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**A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY: NCAA DIVISION III FIRST-GENERATION  
STUDENT-ATHLETES AND TRANSFERABLE SKILLS**

by  
Eric Brennan

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Leadership, Administration & Research  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of  
Doctor of Education

at  
Rowan University  
January 8, 2024

Dissertation Chair: Ane Turner Johnson, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Educational  
Leadership, Administration & Research

Committee Members:

Monica Reid Kerrigan, Ed.D., Professor, Department of Educational Leadership,  
Administration & Research

Cristina Fink, Ph.D., Athletics Director & Chair of Physical Education, Bryn Mawr  
College

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my late father, John Brennan Sr., who taught me a work ethic that was second to none and reminded me to always finish what I started. I know this would have made you proud.

## **Acknowledgments**

There is a saying that comes to mind when I think about the dissertation process: “you don’t have to do it alone, but alone you must do it.” This saying emphasizes the importance of individual and collective effort. Without the help of others, I would have not been able to accomplish this feat.

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my chairperson, Dr. Ane Turner Johnson for her guidance, expertise, and encouragement throughout this process. I am certain I could not have undertaken this journey without her. I am forever grateful.

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## **Abstract**

Eric Brennan

### **A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY: NCAA DIVISION III FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT-ATHLETES AND TRANSFERABLE SKILLS**

2023-2024

Ane Turner Johnson, Ph.D.

Doctor of Education

The development of transferable skills is seen as an important factor for higher education institutions to enhance the employability of their graduates (Holmes, 2013; Tymon, 2013). An overarching purpose of the higher education system is to prepare students for their professional careers and lives. This qualitative instrumental single case study explored how first-generation student-athletes develop transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics at a public, Division III university in New Jersey. Further, it sought to understand how the university validates these transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes. Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth open-ended interviews to capture rich details from the participants related to the phenomenon. This study assists in filling the void in research regarding the transferable skills first-generation student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics and how the university validates these experiences for them that may contribute to a more career ready first-generation student-athlete.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

An overarching purpose of the higher education system is to prepare students for their professional careers and lives (Fox, 2018; Navarro, 2015). Career readiness is the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for the workforce (NACE, 2018). There seems to be a growing disconnect between employers and higher education institutions in that employers do not feel that higher education institutions are preparing college graduates with the skills necessary to be impactful members of the workforce directly out of college (Cronin et al., 2021; Fox, 2018; Reed, 2021). Yet most students attend college with the intention to graduate with a degree that will help them obtain employment and a higher salary than if they did not attend (Stolzenberg et al., 2020). Securing a higher education degree is one of the most prominent and identifying factors for future success and financial freedom in our current society (House et al., 2020). The attainment of a higher education degree is magnified when we consider first-generation students which are students whose parents did not attain a baccalaureate degree (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Often, first-generation students face financial, personal, emotional, social, and educational challenges compared to continuing-generation students (Greenwald, 2012) that may affect their career readiness and employability as they transition out of college.

Employability among college graduates has been conceptualized as the ability for a college graduate to use one's capabilities to add value across multiple contexts including one's work and career (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). A recent survey found that nearly one in five college graduates reported that their college education experience

did not provide them with the skills needed to perform their first job out of college (Cengage, 2021). Nearly two in five college graduates said they occasionally or rarely use the skills they learned (Cengage, 2021).

There may also be a gap in student's understanding of the skills that are being taught, either through classroom instruction or extracurricular activities, and a student's perception of these skills and their ability to apply them to a work setting (Martini et al., 2021). Moreover, universities may not be explicitly helping students understand the skills they are developing (Martini et al., 2021). Student-athletes develop transferable skills through classroom instruction and their intercollegiate athletic experiences that are applicable to their careers outside of sports (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Carodine et al., 2001; Coffey & Davis, 2019; McCarthy, 2017; Papacharisis et al., 2005; Van Raalte et al., 2017). Higher education institutions may better equip first-generation student-athletes by prioritizing career readiness using the transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics and helping first-generation student-athletes make the connections between these skills and their careers outside of sports (Cengage, 2021; Martini et al., 2021).

On average, NCAA student-athletes graduate at a higher rate than the general student population (NCAA, 2014). However, student-athletes lag behind their nonathlete peers in terms of career readiness (Van Raalte et al., 2017). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) defines career readiness as “the foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management” (NACE, 2018, para. 1). A student-athlete's lack of career readiness may be due to the competing demands

associated with balancing their schoolwork and sport requirements (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). Student-athletes have limited interaction and participation with traditional campus activities that can contribute to their career readiness including off-campus internships and study abroad programs due to the time constraints of participating in an intercollegiate sport (Coffey & Davis, 2019). Additionally, student-athletes identify more with their athletic identity potentially dedicating larger amounts of their time to their sport and less time developing other identities associated with an academic discipline or potential career (McCarthy, 2017).

Transferable skills are often considered skills that are context and content free (Wiant, 1977). Research shows that student-athletes develop transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics and sports that can be applicable to their careers outside of sports (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Carodine et al., 2001; Coffey & Davis, 2019; McCarthy, 2017; Papacharisis et al., 2005; Van Raalte et al., 2017). Bell et al. (2018) identified eight key elements of high impact practices for student-athletes which includes the ability of student-athletes to relate the skills they have learned or developed through intercollegiate athletics to real-world applications. Ninety-two percent of NCAA Division III student-athletes agreed that intercollegiate athletics had a positive or very positive effect on their teamwork skills among other transferable skills (Bell et al., 2018). On average, NCAA Division III student-athletes dedicate 28.5 hours a week to their sport, 40.5 hours a week to their academics, 7.1 hours a week to socializing and relaxing, and 6.27 hours a night to sleeping (Bell et al., 2018). The ability for first-generation student-athletes to translate these skills to other areas of their life can prepare them for a successful transition into the workforce.

The transitioning of these skills is important because fewer than 2% of NCAA student-athletes go on to be professional athletes (“NCAA recruiting facts”, 2014). This tells us that student-athletes need to be prepared for professional careers outside of sports. The NCAA states that “most student-athletes depend on academics to prepare them for life after college” (NCAA recruiting facts 2014, para. 4). This statement is incomplete considering the research that shows how student-athletes develop transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics can be applied to areas outside of sports (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Carodine et al., 2001; Coffey & Davis, 2019; McCarthy, 2017; Papacharisis et al., 2005; Van Raalte et al., 2017). Moreover, the role of the university in helping student-athletes validate these skills should be examined. Validation is the intentional and proactive affirmation of students from university faculty and staff to validate students as creators of knowledge and valuable members that foster personal development and social adjustment (Rendón & Munoz, 2011).

### **NCAA Division III Student-Athletes**

Division III student-athletes make up the largest percentage of the general student body of any division, accounting for one in four students on a Division III campus (“Our Division III Students” 2022). NCAA Division III student-athletes differ from Division I and II student-athletes because they cannot attend a university on an athletic scholarship. The NCAA posits that Division III student-athletes compete for the love of the game and the sport they play without having the pressure of an athletic scholarship (“Our Division III Priorities” 2022). However, the athletic participation hours per week reported by Bell et al. (2018) show that NCAA Division III student-athletes only engage in athletic activities three and a half hours less than Division II student-athletes and five and a half

hours less than Division I student-athletes. Although the NCAA prides itself on an intentional balance between academics and athletic competition among Division III student-athletes, it seems that a large amount of a Division III student-athletes time is still dedicated to their athletic participation. The idea that NCAA Division III student-athletes dedicate a considerable amount of their time to their athletic activities and duties compared to Division I and II student-athletes is not necessarily a bad thing if these athletic experiences can be leveraged for student-athletes outside of their sport-related fields. Athletes, regardless of their level of competition, will have acquired valuable lessons and transferable skills that are applicable to areas outside of sports (McKnight et al., 2009). A heightened focus, especially for Division III student-athletes considering they don't receive athletic scholarships, should be concerned with helping student-athletes leverage these transferable skills that can be beneficial as they pursue professional careers outside of sports.

### **Transferable Skills**

Transferable skills are those skills that are deemed necessary or useful in an array of life and work situations (Wiant, 1977). Even though specific work activities or duties may differ; the underlying skills, abilities, and attitudes to accomplish these different tasks can be applicable to multiple settings (Wiant, 1977). The development of transferable skills is a life-long process that can occur through various stages of an individual's life (Wiant, 1977). Transferable skills for student-athletes are skills that an athlete develops through sport that can be applied to non-sport areas of their life (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000). Universities play a pivotal role in not only developing transferable skills, but helping students understand the skills they are acquiring so they



can communicate effectively about these skills with future employers (Wiant, 1977).

Wiant (1977) posits that schools should give greater attention to the development of these skills by including them in educational objectives.

Higher education institutions have a responsibility to prepare student-athletes for life beyond their athletic competition (Carodine et al., 2001). This preparation can occur by leveraging the student-athlete's athletic learning experience and helping them apply these experiences to areas outside of sports. Research shows that athletes respond positively when they learn about the skills they have acquired through sports and how these skills can be applicable to their professional careers (Petitpas et al., 1992). The transition from athletic playing career to professional job career occurs for most NCAA Division III student athletes once they graduate college. Few NCAA Division III student-athletes graduate college and continue to a professional playing career. Enhancing first-generation student-athletes collegiate experience by making them aware of the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics can prepare them for their professional careers.

### **Career Readiness**

The expectation of employers, parents, students, and universities themselves, is that when a student graduates from their institution they are prepared to enter the workforce (Fox, 2018). As mentioned before, career readiness is the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for the workforce (NACE, 2018). Students need to present themselves in dynamic ways through various platforms and avenues such as resumes, interviews, networking, and internships to employers. More importantly, students need to be self-aware enough to understand the

unique skill sets they may bring to a potential employer (Fox, 2018). A concern from employers is that students can not accurately apply the learning outcomes they have learned from their educational and co-curricular experiences (Fox, 2018). Student-athletes are situated uniquely within universities in that they acquire educational experiences as well as athletic experiences that can translate into their non-sport professional careers. As the labor market becomes increasingly competitive and the pursuit and investment of a college degree continues to fall under more scrutiny, career readiness should become an institutional priority for colleges and universities (Fox, 2018). Further, the institutionalized approach to career readiness should involve more than just educators and career service professionals; it should involve all of those that interact with students throughout their college experience (Fox, 2018). College coaches, athletic administrators, and educational professionals that interact with first-generation student-athletes can use these interactions as opportunities to help first-generation student-athletes understand the transferable skills they acquire through intercollegiate sports that can carry over to their professional careers.

### **Problem Statement**

Are first-generation student-athletes able to translate the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate sports to their professional careers? Are they able to accurately convey the transferable skills they have developed through sports with potential employers? There is plenty of research that shows transferable skills are developed through sports and intercollegiate athletics (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Carodine et al., 2001; Coffey & Davis, 2019; McCarthy, 2017; Papacharisis et al., 2005; Van Raalte et al., 2017). The NCAA has conducted a GOALS study in 2006, 2010, 2015,

and 2019 where NCAA Division III student-athletes are surveyed on the positive effect their athletic experience has had on their skills and qualities (NCAA, 2019). At least 88% of NCAA Division III student-athletes surveyed through the GOALS study in 2019 answered that their college athletics experience either had a positive or very positive effect on their skills and qualities in areas including their attention to detail, leadership skills, time management, goal setting, teamwork, personal responsibility, and work ethic (NCAA, 2019). It seems that the research makes it clear that transferable skills are developed through sports and intercollegiate athletics and based on the surveys conducted by the NCAA, it seems clear that student-athletes acknowledge the skills they've developed through their athletic experience, but there seems to be little qualitative research to understand the student-athletes experiences around transferable skills and if they are able to convey these skills to contexts outside of sports. Similarly, there seems to be little research on how higher education institutions support them in making these connections.

On average, Division III student-athletes make up 21% of the student body at their respective universities and colleges ("NCAA recruiting facts" 2014). Student-athletes are a unique subset of the general student population in that they deal with responsibilities and expectations of participating in intercollegiate athletics and maintaining their academic standing. They deal with the time constraints of balancing the demands of their academics, social life, and sports requirements which may contribute to their lack of career readiness compared to their non-athlete peers (Raalte et. al, 2017; Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). Further, student-athletes, like others, develop a need to acquire a personal identity. Student-athletes, typically at a young age, develop an athletic

identity that grows stronger overtime because it is reinforced by rewards related to athletic achievements and endeavors (Danish et. al, 1993). The insurgence of this athletic identity may impede the development of student-athletes exploring other areas of their personal identity such as academic achievements and other career opportunities (Danish et. al, 1993). Student-athletes may commit more of their time to their sport because of their association with their athletic identity and less time to other competing needs such as career readiness (McCarthy, 2017). Research has been conducted to show that athletic identity plays a role in a student-athletes collegial experience (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Danish et. al, 1993; McCarthy, 2017; Raalte et. al, 2017). Given that student-athletes on average make up almost a quarter of the student body population, it is important for higher education professionals and institutions to understand the experiences of student-athletes including their need to balance multiple responsibilities and navigate their athletic identity as they transition to their professional careers.

Division III NCAA student-athletes graduate at a rate 5% higher than the general student population (“Division III Academics”, 2022). Unfortunately, student-athletes lag behind their nonathlete peers in terms of career readiness factors such as career exploration and career acquisition (Raalte et. al, 2017). Student-athletes must deal with the competing demands of balancing their schoolwork and sports requirements among other things. The limited time for student-athletes to engage in career readiness activities during college (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017) emphasizes the need for student-athletes to be aware of the transferable life skills they learn through intercollegiate sports. Moreover, less than 2% of NCAA student-athletes go on to be professional athletes and these percentages decrease even more for Division III student-athletes (NCAA, 2014). For

these reasons it is important for Division III student-athletes to focus on their career readiness and their ability to identify transferable life skills through sports.

Although the study and application of transferable life skills developed through sports has been studied at length, most of these studies seem to focus on the experience of Division I student-athletes (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Carodine et al., 2001; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Shiina, et al., 2003; Van Raalte et al., 2017). Division III student-athletes differ from Division I and II student-athletes because Division III student-athletes are not eligible to receive a sports scholarship. This study will focus on a population of first-generation student-athletes from a public, Division III university in the northeast region of the United States and the institution's role in developing and validating the transferable skills that student-athletes acquire through intercollegiate athletics and how these skills can contribute to their career readiness. Outcomes associated with this study may improve Division III first-generation student-athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators understanding of the transferable skills that are developed through intercollegiate sports among first-generation student-athletes.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the development of transferable skills among first-generation student-athletes at a public, Division III university in New Jersey. For purposes of this study the university will be referred to as Elicot University. Further, I sought to understand how Elicot university validates the skills developed through intercollegiate sports. As an instrumental case study, understanding how first-generation student-athletes identify these transferable skills and

how the university supports and validates these experiences for them may contribute to a more career ready student-athlete.

The concept of athletic identity (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; McCarthy, 2017; Steele et. al., 2020) and validation theory (Rendón, 1994) were used to formulate the research questions and guide the interviews. Using in-depth qualitative interviews, I was able to capture the experiences of individuals directly related to the phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2016).

### ***Research Questions***

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do first-generation student-athletes at a public, Division III university, experience the development of transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics?
2. Which people do first-generation student-athletes identify in helping them recognize the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics?
3. In what ways do first-generation student-athletes describe how their athletic identity may influence their ability to apply transferable skills to areas outside of sports?
4. How do athletic department staff and coaches validate transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes that help them apply these transferable skills to areas outside of sports?
5. How does the Office of Career Advancement support the development of transferable skills among student-athletes to contribute to their career readiness?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms are defined for the purpose of the study:

Student-athlete. A student-athlete is a full-time or part-time student enrolled at a university or college governed by the NCAA that participates in an athletic program.

First-generation student. First-generation students are those whose parents did not attain a baccalaureate degree (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008)

Athletic identity. Athletic identity refers to an identity that student-athletes develop while playing sports and something that can negatively influence their exploration into other identities outside of sports (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; McCarthy, 2017; Steele et. al., 2020).

Career readiness. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (2018) defines career readiness as the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workforce. Career readiness is used in this study to broadly describe student-athletes transition into the workforce and the factors that influence a student-athletes career readiness.

Transferable skills. Transferable skills are often considered skills that are context and content free (Wiant, 1977). Transferable skills in this study refers to the skills student-athletes develop during their intercollegiate athletic experiences that can be applied to their professional careers.

NCAA. The NCAA is the governing body in which the participating institutions student-athletes compete in. It is a member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes (“What is the NCAA?” 2022).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Athletic identity (Danish et. al, 1993; McKnight et. al, 2009; Steele et. al, 2020) and validation theory (Rendón, 1994) will be used to inform the research study. The theoretical framework is discussed below.

### ***Athletic Identity***

Athletic identity is developed in relation to an individual's role as an athlete and the meaning and relevance that an athlete may attribute to their self-concept because of athletic involvement and achievement (Steele et. al., 2020). As the demands of the sport intensify, athletic identity grows stronger (Steele et. al., 2020). Student-athletes become hyper focused on their collegiate playing careers that often they devote little time to thinking about their careers after college (McCarthy, 2017). Little time is spent on developmental programming by student-athletes about their careers partly because of the time and energy required to participate in intercollegiate athletics and partly because they associate with their athletic identity so much that it overshadows other areas of their personal identity. Balancing these time demands can result in limited identity development for student-athletes regarding career exploration and transitioning to life outside of sports. Identifying exclusively with the role of an athlete can cause an athlete to develop a foreclosed identity where they have trouble associating themselves or their skills that are learned within sports to other areas of their life (McKnight et al., 2009). Student-athletes' often fail to recognize the skills and lessons they've learned through sports and how these are applicable to other settings (McKnight et al., 2009).



### *Validation Theory*

Validation theory was initially introduced by Rendón (1994) who sought a theory that could capture the experiences and interactions of low-income, first-generation students who had doubts about their ability to succeed in college and how they might find success in college. Rendón (1994) describes validation as “an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). Validation refers to the intentional and proactive affirmation of students from in- and out-of-class agents such as faculty, students, academic affairs staff, family members, and peers to validate students as creators of knowledge and valuable members that foster personal development and social adjustment (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Validation theory provides a framework that university faculty and staff can use to work with students to employ them with a self-competence that can be internalized and used in shaping their academic success (Rendón & Munoz, 2011).

Validation theory consists of six elements (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The first element of validation theory places the responsibility on the institutional agents to engage students by offering assistance, support, and encouragement (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Further, the validating actions taken by institutional agents should be actions that encourage students and validate them about their ability to learn within the college environment (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The second element deals with the agent that the student turns to for validation; this agent should affirm that the student has potential to succeed (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The third element incorporates this idea that when students are validated on a consistent basis, they are more likely to feel confident about themselves and their ability to succeed (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The fourth element

confirms that validation can occur in and out of the classroom (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The fifth element is that validation should not be viewed as an end, rather it is a continual process that should begin early and can contribute to a more fulfilling college experience (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Lastly, the final element of validation theory states that validation is most critical when it begins early on in a student's college career (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The six elements of validation theory will help ground an understanding of the context of this study as I seek to understand how the university and its out-of-class agents interact with first-generation student-athletes and contribute to their development and use of the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics outside of sports settings.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study seek to influence policy, practice, and research. Developing a more career ready first-generation student-athlete benefits society as they transition from their athletic careers to their professional careers. In this qualitative single case study, I am interested in understanding first-generation student-athletes' experiences with the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics and how they may associate these skills with their careers after sports. Further, it is interested in understanding how Elicot University may help them make the connections about these transferable skills to their careers.

### ***Policy***

Student-athletes have a competitive advantage in the job marketplace when they engage in the classroom and absorb the learning opportunities provided through athletics (Coffey & Davis, 2019). This study may engage debate about leveraging the transferable

skills first-generation student-athletes' develop through intercollegiate athletics in a way that recognizes their experiences through athletics as valuable learning opportunities. Policy may be drawn up in such a way that emphasizes the experiences of first-generation student-athletes and how these experiences contribute to their career readiness, rather than as an ancillary piece that occurs during their college experience. Such policies may influence first-generation student-athletes in how they think about their athletic experiences and how they connect them to their professional careers after sports.

### *Practice*

Universities, college coaches, and athletic administrators may benefit from the findings of this study by understanding the experiences of first-generation student-athletes' and how they can help foster first-generation student-athletes in their professional careers by connecting the transferable skills they develop through athletics to their professional careers. Universities may begin to leverage the experiential learning that occurs through intercollegiate athletics for first-generation student-athletes that contributes to their growth and career readiness. College coaches may develop a better understanding of athletic identity associated with first-generation student-athletes' and incorporate learning opportunities through player-coach meetings, team meetings, and other student-athlete interactions that help first-generation student-athletes connect their experiences from athletics to areas outside of sports. Athletic administrators may use this study to understand how they can help first-generation student-athletes' connect the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics through different workshops and programming designed for student-athletes.

## ***Research***

This case study attempts to provide insights into first-generation student-athletes' experiences at a Division III, public institution in New Jersey, about the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics and how first-generation student-athletes' may connect these transferable skills to their professional careers. Further, it attempts to analyze how the university helps first-generation student-athletes' make these connections. This research may influence how universities, coaches, and athletic administrators prepare first-generation student-athletes for their professional careers. This case study was pursued in part to fill a void in the research around Division III first-generation student-athletes' experiences about transferable skills, but this case study could serve as a starting point to conduct a multiple case study about the same topic to generalize these findings. Further research could be conducted about specific transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics and how first-generation student-athletes' may associate these with certain professional careers.

