjusting to a new environment, academic preparedness and athletic competition.

For athletic competition, several participants discussed having to go from a team leader in high school to having to prove themselves all over again. They found that having to compete for a spot on the roster and adapt to a new style of play was both stressful and hard to balance with their academic pressures. Participant 1 said, “My

biggest challenge was going from being the best in high school to not the best in college.”

Participant 5 described his biggest challenge as “trying to stay relevant to the team.”

Participant 4 spoke about getting discouraged trying to compete for a spot on the team by saying, “My challenge was having to compete with other people who are four years older. I worked really hard but got so discouraged I decided I needed to quit.”

As previously mentioned, time management was predominately the most discussed challenge for the participants and appeared many times throughout the data. It was clear that the participants did not anticipate the time commitment of having to balance academic and athletic aspects of their collegiate career. Participants not only felt unprepared in how to properly manage their time but also felt “tired,” “overwhelmed,” and like they could not “keep their head above water.” In discussing her biggest challenge, participant 3 said:

Time management, the constant feeling of being tired but knowing I had to go to class, practice, eat and do homework. It was learning how to balance everything while I tried to keep my head above water. It’s not something that we are taught and I just needed to learn it on my own.

Participant 11 described his challenge as:

Trying to find the time to do assignments. When you are in season it’s tough to manage multiple things and have deadlines, so you have to manage time very well. I’m unaware of anything that helps with time management so I had to learn on my own.

Participant 2 felt that time management was his biggest challenge by saying:

My biggest challenge was time management. Having to schedule classes around practice was difficult. I struggled with going to class after practice because I was so tired. I would fall asleep or couldn't pay attention from being tired and that hurt my GPA. I had to figure out how to make it work on my own.

While some students felt that managing their time in season was difficult, others found the structured schedule to be helpful and were more challenged by managing their time out of season. Participant 6 describes his challenge with time management as:

When I first got here I was not in baseball season and had a lot of free time on my hands. I would have morning classes and be done for the day. I had to juggle do I want to take a nap, go the gym, or start my homework. The time management piece was the biggest challenge for me.

Addressing these challenges, especially time management, should be a priority for both the university and the athletic department. First-year student athletes are expected to balance adapting to a new team, living on their own and adjusting to new social and academic expectations within the first few weeks of their collegiate career. Although a support system is there through teammates and coaches, more emphasis should be placed on both directing them to the resources available and developing programs to better educate them on the challenges they will encounter and how to deal with them.

RQ #2: Expectations

Predetermined expectations (Schilling & Schilling, 1999) of the transition to college can often impact social and academic experiences during the first year (Kuh, 2005). For athletes, this also means the added performance expectations (Marx, Huffmon,

& Doyle, 2008) in addition to the previously mentioned expectations faced by all students. Therefore, institutions should put value in understanding these expectations so that programming can be developed to help close the gap between expectations and experiences.

To better understand the expectations of first-year student athletes at Rowan University, several open-ended questions were asked during the interview pertaining to this topic. Participants were asked to describe the expectations they had of their first year and whether or not their expectations were met. If expectations were met, participants were asked to explain how and if not, participants were asked to explain why not. Of the 13 participants, eight participants agreed that their first-year experience did meet their expectations while five did not.

Participants who felt that their expectations were met described feelings of independence, academic preparedness and good relationships with coaches and teammates. They indicated that the coursework wasn't any harder than they had thought it would be and several described feeling happy.

The five participants who did not feel as though their expectations were met mainly discussed the time commitment of their sport, athletic performance and the ability to get involved in clubs and organizations outside of athletics. Participant 8 explained, "My expectations were not met in the area of joining clubs, I haven't done much of that." Aside from the change in daily routine from high school schedules, the participants seemed to be satisfied with their academic experiences lining up with expectation. Participant 1 said:

I knew it would be harder and I would have to study a lot, but I did not expect it to be as intense in sports. I know everyone says we are just division III but we are just as intense as Division I schools

Participant 9 also felt as though the time commitment to playing a sport was not what was expected.

I didn't expect it [athletics] to be so much. There are days we have four practices a day and a final and I just didn't expect to be busy every minute of every day. I lived in a triple and just never had a moment to myself. I went from practice to class, still in uniform, and just never got a break.

