

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PERSISTENCE AMONG
NATIONAL JUNIOR COLLEGE ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION DIVISION III STUDENT
ATHLETES

by

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persist to a four-year institution. The theory that guided this study was Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Integration (1975) as it established the principle that student's personal commitment or determination to earn a degree and their commitment to their college or university determines whether they will complete their educational goals. The central research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully persist to a four-year institution? The sub-research questions investigated how Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their (a) social, (b) athletic, (c) academic and (d) personal experiences at the community college level that led to their successful persistence to a four-year university or college. This study intended to capture the authentic voice of NJCAA Division III student-athletes who had persisted to a four-year institution. The method for this transcendental phenomenological study incorporated individual in-depth interviews, writing samples, and a focus group as the primary data collection methods. Four themes emerged: Parent Support, Push to Succeed, Love of Sport, and Not Ready for a University.

Keywords: athletics, community college, persistence, retention, student-athletes

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my wife, Wendy, who is the strongest person I know and makes the world a better place for all who know her. God knew what He was doing when He put you in my life. I love you from home plate to over the fence in the world's biggest stadium!

To my children, Pait and Carrie Ellen, I pray you will always be competitive in all you do and that this task I undertook served as an example to you that you can obtain anything with hard work and a "push." I have enjoyed watching you both grow physically, athletically, spiritually, and in wisdom. You both and your Mom are the reason I breathe!

To my parents, Carlton and Joyce, I thank you for showing me love, the value of hard work and the ability that nothing can stand in one's way, no matter the obstacles.

Thanks to all of my family and friends for supporting me through this goal of obtaining a Doctorate in Education.

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List of Abbreviations

American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)

Division I (DI)

Division II (DII)

Division III (DIII)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA)

Cougar Community College (CCC)

Flyer Community College (FCC)

Jaguar Community College (JCC)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present a framework for this qualitative research study. Community colleges serve as a point of entry (or re-entry) to higher education for more than 12 million credit-seeking and non-credit students each year – approximately one-half of the college-attending population (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). However, student completion rates at the community college level are relatively low (Brock, 2010; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). The National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) is considered the primary governing body for community college sports nationwide, overseeing as many as 60,000 student athletes from 525 member junior and community colleges participating in 28 different sports (Chen, 2017). Recent studies related to the academic performance, persistence and career development of student-athletes focused solely on National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, II, and III member institutions (Constantinides, 2017; Elfman & Hudson, 2018; Fennern, 2017; Janosko, 2018; Napientek, 2017; and Trump, 2018). The NJCAA, which oversees community college athletics, has some research on its Division I (full athletic scholarships including tuition, books, fees, room and board provided to student-athletes) and Division II (limited scholarships covering tuition, books, and fees) levels (Bentley, 2017; Borak, 2018; Gall, 2016); however, this study was designed to examine the experiences of NJCAA Division III (no athletic scholarships are permitted) student-athletes who graduate from community college or successfully transfer to senior institutions to continue their studies. This is a topic that is insufficiently understood at the present and therefore constitutes a gap in the existing research. The first chapter provides (a) the background for the problem, which will establish the foundation for this study, (b) the situation to self, (c) the

problem statement, (d) the purpose statement, (e) the significance of the study, (f) the research questions, and (g) definitions relevant to the study. A chapter summary is provided as well.

The study was a transcendental phenomenological study to describe the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. The theoretical framework of the proposed study was guided by Tinto's (1975) student integration model as it established the principle that a student's personal commitment or determination to earn a degree and their commitment to their college or university determines whether they will complete their educational goals.

Background

Since the beginning of the community college system in the United States, community colleges have offered students an open-door admission as well as an affordable avenue for obtaining certificates, diplomas, associate degrees, and opportunities to transfer to senior four-year institutions. Open-door admissions is a type of unselective and noncompetitive college admission process in which the only criterion for entrance is a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Beck, 2017). Subsequently, community colleges have provided enhancements to campus life such as clubs, athletics, and honor societies to both recruit students and provide resume building, community investment, and professional development (Beck, 2017). Raepple, Peery and Hohman (1982) asserted that collegiate athletic programs are part of the college education process, supporting and promoting goals of the institution to develop the whole student. To provide more of the traditional college experience, recruit and retain more students, and develop the whole student, community college administrators have begun to invest more in student activities, particularly athletics (Wolf-

Wendel & Ruel, 1999). Athletics at the community college level is an area of growing research interest (Astin, 1999; Borak, 2018; Matthews, 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Trump, 2018). Athletic programs may attract students, but it should be acknowledged that persisting in the classroom to meet the educational and career seeking goals that are the integral part of being a student-athlete should be of paramount concern to those college athletic and academic programs. Horton (2015) urged that more research needs to be conducted pertaining to student-athletes, as their completion rates of college courses are significantly behind those of the non-athlete students. Demas (2017) asserted that community college student-athletes face more obstacles in obtaining their college education than do students starting in their four year institutions due to absence of focused support programs. Additionally, “most student-athletes indicate that they wish to transfer to a four-year institution to continue their studies and possibly continue to play their sport, but despite this goal, few community college students go on to earn bachelor degrees” (Pflum, Nadler & Miller, 2017, p. 532). Existing theory suggests that commitment and determination are required for students to complete college (Knowles, 1980; Tinto, 1975). However, many community college students fail to make the successful transition from the admission process to graduation and conferring of degrees (Tinto, 1999). As such, there is a need to examine the experiences of NJCAA Division III student-athletes who transfer to four-year institutions to continue their studies – a topic that is insufficiently understood at the present time and a gap to be filled in the existing research.

Historical Context

Collegiate sports competition has been in existence since 1852 when the rowing team from Yale University competed against the rowing team from Harvard University (Lewis, 1970). As competition at the university level grew, athletic participation began to branch into the two-

year community and technical college system (Majerus, 2016). The California Community College Athletic Association (CCCCAA) was formed in 1929 for community colleges in the state of California to oversee 108 athletic programs as well as promote the transfer of its student-athletes to four-year universities to continue their athletic and academic endeavors (NJCAA, 2018). Subsequently, in 1938, 13 California two-year colleges formed the National Junior College Athletic Association to promote athletic and academic opportunities for community colleges around the nation (NJCAA, 2018). As participation grew, the term “student-athlete” was coined in 1964 by then NCAA president Walter Byers in response to a worker compensation suit against the Fort Lewis A&M Aggies due to a football player’s traumatic head injury (Branch, 2006). Student-athlete became the collegiate signature term that was deliberately ambiguous. College players were not students at play, nor were they just athletes in college (Branch, 2006).

Brown (2014) presented that in 1983, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) adopted Proposition 48 which required incoming student-athletes to achieve an SAT score of 700 or ACT score of 15 and a 2.0 high school grade point average in 11 academic core courses for athletic eligibility. This standard was the beginning of the NCAA tracking graduation rates of its student-athletes (Brown, 2014). Though data efforts continued in tracking graduation rates in the NCAA, there were no such data tracking mandates administered in the NJCAA (NJCAA, 2018). The NJCAA continues to not track graduation rates. However, community college student-athlete persistence and retention is a major topic, as community colleges are experiencing growing enrollment accompanied by increased student-athlete participation (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Mendoza, 2012).

Nakajima, Dembo and Mossler (2012) insisted that there is much to be learned from examining community college students' retention and persistence. Nakajima, Dembo, and Mossler (2012) examined demographic, financial, academic, academic integration, and psychosocial variables and their relationship to student persistence and found that age, work hours and financial aid influenced student persistence. However, all of the aforementioned factors interrelate, which indicates the importance of isolating and examining the individual factors to solve the problem of student retention and persistence (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012).

Juszkiewicz (2017) indicated that there had been a continued nationwide decline in community college enrollment since the Great Recession of 2007-2009, which eventually led to a dramatic spike in community college enrollment. Furthermore, Juszkiewicz (2017) reported that the graduation rate of all students from community colleges is 25 %. First-year attrition rates at community colleges have been a longstanding problem (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Liao, Ferdenzi, & Edlin, 2012; Windham et al., 2014). Terenzini and Pascarella (1991) concluded that community college students are less likely to persist compared to four-year college students. Barnett (2011) offered that while more students are entering college than ever before, large numbers leave during the first year, and a substantial proportion depart before attaining a degree or other credential. Bartlett (2011) asserted that early departure from college is much more common among some institutional types and groups of students than others.

Social Context

Colleges and universities have steadily worked towards being more student-centered environments in their practices through appreciative advising and the use of such predictive analytic programs such as AVISO to indicate whether students are performing well in their

academic pursuits (Hall, 2017). Community colleges have embraced providing their student body with orientation courses or freshmen seminars to address topics such as interpersonal leadership, social skills, support services, and career decision making (Coleman, Skidmore, & Weller, 2017; Keim, & Strickland, 2004; Robertson, 2016; Torgerson, 2016).

Hollis (2002) summarized that student-athletes confront five athletic activity areas which present obstacles in their education: practice, travel, trainer time, weight training, and film sessions. Given that additional list on top of college demands and part time jobs, a student-athlete at the Division III level may need to fund his or her education, the challenge of completing a degree becomes more significant. As student-athletes are a relevant part of a community college's student body tapestry, questions emerge regarding how to address the challenges that these students face in representing their college in collegiate competition, to address the rigor of their classroom endeavors, and how to acknowledge their time spent in part-time jobs to fund their college studies (Boggs, 2011; Morris, Modica, & Miller, 2010; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986). For instance, community colleges, depending on funding, offer different levels of student support services to address student needs in and outside of the classroom; however, student-athletes place little emphasis on utilizing these student support services (Demas, 2017; Horton, 2015; Keim, & Strickland, 2004). Therefore, many questions remain for college institutions in how they can address the needs of their student-athletes.

Theoretical Context

Theoretically, this study will be guided by Tinto's (1975) student integration model as it established the principle that a student's personal commitment or determination to earn a degree and the student's commitment to the college or university determines whether the student will complete their educational goals. From a theoretical perspective, retention and persistence is an

important focus of study as it applies to how Division III NJCAA student-athletes who receive no athletic scholarships engage in their studies and their college environment, their quality of their experience and their motivation to persist to their degree pursuit at a four-year university. Studies have been conducted examining student-athlete retention and persistence, at the NCAA levels and at the NJCAA Division I and II levels from a quantitative perspective, but none have looked specifically at the Division III NJCAA student-athlete (Balduf, 2009; Burkum et al., 2010; Johnson, Wessel, & Pierce, 2013; Kitsos, 2012; Ting, 2009; Weiss & Robinson, 2013). Students who are able to establish personal commitments to other students, faculty, and staff tend to have a greater accountability to learning, which helps them flourish both socially and intellectually (Tinto, 1997). This study may provide a new outlook to the theory because it focused solely on the Division III NJCAA student-athlete. These student-athletes shared their lived experiences at their level of college and athletic participation. It is anticipated that this study may have a theoretical value because it presented narratives that reinforce or delve deeper into the social and academic experiences Tinto held so valuable. Subsequently, it may extend existing research and knowledge regarding Division III NJCAA student-athletes and their ability to persist to both their academic and athletic goals. This study has the potential to benefit faculty, advisors, success coaches, student services personnel, parents of Division III student-athletes, and athletic administration that work at Division III NJCAA level institutions, as it relates to the academic, athletic, and social journey a student-athlete embarks upon as well as the commitment and determination of the college personnel that work with these student-athletes.

Situation to Self

When I was 24 years old, I was initially employed as a physical education instructor and coach at a NJCAA Division III community college. Student-athletes at this Division III NJCAA

college were tasked with not only maintaining a full-time status as students, but they also often needed part-time jobs to pay for college, as Division III NJCAA student-athletes are not permitted to have any athletic scholarships (Chen, 2017). Their academic and part-time job commitments were in addition to their desire to compete in their respective sport. Through my years of employment, I have coached a myriad of student-athletes who I also taught in the classroom and advised through the college transfer process. Fortunately, I have had some successes in all of three arenas; however, I have also experienced failures with student-athletes not persisting semester to semester either through academic probation, academic suspension due to poor grades, or simply running out of funding for their education. My work has continued at the community college level, and I have a passion to help students meet their academic, athletic, social, vocational, and personal goals in their lives. In my years of experience at the community college level, I have developed a varied skill set to share with students to help them in these goal areas. Therefore, my motivation for conducting this study originated in my work with the student-athletes that I had previously coached, taught, and advised.

My past work with NJCAA Division III student-athletes motivated me to better understand the lived experiences of these students and to contribute to the knowledge base of how these students view their personal, academic, and athletic experiences that contribute to their overall success. It was my goal to understand how the NJCAA Division III student-athletes have persisted from the community college to their senior institution. To aid in my understanding of participants' views during my proposed study, I based my research on the framework of Tinto's theory of student integration (Tinto, 1975, 2012).

I relied on an ontological assumption in order to achieve the purpose of my study, which was to convey the participants' experiences in my study (Creswell, 2013; Kajee et al., 2017).

Ontological assumptions define the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell, 2013). Knight (2006) offered that ontology is “what it means for anything to be” (p.18). The lens through which I looked at reality may be the direct opposite of the lens utilized by another person. Each participant’s lived experiences may create a different perspective from my own or those of their fellow participants. I recognized that those different perspectives may be different from my own journey in persistence. Thus, rather than judging those experiences against my own, I simply embraced the fact that my reality I have developed from my experiences regarding this phenomenon of persistence differed from the participants’ realities. I accepted those multiple viewpoints and accurately reported them as they were shared with me (Creswell, 2013; Kajee et al., 2017; Moustakas, 1994).

Epistemology is the philosophical assumption related to the study of knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Gutek, 2011; Kajee et al., 2017; Miller, 2011). Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who is known for his work in child development, believed that knowledge is constructed by people’s actions, thoughts, and experiences (Miller, 2011). Consequently, the epistemological assumption necessitated that I immerse myself into the participants’ responses to the questions posed so that I could find answer to how they know what they know (Creswell, 2013; Knight, 2006). I used the personal information gathered and my subjective experiences as a researcher to develop the knowledge on this study (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1988). Realizing that knowledge is created through the subjective experiences of individuals, I sought to conduct all data collection in the places where the participants felt at ease to speak (Creswell, 2013; Kajee et al., 2017).

Creswell (2013) offered that all researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study (p.20). Therefore, an axiological assumption

indicates that the researcher will not only examine his or her values but will also actively report any biases or values as well (Creswell, 2013). An individual's ethics, which involve a moral thermometer and value system, are included under the umbrella of axiology (Creswell, 2013). Axiology is central to the educational process and qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Knight, 2006). Opong (2014) suggested that "researchers should admit and deliberately include their cultural orientation in the research process" (p. 248). It is normal that people have partialities or biases (Creswell, 2013; Knight, 2006). In the same way that biases differ among people, not all people have the same value system nor the same priorities as others (Knight, 2006).

A social constructivism paradigm guided this study, which meant that the "participants' particular views about the phenomenon are constructed through their lived experiences and interactions with others" (Creswell, 2013, p.25). Consequently, it is important to allow the participants to share the similarities and differences in their experiences and perceptions of reality (Creswell, 2013). I am cognizant that the participants' subjective meanings or realities are closely connected to their social and historical experiences (Creswell, 2013). The questions I designed were general and broad, which allowed participants to construct their own meaning and share varied experiences (Creswell, 2013). I subsequently analyzed responses to questions for complexity and themes regarding the participants' viewpoints as they shared their experiences (Creswell, 2013). My intention was to interpret the meanings the participants developed about the phenomenon. The findings of this study related to the interactions and historical and cultural norms that the participants experienced (Creswell, 2013).

Problem Statement

Community colleges serve as a point of entry (or re-entry) to higher education for more than 12 million credit and non-credit seeking students each year – approximately one-half of the

college attending population (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014); however, student completion rates at the community college level are remarkably low (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2016; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014).

The National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) is considered the primary governing body for community college sports nationwide, overseeing as many as 60,000 student athletes from 525 member junior and community colleges participating in 28 different sports (Chen, 2017). Recent studies related to the academic performance, persistence and career development of student-athletes focused solely on National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, II, and III member institutions (Constantinides, 2017; Elfman & Hudson, 2018; Fennern, 2017; Janosko, 2018; Napientek, 2017; and Trump, 2018), but not on the NJCAA which oversees community college athletics.

Horton (2015) acknowledged that due to the community college's open door policy, pressure to produce NJCAA student-athlete graduates is not tied to punitive measures as it is at the NCAA level; moreover, Demas (2017) asserted that community college student-athletes face more obstacles in obtaining their college education than students starting in their four year institutions due to absence of focused support programs. While "student-athletes indicate that they wish to transfer to a four year institution to continue their studies and possibly continue to play their sport, few community college students go on to earn bachelor degrees" (Pflum, Nadler & Miller, 2017, p. 532), a finding which is supported by the fact that many community college students fail to make the successful transition from the admission process to graduation and conferring of degrees (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2016; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Tinto, 1999). Horton (2015) urged that more research needs to be conducted

for student-athletes, as their completion rates of college courses are significantly behind those of the non-athlete students. The NJCAA Division III student-athletes compete in their respective sport embracing the academic, athletic, and personal demands that their comparable peers do at higher levels of intercollegiate competition, but without financial assistance and intentional academic success programs and often with the additional responsibility of a working a part-time job.

Over the past two decades, community colleges have reported significant dropout rates among their students (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Radcliffe et al., 2006; Reese, 2015). The problem is that community college students, especially community college student-athletes at the Division III NJCAA level who are enrolled to both complete their degree and participate in their sport, are at great risk of not completing their programs of study (Balduf, 2009; Baldwin, Bensimon, Dow, & Kleiman, 2011; Beauchemin, 2014; Beck, 2017; Bentley, 2017; Connolly, 2016; and Cooper, 2017). It is important to understand how NJCAA Division III student-athletes successfully persist to four-year institutions, as there is no research giving a voice to NJCAA Division III student-athletes who persist to four-year colleges. Despite the lack of persistence to senior institutions by all levels of community college student-athletes, there is relatively little research that focused on the experiences of NJCAA Division III student-athletes who persisted to senior institutions. As community college student-athletes represent over 50,000 students, research was needed to explain how NJCAA Division III student-athletes persist because their academic and athletic journey is not the same as NCAA Division I student-athletes (Tekle, 2018).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year college or university. A student-athlete who persisted was operationally defined as a student who participated both his or her freshman and sophomore years in a NJCAA Division III organized sport and either graduated with a degree from the community college or accrued a minimum number of credit hours (45) to transfer to a senior institution to complete his or her bachelor's degree (NJCAA Handbook, 2018).

This study was guided by Tinto's (1975) student integration model, as it established the principle that students' personal commitment or determination to earn a degree and their commitment to their college or university determine whether they will complete their educational goals. Students who are able to establish personal commitments to other students, faculty, and staff tend to have a greater accountability to learning, which helps them flourish both socially and intellectually (Tinto, 1997). Existing theory suggests that commitment and determination are required for students to complete college (Knowles, 1980; Tinto, 1975). Successful students must be willing to experience a "rite of passage" and establish goals (Tinto, 1988, 1997, 2012). Tinto's (1975) student integration model also focused on the important of goal commitment and external factors such as time, student attitudes, and students' personal and academic backgrounds. Most importantly, students must make meaningful academic and social connections to be academically successful and persist through difficult times in their academic experiences. A previously noted, Horton (2015) urged that more research needs to be conducted for student-athletes, as their completion rates of college courses are significantly behind those of

the non-athlete students. Current research that explores the Division III NJCAA student-athletes is limited. Division III student-athletes who have graduated or transferred to senior institutions have yet to be heard, and a gap in the literature is present that needs to be addressed.