## **Delimitations**

This study is delimited by several factors. This qualitative study is taking the form of a single case study to honor the voices of participants (Saldaña, 2016), so the assumption that participants will answer questions honestly should be considered. While the use of a single-case study is to elicit rich detail from multiple sources about a particular phenomenon within a specified context (Rossman & Rallis, 2017), delimiting the study to a particular case does not make it generalizable to a larger population. However, universities may use the findings of this study to help improve practices at their own institutions. Further, criterion sampling will be used to meet some predetermined

criterion of importance (Patton, 2002) that I establish to fulfill the research questions, so the choice of criteria may delimit the study. Lastly, I am an insider researcher and therefore have the potential for bias. To combat this bias and accurately convey the voices of his participants I will use in vivo coding to ensure that the data is grounded in the participants perspectives (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This study is designed to explore how first-generation student-athletes at a Division III public university identify with the transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics and how the university supports them in doing so. The intent of the study is to elicit a deeper understanding of first-generation students-athletes experiences about transferable skills and how Elicot University validates these transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes that may contribute to their career readiness. Chapter Two of the dissertation will provide a literature review which will synthesize the scholarship regarding first-generation student-ahtletes, transferable skills acquired through sports, time constraints for student-athletes and the multiple responsibilities they balance, athletic identity, and programs administered by other higher education institutions that contribute to student-athlete's career readiness. Chapter Three will explain the methodology of the study. Chapter Four will cover the findings of the study. Chapter Five will answer the research questions, situated within the broader literature, and provide recommendations.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This literature review analyzes research about first-generation students, transferable skills of student-athletes learned through sports, career readiness among student-athletes, the time commitment and experiences of student-athletes, the role of athletic identity, the use of validation theory, and programming that is designed to help student-athletes apply the transferable skills they have learned through intercollegiate sports. The literature review seeks to identify gaps in the existing research about the transferable skills first-generation student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics and how coaches, athletic administrators, and other professional staff help student-athletes leverage these transferable skills as they transition from school and sport to post graduation.

#### **First-Generation Students**

First-generation students are those whose parents did not attain a baccalaureate degree (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). They are considered one of the most rapidly growing student populations, but have also been recognized as an at-risk group of students with high dropout rates in postsecondary education (Lightweis, 2014). Additionally, they are largely one of the most underrepresented college populations (Lightweis, 2014). First-generation students face significant challenges when deciding which institutions to attend, succeeding academically once enrolled, navigating the cultural and social climates of college campuses, and persisting through graduation (Pascarella et al., 2004). Some issues facing first-generation college students are a lack of family support and understanding about the higher education process, academic

preparation, possessing the confidence to succeed in a higher education landscape, and having the financial resources to attend college (House et al., 2020). Compared to continuing-generation college students, first-generation students are more than twice as likely to leave their four-year institution before their second year (Choy, 2001).

The differences first-generation students face are considerably different than their continuing-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation college students struggle assimilating to college campuses and feeling a part of the larger campus community (Pascarella et al., 2004). They tend to be at a disadvantage in terms of their goals and planning for the future (Pascarella et al., 2004). Continuing-generation students often possess higher levels of social and cultural capital (Pascarella et al., 2004). First-generation college students often feel lost in navigating the transition to higher education and do not have the same social capital as continuing-generation students that help them navigate these difficulties (Saenz et al., 2007). First-generation college students often find themselves balancing two different types of culture; navigating a college environment that they nor their families are familiar with (McConnell, 2000). They are often less likely to be prepared academically for a college environment and have less emotional and mental support (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation students face financial, personal, emotional, social, and educational challenges as they navigate the higher education landscape (Greenwald, 2012). Research shows that first-generation college students often lack self-confidence and leadership ability (Saenz et al., 2007). These challenges persist through their college experience (Saenz et al., 2007).

Combining these two populations, first-generation students and student-athletes, into one population, further complicates the challenges they face as they enter and persist

in college. It seems that separately there is a large field of research on each, but there seems to be little research on first-generation student-athletes. However, fifteen percent of student-athletes at the Division III level are likely to be first-generation students (NCAA, 2016).

### **Student-Athletes**

Student-athletes are distinctively situated in the college environment balancing responsibilities and time commitments between athletics and academics, that their career readiness experiences may look different than other students who participate in internships and study abroad programs (August, 2020). Competing in intercollegiate sports adds a complex layer to a student-athletes collegiate experience (Watt & Moore III, 2001). The athletic demands placed on student-athletes influence their types of engagement on and off campus, influencing their learning and personal development (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Valentine & Taub, 1999). Student-athletes face similar challenges as other students in the general student population, but either by the athletic structure or by the student-athletes themselves, they experience demands imposed by sports that create considerable challenges to their collegiate experience such as their involvement in student life, career preparation, and academic progress (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Valentine & Taub, 1999; Watt & Moore III, 2001).

The interaction between student-athletes and their institution shape how student-athletes experience college (Watt & Moore III, 2001). Institutions should be prepared to work with student-athletes by preparing policies and programs that support their academic and personal growth (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). Student affairs professionals, especially those that work closely with student-athletes, may be able to



influence a student-athletes collegiate experience as it relates to their career readiness (Watt & Moore III, 2001).

### **Career Readiness and Student-Athletes**

Career readiness is a growing topic of concern throughout the U.S. educational landscape. Career readiness is an individual's ability to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to make an informed career choice (Savickas, 1984). The National Association of Colleges and Employers has attempted to define career readiness in higher education as the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for the workforce (NACE, 2018). Gysbers (2013) posits that participation in multiple life roles and settings can affect career readiness. Student-athletes experience a set of complex challenges and demands different from their peers that arise from their involvement in a competitive sport (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). These challenges include balancing athletic and academic responsibilities (Knight et al., 2018), balancing social activities in pursuit of athletic responsibilities, balancing athletic success or lack of athletic success, balancing physical health and injuries with the need to keep competing, balancing the demands of various relationships, and dealing with the retirement from an athletic collegiate career (Broughton & Neyer, 2001).

College student-athletes scored lower on career maturity than general college students (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Often, student-athletes who are not career ready express feelings that are attributed to the large amounts of time spent on their sport and the little amount of time they spent on what is next (August, 2020). Student-athletes who are career ready express planning steps to achieve career goals outside of sports which

could include expressions of career interests, developing career plans and resumes, and pursuing job opportunities (August, 2020). Research suggests that student-athletes are most successful in their transition from college to career if they have had a balanced college experience and one where athletes have not based their identity solely on athletics, are open to exploring other careers, have demonstrated pre planning transition, and have developed and maintained strong relationships through their collegiate experience (Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015).

Role conflict among student-athletes, which can be associated with athletic identity, has often resulted in limited career exploration (Navarro, 2015). Student-athletes experience role conflict as they balance commitments between their athletic, academic, and social roles (Navarro, 2015). For example, when a student-athlete must decide on a major that may not be conducive to their athletic schedule they may experience role conflict having to choose one over the other. Frameworks and strategies have been developed to help guide the advising and counseling of student-athletes through their college journey preparing them for their careers after sports such as Broughton and Neyer's (2001) four area approach which includes academic advising, life skills development, clinical counseling, and performance enhancement and Danish et al. (1993) Life Development Intervention framework which focuses on enhancement strategies, support strategies, and counseling strategies.

Advising and counseling of student-athletes historically has been focused on academics, specifically, helping student-athletes maintain their academic eligibility requirements (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Broughton and Neyer (2001) posited a practical approach to counseling and advising student-athletes which they divided into

four areas: academic advising, life skills development, clinical counseling, and performance enhancement. Similarly, Danish et. al (1993) created a Life Development Intervention framework for student-athletes which focused on enhancement strategies, support strategies, and counseling strategies. These strategies support student-athletes before, during, and after a student-athlete has graduated (Danish et al., 1993). Athletes that participate in enhancement strategies, such as a self-assessment, have shown to reap the benefits of being more prepared for life after sports by seeing themselves as more than just athletes and recognizing what they may bring to their professional careers after sports (Van Raalte et. al, 2017). Life skills development emphasizes the personal, practical, and emotional well-being of student-athletes (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). For example, drug and alcohol education for student-athletes (personal/emotional), time management skills (practical), and career development and selection (personal).

Universities such as Ohio State University and Washington State University have implemented comprehensive student-athlete advising and counseling programs which focus on developing a holistic student-athlete and one that is better prepared for a career after sports and college (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Ohio State University has implemented a comprehensive student-athlete advising and counseling program focused on developing the whole student-athlete which includes a full-time psychologist trained in student-athlete issues, a full-time life skills coordinator, 7 academic advisors, and four graduate assistants (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Washington State University has implemented a similar program focused on the well-being of student-athletes which includes a full-time life skills coordinator who conducts seminars and workshops for student-athletes on several different topics (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Other universities

have begun implementing transferable skills workshops for student-athletes through different partnerships which may contribute to a more career ready student-athlete (Carodine et al., 2001; McCarthy, 2017). These workshops and counseling strategies for student-athletes may contribute to helping first-generation student-athletes connect the transferable skills they learn through sports to areas outside of sports as well as help professional university staff that interact with student-athletes to support and validate these transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes.

### **Transferable Skills**

The needs of the 21st century workplace is evolving and changing, higher education institutions are placing an emphasis on developing college graduates that are equipped with transferable skills, or skills and abilities that are considered context free (Chan et al., 2017; Kemp & Seagraves, 1995; Nägele & Stalder, 2016). Different labels have been attached to this concept of transferable skills such as core competencies, core skills, generic skills, and personal skills which reflect developing written and verbal communication skills, interpersonal skills, social skills, problem-solving skills, and self-management skills (Kemp & Seagraves, 1995; Nägele & Stalder, 2016). These transferable skills or competencies can include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity, and time management among others (Chan et al., 2017; Kemp & Seagraves, 1995). Transferable skills are often referred to as non-technical skills such as social skills and problem-solving skills compared to technical skills which are much more specific to carrying out certain job-related tasks (Nägele & Stalder, 2016).

Regardless of the label and the need to create an exhaustive list of transferable skills, there is an assumption that these groups of skills can follow an individual wherever

they go (Kemp & Seagraves, 1995; Nägele & Stalder, 2016). It has been argued that institutions should emphasize the importance of developing transferable skills among students, assessing them, and formally incorporating them throughout the curriculum and larger university activities (Chan et al., 2017). Individuals that possess transferable skills and can accurately display and communicate them may improve their employability, or their ability to adapt to the requirements of the work domain (Nägele & Stalder, 2016).

The development of transferable skills is seen as an important factor for higher education institutions to enhance the employability of their graduates (Holmes, 2013; Tymon, 2013). Research shows that transferable skills are valued by employers (Fugate et al., 2004) and individuals that can signal their use of transferable skills as it pertains to the demands of the job market increase their employability (Nägele & Stalder, 2016). Further, social skills, such as being polite, listening to others, and showing interest can help job applicants during the interview process (Hogan et al., 2013). Since recent graduates do not have work experience to be judged upon, the use of displaying transferable skills during the job interview becomes important to attaining the job (Nägele & Stalder, 2016). However, the transfer of these skills from one application to another may not occur naturally for individuals as they may experience a lack of motivation, metacognitive strategies, or other personal factors that allow them to do so (Nägele & Stalder, 2016). Higher education institutions may be able to harness their position with students that facilitate the application of transferable skills from one context to another (Nägele & Stalder, 2016). Student-athletes are a subset of the larger student population that develop transferable skills in a unique context different from their peers

through their participation in intercollegiate athletics (Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000; McKnight et al., 2009; Van Raalte et. al, 2017).

### **Transferable Skills Learned Through Sports**

Student-athletes develop important life skills through sport involvement such as leadership, teamwork, organization, and communication, but they lag behind their non-athlete peers in terms of career readiness and assessing their personal interest and skills (Van Raalte et. al, 2017). Studies on the topic of transferable life skills learned through sports have been conducted which found that the top five values learned through sports participation include teamwork, commitment, time management, leadership, and perseverance (Coffey & Davis, 2019). Life skills are the physical, behavioral, and cognitive attributes that facilitate the development of the psychological skills needed to meet the challenges of everyday life (Papacharisis et al., 2005). Physical skills can include taking the right posture, behavioral skills can include communicating effectively, and cognitive skills can include making effective decisions (Papacharisis et al., 2005). Simply, transferable skills are often considered skills that are context and content free (Chan et al., 2017; Kemp & Seagraves, 1995; Nägele & Stalder, 2016; Wiant, 1977).

Athletes develop transferable skills through sports that can be applied to other areas of their life (Knight et al., 2018; Mayocchi & Hanrahan, 2000; McKnight et al., 2009). Eighty-five percent of student-athletes responded in a study that their participation in athletics contributed to the development of specific skills preparing them for life after graduation, such as leadership skills, teamwork, the ability to take responsibility for yourself, ability to make decisions, time management skills, and the ability to take responsibility for others (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Therefore, sports may have the

potential to enhance personal development depending on the individual experience of each participant (Papacharisis et al., 2005). Valuable skills such as work ethic and the ability to deal with adversity, among other skills, are skills acquired through sports participation that can be applicable in student-athletes' professional and personal lives after sports (Menke & Germany, 2019). Further, the influence of college coaches and athletic staff personnel may help facilitate the learning experiences of student-athletes about these life skills (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007).

Coaches spend countless hours with student-athletes which places them in a unique position to observe student-athletes in multiple contexts and assist them not only in sport development, but in other areas such as personal and social development (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). Coaches referenced how involvement with an athletic team contributes to transferable skills such as working with others and managing interpersonal relationships (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). Further, coaches mentioned how focus and time management skills are developed through sports which they believe are employer-desired skills (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). A student-athlete's lack of awareness of these transferable skills may contribute to their lack of career readiness compared to their non-athlete peers (Van Raalte et al., 2017). Incorporating campus professionals that interact with student-athletes such as coaches and athletic staff to deliver effective career awareness programs may contribute to a student-athlete's awareness of the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics and how these skills may be applicable to other areas outside of sports (Van Raalte et al., 2017).

Mixed-methods and quantitative studies have been conducted to help facilitate an understanding of the transferable skills that athletes acquire through sports (Bjornsen-

Ramig, 2020; Papacharisis et al., 2005; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Shina et al., 2003; Van Raalte et al., 2017). Significant themes that emerged from these studies include the experience of student-athletes preparing to transition from sport (Bjornsen-Ramig, 2020), life-skills programming that instilled a higher self-belief among student-athletes (Papacharisis et al., 2005), transferable skills learned through sports contributing to desired careers (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007), transferring life skills learned through sports to chosen careers (Shina et al., 2003), and participation in a career self-efficacy workshop to leverage student-athlete experiences (Van Raalte et al., 2017). Athletes that participated in a life-skills program that integrated sports and life-skill training showed improved sports skills as well as a higher self-belief of life skills such as goal setting, problem solving, and positive thinking (Papacharisis et al., 2005). Such programming helps student-athletes see the parallels between what is being learned through sports and how it can be applied to their everyday lives (Papacharisis et al., 2005).

According to Potuto & O’Hanlon (2007), student-athletes believed that the skills and/or values learned through intercollegiate athletics such as leadership skills and teamwork would contribute to their desired careers. Van Raalte et al. (2017) showed that student-athletes that participated in a career self-exploration workshop significantly increased their career self-efficacy including how they may leverage their student-athlete experiences in other settings. Research has suggested that campus advisors, athletic directors, coaches, and life skills coordinators should participate in these workshops to increase a student-athletes career self-efficacy (Van Raalte et al., 2017). Student-athletes that participated in a career workshop developed by Shina et al. (2003) were more likely to transfer their learned life skills through sports to their chosen career fields compared to



those that did not participate in the career workshop. Yet, much of the research on transferable skills among student-athletes has been through the lens of Division I NCAA student-athletes (Bjornsen-Ramig, 2020; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Shina et al., 2003; Van Raalte et al., 2017).

### **Leveraging Experiences**

Most student-athletes have limited interaction and participation with traditional campus activities including off-campus internships and study abroad programs due to the time constraints of participating in an intercollegiate sport (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Coffey & Davis, 2019). Student-athletes balance time and energy between fulfilling their academic and athletic responsibilities (Carodine et al., 2001; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Student-athletes may struggle with their transition out of sports due to the competing demands of school and sport and dedicating less-time to career focused initiatives and support services (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017; Valentine & Taub, 1999). NCAA regulations require institutions to give student-athletes off at least one day per week and student-athletes can’t practice more than four hours per day and twenty hours per week (Carodine et al., 2001). The high level of commitment student-athletes must dedicate to their sport and their academic studies can create a disconnection between the student-athlete and their campus resulting in a negative experience for the student-athlete (Carodine et al., 2001). Athletes spend much of their time dedicated to their sport, creating an identity so engulfed in their athletic achievement that they don’t dedicate time towards acquiring interests in other areas, so their transition from athletics to a career field is much different from individuals that experience a transition from one career to another (McKnight et al., 2009).

The experiential learning gained through intercollegiate sports is valuable for student-athletes in that they acquire transferable skills through sports which can benefit them in their professional careers. Experiential learning is often defined as the practical knowledge and experience gained from engaging in activities outside of the classroom (Coffey & Davis, 2019). Since student-athletes spend a considerable amount of time dedicated to their sport (Carodine et al., 2001), intercollegiate athletics should be seen as an area where experiential learning can occur (Coffey & Davis, 2019). Coffey and Davis (2019) completed a mixed-methods study on student-athletes spanning across multiple NCAA divisions. The student-athletes that participated in this study credited the experiences they learned outside of the classroom through sports most prepared them for their careers which included teamwork, building relationships, and interactions with people (Coffey & Davis, 2019). Further, student-athletes credited their leadership skills through their participation in sports rather than their learning that occurred in the classroom (Coffey & Davis, 2019). Universities may leverage the time commitment first-generation student-athletes dedicate to their sport as experiential learning opportunities in a way that supports the growth of student-athletes in helping them transition into their professional careers. A first-generation student-athlete's athletic identity should be considered in exploring these learning experiences.

### **Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity is a self-concept, or an outlook an individual comprises both internally and externally of themselves (Higgins, 1987), which is derived from the cognitive, affective, behavioral, and social structures of identifying with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993). Athletic identity as a cognitive structure provides a framework for

interpreting information and inspires behavior consistent with the athlete role (Horton & Mack, 2000). Athletic identity as a social role may be determined by the perceptions of people the athlete deems as important (Horton & Mack, 2000; Valentine, & Taub, 1999). For example, friends, family members, and coaches that are important to an individual that emphasize the athletic dimension of an individual, may result in an individual identifying themselves exclusively with the role of an athlete (Horton & Mack, 2000; Valentine & Taub, 1999). Athletic identity refers to an identity that athletes develop while playing sports which is usually reinforced by the success and rewards athletes experience through sports (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; McCarthy, 2017; Steele et. al., 2020). Researchers posit that student-athletes develop strong athletic identities prior to and during their involvement in college sports (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987; Horton & Mack, 2000; Lally & Kerr, 2005; McCarthy, 2017; Menke & Germany, 2019; Sparkes, 1998; Steele et. al., 2020).

College student-athletes typically compete in their sport from a very young age, developing a role centered around their athletic abilities (Menke & Germany, 2019). College student-athletes have reported greater identity foreclosure compared to general college students (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Athletic identity foreclosure consists of the commitment a student-athlete dedicates to identifying with an athlete role in absence of exploring other occupational or ideological alternatives (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). The evolution of an athletic identity is something that can negatively influence a student-athlete's exploration into other identities outside of sports (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; McCarthy, 2017; Steele et. al., 2020). It is reported that college student-athletes can experience poor identity development because of their participation in sports and their

athletic identity (Horton & Mack, 2000; McCarthy, 2017; McKnight et al., 2009; Steele et. al., 2020).

Sport retirement is a major life transition for athletes (Menke & Germany, 2019). Student-athletes may struggle with their transition out of sports due to the competing demands of school and sport and dedicating less-time to career focused initiatives and support services (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). Understanding the feelings associated with the end of sports in athletes can help them prepare for life after sports (Menke & Germany, 2019). Research shows that athletes who are more prepared for careers outside of sports have a smoother transition once sport retirement occurs (Lally & Kerr, 2005). The same is true for student-athletes. Student-athletes become hyper focused on their collegiate playing careers that often they devote little time to thinking about their careers after college (McCarthy, 2017). A career in sport is often regarded as a symbol of success and something athletes become obsessed with further strengthening their athletic identity (Menke & Germany, 2019). Typically, student-athletes spend little time thinking about their careers after sports partly because of the time and energy required to participate in intercollegiate athletics and partly because they associate with their athletic identity so much so that it overshadows other areas of their personal identity (McCarthy, 2017). Balancing these time demands can result in limited identity development for student-athletes regarding career exploration and transitioning to life outside of sports (Carodine et al., 2001; McKnight et al., 2009).

Student-athletes that struggle with their transition out of sports often include those that have structured their identity around their athletic participation (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Identifying exclusively with the role of an athlete can cause an athlete to

develop a foreclosed identity where they have trouble associating themselves or their skills that are learned within sports to other areas of their life (McKnight et al., 2009). They often fail to recognize the skills and lessons they've learned through sports and how these are applicable to other settings (McKnight et al., 2009). Discussing the transition out of sports before the transition occurs can help athletes understand and prepare for the process (Menke & Germany, 2019). Encouraging multiple identities throughout a student-athletes collegiate experience can help them transition to lives outside of sports (Menke & Germany, 2019).

### **Validation Theory**

Validation theory was originally introduced in 1994 by Rendón as a new way to theorize how low-income, first-generation college students might find success in college, especially those who have been invalidated in their past by their internal and external networks such as their family, neighborhood, teachers, and school environments among other things (Rendón & Munoz, 1994). Rendón (2002) made a distinction between traditional and nontraditional students: traditional students are students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds with predominantly white whose parents and siblings attended college; nontraditional students come from low-income, working-class backgrounds and are often the first in their family to attend college. Rendón's (1994) theory emerged from a qualitative study called the "Transition to College Project" involving 132 first-year, low-income students. In it, she showed that at some point, low-income students suddenly began to believe in themselves in the college environment because of some persons in or outside of their college environment that reached out to them and affirmed their ability and innate capacity to learn (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Students attributed

their confidence and motivation to be successful in a college environment to the affirmations they received from persons inside and outside of their college environment (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Further, there was a distinction between traditional and nontraditional students where traditional students expressed few concerns about succeeding in college compared to their nontraditional counterparts (Rendón, 1994). Out-of-class validation experiences for students, both academically and interpersonally, showed equally as important as to what was occurring in the classroom (Rendón, 1994). Out-of-class interpersonal validations included support from friends and family to talk through their experiences and any problems they may be facing (Rendón, 1994).