Two of the five participants who did not have their expectations met are no longer participating in their sport. While probing into their expectations, data were collected on why they decided not to continue on as student athletes. Both indicated the level of sacrifice and time commitment needed to be successful on the field and were unwilling to continue as athletes. They also discussed their disappointing athletic performances and lack of playing time as having a role in not continuing in the sport. Participant 4 explained, "I have so much more free time now. It was taking up at least 20 hours per week for me. I'm not in as much of a panic without it because I have more time to do my work." Participant 5 said:

As far as academics and playing at the Division III level, I just didn't see the sacrifice being worth it. I know that's just part of being a college athlete you have to sacrifice. Just with all the time being in the gym and early morning practices and being on the bus to go to games, you get back to your dorm for a couple of

hours to scrape together a report then had to go to practice the next morning. It all caught up to me.

Overall, the majority of participants felt that their expectations of college life as a student athlete were met or exceeded. Those that did not have their expectations met indicated poor on-field performance and time commitment as a major reason why. These student athletes did not feel they were provided enough time to get involved outside of their sport, which could result in the feeling of social isolation.

RQ #3: Social Isolation versus Connectedness

One of the research questions explored in this study investigates whether or not student-athletes feel they are either socially isolated or connected to the campus community. Following the lead on Tinto's theory of student departure, it is important for institutions to recognize both the academic and social needs of students to help improve the college experience and increase retention rates (Tinto, 1993). In order to help determine the level of social connection students have to the university community, each participant was asked whether or not they felt isolated or connected. This research question follows up on a previous research study regarding the level of involvement of student-athletes outside of their sport. The study found that while most student-athletes feel they are socially connected to the campus, many have failed to become involved in any capacity outside of their team or the athletic department (Hendricks, 2014). To measure the level of social isolation or connectedness for first-year student athletes at Rowan University, each participant was asked to describe how being a student athlete has either isolated or connected them to campus culture.

The results were that the student athletes' experiences varied on the idea of

campus connectivity. Of the 13 participants, seven indicated that they felt socially connected to the rest of the campus while six suggested that they feel a sense of social isolation. Of the seven participants who feel socially connected to the campus outside of athletics, only one reported to actually being involved in a club or organization. The student athletes defined being socially connected to the campus culture as getting to know athletes on other teams or doing community service projects with their teammates. When asked to describe why they are not involved outside of athletics, the participants mentioned time-restraints and lack of interest. Participant 11 said of not being involved, “Time-restraints and I mean I’m not pushing hard for it either.” Participant 6 felt socially connected to the campus and said:

I feel connected. Through the student athlete advisory committee [SAAC] we do a lot of events. When you first come here you don’t really know anyone. Once you get involved on campus, no matter student athlete or not, you are interacting with more people. I feel more connected on campus and I meet people through athletics.

Participant 2 suggested that the level of campus involvement and connectivity largely depended upon the sport in which the student-athlete was involved. He hinted at some sports being more demanding and having strict schedules while other sports are more flexible, allowing students the opportunity to get more involved. He explained, “It depends on your sport. I feel like with track there is a lot of members involved outside of track. You have more of an opportunity to take advantage of things outside of track.”

The six participants who felt socially isolated from the rest of campus also indicated lack of time as a main factor but spoke more about the idea of not needing

outside involvement to have a positive experience. Participant eight explains, “Yes, I do believe we are isolated but not because of athletics. I mean I could easily go I just don’t, sometimes I’m too tired.” Another participant discusses social isolation as a positive, stating “Isolated but in a good way. We all hang out together but not much with anyone outside of athletics.” Participant 12 discussed wanting to surround herself with other athletes that understand what she is going through.

Since we are all Rowan athletes we know what each other are going through. I was involved in a lot in high school and just wanted to focus on my sport in college. My freshman year was so hard and I didn’t get involved. It’s also just so hard to fit everything in my schedule.

As higher education focuses more and more on retaining students, the idea of social integration becomes that much more important. Division III prides itself on the well-rounded collegiate experience and often uses the idea of allowing its athletes to be involved in more than just their sport as a selling point. The time constraints placed on student athletes at this level, according to the participants in this study, tell a different story. With that said, while student athletes do not feel they are able to seek opportunities outside of their sport, many were not interested in doing so and find their involvement in athletics to be sufficient enough to think they are not socially isolated and in fact very much so a part of the campus.

RQ#4: Athletic Success and Retention

Another question investigated in this research study was the perceived impact that athletic performance had on the first-year experience of student athletes. Is it possible for the student athletes to lack success on the field but still view their experience as a

success? Was their performance on the field linked at all to their performance in the classroom? During the interview, each participant was asked to describe how their success (or lack thereof) on the field impacted their first-year experience.