Significance of the Study

This study described the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. The sample in this study was ten student-athletes who participated both their freshmen and sophomore years in a NJCAA Division III organized sport and either graduated with a community college degree or accrued a minimum number of credit hours (45) to transfer to a senior institution to complete their bachelor's degree (NJCAA Handbook, 2018). This study may have empirical, theoretical, and practical significance regarding research involving student-athletes at the community college level. The empirical basis for this study may add to the existing literature by filling the present gap regarding Division III NJCAA student-athletes lived experiences in regards to their graduation and persistence to a four-year university. The theoretical significance is that Tinto's (1975) student integration model will have additional contributions by addressing NJCAA Division III student-athletes and their persistence to four-year universities, as they have yet to be examined under this theory. Finally, the practical implications will be that this study provides a description of the experiences of NJCAA Division III student-athletes for stakeholders, such as academic advisors, success coaches, faculty, financial aid specialists and athletic personnel that play an important role in Division III student-athletes' academic journey to their degrees and will aid them in constructing best practices to apply in their work with student-athletes.

Empirical Significance

There continues to be a concern in the United States about the growing number of college students who struggle in college and are at risk for dropping out (AACC, 2015; Burkum, Habley, McClanahan, & Valiga, 2010; NJCAA, 2018; Schuetz, 2008). One way to examine and address that issue is by listening to the voices of college students who have a demanding academic and athletic life and learning their beliefs about what they experienced in college and how they experienced the demands of their time in college (Beauchemin, 2014; Borak, 2018; Kane et al., 2008). This study focused on a distinct group of student-athletes; therefore, it is anticipated that it will extend the current literature to support applicability of any themes that emerge from the interviews, focus groups, and written documentation that are deemed best practices for persistence of student-athletes at the community college level.

A community college student-athlete comes into contact with many stakeholders in their daily life as a college student. Stakeholders at the community college level would include those that work with student-athletes such as faculty, academic advisors, success coaches, and financial aid personnel. Studies have provided evidence of the relationship between faculty support in and out of the classroom and student retention (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Cejda & Kaylor, 2001; Comeaux, Snyder, Speer, & Taustine, 2014; Jain, Bernal, Lucero, Herrera, & Solorzano, 2016; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Schumaker, 2017; Starobin, Smith & Laanan, 2016). The social systems in place around student-athletes may not be conducive to them being successful at institutions of higher education. In many cases, student-athletes are the first in their family to go to college (Harper, 2009). As such, they may not have parents or guardians who can speak from a position of experience when discussing the college process (Schumaker, 2017). Furthermore, a lack of knowledge of how to actively

engage with faculty may be lacking among most community college students, including student-athletes (Harper, 2009). Such factors contribute to the importance of faculty support both in and outside the classroom through informal conversations, advising, and game attendance to show support (Kissenger et al., 2011). The repetition and normalizing of these interactions may perpetuate other behaviors that lead to student success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Comeaux, Snyder, Speer, & Taustine, 2014).

There has been an increasing nation-wide emphasis on academic advising and its impact on retaining and graduating students as colleges and universities seek ways to increase their retention (Gordon & Habley, 2000; Marques & Luna, 2005). Bloom et al. (2008) defined appreciative advising as a social constructivist academic advising philosophy that provides a framework for advisors to optimize their interaction with students, in both individual and group settings. Appreciative advising involves a six-phase model through which advisors intentionally use positive, active, and attentive listening and questioning strategies to: build trust and rapport with students while guiding them to uncover their strengths and interests; help students express their dreams and aspirations; co-construct action plans with students; support students in carrying out the plans; and challenge both students and themselves to attempt to become even better at their planning and completion (Hutson, 2010). Additionally, another layer of the appreciative advising process is the use of student success coaches who have become a part of student support at many community colleges (Hall, 2017). Success coaches using student-monitoring systems provide both reactive and proactive student interventions in an effort to preempt and prevent potential academic issues (Hall, 2017). The lens on the role of success coaches and their contributions to student retention has been focused on the community college ranks (Allen & Lester, 2012; Gilardi & Gulgielmetti, 2011; Kuh, 2009). Mendez, Mendoza and Archer (2013)

studied the effects of financial aid on student-athlete retention indicating a significant influence on student persistence. When a student does not have to worry about funding streams, an additional college demand on his or her time is reduced. Therefore, those that work in the fields of academic instruction, academic advising, success coaching and financial aid would benefit from a more targeted inquiry on behalf of the student-athletes who attend their institutions.

Theoretical Significance

This study extends the literature regarding Tinto's (1975) student integration model by addressing NJCAA Division III student-athletes and their persistence to four-year universities, as they had yet to be examined under this theory. The student integration model focuses on the importance of social and academic integration for all college students.

Practical Significance

This study will provide advising, retention, and persistence recommendations for stakeholders, such as academic advisors, success coaches, faculty, financial aid specialists and athletic personnel that play an important role in Division III student-athletes' academic journey to their degrees. Any practical information that may arise from this study that can contribute to the student-oriented practices of a college may reveal significant areas for growth and improvement within the institution. This information can also help ensure that faculty, staff, student support personnel, and athletic department members are motivated to persist in their roles, continue to effectively work with students, foster innovation in higher education, and provide support to all vested parties. It is also anticipated that the themes that emerged will provide advising, retention and persistence recommendations of best practices for students, faculty, college student support services, and athletic departments.

Research Questions

One central research question and four sub-questions guided this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research study on the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. The central research question focused on the overall experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete while enrolled at a community college that led to successful persistence to a four-year institution. The first sub-question focused on the personal experiences that Division III NJCAA student-athletes underwent while enrolled in community college and participating in their sport and subsequently led to their persistence to a senior institution. The second sub-question was designed to obtain an understanding of their athletic experiences while enrolled in community college and how those experiences led to their successful persistence to a senior institution. The third sub-question centered on an understanding of their academic experiences and how those experiences contributed to their successful persistence to a senior institution. The fourth sub-question examined an understanding of their personal experiences and how they contributed to their successful persistence to a senior institution.

Central Research Question: What are the experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution? As the sub-questions addressed specifics in terms of social experiences, athletic experiences, academic experiences and personal experiences, it was anticipated that the overall question would serve to provide participants' individual experiences which can offer new insight into this existing body of literature. This examination of students' experiences was designed to inform interventions intended to increase the transfer success of students (Balduf, 2009).

Sub-Question 1: How do participants describe their social experiences while enrolled at a community college that led to persistence to a four-year institution? The development of this question addressed the dynamics of a participant's social, vocational and family experiences during his or her time at the community college. Tinto's integration framework stressed the importance of social integration (Tinto, 1993). The process of a student's life is a "highly interrelated web-like series of family, interpersonal, academic and organizational pulls and pushes that shape a student's persistence" (Connolly, 2016; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Reason, 2009). To extend existing research and theory, this question sought to obtain information about the importance of a student's social experiences as they lend themselves to persistence to a four-year institution from a community college.

Sub-Question 2: How do participants describe their athletic experiences while enrolled at a community college that led to persistence to a four-year institution? This question addressed the application of Tinto's (1975) student integration model in this population by providing insight into the social aspect of athletic teams as well as how success in the athletic arena can have an impact on student success in transferring to a senior institution. At the second stage in the student integration model, Tinto acknowledged that external commitments to others and entities outside of the institution, such as family, friends, and work obligations, have an ongoing effect throughout the time spent in college (Connolly, 2016). The external forces can either be supportive or have a negative influence on a student's goals and commitments, subsequent interactions with the institution, and ultimately, his or her departure decision (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Reason, 2009; Tinto 1993). Primary to Tinto's original model was the finding that the degree to which students are successful in their pursuits

determines the degree to which they are committed to their career and educational goals as well as to the institution (Connolly, 2016).

Sub-Question 3: How do participants describe their academic experiences while enrolled at a community college that led to persistence to a four-year institution? This question was designed to inform one of the academic journey that a successful student embarks upon when a student's involvement in the academic environment is critical to success in college. Tinto (1993) found that a student's sense of academic and social belonging impacts retention and graduation. Subsequently, this sense of belonging is increased or decreased through interactions with the academic and social environments of a college or university (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 1993).

Sub-Question 4: How do participants describe their personal experiences while enrolled at a community college that led to persistence to a four-year institution? This question addressed the dynamics of a participant's social, vocational and family experiences during his or her time at the community college (Connolly, 2016; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Reason, 2009). Again, Tinto's integration framework stressed the importance of social integration (Tinto, 1993). The process of a student's life is a "highly interrelated web-like series of family, interpersonal, academic and organizational pulls and pushes that shape a student's persistence" (Tinto, 1993, p.61). To extend existing research and theory, this question obtained information about the importance of a student's personal experiences as they lent themselves to persistence to a four-year institution from a community college.

Definitions

Key terms relating to the experiences of the population and the phenomenon of interest were used throughout this study.

1. *Community Colleges* – Traditionally, community colleges are two-year post-secondary institutions of higher learning that offer noncredit courses and workforce and university transfer academic programs (Boggs, 2011).
2. *National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)* – An organization in the United States that administers intercollegiate athletics and functions as a general legislative and administrative authority for men’s and women’s intercollegiate athletics for four-year institutions of higher learning (NCAA, 2018).
3. *National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA)* – An organization that is the governing body of intercollegiate athletics for two-year colleges. As such, its programs are designed to meet the unique needs of a diverse group of student-athletes who come from both traditional and non-traditional backgrounds and whose purpose in selecting a two-year college may be as varied as their experiences before attending college (NJCAA Handbook, 2018).
4. *National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) Division I* – The Division level where NJCAA colleges may grant full athletic scholarships (tuition, books, fees, room and board), up to \$250 in course-required supplies and transportation costs one time per academic year to and from the college by direct route. Each sport has limits on the number of scholarships that can be granted (NJCAA Handbook, 2018).
5. *National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) Division II* - The Division level where NJCAA colleges may grant athletic scholarships, but scholarships are limited to tuition, books, fees and up to \$250 in course required supplies. Each sport has limits on the number of scholarships that can be granted (NJCAA Handbook, 2018).

6. *National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) Division III* - The Division level where NJCAA colleges are not permitted to offer any athletic scholarships (NJCAA Handbook, 2018).
7. *Persistence* – The rate at which students continue their studies in higher education, often measured by the percentage of students who continue in higher education from one year to the succeeding year (Barnes, 2012).
8. *Qualitative Research*- A process that begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks which inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, which leads to researchers inquiring about the world. That inquiry provides a collection of data from the natural setting which is sensitive to the people and places under study. This culminates with data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes (Creswell, 2013).
9. *Retention* – The percentage of first-time, degree/certificate seeking students (either part-time or full-time) for a particular fall semester who either complete their program by the following fall semester or are enrolled in the institution the following fall semester (NCES, 2018).
10. *Tinto's Theory of Student Integration* – This model primarily focuses on the importance of social and academic integration in the lives of all college students, not just community college students. Academic integration is essential for students to be successful in higher education. This notion of academic integration incorporates academic development, personal growth, academic confidence, and values (Tinto, 1975, 2012).

11. *Transcendental Phenomenology*- A scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness (Moustakas, 1994).

Summary

Within this chapter, a background for the defined problem was provided by a concise review the literature. Despite the lack of persistence to senior institutions by all NJCAA Divisions of community college student-athletes, there is relatively little research that focuses on the experiences of NJCAA Division III student-athletes who persist to senior institutions. An examination of recent literature indicated that there is currently a gap in the research and an insufficient understanding of the experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete and their successful persistence to a four-year institution (Horton, 2015; Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2016; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014); Tinto, 1999). To understand this phenomenon, it was important to examine the personal, athletic, and academic experiences of these student-athletes and investigate the cause of their success in persisting to a four-year institution of higher learning. Tinto's (1975) student integration model was used as a theoretical underpinning to reveal the experiences of the participants. This chapter explained the scope of the study and the situation to self. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year college or university. The chapter provided the overall significance of the study as well as the empirical, theoretical and practical significance. Research questions were designed to facilitate understanding of the experiences of the participants. To conclude, this chapter offered definitions applicable to this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. Astin and Tinto believed that extracurricular and out-of-classroom experiences, such as athletic participation, are critical to the development, persistence, and retention of students (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997). Melendez (2007) asserted that although athletic participation had been theorized to influence psychosocial development in general, the role of the student athlete and the athletic subculture is often overlooked as a key developmental force on the college campus (p. 41).

It is incumbent on colleges and universities to learn more about the experiences of their student-athletes and determine whether they are taking part in educationally sound activities and benefiting in desired ways from college at levels commensurate with their non-athlete peers in order to find success in both retention and persistence. Student-athletes have many reasons they choose community colleges, and it is important for faculty, administrators, support personnel and coaches to make sure the students' time is used to enhance all aspects of their academic experience as well as their personal growth. The successful student-athlete experience should be studied to identify a "positive influence on academic adjustment for student-athletes" (Melendez, 2007, p. 52) and provide more context to the student-athlete and their successful transfer to a four-year institution of higher learning.

This chapter presents a review of the literature pertaining to the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who

successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. This section includes literature related to the theoretical framework that guided this study, specifically Tinto's (1975) student integration model.

A variety of resources was used in compiling this literature review, including The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. The review covers current literature on community colleges, community college student-athletes, retention, and persistence as applicable to the study.

Theoretical Framework

Perhaps the best known theoretical approach that centers on student retention is Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration model. Tinto (1975) developed his model out of the principles of Durkheim's theory of suicide (1897), by postulating that student attrition is linked to a lack of social and academic interactions, and the work of Spady (1970), who first applied Durkheim's ideas to the study of persistence. Integration is the incorporation of individuals into a community and the feeling experienced by individuals that they fit into the community of which they are part (Tinto, 1993). This model was employed to help examine and interpret experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. By examining the experiences of this specific group of students, this study endeavors to create a contribution to the literature that can provide best practices for college retention and college persistence to stakeholders. Tinto's work principally focuses on the importance of social and academic integration in the lives of all college students, not just community college students, and emphasizes that academic and social integration are paramount for students to be successful in higher education. This concept of academic integration combines a student's efforts in academic development, personal growth,

academic confidence, and values into a concerted effort (Kuh et al., 2007; Tinto, 1975, 2012). Social integration describes the building of relationships with other individuals within academic learning environments, such as fellow students, teaching assistants, teammates, club members and so on. Relationships between college students, faculty and staff are crucial, as they create a network that students can utilize when they are confronted with challenges both within and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1975). This model focuses on the relationship between students and their postsecondary learning environments.

Tinto (1993) asserted that higher education comprises both academic and social systems. Each system establishes its own characteristics of formal and informal structures regarding faculty, student, and staff communities. The academic system conducts the formal education of students. The structured interaction in the classrooms and laboratories of the university is the primary focus of the academic system. The societal system concerns itself with the personal needs and daily life of the student population via campus life. This system focuses on the mostly informal and recurring interactions of faculty, staff, and students mainly outside of the classroom. Tinto (1993) emphasized that these very distinct systems do exist within one university and that a student's independent experiences in each may lead to departure from the institution. In many instances, the two systems are not in concert on campuses. An institution's emphasis upon education may dominate the wider social opportunities at a university. In other cases, the social opportunities may be more important than the actual academics. Subsequently, a student may depart, voluntarily or involuntarily, from an institution due to lack of integration in either system.

Tinto asserted that students who fail to make meaningful social and academic connections with their instructors and peers while they are in college are at a greater risk of

dropping out of college (Tinto, 1975, 2012). Once students decide to leave college, the chance of them completing an academic program of study diminishes greatly (Tinto, 1975, 2012). In developing his theory, Tinto (1975) adapted Durkheim's (1897) opinion that there are numerous reasons behind an individual giving up on life and committing suicide. Durkheim labeled those as altruistic, anomic, fatalistic and egotistical (Tinto, 1993, p. 100). The type of student academic suicide that is most prevalent is egotistical suicide. In using suicide as his guide to develop his retention model, Tinto does not imply that institutional departure leads to suicide by taking one's life or that institutional departure is a form of social suicide (1993). While it is not the actual termination of a student's life, it is a form of educational suicide, whereby students simply abandon their college studies when they are unable to integrate, fit in, or build relationships with individuals on their college campuses (Tinto, 1993). Durkheim's (1897) model of egotistical suicide supported Tinto's (1975) argument that supportive social and intellectual structures on college campuses can influence students' willingness to stay at college. Tinto recognized that there are intriguing analogies between both forms of behavior. Most notably, both institutional departure and suicidal departure are "a voluntary withdrawal from local communities that is as much of a reflection of the community as it is of the individual who withdraws" (Tinto, 1993, p. 99). Thus, it is tremendously beneficial to colleges and universities to have services in place to help students transition into college life as effortlessly and successfully as possible (Tinto, 1993). And consequently, it is in the best interest for this particular study to examine those successful students who persisted in order to find best practices for colleges' and universities' faculty, staff, and student support personnel.

In relevance to this study, athletic participation would be under the umbrella of the social systems of the community colleges, colleges and universities. Community colleges are typically

non-residential institutions. Assuming that living on campus contributes to the social system interactions, the typical community college student may have a more difficult time integrating into the social system of a community college. Consequently, the academic system bears the heavier load of integration into the college. For community college student-athletes, it is possible that the student has a high level of integration within the community college setting due to participation in college athletics. However, the same student-athlete may experience disconnection in the academic system of their college. A community college student athlete may experience lack of academic preparation, increased time devoted to their particular sport, and a lack of understanding of how to integrate into the academic system of the college.

However, community college student-athletes' integration may be less difficult than that of other community college students in that they have a quick initial assimilation into their college's social structure via their athletic team. Adopting the new collegiate team's norms and value system becomes very beneficial for the student athlete in terms of retention and persistence. For student athletes, the focus on retention and graduation has been even more intense (Radcliffe, Huesman, & Kellogg, 2006). While various models have been developed on student retention and the college experience, Tinto (2006) suggested that student involvement is most critical during the first year of college. Tinto (2006) explained that it is one thing to understand why students leave, but it is another to know what institutions can do to encourage students to stay and succeed. Tinto (1993) wrote that "commitment to students then generates a commitment on the part of students to the institution" (p. 146).

Every student is on a unique academic journey and has his or her own physical and emotional demands in their lives. Each student's environment, outside demands on their schedule, and personal choices affect him or her differently. Two key elements, intention and

commitment, stand as bases of academic departure (Tinto, 1993). Tinto, with his theory of student integration, attempted to explain why students decide to leave college at critical moments in their lives (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration established the principle that a student's commitment or determination to earn a degree and their commitment to their college or university determines whether they will complete college. Students develop academic skills, social skills, and other abilities. In turn, these skills and abilities influence the goals and commitments of students concerning college, the workforce, and their place in society (Cannon, 2016).