Validation refers to the intentional and proactive affirmation of in- and out-of-class agents that validate students as creators of knowledge and valuable members of the learning community (Rendón & Munoz, 1994). In-class agents can consist of faculty, classmates, and teaching assistants while out-of-class agents can consist of coaches, family and friends, and counselors and advisors (Rendón & Jalomo, 1995). Validation occurs through academic validation, when students are affirmed of their innate ability to learn and build confidence in being a college student, and interpersonal validation, when in- and out-of-class agents affirm students' personal development and social adjustment such as providing encouragement and support with life issues and identity development (Rendón, 2002; Saggio & Rendón, 2004). Students experience validation and invalidation along a continuum occurring at different times, on different occasions, from distinct validating agents, and to different degrees of validation (Rendón & Jalomo, 1995). For example, encouragement can be viewed on a continuum where encouragement, a validating experience, is on one end of the continuum, and discounting life experiences,

an invalidating experience, is on the other end of the continuum (Rendón & Jalomo, 1995). The validating or invalidating agent, the degree of validation or invalidation, and the time and place of the validation or invalidation may shape a student's experience through college (Rendón & Jalomo, 1995). The university's involvement in fostering validation is active; it involves faculty, coaches, counselors, and administrators actively engaging students in a way that promotes learning and interpersonal growth (Rendón, 1994).

Rendón (2002) used validation theory in a qualitative study at Community College Puente to explore academic and interpersonal validation about who the validating agents were at the community college, how validation was employed in the English classroom, and the impact of validation on Latino students and Puente faculty and staff. Key validating agents were identified as counselors and mentors (Rendón, 2002). Puente counselors affirmed the importance of academics to all students and became active participants in their academic growth providing educational plans, attending the English class and collaborating with the English instructor to validate students as capable learners, and consistently affirming that transferring to a 4-year college was a real possibility (Rendón, 2002). Mentors represent the community, they are the role models within the community, and they validate the notion that academic achievement is an individual success as well as a success for the community (Rendón, 2002). Further, mentors provided care, support, and encouragement both inside and outside of the classroom for students (Rendón, 2002). Other key findings included validation employed in the English classroom took the form of inviting Latino role models to the classroom, providing the opportunity for students to witness themselves as capable learners, faculty

actively reaching out to students for academic assistance, and providing positive feedback (Rendón, 2002). Employing validation in this way allowed Latino students to see themselves as capable learners by looking up to the Latino role models (Rendón, 2002). Puente staff were able to understand how important it was for students to see themselves in what they are reading and learning (Rendón, 2002). Validation helped Puente students gain confidence in their academic ability and the idea that their newly acquired skills through their English class can be transferred to other classes (Rendón, 2002).

Another qualitative study conducted by Rendon and Jalomo (1995) showed multiple types of validation and invalidation among students at 3 different community colleges throughout the U.S. Types of invalidation among in- and out-of-class agents included faculty who appeared not to care, faculty and staff who discounted life experiences, and friends who teased students about not attending a “real college” (Rendon & Jalomo, 1995). Types of validation among in- and out-of-class agents included faculty who worked closely with students, faculty who encouraged students to work together and help each other, and spouses who provided support and encouragement (Rendon & Jalomo, 1995). Findings showed students that experienced validation got involved in institutional life and became excited that they could be contributors to the learning environment (Rendon & Jalomo, 1995).

Validation theory has been used in quantitative studies as well. Bauer’s (2014) quantitative study sought to determine if Black male students at a community college reported higher levels of engagement with faculty based on the validation they received from faculty. Findings showed that Black male students that received higher levels of faculty validation of their ability to be successful in college showed higher levels of



faculty student engagement (Bauer, 2014). Barnett (2011) conducted a quantitative study on a community college in the Midwest to measure whether faculty validation had discernible sub constructs or different types of faculty validation, whether higher levels of faculty validation predict a stronger sense of academic integration among community college students, and whether higher levels of faculty validation predict a stronger sense of persistence. Findings from this study showed that students that experienced faculty validation were more likely to feel academically integrated and expressed intent to persist in college (Barnett, 2011). The study showed different types of faculty validation exist such as students feeling known and valued, faculty displaying caring instructions, appreciation of diversity, and mentoring (Barnett, 2011). Results showed that faculty validation strongly predicts students' academic integration in college (Barnett, 2011). In terms of persistence, Barnett's (2011) study showed modest levels of faculty validation contributed to students' intent to persist.

Validation theory consists of six elements and emphasizes the role of students' interactions with faculty and staff at higher education institutions (Anderson & Blankenberger, 2020; Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The first element of validation theory places the responsibility on the institutional agents to engage students offering assistance, support, and encouragement (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Further, the validating actions taken by institutional agents should be actions that encourage students and validate them about their ability to learn within the college environment (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Validating actions can include faculty taking time to learn students' names and refer to them by name, faculty encouraging students by communicating "you can do this", coaches taking time to help students select courses and plan their futures, and faculty and

staff serving as mentors and making an effort to meet with students outside of the classroom on campus (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The English instructor at Puente Community College employs the first element of validation theory when she took the initiative to assist students with their assignments (Rendón, 2002) rather than waiting for the students to ask for help which often does not occur among non-traditional students who find it difficult to navigate the college experience by themselves (Rendón, 2002; Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Counselors and those outside of the classroom can become active participants in validating students by building personal relationships that help students make an intentional commitment to stay in college (Rendón, 2002). Students at another community college that were validated by faculty in terms of being known and valued predicted modestly higher levels of academic integration (Barnett, 2011). Higher levels of validation in turn predicted stronger levels of a student's intent to persist (Barnett, 2011).

The second element deals with the agent that the student turns to for validation; this agent should affirm that the student has potential to succeed (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). For example, affirming students' voices and allowing their personal and intellectual voices to be heard in the classroom reinforces the idea that the knowledge and experience they bring is just as important as others (Rendón, 2002). Black male students at a community college who reported higher levels of feeling validated by faculty to complete their coursework showed higher levels of faculty student engagement (Bauer, 2014). These higher levels of faculty student engagement may lead to students feeling more confident about asking for assistance throughout their college journey (Bauer, 2014).

The third element incorporates this idea that when students are validated on a consistent basis, they are more likely to feel confident about themselves and their ability to succeed (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Barnett (2011) explores this element in his research which showed community college students expressed stronger levels of persistence when they were validated by faculty. Further, Puente staff takes an active role to reach out to nontraditional students and incorporate them as active learning members in the university community; Puente students benefited from direct and sustained academic and interpersonal validation (Rendón, 2002). Nontraditional students were transformed when someone took a consistent initiative in affirming these students as being capable learners and capable of making the social adjustment in the college environment (Rendón, 2002).

The fourth element confirms that validation can occur in and out of the classroom (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). In-class academic validation for nontraditional students helps them trust their innate capacity to learn and acquire the confidence of being a college student (Rendón, 1994). For example, when faculty were personable and approachable towards nontraditional students, demonstrated a genuine concern for teaching nontraditional students, worked individually with nontraditional students needing extra help, and provided meaningful feedback, nontraditional students fostered behaviors that led to academic development (Rendón, 1994). Nontraditional students also turned to out-of-class agents for academic validation and support such as parents and meeting with student groups outside of the classroom that helped them persist through college (Rendón, 1994). Interpersonal validation from in- and out-of-class agents such as instructors and friends helped nontraditional students by providing direction, providing examples of how to interact with people in a college environment while still being

yourself, and offering support when a student was experiencing a difficult personal problem (Rendón, 1994).

The fifth element is that validation should not be viewed as an end, rather it is a continual process that should begin early and can contribute to a more fulfilling college experience (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The more students were validated by in- and out-of-class agents, the richer their academic and interpersonal experience became (Rendón, 2002). Holmes et al. (2000) proposed a model of this continual process for African American students at predominantly White institutions which consisted of validating students during recruitment, through orientation and their first-year experience, and conducting exit interviews among graduate students to evaluate the universities retention strategies. Validation through recruitment happens by creating a non-threatening and supportive environment for prospective students and their families, or out-of-class validating agents, to ask questions about the university without feeling intimidated because of their cultural differences (Holmes et al., 2000). Validation through orientation and their first-year experience includes establishing connections for African American students with current African American students and ethnic groups in addition to current African American faculty and staff (Holmes et al., 2000). Lastly, exit interviews would allow the African American students to describe and explain their college experience, so the university may evaluate and improve these experiences for future African American students (Holmes et al., 2000). The continual process of validation may lead to a richer experience for nontraditional college students (Holmes et al., 2000).

Lastly, the final element of validation theory states that validation is most critical when it begins early on in a student's college career (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Saggio

and Rendón (2004) conducted an exploratory case study at a bible college to better understand how validation can shape American Indian and Alaska Native's ability to persist through their pivotal first year of college. Academic and interpersonal validation from in- and out-of-class agents such as faculty and staff, coaches, and family members fostered persistence behaviors in American Indian and Alaska Native when they were validated as capable learners of academic success, provided spiritual encouragement, provided care and encouragement, and when importance was placed on academic achievement (Saggio & Rendón, 2004). Multiple studies have been conducted at the community college level that stresses the importance of validating students early in their college career (Barnett, 2011; Bauer, 2014; Rendón, 2002).

While the intent of validation theory was to focus on low-income first-generation students, the theory has been applied to multiple settings: including the impact of validation and participation in living-learning communities on GPA and student retention (Anderson & Blankenberger, 2020), improving pedagogic practice (Rendón & Munoz, 2011), improving persistence among nontraditional community college students (Barnett, 2011), and establishing new measures to show how validation can be assessed across two-year and four-year institutions among White students and students of color as well as the differences between them (Hurtado et al., 2011). However, there seems to be a gap in understanding how a university may validate the experiences of first-generation student-athletes in identifying the transferable skills they learn through intercollegiate athletics and how these might be applicable to other settings. Most of the research has been focused on community college populations and academic validation through faculty (Barnett, 2011; Bauer, 2014; Rendón, 2002; Rendón & Jalomo, 1995; Rendón & Munoz,

2011) with some studies focusing on both in-class and out-of-class agents (Rendón, 2002; Saggio & Rendón, 2004). Few studies have highlighted and focused on the impact out-of-class agents may have on validating first-generation students and I could not find any that focused on first-generation student-athletes. This dissertation will be focused on out-of-class agents such as coaches, athletic staff, and other professional staff in how they validate first-generation student athlete experiences in the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics. The six elements of validation theory will help ground an understanding of the context of this study as it seeks to understand how the university and its agents interact with student-athletes and contribute to their development and use of the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics outside of sports settings.

## **Conclusion**

Much of the previous literature has focused on the experiences of NCAA Division I student-athletes. Whether the literature focuses directly on the transferable skills of student-athletes (Bjornsen-Ramig, 2020; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Shina et al., 2003; Van Raalte et al., 2017), their athletic identity (Adler & Adler, 1985; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Lally & Kerr, 2005; McCarthy, 2017; McKnight et al., 2009; Menke & Germany, 2019; Webb et al., 1998), or areas that may contribute to the career readiness of student-athletes (August, 2020; Cummins & O'Boyle, 2015; Navarro, 2015; Park et al., 2013; Van Raalte et al., 2017), the literature has almost been hyperfocused on the experiences of NCAA Division I student-athletes. NCAA Division III student-athletes seem to be understudied. Further, it was difficult to find literature surrounding the use of validation theory with student-athletes. There seems to be few qualitative studies that

dive into the details and rich experiences of student-athletes about their athletics experience and transferable skills. The literature discussed here is important in improving the experience of all student-athletes and preparing them for life after sports, but qualitative research among Division III first-generation student-athletes about the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics and how the athletic department staff, coaches, and career resource center support their development may bring about nuances in the literature and or contribute to the growing literature on these topics. It may contribute to a better understanding of how these transferable skills can be leveraged to help student-athletes as they transition to their professional careers. Through the lens of validation theory (Rendon; 1994; Rendón & Munoz, 1994) athletic department staff and other professional staff that work closely with student-athletes may understand the experiences of first-generation student-athletes better to facilitate meaningful career discussions with first-generation student-athletes. They may be able to use these discussions as ways to validate first-generation student-athletes' learning experiences and acquisition of transferable skills that occur during their athletic experiences.

### **Context of the Case**

Instrumental case study research attempts to explore a phenomenon within a certain context in hopes that the case can tell us something about the phenomenon in general (Cousin, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Providing context about the case is important in understanding the unique characteristics and factors that may influence the findings of the research (Stake, 1995). Elicot University, the case being studied here, is a public four-year, Carnegie-classified R2 (high research activity) doctoral research institution in Southern New Jersey enrolling over 20,000 students. Elicot University

consists of 8 different colleges and 9 different schools offering over 90 bachelor's, 48 master's, 2 professional, and 9 doctoral degree programs. It is one of the fastest growing public research institutions in the United States (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2021). Based on Fall 2021 student enrollment data, undergraduate students make up seventy-nine percent of the student body totaling 15,144 students. Thirty-six percent of the student body is from under-represented groups while the remaining student body is White. The university is evenly divided between male and female students and ninety-three percent of the student body are in-state residents.

Elicot University athletics department boasts 8 men's and 10 women's sports teams competing in Division III NCAA athletics. There are a total of five hundred and thirty-seven student-athletes. Twenty-six percent of student-athletes are from under-represented groups while the remaining student-athlete population is White. Fifty-seven percent of student-athletes are male while forty-three percent are female. When football student-athletes are suppressed from the student-athlete population; males make up forty-six percent of the student-athlete body while females make up fifty-four percent. Student-athletes selected for this case study will be representative of the larger student body population.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the development of transferable skills among first-generation student-athletes at a public, Division III university in New Jersey. Further, I sought to understand how the university validates the skills developed through intercollegiate sports. As an instrumental case study, understanding how student-athletes identify with these transferable skills and how the university supports them may contribute to a more career ready student-athlete. The concept of athletic identity (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; McCarthy, 2017; Steele et. al., 2020) and validation theory (Rendón, 1994) were used to formulate the research questions and guide the interviews. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with first-generation student-athletes, athletic administrators and coaches, an athletic faculty liaison, and the director of the Office of Career Advancement, I was able to capture how first-generation student-athletes experience the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics and the role athletic identity plays in their ability to apply these skills to areas outside of sports and how athletic department staff and coaches validate these experiences for student-athletes. To maintain accuracy all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and double checked by the interviewees (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Research Questions**

1. How do first-generation student-athletes at a public, Division III university, experience the development of transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics?
2. Which people do first-generation student-athletes identify in helping them recognize the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics?

3. In what ways do first-generation student-athletes describe how their athletic identity may influence their ability to apply transferable skills to areas outside of sports?
4. How do athletic department staff and coaches validate transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes that help them apply these transferable skills to areas outside of sports?
5. How does the Office of Career Advancement support the development of transferable skills among first-generation student-athletes to contribute to their career readiness?

### **Rationale for and Assumptions of Qualitative Methodology**

Qualitative research methods are particularly effective in identifying and interpreting concepts that are difficult to quantify (Walters, 2001). Qualitative research is an inductive and interpretive process focused on understanding what has happened in a particular instance rather than trying to predict what will happen (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative research is concerned with the lens in which people view events and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). It allows the researcher to analyze and interpret rich data by interacting with and interviewing participants, gathering documents, and observing behavior (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The analysis of this data is transformed into knowledge to understand how these phenomena are interacting within our society while still honoring the voices of participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). The goal of qualitative researchers is to describe the perspective of the participants through the interpretations of what they hear and see (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Rubin & Rubin,

2012). Qualitative research suggests the researcher engages directly with participants to understand their worldviews where society is generally viewed as orderly, and knowledge is viewed as subjective (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

The interpretive characteristic of qualitative inquiry places an emphasis on the researcher to understand their own worldviews and how these may influence how they interpret their data (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Data is interpreted through a researcher's own complex cognitive process (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Assumptions are fundamental ways of thinking that are taken for granted (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). These assumptions are brought into the field of qualitative research by the researcher. Assumptions can consist of ontology, or the nature of reality and truth, and epistemology, or how an individual comes to understand that reality (Bleiker et al., 2019).

Rossman and Rallis (2017) describe four paradigms or worldviews that qualitative researchers may assume that intersect along two continuums: interpretive vs. objective (ontology) and improvement vs. radical change (epistemology). Interpretivist beliefs argue that knowledge comes through experience, interaction, and discussion from multiple perspectives; there is not necessarily one truth, but many truths compared to objectivist beliefs (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I have adopted an interpretivist view which argues that humans construct understandings of reality through their own experiences and how they interpret these experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). My research is interested in studying just that, how first-generation student-athletes interpret their reality and experiences about transferable skills within their university. Along the improvement/radical change continuum, individuals that favor the improvement end of the continuum believe society is essentially orderly and predictable, while the radical

change end of the continuum believes society is characterized by oppression and domination (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). My view of society falls closer to the improvement end of the continuum that society is essentially orderly and predictable, but I also acknowledge the oppression that is faced by individuals in society. The four paradigms that result from these intersecting continuums consist of critical humanism, critical realism, positivism, and descriptive interpretivism (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Rossman and Rallis (2017) describe the descriptive interpretivism paradigm as one that tries to understand the social world from multiple perspectives of individual experience. Humans are viewed as creators of their world; research methods that follow this paradigm typically include in-depth interviews to understand their experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This paradigm supports the use of qualitative inquiry for this study as it suggests that individuals experience and interpret their social realities differently and through the use of in-depth interviews it will be able to capture those multiple perspectives in a way that may draw about new knowledge about the phenomenon and essentially work towards improving the phenomenon.

Rossman and Rallis (2017) describe four perspectives for using qualitative inquiry: instrumental, enlightenment, symbolic, and transformative. This study will employ the use of qualitative inquiry as one that is instrumental and enlightened. Instrumental use of qualitative inquiry is one that produces knowledge that results in solutions or recommendations (Rossman and Rallis, 2017). Enlightenment use of qualitative inquiry is one that typically seeks to display deep insights and create a pool of accumulated knowledge that may contribute to an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon and making several decisions (Rossman and Rallis, 2017). Using qualitative

inquiry, the findings of this study will produce knowledge that results in recommendations as well as knowledge that will contribute to a deeper understanding and may change the way people think about this phenomenon. The most appropriate means to produce knowledge about the experiences of first-generation student-athletes and transferable skills and how athletic department staff and other campus resources and staff support and validate these experiences for student-athletes within a bounded context was a qualitative instrumental case study (Stake, 1995).

### **Research Design: Case Study**

An instrumental single case study was used to understand a larger phenomenon through an examination of one specific instance (Cousin, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Different from intrinsic case study research which primarily focuses on exploring the case itself and not generalizing the findings of the phenomenon; instrumental case study research attempts to explore a phenomenon within a certain context and real-life setting in hopes that the case can tell us something about the phenomenon in general (Cousin, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Instrumental case studies are concerned with drawing insight into an issue and deepening our understanding of that issue (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Stake, 1995). For example, the case study being explored through this dissertation sought to understand and gain insights into the experiences of Division III first-generation student-athletes at Elicot University about the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics to leverage these experiences for student-athletes in areas outside of sport that contribute to their career readiness. Understanding the phenomenon of transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics was paramount to, although not in place of, understanding the case itself. While context is

important to instrumental case studies, exploring the phenomenon is more important to the nature of the study (Stake, 1995). The case plays a secondary role in facilitating an understanding of something else (Stake, 1995).

A qualitative instrumental case study was used to explore this phenomenon within a particular context to understand the uniqueness and commonality among participants (Stake, 1995). Case studies favor “how” and “why” research questions because they assume an exploratory nature in conducting research and elicit the details associated with such questions (Yin, 2018). The research questions involved in this research focused mainly on “how” the phenomenon is unfolding within their context; how student-athletes experience transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics, how the athletic staff and coaches validate these experiences for student-athletes, and how the Office of Career Advancement and professional staff support student-athletes in developing transferable skills, and in what ways do first-generation student-athletes describe how their athletic identity influences their ability to apply transferable skills to areas outside of sports. Case studies highlight the complexity of a phenomenon by providing rich detail through the experiences of participants to extend the reader's comprehension of the issue (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Instrumental case studies are meant to catch the complexity of a particular case not only to understand the case, which is an integrated system of functioning actors, but to understand how the phenomenon is unfolding within the case (Stake, 1995).

This dissertation seeks to explore the experiences of first-generation student-athletes in how they develop transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics and how these skills can be applied to areas outside of sports. It explores the role that athletic identity plays on first-generation student-athletes and their ability to translate these

transferable skills to areas outside of sports. Further, it seeks to understand how the athletic department and other professional staff within the university support student-athletes in making these connections using validation theory. A single case model allows the researcher to understand the complexity of the phenomenon as it pertains to a particular context (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Stake, 1995). Using an instrumental single case study is most appropriate for this study as it will elicit rich details about specific experiences and deepen our understanding (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Stake, 1995) about the transferable skills Division III first-generation student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics and how the athletic department and career center validate and support Division III first-generation student-athletes in doing so.

### **Sampling Method**

The difference between qualitative and quantitative research may be highlighted in the sampling techniques and the logic that follows each method (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research typically focuses on small sample sizes to generate rich in-depth material following purposeful sampling strategies compared to quantitative research that typically depends on larger samples selected randomly (Patton, 2002). Studying cases that can yield rich detail and in-depth understanding to the central questions being asked is a strength of purposeful sampling that contributes to qualitative research (Patton, 2002). This type of in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that can be generated from purposeful sampling is often hard to mimic in quantitative research or by using the sampling strategies associated with quantitative research (Patton, 2002). A type of purposeful sampling involved in qualitative research used in this case study was criterion sampling (Patton, 2002).

First-generation student-athletes in this study were identified using criterion sampling, a type of purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 2002). Criterion sampling is used to identify participants who meet a predetermined criterion of importance significant to the study (Patton, 2002). The criteria that were used in this study was that all participants were first-generation student-athletes that have spent at least two years at the same university competing in intercollegiate athletics. Single case studies are context dependent (Rossman & Rallis, 2017), so the study was also bounded by the university where the research was being conducted. Focusing on first-generation student-athletes that have completed at least two years at the university provided some validity to the case study as they would have spent the same amount of time at the university compared to freshman, sophomores, and first-year transfers that completed one year or less. Freshman, sophomores, and first-year transfers were excluded from the study.

Similarly, criterion sampling was used to identify coaches and athletic department staff that worked closely with student-athletes. Snowball sampling was also used with the pre-selected athletic department staff, coaches, and first-generation student-athletes to identify other key university staff that worked closely with student-athletes at the university that may contribute information-rich data to the study (Patton, 2022).

### **Participants**

The participants included 12 first-generation student-athletes from 6 different intercollegiate sports teams: football, women's and men's basketball, softball, field hockey, and women's swimming.