Overwhelmingly, ten (77%) of the participants agreed that their performance on the field spilled over into their academic and social well-being. Many indicated that doing well on the field motivated them even more to meet NCAA eligibility criteria in the classroom. One participant explains, “I wanted to work hard to do better and keep my grades up to remain eligible.” Participant 6 said:

You need to have a 2.0 grade point average and pass 24 credits. Getting playing time motivated me to do better in the classroom. You have to be able to get it done in the classroom to play your sport. If I do poorly, I can’t play. If I can’t play it would devastate me. I do well in the classroom so that I can play. When you play a sport and have something driving you to do good, I think that’s what makes it easier to get better grades.

Participant 2 explains:

If you are doing good on the track you want to do good in the classroom. I work my butt off and put school first so that I can remain eligible to run track. It makes me do better.

Others mentioned that what you do on the field impacts your mood and stress levels. How they are performing on the field set their mood and confidence levels for how they acted off the field. Participant eleven explains, “Yes, I would say if you are playing better then you are in a better mood. When you are in a better mood, everything

else is better.” Participant 12 says, “If we have a bad game that affects my mood which affects everything. When you are successful playing it gives you confidence and makes your transition easier.” Another participant also discussed the positive impact on-field success has with other aspects of college life.

I felt like since my year was going well on the field that I was like in a better mood all the time. I hate losing or being in a slump so having a bad season would have impacted my school work and day to day feeling.

In trying to better understand the first-year experience of student athletes this research question was able to uncover the perception that their success on the field is a large predictor of their ability to be successful both academically and socially. It is important information for athletic departments and institutions to use to help develop programs that focus on first-year student athletes who might have been injured, cut from the team or not having success on the field.

Conclusion

This chapter provided participant data to answer the research questions created for the purposes of this study. A discussion of these findings along with their implications to Rowan University will be explained in the next chapter.

Chapter V

Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

First-year student athletes at Rowan University face challenges that differ from the general student population. In addition to the normal academic and social pressures, this population of students must cope with athletic and performance pressures, time commitments, meeting expectations of coaching staff and teammates and representing the institution. Often, they rely on their coaches and teammates for information and fail to use the resources provided by the institution, either due to embarrassment or lack of awareness. Coaching staffs are stretched beyond their level of expertise and are being asked to act as academic coaches, run tutoring sessions, become psychologists and handle any and all situations with their athletes, even though professionals and resources exist on campus.

It is imperative that both the university and Office of Athletics do a better job in recognizing issues faced by first-year student athletes and create programs to support them during their transition. Playing a sport at the collegiate level is time consuming and often alters the daily routine that each student athlete became accustomed to in high school. Providing support that helps first-year athletes adapt to their new routines, allows them to learn about the resources available and teaches off field skills such as time management and study habits that would prove beneficial for both parties.

Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of this research study was to determine the perceptions student athletes have of their first year experience at Rowan University. This study is important to university officials and members of the institution's enrollment management and

athletic department staff as they invest in the development and implementation of retention programs. As the university continues to grow at a rapid pace, so does the student athlete population, whose needs differ (Bean & Metzner, 1985) from the traditional student body (Crom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, & Gerber, 2009). This research study is significant not only because of how important this population is to maintaining targeted enrollment goals but also because very little research exists regarding NCAA Division III student athletes (Bandre, 2011).

Prior to universities investing resources into student retention programs, a student's ability to persist or drop out was viewed as a reflection of the student, not the institution (Tinto, 2006). Of the students who chose not to persist, the majority of departures occurred during the first year of college (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Today, a shift has occurred in higher education as more of an emphasis is placed on retaining students, as doing so would be more economically efficient than the cost of recruiting new students to fill their seats (Shinde, 2008).

The research indicates students generally drop out of college after their first year (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985) and student athletes face heavier time constraints (Perrelli, 2004) and more campus isolation (Bowen & Levin, 2003) than the general student body. Tinto (1993) identifies the inability to incorporate with the social life of the institution as a major contributor in student departure. Additionally, the research suggests the need for student athlete specific transitional programming (Kissinger & Miller, 2009). It also reveals that a lack of research exists on the Division III student athlete as most studies focus on the Division I and Division II levels. Combining this information with the lack of programming offered specifically to first-year student athletes at Rowan University

indicates the importance of this research.