A college student's goal commitment is a strong predictor of persistence. Goal commitment is described as the measure of the student's devotion to the goal of attending college and completing a degree (Tinto, 1993). A variety of institutional factors influence the social and academic experiences of students as well as their goals and aspirations (Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997). Students who are able to establish personal commitments to other students, faculty, and staff tend to have a greater commitment and accountability to learning, which helps them flourish both socially and intellectually (Kuh, 2005). Tinto (1993) emphasized "frequent and rewarding contact between faculty, staff and students in a variety of settings both inside and outside the formal confines of the classroom" (p. 148). Additionally, students then develop a strong commitment to their educational institutions and have the desire and will to continue their studies (Tinto, 1997). Tinto (1993) encouraged institutions to involve students "in the daily life of the institution" and to "provide social and intellectual support for their individual efforts" (p. 147). Tinto's seminal integration framework of college persistence argues that students who feel more connected to their college through social ties and academic engagement are much more likely to persist in college than are students who never quite feel like they "fit in" (Tinto, 1993).

Consequently, Tinto found that as people's commitment to their educational goals increases, so does their persistence to degree completion. First-generation, low-income students who have not declared a major are almost four times more likely to leave college without a degree than are students who have declared a major, so persistence within a subject is important to keeping students on track for graduation (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Successful students must be willing to experience a "rite of passage" and establish goals (Tinto, 1988, 1997, 2012). At some point in their lives, all individuals transition through the phases of separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1993). Students, particularly student-athletes, need to be willing to separate themselves from their previous relationships and networks that could potentially hinder future progress towards transition (Kuh et al., 2011). This allows them to make meaningful associations with new communities and become incorporated into the college community environment (Tinto, 1988, 1997, 2012). Students who successfully make it through these transitional phases often are successful in persisting in their college studies.

Tinto's (1975) student integration model also focused on the importance of goal commitment and external factors such as time, student attitudes, and students' personal and academic backgrounds. Most importantly, student-athletes must make meaningful academic and social connections to be academically successful and persist through difficult times in their academic and sport experiences. College campuses, athletic teams, and classrooms are the areas in which transition periods take place for student-athletes. In order to ensure success, meaningful connections that take place on these campuses must bolster these connections (Tinto, 1997, 2012).

Additionally, Tinto's theory of student integration established the principles that students develop traits that influence their commitment to the institution where they are enrolled and that

a student's commitment to earn a degree and commitment to their college or university determine whether they complete college. Research has validated Tinto's student integration model and the relationship between student integration and retention (O'Gara et al., 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). If college students can avoid dropping out of school early in their education, they will eventually develop the skills and experiences necessary to persist and graduate (Tinto, 2015). It is commonly believed that the more students immerse or involve themselves into college life, the more likely they will be to persist (Tinto, 1975). Astin (1985) defined student involvement as the extent to which students invested themselves in learning, an investment that included elements of physical and psychological time and energy. Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) concept of integration is closely related to Astin's involvement, as is Pace's (1988) quality of effort.

Tinto's (1975) model measured student success and integration by using grade point averages and the number of positive interactions that students had with their faculty and peers throughout their college experiences. It is crucial for students to establish positive relationships with people who support the learning process and offer encouragement during challenging stages in life (Burgess, 2017). Therefore, positive relationships among student-athletes with their coaches, teammates, faculty, staff, and other integral staff of both the college and athletic department are imperative to the success and persistence of the student-athlete. Students who are unsuccessful in transitioning to college and fail to integrate into their new environments and sports teams are more likely to drop out of college without completing their education goals (Burgess, 2017). In particular, many community college students fail to make the successful transition from the admission process to graduation and the conferring of degrees (Tinto, 1999).

Although Tinto's work is not specifically directed toward examining the lives of community college students and the challenges that are often experienced on community college campuses, it is evident that social integration has a strong impact on learning and persistence. It is crucial for students to establish positive relationships with people who support the learning process and offer encouragement during challenging stages in life. Beck (2017) offered that students who are unsuccessful in transitioning to college and fail to integrate into their new environments and social groups are more likely to drop out of college without completing their educational plans. Learning must take place among students, peers, faculty, and staff to promote student persistence (Crawford & Jervis, 2011; Tinto, 1999).

Related Literature

This section analyzes relevant themes that contributed to the study as found in resources from The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. This review of current literature in application to the study addresses community colleges, community college student-athletes, and retention and persistence and provides the foundation for the research proposal's rationale, namely that there is a gap in the understanding of the experiences of community college student-athletes from several community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduate or transfer to a four-year institution.

Community Colleges

Community colleges serve as a point of entry (or re-entry) to higher education for more than 12 million credit and non-credit seeking students each year -- approximately one-half of the college-attending population (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Researchers suggest that community colleges are most appealing to diverse student populations (e.g., students of color, low income students, first-generation students,

women, and adult learners) because of their “open door admissions, low tuition rates, flexible course scheduling, and their close proximity to a student’s home or place of employment” (Ma & Baum, 2016, p. 21). Ma and Baum (2016) assert that although community colleges provide easy access for students, the majority of students are underprepared academically and do not complete a credential. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded that there was consistent evidence that initial attendance at a two-year rather than a four-year institution lowers the likelihood of a student’s attaining a bachelor’s degree by fifteen to twenty percentage points. Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, and McCormick’s (1996) early work in persistence revealed that the retention rate of students who started at four-year institutions was 56% after five years, with 44 % dropping out entirely and others transferring. For students starting at two-year institutions and seeking a bachelor’s degree, only 39% transferred to a four-year institution, and only about 8% had earned a bachelor’s degree within five years (Berkner et al., 1996). Moreover, Tinto (1997) indicated that since the end of the 20th century, student attrition has grown in America’s post-secondary institutions of higher learning. Tinto (1993) recorded that only a third of all beginning full-time students at community colleges earn associate degrees or certificates.

The majority of students who leave college make the decision to leave voluntarily. Community college students in particular often face many challenges after admission that lead to departure from their schools, such as socioeconomic conditions, failure to complete developmental courses, the inability to succeed academically while working in a place of employment, the struggle to pay tuition and fees, and the stress of raising a family while taking classes (Everett, 2015; Stewart et al., 2007). Early departure of college students has personal, monetary, occupational and social ramifications that not only impact students’ lives, but also the communities in which they reside (Tinto, 1997). Historically, the majority of students who

depart early from college do so on their own without any intervention on the part of the academic institutions where they attend (Tinto, 1993). Faculty and staff at institutions of higher education, and specifically at the community college level, are called to consider various strategies such as appreciative advising or intentional advising to support students in their degree pursuits (Hall, 2017; Tinto, 1982).

Community college students have unique characteristics when compared to university students. The specific impact of these characteristics on community college retention needs to be further assessed (Fike & Fike, 2008). Fike and Fike (2008) reported variables that differentiate community college students from university students. These variables include age, because community colleges enroll large numbers of adult and returning students; ethnicity, because the community college is the primary entry point to higher education for minorities; enrollment in developmental education, because a high proportion of students entering through the open door are not college ready (Fike & Fike, 2008); the number of hours for which students enroll, because nearly two-thirds of community college students attend on a part-time basis (Powers, 2007); and because “students can enter a community college to take classes for the purpose of obtaining a 2-year transferable degree or a terminal certificate, enhancing general job skills, or for personal enrichment” (Derby & Smith, 2004).

However, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) expound that when students attend a two-year institution and transfer to a four-year institution, their chances of earning a bachelor’s degree are about the same as those who began at a four-year institution. Therefore, an examination of those that met their academic goals and persisted is warranted.

The American community college saw its beginning around the turn of the nineteenth century, serving as the catalyst for social change and equality (Boggs, 2011). Since the founding

of Joliet Community College in 1901, there has been dramatic growth to 1,462 community colleges (Beach, 2011). As a result of a growing economy, expanding industries, and the need for more training, the community college movement expanded across the United States. The basic function of early community colleges was to train individuals for jobs in the ever-expanding industrial society (McKinney, 2017). To meet the demands of a mobile and changing society, community colleges expanded from predominantly agricultural and teaching colleges to thriving educational institutions prepared to train all (Everett, 2015; Smith, 2013). The perception held by the American people was that education is the catalyst for social growth and upward mobility (Boggs, 2011). Accordingly, Boggs (2011) contended that community colleges owe their success to four American values: community, access, responsiveness, and creativity. Further, Boggs (2011) explained that community colleges became America's most highly affordable and most responsive sector of higher education.

Community colleges were some of the first institutions to respond to the demand of World War II and the need for skilled workers by adding workforce training to accommodate the country's time of need (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Eventually, the community college evolved to include curriculum for transfer to a four-year college, vocational and career technical education, developmental and continuing education, as well as community service opportunities. Shaped by the Truman Commission in the late 1940s, the community college challenged discrimination of race, sex, and religion by increasing the accessibility of higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Through the ages, legislation shaped the community college arena. The Truman Commission wanted the community college to be the keystone of American higher education (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Subsequently, societal changes such as The Vietnam War, the Civil

Rights Movement, and the Native American Community College began to shape community colleges all around the country (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). The community college shifted to a more needs-based model to foster collaboration and serve communities, and it continues that mission today (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). As previously noted, community colleges serve as a point of entry (or re-entry) to higher education for more than 12 million credit and non-credit seeking students each year, which is approximately one-half of the college attending population (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

Beach (2011) concluded that the community college, much like the country itself, was born of contradictions, and it continues to be an enigma. For the past century this institution has been seen by many as a promise and has represented the meritocratic ladder to college and to the middle class. Beach (2011) asserted that, once seen as a tool to limit access to higher education, the community college is now a tool for increased social mobility, community organization, and regional economic development.

College Student-Athletes

Recent studies related to the academic performance, persistence and career development of student-athletes focused solely on National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, II, and III member institutions (Constantinides, 2017; Elfman & Hudson, 2018; Fennern, 2017; Janosko, 2018; Napientek, 2017; Scott et al., 2008; and Trump, 2018), but not on the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) which oversees community college athletics. Pflum, Nadler, and Miller (2017) noted that “NCAA institutions are typically large, research-intensive college and universities that devote considerable attention to their athletic programs and rely on them to build community among students and alumni” (p. 531). However, the NJCAA is a less prominent field of intercollegiate athletic competition that exists within the

community college structure of higher education. In regard to extending student access, participation data from the National Junior College Athletic Association (2008) suggested that more than 70,000 students participate in athletics at community college institutions each year (Mendoza et al., 2012, p. 204). However, the literature and existing research is quite limited when it comes to community college transfer student-athletes (Horton, 2009a; Horton, 2009b).

The National Junior College Athletic Association is the largest national governing body for student-athletes at the community college level and was created in 1937 when several track and field coaches gathered in Fresno, California to discuss national organization and participation in NCAA events (Horton, 2015). After many years of organized competition at a local level, these coaches and administrators sent a letter of petition to the NCAA requesting permission to enter the NCAA Track and Field Championship (NJCAA, 2018). A year later, the NCAA rejected a petition from 13 two-year colleges in California to grant their teams and athletes permission to compete at the NCAA Track and Field Championships (NJCAA, 2018). In the spring of 1938, following the NCAA's rejection, those same 13 two-year colleges gathered again in Fresno, California to organize and form an association that would promote and supervise a national athletics program exclusively for junior and community colleges (NJCAA, 2018). Much like the NCAA, the NJCAA defines its divisions and establishes scholarship guidelines. NJCAA Division I colleges may grant full athletic scholarships (tuition, books, fees, room and board, and up to \$250 in course-required supplies and transportation costs one time per academic year to and from the college by direct route). Each sport has limits on the number of scholarships that can be granted (NJCAA, 2018). NJCAA Division II colleges may grant athletic scholarships, but scholarships are limited to tuition, books, fees, and up to \$250 in course required supplies. Each sport has limits on the number of scholarships that can be granted

(NJCAA, 2018). NJCAA Division III colleges are not permitted to offer any athletic scholarships (NJCAA, 2018).

The National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) is considered the primary governing body for community college sports nationwide, overseeing as many as 60,000 student athletes from 525 member junior and community colleges participating in 28 different sports (Chen, 2017). This division of athletic participation ranges from scholarship athletes who are establishing collegiate grade point averages in general college requirements and are awaiting transfer to NCAA Division I athletic programs to local high school students who simply have the personal interest in continuing to play sports (Boulard, 2008; London, 1992).

There are no specific initial eligibility requirements for incoming student-athletes in their first semester of college. Additionally, to remain academically eligible, student-athletes must always remain enrolled as full-time students, or in a minimum of 12 credit hours. Furthermore, student-athletes must pass a minimum of 24 credits with a minimum GPA of a 2.0 in order to remain eligible to compete in their second year (NJCAA, 2018).

Horton (2009a) interviewed a number of community college student athletes and identified that the experiential aspects of involvement with sport at their respective colleges was the primary value they drew from participating. Horton (2009a) also reasoned that the community college student-athlete participated at this level as it included such opportunities as staying closer to home, incurring lower expenses, attending a smaller institution and addressing reservations about overall preparedness for college. Some institutions use athletics as a major marketing tool (Morris, Modica, & Miller, 2010), while others rely on athletics solely as a form of campus recreation. From the community college's perspective, study findings suggest that they can use athletics as a form of student recruitment and that financial aid packages for

athletics can be a key factor in enrolling students. Additionally, Pflum, Nadler and Miller (2017) showed that NJCAA student-athletes found coaches, athletic advisors, academic advisors, and even professors to be of great assistance in navigating their academic experience; thus, college leaders may wish to find programs and training opportunities to further enhance these experiences. Pflum, Nadler and Miller (2017) indicated that “faculty should be cognizant of their role as mentor and use this role as an opportunity to cultivate in students the best that academics and sport offers: dedication, commitment, perseverance, and teamwork” (p. 535). Research on community college student-athlete recruitment, for example, noted the importance of faculty interaction on the community college campus (Horton, 2009a; Horton, 2009b). Regardless of purpose, community college athletic programs have received little scholarly attention and need greater study (Bush, Castaneda, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2009; Gohn & Albin, 2006; Horton, 2015).

Student-athletes seem to have a unique culture and set of experiences that distinguish them from other students. It has been suggested that college student-athletes are to be considered the same as other nontraditional students with their own culture and difficulties in relating to the larger system (Helmcamp, 2010; Hyatt, 2003; Peltier et al., 1999; Storch & Olson, 2009). They require support for their academic, personal, and athletic needs and concerns, spend much time together, and often have common goals and values generated by their experiences (Peltier et al., 1999). Due to their unique status and role in the university or community college setting, student-athletes are provided with a number of opportunities for personal growth, including the development of social skills, opportunities for travel, and a chance to become more assertive (Melendez, 2008). Additionally, while NCAA student-athletes commonly receive special academic benefits with extra assistance from teachers, counselors, coaches, and peers, the onus is

on the NJCAA student-athlete to obtain special assistance (Matthews, 2017). Spreitzer and Pugh (1973) suggested that the training regimens, athletic scholarships, and prestige in participation encouraged higher achievement in academic endeavors by student-athletes. Spreitzer and Pugh (1973) also contributed that student-athletes tend to have higher grade point averages, higher educational expectations, and higher rates of college attendance than their non-athlete counterparts. Additionally, Sellers and Kuperminc (1997) offered that sports participation has the potential for preventing and/or reducing at-risk behavior and enhancing development of competence skills. Pflum, Nadler, and Miller (2017) noted that community college student-athletes, though involved in other areas of campus life, primarily identify with their roles as athletes for their college careers.

Many students enter community college classrooms academically underprepared, as the community college has an open-door policy of accepting all who seek to enroll. Frequently, they lack the support that is needed to help them meet their academic and professional goals (Crawford & Jervis, 2011; Pinkerton, 2010; Pruett & Absher, 2015). Cooper (2017) provided that increased enrollment at community colleges has accompanied a decrease in the percentage of students who complete a program at community colleges (Cooper, 2017). Although many institutions do not emphasize student retention as much as they do student recruitment (particularly student-athlete recruitment), all parties with a vested interest in student learning and persistence should take responsibility for students' learning experiences and academic success (Tinto, 1999). College students, especially student-athletes who are academically underprepared, often need support programs in place to guide them into their academic careers: Student success often hinges upon well-developed and proactive efforts of colleges and universities that extend beyond the admission process. This provides students with the support and tools that they need to

succeed in college (Tinto, 2008). Overall, the more that community colleges' students integrate themselves in social and academic arenas on and around their college campuses, the greater the chances that they will obtain their education goals and be academically successful in their college classrooms and in life (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). However, that is not always the case for the Division III NJCAA student-athletes, as they may not be at a community college that can offer support mechanisms such as tutors, study halls or intentional advising and instruction that their NCAA counterparts enjoy.

Researchers have provided evidence that the student-athlete population on a college campus fits the definition of a non-traditional or special needs student group (Hyatt, 2003; Peltier et al., 1999). Unlike other college students (Broughton & Neyer, 2001), student-athletes face an additional set of complex demands, stresses, and challenges that arise from their involvement in a competitive sport. Student athletes often lead stressful lives, have unique and time consuming demands placed upon them, and often face stereotyping and discrimination on campus and in the classroom (Hyatt, 2003; Scott et al., 2008). Due to the time and physical nature of practices and competitions, student athletes have less time and energy available for academics and socialization (McFarlane, 2014; Scott et al., 2008). Consequently, student-athletes may also experience a "fishbowl" existence where their behavior is constantly under examination on and off the playing field (Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999). However, Astin (1993) reported that athletic participation while in college was positively associated with overall satisfaction with the college experience, motivation to earn a degree, and the development of interpersonal and leadership skills. Furthermore, Melendez (2007) suggested that athletic participation often provides opportunities for social interaction and support, generating feelings of belonging and acceptance among one's peer group and pride and attachment to one's school.

Tinto's (1987) student-attrition model suggested student-athletes' grades, intellectual development, and engagement with a degree program increases the likelihood of academic institutional integration. Research on the academic experience of college athletes, specifically freshman athletes, suggested that the focus should shift towards factors related to their success while they are in college, such as their institutional integration and their motivation to succeed (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Cromeaux and Harrison (2011) stated that, "academic integration is expected to influence goal commitment, sport commitment, and institutional commitment, and ultimately academic success" (p. 239). A student-athlete's academic integration into the campus community could include academic achievement through the student-athlete's frequency of communications with advisors, faculty, and success coaches; memberships in academic clubs; and participation in study groups that are not part of their sports affiliations and internships (Beauchemin, 2014; Hyatt, 2003). Melendez (2006) stated that student athletes have traditionally reported greater feelings of inclusion, satisfaction with college, personal identity and ego linkage to their schools, and increased motivation to achieve a degree when compared to their non-athletic peers, all of which reflect greater institutional attachment.