Various sports team were included to give the research study a balance between student-athlete experiences across multiple sports. In addition to the first-generation



student-athletes, 8 coaches were interviewed along with the Director of Athletics and the Assistant Director of Athletics for Compliance and Athletic Support. Interviewing the coaches and athletic department staff was beneficial to this single case study as it helped conceptualize the phenomenon within this university. Interviewing the athletic department staff and coaches contributed to understanding the phenomenon from their perspective and how they supported and validated student-athletes experiences of transferable skills developed through sports to develop more career ready student-athletes. Similarly, the NCAA faculty representative for the athletic department and the director of the Office of Career Advancement were interviewed to understand how Elicot University was supporting student-athletes in the transferable skills they developed through sports and how these may be applicable to their careers outside of sports.

The number of participants chosen assumed that data saturation would be reached with this number of participants. Patton (2002) argues that there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry; it depends on what the researcher wants to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, and what will have credibility. Patton (2002) argues that purposeful sampling should be judged according to the purpose and rationale of the study. Data saturation is something that emerges from the study when the data collection offers no new insights or relevant data (Dworkin, 2012; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Data saturation in a qualitative study is more concerned with obtaining rich and thick data that allows the researcher to answer their research questions rather than the size of their sample (Dibley, 2011).

## **Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted using in-depth open-ended interviews (Walters, 2001). Interviews are forms of conversations that the researcher uses to address the research questions (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). Meaningful interviews include listening and recording carefully, asking probing questions, maintaining integrity of the data and maintaining field notes, taking care of participants, and considering debriefing with participants (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). The use of interviews allows the researcher to speak with individuals experiencing a particular phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Conducting in-depth interviews contributed to the study to elicit rich detailed experience and knowledge from participants about the phenomenon being studied (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The data collection techniques are discussed below.

## **Instrumentation**

Minimally, one-hour interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviewing offers opportunities to understand the worldview, perspectives, experiences, and feelings of participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The interviews were semi-structured, prepared with a limited number of open-ended questions in advance through an interview protocol to learn about the specific research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Each set of participants, for example, first-generation student-athletes, coaches and athletic staff, and university professional staff had their own semi-structured interview protocols. Semi-structured interview protocols provide a starting point for researchers and are designed to keep the conversation on topic (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Creating questions with a clear focus is an important interviewing technique (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Open-ended questions foster exploration and allow

the interviewees to provide the rich detailed data qualitative researchers are looking for (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). An initial open-ended grand tour question was created for first-generation student-athletes to keep a consistency among the interviews that allowed first-generation student-athletes to explore the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Similarly, open-ended grand tour questions were created for the athletic department coaches and staff and other professional university staff that were identified. In addition to the grand tour questions and interview protocol, probes in the form of asking for specific examples, were used to elicit more detailed responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis requires reducing the data, coding the data, and drawing conclusions from the coded data (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). Codes in qualitative research are most often short words or phrases to describe data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). First cycle and second cycle coding were used to analyze the data collected from the interviews. Qualitative case studies require both direct interpretation and categorical aggregation to make meaning data (Stake, 1995). Direct interpretation happens through a single instance where meaning is derived from that particular instance (Stake, 1995). Direct interpretation aligns with my first cycle in vivo coding. Categorical aggregation occurs through the aggregation of instances throughout the data that collectively make meaning of the data (Stake, 1995). In instrumental case studies the need for categorical data is greater as it serves to help us understand the phenomenon within the case (Stake, 1995). The search for meaning within data is often a search for patterns and for consistency within certain conditions (Stake, 1995). Categorical aggregation aligns with

my second cycle pattern coding. In addition to coding, analytic memos were completed to think critically about the data that was collected, the phenomenon, and the potential solutions that may emerge from the data (Saldaña, 2016).

### ***First Cycle Coding***

The first cycle coding used to analyze the data was in vivo coding. In vivo coding honors the voices of the participants to ensure that the data analysis is grounded in their perspectives (Saldaña, 2016). The use of in-vivo coding was important to this study because it was interested in understanding the experiences of first-generation student-athletes in how they recognize the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics. Further, it was interested in exploring the perspectives of athletic department staff and other university staff that interact with and support student-athletes in helping them identify these skills. Using participants' actual words can deepen and enhance the validity and analysis of the study (Saldaña, 2016). Capturing the terms and language used by participants aligned with and was important in answering the research questions from the perspectives of first-generation student-athletes, athletic staff and coaches, and the Office of Career Advancement.

### ***Second Cycle Coding***

Pattern coding was used as the second cycle coding technique which helped identify and group similarly coded data from the previous in-vivo coding cycle (Saldaña, 2016). Pattern coding assembles codes together to analyze their commonality and create a pattern code (Saldaña, 2016). Pattern codes help identify themes, concepts, and patterns from the data (Saldaña, 2016). Pattern coding allowed me to reduce the data even more, but more importantly, it allowed me to attribute meaning in a succinct way to a larger set

of codes. Where applicable and appropriate, some pattern codes were created from the previous in-vivo coding, maintaining the language used by participants to ground the data analysis in their perspectives (Saldaña, 2016). Applying pattern coding as the second cycle coding technique helped identify emerging themes for the research study. A theme is an outcome of the coding and analytical process (Saldaña, 2016). Further, pattern coding may lay the groundwork for cross-case analysis by generating common themes (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Analytic Memos**

Analytic memos were completed for the transcribed interviews as well as the documents collected. Analytic memo writing is a reflective process that allows the researcher to think critically about what they are doing and why (Saldaña, 2016). Analytic memos go beyond the surface of collecting codes and transcribing interviews and embark on a question-raising and connection-making process the researcher undergoes throughout the research project (Saldaña, 2016). The interviews were examined critically in terms of the research questions being asked that lead to a deeper understanding about the phenomenon and findings.

### **Outcomes**

The proposed outcome of this case study was to inform university administrators, athletic staff and coaches, and other university professionals about the transferable skills Division III first-generation student-athletes experience through intercollegiate athletics and how they may consider leveraging these skills for first-generation student-athletes in a way that contributes to their career readiness. The process of coding and writing analytic memos prepared the case study for data analysis. The use of in vivo coding

captured direct interpretations from participants' experiences so that the analysis was grounded in their perspectives. Direct interpretation is an appropriate measure when conducting case studies (Stake, 1995). Data was further analyzed by searching for patterns to help understand the phenomenon within the case and collectively make meaning of the data (Stake, 1995). This type of coding is consistent with case studies and allowed for meaning making to occur, but triangulating the data through multiple perspectives produced an analysis that minimized misrepresentation and misunderstanding and created validity in the outcomes (Stake, 1995). Further, this study sought to explore how athletic department staff and coaches validate these skills for student-athletes and to what, if any extent, these validations help student-athletes connect these transferable skills to areas outside of sports. Additionally, this case study was initiated to understand the role athletic identity plays in a first-generation student-athlete's ability to apply these transferable skills to areas outside of sports. Finally, this study was interested in understanding how the Office of Career Advancement contributed to the development of transferable skills among student-athletes.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers are active participants in qualitative studies, so it is important for qualitative studies to ensure validity and credibility are maintained throughout the research project as biases are virtually impossible to remove in qualitative studies (Stahl & King, 2020; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Validity can be achieved through systematic inquiry which follows a deliberate, conscious process of making decisions about the data which can be ascertained through the transparency and process by which the study was conducted (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Credibility was maintained by

through in-depth interviews and analytic memos to identify similar patterns for themes to emerge (Stahl & King, 2020). Qualitative studies that exuberate trustworthiness are studies that provide a clear and explicit chain of reasoning in exploring specific research questions (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The trustworthiness of this study can be found in the methodological research design, sampling, data collection, and data analysis techniques.

### **Participant Validation**

Participant validation improves accuracy and validity in qualitative studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participant validation was used where interviewees double checked the transcribed interviews to ensure their experiences were being captured accurately. Interviewees had the ability to comment and critique the transcribed interviews they received. Additionally, all interviews were transcribed immediately after they were conducted to ensure that no details were missed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The use of in vivo coding helped maintain validity of the study by using the exact words of participants (Saldaña, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Finally, the role of the researcher in the qualitative study plays an integral part in conducting a trustworthy study (Stahl & King, 2020; Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a former first-generation student-athlete I was always fascinated by what sports provided for me; the discipline, the work ethic, an extended network of friends, camaraderie, and so many other great attributes that can be used in various settings. Competing as a first-generation student-athlete and participating in intercollegiate athletics equipped me with lifelong tools that I use daily in multiple settings. However, it was not until I grew older that I realized the impact sports had on my life. Now, as a head

coach that works closely with student-athletes, I am interested in creating these same experiences for other student-athletes and helping them connect what is being developed through intercollegiate athletics to other settings of their life. While my experience as a first-generation student-athlete and coach can create a familiarity with participants and contribute to this qualitative study, I must be careful not to let my own biases and assumptions cloud the data I am gathering. My own assumptions include the belief that student-athletes develop transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics. Additionally, I do not believe that universities are doing enough to validate these experiences for first-generation student-athletes. Lastly, as an insider researcher I need to be aware of the potential biases and assumptions that follow such a role.

Reflexivity by journaling was practiced prior to the study to be conscious of my own assumptions, during participants interviews, and the transcription of interviews to reflect on what was shared, my feelings towards them, and in the analysis of data to ensure I was accurately conveying what was being shared (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). My role as the researcher is generally interested in understanding the experiences of these first-generation student-athletes and the university staff members that interact with them to draw findings that may improve the use of transferable skills that are developed through intercollegiate athletics.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Producing a trustworthy study is one that is ethically sound (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The proposal of this study was reviewed and approved by the Rowan Internal Review Board (IRB) to ensure the protection of all human participants and the use of research protocols. Participants were made fully aware about the intent of this study and



that their identification would remain private and confidential. Participants were informed about how the data would be collected and interpreted. The transcribed interviews were stored electronically where only the researcher had access and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. Further, participants' interviews were shared with them to ensure they were portrayed accurately. Lastly, participants were not paid to participate in the study and participants were given the freedom not to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

Chapter Four presents the findings of a qualitative, instrumental single case study that was conducted to understand the experiences of first-generation student-athletes with the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics at a NCAA Division III public university. Transferable skills are often considered skills that are context and content free (Wiant, 1977). Additionally, this study sought to understand how athletic department staff and coaches validate transferable skills for student-athletes and help them connect these skills to areas outside of sports. Further, the study investigated how other professional staff supported the development of these students in a way that contributed to their career readiness. Conducting an instrumental case study allowed this research to elicit rich details about specific experiences and deepen our understanding about the phenomenon itself (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Stake, 1995).

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do student-athletes at a public, Division III university, experience the development of transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics?
2. Which people do student-athletes identify in helping them recognize the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics?
3. In what ways do student-athletes describe how their athletic identity may influence their ability to apply transferable skills to areas outside of sports?
4. How do athletic department staff and coaches validate transferable skills for student-athletes that help them apply these transferable skills to areas outside of sports?

5. How does the Office of Career Advancement support the development of transferable skills among student-athletes that contribute to their career readiness?

The case study took place at a public, Division III university in the northeast region of the United States. Elicot University has over 20,000 students and consists of eight different colleges and nine different schools offering over 90 bachelor's degrees, 48 master's degrees, two professional degrees, and nine doctoral degree programs. The athletic department hosts eight men's and 10 women's sports teams competing in Division III NCAA athletics. There are a total of 537 student-athletes. Forty-one student-athletes have been identified as first-generation via criterion sampling. For the purposes of this study, I sampled students who were admitted to the university between Fall 2019 and Spring 2022 because it was likely that these first-generation student-athletes were currently enrolled at the university and the experiences they are drawing from are recent.

### **Participants**

Initially, 41 first-generation student-athletes were invited to participate in the study and 12 of the 41 agreed to participate (n=12). The participants' gender and sports they participated in varied. A review of their gender and sports they participated in can be found in Table 1 below.

**Table 1***Description of First-Generation Student-Athletes*

Participant Alias	Sex	Sport
Marquis	Male	Men's Basketball
Steven	Male	Men's Basketball
Charlene	Female	Field Hockey
Geneva	Female	Women's Basketball
Alicia	Female	Field Hockey
Arthur	Male	Men's Basketball
Kelsey	Female	Field Hockey
Elise	Female	Women's Basketball
Amber	Female	Women's Swimming
Clare	Female	Softball
Drake	Male	Football
Rachel	Female	Softball

Fifteen coaches at the university were invited to participate and eight of the 15 agreed to participate (n=8). Further, two athletic administration staff and two university staff members were invited and agreed to participate (n=4). A review of the sports they coached and the titles they hold can be found in Table 2 below. A total of 24 student athletes, coaches, administrators, and staff participated in this study (N=24).

**Table 2***Description of Coaches, Athletic Administrators, and Professional Staff*

Participant Alias	Role	Sport/Department
John	Head Coach	Men's Basketball
Darius	Head Coach	Women's Basketball
Steve	Head Coach	Men's Soccer
Laura	Head Coach	Women's Lacrosse
Dillon	Head Coach	Men's Cross Country/Track & Field
Mary	Head Coach	Field Hockey
Jessica	Head Coach	Softball
Ericka	Head Coach	Women's Swimming
Jacob	Athletic Administrator	Athletic Department
Miley	Athletic Administrator	Athletic Department
Julie	NCAA Faculty Representative	Health & Exercise Science
Bill	Director	Office of Career Advancement

**Findings**

Data were generated from multiple sources, via semi-structured interviews, to understand the participants' experiences surrounding first-generation student-athletes and their transferable skills. Specifically, the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics that may be applicable to other professional settings. The findings provide rich detail on how first-generation student-athletes experience transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics, including the types of transferable skills they acquire

and the impact their coaches have. Further, the findings show how coaches, athletic staff, the Director of the Office of Career Advancement, and a NCAA faculty representative validate and support student-athletes in helping them recognize the transferable skills that are developed through intercollegiate athletics. Analysis generated nine different findings, which are represented as themes: *Sports equips skills, immediate feedback, creating ownership and accountability, DIII athletic identity, a coach's impact, a coach's duty, organic teaching, "best class you'll ever take", student-athlete development, and lacking systematic approach.* In this section I provide a detailed description of each finding, an explanation of that finding, and data from participants that support each finding.

### ***Sports Equips Skills***

The participants shared many transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics valued by employers that can contribute to their career readiness including time management, teamwork, leadership, and communication. First-generation student-athletes can benefit from these skills developed through intercollegiate athletics in a way that prepares them for their professional careers. Further, less than 1% of NCAA Division III student-athletes will pursue a professional career in their specific sport, so leveraging what is developed and learned through their participation in intercollegiate athletics should be a premium. Understanding the experiences behind these transferable skills developed by athletes through intercollegiate athletics is an important starting point as it can allow universities to help first-generation student-athletes make the connections between what they are developing through athletics and how it applies to their

professional careers. The sub-themes of the larger *sports equips skills* theme are shared below.

**Time Management.** An overwhelming majority of participants shared how participating in intercollegiate athletics equipped them with time management skills. Time management skills are desired by employers as it communicates that candidates can balance multiple priorities and use their time efficiently. First-generation student-athletes reported how competing in intercollegiate athletics while also attending school full-time, and at times, working a part-time job, has equipped first-generation student-athletes with the tools to juggle multiple responsibilities. Further, it has taught them how to prioritize certain tasks throughout their day.

One first-generation student-athlete described how competing in intercollegiate athletics helped with their planning:

Well, time management, I feel like you're kind of just thrown into it because you choose to do something. So now you have to show up. Like you have to figure out how you're gonna get here. You have to block out times. You might have to give some things up in your season... so I feel like time management. You kind of just learn your strong points, like you know if you can get certain things done, or you know, if you have to, like plan it out. (Charlene)

Further, another first-generation student-athlete described how athletics helped them develop time management skills among other skills that will be transferable into their career and interviews when communicating about these skills:

Athletics at Rowan helped me with time management. It helped me develop those skills that are transferable into my career, so like learning how to communicate

with other people, learning how to balance my tasks, you know, learning how to work in groups. It's a lot of things that I had learned just by interacting with my teammates like were things that I started using. I have had 2 internships so far at this company. So things that I started to use in my internship, and even in like interviews and stuff. You're constantly getting asked kind of like the same questions over and over, and you can relate a lot of the questions that they're asking you to experiences that you had when you're an athlete. (Alicia)

Whether intentional or not, first-generation student-athletes at Elicot University learned the value of time management as a transferable skill. Alicia in particular described how she immediately began using this skill in her internship. Alicia went on to explain time management as one of the most important transferable skills she has learned:

The biggest one is always time management, because you have to balance a full load of classes, you know, like basically a part time job with your sports during the week. And then also, like I would work part time as well. So it's like balancing all 3 of those things and learning how to make time for yourself as well, and like mental health and stuff. So I think time management would be a big one. (Alicia)

Similarly, another first-generation student-athlete explained:

I learned a lot of skills like I said before, like leadership, and just like taking a lot of responsibility with stuff, and then also like time management as well, like softball, sports in general, like you have lift, you have the actual practice. You have games. But then also, like we did a lot of like, we do like running one day a week in the fall, or, like yoga, was a big thing we did with us, so like not only you



have to balance that all that stuff, but you also have to balance school on top of it.” (Rachel)

Student-athletes described how participating in intercollegiate athletics required them to balance multiple responsibilities at once including athletic participation, coursework, studying, and at times working a part-time job. Time management skills have been developed as a result of their experience as a student-athlete.

Coaches in this study discussed the multiple responsibilities student-athletes have to balance in college and if handled well, how this can benefit them in the real world.

One coach supported this notion of time management as he explained:

What you're learning here on coaches team is how to be a, how to be a responsible teammate, how to be a responsible young adult managing your time, not wasting your time in college. Time management, in fact to take advantage of the time and take advantage of what you gotta do now, because it's going to be all transferable when you get in the real world. So we do really speak about it. (Darius)

Coaches in this study emphasized how student-athletes have to use their time wisely while they are in college. Some coaches educate them on taking advantage of the time they have. Although this coach in particular didn't specify how they should manage their time, conversations around using their time wisely may contribute to his student-athletes concept of time management. Another coach explained:

I think about time management. you have to be able to go to your classes, get your work done, be at practice, travel for games, or in our case meets. Like for us the meet isn't, you know, 2 hours. It could be 30 min away. We could be there all day, or it could be, you know, 6 hours all day, and then travel back, or like we're going

to South Carolina last year at Auburn. So that's like, we'll be there a couple of days. This class, be able to communicate with your professor that you're missing class, what you're making up, getting all that done, and you know that's in a later part of the year. It's going to be the week before finals, so we have to be able to, yeah, balance that, and you know, find a way to prepare them. (Dillon)

It was evident from the coaches' responses that time management was a significant skill that student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics. It requires student-athletes to think about their days and weeks ahead in a way that helps them prioritize their schedules. Time management is a transferable skill because it can be used in multiple contexts.

These descriptions support the notion that first-generation student-athletes develop time management skills by competing in intercollegiate athletics. By participating in intercollegiate athletics while enrolled in school full-time, first-generation student-athletes are forced to make the best use of their time and to prioritize their commitments throughout their day, semester, and year. After interviewing the participants, time management was a skill that was repeatedly mentioned as one that was developed through their participation in intercollegiate athletics. Coaches are also aware of the time management skills that student-athletes' develop from their participation in intercollegiate athletics. If first-generation student-athletes are able to recall their time management skills through intercollegiate athletics they can use them in a way that supports them in their professional careers.

**Teamwork.** A common transferable skill shared by participants included a concept of teamwork which most described as interacting with multiple personalities and

sharing a difference in opinions while still working towards a common goal. Further, the athletic department staff emphasized the idea of teamwork that is acquired through participating in intercollegiate athletics. Teamwork in an intercollegiate athletic environment often means student-athletes are working together to reach a desired goal within a given season. Teamwork in the workplace often means coworkers are working together toward a common goal in an efficient way. Even with sales jobs and jobs that emphasize individual achievements there is often still a concept of a team that helps push each other to perform at an optimal level. The same can be said for intercollegiate athletics teams where individual accomplishments tend to be the focus for teams such as track and field, cross country, and swimming. Similar to the workplace, participating on an intercollegiate sports team often requires a student-athlete to carry out a specific task or duty that contributes to the overall success of their team.

One first-generation student-athlete described how everyone on the team puts aside their differences to work together. She shared:

I think teamwork is a big thing that you can take inside and outside, because you might not like everyone, like everyone has different opinions, issues whatever. But you all have the same goal at the end of the day. So once you step on that field, or once you get into your workplace like everything aside, like you work together, you get it done. (Charlene)

First-generation student-athletes in this study recognized the importance of teamwork developed through intercollegiate athletics and how you put aside differences in an athletic setting to accomplish a specific goal. Charlene shared about the importance of teamwork and its applicability in the workplace. Another first-generation student-athlete

made the connection between teamwork in intercollegiate athletics and its translation into their professional career. She explained:

I for sure see the transferable skills connecting to my professional career, because I think that they've like become a part of myself. So there's something that, like, I will always carry with me, no matter what walk of life I'm in. You want to do what you can for your team. So that's when, like teamwork comes in, and like responsibility, you do your job off the field that you are getting better, and like hard work, and all of these things, like as you grow as an athlete, all these skills start to become something that you create and like, find in yourself. (Kelsey)

Kelsey drew a connection between the teamwork skills she develops through participating in intercollegiate athletics and how these will be beneficial in her professional career. Further, she emphasized how this skill is something that she will “always carry with her”; it is something that is a part of her makeup now which can assist her as she transitions out of her sport. Most first-generation student-athletes in this study shared how their teamwork skills translate into their workplace environment.

An athletic administrator explained the importance of teamwork and how it translates from intercollegiate athletics to real world application:

I think, being a part of a group, especially the team sports. You don't get to play as much as you want, or maybe or just learning how to function as a group, how to run a play, how to run a play or an offense is not a whole lot different than how you, I'm getting into the business world now, maybe how you work with the team to complete a sales right? It's learning how to work as part of a team. (Jacob)

Athletic administrators and coaches in this study described how student-athletes develop a sense of how to work within a team through intercollegiate athletics. They made the connection between the concept of teamwork and the teamwork skills developed through intercollegiate athletics and its translation into real world settings.

These descriptions suggest that first-generation student-athletes acquire teamwork skills that they will carry with them into their professional careers. Student-athletes shared the relation between teamwork that is developed through intercollegiate athletics and its applicability to their professional careers. They have defined teamwork in the sense of working within a team to achieve a common goal which is a valuable practice in the workplace. Understanding how the part you play in the bigger picture is a valuable skill to attain. Teamwork is something that is valued by employers because it creates strong relationships through communication, support, and working collaboratively and cooperatively.