In order to determine student athlete perceptions, this research study was qualitative in nature and relied on participant experiences (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) as data. The primary method of data collection came from participant interviews using a protocol (Appendix A) designed to address the areas of transition programs, social connectedness, expectations and correlations of athletic success. The overarching research question is to determine how student athletes at Rowan University perceive their first-year experiences. The research questions developed for the purposes of this study included:

1. What are the student-athlete's perceptions of first-year orientation and transition programs offered at Rowan University?
2. To what extent did the first-year experiences meet expectations?
3. To what extent do first-year student athletes feel socially isolated or connected to the campus community?
4. How do student athletes relate athletic success to retention?

Data collection consisted of 13 open-ended interviews of current sophomores who were student athletes during their first year at Rowan University. After the data had been collected, coded and analyzed, emerging themes appeared including time management, campus resources awareness, transitional support and social isolation.

Transitional Programs

The NCAA has approved legislation to improve academic success at the division I and division II levels (NCAA, 2014) however, has left out such legislation at division III institutions. It is up to the discretion of each division III program to develop its own

academic standards and transitional programs.

A theme generated in this study was the lack of transitional support dedicated solely to the needs of student athletes. Overall, the participants viewed their transition as successful but recognized the need to improve programs that are developed to assist them. They felt as though being a part of a team and having a built in support group increased their level of transitional support over their non-athlete peers. The data suggested that the participants had a positive perception of the first-year orientation program and felt the main benefit was the ability to meet their peers prior to the start of college.

Perhaps the most glaring data regarding transitional programs, and one of the themes generated from the data, was the feeling that the university fell short in making them aware of the resources offered to them. The majority of participants either did not seek out campus resources for help or were completely unaware that the programs existed for them. Knowledge of campus resources such as the Academic Success Center would have been extremely beneficial especially in the area of time management.

Another theme developed in this study is the issue of time management. Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study described their ability to manage time as the biggest challenge they faced during their first year. The participants alluded to feeling “tired” and “overwhelmed” during their first year. Results from a previous study, consisting of 526 participants, indicated student athletes report the need for professional counseling in the area of time management (Murray, 1997). Student athletes at the Division III level are committing an average of 30 hours per week to their sport (Brown, 2012), taking a full-time academic course load and trying to integrate into their new

social surroundings. According to a study conducted by the NCAA, student athletes in 2015 reported having spent an average of 28.5 hours per week on their sport, with the highest being baseball at 34 (NCAA, 2016). The same research study, which surveyed more than 7,000 division III student athletes, shows that student athletes on average spend 40.5 hours per week on academics and more than 60% would like more time to socialize with friends or relax (NCAA, 2016)

Being a student-athlete is so much more than participating in a sport and going to class. Often, the requirements stretch far beyond the playing field and include community service projects, mandatory attendance at events and off season training programs. These obligations leave the average student athlete with a low margin of error in their daily schedules and require a high level of skill in prioritizing and managing their time. Universities need to play a more active role in helping first-year students with time management skills (Jansen, Torenbeek & van der Meer, 2010).

Expectations

First year students enter college already having expectations of what their experience could be (Schilling & Schilling, 1999) which may control behavior and determine academic performance and social transition (Kuh, 2005). If students' experiences fall short of their expectations they may decide not to continue (Kuh, 2005). In addition to academic and social expectations, student athletes also have predetermined athletic performance expectations as well (Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008). It is important that we understand these expectations so that the gap between what student athletes perceive college to be like and their actual experience is one and the same.

In this study, participants were asked questions regarding their expectations to

determine what Rowan University could do to improve their experience. Out of the 13 participants interviewed, 62% ($n = 8$) felt as though their first-year experience met expectations. Those who felt their expectations were met or exceeded felt prepared for college and developed good relationships with their coaching staff and teammates.

Participants who felt their experience did not meet their expectations discussed the time commitment of being on a varsity team and inability to be involved in other areas of college as prominent reasons. Other reasons included poor on-field performance and lack of playing time as contributing to their false expectations.

Social Isolation versus Connectedness

Tinto's theory of student departure was used as the framework for this research study. This theory describes the need for positive integration in both the academic and social aspects of college life (Tinto, 1993). Their decision to persist solely relies on their ability to socially and academically integrate with the university (Yorke, 1999). As previously mentioned earlier in this study regarding student expectations, data indicated that participants felt an inability to involve themselves with the campus, outside of their sport. Therefore, it was necessary that we understand whether or not the student athletes feel socially isolated or connected to the culture of the campus. To do so, one measure of social connectedness was used by determining involvement on campus outside of athletics.