Attempts to improve the academic performance of student-athletes should not focus on academic skills alone, but they should also encourage student-athletes to feel an integral part of the academic and social community and thus identify more fully with academic pursuits (Simons & Van Rheenen, 2000). Social integration occurs primarily through student-athletes' engagement with campus activities, interactions with faculty, and interactions with non-athlete peers (Cromeaux & Harrison, 2011). Social integration may include developing close friendships, joining clubs and groups, engaging in informal relationships with faculty and staff, and attending social or cultural campus events. Student-athletes may also find an adequate sense of belonging,

support, and friendship within the athletic team (Hyatt, 2003). Integrating and adjusting to the social environment not only requires time and interest from the student-athlete but also the availability of opportunities on a community college campus. An institution must provide an environment that is comfortable to the student, and the student-athlete must be willing to take time to integrate. Opportunities for students to interact with each other are important because the research indicates that engagement improves retention, and “retention is the key to success” (Baldwin, Bensimon, Dowd, & Kleiman, 2011, p. 83)

Kane, Leo, and Holleran (2008) suggested that institutions should have positive and significant interactions between coaches and faculty, as these interactions are critical to more completely integrating student athletes into the university community as a whole. Further, Kane et al. (2008) recommended that institutions take a proactive approach to encourage cooperation among faculty, coaches, and the academic and athletic staff to aid student-athletes in a holistic manner. The Faculty Advisory Committee on Academics and Athletics at University of Minnesota reflected that efforts must be made to ensure that student athletes are treated as integral members of the university community, are eligible to participate in all its activities, and take full advantage of the opportunities and services that the university can provide to facilitate their development and graduation (Kane et al., 2008). Examples of these integration techniques included creating opportunities for academic and athletic personnel to discuss matters of mutual interest (e.g. student-athlete graduation rates), inviting coaches and athletic administrators to participate in campus-related events (e.g. orientation week), and actively publicizing and promoting the academic accomplishments of student-athletes (e.g. making the Dean’s list, graduating with honors) (Kane et al., 2008).

Student-athletes who are academically underprepared or carry family and/or part-time job time demands face a tougher road towards a one-in-four chance of graduation. Often, these student-athletes need support programs in place to guide them into their academic careers and to subsequently aid them in their transfer to a four-year institution. Student success often hinges upon well-developed and proactive efforts of colleges and universities that extend beyond the recruiting and admission process. This provides students with the support and tools that they will need to succeed in college (Tinto, 2008). Therefore, the more community colleges' student-athletes integrate themselves in social and academic arenas on and around their college campus, the greater the chances that they will obtain their education goals and be academically successful in their college classrooms and in life (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Tinto, 1993). While community colleges do recognize the need to provide a myriad of services to make their institutions more student-centered to aid in persistence (Hollis, 2002), that is not always the case for the Division III NJCAA student-athlete, as he or she may not be at a community college that can offer all the recommended support mechanisms such as tutors, study halls or intentional advising and instruction that their NCAA counterparts enjoy. Additionally, community college students are typically commuter students; they do not live on campus. Their lives are often more complex than the lives of students who live on campus in a more traditional college setting. They work outside of their school and have families. All of these challenges can derail students from their educational paths, leaving them as non-completers without college credentials (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Horton (2015) urged that more research needs to be conducted for student-athletes, as their completion rates of college courses are significantly behind those of the non-student-athletes. Furthermore, Horton (2009a) stressed that "issues pertaining to community college athletes and athletics have received far less attention to [sic] both research-based and

practitioner-based literatures compared to their four year counterparts“ (p.16). Demas (2017) asserted that community college student-athletes face more obstacles in obtaining their college education than students starting in their four-year institutions due to absence of focused support programs. Therefore, alternative ways of predicting student success, persistence, and retention practices for community college student-athletes need to be examined, as the existing research fails to provide the complete story of persistence and retention that can only be gathered through the narratives of Division III NJCAA student-athletes.

Post-Secondary Retention

The study of retention focuses on institutions' environments and processes as associated with continued student enrollment through graduation (Astin, 1993, 1999; Boden, 2011; Cabrera et al., 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; and Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2006). More formally, the National Center for Education Statistics defined retention as “a measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution; this measure is often expressed as a percentage of bachelor's degree seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are enrolled for the current fall” (NCES, 2017). Through all of the changes and growth in understanding retention, Tinto (2006) asserted that the clear and consistent fact remains that involvement in one's campus matters, and it matters the most during the critical first year of college.

According to Tinto (1999), most institutions historically have not taken student retention seriously. However, retention is now a common concern among college administrators (Allen & Lester, 2012; Connolly, 2016; Fike & Fike, 2008; Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). Understanding why students choose to leave or choose to stay is essential to those wanting to make a difference in students' lives. Ryan and Bauman (2016) asserted that:

In 2015, the majority (88 percent) of adults were at least high school graduates and more than half (59 percent) had completed some college or more. One out of three adults (33 percent) reported they had a bachelor's degree or more education, and 12 percent reported an advanced degree, such as a master's, professional, or doctorate degree (p.1). This focus on retention and persistence provided more of an emphasis on the academic life at a college which involves interactions with faculty and staff.

Additionally, the institutional goals come into play as colleges and universities are observing non-completers as an institutional issue; "With over half of the student population resting at 59 percent, and subsequently dwindling to 33 percent at the bachelor's degree level or more, retention and persistence has never been more at the forefront of discussion for colleges and universities" (Ryan & Bauman, 2016, p.6).

Tinto (2006) explained that retention is different based on various collegiate factors, including residential versus non-residential and whether a student was attending a 2- or 4-year institution. For students at non-residential institutions, such as community colleges, the classroom becomes increasingly more important as that is where they connect with faculty and fellow students. In 2006, Tinto stated that while "access to higher education has increased, greater equality in attainment of four-year college degrees has not followed suit. For too many low-income students access to higher education has become a revolving door, the promise of a bachelor's degree unfulfilled" (p.12). Subsequently, academic self-efficacy, or confidence in one's academic ability and the belief that one can set and achieve desired academic goals, is supported as being correlated with better academic performance, adjustment to the college environment, and longer-term retention in college (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Chaves, 2006; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Robbins et al., 2004; Zajacova, Lynch, &

Espenshade, 2005). Castleman and Meyer (2017) noted that there has been comparatively little progress in increasing college student retention and completion. While college enrollment has risen over time, college completion conditional on enrollment has declined; high school graduates in 1992 who enrolled in college were less likely to graduate than students who enrolled in college in 1972 (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010).

Tinto (2012) believed four conditions were associated with enhanced student retention: expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. Expectations should be clearly defined at the college-wide and classroom levels. Support should be supplied throughout the college experience. Assessment and feedback should be conducted frequently and in a timely manner, and involvement should be encouraged at all opportunities. Piland (2018) offered that “persistence is the student’s view on success while retention is the institutional view of the same outcome” (p. 32). Little (2016) reinforced that the connection between a student’s first academic experience and the importance of student/faculty interaction in the classroom is paramount to retention. Feldman (2017) echoed the importance of faculty interactions and stressed the important role faculty members play in facilitating student retention through their teaching, their research, and their relationships with students.

Windham, Rehfuss, Williams, Pugh, and Tincher-Ladner (2014) in determining what student characteristics increased retention found that student participation on campus outside of scheduled class time is related to increased student retention. Mertes and Hoover (2014) endeavored to identify predictors of first-year retention to community college students with the acknowledgement that most studies on retention look exclusively at the four-year universities. Their work identified retention rates that were lower in students aged 18-24 and 25-29 with undeclared majors and lack of a computer class on their schedule. Prior studies (Bush,

Castencda, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2009; Hall, 2017; Hollis, 2002) exemplified the importance of college athletic participation as well as intensive and appreciative advising by advisors and faculty members when working with student-athletes in order to retain them.

The challenges of a community college student-athlete are different in some ways from being a four-year university student-athlete (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). One reason that is offered why community college student-athletes have lower retention rates in comparison to their four-year counterparts is that community colleges only allow their student athletes to compete for a maximum of two athletic seasons. Community college sport programs have a shorter time window to influence their student-athletes in their collegiate climate. A four-year institution can pride itself on its development and retention of student athletes for four years, but that option is simply not available for community college athletic programs (Le Crom et al., 2009).

Community college campuses have started to accept that they have a responsibility to support students in all areas that threaten their ability to stay in school. However, despite these additional programs and resources, little evidence of improved retention rates can be shown (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2008; Tinto, 2006). Rather, it appears that these significant efforts to improve retention have not been effective, a fact that is perplexing to researchers, administrators, faculty, and campus staff (Reason, 2009). As noted by Tinto (2006), “Most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation” (p. 5).

Post-Secondary Persistence

Peterson (2017) offered that persistence is defined as “the student’s actions and individual-level goal attainment in his or her pursuit of degree completion” (Peterson, 2017, p. 20). Subsequently, Peterson contributed identifying that cognitive factors such as high school

grade point average and ACT/SAT scores are a strong predictor of academic persistence.

However, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) noted that a student's socioeconomic status (parent's educational attainment and family income) is significantly related to college persistence. Eventually, Bui (2002) and Choy (2002) examined first-generation college students and their slower persistence in relation to their parents' socioeconomic status. Torres (2018) indicated that the persistence rate is the percentage of students who continue their postsecondary education at any institution for their second year, while the retention rate is the percentage of students who return to the same institution. Overall, persistence rates are higher than retention rates, especially for community college students (Torres, 2018). For students who started college at two-year public institutions in fall 2014, the persistence rate was 60 percent. In other words, one year after entering community college, six out of 10 students had either enrolled at the original institution (retained), transferred to a different four- or two-year institution (persisted), or completed a postsecondary degree or certificate (Torres, 2018).

Peterson (2017) elaborated further that there are non-cognitive attributes that should be considered to contribute to persistence such as personal actions, attitudes and behaviors.

Couched in this non-cognitive arena are motivation, engagement and grit (Peterson, 2017).

Motivation refers to anything that initiates and sustains learning behavior (Palmer, 2005). That motivation can be either intrinsic (belief about oneself and their abilities) or extrinsic (honors, grades or awards). Beghetto (2004) advocated that student motivation provides the greatest contribution to students' academic success and persistence. Mendoza, Horton and Mendez (2012) in their work on financial aid impact on student-athletes' persistence indicated "student-athletes at four-year institutions receive the lions' share of the attention; however, not much is known about student-athletes at two-year institutions. (Mendoza et al., 2012, p. 217).

York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015) specified that persistence can and should capture individual students' academic goals across multiple programs of study and in various institutional contexts. Persistence captures the focus, drive, and forward progression needed by students to complete a program of study as well as an institution's understanding the needs of the student body (Welch, 2014; Wood & Williams, 2013; York, Gibson & Rankin, 2005).

Community college student-athletes lack the supervision available during high school such as access to guidance counselors or physical proximity to family members. They experience additional strains on their time as they acclimate to new schedules and environments. These new experiences can tax students' ability to focus on different tasks, and low-income students, who often work part- or full-time jobs to help finance their education, may have even less mental bandwidth than students from higher income families have to process the stressful emotions associated with moving to a new community (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013; Ross, White, Wright, & Knapp, 2013). York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015) offered that many low-income student-athletes when faced with a sense of isolation, few resources, and cognitive overload may infer that college is not designed for people like them and may pursue other paths.

However, institutional practices such as college advising, intentional advising, and access to information have been positively associated with persistence (Orozco et al., 2010; Stuart et al., 2014; Wood & Williams, 2013). Yet, Bailey and Alfonso (2005) counter that there is little consensus on what community colleges can do to promote persistence for community college students in general and that it is apparent that there is no specific model for persistence.

Tinto (1993) asserted only a third of all beginning full time students at community colleges earn associate degrees or certificates. However, Pascarella and Terenzine (2005) stressed that when students attending a two-year institution transfer to a four-year institution,

their chances of earning a bachelor's degree are about the same as those who began at a four-year institution. The distinction between persistence and retention is especially critical in investigating graduation and enrollment patterns among community college students, since part of the mission of community colleges is to prepare students for transfer to a four-year institution. Therefore, persistence from a two-year institution to a four-year institution places the community college student-athlete on a level playing field with their four-year counterparts. However, that persistence has to take place.

Numerous studies support Tinto's (1975, 1993) theories and have furthered additional research pertaining to student success and persistence (Burgess, 2017; Byrd, 2017, Bean & Eaton, 2001; Fletcher, Gies, & Hodge, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006; Tucker, 2012). The study of student persistence focuses on the students' attitudes, actions and behaviors as associated with their educational attainment (Astin, 1993, 1999; Boden, 2011; Cabrera et al., 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peterson, 2017; and Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2006). High school grades, higher incomes, gender, older student age, parent support, race and commitment all have been supported as strong contributors to student persistence (Astin, 1993; Christensen, 1990; Lang & Nora, 2001; Peltier, Laden & Matranga, 1999; Stage & Hossler, 2000; and St. John, Kirshstein, & Noell, 1991).

Additionally, institutional size has also been found to impact the success of community college students. Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach (2005) considered the connection between institutional characteristics and student results such as persistence and transfer. Bailey et al. (2005) found that institutions with 1,001 to 5,000 full-time enrolled students were 15 percent less likely to have a successful outcome compared to students attending institutions with an enrollment size of fewer than 1,000 full-time students. Additionally, the

authors discovered that colleges with higher rates of part-time faculty also had lower associate degree completion rates for students.

The interactionist model of student persistence suggests that students enter higher education with a variety of characteristics that impact their initial commitment to the institution, the goal of graduation, and the likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1975). A student's ability to integrate both socially and academically ultimately defines the level of persistence (Piland, 2018). Social integration increases institutional commitment which ultimately increases the likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1975). For Tinto, academic and social integration were linked to greater student persistence and success. To be academically and socially integrated, according to Tinto, students must go through a period of transition in which they adopt and come to comply with institutional academic norms as well as develop a connection with the social environment through peer-to-peer and faculty interaction (Kuh et al., 2006).

A key task for the community college student-athlete is to integrate into the social environment and develop a sense of belonging in the campus community. All people share the fundamental human need to belong and to be accepted by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald & Leary, 2005), particularly in times of stress (Rofé, 1984; Walton & Cohen, 2007). For college students, social support from friends has been associated with better college adjustment even more than has family support (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). Greater social support is also associated with higher life satisfaction (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002). Social belonging is critical for first-year college students because it influences college persistence and retention (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009), not just in the first year but throughout college (Allen et al., 2008). Belonging also predicts college students' academic competence, grades, and psychological adjustment (Pitman & Richmond, 2008). Moreover,

increased social belonging is associated with more restorative sleep and better physical health among college students (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005; Sladek & Doane, 2015). Developing new social networks in college that complement students' pre-existing networks at home and in high school help to bolster belonging and psychological resilience in first-year students (Walker, Matthew, & Black, 2004)

Other theories incorporating Tinto's integration model have emphasized the importance of social networks. Research by Astin (1977, 1993), Kuh et al. (1991), Kuh (2005), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested that a student's relationships with peers, faculty, staff, family, friends, and mentors all mediate the student's integration and college success. Tinto (1975, 1993) offered that the more time an individual engaged in various activities while attending college, the more likely he or she was to persist. Echoing that thought, Astin (1999) provided, "Students learn by becoming involved" (p.522). How students choose to use their social and academic time affects their performance in college. Kuh (1999) and Howard (2005) asserted that students hold certain beliefs about the appropriate nature of relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. These expectations shaped behavior, which in turn impacted how students performed academically and adjusted to college life. Kuh (2001) indicated that a key factor in student success is student engagement in the institution.

Student engagement represents two critical features. The first is student driven in the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities (Upcraft et al., 2005). The second is institution driven in how a school deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that

constitute student success (persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation) (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Duckworth, Weir, Tsukayama, and Kwok (2012) suggested that a relationship exists between an individual's goal commitment and his or her perceived benefits, cost, and the likelihood of realization: a combination of characteristics that they asserted leads to grit – the passion and perseverance towards long-term goals. Duckworth et al. (2012) suggested that an individual's willingness to exert energy to accomplish a specific task is a marker on the path for achieving long-term success, noting that much of success is a result of consistently showing up when others do not. The major benefit of showing up when others do not is that the student becomes more seasoned to strive for and achieve success with any activity. Peterson (2017) indicated that practice of showing up involves effortful striving toward a very specific goal where the level of difficulty exceeds the current skills and where feedback is desired, most often, from coaches and/or teachers. Students who are motivated to routinely engage in their studies or practice for long periods of time exhibit grit.

Summary

Within this chapter, the key components of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks were provided which guided this study. The literature review identified the gap in literature that was discovered in initial research, specifically that there was insufficient understanding of the personal experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athletes who successfully graduated or transferred to four-year institutions. Tinto's (1975) student integration model was presented as the theoretical foundation to understand the proposed research. Additionally, the following themes were discussed: (a) community college, (b) community college student-athletes, (c)

retention, and (d) persistence. This study endeavored to create a contribution to the literature that will be of use to stakeholders that work with student-athletes within community colleges.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. This study was guided by Tinto's (1975) student integration model, as it established the principle that a student's personal commitment or determination to earn a degree and their commitment to their college or university determines whether they will complete their educational goals. To examine this phenomenon, a qualitative study with a transcendental phenomenological design was conducted in order to understand the personal experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athletes.

This chapter explains the methods employed and provides details of the research design used. The setting and participants are identified. The researcher's role is provided to give the reader background information about the person conducting the research. Data collection, interview questions, analysis and procedures that were used to guarantee trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed before ending with a summary.

Design

A qualitative method was required for this transcendental, phenomenological design. Qualitative research was the best method for this study because it was conducted in a natural setting, used the researcher as the main component in data collection, gathered data via multiple methods, and formed patterns and themes to "develop a complex picture of the problem or the issue under study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). The qualitative research process is emergent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It affords the researcher flexibility because it is not "tightly

prescribed” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 44). Rather than learning about the problem through numbers and measures, qualitative research allows the researcher to learn about the issue from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is appropriate because it presents a holistic, complex picture of the study that can only be achieved by talking directly with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Chenail (2011) provided that different qualitative research methodologies have different strengths when it comes to meeting the needs of different design concepts. Phenomenology is appropriate for this study because it is used to describe the lived experiences of several individuals regarding a phenomenon or concept (Chenail, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological approach was used to gather narratives about the participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The participants’ narratives reflect their perceptions, which are “regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52). Phenomenology emphasizes subjectivity, and the core of the phenomenon can only be discovered by examining it from various angles and perspectives, which are shared through the participants’ stories (Moustakas, 1994). The participants’ stories will hopefully shed light on the existing phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

There are two distinct forms of phenomenology: transcendental and hermeneutical (Creswell, 2013). Unlike transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology involves the researcher making an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences through his or her own lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study did not seek to interpret the experiences shared, which defines the hermeneutic approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, transcendental phenomenology, which does not search for interpretative meaning, is appropriate because it “is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them

and as they appear to us in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). The transcendental approach is pure and descriptive (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) suggested the use of a transcendental phenomenological study when focusing on the experiences of the participants instead of the researcher’s experiences. Since the core of transcendental phenomenology is meaning (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004), the transcendental, phenomenological design will meet the objective of gaining first-hand knowledge from those affected by the phenomenon.