**Leadership.** A few first-generation student-athletes described the leadership capabilities they acquired by participating in intercollegiate athletics and how this relates to their future professional careers. Further, some coaches supported this notion that leadership is built through intercollegiate athletics, and it serves as a valuable transferable skill.

One first-generation student-athlete described how she was able to assume a leadership role within her team. She explained:

Then leadership on the end of it as well, being able to like, help others and be the one that's kind of like standing up in a team meeting that has definitely helped by being a student-athlete. (Clare)

First-generation student-athletes in this study described how the leadership skills developed through intercollegiate athletics will be applicable to their professional careers. Clare connects her leadership skills as a student-athlete to her future career and wanting to advance in a company. Another first-generation student-athlete described the leadership he developed through intercollegiate athletics with his work experience:

I'll be the person that like the sergeants would call and ask questions. I know I keep saying it, but like the leadership part of it and like it's bigger than yourself. You know what I mean. Like going every day trying to represent North Wildwood, where I work, like trying to represent for the department, and just give an example for everybody else. (Drake)

He went on to explain:

I feel like you're a leader on campus. I feel like. and it's kind of a role that you have as a student-athlete as well as like the skills you learn is important to me. That's the main thing I'm going to pick up from college. That I came to a place where I think that it would make me a better person like a better man. Not just a better athlete. (Drake)

He described how his leadership skills through being a student-athlete at Elicot University translated into the summer job he holds in law enforcement.

Coaches in this study described how leadership skills are developed by student-athletes through intercollegiate athletics. One coach described how he tries to identify players on his team that are progressing in their leadership roles and traits. He explained:

I try to identify certain students who are making progress in their leadership roles and their captain roles and even some of them are unofficial [roles] because

they're you know, they are trying to be leaders, and they try to be, you know, good for the team. I try to encourage them, and I try to at least acknowledge it. I think, acknowledging it is enough to praise somebody. They don't need a pat on their back every day, but they need to know that somebody notices that they're doing something better than what they used to. (Darius)

Darius used encouragement and acknowledgement to recognize student-athletes that are making progress in their leadership roles. Encouragement and acknowledgement for first-generation student-athletes can help propel them forward and give them the confidence they need throughout their collegiate journey. Another coach explained:

We, you know, hopefully provide them leadership. Show them how to be a leader. Show them the positive things of teamwork, and all the things that go into athletics that you know, hopefully, are life skills for them, for their future. We don't have as many teachers as we used to have, so they're going out into so many different professions that I think the leadership skills that they come away with are important. (Jessica)

She went on to explain further:

But in leadership we do spend a lot of time talking about different ways that you can become a leader and how to do it. (Jessica)

Most coaches in this study explained how intercollegiate athletics instills leadership skills in student-athletes. They recognized how these leadership skills will be beneficial to their student-athletes throughout their life. Coaches shared how they try to lead by example, so their student-athletes mimic their behavior and develop similar leadership skills such as being on time and organized, communicating effectively, showing empathy, providing

encouragement, respecting others, and resolving issues. Additionally, some coaches would have guest speakers talk about what it means to be a leader.

First-generation student-athletes recognized how participating in intercollegiate athletics improved their leadership capabilities and provided them with opportunities to serve in leadership type of positions. One first-generation student-athlete described how having leadership skills may help her in her future career while another described how these leadership skills are already on display in his current summer job. Some coaches communicated how they encourage and support student-athletes in building their leadership capabilities. These descriptions support the notion that leadership skills are developed through intercollegiate athletics.

**Communication and Improved Social Skills.** Many participants shared the importance of communication in intercollegiate athletics and identified this as a transferable skill that will be beneficial to them in their professional careers.

Communication is constant in college athletics and the first-generation student-athletes described how it happens on multiple levels for them. This communication occurs among teammates during competition and practice, between players and their coaches, between players and their teachers when they need to make up schoolwork or request an extension due to their competing schedules, and between players and the athletic administration.

Student-athletes shared how their ability to communicate with teammates and coaches boosted their confidence to be more comfortable communicating in other settings with people they are less familiar with. Multiple first-generation student-athletes discussed how they became better communicators and developed necessary social skills due to competing on an intercollegiate athletic team. These student-athletes seemed to



develop a greater confidence in themselves because of these skills they were acquiring. One first-generation student-athlete explained how his involvement in intercollegiate athletics gave him the social skills he was missing:

It gave me the social skills that I needed. So, Elicot allowed me to talk more to my teammates, to my coaches and have better relationships. So it gave me the ability to, you know, um, just just speak to different people, you understand?

(Marquis)

Another first-generation student-athlete explained how participating in intercollegiate athletics allowed him to speak with and get to know, other people:

I was from a small town, so I really didn't talk to a lot of people. I never thought I'd talk to people that I talked to now on the team, just like people from all over the place, New York. So, I'll never meet these people and never talk to them, but they gave me the opportunity to see where other people are from. (Clare)

Another first-generation student-athlete shared the same sentiment and explained:

I would say that the ability to like, talk to people. I know that sounds like so random, but like when you're thrown on a team, sometimes you don't know anyone. So, like you need to build that chemistry, and you need to start to get to know your teammates. And I think that does translate in my life because I was not the type of person that will go up to people and be like, hey, I'm Kelsey! What's your name? Like, what major? Like all that stuff, like I have become a very outgoing person, I think because of situations like being put on a team where I don't know anyone. (Kelsey)

For first-generation student-athletes in this study, competing in intercollegiate athletics helped them with their communication and social skills. Many first-generation student-athletes in this study described how their communication skills and ability to talk to other people improved based on their involvement with their intercollegiate athletic team.

First-generation student-athletes expressed the importance of communication both in their respective sports and its applicability in real life situations. They described how they forged better relationships by communicating with their teammates and coaches. One first-generation student-athlete explained how communication is a major factor to success and how she feels this area of sports transcribes to real life:

Like communication in all sports is huge. On the field, like you can tell just watching a game, if communication is low, or if it's high, so I feel like learning that, the best way to succeed is to just be open with everyone. Talk, no matter what. Like just get it going, all be on the same page. I feel like that transcribes into real life. (Charlene)

Another first-generation student-athlete explained how her leadership role on the team provided her the opportunity to communicate with and behalf of student-athletes to coaches which forged better relationships. She explained:

Communication, like since I am a captain, some of the girls might not, want to talk to the coach, they bring it to me, and I bring it to coach something like that, or even just like having a relationship with the coaches, whether it's like on or off court stuff, just like communicating like that. (Geneva)

First-generation student-athletes in this study described how participating in intercollegiate athletics equipped them with better communication skills. Garnering good

communication skills translates into multiple industries and facets of life post-graduation.

One coach supported the notion and described the importance of communication. She explained:

They have to communicate with people that they're competing with or training with. They need to communicate with the coaches because it's the only way it actually works. (Ericka)

She went on later to explain:

I think by far, like everything else falls into place if they can communicate. And so really we hone in on that, because those are probably the most successful seasons, when the athletes can talk with the coaches, talk with one another, dissolve any issues that there are. It keeps chemistry good. I think you know that really is the overarching thing that everyone needs. (Ericka)

Coaches described how communication is a cornerstone of any successful team and how their student-athletes can take these same communication skills into their professional lives.

Essentially, first-generation student-athletes described how participating in intercollegiate athletics improved their ability to communicate and speak up for themselves because they were in an environment where communication happens constantly. In turn, they understood the importance of communication and how this can benefit them in their professional careers. Further, it gave them the confidence to communicate in settings outside of sports. Coaches further supported this notion of communication and the positive effect it can have on student-athletes. Similarly, the other data highlighted in this section supports the notion that sports equips skills.

First-generation student-athletes and their coaches described how time management, teamwork, leadership, and communication are skills that student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics. They described how competing in intercollegiate athletics equipped them with transferable skills that can be beneficial to their professional careers. These types of transferable skills may contribute to the career readiness of first-generation student-athletes. If these transferable skills are nurtured by coaches, athletic administrators, and other university staff that regularly interact with first-generation student-athletes, they may be able to leverage these skills post-graduation as they pursue their professional careers.

### ***Constructive Feedback***

Participants in the study identified how they developed an ability to receive constructive feedback through intercollegiate athletics. They shared that the type of feedback they receive from their coaches is immediate and constant. It's the type of feedback that they believe is hard to duplicate through other settings such as the classroom, but it is something they believe will benefit them in real world settings. They went on to share the understanding that the feedback they were receiving was to help them.

One first-generation student-athlete explained:

Being able to take constructive criticism, hard criticism, or any criticism, they [other people] immediately think that they're attacking the person. I like having good hard coaches. I've always preferred them to be even harder on me, but I would say constructive criticism, and just knowing that they're not attacking you

as a person, but that you need to improve, and that goes for any job, not just law enforcement, but anywhere in the world. (Drake)

Similarly, another first-generation student-athlete described:

I feel like constructive criticism of sports, like I've learned to take that my whole life, so like I go out in the real world like it might not bother me the way it bothers some other people, so, you can take it and go with it. (Charlene)

These first-generation student-athletes described how their ability to take constructive feedback was developed through intercollegiate athletics. They recognized how being able to take such feedback is something that will help them in the real world. An athletic administrator explained how student-athletes are constantly receiving feedback in a very immediate way:

I think, taking coaching, or suggestions or criticism. You could walk into a practice in any sport and multiple times. The coach is going to say, you know you didn't do that right? That's important. (Jacob)

He explained further:

I don't think you get these things in a classroom... You don't have a teacher telling you 10 times a day in a classroom, you don't really understand this concept, or I don't think you're taking notes properly right now, or you know, work on your body language. (Jacob)

Jacob described how the type of feedback received through intercollegiate athletics is unique; it is immediate and constant. This type of feedback is important as it helps student-athletes grow in their athletic abilities, but it also helps them become accustomed to receiving criticism in general and using this criticism to develop in other areas of their

life. A representative from the Office of Career Advancement further supported this notion as he explained:

At the end of the day there's not many places in college where you get formal feedback immediately, where, like in the world of work, you know, like if we mess up today, you're getting called on it like someone's telling you like, hey? That's not good. We're getting a call like hey? Fix this. Where I think for some students that's a jarring thing when it happens to you in the world of work. But I think if you're an athlete, that's not the first time you've been called to stand for your actions. (Bill)

Bill explains how student-athletes are prepared to receive the type of feedback that may occur in a work environment because they have been receiving this type of criticism through their experience as a student-athlete.

First-generation student-athletes described how they are better equipped to handle feedback as a result of competing in intercollegiate athletics. They explained how the feedback they receive through intercollegiate athletics will prepare them for the criticism they may receive in their professional careers. Further, university professional and athletic staff recognized how the type of immediate feedback that occurs through intercollegiate athletics is something that is hard to duplicate in other college settings such as the classroom. First-generation student-athletes receive this type of feedback as something positive.

### ***Division III Athletic Identity***

Athletic identity was a concept unfamiliar to most first-generation student-athletes interviewed in this study. I explained to the first-generation student-athletes that athletic

identity is an identity athletes develop through their participation in sports that sometimes halts their ability to recognize themselves in any other way than as an athlete. I further explained that sometimes athletic identity may overshadow an individual's ability to explore other areas of their personal identity such as their academic and career aspirations. After explaining the concept of athletic identity with the participants they described their identity within the university. A few first-generation student-athletes identified as an athlete first and student second while most first-generation student-athletes identified as student first and athlete second. Some participants mentioned the support from their coaches to keep school first that seemed to help them prioritize their studies before their sport. Other first-generation student-athletes described how their experience in intercollegiate athletics helped them think about how the skills they have learned through intercollegiate athletics can benefit them in their lives after sports. One participant mentioned their interest in pursuing graduate school after their athletic eligibility has been exhausted. Two sub themes developed as a result of this theme: *athlete-student* and *student-athlete*.

**Athlete-Student.** Some participants shared that they identified first as an athlete then as a student upon considering their identity within the university. They mentioned how their focus at times during their enrollment has been mainly on their sport. It seems, at least for a few, academics was secondary. However, one first-generation student-athlete that identified as an athlete first did not feel like her participation in intercollegiate athletics negatively impacted how she thought about her professional career or applying the skills she has learned through intercollegiate athletics to her professional career. She

further explained how student-athletes bring a unique skill set into their professional career.

One first-generation student-athlete described how they associate more with the role of an athlete:

When people ask me like you know, what do you do or what's your plans? I tell them like, I'm a basketball player. I play basketball at Rowan, or you know, I go by that, like a basketball player. I would say that I'm an athlete right now, like I said I'm kind of not into school, but I also still go by the title of a student-athlete, because I know that it's important to go to school as well as it is to play a sport at school, so I would say, I would say athlete, athlete first, but also I know that I have to be a student. (Marquis)

Marquis identified with the role of an athlete. He did not necessarily see himself as a student-athlete in the true sense of the word and school essentially was secondary to his competing in intercollegiate athletics. Another first-generation student-athlete described how she identifies more as an athlete-student:

I would say for me specifically, I would say more like an athlete-student. I feel like I tend to put athletics at the forefront. I know in Division 3 we really should not be, but for me it's kind of, it's just my lifestyle when I'm not at practice, when I'm not in class, I'm at the gym. It's kind of just like I'd rather spend my free time like doing athletic things like going to games. So I would say it'd be more like athlete-student kind of and I do prioritize school work and such, but the athlete side of it when you're young is more fun. (Clare)



However, she went on to explain how she doesn't believe competing in intercollegiate athletics has influenced her ability to apply the skills she has learned through sports to her professional career even though she identifies as an athlete first. She explained:

No, I don't think it has, just because, well like Elicot specifically, like them letting me kind of come down here [work] and see if this is something I want to do.

Sports did not stop me from doing that. And you know I'm probably gonna come back next fall and just play again, you know. So I definitely think that being a student-athlete has not hindered me like career-wise, and I know that, like even when I'm done graduating, I'll be like okay, like being a student-athlete helped me learn a lot of things, and I'm ready to then take those skills to the next level.

(Clare)

Over identifying with the role of an athlete can have a negative impact on student-athletes. It affects growth in areas such as career exploration and how they think about their academic abilities. One first-generation student-athlete described how their involvement in intercollegiate athletics negatively influenced their ability to focus on their classes and career:

I definitely, whether it's good or not, definitely at times have focused more on basketball than like school, which probably isn't the best. But I don't know, my focus is mainly on basketball, and it definitely does take away from school, even like class, studying for exams, like having late practices and then coming back from a late game. It's hard to like have the energy to study for exams, and even like go to class and explore stuff like that. So it definitely has like kind of shifted

my focus, like being an athlete more towards athletics than kind of focusing on my career and classes and stuff like that. (Geneva)

Geneva shared how her main focus was her sport. She reflected on how this approach probably wasn't the best and the negative effect it has on her studies and exploring other areas of her college experience.

Understanding how first-generation student-athletes perceive themselves at the university may provide insight on whether their athletic identity may influence their ability to apply the transferable skills they learn through intercollegiate athletics to their professional careers. A few participants shared how their main focus at the university was their sport and how at times this took away from their pursuit and focus as a student and beyond. However, one participant shared that even though they identified as an athlete-student that this did not seem to influence their ability to think about the skills they acquired through intercollegiate athletics and how it is applicable to their career.

**Student-athlete.** Most participants shared that they associated themselves as a student first and athlete second. They stressed the importance of school and how this supersedes their athletic participation. Further, many participants described how what they are learning in sports is interconnected to their careers after sports. Many participants mentioned their aspirations after their intercollegiate playing careers are over which indicates that they are thinking about their next move. Throughout the interviews I came to understand that athletic identity may serve a lesser role for Division III first-generation student-athletes.

One first-generation student-athlete described the different options she is considering post-graduation:

I have many different options right now, but I'm looking into paralegal social work, the FBI, or even a state police trooper. I already applied to be a state police trooper. So I'm waiting on that. Yeah, I plan to stay in law and justice. Do anything within that. I just wanna help people better themselves and better the community. (Elise)

A number of first-generation student-athletes discussed their plans for after graduation once their intercollegiate playing careers were over. Many of the first-generation student-athletes in this study were focused on their lives after sports and have begun developing plans on what that looks like. Another first-generation student-athlete described how she values academics:

It's kind of like a lifestyle. I feel like that's one of the biggest like parts in my life, being here. Like of course, school is important and school is number one, but sports is the runner up. They are neck and neck. It's like it's just a little family like it's nice to be able to go to them whenever, any of them. I do love athletics, but I wouldn't choose just athletics because I am big in the classroom. I do value my education a lot, and I do like sports a lot, and I think I do shine in both worlds. It's a mix of both. (Charlene)

Another first-generation student-athlete explained how their college experience actually helped them transition from an athlete mindset that just focused on sports to a student-athlete mindset that focused on sports and academics:

I would say student-athlete. Now, if you ask me this question in high school, I would say athlete. I'm doing better. I have 3.8, and, like I'm involved. I have a double major which is like not something I could say in high school, but like

maturing and being around more mature people and leaders and older guys in sports, you see what's important and acting cool is not important. The grades, and like what you actually do are. (Drake)

He went on to explain:

I think it [sports] helped me with traits, and like it helps me, my identity, and like outside of sports with like school and jobs. Like high school, I wasn't that great at school, but being here and learning the skills [leadership, communication, decision-making] from being an athlete and taking on that responsibility, really made me try more in school. (Drake)

Most first-generation student-athletes in this study placed an emphasis on their schoolwork and maintaining good grades over the importance of participating in their collegiate sport. They understood the importance of their education and how this took precedence over any athletic related goals.

First-generation student-athletes described how they understood how things between intercollegiate athletics and life after sports are interconnected. These types of descriptions suggest that first-generation student-athletes in this study were not consumed by their athletic identity. A few first-generation student-athletes described how intercollegiate athletics and other areas of their life were interconnected. For example, Alicia mentioned how she connected the skills she developed through intercollegiate athletics to other areas of her life:

I'm very self aware, so like I understand how things usually are interconnected like that. Sometimes your identity is so driven as being an athlete, that you don't really know how to connect it to everything else. So I think, having somebody

kind of have that wake up call for me to like give me advice on how to connect things and show me the right things to say kind of helped me make more steps in the future, of like, this connects to this type of thing. (Alicia)

Similarly, another first-generation student-athlete explained how competing in intercollegiate sports actually helped them make connections to other areas of their life:

So I think specifically sophomore year. I really developed that connection [between sports and other settings]. We're like, oh, I can take this and apply it here and, like, I need to put my same effort into both school and sports. (Kelsey)

A few first-generation student-athletes recognized that the work ethic they put into their sport can also be applied to the work ethic they put towards their academics. Further, they recognized the connection between the skills and lessons they learn through sports are applicable to other areas of their lives.

First-generation student-athletes in this study described how their coaches prioritized school before sport. The same sentiment was shared by coaches interviewed in this study as well in terms of the messages they send to their student-athletes. Coaches helping student-athletes realize the importance of their academics and their careers after sports can contribute to student-athletes exploring other areas of their identity. One first-generation student-athlete described how their coach supports their academic workload and how she recognizes that she won't be playing professionally in their sport after college:

Well, first of all, coach is always like class first, homework first, student first.

Also, I think about it as in like after I graduate, I most likely won't play basketball

ever again, at like the professional level. So to me, the student comes first, then the athlete. (Elise)

Another first-generation student-athlete described how she identifies as a student-athlete and how her coach supports this:

Definitely a student-athlete because our coach like wants us to be dedicated to education, because she knows, like outside of swimming, we also want to get like a good career and everything like that. So it's a lot of both for me. (Amber)

She further described how she doesn't believe her involvement in intercollegiate sports will negatively affect how she thinks about her professional career:

I do not think so, because as much as I love swimming, and everything like that, I also know, like I have a different career path outside of this. That's what I'm going for, because if I wanted to like be a professional swimmer, I would have gone like D1 instead of like D3. So, I think there's a difference between that. If you're, I feel like, if you're D3, you do it for the passion of the sport, cause you like, you enjoy doing it, but it's like not your entire life. That's how I see it. (Amber)

Another first-generation student-athlete described how she prioritizes school and her athletic program does the same:

I would say student-athlete, for sure. I really prioritize school, and I know the athletic program really prioritizes school. And so for me it was always student-athlete, because it's a balance. (Alicia)

Coaches in this study seemed to be key players in helping their student-athletes understand the importance of getting an education. This type of support from coaches can help student-athletes not develop such a high level of athletic identity. A coach described

how some student-athletes may struggle leaving a sport while others will benefit and be able to connect the skills they have learned through sports to other areas of their lives:

I think there's always a couple athletes that through many years that like always had their sport to fall back on. It's like the moment that, or the activity, or whatever that defines them right. We always talk about that as like former athletes, that it's hard to transition into work, life, or just life after being a student athlete that I think some of them don't realize in those moments like that pivotal transition moment everything that they've learned, and how they can apply that to something else, because all they're thinking about is you know what they just lost. But again, I think that more than that, you're going to have a lot of athletes that understand what they just learned. And you know they're able to apply that to work life after or career readiness. But I think there's definitely going to be a few that struggle because of that like loss of self per se. (Erika)

Coaches that approach student-athletes from this mindset can help them navigate the transition from sport to career more easily.

The participants in this study emphasized a dedication to their studies and explained how they did not feel that participating in intercollegiate athletics hindered their ability to focus on their careers after sports. As one coach mentioned, for some student-athletes and often those that compete at higher levels of NCAA athletics, often it is difficult for them to transition into their professional lives from their athletic careers, but for participants in this study it was evident that they may not deal with the same type of identity crisis during this transition. Many student-athletes shared their plans on life after sports once their athletic eligibility was exhausted which supports the notion that

their athletic identity may have little influence on their ability to manage this transition and apply the transferable skills they have learned from intercollegiate athletics to their professional careers.

### *A Coach's Impact*

Overwhelmingly, many first-generation student-athletes talked about the impact their coaches and the athletic department staff had on their understanding of the transferable skills they were developing through intercollegiate sports. By denoting conversations and interactions with their coaches they explained how their coaching staff has been a support system and helped them navigate discussions about life after sports and how they can use what they are learning through sports later in life. In a similar way many first-generation student-athletes mentioned how the athletic department as a whole prepares them to think about their life after sports.