A theme developed through the data collection of this study is social isolation from the rest of the student body. Of the 13 participants interviewed, 54% ($n = 7$) felt as though they were socially connected to the campus while 46% ($n = 6$) described feeling isolated. After probing, it was determined that only one participant, who described

feeling socially connected, was actually involved with any club or organization outside of their sport. This meaning that 83% of participants who described being socially connected have not actually integrated with any other part of Rowan University, outside of their sport.

The main contributors to social isolation, as described by the participants who feel isolated, were both time constraints and lack of desire to get involved. The majority mentioned not having enough time to balance campus involvement in addition to their team and academics. Others felt as though their needs were being met through their athletic involvement and did not feel getting involved in other areas would add to the value of their experience.

Athletic Success and Retention

As previously mentioned in the data, poor athletic performance and lack of playing time was perceived to have an impact on the student athlete expectation and, using Tinto's theory of student departure, ultimately could be a factor in a student athlete's decision to persist. During the interview, participants were asked open-ended questions to provide data that will determine the level of impact a student athlete's performance on the field has on the rest of their college experience.

Compellingly, the majority of participants indicated that their level of performance on the field affected their academic and social experience. Of the 13 participants, 77% (n=10) correlated their on-field performance having off-field implications. Several participants mentioned successful performance motivated them to do well academically to remain eligible, while poor performance left them in a negative mood and created stress.

Implications

Practice

The findings of this study present implications for future practices at Rowan University. These implications have the potential to improve the first-year experience of student athletes by addressing the issues discussed by participants in the data collected and the themes that were identified.

Transitional support. An issue discussed at length in both the literature and collected data is the idea of offering transitional programs geared toward the demands and issues faced by student athletes. Currently, student athletes are offered the same transitional support programs, such as orientation, as the general student body. These programs do not focus on student athlete specific issues such as balancing athletic and academic schedules and handling performance pressures. Of the participants, 77% ($n = 10$) did not believe that Rowan University assisted them at all during their first year transition. It is important that we understand the pressures and limitations placed on student athletes (Porter, 2008) and develop programs that educate them on how to best handle situations they will encounter.

One theme that emerged in this study is that student athletes need to be better educated on how to manage their time. Many of the participants did not anticipate the level of commitment they would have to dedicate to their sport and felt underprepared when it came to how to properly manage their time. Phrases such as “tired,” “overwhelmed,” and not being able to “keep their head above water” were all used when describing time management as their biggest challenge.

Another theme generated in the data was the lack of information given to the

student athletes regarding the available resources on campus. Currently, Rowan University offers resources on campus, including the Wellness and Academic Success Centers that provide support for students in areas such as stress management, counseling, academic workshops and tutoring. Although these resources exist, the general consensus of the participants in this study was that they were unaware.

In order to develop a transitional program for first year student athletes, we would need to consider their time restraints in the planning process. Although the resources may exist for them throughout the semester, their time commitment to class meetings and athletic participation would most likely hinder them from being able to get the help they need.

I recommend that the Athletic Department create a summer workshop for all incoming first-year student athletes. The workshop would be in collaboration with other university departments and include topics such as time management, academic advising, resource information and discussions with current athletes. Through this workshop, incoming first-year athletes will be able to have a better understanding of what to expect being a college athlete and where to seek out help, prior to their first day of classes and athletic participation.

In addition to the summer workshop, I recommend developing a student athlete mentorship program that would allow first-year student athletes the opportunity to connect with and gain support from current student athletes. The idea of a mentorship program was provided by several participants in this study as they feel it necessary to be able to reach out to someone who is going through the same circumstances as themselves.

Policy

The implications of this research study show that there is a large discrepancy between legislation required by the NCAA at the division I and division II levels and what is required for division III. Although each level resides under the umbrella of the NCAA, division III schools and conferences are left to fend for themselves in creating their own standards from the enrollment process to graduation. Not having standardized legislation across all division III athletic programs creates an uneven playing field and could have a negative impact on the experiences of first-year student athletes.

In both divisions I and II, prospective student athletes coming out of high school must meet the NCAA clearing house sliding scale in order to qualify for participation. This sliding scale provides grade point average and test score requirements prospective athletes would need to meet in order to be eligible to participate in a sport at a particular institution. At the division III level, each institution is able to set their own admissions standards, often creating an unbalanced playing field between universities while also placing an academically low student in a situation to fail.