The researcher sought to ascertain themes in exploring these experiences in order to produce new knowledge founded on the similarities of the participants’ lived experiences. Adopting the assumptions characteristic of a transcendental phenomenological design allowed the researcher to examine the phenomenon of interest in a way that is least biased by his personal experiences and rather determined by the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The participants’ narratives reflected their perceptions, which are “regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52). The participants’ stories shed light on the existing phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology allowed the researcher to describe the phenomenon as he bracketed his own experiences, as much as possible, which enabled him to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing in this transcendental phenomenological study was a process of setting aside predispositions, biases, and preconceived ideas that could have affected the data collection and the research interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

This study used a transcendental phenomenological design to examine the essence of the participants’ experiences. The phenomenon of interest was defined as the experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina

who successfully graduate or transfer to a four-year institution; therefore, a qualitative research approach was appropriate (Creswell, 2013).

Research Questions

The following research questions focused this study:

Central Research Question:

What are the experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully graduates or transfers to a four-year institution?

Sub-Question 1

How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their social experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution?

Sub-Question 2

How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their athletic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution?

Sub-Question 3

How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their academic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution?

Sub-Question 4

How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their personal experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution?

Setting

The settings for this study were three rural community colleges in North Carolina that are within the central part of the state and are classified as NJCAA Division III institutions. As there are only six NJCAA Division III institutions in the state of North Carolina, these sites are within

one county distance from each other, thus providing a convenience sample for the author to undertake the study. To ensure confidentiality, each respective college is referred to as Cougar Community College (CCC), Flyer Community College (FCC), and Jaguar Community College (JCC) throughout the dissertation.

Cougar Community College (CCC) has three main campuses across three counties: Cheetah campus, Lion campus, and Tiger campus. CCC is one of the three convenience sites for this study. CCC currently fields the following sports on a NJCAA Division III level: Men's Golf, Women's Volleyball, Women's Basketball, Men's Basketball, Men's Cross Country and Women's Cross Country. During the 2016-17 academic year, CCC had 5,267 students with 4160 of those enrolled in an associate degree program and the remaining 1,107 seeking non-degree certifications. CCC offers numerous certificates, diplomas, and associate degrees and has students enrolled in curriculum, continuing education and high school programs. CCC also has significant online course offerings so that students can pursue more than 130 associate degrees, certificates and diplomas. At CCC, student-athletes compete out of their Lion campus, as that is where their gymnasium is located, as well as other off-campus venues for athletic competition.

Flyer Community College (FCC) is the second convenience site and it has one main campus in one county and two centers that offer specific programs for its service population. FCC currently fields the following sports on a NJCAA Division III level: Men's Basketball, Men's Cross Country, Women's Cross Country, Men's Golf, Men's Outdoor Track & Field, Women's Outdoor Track & Field and Women's Volleyball. During the 2016-17 academic year, FCC had 4,557 students with 3,764 of those enrolled in an associate degree program and the remaining 793 seeking non-degree certifications. At FCC, student-athletes compete out of their main campus as that is where their gymnasium is as well as other off-campus venues for athletic

competition. Jaguar Community College (JCC) is the third convenience site as it has one main campus in one county and four smaller centers which serve as exclusive degree-seeking sites for continuing education. JCC currently fields men's basketball as its sole sport on the NJCAA Division III level. During the 2016-17 academic year, JCC had 4,528 students with 3,796 of those enrolled in an associate degree program and the remaining 732 seeking non-degree certifications. At JCC, student-athletes compete out of their main campus, as that is where their gymnasium is located, as well as accessing their other venues for athletic competition.

Each of the three venues has an athletic director who oversees the day-to-day operation of each athletic department's endeavors and serves as the initial contact person for this study. As there are only six NJCAA Division III institutions in the state of North Carolina, these sites are within one county distance away from each other, thus providing a convenience sample for the author to undertake the study. The colleges do not have specific staff who are trained to work specifically with student-athletes in their advising or academic journeys. The athletic directors and coaches maintain part-time roles in their respective jobs and consequently do not have an on-campus presence other than at athletic contests and practices. Furthermore, out of the 158 Division III NJCAA colleges, only six Division III NJCAA colleges exist in North Carolina, and the three proposed colleges are juxtaposed geographically in adjacent counties to each other; thus they are a convenience sample to use. Their classification as Division III NJCAA colleges provided a pool of similar student-athletes to recruit for this study (NJCAA, 2018).

Participants

In order to ensure that volunteer participants could fully inform the researcher about the central phenomenon, a purposeful sampling method was used for this study (Creswell, 2013). The sampling type for this study included criterion (meets the criteria of having been a Division

III NJCAA student-athlete for two consecutive years at their respective Division III NJCAA community college and subsequently transferred to a senior institution prior to the 2012-2013 academic year), purposeful intensity (4-5 participants at each institution), with maximum variation (including a variety of sports, gender, and minorities) (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The anticipated sampling pool at each site was between 5-10 student-athletes who have transferred to a senior institution within the five-year period from 2012-2013 to 2017-2018 academic terms. The ideal volunteer population was to be 50% male and 50% female with 44% minority as exemplified by the three proposed sites' demographic information provided by each institution's Institutional Effectiveness and Research departments.

The researcher contacted the athletic director at each community college to obtain contact information for potential participants who met the criteria. Each college maintains a list of their prior student-athletes along with contact information. Each athletic director had assured the researcher that they would provide a list of prospective participants in the study once IRB approval was granted. The recommended participants were contacted by phone or email and invited to participate in the study. The participants were selected by first confirming their interest in the study and their willingness for their interviews to be recorded (Moustakas, 1994). The participants were also willing to have their experiences/narratives published in the researcher's dissertation and in other publications, as deemed appropriate (Moustakas, 1994). Once a prospective participant provided informed consent and affirmed they would participate, an email was sent with a demographic questionnaire as well as directions for completing the demographic questionnaire. The participants agreed to participate in the lengthy interview process, which included possible follow-up interviews (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher obtained written permission in a consent form from each participant stating an understanding of the selection

criteria and a willingness to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interested participants who were NJCAA Division III student-athletes completed the questionnaire in under ten minutes, providing basic information including name (which was changed to a pseudonym), race/ethnic background, gender, class year, grade point average (best estimation), academic major, family residence, and year of graduation from both community college and year of entry into their four-year institution.

For this study, 24 potential participants were identified and recruited to participate in the study through athletic director referrals. These potential participants had already completed their community college education goals and had successfully transferred to a four-year institution or had completed their four-year degree. The first ten potential participants to affirm that they would participate were subsequently provided the necessary paperwork to participate in the study.

As each of the college names has been changed to maintain confidentiality, student-athlete participants' names were changed using a name that matches the first letter of their last name. For example, Carl Bryan would become "Bart." While the desired number of participants is five to ten student-athletes per site, only ten participants were used in total as data collection ceased once saturation was achieved (Patton, 2015).

For this study, ten student-athletes who attended CCC, FCC or JCC and were between the ages of 18-26 participated. The student's eligibility was verified through affirmation from athletic directors at the respective colleges as well as self-reporting. Table 1 lists various descriptors for each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Sport	Community College
Charles	26	Male	Caucasian	Golf	CCC
Nancy	21	Female	Caucasian	Volleyball	CCC
Denise	25	Female	Caucasian	Volleyball	CCC
Sarah	24	Female	Hispanic	Volleyball	FCC
Jimmy	23	Male	African American	Basketball	JCC
Bill	25	Male	African American	Basketball	CCC
Laura	21	Female	Puerto Rican	Volleyball	FCC
Harry	22	Male	African American	Basketball	CCC
Wendy	20	Female	Caucasian	Volleyball	CCC
Hank	24	Male	African American	Basketball	CCC

Note. Names listed are pseudonyms

Purposeful homogeneous sampling was used, as it allowed information-rich cases to be selected (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This type of sampling allowed for the establishment of a group of participants who shared similar backgrounds and experiences that relate to the phenomenon examined (Patton, 2002).

Procedures

The initial step in this study was to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Approval of the IRB was obtained before collecting data to ensure the risk-benefit ratio met requirements and ensured that equitable selection of participants took place (Creswell & Poth,

2018; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). Once IRB approval for the study was received from Liberty University, CCC, FCC, and JCC, possible participants were identified from the sample of student-athletes listed in the previous section. After receiving approval from each institution, the researcher contacted the athletic director at each community college to obtain contact information for potential participants who met the criteria. Potential participants were contacted via email or phone to inquire as to their willingness to participate and the potential for earning up to \$75 in Amazon gift cards for their completion of all stages of the proposed research plan (one-on-one interview, focus group interview, and writing prompt response). The sampling goal of maximum variation was anticipated to yield four to five volunteer participants originating from each community college, yet yielded ten participants. Identified participants were sent a welcome letter, the purpose of the study including the procedures to be used including the data collection process, how the researcher would protect their identity, known risks and benefits from participating in the study, consent form, and a copy of the IRB approval letter (Creswell, 2013). Along with protecting the confidentiality of the volunteer participants, their institutions were also protected and given an assigned pseudonym. Institutions were given an arbitrary mascot name, while participants were given a name based on the first letter of their last name.

Once a prospective participant affirmed he or she would participate, an email was sent with a demographic questionnaire as well as directions for completing the demographic questionnaire. Interested participants who were NJCAA Division III student-athletes completed the questionnaire in under 10 minutes as basic information including name (which was changed to a pseudonym), race/ethnic background, gender, class year, grade point average (best estimation), academic major, family residence, and year of graduation from both community college and year of entry into their four-year institution. In addition to the questionnaire, a

separate consent form was provided that informed participants that they could voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. The selected individuals signed the consent form, which included the intent/purpose of the study, the known risks and expected benefits associated with participation in the study, the participants' right to confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After obtaining the consent form and completed questionnaire, participants were sent subsequent emails with instructions on how to complete a one-on-one interview either in person or using Blackboard Collaborate, an online conferencing tool, within a proposed time frame as well as the written prompt to respond to after the interview. An additional email invitation was sent after all one-on-one interviews had been conducted which invited participants to attend a focus group which will allow them to share further experiences in a comfortable setting (Creswell, 2013). All interviews and the focus group session were recorded using an audio recorder and a hired transcriptionist transcribed them for further analysis (Creswell, 2013). To meet the standards of confidentiality in psychological research, up-to-date security software and password protection safeguarded computer files containing transcripts and any other documentation (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, all data was backed up using NVivo 11 software (Creswell, 2013), which was utilized to examine themes and patterns in the interview and focus group transcripts. At the time of writing this dissertation, the plan is to delete all documentation and data for this study three years after the completion of the researcher's doctoral program (Creswell, 2013).

The Researcher's Role

The role of the researcher in a transcendental phenomenological qualitative study is as a "key instrument" (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). Creswell (2013) asserted that "bracketing one's prejudgments as well as personal background must be clarified through a process also known as

‘epoché’” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). By bracketing (Moustakas, 1994), the researcher ensures that only the participants’ descriptions provide what they deem as meaningful content related to their experiences as NJCAA Division III student-athletes. In anticipation of this particular study, the researcher recused himself from a role as a student-athlete advisor and worked solely with students in the health and fitness science curriculum and the Associate in Arts or Associate in Science curriculum. He was granted the request to not be a part of any aspect of athletics at his community college in anticipation of bracketing himself from any advisory capacity or personal interaction with the current student-athletes so as to not have the exclusive insight into any student-athlete’s current educational journey. The researcher did not personally know any of the participants.

As part of the bracketing or epoché process, the researcher diligently monitored the list of proposed participants to ensure that he did not recognize them or know them personally before requesting their consent forms. The researcher had already started bracketing through the research process (Creswell, 2013). Prior to the reviewing the literature related to the phenomenon studied, the researcher had started to bracket his personal assumptions and experiences related to the research through the process of memoing and examining his thoughts in regard to student-athlete success in transferring. He continued to bracket his experiences throughout the collection and analysis of data through the use of a reflexive journal and memoing. These activities allowed the researcher to identify preconceptions throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1994).

The role of this researcher is one of a former student-athlete and coach. Unfortunately, prior roles as a teammate, classmate and coach may have also caused a bias. Reflexivity was used in this case to silence the researcher’s voice, and the researcher ensured that all data was

accurate through the use of member checking. While “member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (Creswell, 2013, p. 259), it also aided the researcher in ensuring that participants’ voices were not changed in any way.

Data Collection

Traditional data collection for a phenomenological study includes interviews, written documents, and a focus group (Creswell, 2013). All of these methods of data collection were incorporated to gather rich feedback from multiple sources of information. A transcendental phenomenology design was used to gather data about the experience while obtaining various perspectives of the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Data triangulation involves the use of multiple data collection methods, and it enhances the validity and trustworthiness of the study by cross-verifying data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013). Trustworthiness of the research study was ensured by collecting data from interviews, written documents, and one focus group. In the search for emergent themes, the researcher approached each source of data with an acknowledgment of his biased perspective. However, bracketing, journaling, and field notes were employed to be aware of the researcher’s biases in an effort to remove them from the process. Data from each of the sources were critically compared and synthesized, and considered themes were observed through more than one collection method to ensure they were the most stable themes. The following sections detail the procedure employed in each collection method: Interviews, Written Documents, and Focus Group. The Interviews and Written Documents sections focus on the experiences of the individual participants, while the Focus Group section details how data was gathered from the interaction among the participants (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews

Interviewing is an effective way to gather data from participants in qualitative research. Interviews require an exchange of words and provide researchers with a natural way of gathering participant perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Griffiee, 2005). The one-on-one interview experience provided an opportunity to gather verbal feedback through direct interaction with the participants. Interviews are often the primary method of gathering data for phenomenological research because they allow participants to provide their own depictions of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, data were gathered using semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, which allowed for the acquisition of rich information about the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully transferred to a four-year institution. Participants were allowed to choose whether they would attend face-to-face interviews or utilize Blackboard Collaborate, an online conferencing tool, due to travel constraints. The interviews provided an opportunity to gather verbal feedback through direct interaction with the participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 164). Semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility to obtain the richest of responses (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010).

Moustakas (1994) explained that researchers may elect to follow cues of the participants during interviews to gather a thorough description of the experience. When conducting this study, all research questions were scripted; however, participant cues were followed to deepen the collection of data about experiences that would otherwise not have been captured by the set of interview questions. For example, if a participant provided a story about a particular instructor, the researcher would ask for more explanation to better clarify how that instructor influenced the participant. Interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, and a professional

transcriptionist transcribed the audio recordings. Each participant was provided an electronic copy of his or her transcriptions to verify correctness and clarify any areas (Creswell, 2013). The interviews consisted of 17 questions that were created to develop a comprehensive description of the phenomenon being examined. Interview questions were designed to gather information to address the central research questions as well as the four sub-questions.

Table 2

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.
2. What made you decide to attend community college? (SQ4)
3. What role did your parents have in your community college academics? (SQ3)
4. What role did your peers have in your community college academics? (SQ3)
5. What role did your parents have in your community college athletic participation? (SQ3)
6. What role did your peers have in your community college athletic participation? (SQ1)
7. Looking back on your time as a student-athlete, what could have contributed more to your success in graduation or transferring? (Central Research Question)
8. What concerns, challenges, or reservations did you have when choosing to attend a community college for academics? (SQ3)
9. What made you decide to play the sport you participated in as you attended community college? (SQ2)
10. What concerns, challenges, or reservations did you have when choosing to attend a community college for athletics? (SQ2)

11. What role did your teachers and coaches have in your community college academics?
(SQ3)
 12. What role did your teachers and coaches have in your community college athletic participation? (SQ2)
 13. As you went through your community college athletic and academic career, please describe your experiences as a student that did not involve athletics or the classroom.
(Central Research Question)
 14. How did attending a community college contribute to or detract from your attending a four-year institution? (Central Research Question)
 15. Describe your decision in continuing or finishing your athletic career after completion of community college. (Central Research Question)
 16. To what or to whom do you attribute your ability to persist to completion? (Central Research Question)
 17. I appreciate the time you have provided to this study. What else do you think is important for me to know about your journey as a NJCAA Division III student-athlete?
-

The 17 questions above are broad, open-ended questions, which were designed to “facilitate the obtaining of rich, vital, substantive descriptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116). The questions were strategically open ended, evolving, non-directional (Creswell, 2013) and focused on getting at the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In the end, the questions allowed for the essential experiences of the participants to be described (Moustakas, 1994).

Question one allowed participants to provide background information (Patton, 2015). Question one was also a knowledge question, as it inquired about factual information (Patton, 2015). Question two was a linear question (Evans & Whitcombe, 2016). A linear question helps

the researcher determine information about the circumstance and requires participants to orientate themselves with the phenomenon (Evans and Whitcombe, 2016). Questions three, four, five, six, seven, eight, eleven and twelve were an effort to gain information under the academic and social aspects of Tinto's (1975) student integration model. These questions were asked to determine the individual participant's experiences and whether all participants shared common behaviors and actions regarding the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Subsequently these questions also examined student success, as Tinto (1975) suggested that in order for students to be successful, they must be able to thrive both socially and academically. Questions 13, 14, and 16 were raised during the interview to elicit an emotional response (Patton, 2002). Questions 2-16 deal with experience/behavior, as Balduf (2009) asserted that participants' shared experiences may be used to conceive new interventions to promote student success. These questions were asked to determine the individual participant's experiences and whether all participants shared common behaviors and actions regarding the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Questions 8 through 16 were posed in an effort to gain information under the social integration aspect of Tinto's theory (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1975). Again, Tinto (1975) suggested that in order for students to be successful, they must be able to thrive both socially and academically. Students must have determination and a vision if they are going to complete college (Tinto, 1975). These questions helped provide information about the relative importance of a student's commitment and readiness to learn. Question 16 was designed to give the participant an opportunity to share valuable information that may not have been covered in the prior questions (Patton, 2015). Students who are able to provide feedback about their learning experiences can help colleges create learning environments that benefit future learners (Boling et al., 2012).

Letter to Prospective Student-Athletes

While Moustakas (1994) focused merely on interviews, Adams and van Manen (2017) found it valuable for participants in phenomenological studies to write first-person descriptions of their experiences. For this study, document analysis entailed participants respond to the following writing prompt: “What academic, athletic and personal advice would you provide to a high school athlete based on your experience as a NJCAA Division III student-athlete?” The written prompt was provided on a Microsoft Word document and emailed to each participant with directions on completion, and participants then returned it to the researcher. This data collection method took place after the interview since the participant was required to revisit and examine the phenomenon in detail (Englander, 2012). In this letter, the participants were encouraged to write freely and honestly. Honesty is highly important, or the activity may be ineffective and unproductive (Englander, 2012).

It was anticipated that this type of writing experience would contribute information about many experiences, thoughts, feelings and reflections that cannot be observed (Patton, 2015). The freedom that comes from this writing was intended to add richness to the research (Creswell, 2013; Ortlipp, 2008). This writing added transparency to the qualitative research process (Ortlipp, 2008; Englander, 2012). The participants were able to gain clarity or closure on certain issues from this assignment. These letters also provided the researcher with snapshots of the participants’ lives during their community college experiences that may not have been addressed during the interview (Creswell, 2013).

Subsequently, all the written prompts were reviewed as it allowed the researcher to observe participants’ writing that was completed in their natural setting (Patton, 2015). The researcher assumed the role of an observer and bracketed himself as to remain independent from

the written submissions. The goal was to gather and analyze data to provide theoretical saturation.