When asked about the persons that help them identify the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics, one first-generation student-athlete explained:

I would say, yeah, like coaches, just people I know like within the athletic department, teammates...I started developing them [transferable skills] from like I said, my coaches. (Marquis)

Another first-generation student-athlete gave credit to her coaches and explained:

So like with the transferable skills, and like seeing them happening, I feel like it's due to like a good portion of like coaches all like mentioning it, pushing it towards you, like we have people come out like, I blank on names, but Mary [coach] always has people coming out like they're doing like different things on like campus, like preparing us for the real world, like to get us kind of moving and



like transitioning into that section of our lives. So I feel like it's definitely a good mixture. (Charlene)

First-generation student-athletes in this study described the support they received from their coaches and the athletic department at large in terms of preparing them for their lives after sports. Another first-generation student-athlete credited the athletic department when she described:

I think our own athletics department does a really great job of making students realize that there's more to them than just being an athlete. You know we have meetings in the beginning of every season where they bring us all into the auditorium, and, like, show us the resources that we have, and then, like, help us realize that we need to like progress more than just being an athlete. (Alicia)

She further described:

I think I've had a support system given to me by, like my teammates and my coaches as well, where I know that I could always go to Mary [Coach] if I need help with anything, or even like Perla [Assistant Athletic Director] in the athletic department, like they're constantly there as mentors, where, if I ever, you know, needed help, with like a recommendation letter or something that has to do with my career, they're always there to help guide me. (Alicia)

There was this notion shared by first-generation student-athletes that their coaches were a huge impact on helping them realize that they valued them outside competing for their team. Their coaches were invested in them as people and preparing them for their professional careers. One first-generation student-athlete explained how her coach values the academic area of her student-athlete experience:

I know my coach specifically, like if something really comes up like we need to go to a study thing or something like we can be late to practice. We can leave practice early, like, so she, like, especially Coach Mary, does a really good job of highlighting the school aspect of being an athlete (Kelsey)

Coaches had a significant impact on the first-generation student-athletes interviewed in this study in terms of their influence to keep student-athletes focused on their lives and career after sports. Coaches helped student-athletes in helping them understand how the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics are applicable to their lives post-graduation.

First-generation student-athletes described how their athletic coaches and members within the athletic department pointed out the transferable skills they are developing through intercollegiate athletics. Further, they described how their coaches and the athletic department staff valued them as more than just athletes by educating them on life after sports and creating spaces for them where academics came first. First-generation student-athletes described how they felt they could count on their coaches to be a support system for them as they began navigating their careers after sports. These statements show the impact and influence that coaches have on their student-athletes.

### ***Organic Teaching***

Coaches in the study spoke about how they educate student-athletes with the transferable skills that are learned through intercollegiate athletics. They asserted that much of their discussions around transferable skills with student-athletes happen “organically” and there isn’t a systematic or structured way in which these occur. Further, they explained that the athletic department does not educate student-athletes on this topic

in a systematic way, but feel that it does happen in an indirect way. Some coaches reflected on how they could be more intentional about helping student-athletes understand the transferable skills they learn through intercollegiate athletics and how they are applicable to other areas of their life.

One coach explained how conversations about transferable skills doesn't happen in a systematic way and how his conversations about this topic with student-athletes happens more organically:

In a systematic way, not much. I think it's more dependent on the coach. Uh, I think, you know, I think resource wise, I don't know that we have the resources to do it, you know. So, it may be a bigger priority than I really get into. And the reality is, if I, if we, went to all our student athletes, there are many who just don't need it. They don't need to understand it. They're already doing it. They're fine, but I think we probably could do a lot better for kids who do. (John)

He went on to explain:

I could grow in being a little more ordered. It's one area I'd like to get better at. Is just being more orderly, and uh, maybe more purposeful, consistent to like meeting every two weeks to talk specifically about this thing. I'm a little more organic, you know. (John)

John recognized how he could be more purposeful in his approach with student-athletes concerning the transferable skills they develop and how they are applicable to their professional careers. Unlike other participants in this study, John felt that not all student-athletes needed this type of support and direction in terms of helping them understand the

transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics. Similarly, another coach explained her approach with student-athletes:

I'm a big believer in letting things organically happen. So, when something happens, whether it's something happening in the world, or you know, for instance, during the course of the season, I ask them like, okay, so how many of you go to class? They all raise their hands. Thank God. I said, how many of you just go to class and don't do the homework? Do you expect to get an A? I said. It's kind of the same thing here, right, kind of the same type of conversation. That's kind of my philosophy with that, like letting that stuff kind of happen naturally because sometimes people aren't ready, so sometimes you can't make them.

(Mary)

Another coach explained how helping student-athletes understand the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics happens in an indirect way:

Maybe not in a direct way, but in an indirect way, yes, but maybe not directly, maybe not specifically. There may be workshops. There may be, you know, different things you can get involved with right and I think overall, the department wants you to be a better, better person, a better student who actually has transferable skills. Be better, you know about these qualities that are transferable to the real world because we do want them to be able to adapt to the real world, and make adjustments when they need to, and sports is a great way to be open minded, to learn about yourself, to learn about building skills in different ways, and to work with other people, and to have those skills when you go in the working world. It's definitely something that you can get from playing sports. So

the athletic department does help you out in that way because everything is so competitive. But yeah, so in an indirect way, yes. (Darius)

Similarly, another coach explained how these things happen organically:

It's organically. I think it's kind of like asking a professor, how do you teach? You know? I mean they might have a syllabus, but you know I could say, here's our off season, and here's our regular season. And here's you know, whatever, so I guess some of it's organic and some of it's pretty self-explanatory. (Steve)

Coaches in this study described how their student-athletes learn about the transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics. They placed an emphasis on how it happens in organic ways and one coach noted that he could be more purposeful about conversations around the transferable skills his student-athletes develop.

A common theme among most coaches interviewed for this study centered around this idea that transferable skills were being developed for student-athletes in an organic way through intercollegiate athletics. They did not point to any specific structure or systematic way that they instilled transferable skills in their student-athletes, but they were adamant that they were being developed. These descriptions support the notion that most coaches believe student-athletes organically learn about the transferable skills they acquire through intercollegiate athletics.

### ***A Coach's Duty***

Coaches interviewed for this study shared multiple perspectives on how they validate and assist student-athletes in preparing them for life after sports. They discussed their involvement in helping student-athletes understand the transferable skills they are learning through sports and recognized the support they provide for their student-athletes.

Intercollegiate coaches are uniquely situated in the student-athlete experience. They are often the first point of contact for the prospective student and the university and the time they spend with their student-athletes is often the most time a student-athlete will spend with any one single person on campus. Coaches shared about the consistency in which they have conversations with their student-athletes about life after sports and how sports can equip them to be successful in their careers. Many coaches went on to explain the encouragement, advocating, and follow up they conduct with their student-athletes to prepare them for the real world. As a result, two sub themes emerged; *consistent and individual meetings, and encourage, advocate, follow up.*

**Consistent and Individual Meetings.** Coaches shared how they are constantly talking about life after sports with their student-athletes and how what they learn through intercollegiate athletics is transferable to areas outside of sports. Coaches shared how these interactions occur through coaches' meetings and individual interactions with student-athletes that are less structured than a meeting. One coach shared how they use some of their practice time to discuss life outside of sports including the transferable skills they acquire through intercollegiate athletics.

One coach explained how he is consistent with the student-athletes that need it:

It's definitely consistent with those who need it. Those who don't I just, personally I just check in, how things are going? Great. They already have the vision.

They've doing great. I don't even need to say it. They already have it. (John)

John did not believe that all student-athletes needed the same type of consistent individual meetings, but for those that do, he was present and able to help. Another coach mentioned the individual conversations she has with her student-athletes:

You know, we have conversations individually, as something approaches.

Especially on our end, like especially in meetings and stuff like that for us. Our non-traditional season is really the time I get to talk with them and get to know them and stuff like that. (Mary)

Mary, unlike John, seemed to have more regular individual consistent meetings with all of her student-athletes. Another coach described how he talks about life all the time with his student-athletes and what they learn through their athletic participation is transferable to their life:

We talk about life all the time. We talk about how there's no guarantee that you are making them back home, right? There's no guarantee for nothing. So we do talk about life, and how what you learn on the basketball court, what you're going through helps you through life. (Darius)

He went on to explain:

Every night after practice I come up with some questions for myself, and I ask questions that I would ask my 22 year old self, right? You know, that I would want to know. And then the next day, I bring it up. You know, and it could be about anything. It doesn't have to be about basketball. Yeah, it's mostly about real life and the girls really like it. They really like talking about it. They like to talk about real stuff, and they appreciate it. It's just not all basketball is about. (Darius)

He explained how he tries to be consistent with this messaging.

Yeah, yeah, I try to be consistent with it. I try to, if I notice something about somebody, I'll say it, and maybe I'll say it to the group, or maybe I say it to her. It depends on what type of person they are, you know, do they get embarrassed, or

whatever. But if not, I'll pull them to the side or I have a coaches meeting with them. Say, hey, we notice you are doing better... I want to acknowledge that, to be positive because you're giving that person that personal attention. You're seeing their personal growth. (Darius)

Darius makes it a purpose to incorporate non-sport related conversations into his interactions with his student-athletes on a daily basis. The need to have these types of conversations with his student-athletes was important to him and the development of his student-athletes.

The coaches in this study emphasized the importance of helping student-athletes understand the importance of life after sports and they accomplished this through consistent conversations about this topic. They recognized that not all student-athletes are the same and the way in which they have these conversations as well as the consistency around these conversations may look different for each student-athlete.

**Encourage, Advocate, Follow up.** Participants spoke about the need to encourage student-athletes to show them the progress they are making and to help them understand the importance of what they are learning through intercollegiate athletics. They recognized that acknowledging student-athletes is important to their growth. Further, participants shared that they are the advocates for their student-athletes. Participants recognized that not every student may have an advocate the same way student-athletes do and it is their responsibility to help student-athletes bridge the gap between their intercollegiate experience and the real world. Finally, participants mentioned that it is their responsibility to follow up with and on behalf of student-athletes.



One coach spoke about encouraging student-athletes and helping them understand that some things are bigger than their sport:

So, I think encouragement like this is good for you. This is how life works. You're going to need this more than you think. This is more important than you think, right. (John)

Another coach mentioned how he tries to acknowledge and encourage his student-athletes in the progress they are making:

I try to identify, and everybody is not the same. I try to identify certain students who are making progress in their leadership roles, their captain roles, some of them even not official because they're, you know, they are trying to be leaders, and they try to be, you know, good for the team and I try to encourage them. I try to at least acknowledge it. I think acknowledging it is enough to praise somebody. They don't need to pat on the back every day, but they need to know that somebody notices that they're doing something better than what they used to. And if they notice that I think they have more confidence in the group... If you let them know you acknowledged it. It gives them a boost, and they feel confident. (Darius)

Coaches in this study recognized the influence they have over student-athletes and how their encouragement and acknowledgement can go a long way. They shared how they understood the impact this can have on their student-athletes. They explained how these types of interactions and the focus of them can be beneficial to their student-athletes in different aspects of their lives.

Often, first-generation student-athletes need help navigating the college environment they transition into. They will be faced with some challenges that no one in their family has ever experienced such as scheduling their courses, communicating with professors, and connecting with different campus resources. One coach explained how he advocates for his student-athletes:

We're the ones advocating for when they may not have an advocate and not every student does, but that's one of the reasons, maybe our students do a little better is because we're doing that. (Dillon)

He went on to explain:

If somebody is not following through with them, you know, to be an advocate for them and help connect them with the right campus resources it may be a little more difficult for them. (Dillon)

Dillon described how student-athletes are in a unique position because they have the support of their coaches. He shared how he advocates for his student-athletes on behalf of them if they have trouble receiving a response or getting connected to the appropriate resources. The NCAA faculty representative discussed her role with student-athletes in terms of advocating for them:

I think you know that my focus really is to advocate, to bridge the gap, but really to talk openly about that transfer into the real world, and what that might look like. So, that might be on a one-on-one basis. If a student athlete reaches out, or if there's questions about grad school, or someone that offers postgraduate scholarships. So, I've written a couple of them for athletes to support them in that journey. (Julie)

Julie described how her main focus is to bridge the gap for student-athletes between their student-athlete experience in college and preparing them for the real world.

In addition to encouraging student-athletes and advocating for them, participants in this study described the need for them to follow up with student-athletes to ensure they are connecting them with university resources that will help them be a successful student. One coach explained how it is her duty to follow up with her student-athletes and make sure they are connected with the correct resources:

So, I think again it's just following up. I think your job as a coach is to follow up, it's not okay to say to them; do you have an iep like coming out of high school and them saying, yes. I mean, okay. Well, there's the office. Good luck, right? It's my job to say, okay, well, here's who you're going to connect with. Let me see how you're connecting. How are you utilizing that? And then continuing to follow up, so that until, if they get that independence, and they feel that level of security that they can do it on their own. (Laura)

Laura described how she takes a hands-on approach with her student-athletes. She is constantly following up with them to make sure they are connected to the appropriate resources throughout the university and ensuring they are following through with the work on their end as well. Similarly, another coach explained:

We move back next week, a week before class, to start, one of the days we're having career services come in and talk to the guys to make sure they know what's available. They're going to have resume writing tips, and they're gonna have time where they can, you know, talk to them about their resume or follow up the next day in the office again, when they don't have classes because we know they have

a lot of things going on in classes, especially if they're in a sport as well. So we try to do some of those things. (Dillon)

Connecting student-athletes directly with university resources such as the Office of Career Advancement can assist first-generation student-athletes as they transition out of college and into their professional careers. Further, Dillon emphasized the importance of following up with his student-athletes when they have completed tasks related to the services provided by such university departments.

These descriptions show the type of impact and support coaches and other professional staff that interact regularly with student-athletes can have on them. It shows their willingness to help their student-athletes outside of competing in their sports. These descriptions show the commitment coaches have towards their student-athletes to develop them in areas outside of sports.

### ***Creating Ownership and Accountability***

Many coaches shared how they regularly talk about ownership and accountability with their student-athletes. They speak with them about being responsible for their own actions and the potential consequences that come with them. One coach mentioned how they established high standards in their program such as being on time and being a good teammate, and how the players have taken ownership over these expectations. As they have these conversations they instill the importance of these skills in student-athletes as something they can take forward with them in their professional careers.

One coach described how they talk about accountability and ownership:

You know, we talk about it. Like, we want you to be better men. Right? I'm coaching young men. We think they're all ready, but they're not, and it's like, well,

we want you to be better men and men show up. Men take responsibility. Men can handle the hard work. If you want to be a better man and like you messed up, own it. Let's move on. You were late, own it, take the consequences, move on, like that's kind of how we talk. (John)

Coaches in this study shared how accountability is developed through intercollegiate athletics. Overwhelming, they acknowledged that creating a level of accountability among their student-athletes will benefit them well beyond their college experience.

Similarly, another coach described:

Oh, I've got plenty of conversations about accountability, and what that looks like, and how it's not always a negative thing, and they seem to think that accountability is negative. And the way it is handled has to be different in different situations. So, those definitely are conversations that do come up, and sometimes they're really productive, and sometimes they're really not, like anything else. (Elise)

Another coach described:

So, I do think I hammer to them individual ownership and responsibilities from the beginning, and hold them to a pretty high standard. So, that's where I have to credit them and let them know how much they're actually doing on their own, because it's just an expectation built into this program at this point. (Laura)

Laura described how she created a level of individual ownership within her program that her student-athletes seem to abide by. She shares how this ownership is an expectation of her program which includes getting good grades, showing up to class, being on time for practice, and communicating about missed class with professors among other things.

The data suggests that coaches are actively teaching their student-athletes about accountability and ownership. Coaches throughout the study emphasized the importance of instilling accountability and ownership among their student-athletes. As coaches hold their student-athletes more accountable their hope is that student-athletes will assume these qualities as they move forward in their professional lives.

***“Best Class You’ll Ever Take”***

Coaches, athletic administrators, and professional staff that work directly with student-athletes emphasized the real world application that student-athletes learn through intercollegiate athletics. One athletic administrator stated “it will be the best class you’ll ever take”. Participants shared repeatedly that the skills student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics are transferable to other parts of their life and hard to duplicate in settings outside of intercollegiate athletics. Participants spoke about creating a holistic experience for student-athletes and ensuring they transition what they learn through intercollegiate athletics to the real world.

One athletic administrator described the impact of intercollegiate athletics on student-athletes:

I say this in every freshman, in every athletic open house that I speak at. If you're an athlete at Elicot, it will be the best class that you ever take. They will meet every semester. It will meet 6 days a week. You will learn how to deal with pressure. You will learn how to fit into a group and be unselfish. You will learn how to take criticism. You will learn how to push yourself. You will learn how to deal with disappointment. I think the life skills that one gets from athletics cannot be duplicated in a classroom. Normally, we're trying to build on that through

community service projects, through Elicot Academy, through having a part-time person trying to help out with students. (Jacob)

Jacob, like many other participants, shared how much learning and development is happening through participation in intercollegiate athletics. He posits that the life skills developed through intercollegiate athletics cannot be duplicated in the classroom.

Similarly, another coach described intercollegiate athletics as a “modern day training program for real life”:

I think one of the things I've often said to our players, especially ones who struggle because, I'll start with this, I was more of an athlete-student, but the point is that like you got to get stuff done. You got to turn in homework. You got to get to class. You got too. Just handle life right. It's kind of our modern day training program for real life and accountability and consequences. Um, so, although the content of what they're learning is important to me, what's even more important is the challenge of it and the skills they're building just to do what is expected of them, even if or maybe even especially if they don't like it. (John)

John shared how the “doing” or learning how to accomplish certain tasks throughout your student-athlete journey is important. The importance does not come necessarily from the material of what is being studied or the task that is being asked of them; it is more so the “figuring out” of how to get it done where the skills are developed that will benefit them in life.

One coach explained how she uses metaphors to help student-athletes understand the “bigger picture”:

I use all sorts of dumb little metaphors when the opportunity presents itself. But I do point out, like you know, sometimes when I need them to really understand the larger picture, I bring into like what the next piece of their life could be. (Mary)

Similarly, another coach explained:

Sometimes they don't like what we have to say, too. And I say, what are you gonna act like this towards your boss, or like they miss the practice, and don't tell us ahead of time. They miss a meet. Well, you're going to lose a job if you do this, and we bring those examples up because we say like, yeah, this isn't that important right? It's a sport. Nobody's dying if we lose, but at the end of the day, hopefully you're gaining something from us, and it's important to the people doing it, so you know your job might not be to save people's lives either, but the people who rely on you, the clients or the things it's important to them. So, you have to realize that. (Dillon)

Mary and Dillon shared how they use metaphors connecting examples between what their student-athletes are doing in intercollegiate athletics and painting a picture for them of what that means in a professional setting when they graduate. Mary reminds her players of just how much they are learning through intercollegiate athletics and all that they participate in that is applicable to their resumes:

Transfer that onto the resume. I do their resume with them, you know. I'm like wait, you guys forgot about this or that is not on your resume. You guys forgot that you do this and that. I'm like, oh my God! Put it on your resume. (Mary)



Mary shares how she reminds her student-athletes about all they do through intercollegiate athletics and how these experiences are applicable to their resumes and future employment.

The NCAA faculty representative interviewed in this study described her role with student-athletes in helping them become more self aware so that they can transfer what they learn at the university into the real world:

So I think my role with student-athletes really is to help them become more self aware and develop skills, so they can become more self-regulated and apply coping mechanisms when needed. And a lot of us, especially once we get out of college, that's when most of us start to explore that on our own, or I know that's how I was when I graduated from college, but being able to provide it to them when they are in college, when they have support systems around, not just me, but just as a unit at Elicot University. I think it's an advantage for them, because they're learning about themselves. They have strong support systems with their teams, with, you know, maybe athletic training, and with other individuals on campus, too. So that's really my goal. When I meet with them it is to really just help them learn more about themselves, they can cope and grow, and, you know, transfer into the real world more gradually, hopefully. (Julie)

Julie shared how it is important to begin connecting with student-athletes when they are in college and help them learn more about themselves so they can transition into the real world more seamlessly. She described how there are many support systems in place throughout the university which is why it is an ideal time to educate student-athletes on their own experiences and how these are applicable to the real world. A staff member

from the Office of Career Advancement spoke about the skill sets student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics and being able to leverage those skills in professional career settings:

Making sure that student-athletes capitalize on their experience to showcase that to the external world. Not just, I was All-American or All-Conference, or you could have been the twelfth guy or twelfth girl on the bench. It does matter that you have skills that make you great for an employer. That's something that's more important than almost anything else, because sadly, those accolades, they disappear, you know. (Bill)

He went on to explain:

You want them to have the full holistic experience here more so. You want to make sure that they can translate what they're doing in athletics to the real world, and that's something not always as easy. (Bill)

Bill explained how he tries to educate student-athletes on the skill sets they have acquired through intercollegiate athletics and how these are applicable to their future careers. He emphasized the importance of helping student-athletes translate what they have learned in athletics to the real world. One coach described how his assistant coach talks about the real world all the time as it relates to their experience as student-athletes:

So, we do speak about it [transferable skills], we have a really good assistant coach, Dr. Cruz. He's a principal. He talks about life all the time. Every day I have a time he talks about being in the real world. He talks about how he looks for leaders on the court, so he can hire the next principal. He's a vice principal and he looks for competitive athletes to put in the competitive world right? Because that's

you know that's what life is all about. They are not going to play sports forever, right? It's going to end. So we do definitely speak about it, and we've, you know we really talk about it. We have a half time every practice. It's not about basketball. It's about real life. (Darius)

Darius shared how he dedicates a certain amount of practice time to have “real world” conversations which includes talking about the transferable skills that his student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics. This consistent type of messaging from the coaching staff about their student-athletes transition into the real world is beneficial for student-athletes to begin thinking about their careers after sports.

Another coach related how student-athletes need to “think on the fly” during competition and how they will need to do this in the real world as well. She explained:

I think the resolution skills are a huge deal. You know, in softball there's only so many huddles we can have, and you know timeouts that you can have. So they have to figure it out with you... and so I think those things are, you know, your boss isn't always going to be there when you're in the real world. So hopefully you can, you know. think on the fly, and be able to implement the strategies or whatever that we think we've taught them. (Jessica)

She went on to explain the crossover between skills in sports and skills in professional settings:

You know we challenge them. We, you know, hopefully provide them leadership. Show them how to be a leader to show them the positive things of teamwork, and all the things that go into us athletics that you know, hopefully are life skills for them, for their future. We don't have as many teachers as we used to have, so

they're going out into so many different professions that I think the leadership skills that they come away with also just working in small groups, working on for the greater good of an organization. you know. being able to have resolution skills, and you know not fighting it out, being able to work with somebody even after they disagree with somebody like there. There's so many things that cross over. (Jessica)

Many coaches shared how there are so many transferable life skills that happen throughout their student-athletes journey in college as it relates to their participation in intercollegiate athletics. They are hopeful that their student-athletes will be able to implement these transferable skills as they transition out of college.