Another discrepancy in policy is the unclear academic and eligibility requirements through division III. In division I athletics, student athletes must complete 40% of their coursework for a degree by the end of their second year, 60% at the end of their third year and 80% by the end of their fourth year, and must use all four years of eligibility by the end of their fifth year (NCAA, 2016). Division II student athletes are required to maintain certain mandated grade point averages throughout their academic career and must complete a minimum of six credit hours each semester, 24 in an academic year, in order to be eligible for the following semester (NCAA 2016). For division III, the NCAA

(2016) indicates “there are no minimum national standards for establishing or maintaining eligibility in division III, student athletes in that division must be in good academic standing and make a satisfactory progress toward a degree as determined by the institution.” Therefore, division III athletic programs are able to enroll underachieving students needing support, have limited budgets to offer said support and must be held responsible, either at the institution or conference level, to create their own standards for academic progress and eligibility. This has led to creating environments that do not provide first-year student athletes with the tools they need to persist.

Research

While there is no shortage of research conducted on NCAA division I student athletes, finding literature pertaining to the division III student athlete population is not so easily accessible. Understandably, division I athletic programs operate as multi-million dollar entities and are often a national topic of discussion, generating interest and warranting research. The lack of research results on division III athletics clearly identifies a need for further study (Bandre, 2011). The division III level operates on a smaller scale and generally goes unnoticed by those not a part of the institution or in the surrounding community. In addition they are the least funded of all three divisions, severely handicapping the amount of support that can be offered to student athletes. Although the largest division in the NCAA, division III only receives 3.18% of the NCAA’s operating budget (Schrotenboer, 2012). Having the largest number of participants, no legislative academic standards, lackluster budgets and often failing to provide the support needed to its participants, it would seem logical that the division III level warrant much more research than its division I and II counterparts.

This study focused on the first year experiences of student athletes at Rowan University, a population that has different needs and demands than the general student body. Although I focus on this particular subgroup of the general student body, there are also subgroups within the student athlete population that deserve future study. Therefore, I recommend further study be conducted on the topic of the first-year student athlete experience broken down by subgroups, within the student athlete population, including gender, sport, learning disabilities, and race. Furthermore, this study determined that athletic performance is perceived to impact academic success. I propose that further research be conducted in this area so that support may be offered to those suffering injury, cut from rosters or suffering from stress caused by performance pressures.

Prior research indicates the differing needs between student athletes and the traditional student body. In addition to the previous recommendations for further research, I also suggest exploring these differences and mapping out the disparities between the two groups.

Conclusion

Research shows that the first year of college is the most critical for determining a student's desire to persist or drop out. Currently, Rowan University offers programming to support the transition of incoming first-year students but fails to identify the differing needs of subpopulations such as student athletes. It has been determined that student athletes enter their collegiate career having far more time constraints and pressures than the traditional student. This study has provided data that indicates first-year student athletes do not feel prepared in how to manage their time, do not have an understanding of the resources provided to them, have limited opportunity for engagement outside of

their sport and are impacted both academically and socially based on their athletic performance.

Using the information produced from this study as well as prior research, it is important that institutions understand the need for supporting this population and develop programming that will improve the retention of first-year student athletes. Doing so will improve retention, increase graduation rates and enhance the athletic and academic successes of the athletic department.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol: First-Year Student Athlete Experience

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research study. The interview is set up to take no longer than 60 minutes and will be recorded. This interview will also be completely confidential. Are you ready to begin?

- 1) Could you please tell me about yourself?
- 2) What led to your decision to attend Rowan University?
- 3) What experiences could you share leading up to your decision to attend Rowan University (family life, athletics, academics, demographics, etc.)
- 4) What were your expectations of your first-year of college?
- 5) Now that your first year is complete, have your expectations been met?
 - a. If yes, how have your expectations been met?
 - b. If no, why were your expectations not met?
- 6) Looking back on your experience as a first- year student athlete, what was your biggest challenge?
- 7) Describe your transition from high school to college.
- 8) Did Rowan University assist you during the transition process?
- 9) What could Rowan University have done better to assist your transition?
- 10) What could the athletic department have done better to assist your transition?
- 11) How has being a student athlete made you isolated or connected to the campus culture?
- 12) What are your perceptions of first-year orientation programs at Rowan University?
- 13) How has your success (or lack of success) on the field impacted your first year experience?
- 14) Is there anything else you would like to share about your first-year experience at Rowan University?

Probing Questions

Can you expand on that?

Do you have specific examples?

What did you mean by that?