Focus Group

Focus group interviews typically include a small group of participants who share similar backgrounds (Patton, 2015). Focus groups generally last one to two hours and provide a variety of perspectives from participants that can be used to establish patterns and themes (Patton, 2015). For this study, the researcher conducted one face-to-face focus group at a neutral site away from the three aforementioned community college sites. The focus group took place after one-on-one interviews were conducted. Patton (2015) stated that while 10-15 participants is an ideal target, a minimum of six participants for the focus group is acceptable. Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, and Zoran (2009) indicated that focus groups should include enough participants to yield diversity in information provided, yet they should not include too many participants because large groups can create an environment where participants do not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. For eligibility to join the focus group, the members had to have been part of the initial interview pool of participants. The first six participants that responded affirmatively to join the focus group received an additional \$25 Amazon gift card to their original \$50 Amazon gift card stipend upon their completion of the focus group interviews.

Focus group questions were designed to gather information to address the central research question as well as the four sub-questions. The participants were encouraged to share ideas, opinions, and writings. Focus groups may “help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). A focus group interview allows participants to collaborate without the interviewer serving in an instructor role (Gall et al., 2010). The focus group meeting was audio-recorded and transcribed.

The participants were provided an electronic copy of their transcriptions to verify correctness and clarify any areas (Creswell, 2013). The focus group addressed nine questions that were designed to allow the interviewer to gain an in-depth description of the phenomenon. Focus group questions were developed to address the central research question as well as the sub-questions.

Table 3

Standardized Open-Ended Focus-Group Questions

Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves to the group and share your community college, the college where you are now enrolled, and your sport you participated in at the community college.
2. What advice would you give to those thinking about attending a community college to participate in athletics? (SQ2)
3. What advice would you give to those thinking about attending a community college for academics? (SQ3)
4. What opportunities were offered at your community college that enhanced your academic career while attending your community college? (SQ3)
5. How did your athletic participation at the community college play a part in your transferring to a senior institution? (SQ2)
6. What was your greatest feeling of accomplishment in terms of athletics while participating at the community college? (SQ3)
7. What was your greatest feeling of accomplishment in terms of academics while enrolled in community college? (SQ4)

8. Outside of the classroom and athletic participation, describe what other aspects of life contributed to your success in transferring to a four-year senior institution. (Central Research Question)
 9. What other aspect of life as a Division III NJCAA student-athlete would you like to contribute that we have not addressed? Please elaborate. (Central Research Question)
-

When focus group discussion guides are filled with numerous questions, the researcher may become consumed with getting through the questions and neglect spending time on probing the participants' reasons for their responses (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Therefore, only nine questions were listed to ensure that ample time was provided during focus groups for active conversation to occur between participants (Stewart et al., 2007). The first question sought to obtain background information about the participant (Patton, 2015; Stewart et al., 2007). The second question sought to obtain the overall orientation each participant had toward the topic (Stewart et al., 2007). The remainder of the questions were designed to stimulate discussion with wide ranges and encouraged interaction among the participants (Astin, 1993; Patton, 2015; Stewart et al., 2007; Tinto, 1975). These focus group questions provided crucial information, as the participants' experiences had the potential to guide the development of new interventions and programs to promote student success (Balduf, 2009).

Questions two, three and five sought to address the role of the academics and athletics in both retention and persistence, in relation to Kuh's (2009) emphasis on the relationship of academics and athletics as essential in both a student's staying with their course of study and moving on throughout college. Question four, six and seven addressed the dynamics of participants' social, vocational and family experiences during their time at the community

college, as Reason (2009) provided that these areas contributed to retention and persistence. Again, Tinto's integration framework stressed the importance of social integration (Tinto, 1993). Question eight and nine explored persistence, based on Balduf's (2009) indication that students provide the most valid reasoning and illustrative anecdotes for explaining their academic journey and challenges in college and finding ways to persist in college successfully.

Data Analysis

This qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach to describe the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. Therefore, the data analysis relied on the methodology established by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas provided that "the human scientist determines the underlying structures of an experience by interpreting the originally given descriptions of the situation in which the experience occurs" (p. 13). To initiate this research process, the researcher must employ the process of "epoché" whereby "everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). The researcher employed "bracketing" which is a similar process to epoché. In bracketing, "the focus of the research is placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). To accomplish, this horizontalizing must be employed as the researcher gathers data to make sure that every piece of data is assigned an equal value and taken into consideration. Data not relevant to the study are then removed, leaving only "the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the central phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 180-181). Consequently, themes and rich descriptions are developed.

Following this phenomenological reduction, the researcher attempted to draw meaning from the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon in order to find structural qualities of the textural meanings that the participants described, as "These structural qualities have structural themes which are integrated into the universal structural description of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 180-181). This process culminated with the intuitive integration phase, wherein the researcher used all the textural and structural descriptions and provided a cohesive statement conveying essences of the experience of the phenomenon as relayed from the participants.

Adhering to the Moustakas (1994) template, the researcher bracketed out prejudice in an effort to "eliminate suppositions and the raising of knowledge above every possible doubt" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Creswell (2012) advised the researcher on the use of a reflexive journal to position oneself and convey how the researcher's work history, teaching experiences, coaching and history would inform the interpretation of the proposed study. Employing the use of a journal throughout the process enabled the researcher to constantly check any bias or previous experiences that may have influenced interpretations of the data.

Prior to any data being collected, IRB approval was obtained from Liberty University and the proposed three respective sites for data collection. Once approval was granted, the researcher gathered the targeted populations' contact information from each proposed site. It was anticipated that once the targeted population provided a willingness to participate, appropriate permission and information statements were to be provided as well as demographic data for each proposed participant. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews and a focus group, both of which were audio recorded and transcribed by a transcription service. After the one-on-one interview, the researcher provided a writing prompt to each participant for reflecting upon his or

her time as a Division III NJCAA student-athlete. Once all interviews and focus groups were concluded and transcribed and writing prompts collected, horizontalizing the data began. This process was aided by a software program, NVivo 1, to allow the researcher to analyze the qualitative data using pattern-based auto coding, therefore increasing dependability. A code is “often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 3). All transcriptions of interviews, focus groups and writing prompts were entered into NVivo 11 in order to triangulate the data, further ensuring horizontalizing of data. All data not pertaining to the research questions were removed, and data applicable to the research questions were clustered into themes (Moustakas, 1994). The varying textural descriptions of a Division III NJCAA student-athletes were found. Following this, the researcher utilized “imaginative variation” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97-98) to gain a sense of the essence of the experience of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete. From this process, structural descriptions arose through examining the transcripts, writing prompt responses and audiotapes. Cross-referencing throughout this process again ensured data triangulation (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher created a description of what the participants experienced and included examples verbatim. This is the textural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A description of how the phenomenon occurred was created as well. This is the structural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). Structural themes emerged from the structural descriptions, and when this occurred, the researcher was intuitive and “reflectively integrated the composite textural and composite descriptions to develop a synthesis of the meanings and essences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 181), thus capturing the experience of a Division III NJCAA student-athlete who successfully

persisted to a four-year institution. This step in the process provided a starting point for finalizing chapter four of the dissertation and the initiation of chapter five.

Trustworthiness

The integrity of the researcher and the findings obtained through the interpretations of the voices of the participants “depend on ...careful attention to establishing trustworthiness” (Patton, 2015, p. 685). The researcher ensured that trustworthiness would be evident by establishing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility denotes the “activities increasing the probability that credible findings will be produced” (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 301). To establish credibility, the researcher bracketed out his prejudgment in an effort to eliminate “suppositions and the raising of knowledge above every possible doubt” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Reflexive journaling was employed by the researcher to bracket key statements that speak to the phenomenon, which could lead to interpretation of these meanings and phrases, which lead to inspection of the meanings, which built to the tentative statement of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Data was also triangulated through collecting multiple sources of information (questionnaires, writing prompt, interview recording, and focus group interview recordings) (Patton, 2015).

To increase credibility, the researcher field-tested interview questions with student-athletes that were not part of the study. Furthermore, to ensure credibility, interview responses were recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, the researcher shared transcripts with the participants via email to allow the participants to make edits and corrections to the transcripts; by member checking, the researcher ensured accuracy or credibility of the data. Buchbinder (2011) indicated that one of the main means of achieving credibility is the performance of a member

check or validation interview. Member checking allows participants to provide their own views and determine revisions, and it assists in avoiding the researcher's bias (Creswell, 2013).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability addresses “the process of the inquiry and the inquirer’s responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented” (Patton, 2015, p. 685). To increase dependability, the researcher recorded interviews, had the interviews professionally transcribed, and then allowed the interviewees to read and edit them for accuracy. The research utilized NVivo 11 software to allow the researcher to analyze the qualitative data using pattern-based auto coding, increasing dependability.

All steps were documented and followed a logical progression, including requesting that participants respond to a writing prompt after the one-on-one interviews, then conducting one-on-one open-ended interviews, followed by group interviews (Patton, 2015). This information was kept and is available for all inquiries and will be used in auditing by an independent third party who will verify that all pieces of information lead to the final dissertation (Schwandt, 2015, p. 10).

Confirmability is “concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry are not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (Patton, 2015, p. 685). To help reduce researcher bias and increase confirmability, the researcher identified personal experiences and prejudgments before the study to allow the researcher to put them aside and listen to the participants, openly and without judging. The researcher also completed a reflexive journal as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1988) to aid in the identification of experimenter bias and help acknowledge questions or feelings that may arise during the interview process.

Transferability

Transferability “deals with the issue of generalization in terms of case-to-case transfer” (Patton, 2015, p. 685) and “the responsibility of the original investigator ends in providing sufficient descriptive data” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 298) in order to help future researchers conduct similar studies and reach similar conclusions. When ensuring transferability in a phenomenological research design, the research focus must be on studying human experiences and obtaining knowledge purely by perceiving the data as they are, rather than through the lens of more complex interpretation or meaning making (Moustakas, 1994). All definitions and procedures in this study were be clearly defined and annotated to ensure future researchers can apply the same or similar parameters to conduct future studies (Patton, 2015; Schwandt, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

It is important for all researchers to consider what ethical issues are relevant to their studies in order to establish plans to address any potential problems that might arise (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher currently works at a community college and inevitably has assumptions about student-athletes, bracketing these pre-existing notions was a must (Creswell, 2013). IRB approval from Liberty University as well as the three proposed sites aided in anticipating and minimizing potential risks and ensured that all research was confidential. Pseudonyms were used for the names of all participants and the community colleges that provided the settings for the study in order to uphold the confidentiality of the participants (Creswell, 2013). To meet the standards of confidentiality in qualitative research, up-to-date security software and password protection safeguard computer files containing transcripts and any other documentation. The researcher will delete all documentation and data for the study three years after completion of the doctoral program. Finally, all participants were required to sign a consent form that clearly

stated that they could withdraw from the proposed study voluntarily at any time during the process by contacting the researcher and informing him of the decision. The consent form also informed participants of the research design. This aided in the IRB requirement of the researcher not causing the participant any harm (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014).

Summary

This chapter described the methodological foundations for this transcendental phenomenological study designed to elucidate the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. A triangulated approach involving multiple sources of data was used to maximize trustworthiness. Once data was collected from multiple sources including interviews, written documents, and a focus group, the participants' written documents and the transcripts from the interviews and focus group were examined to synthesize rich information about participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization, or highlighting of important comments or quotes, was used to assist in analyzing the data. Once the data was analyzed, the themes that emerged from the interviews, written documents, and focus groups were clustered together in common themes (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing was used during this process of analyzing the data to ensure that the emerging themes and meanings provided a description that represented the substance of the phenomenon rather than the researcher's own formulations or biases (Creswell, 2013). NVivo 11 was used to track significant statements and assisted in the analysis of the data (Moustakas, 1994). Out of these statements, a composite description was written to present the essence of the phenomenon. (Creswell, 2013). All necessary steps were taken to minimize any ethical risks and ensure that the confidentiality of research participants' information was maintained.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. The problem that formed the basis for this research study was that community college students, especially community college student-athletes at the Division III NJCAA level who are enrolled to both complete their degree pursuits as well as participate in their sport, are at great risk of not completing their programs of study (Balduf, 2009; Baldwin, Bensimon, Dow, & Kleiman, 2011; Beauchemin, 2014; Beck, 2017; Bentley, 2017; Connolly, 2016; and Cooper, 2017). A transcendental phenomenological design was used in this study to examine the essence of the participants' experiences. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the common meaning for participants in their lived experiences and determine the meaning of the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). While collecting and analyzing data, bracketing, memoing, and journaling were used (see Appendices L and M) to help set aside the researcher's predispositions, biases, and preconceived ideas that could have had an effect on the study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Interviews, participants' written documents, and a focus group were used to collect data for this study.

The theoretical underpinning for this study was Tinto's (1975) student integration model. Tinto's (1975) student integration model informed the study through its focus on the importance of social and academic integration in the lives of NJCAA Division III student-athletes. One central research question and four sub-questions guided this phenomenological research study:

Central Research Question: What are the experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution?

Sub-Question 1: How do participants describe their social experiences while enrolled at a community college that led to persistence to a four-year institution?

Sub-Question 2: How do participants describe their athletic experiences while enrolled at a community college that led to persistence to a four-year institution?

Sub-Question 3: How do participants describe their academic experiences while enrolled at a community college that led to persistence to a four-year institution?

Sub-Question 4: How do participants describe their personal experiences while enrolled at a community college that led to persistence to a four-year institution?

This chapter presents the results of analysis of data acquired from the interviews, participants' written documents, and focus group interviews. The findings were derived from the experiences of ten Division III NJCAA student-athletes who successfully persisted to four year institutions. This chapter initially provides a brief, qualitative description of each participant. Four themes that emerged from the data analysis are then discussed, including: (a) Parent Support, (b) Push to Succeed, (c) Love of Sport, and (d) Not Ready for a University. Following presentation of themes, the central question and sub-questions are then answered narratively using the data collected, included the stated themes. Finally, a summary is provided to conclude the chapter.

Participants

As shown in Table 1 (from Chapter 3), 10 Division III NJCAA student athletes who successfully persisted to four year institutions and attended three different community colleges participated in this study. Each student-athlete had participated in his or her respective sport for

two years as a NJCAA Division III student-athlete and subsequently persisted to a four-year university where he or she was pursuing a four-year degree or had recently graduated with the degree at the time of the study. After collecting and reviewing consent forms (see Appendix C) from all participants, a Bb Collaborate interview was set up with each participant. Bb Collaborate is administered through the Blackboard (Bb) learning management system (LMS). Blackboard's LMS is utilized for distance education classes, and the Bb Collaborate tool allows synchronous interviews to take place, as the interviewer and interviewee see and hear each other via their laptop computers with the aid of a webcam. Each participant was provided a pseudonym that was used to refer to that participant throughout the study.

Charles

Charles is a Caucasian 26-year-old student who is in his last semester of his four-year degree. After coming to community college right out of high school and working towards an associate's degree in broadcasting, he quit that pursuit to work full time. He returned to college after a two-year hiatus and earned his Associate in Arts degree while playing golf. Charles said "I wasn't the greatest of high school students, and I needed to recommit myself to school and to golf."

Nancy

Nancy is a Caucasian female who is 21 years old and majoring in poultry science. She is originally from North Carolina. She participated in volleyball since the age of 12 and pursued playing at the Division III NJCAA college level. She was familiar with the college team prior to attending her community college. She stated, "I grew up saying I was going to play here! I want to play on this team." Due to an injury, she no longer participated in volleyball at her senior institution; however, she says she "can play for fun now and not competitively."

Denise

Denise is a Caucasian female who is 25 years old and has a degree in business from a private university. She is currently pursuing her master's in business administration online while in her first year of teaching math at a middle school. She played volleyball since middle school and remarked "I loved volleyball. The hardest thing was that last game...I hated that. If I had not started volleyball, I don't know what my life would have been without it."

Sarah

Sarah is a 24-year-old Hispanic female who graduated with a BA in exercise physiology after playing two years of volleyball at her local community college. She is currently working as a fitness coach in a hospital-affiliated fitness club. She had not played volleyball in high school and took advantage of an opportunity to play at the collegiate level. Sarah said, "I came in with the mentality that I was coming in new to North Carolina, so let me try everything."

Jimmy

Jimmy is an African-American male who is 23 years old and has a BA in psychology and works at a bargain outlet store. He played basketball at his community college for two years, took one year off from the sport to complete his associate in arts degree, and subsequently played basketball at the university he attended. He said, "I didn't know much on how to apply for college and how to get to a nice college, so I talked to a coach that saw me play and then I decided to attend community college."

Bill

Bill is an African-American male who is 25 years old who earned a bachelor's degree in business administration as well as a minor in health care management. He spent three years at community college, playing basketball for two of those, and then attended an out-of-state university to obtain his four-year degree. He said, "I grew up playing basketball, and I was always in love with it! I accomplished many things in basketball, and I still have more to achieve."

Laura

Laura is a 21-year-old Puerto Rican female who is currently working on her degree in exercise science at a four-year university. Having participated in a program that allows college classes to be completed during high school, she had one year remaining at community college. However, she chose to complete her degree and add a respiratory therapist associate in applied science one-year diploma to her credentials so she could continue to play volleyball. She said, "Playing volleyball at FCC made me a better athlete, a better person, and I could not imagine not playing volleyball at FCC."

Harry

Harry is a 22-year-old African-American male who graduated with a degree in sports management from a four-year university. He played basketball at his community college and subsequently was awarded a scholarship to play basketball at his four-year university. He lives out of state from where he went to school and is employed in the United States Postal Service. He said "When you get out of high school and even if you are DI [Division 1], you are going to ride the bench. At a junior college, I got to play immediately."

Wendy

Wendy is a 20-year-old Caucasian female who is enrolled as a junior pursuing a bachelor's degree in exercise science and is planning to apply for a graduate degree program in athletic training. She played volleyball at her community college and now plays club volleyball at the university she attends. She said "I had given up sports to focus on school; however, at the end of my senior year, I got a call from the volleyball coach saying that they had a position for me. I played for two years more and I ended up loving the sport of volleyball even more."

Hank

Hank is a 24-year-old African American male who graduated with a bachelor's degree in business management and a minor in sociology. He played basketball in community college and was awarded a scholarship to a four-year university to continue to play basketball to finish his studies. He said "Community college prepared me for academics better than my four-year university. My coaches made sure that we knew that school came first."

Results

Participants chose to engage in Bb Collaborate interviews to complete the interview requirement. All ten interviews took place in a secure area at the researcher's workplace. All interviews were conducted within a three-week period of the spring 2019 semester. Participants were asked the same 17 interview questions (see Appendix E), with additional questions included if clarification from participants was needed. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. Once interviews were completed, each participant was emailed instructions for how to complete the writing prompt for the study (see Appendix F). Participants were asked to respond to the following writing prompt: "What academic, athletic and personal advice would you provide to a high school athlete based on your experience as a NJCAA Division III student-athlete?" As

acknowledged in Table 4, ten out of the ten participants submitted written documents for the study by email. During the fifth week of the spring 2019 semester, participants were emailed a request inquiring if they were willing to participate in an online focus group conducted via Blackboard Collaborate (see Appendix G). The first six participants that responded to affirm they would participate were selected for the focus group, as six is an acceptable number according to Patton (2015). As stated in Table 4, six out of the ten participants participated in the focus group. Participants were asked nine questions (see Appendix H) and were encouraged to share their experiences as they related to the phenomenon with the other members of the focus group.