These descriptions support the notion that what student-athletes learn through intercollegiate athletics have real world applications. It shows that coaches, athletic administrators, and professional staff recognize the importance of the learning that occurs through intercollegiate athletics. Coaches, athletic administrators, and professional staff acknowledged the importance of student-athletes transitioning what they learn through intercollegiate athletics to their professional lives.

### ***Student-Athlete Development***

First-generation student-athletes, coaches, athletic administrators, and professional staff that work closely with student-athletes described a pilot program offered through the university for student-athletes that focus on the areas of self awareness, mental health, and career preparedness. Participants shared how the purpose of this program, which is specific for student-athletes, is to prepare them for a career after sports in addition to other areas of their life. Participants shared how student-athletes are

exposed to different guest speakers and networking events that help them make connections to employment opportunities once they graduate. Participants shared how the program takes a holistic approach to the development of student-athletes.

One first-generation student-athlete explained how he receives useful tips through Elicot Academy that helps him navigate life after sports :

Elicot Academy, uh, that's the group. Uh, now, I think, Julie, she um, yeah, she runs it. And you know, we get weekly emails of these and stuff, just little stuff for us to help think about. You know she just be given a little nugget here and there. And I would just say most of the athletics enrolled in the whole program. You know a lot of people I come into contact with. I would say, like the athletic director. Um, Miley, she's now deeper into athletics. She is always, you know, trying to help, and you know, just a bunch of different people within the uh, the program. (Steven)

Steven described how the athletic department and largely the university is trying to prepare student-athletes for their lives post-graduation. He shared how he receives weekly emails inviting him to different types of workshops that work on his development outside of athletics.

Another first-generation student-athlete explained:

Right now, I'm doing this thing called Elicot Academy. It's basically for student-athletes trying to help them like to get a job, I guess. Like what to do after you graduate and developing skills that you need also. So I think the University is taking good steps in leading to that. (Elise)

Most first-generation student-athletes enrolled in Elicot Academy described how the Academy is preparing them for life after graduation and seeking to improve their skills so that they are more prepared for this transition. Another first-generation student-athlete explained:

Elicot Academy is a good one that, like we all pretty much got involved with. We also did, I don't know what it was called, but we did like a mental health thing, too, with Dr. Julie that she like ran and like we had different speakers come in. We did yoga first, and then we would talk about different things like that, for like mental health, which was good. (Rachel)

Rachel described how the Academy is not only focused on career preparedness and developing their skills for employment, but also improving their mental health through different mechanisms and coping strategies. Another first-generation student-athlete explained:

The university does a good job. I know I'm enrolled in that, like Elicot Academy, so that definitely has helped me a lot kind of seeing both ends of it and I hope that they can launch that, for like a wider round, like, I hope that, like a lot of student-athletes at least, for like the next round of it can be enrolled in something like that because I think it's very valuable. Yeah, more initiatives kind of along those lines would be very beneficial. (Clare)

Clare recognized the value in Elicot Academy and felt that it was beneficial to her collegiate experience in terms of thinking about life after graduation.

Coaches in this study discussed how the athletic administration is trying to prepare student-athletes for their careers through Elicot Academy. One coach explained:

Yeah, I think really just right now with the Elicot Academy, and then, you know, they'd mention it in a lot of the early season meetings, or the you know meetings, you know, with the athletic director and things, and they were pretty good about it. Like John's pretty good about saying all the great things they do too. This is going to help you in life, and you know, like John, goes over domestic violence and sexual assault, and those things as part of his thing. But he, you know, does like this being accused of this, or having some of these things happen, even if you didn't think this category that could affect the rest of your career, so bringing it like tying anything into a career. (Dillon)

Dillon shared how the university was trying to be more intentional in preparing student-athletes for their lives after graduation by launching Elicot Academy. He further described how the athletic director tries to incorporate examples into conversations with student-athletes that help them realize the real life implications of some of their actions. The NCAA faculty representative that helped launch Elicot Academy described its intent and all of the workshops involved:

Our whole goal was to really have them [student-athletes] understand sort of the combination between self awareness, mental health, and career preparedness. So we brought in speakers, and we wanted to be in-house. We didn't want to outsource speakers. We didn't want to outsource materials. We wanted everything to be here, because that way, you know, it could even show other campuses that it can be replicated because you have the same tools we do. (Julie)

She further explained:

I think the biggest piece that I do with the transferable skills is Elicot Academy, and that's really just letting them know... we don't know what is next. We don't know life after sports. We don't know how to transition. Even athletic identity is huge during that time, too. So it's kind of hard, but that's one aspect we're measuring in Elicot Academy this time around... but I think the biggest piece that I try to express is that whatever you're feeling is valid, it's 100% normal to be nervous, anxious, excited, happy, like whatever emotion it is, but you don't have to isolate or hide yourself from speaking about it. So I guess that would be the largest piece. But other than that, I don't really talk openly about the transferable skills, because I don't think I've ever been asked about the transferable skills.

(Julie)

In an interview with Julie she recognized that the transferable skills that student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics is not a specific module within the Academy. It is not something they explicitly focus on, but something that she thought they should strongly consider moving forward. Largely, Elicot Academy was focused on developing a holistic student-athlete; one that is prepared mentally, emotionally, and pragmatically, so while transferable skills may be incorporated in some way throughout the academy it was not something that was done with intention.

There was a supported notion around growing Elicot Academy. An athletic administrator described how he would like to grow Elicot Academy:

I'd like to see Elicot Academy grow. I think that model is really good. The whole goal in that is exactly what you're talking about [transferable skills/career



preparedness]. Julie wants to make it bigger, but how do you keep making it better, too? (Jacob)

Similarly, a staff member from the Office of Career Advancement described how he would like to improve Elicot Academy:

Working with the athletic department to be more specific. So in the second iteration of Elicot Academy, making sure that we can make those [transferable skills] connections. (Bill)

Coaches, athletic administrators, first-generation student-athletes, and professional staff alike would like to see Elicot Academy grow; both in terms of their numbers and also in terms of the material they are covering within the academy. The Office of Career Advancement, athletic administrators, and the athletic faculty liaison all shared how a learning component of the transferable skills developed by student-athletes through intercollegiate athletics would be beneficial to Elicot Academy and the student-athletes enrolled.

There was an overwhelming response about the benefits of Elicot Academy and its intent to approach student-athletes from a holistic mindset focusing on their self-awareness, mental health, and career preparedness. The participants in this study shared how Elicot Academy assists student-athletes with career preparedness in connecting them with employers and former student-athletes that can share their experiences with them. First-generation student-athletes found a lot of value in this Academy through different types of networking such as these, resume workshops, and other modules that focus on developing the student-athlete outside of sports.

### ***Lacking Systematic Approach***

Although the participants interviewed in this study described how transferable skills are being developed through intercollegiate athletics, it does not seem that this is occurring in a systematic way based on the lack of documentation and participants interviewed. For example, coaches in this study described how their conversations with student-athletes around the transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics happens in a much more “organic” way. Similarly, a staff member from the Office of Career Advancement discussed how he has conversations with student-athletes about the skills sets they are developing through intercollegiate athletics and their applicability to their professional careers and while he seemed to have a more intentional approach behind his conversations, there still seemed to be some lack of formal structure in ensuring that these occurred. Athletic administrators and other participants claimed it’s the “best class they’ll ever take”. The athletic faculty liaison that helped launch Elicot Academy recognized that they do not have a module on helping student-athletes understand the transferable skills they are developing through intercollegiate athletics and how they are applicable to their career field in a systematic way. Most first-generation student-athletes interviewed in this study were able to recall numerous transferable skills that they developed through intercollegiate athletics, but their claims didn’t seem to be supported in a systematic way throughout the university.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis showed that Division III first-generation student-athletes acquire transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics that can help them in their professional careers and lives. It showed the type of constructive criticism that student-athletes

received through intercollegiate athletics is something they believe will prepare them for the real world and something that is difficult to duplicate through other college settings. Further, although some first-generation student-athletes described how they were mainly at the university for their desired sport, potentially causing identity foreclosure issues as they progress towards graduation and beyond, most first-generation student-athletes shared how their academics superseded their desired sport especially since they were competing at the Division III level where the hope of a professional career after graduation was much slimmer. First-generation student-athletes went on to describe the impact their coaches had on their understanding of the transferable skills they acquire through intercollegiate athletics and their professional lives after sports. Coaches also described how they validate the experiences of their student-athletes around transferable skills, but shared how this happens in a more “organic” way with no systematic way of achieving specific outcomes. However, all coaches, athletic administrators, and professional staff described how an athletic environment teaches student-athletes in a particular way that is unachievable in an academic setting and in a way that prepares them for the real world. Lastly, the university implemented a program for student-athletes specifically which took a holistic approach to improving student-athletes for their lives upon graduation. While all participants emphasized the value this program provided for them and their student-athletes, this program did not specifically have workshops centered around the transferable skills student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this instrumental qualitative single case study was to explore how first-generation student-athletes experience the development of transferable skills at a public, Division III university (Elicot University) in New Jersey. Further, this study sought to understand how Elicot University validates the transferable skills first-generation student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics. As an instrumental case study, understanding how student-athletes identify with these transferable skills and how the university supports them may contribute to a more career ready student-athlete. The work in this chapter was guided by five research questions:

1. How do first-generation student-athletes at a public, Division III university, experience the development of transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics?
2. Which people do first-generation student-athletes identify in helping them recognize the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics?
3. In what ways do first-generation student-athletes describe how their athletic identity may influence their ability to apply transferable skills to areas outside of sports?
4. How do athletic department staff and coaches validate transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes that help them apply these transferable skills to areas outside of sports?
5. How does the Office of Career Advancement support the development of transferable skills among student-athletes to contribute to their career readiness?

A total of 24 first-generation student-athletes, coaches, athletic administrators, and staff participated in semi-structured interviews that explored the research questions in this study. The data from these interviews were transcribed and analyzed to produce findings for this study. In this chapter, I connect the major findings from Chapter Four to the literature on this topic. This chapter further explores the findings as it relates to the theoretical framework of this study. Finally, this chapter presents recommendations and implications as they apply to practice, leadership, policy, and suggestions for future research.

## **Discussion**

### ***First-Generation Student-Athletes and Transferable Skills***

The first research question explored how first-generation student-athletes at a Division III public university experienced the development of transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics and was addressed in the findings by participants responses which showed several transferable skills that first-generation student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics. The skills highlighted in the findings are considered transferable skills because they are skills first-generation student-athletes can apply to multiple settings. More specifically, the rich descriptions provided by participants gave insight into how these transferable skills are being developed within intercollegiate athletics and how they may be applicable to their professional careers.

Higher education institutions are interested in developing transferable skills among their students as it is seen to enhance employability among their graduates (Holmes, 2013; Tymon, 2013). Participants in this study highlighted the transferable skills of time management, teamwork, leadership, and communication and improved

social skills. These findings corroborate the literature on transferable skills developed through sport involvement (Coffey & Davis, 2019; Van Raalte et. al, 2017). The findings helped understand how these transferable skills came about for first-generation student-athletes as it relates to their experience competing in intercollegiate athletics. First-generation student-athletes that possess transferable skills and can accurately convey them to future employers may improve their employability (Nagele & Stalder, 2016).

Understanding the transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics is important since student-athletes often have little work experience to be judged upon, therefore displaying these skills to potential employers becomes essential (Nagele & Stalder, 2016).

McKnight et al. (2009) posit that athletes regardless of competition level learn skills that are valuable in other settings. Research conducted by Knight et al. (2018), Mayocchi and Hanrahan (2000), and McKnight et al. (2009) support this notion. Consistent with the research, participants in this study repeatedly mentioned how they developed transferable skills in a sports context (intercollegiate athletics). The transferable skills highlighted in the findings are consistent with those in the literature that prepare student-athletes for life after graduation (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) conducted a study in which eighty-five percent of student-athletes responded that their participation in intercollegiate athletics equipped them with skills such as leadership, teamwork, and time management among other skills that prepare them for life after graduation. Consistent with the research, first-generation student-athletes in this study repeatedly shared how they developed the transferable skills of leadership, teamwork, and time management through intercollegiate athletics. One participant

described how she is basically balancing a part-time job competing in intercollegiate athletics; balancing her class schedule with her practice and game schedules daily which contributed to her time management skills. Other participants described how the leadership skills they developed through athletics may translate to leading teams in their respective professional settings.

Further, the research is consistent with a more recent study which found that medical student-athletes are more prepared for their future professions given the life-skills development that occurs in a sports context (Quinaud et al., 2023). Quinaud et al. (2023) found that their qualitative study on medical students and the transferable skills they develop in a sports context will likely offer opportunities to apply these skills to a medical career. First-generation student-athletes in this study were able to connect the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics with their part-time jobs, internships, and describe how these skills could benefit them in their professional careers. For example, one first-generation student-athlete credited her time management skills and her ability to communicate with others in her internships to the skills she developed through intercollegiate athletics. Another participant described how he took his leadership skills developed from intercollegiate athletics and applied them to his summer work job as a law enforcement officer. He described how being a leader is someone that sets a positive example for others and being someone that others can count on for guidance.

Some first-generation student-athletes highlighted the connections they have already begun to make between the transferable skills they developed with their internships and part-time jobs. Fox (2018) states it is important for students to be self-

aware of the unique skill sets they bring with them to potential employers. These assertions made by first-generation student-athletes in this study around their intercollegiate athletic experience and the transferable skills they developed may contribute to a more career ready first-generation student-athlete.

### *Coaches and Transferable Skills*

The second research question was answered by first-generation student-athletes' responses on who at the university helped them recognize the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics. Overwhelmingly, first-generation student-athletes credited their coaches in helping them recognize the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics. Further, they credited coaches for assisting them in seeing the applicability of these skills to their lives and professional careers after sports. This finding is consistent with the literature around a college coach's influence in helping student-athletes facilitate their learning experience around life skills (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Additionally, some first-generation student-athletes reported how a program created by the university, focused on the holistic development of student-athletes helped them prepare for life post-graduation. Through this program first-generation student-athletes shared how they participated in mental health awareness seminars, listened to different speakers about the transition from athletics to their professional careers, and participated in workshops about preparing for life after graduation and the skills sets you need entering the workforce. Incorporating coaches, athletic administrators, and other campus professionals through programming such as the one described by participants in this study may influence a student-athletes career readiness (Papacharisis et al., 2005; Van Raalte et al., 2017; Watt & Moore III, 200).



**Coaches.** Coaches have a unique opportunity to positively influence student-athletes given the context in which they interact with them and the number of hours they spend with them (Bjornsen & Dinkel, 2017). Discussing the transition out of sports before the transition occurs can help athletes understand and prepare for this process (Menke & Germany, 2019). First-generation student-athletes repeatedly mentioned how their coaches invested in them, providing support to their growth outside of athletics and helping them understand how their athletic experience may contribute to their professional careers. It was reported by participants that coaches consistently mentioned the transferable skills student-athletes learn through intercollegiate athletics and how they can benefit them in the future. This occurred through individual and group meetings with their student-athletes. Additionally, some coaches would have speakers talk to their team about preparing for their professional careers and how they can use the skills they acquired through athletics to assist them. Further, the athletic department would have meetings at the beginning of each season helping student-athletes understand there are resources provided by the university to help them grow holistically outside of just being an athlete at the university. This is consistent with recent research which showed the critical impact and influence sports coaches have on their student-athletes life skills development (Quinaud et al., 2023). Preparing students for their professional careers should not only be centered around educators and career service professionals within an institution, but all of those that interact with students throughout their college experience (Fox, 2018). The findings in this study support existing research around the impact of coaches on student-athletes about the life skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Quinaud et al., 2023; Van Raalte et al., 2017).

Further, first-generation student-athletes reported that a program created by members of the athletic department and career services staff supported them in preparing for their careers and lives after sports.

**Elicot Academy.** In addition to coaches, the larger university community including career services professionals, athletic administrators, and campus professionals that interact with student-athletes have an opportunity to prepare them for their careers post-graduation by leveraging their student-athlete experience. For example, universities have begun implementing life skills development coordinators that focus on interpersonal communication skills, time management skills, and career development and selection among other things (Broughton & Neyer, 2021). Universities can help bridge the gap for student-athletes between the skills they are developing through intercollegiate athletics and how they apply them to their professional careers. Rather than focusing solely on their athletic abilities and performance, coaches and athletic administrators need to be aware of the personal and academic challenges student-athletes face to adequately prepare them for their lives after graduation (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Further, the transition student-athletes face as they prepare for the next phase of their life upon graduation is often surrounded with worry and anxiety. This type of transition can have an impact on a student-athletes mental health (Reifsteck et al., 2023). Helping student-athletes recognize the transferable skills they have developed through intercollegiate athletics through a program like Elicot Academy may improve their mental health. They may feel more prepared for this transition knowing they have transferable skills that will support them in this next phase; potentially decreasing some of the worry and anxiety surrounding the transition. Institutions should construct policies and programs that

support student-athletes in their academic and personal growth (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001).

Universities such as Ohio State University and Washington State University have implemented comprehensive student-athlete advising and counseling programs which focus on developing a holistic student-athlete and one that is better prepared for a career after sports and college (Broughton & Neyer, 2001). Consistent with the research, participants in this study shared how Elicot Academy, a program developed by Elicot University, focuses on preparing student-athletes for their lives after graduation. Specifically, participants shared how Elicot academy focuses on student-athletes self-awareness, mental health, and career preparedness. Through this academy student-athletes receive weekly emails about different seminars and tips centered around career preparedness. Additionally, participants shared how Elicot Academy helped connect student-athletes with employers and former student-athletes to garner an understanding of their experiences and what they can expect transitioning into the workforce. Although participants in this study shared how one of the aims of Elicot Academy is career preparedness among student-athletes, participants also noted how Elicot Academy has not focused intentionally on the transferable skills student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics and how these can be applicable to their professional careers. Incorporating an approach that focuses specifically on the transferable skills student-athletes develop may contribute to a student-athletes awareness of the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics and how these skills may be applicable to areas outside of sports (Van Raalte et al., 2017; Watt & Moore III, 2001).

### *Athletic Identity and Transferable Skills*

The third research question explored how first-generation student-athletes' athletic identity may influence their ability to apply transferable skills to areas outside of sports. Overwhelmingly first-generation student-athletes described the little impact athletic identity may have on their ability to apply the transferable skills they developed to other settings. This finding is largely inconsistent with the research around athletic identity among student-athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Horton & Mack, 2000; McCarthy, 2017; McKnight et al., 2009; Steele et. al., 2020). Student-athletes typically develop a role centered around their athletic abilities (Menke & Germany, 2019). Research posits that student-athletes develop strong athletic identities prior to and during their involvement in college sports (Adler & Adler, 1985, 1987; Horton & Mack, 2000; Lally & Kerr, 2005; McCarthy, 2017; Menke & Germany, 2019; Sparkes, 1998; Steele et. al., 2020). It has been reported that student-athletes can experience poor identity development because of their participation in sports (Horton & Mack, 2000; McCarthy, 2017; McKnight et al., 2009; Steele et. al., 2020). Most first-generation student-athletes in this study reported how their schoolwork superseded their athletic participation. Further, participants actively discussed their career aspirations and how the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics may be applicable to their professional careers. This suggests that their athletic identity may have little influence on their ability to apply the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics to areas outside of sports. The findings inconsistent with the research may be because much of the research on transferable skills among student-athletes has been

through the lens of Division I NCAA student-athletes (Bjornsen-Ramig, 2020; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Shina et al., 2003; Van Raalte et al., 2017).

Research shows that athletes who are more prepared for careers outside of sports have a smoother transition once sport retirement occurs (Lally & Kerr, 2005). First-generation student-athletes discussed their aspirations once their intercollegiate playing careers were over which mostly included graduate school and different employment opportunities. Further, first-generation student-athletes were able to connect the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics and how they were applicable to their current internships and part-time jobs. For example, one first-generation student-athlete recognized the time management skills she developed through intercollegiate athletics being applicable to her internship by being able to balance multiple work meetings and her individual work assignments she needed to complete for the day and week. These findings are inconsistent with the research of McCarthy (2017) which posited that student-athletes become hyper focused on their collegiate playing careers that often they devote little time to thinking about their careers after college. Similarly, the findings are inconsistent with the research of McKnight et al. (2009) which posited that student-athletes often fail to recognize the skills and lessons they've learned through sports and how these are applicable to other settings.

Discussing the transition out of sports before the transition occurs can help athletes understand and prepare for the process (Menke & Germany, 2019). Student-athletes in this study described how their coaches and programming designed by the university consistently addressed their lives after sports. The Division III dynamic, where few student-athletes play professionally, and academics often takes precedence over

athletics grouped with the support of their coaches and university may have contributed to the reason why first-generation student-athletes in this study did not seem to struggle with their athletic identity.

### ***Validation of Transferable Skills***

The fourth research question asked, “how do athletic department staff and coaches validate transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes that help them apply these transferable skills to areas outside of sports?” Rendón (1994) describes validation as “an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). In-class agents can consist of faculty, classmates, and teaching assistants while out-of-class agents can consist of coaches, family and friends, and counselors and advisors (Rendón & Jalomo, 1995). Rendón’s (2002) theory focused on first-generation students from low-income, working-class backgrounds. Rendón (2002) theorized how low-income, first-generation college students might find success in college through validation between in- and out-of-class agents. Rendón’s theory emerged from a qualitative study which found that at some point, low-income first-generation college students began to believe in themselves in the college environment because of some in- and out-of-class agents that affirmed their ability and innate capacity to learn (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Munoz, 2011).

Validation theory has been used in number of studies focusing on different areas such as the impact of validation on GPA and student retention (Anderson & Blankenberger, 2020), improving pedagogic practice (Rendón & Munoz, 2011), and improving persistence among nontraditional community college students (Barnett, 2011). Most of the research involving validation theory has been focused on community college

populations and academic validation through faculty (Barnett, 2011; Bauer, 2014; Rendón, 2002; Rendón & Jalomo, 1995; Rendón & Munoz, 2011) with some studies focusing on both in-class and out-of-class agents (Rendón, 2002; Saggio & Rendón, 2004). This case study focused specifically on out-of-class agents and first-generation student-athletes at a public 4-year institution.

Validation theory consists of six elements (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). The first element of validation theory posits that institutional agents should engage students through actions that encourage, support, and validate them in ways about their ability to learn within the college environment (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Through Rendón's study, low-income first-generation students attributed their confidence and motivation to be successful in the college environment to the affirmations they received from persons in and outside of their college environment (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). When asked who helped them recognize the transferable skills they were developing through intercollegiate athletics, first-generation student-athletes overwhelmingly mentioned their coaches and athletic department (out-of-class agents). Coaches engaged first-generation student-athletes through individual conversations and team meetings about the transferable skills that are developed through intercollegiate athletics. One coach explained how they spend a lot of time talking with their student-athletes about different ways you can become a leader and the leadership skills that are developed through intercollegiate athletics. Another coach offered encouragement through conversations with their student-athletes such as "you're going to need this more than you think" when their student-athletes wouldn't understand the connection between certain sport-related requirements and their applicability to real world situations.

Research conducted by Barnett (2011) showed students that were validated by faculty in terms of being known and valued predicted modestly higher levels of academic integration. Rendón's (1994) study showed out-of-class validation experiences were equally as important as to what was occurring in the classroom in terms of students acquiring the confidence to be successful in the college environment. Similar to the research conducted by Barnett (2011) and Rendón (1994) the validation of these transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes by their coaches and athletic department (out-of-class agents) seemed to contribute to their understanding and awareness of how these skills can benefit them in their professional careers. Career-focused experiences, including university staff initiating a conversation about career preparation, significantly boosts students' confidence about their career readiness (Flaherty, 2023). One first-generation student-athlete shared how athletics at Elicot University helped her with skills that are transferable to her career such as learning how to communicate with others, time management, and learning how to work in groups. Similar to the research by Rendón (2002) at Puente Community College where the English instructor took the initiative to assist students with their assignments, the participants in this case study took the initiative to help student-athletes understand how their student-athlete experience is applicable to their professional careers.

The second element of validation theory states that the agent should affirm that the student has the potential to succeed (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). First-generation student-athletes in this study stressed how their coaches have been an impactful part of keeping them focused on their lives and careers after sports. According to participants, coaches reminded their players about just how much they are learning through



intercollegiate athletics. For example, student-athletes highlighted the skills of teamwork and time management that are acquired through intercollegiate athletics and how their coaches, athletic administrators, NCAA faculty representative, and Office of Career Advancement remind them about the real-world application these skills have. One coach reminded his players “what you’re learning on the coach's team is how to be a responsible teammate, how to be a responsible young adult managing your time”. Another coaching staff member who is also a Vice Principal at a local high school talks about how he looks for “leaders on the court” so he can hire the next principal.

Participants discussed the leadership skills among other skills that student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics and how these skills will be beneficial to their lives post-graduation. For example, one coach tried to recognize certain student-athletes on his team that were making progress in their leadership roles through encouragement and acknowledgement. He stated, “if you let them know you acknowledged it, it gives them a boost, and they feel confident”. He shared how student-athletes don’t need a “pad on their back every day”, but they need someone to acknowledge that they’re doing something better than they used to. A first-generation student-athlete supported these claims stating that she feels she is being prepared for the real world because of her coaches affirming the skills that are being developed through intercollegiate athletics and the speakers their coach brings to talk to their team about transitioning into the real world. Similar to the research by Bauer (2104) which showed higher levels of faculty student engagement may lead to Black male students feeling more confident about asking for assistance through their college journey; first-generation student-athletes in this study may transition better to their professional careers through the affirmations they receive

from their coaches, athletic administrators, and Office of Career Advancement about the skill sets they bring with them. First-generation student-athletes may feel more confident and self-aware about the skills they are developing through intercollegiate athletics.

The third element of the theory states that when students are validated on a consistent basis, they are more likely to feel confident about themselves and their ability to succeed (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Intercollegiate college coaches in this study shared how they consistently have conversations with their student-athletes about the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics. Coaches shared how these types of consistent validating messages occur through team meetings, individual meetings, and even during practice time. One coach uses some of his practice time to talk about “real life” including the transferable skills his student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics. Often student-athletes are drawn to their coaches because of the amount of time they spend with each other and the dynamic in which that time is spent. It is not your typical teacher-student relationship. One athletic administrator described it as the “best class you’ll ever take” stating they will meet every semester, 6 days a week, where they’ll learn how to deal with pressure, learn how to fit into a group and be unselfish, and learn how to take criticism. Rendón’s research (1994; 2002) showed students’ college experiences were transformed when they were consistently validated by in- and out-of-class agents. Similar to the previous studies, the research in this case study showed how out-of-class agents consistently validated first-generation student-athletes on the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics.

The fourth element states that validation can occur in and out of the classroom (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). As discussed, most research involving validation theory has

focused on in-class agents (Barnett, 2011; Bauer, 2014; Rendón, 2002; Rendón & Jalomo, 1995; Rendón & Munoz, 2011). Some studies have focused on both in- and out-of-class agents (Rendón, 2002; Saggio & Rendón, 2004). This case study contributes to the fourth element of validation theory as it solely focused on out-of-class agents and showed the impact of out-of-class agents through the responses shared by first-generation student-athletes. Rendón's (2002) research at Community College Puente found that establishing supportive relationships through interpersonal validation by out-of-class agents can produce positive effects for first-generation students (Rendón, 2002). Mentors and counselors at Community College Puente engage in interpersonal validation by providing care, support, and encouragement both in and outside of the classroom with their students (Rendón, 2002). Rendón's (2002) research showed that counselors facilitated discussions with parents about their children's transition to a 4 year college and mentors assisted students in making career choices. Based on student narratives these approaches had a transformative effect on first-generation students (Rendón, 2002). First-generation student-athletes in this study talked about the support system they have between the athletics department and their coaches that helped them realize there is more to them than just being an athlete. One first-generation student-athlete shared how her coach and assistant athletic director served as mentors to her and she felt comfortable going to them if she needed help with anything. Participants in this study shared how they are advocates for their student-athletes helping connect them with the appropriate resources at the university and talking openly about their transition into the real world. Rendón's (1994) study displayed how validation by out-of-class agents such as parents and student groups outside of the classroom helped nontraditional students persist

through college. This research contributes to validation among out-of-class agents such as coaches, athletic staff, and other university staff around validating the transferable skills first-generation student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics.

The fifth and sixth elements of validation theory include validation not being viewed as an end, but rather a continual process that should begin early in a student's college career (Rendón & Munoz, 2011). While some coaches, athletic administrators, and other professional staff shared that it was important to connect with student-athletes when they were in college to help them learn more about themselves, including the transferable skills they developed, the research conducted here did not measure when this validation occurred. Participants' responses did not exclusively mention when this occurred, rather generally mentioned that it occurred consistently throughout their student-athletes time with them.

The case study research conducted contributes to validation theory by using a population of first-generation student-athletes, a group heretofore unstudied through the lens of validation theory, and exclusively examining this theory through out-of-class agents. Additionally, this research took place at a 4-year institution whereas validation theory has mostly been used within a 2-year community college setting. Although in a different context using a population of first-generation student-athletes, the participants' responses corroborate the concept of validation theory and the elements that make it up.

### ***Career Readiness Support***

The fifth research question explored how the Office of Career Advancement supported first-generation student-athletes in the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics to contribute to their career readiness. This research

question was addressed in the findings by responses from the Director of the Office of Career Advancement. Specifically speaking about student-athletes, the Director of the Office of Career Advancement wants to make sure that student-athletes are capitalizing on their student-athlete experience in a way that they can display it to the external world and future employers. For example, he wants them to be able to leverage and communicate the skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics that make them great for an employer. Through individualized meetings, the Director of the Office of Career Advancement tries to help student-athletes understand what they are acquiring through intercollegiate athletics and how it is applicable to the real world. However, this occurs on a one-to-one basis for those student-athletes that visit the Office of Career Advancement. It was not clear that the university is actively strategizing on how they can leverage the transferable skills that student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics in a way that can contribute to their career readiness. According to the newest Student Voice survey of 3,000 4-year and 2-year students on life after college, nearly 3 in 10 students say they have never interacted with their career center (Flaherty, 2023). The university should consider ways to increase these engagements and support student-athletes' transferable skills through the Office of Career Advancement.

Higher education institutions can support student-athletes by prioritizing career readiness through a lens of the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics and the connection between these skills and careers outside of sports (Cengage, 2021; Martini et al., 2021). Student-athletes need to be self-aware of the unique skill sets they bring with them to a potential employer (Fox, 2018). Student-athletes are uniquely situated in that they acquire skills through their educational experience as well as their

athletics experience. Students need to present themselves in dynamic ways through various platforms and avenues such as resumes, interviews, networking, and internships to employers; all of which is offered through the Office of Career Advancement at Elicot University. Additionally, equipping them with the knowledge of the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics can add to their toolbox of career readiness. Participants in this study shared how a learning component exclusively about the transferable skills student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics would contribute to a student-athletes career readiness.

### **Recommendations**

In this section, I offer a series of recommendations aimed at leveraging the transferable skills first-generation student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics that may contribute to their career readiness.

1. Elicot University should prioritize the learning experiences developed among first-generation student-athletes through intercollegiate athletics, specifically the transferable skills they develop because of participating on an intercollegiate athletic team. The findings suggest that first-generation student-athletes develop meaningful transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics that can be applicable to their professional careers. Part of the institution's mission is to develop career ready students or students that are employable based on the learning and skills they develop while at the institution. The institution should consider competing on an intercollegiate athletics team as experiential credit and develop an internship like class where student-athletes receive academic credits for

their participation on an intercollegiate athletics team. Since student-athletes spend a considerable amount of time dedicated to their sport (Carodine et al., 2001), intercollegiate athletics should be seen as an area where experiential learning can occur (Coffey & Davis, 2019). This course would include reflective papers about the transferable skills the student-athlete has developed through intercollegiate athletics, a submission of their resume that includes these skills, and a culminating presentation that shows they can accurately convey the transferable skills they have developed as it pertains to their professional careers. Elicot University categorizes experiential education as students in active learning through direct experience and focused reflection. Thus, creating a space where student-athletes can reflect on the transferable skills they developed through intercollegiate athletics may develop a more career ready student-athlete.

2. Coaches should be contributors to first-generation student-athletes career readiness concerning the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics. Based on the findings it is obvious the impact coaches have on their student-athletes and their ability to positively impact and influence their lives. However, it seems that conversations about the transferable skills first-generation student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics happens in an organic way, meaning potentially, that not all first-generation student-athletes are aware of the transferable skills they develop that are applicable to their professional careers.

Throughout the athletic season when student-athletes are competing, coaches should hold monthly individual meetings to review what skills a particular student-athlete may have displayed and/or experienced. These meetings can be used as a time for the coach to validate the skills that the student-athlete may have employed during that month. For example, if a student-athlete suffered an injury that month that means that they now must coordinate time in their schedule to see the athletic trainers on a weekly, sometimes daily basis. The coach can use this as a time to validate the time management skills the student-athlete is developing in addition to the resilience they may be displaying through the injury. If individual meetings are not feasible because of the size of the roster, a monthly team meeting may be beneficial to highlight some student-athletes that have displayed the use of specific skills. Additionally, a recap meeting or workshop with first-generation student-athletes that are nearing graduation should be conducted between the coaches and their student-athletes. Given the dynamic and relationship between coaches and student-athletes, coaches have a way to connect with them that is different from anyone else they interact with in a college environment. Creating a space where coaches help student-athletes identify all they have learned and developed through intercollegiate athletics that are applicable to their professional careers can ensure all student-athletes leave their intercollegiate athletics career with an understanding of the transferable skills they developed.



3. A module or area of emphasis on the transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics should be incorporated into Elicot Academy. The university has taken the initial steps on a holistic approach to student-athlete development through Elicot Academy. Elicot Academy was designed to focus on the overall well-being, mental health, and professional development of student-athletes. In doing this, the university and athletic department would be taking an intentional approach in helping student-athletes understand the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics and how they are applicable to their professional careers. Further, the university may be improving the mental health of student-athletes surrounding the transition to their professional careers as they may feel more prepared for this transition knowing that they are bringing certain transferable skills with them. Through this module student-athletes would learn about the transferable skills that are developed through intercollegiate athletics, be provided with real-life examples of their application, hear from employers about how their student-athlete experience gives them an advantage in their professional careers, and go through mock interviews that teach them how to incorporate these transferable skills into their job interviews. Implementing an area through Elicot Academy that is focused on this specific topic would be an attempt to systematically help student-athletes understand the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate

athletics. It would contribute to developing a holistic student-athlete that is career ready.

4. The Office of Career Advancement is also advised to incorporate more education around the transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics for student-athletes. Creating validating environments of these skills should occur across multiple platforms throughout the university. All professional staff within the Office of Career Advancement should be trained on the types of skills student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics and how they can leverage these skills to future employers. The Office of Career Advancement can consider imitating the initiatives taken by Bryant University and Maryville College which require first-year students to engage with their career centers through a new general education course and program (Flaherty, 2023). This type of requirement can increase the engagement first-generation student-athletes have with the Office of Career Advancement. Through this requirement the Office of Career Advancement can hold their own workshops and seminars dedicated to student-athletes around this specific topic.
5. A peer mentorship program should be considered within the Athletic Department among first-generation student-athletes. This peer mentorship program would involve upper-class student-athletes mentoring incoming first-generation student-athletes about the transferable skills they have acquired through intercollegiate athletics. Many mentor/mentee relationships are established informally through athletic participation, but

this peer mentorship program should be formal in nature and established by athletic administrators to help facilitate the learning and validation of transferable skills student-athletes develop through intercollegiate athletics. Athletic administrators and coaches would be essential in starting the program until older student-athletes serving as peer mentors are respected amongst mentees and mentees begin to find an increased value in the mentorship program. Further, the mentors will need initial training from athletic administrators and coaches around this topic in order to accurately convey them to their mentees, but they should also speak from their own personal experiences. Creating such a program would facilitate a knowledge base around transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics for first-generation student-athletes that is perpetually shared by first-generation student-athletes.

## **Implications**

### ***Practice***

Based on the findings of this study, first-generation student-athletes shared that they are developing transferable skills through intercollegiate athletics that contribute to their career readiness. First-generation student-athletes went on to describe the university staff that validated these skills for them. Further, first-generation student-athletes shared this idea that their athletic identity did not alter their ability to focus on areas outside of sports thus potentially removing the notion that their athletic identity may hinder their career readiness. First-generation student-athletes shared their career aspirations for after

graduation or at least their next steps which often included pursuing graduate school or seeking a job in their career field.

Career readiness is the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for the workforce (NACE, 2018). Intercollegiate athletics is a co-curricular activity where transferable skills that are applicable to future employers and contribute to a student-athlete's career readiness are being developed. After triangulating the first-generation student-athlete interviews with those of other participants such as coaches, athletic administrators, Office of Career Advancement, and the NCAA faculty representative it is clear that the university should approach this topic for first-generation student-athletes with more intent. Much of the learning about transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics for first-generation student-athletes happens in an organic, non-systematic way. Other universities have begun implementing full-time life skills coordinators (Broughton & Neyer, 2001) and transferable skills workshops (Carodine et al., 2001; McCarthy, 2017) that may contribute to a more career ready student-athlete. Elicot University should continue to build on the work they have started that focuses on developing a holistic student-athlete, but with more intent around the transferable skills they develop that may contribute to their career readiness.

### ***Policy***

Administrators and leaders within the state department of education may want to consider reviewing their policies as it relates to what they qualify as co-curricular activities and experiential learning opportunities. Experiential learning is often defined as the practical knowledge and experience gained from engaging in activities outside of the

classroom (Coffey & Davis, 2019). Elicot University labels experiential learning as internships, in which students can receive college credits, volunteerism, research, study abroad, fellowships, assistantships, simulations and gaming, practicums, and field work. This study suggests that there may be opportunities for key administrators and leaders to reconsider how intercollegiate athletics is viewed. There are meaningful learning experiences tied to competing in intercollegiate athletics and transferable skills that are developed as a result. These learning experiences and transferable skills contribute to developing a holistic student and one that is career ready. Administrators may consider tying these experiences and skills to learning mechanisms and outcomes that can be measured.

### ***Leadership***

The findings presented that coaches had a significant impact on validating transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics for first-generation student-athletes. However, it seems that college coaches do this on their own accord and in much more organic ways that develop through team meetings and individual meetings. Transferable skills developed through intercollegiate athletics for first-generation student-athletes can be applicable to their career readiness. The influence of college coaches may help facilitate the understanding of transferable skills for first-generation student-athletes through intercollegiate athletics (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Thus, this study implies that the university should focus on incorporating other campus professionals such as coaches that interact with student-athletes to deliver effective career readiness programs that may contribute to first-generation student-athletes career readiness.

### ***Future Research***

Naturally, future research can expand to understand multiple cases of NCAA Division III institutions to understand the experiences of first-generation student-athletes and the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics as it relates to their career readiness. The research conducted in this study focused on a single case study, so expanding this to understand other cases may garner more insight into the topic and how institutions can contribute to first-generation student-athletes career readiness through the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics.

Further, investigating the programs and life-skills workshops, similar to Elicot Academy, that other institutions are implementing to contribute to their student-athletes career readiness would be meaningful. Elicot Academy emerged from this research after interviewing participants and it was clear that the intent of this program was a holistic approach to the growth of student-athletes including their career readiness among other things. Conducting research across a plethora of these types of programs may establish best practices toward promoting career readiness among student-athletes.

Athletic identity can be expounded upon more to see if it truly has less of an influence among NCAA Division III first-generation student-athletes. It was my assertion, prior to conducting this study, that athletic identity would serve a greater role in how first-generation student-athletes thought about themselves and the negative impact it had on their career readiness, but it appears that most participants interviewed in this study did not share those sentiments. Yet most research surrounding athletic identity includes populations of professional athletes and Division I athletes, so conducting

further research among Division III student-athletes may contribute to understanding the differences between these populations.

Lastly, this research focused on the transferable skills first-generation student-athletes developed through intercollegiate athletics and how this contributed to their career readiness, but it did not measure any differences among participants such as gender, GPA, or the sport they participated in. Further, it did not measure any differences between continuing-generation students. Focusing on these specific variables or a combination of them may offer additional data to determine if they have any influence on participants' responses.

### **Conclusion**

Student-athletes are contributing a considerable amount of their time in school to their collegiate teams. This research shows the type of transferable skills that are developed during this time and the impact out-of-class agents have on student-athletes. As the need among higher education institutions is centered around developing career ready college graduates, institutions may consider the experiential learning that is occurring among student-athletes through intercollegiate athletics in ways that help student-athletes leverage these experiences. Leveraging the transferable skills that are developed among first-generation student-athletes becomes increasingly important considering the time commitment dedicated to their sport and the lack of social and cultural capital first-generation student-athletes have to lean on as they pursue professional opportunities post-graduation. The findings of this study can be used for institutions to reconsider how they think about intercollegiate athletics as it relates to career readiness among student-athletes.

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## Appendix A

### First-Generation Student-Athlete Interview Protocol

1. Describe what your involvement in sports at Rowan University means to you.
2. In what ways has your participation in intercollegiate athletics at Rowan University become a part of your identity?
3. In what ways did your participation in sports influence your college choice?
4. Would you associate your identity at the university more with the role of an athlete, student, student-athlete, neither, or something else?
  - a. Please explain why you chose this role.
5. Understanding athletic identity, do you think this has influenced your ability to think about the skills you are developing and how they may apply to your professional career?
6. Describe your experience as a student-athlete at Rowan University.
7. Have you thought about your career after Rowan University? Please explain.
8. In what ways has participating in intercollegiate athletics at Rowan University prepared you for a career after sports?
  - a. Can you provide specific examples?
9. Have you acquired any transferable skills by participating in intercollegiate athletics at Rowan University? Please explain.
10. In what ways did you develop these transferable skills?
11. At which point did you begin to make a connection between the skills you are developing through intercollegiate athletics at Rowan University and how they are applicable to your career and life outside of sports?

- a. Who helped you make these connections?
  - b. Was there a specific coach, athletic administrator, university staff, or person close to you?
12. Have you thought about the skills you are developing through intercollegiate athletics and how they might be applicable to your professional career? Please explain.
13. Are there any ways the University can improve your awareness of transferable skills you have developed through athletics and how these might be applicable to your professional career? Please explain.
14. Is there anyone else at the university you recommend I interview that would provide valuable insight about your experience as a student-athlete and the transferable skills you developed through intercollegiate athletics?

## **Appendix B**

### **Athletic and University Staff Interview Protocol**

1. How long have you been working with student-athletes at Rowan university?
2. In what ways does your involvement with student-athletes shape how they experience Rowan University?
3. In what ways do you think intercollegiate athletics at Rowan helps prepare student-athletes for their career after sports? Please explain where you are situated within this.
  - a. Can you provide specific examples?
4. In what ways does the university prepare student-athletes for their careers after sports?
5. What transferable skills do student-athletes acquire by participating in intercollegiate athletics at Rowan?
6. In what ways do you engage with student-athletes in helping them understand the transferable skills that are learned through intercollegiate athletics?
  - a. Do you typically initiate this engagement or is it initiated by the student-athlete?
7. Do student-athletes at Rowan ever ask you about questions related to the transferable skills they are developing? Please explain.
8. How do you support student-athletes in helping them understand the transferable skills that are learned through intercollegiate athletics?
9. Are these conversations you have on the regular?

10. How does the university support student-athletes in helping them understand the transferable skills that are learned through intercollegiate athletics?
11. In what ways do you offer encouragement for student-athletes about the transferable skills they are acquiring through intercollegiate athletics?
  - a. Would you say this occurs on a consistent basis? Please explain.
12. In what ways does the athletic department teach student-athletes about transferable skills that are being acquired through intercollegiate athletics?
13. Is there anyone else at the university you recommend I interview that would provide valuable insight about supporting student-athletes in the development of the transferable skills they develop through intercollegiate athletics?