Each interview and the focus group were recorded with an audio recorder and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Once transcribed, the transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy. Using member-checking, the interview transcripts and a list of preliminary themes were shared with participants (see Appendices L and M) to check for accuracy. All participants agreed with the transcriptions and the themes that were revealed based on the interviews. Once data was collected, it was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) suggested the use of a transcendental phenomenological study when focusing on the experiences of the participants instead of the researcher's experiences. Since the core of transcendental phenomenology is meaning (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004), the transcendental phenomenological design met the objective of gaining first-hand knowledge from those affected by the phenomenon. Adopting the assumptions inherent in a transcendental phenomenological design allowed for examining the phenomenon of interest in a way that is least biased by the researcher's personal experiences and rather determined by the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of the NJCAA Division III

student-athletes' lived experiences were captured using the four major processes of phenomenology outlined by Moustakas (1994): (a) the epoché process, (b) phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis. Transcendental phenomenology allowed the researcher to describe the phenomenon while bracketing his own experiences as much as possible, which enabled him to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing was utilized throughout the data collection and analysis stages of the study through the use of a reflective journal and memoing (see Appendices I and J). These activities allowed the identification of any preconceptions throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction, the second process, allowed the discovery of the pure essence of the shared experiences and uncovered the underlying meaning units through analysis. By employing imaginative variation, the third process, possible meaning through varying frames of reference was utilized and allowed an approach to the phenomenon from divergent perspectives and alternate roles or positions. Phenomenological research concluded with the synthesis of the derived meanings and essences. Analysis of the data involved examining significant statements and themes that reflected distilled commonalities among the lived experiences of participants in a simplified way (Moustakas, 1994).

Table 4

Participants' Contributions by Data Collection Methods

Pseudonyms	Interview	Written Documents	Focus Group
Charles	x	x	
Nancy	x	x	x
Denise	x	x	x
Sarah	x	x	
Jimmy	x	x	
Bill	x	x	x
Laura	x	x	
Harry	x	x	x
Wendy	x	x	x
Hank	x	x	x

In the first step of data analysis, a professional transcriptionist transcribed each of the audio-recorded interviews into typed documents. Upon receipt of each transcription, the researcher read and reread each individual story for familiarity with the totality of the participants' experiences. At the completion of the second reading of the transcribed interviews, interview summaries were emailed to each of the participants with requests that they verify that the researcher had accurately captured their experience (Patton, 2002). The data analysis process began by addressing the central research question and the four sub-questions. Hand-coding was utilized for the transcribed interviews at first. Different colored pens and highlighters were used to identify participants' statements that pertained to the experience of NJCAA student-athletes who had persisted. The hand-coding process increased familiarity with the participants'

experiences. To manage and facilitate the data analysis, typed interview documents, with participants identified by a pseudonym, were uploaded into NVivo 11 software. The research question was bracketed to safeguard its attention (Patton, 2002). Following the process of horizontalization, every significant quote or statement pertaining to the research question representative of how the participants experienced the phenomenon was listed and regarded equally. Repetitive statements were deleted. Remaining statements identified as relating to persistence were labeled. Categories were designed to organize related textual content under an NVivo 11 code created for this purpose. The log was studied for any differences in data analysis or variations in the researcher's assumptions as data was deeply reviewed looking for significant statements (Creswell, 2012). As participants were interviewed, parallels were found between their experiences and the researcher's own experiences as a student-athlete. The researcher made note of any reactions in the field notes log. Participants' unique experiences, commitment, determination, and perseverance in their stories of persistence were also recognized. The researcher's concerns had to be set aside for active listening to the participants' full experiences. The same process was employed in regards to the focus group. Once the professional transcript of the focus group was obtained, the document was read on two separate occasions, and after the second reading, the transcript was emailed to the six participants. Finally, the ten written submissions that were provided by the participants were read and coded as the previous interview and focus group transcripts had been. A list of 41 codes resulted, and these are provided in Table 5. Codes having similar elements were grouped together, forming four themes

Table 5 shows the specific codes and the number of times they occurred in each interview as well as the theme the code best exemplified.

Table 5

Themes and Categories Identified in Phenomenological Reduction

Parent Support	Push to Succeed	Love of Sport	Not Ready for a University
Family 31	Pull 12	Fun 15	Not Ready for University 38
Father 27	Push 64	Competitive 35	High Standard 20
Mother 24	Desire 14	Role Model 22	Community College 33
Home 36	Peers 37	College Athlete 43	Study 32
Coach's Kid 14	Judgement By Peers 22	Childhood Goal 26	Perceptions 12
Support 52	Respect 8		Familiar 23
Parents 44	Competitive 35	Love of Sport 45	Affordable 27
Community 23	Need to Compete 32		Fear 17
Faith 21	Can't Give Up 17	Passion 19	Class Size 25
	Self-Driven 18	Need for Athletics 33	Relationships 37
	Motivation 38		
	Expectations 28	Injury 7	High School 27

In the last step of the phenomenological reduction process, categories having similar features were grouped together into four themes with sub-themes, and the resulting themes were arranged into a clear textual description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). For example, the theme "parent support" comprises the codes parents, father, mother, pull, push, motivation, home, relationships and community. Imaginative variation was used to reveal possible meanings

of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To accomplish this, different potential interpretations were examined to explain the textural meanings, and underlying themes were explored that might best reveal a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. From these themes, a composite description was developed that represented the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013).

Theme Development

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persist to a four-year institution. Data analysis was theoretically grounded in Tinto's (1975) student integration model. Through a continuous immersion in the data and data coding, four themes emerged: (a) Parent Support, (b) Push to Succeed, (c) Love of Sport, and (d) Not Ready for a University. Within all of the themes, subthemes emerged based upon the participants' responses in the interviews, written documents, and focus group.

Theme 1: Parent support. Student-athletes frequently have a starting point of recreation sports followed by a more formal competitive environment, whether through school representation or "travel ball" experiences, such as the Amateur Athletic Union or the United States Specialty Sports Association. In this study, those early playing endeavors by these student-athletes were supported by parents or other adults serving in a parental role, such as coaches and teachers. During the data analysis, the first theme to emerge from the data collection was that all ten of the NJCAA Division III student-athletes who were able to successfully persist in their studies to the four-year university expressed that their parents were huge supporters of their college academics and sports participation. This theme addressed the

second sub-question of how Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their athletic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution and the third sub-question of how Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their academic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution. Two sub-themes emerged from the data: (a) A Mother's Role in Sports Participation and Academics and (b) A Father's Role in Sports Participation and Academics. While mother and father supports are not necessarily distinct by gender, the commentary provided by the participants organically separated the parents by gender. Table 6 displays the sub-themes occurring for each participant for Parent Support

Table 6

Participant Responses by Sub-Themes for Parent Support

Pseudonyms	Mother's Role in Sport Participation and Academics	Father's Role in Sport Participation and Academics
Charles	x	
Nancy		x
Denise	x	x
Sarah		x
Jimmy	x	
Bill	x	
Laura	x	x
Harry	x	x
Wendy		x
Hank	x	

A mother's role in sports participation and academics. All of the participants began their community college career with excitement that they had a chance to pursue their college education while being given a chance to continue a sport they had previously played during their middle and high school years. All ten of the participants enthusiastically spoke of their parents' role in both their sports participation and academics. However, it should be noted that the male student-athletes primarily spoke of their mother's role in their academic and athletic journey. Charles, who played intercollegiate golf, attributed his ability to persist to his mother. He indicated:

I'd say my family, but more particularly my Mom, really wanted to see me succeed. She did not have a college degree and she has done well for herself in other routes. But she said that she was going to support me all the way and this is what I needed to do for my future.

Similarly, Jimmy, a JCC basketball player, stated "My mother had a good big role in it. She pushed me in it. At first I was hesitant, but she was there for me." Reflecting upon his community college experience helped him understand how big a part his mother played in her support of both his college work and his basketball:

It was a big role. She pushed me to be the best I can. And while I was thereI accomplished a few things. Even though times were hard, she was there for me.

Bill reflected on his first year of playing basketball at CCC and his first classes at a community college and quickly pointed out how his parents, particularly his mother, instilled a work ethic into him:

I mean really, you know, the support. She made sure I stayed on my grades, making sure I did what I did in the classroom, what I did in the classroom and outside the classroom, continue to encourage me and stay committed. Her support was the biggest!

When reflecting further about his athletics, he attributed both of his parents to his work ethic:

I can't speak to everyone else, but I was always self-driven, very self-driven. I thank my parents for that, especially my Mom! It has taken me a long way. I was consistent and committed. That played all the factors into who I am today because of my parents, but more importantly my mom!

Along similar lines, Harry, who played at CCC, echoed the importance of his mother to his academic journey. Harry reflected "My parents had a positive role. They stayed hard on me. They were not hovering, but mom was like if you do it and do it the right way, hopefully it will make something out of it."

Hank, a self-described "late bloomer" in his sport of basketball, relayed that "both of my parents were very active in all of my endeavors both basketball and academics. Mom was on the academic side of things making sure I was on top of things."

Charles, Jimmy, Bill, Harry and Hank all attributed an academic support from their mothers in terms of checking in on their progress as well as serving as a sounding board. Bill recognized it in terms of phone calls, as he is a self-described introvert who appreciated being contacted by his mother checking on him, while Harry and Hank indicated it was great to see their parents, especially their mother, at the games cheering and encouraging them. Harry reflected "My parents didn't miss a game (laughs) and mom was right in there....cheering."

Hank said his parents were “Number one supporters! Made it to every home game, and 99.99 % of the away games. I could always hear them, always had my back!”

Denise and Laura also cited their mothers as sources of academic support. Denise reflected that her mother was instrumental on the academic side as she stepped into fulfill the role of an academic advisor for Denise. She stated “My Mom really stepped in to figure out what would transfer so we would not have any wasted classes.” Laura held her mother in high regards due to her work ethic. She reflected:

I’d say my Mom as she is a hard worker and she is currently working on her MA degree. Seeing her wanting to do more for herself. She is an accountant, and she is a realtor. She wants to advance in her career and her life. I want to do the same, and I want to work as hard as I can and do the same.

These participants all provided favorable memories of the ways their parents and particularly their mothers supported their children on and off the court through phone calls, visits, emails, and support.

A father’s role in sports participation and academics. Again, all ten of the participants enthusiastically spoke of their parents’ role in both their sports participation and academics. However, it should be noted that the female student-athletes primarily spoke of their father’s role in their academic and athletic journey.

Denise, a former volleyball who played at CCC and who is now employed as a middle school teacher while working on her MBA, reflected on her father and the influence he had on her at an early age:

My Dad! He was a teacher at my school, he was an athletic director, and he was my coach. It was always sports...if you want to play sports, you have to do academics. My

parents were always pushing me to do way more than I thought I was capable of. I have an older brother. He was not an academic person, but I always had to push myself more. Academics and sports – you did both!

Denise offered that her parents were the most supportive of her decision to both attend a community college as well as participate in athletics as she first went to a private university for a semester and did not make the dance team and then only made the practice squad of a club volleyball team:

They were the most supportive. Especially my Dad, you need to get involved, people will know who you are. People see you as a role model. You're doing school you're doing sports. My parents... I could not ask for anything better in the push for athletics and academics.

Denise, in her written prompt, provided that “My parents have always been my biggest fans, but during those 2 years, they both pushed me on and off the volleyball court. As my previous coach, my dad continuously supported and "coached" me; a bond that will never be replaced!”

Nancy, a former CCC volleyball player who is currently working on her four-year university degree, echoed the importance of her parents, especially that of her father in her academics at the community college:

Um...especially my Dad stayed on top of me as he knew most of my professors. They stayed on top of me. They really helped with my transition from CCC to now here at (the university). They were really supportive, like when a lot of people like my brother said this isn't really college, but they had my back! No this is college!

Nancy went on to remark about her father's encouragement for her athletic participation, stating, "So after I thought I was done my senior year playing volleyball, but Dad said just try, you know the coach, so just try."

Sarah, a former volleyball player who is now working in the fitness industry, lived exclusively with her father once she moved to North Carolina from another state. She reflected that he was very supportive but did not have a part in deciding her future or what she wanted to do academically. She stated, "my family didn't have a huge role in my choices, but they were very supporting. My Dad was very involved in that I decided to play volleyball at CCC. He was very supportive, always attending games, always driving me to practice and very much for doing something other than academics."

Laura, who grew up in Puerto Rico and played volleyball at FCC echoed the same sentiment of support:

My parents were very supportive in all decisions I made. They wanted me to go to FCC and after the first year, I got my AA [associate in arts degree] and then I decided to stay a second season and playing a second season of volleyball, and I did graduate with AA but I needed to stay a second year. They pushed me to do respiratory therapy, and I knew I didn't want to rest a year. Mom did research and found respiratory therapy, and that was major I wanted to do. But even then, I wasn't sure I wanted to play volleyball, but Dad was like you always wanted to play, so play.

Wendy, another volleyball player from CCC who is now enrolled in at a four-year university, resonated as well the level of support her parents had in all of her decisions surrounding her academics and athletics. She said "They both played sports growing up. They

were both supportive. Once I was finished volleyball and they knew there would be no more. Other things took its place and they still supported me.”

Nancy, Denise, Sarah, Laura, Wendy, and Harry all provided a picture of being backed in their decisions on both academics and athletics, and while each celebrated their parent support, they all highlighted their fathers as being encouragers, supporters, cheerleaders, and an advocate for their children to continue playing. As Nancy and Denise both provided, they saw their fathers as “coaches” and their weighing in on their daughters’ continued student-athlete pursuits were seen as “worthwhile” and “involvement” in the college. As Denise expressed in her father’s voice, “If you are doing school, you’re doing sports!” While Sarah told about the time sacrifices her dad made as he was her transportation back and forth to college practices, Wendy simply described the presence of her father at athletic events as a “way of life.” Nick explained, “My Dad is a big sports fan. He didn’t miss a thing I was involved in. He was there for me.”

Theme 2: Push to succeed. A competitive drive for student-athletes may manifest itself in a will to win in athletic competition or to be the best in the classroom. Astin (1993) reported that athletic participation while in college was positively associated with overall satisfaction with the college experience, motivation to earn a degree, and the development of interpersonal and leadership skills. Furthermore, Melendez (2007) suggested that athletic participation often provides opportunities for social interaction and support, generating feelings of belonging and acceptance among one’s peer group and for developing feelings of pride and attachment to one’s school. In exploring that motivation from others in a student-athlete’s life, the data analysis provided the second theme to emerge in that participants were pushed to better both academically and athletically by their peers, family, coaches, teammates as well as themselves.

This theme addressed the four sub-questions in regards to how Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their social, athletic, academic, and personal experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution. Ten participants shared how they were pushed to be better both academically and athletically at the community college level. Looking back on their experiences, many could see the importance of the push provided by their parents, peers, teammates, and coaches. Subsequently, they recognized an inner push that aided them when these support groups were not available. Four sub-themes emerged from the data: (a) Push to Succeed from Parents, (b) Push to Succeed from Peers, (c) Push to Succeed from Coaches and Teachers, and (d) Self-Motivation. Table 7 displays the sub-themes occurring for each participant for Push to Succeed.

Table 7

Participant Responses by Sub-Themes for Push to Succeed

Pseudonyms	Push to Succeed From Parents	Push to Succeed from Peers	Push to Succeed from Teachers and Coaches	Self-Motivation
Charles		x	x	x
Nancy			x	x
Denise	x	x	x	x
Sarah	x	x	x	x
Jimmy	x	x		x
Bill	x	x	x	x
Laura	x	x	x	x
Harry	x	x	x	x
Wendy	x	x	x	x
Hank	x	x	x	x

A push to succeed from parents. Eight participants, in reflecting on their parents' role in both athletics and academics, specifically stated the term "push" in regards to their parents.

Denise on two occasions said "My parents were always pushing me to do way more than I thought I was capable of," and "My parents I could not ask for anything better in the push for athletics and academics." In her written response, Denise offered "My parents have always been my biggest fans, but during those 2 years, they both pushed me on and off the volleyball court."

Similarly, Sarah reflected that while she wanted to have a clean slate and try new things at CCC once she got there, she also attributes a push from her parents as being open to

experience new things. Jimmy expressed the same support in academics with the push coming from his mother when he stated “My mother had a good big role in it, she pushed me in it. At first I was hesitant. But she was there for me.” Bill recognized a lot of influences in his life, but specifically noted that “Blessings to God that I have parents that pushed me to be better.”

Laura was resolved that she was going to stop playing volleyball and simply focus on academics to persist on to a University:

I got my AA and then I decided to stay a second season and playing a second season of volleyball. I did graduate with an AA [Associate in Arts] but I needed to stay a second year to get to play volleyball. They pushed me to do another one-year diploma so I could plan my second year as I knew I didn't want to rest a year.

Harry provided that his parents had a positive role on his academics and athletics:

They had a pretty good positive role. If I go there, it would be best for me to get a degree. They stayed hard on me. They pushed me, but they were not hovering and saying do this or do that. But they were like if you don't do it and do it the right way, then I'm just saying.

Wendy reflected that her parents were “faithful to me and always stayed positive...pushing me to do better” while Hank echoed the same sentiment in his interview offering that “both of my parents were supportive and pushed me keep reaching further in my school and basketball.” Hank went on to state, “my family pushed me as I knew my family on my Dad's side, the younger siblings were watching me! I wanted to keep it going and wanted them to see I could do it, and make Mama proud. Basketball is not forever.” Overwhelmingly, these eight participants cited their parents as positively pushing them to achieve their academic degrees as well as their particular sport goals.

A push to succeed from peers. Nine participants shared that their peers and teammates were very supportive and pushed them in their academic pursuits and in their athletic endeavors at the community college level. Chris, a NJCAA Division III golfer, reflected:

I would say my peers had a big role in my academics and athletics. One of my best friends went to CCC actually and he was on the same path and we ended up having a lot of the same classes and he was on the golf team. We pushed each other.

Chris provided more in his written response that “I always played through high school, and golf was my main thing and I always enjoyed it. My friends and I would always meet up with the coach and he talked them into doing it as well. Golf was fun with my friends... you could still kind of compete at a high level at a structured tournament. They pushed me to play!”

Jimmy, Laura, Wendy and Hank all had similar experiences in what they described as a push from their peers. Jimmy relayed that his friends had a big role in his academics and sports as he stated “I was the only one to go off and play college basketball, so they pushed me to represent.” Laura echoed the same sentiment as her teammates made things really fun as they studied together and went out together. Laura reflected that at FCC “we pushed each other to succeed in our studies, our sport. We even pushed our basketball team to try to outperform us.” Wendy described her friends being “faithful to me [her]n their positivity and pushing me [her]her to do better.”

Hank reminisced about his friends as he stated:

I had a few friends from high school that would try to come to a game or two and kept up with me online. But my sophomore year, my Facebook blew up with people reaching out...all positive, no negatives...pushing me to get better. These were my friends...people outside my family!

Nancy told a story of support, but it was a delayed support after her friends had come back for their first year at university:

A lot of friends went off to four year schools as freshmen and then a bunch came back due to failure and owing too much money. I felt like they were judging me because my first option was going to a community college but after they saw the support I received at the community college and that I was not a number, you are actually a student and a name, then they were more a lot more supportive of my decision to do community college first!

Nancy went on to describe her peers' admiration of her being a college student-athlete:

A bunch of my closest friends were not there, my closest friends were not there but they were supportive and they knew I loved the sport due to my being a college athlete.

People say now you played college ball that is so cool. Oh My God you played college volleyball, that is so cool, no one looked at it as a lower level or Division III...you were a college athlete.

Denise indicated how being local and raised in the same town where her community college is located as being a support mechanism for her peer group:

Being back in my home town, being born and raised, I knew my peers. I knew people in my classes. Just having that team...group setting. We would push each other academically. Oh yeah...we really stuck together. I mean, I met new people too, but we really stuck together.

Sarah's journey was different in that she moved from another state, did not intend on playing volleyball, and was more focused on getting involved in all facets of college life. She had a lot of friends across a variety of majors due to her work with a CCC business club on

campus. However, she said that once she became involved with volleyball, an extra academic push occurred. She stated “My volleyball girlfriends were a support system for grades and we pushed each other to get good grades.” She continued, saying that her academic friends would attend games, and that was nice, but she would not feel inspired to perform better in a game since they were there. “Our focus was on academics and what we could do with that.”

Bill took his push from his peers from an interesting point, as he observed behaviors he did not want to emulate in his college journey:

Honestly watching everyone flunk. Back in the day we had a real bad academic problem. It was ridiculous. I can remember practices we had practices where we all talked thirty or forty-five minutes about the same thing – going to class and doing our work.

The graduation rate was not really high at CCC. My motivation was to not fail and to not fail like they were doing. They pushed me to not be like this – not wanting to fail like they were!

While nine participants indicated that their peers motivated them in their particular sport or in their academic pursuits, those peer motivations came in different ways. Whether through witnessing a negative example as Bill did or having more positive examples of motivation through peer interaction as Denise and others did, peer influence was present in the persistence of these student-athletes.

A push to succeed from coaches and teachers. Nine participants in reflecting on their coaches and teachers reflected positively on how their support, encouragement, and push influenced their journeys to persistence. Hank, Wendy, Harry, Bill and Nancy indicated that their teachers made it a point to come to games to watch them and their teammates play. The

physical presence of teachers at sporting events meant that the institution was supporting them in both the classroom and on the court. Hank reflected:

They made sure the rest of our teammates knew that that school came first. Sometimes we wanted to put basketball first and some of the teachers that actually care about the students came to games to cheer us on, but they told us to be in class the next day. They pushed us on the court and off!

Wendy was inspired by her high school teachers and coaches as early in her freshman year to visit the high school to ask questions and get help, but then she quickly realized her community college instructors and coaches had the same care as her high school coaches. She offered:

My teachers at CCC always strived to help me to perform better. Coaches had strength and conditioning to make me perform and my teachers were there for academics. I actually had a few come to games and understood about assignments and where I was coming from. They would push me to do my best, but they understood our schedule of competition.

Harry acknowledged that not all teachers were about helping him, but the ones who were supportive were fully behind him as long as his basketball performance was matching his academic work and vice versa. He reflected:

I mean the coaches harped a lot on keeping the grades up. Some teachers were good some were not, but those coaches harped on getting good grades to stay eligible! But I had one teacher...she would come and watch the first half. I actually had a couple like that. They would watch the first half, then they got gone! When I was at CCC I had a

few supportive and I liked that. And they called you out too in class if you missed that layup or missed that test.

Bill's recollection of the comparison of his two-year experience and four-year experience was very vivid:

Teachers – I would say supported us. What I can't really say the four year teachers would support me. But at CCC I could remember vividly at CCC that teachers would come by and support us! I could think of a number of teachers that would come by to support a game or two. Oh yeah the coaches - they just kept us pushing us! Kept pushing us! As far as practice goes. They would always give us motivational speeches. Thirty or forty-five minute speeches. Besides the support and tough love, they kept pushing us!

Nancy like the fact that her teachers knew her and knew the demands of being a student-athlete at her community college. She stated:

Everybody...I felt everybody was like supported. All of the teachers came to games if they knew about it! Our coaches said to be focused in class. If you have tests the next day—you can leave practice early to study! I just loved how they were so supportive!

However, Denise indicated while teacher support was important, their presence may not in being at a game but in recognizing you as a student-athlete. She offered:

I would again say the support ...coaches of course will be there to push you to be the best athlete you can be, they are going to get mad at you...I wouldn't say that teachers are going to come to games, but they know she is an athlete and if she can't make it to class or she can make it up. I feel like being an athlete on the community college setting, the teachers know. They know rather than at a university because of the book bag they have, we don't have that. The personal level...they know. It's a lot more personal. Even at

the university, your professors knew you by name if you wanted to stand out in class.

But at CCC, they knew you.

Laura relied more on her coaches than her teachers in both her academic and athletic journey at FCC. She reflected on a more comprehensive role by her coaches in her academic and athletic life:

I didn't really have personal connections with teachers, I went to class, get info I need to get and then go home to study. I had a relationship with coaches and I saw them every day. For two years I was with my coaches every day. They were my friends. I was glad I had coaches there for more than just volleyball.

She wrote that her high school coach provided the push she needed to go to FCC and continue her volleyball career. She wrote "She pushed me to be better every day."

Sarah saw the role of teachers at the community college as more of a support mechanism in her college studies with coaches understanding that athletics had a role, but not their primary role as a student-athlete at NJCAA Division III institution. She stated:

Supportive teachers are the best thing. They know how the environment works, unlike our parents. It was always nice to have that support system. Um – a lot of the teachers and advisors would always told me to think long term, don't focus on the athletic portion, just so it's nice to play good and do your best, but always think of academics first. So that was nice to come from a coach. Keep your grades up Keep doing this or that. Stay and play, even if athletic career was not in the future.

Self-motivation. All ten participants shared that they exhibited self-motivation while attending community college as well as while competing in their sport. For example, when asked what could have contributed more to her success in graduation or transferring, Denise

replied that she reached out on her own to her senior institution as she was motivated to make sure had the correct classes that would transfer. She did not want to waste time in her community college degree pursuit. But she admits that being at a small community college in her hometown did not motivate her to do as many things as she would have liked, as she was comfortable. However, in the focus group, Denise said, “I was able to be an athlete and maintain a 4.0! My life was super hectic and busy, but academics was such a big thing for me that I continuously pushed myself in all classes to be my best.”

Hank described himself as “the hardest worker I know” and remarked that “No matter what obstacle presented itself, I kept my eye on the prize. I stayed on track. Only person that can stop you is you!” When talking about success in the focus group, Harry offered that “I think with my attitude of finishing what you start, it made me want to go out and achieve more after I obtained my two-year degree.”

Charles alluded to motivation in that he initially was not fully committed to what he wanted to do. He offered the following:

Well...um ...primarily I was not fully committed to the idea of what I wanted to do. I wasn't the greatest of a high school student and I needed to recommit myself to school. Looking back, I pushed myself a little more and found my own motivation and things became easier, school became easier, and the golf became easier.

Nancy indicated that her motivation was tied to wanting to win and not wanting to let anyone down:

I knew we were not the best team, but I wanted to do my part. I wanted to win, and I didn't want to let my teammates down. You have to find something to motivate you and that was winning for me!

Jimmy attributed to his ability to persist to his motivation to not be like others:

Just seeing my family and stuff like that, none of them was able to go to the next level and complete anything. I was in a place to be able to go further. I took advantage of that and that is what I did.... what I accomplished.

Bill was motivated by his circumstances at being at a community college as well as playing basketball at CCC:

Coming right out of high school, I figured it (community college) would be easier, but I wasn't looking for easier. I struggled my first year. But after that I did really good. I was looking for challenges. I needed that so I could get better and better at everything!

Theme 3: Love of Sport. During the data analysis, the third theme to emerge from the data collection was that nine of the NJCAA Division III student-athletes who were able to successfully persist in their studies to the four-year university expressed that the love of their particular sport was instrumental in their journey towards persistence. Their journeys were similar in that there was an experience before their eventual participation in their sport where they were coming to terms with giving up their sport. However, their love for their sport opened them up to the option of playing at the Division III level. This theme addressed the central research question as well as second and fourth sub-questions. Two sub-themes emerged from the data: (a) Need to be a Student-Athlete and (b) Joy at a Second Chance. Table 8 displays the sub-themes occurring for each participant for Push to Succeed.

Table 8

Participant Responses by Sub-Themes for Love of Sport

Pseudonyms	Need to be a Student-Athlete	Joy at a Second Chance
Charles	x	
Nancy	x	x

Denise	x	x
Sarah		
Jimmy	x	x
Bill	x	x
Laura	x	x
Harry	x	x
Wendy	x	x
Hank	x	x

Need to be a student-athlete. At some point in a student-athlete's playing career, they confront the finality of their sport participation on a formal level. While they seek resolve that they can play club or recreationally, they do experience relinquishing their identity as a student-athlete. Nine participants expressed loving their sport so much that they simply did not want to give it up. They identified as sense of emptiness or finality when they were faced with not playing their particular sport any longer. Denise, in her written response, reflected on the moment she thought she was giving up her sport:

I never pursued athletic recruitment from any college and I wasn't a good enough athlete to play sports at a D1 college, so I gave it all up. The last game of my high school athletic career was during soccer season. I will never, ever forget the emotions that came over me knowing that my life would no longer consist of athletics.

Denise, in her interview, admitted that "Volleyball has been my life since middle school." She went on to explain:

I hated to have left it. The hardest thing was that last game...I hated that. Even in high school, I had a picture of Mom and I, and soccer was my last sport of the year. I'm crying, she's crying! The picture is so special. You know athletics.... If I had not started it, I don't know what my life would have been without it!

Charles expressed a bit of trepidation in starting his golf career again as it was an important part of his life in high school and he had come to terms with not playing anymore:

My only thoughts were about golf was just getting started again. Was this going to be much of a team at the time, but when I went back and (the coach) was trying to get it going again. I kinda didn't know how serious it would be. I needed this to be bigger than what it was in high school as I felt like I had something to finish. It turned out to be a lot better than what I thought it would be.

Nancy, Jimmy, Bill, Harry, Laura and Wendy all indicated a sense of finality in giving up their sport. Nancy indicated "I thought I was done my senior year playing volleyball."

Similarly, Jimmy expressed "After high school, I didn't have no idea where I was going to go and what I was going to do. I was pretty good at basketball and that is what I knew." Bill said, "Coming straight out of high school, I didn't have a lot of offers. That's scary when you know you can still play." Harry indicated the same in that "When I was coming out of high school, I didn't have any good looks. And it was looking like it was over." Laura provided, "I wasn't sure if I wanted to go and play again. I had put it on the shelf. And my main focus was school." Wendy expressed the finality of her volleyball career as "Once I was finished there would be no more."

Hank went into detail about an injury that shelved the possibility of him playing again. He remembered the finality of his senior year:

For me it was a little bit different, I got hurt playing in the playoffs my senior year and that messed up my recruitment. I didn't have anything on the table and received no offers. That's scary when you poured yourself into basketball, and then no one offers you the chance to play it. You're one injury away from just having it all taken away.

Joy at a second chance. Eight of the participants indicated there was a sense of relief or joy that they were provided a second opportunity at the collegiate level to play the sport they loved. They all had another opportunity to both play their sport but also to reaffirm their identities as student-athletes. Subsequently, that renewal led to a self-confidence that contributed to their persistence to their respective universities. Hank described the relief he felt, stating, "CCC was the only offer I had. Come get a great education and play basketball too! That was the golden ticket!" Bill echoed the same sentiment in his written response:

I did not have many basketball offers coming straight out of high school so maybe around July is when I went to an open gym at CCC and really impressed the coaches. Fast forward to August and I'm enrolled at CCC looking to conquer a bright future ahead of me.

Jimmy relayed how receiving this opportunity to compete in a sport he loved grew him as an individual. He wrote:

Because I love to play basketball in being there at JCC, I had to keep my grades up and know how to act not only on the court but on campus to and even in the public. All of this helped me be able to go to a university and continue my dreams academically and with athletics.

Wendy experienced the same joy at continuing a sport she thought was part of her past. She explained:

Well, I had ended up giving up sports to focus on school. At the end of my high school senior year, I got a phone call and the coach said we have a position....my love of the sport.... I just love volleyball. I ended up going and coach was great. I love the sport even more.

Harry indicated that community college was not a route he had considered, but this opportunity was too great to pass up. He recounted:

The coach got in touch with me and after I figured out what community college was, I figured it was a good start to get where I wanted to go and get to a higher level. I thought my journey was done, but it worked out for me.

In contrast, Laura had exposure to community college in her high school career, having taken classes during her senior year in high school. While she had shelved the idea of playing again, the opportunity presented itself. As she felt focused on completing her academics, she said “I got the chance to play volleyball there so it was two birds with one stone kind of thing.” She still loves the game; when not attending classes at her university, she works with local volleyball clubs and a high school junior varsity team as a coach.

And Bill expressed pure joy about his love for the sport of basketball and the opportunity to continue it. He stated:

I wanted to play as I really have a love for the game...just love for the game. It was still on me...still in my heart... basketball was something I looked to do as I grew up.

Basketball was something I wanted to do really great with. Parents had me in it. I grew up playing it with all my friends and I was always in love with it! I accomplished many things. I feel like I still have more to achieve.

Denise has the same joy for her sport, as she relayed: “The pull was volleyball. And now that I am done with my playing, I thought I would be doing something different. But I love the sport so much, I am now working at a middle school and coaching it.”

Nancy had to finally give up volleyball. After playing her collegiate career, she woke up to an injury as she was preparing to compete in a club environment. She said:

Well I had my back injury and it was really severe for a long time so I still have flare ups with it! I was pretty much recommended by a back surgeon to not play anymore. I get to play for fun but not competitively anymore. That stinks, but I left it all out there! No regrets!

Theme 4: Not Ready for a University. During the data analysis, the fourth theme to emerge from the data collection was that ten of the participants expressed their desire to begin their academic career at the community college level as it contributed to their academic persistence. They recognized that that they needed smaller class sizes, smaller campuses, the normalcy of life near home, affordability, and the help in academics as they were not the strongest of students. This theme addressed the central research question and the first, second, third and fourth sub-questions. Three sub-themes emerged from the data: (a) Academics and Affordability at a Community College, (b) Opportunity to Participate at a Community College and (c) Social Life at a Community College. Table 9 displays the sub-themes occurring for each participant for Not Ready for a University.

Table 9

Participant Responses by Sub-Themes for Not Ready for a University

Pseudonyms	Academics and Affordability	Opportunity to Immediately Play Their Sport	Social Life
Charles	x	x	x
Nancy	x	x	x
Denise	x	x	x
Sarah	x		x
Jimmy			x
Bill	x		x
Laura	x		x
Harry	x	x	x
Wendy	x	x	
Hank	x	x	x

Academics and affordability at a community college. Nine participants identified starting their college studies at a community college to further their education as the best route for them as they were intimidated by the university setting. Each recognized academic shortcomings that could be addressed on the community college level rather than at a university due to their preconceived notions and peer impressions provided to them about university life. The size of a university as well as its distance from their homes were seen as barriers to persisting if they started at a university. Each admitted that the community college was a significant cost reduction in comparison to the more expensive cost of a university. Thus, they saved money that eventually was spent on their university education.

A need for academic preparation was noted by the participants. Charles recognized shortcomings in his high school career and wanted to address those at the community college level as he acknowledged: “Some look at it as not your higher education. I wasn’t your greatest student so I needed a foot in the door. I needed smaller classrooms.” Nancy echoed Charles’ sentiment:

I wasn’t ready to fully come to like a university. I struggled to keep grades up and stuff and needed an extra step. Classes are like 200 here where I am now and not like 25 at CCC. I needed lower class size. It was a stepping stone but I don’t have any debt coming into my university. And I am a junior so yeah – it worked!

Class size was also noted by Wendy, who said, “In a smaller environment you do better.”

Denise echoed that cost was a factor in her attendance when she started at a university, but the opportunity to play volleyball was too strong and pulled her to attend community college. Sport was the primary factor, but affordability was a by-product, as she stated, “I could get the general education courses out of the way, and save money.” And Laura indicated the cost savings as well as she relayed:

I took college classes through FCC and I only needed one more year to finish my associate degree so my main goal was to finish my basic studies and then go to a four year university as it was cheaper, but then I got the chance to play volleyball there so it was two birds with one stone kind of thing.

Bill provided that, “I knew it was beneficial to me in the long run. Community College was beneficial as I could stay at home and it was cheap versus a university. I’m glad I started at CCC.”

Some participants had worried at first that the community college experience would not be as academically rigorous as that at a university. Denise's academic concern was quickly assuaged in her choice to attend a community college. She expressed that she was worried about "not getting the university type academics...maybe it would not be as challenging...not being real world teaching...Which I quickly realized was not the case. It was just as challenging as the university." While Nancy was defending her choice as her brother and others were saying "it is not a real college", she said once her peer group came home after flunking out their first semester at a university, they finally "got it."

For some participants, community college was a better option because they were undecided about their future path. Laura wrote that her decision to attend a community college "helped her discover what she wanted to do." She couldn't see spending all that money to simply explore what she wanted to do for a career. Sarah, like Laura, did not want to spin her wheels in trying to find what she wanted to do: She wrote:

My biggest concern was that I was not going to find something I wanted to do. I wasn't so sure what two-year versus four-year was. Finding a major...not wanting to waste time Looking back now, I don't regret as it allowed me to try different things in a smaller two-year before I got to a four-year.

Participants found that community college was a good academic decision. Hank described his community college experience as a "golden ticket" as he recounted his academic experience:

To be honest the work ethic at the community college was harder than at (my university). There was more effort in their lesson plans than at (my university). The standard I had at

CCC was higher than (my university). I was way more prepared than other of my teammates.

Harry also touted the benefits of his choice about attending a community college:

It helped me out. I have to say it made me more prepared. You still think you are ready for the competition basketball wise and academic wise, but you might want to think junior college. It helped me!

Opportunity to play their sport at a community college. As previously mentioned, while each of the ten participants recognized the affordability, smaller class size, and quality of the academics as a cornerstone in their decision to attend community college, six of these participants also recognized they could continue to play their sport and have the opportunity to start playing immediately if they began their college career as a community college student. Hill and Wilson (2003) utilized a concept of the politics of identity in which there is a construction of identities that refer to “practices and values that are based on subscription or ascription to various and often overlapping social identities” (pp. 2-3), These student-athletes were looking to continue playing their sport and immediately wanted to plug into campus life, renewing their identity as athletes. In this case, the identity of the participant becomes increasingly related to the politics of identity and the iconized identities of an institution (Brashier, 2019). This immediate role renewal was viewed as a continuation from high school and was associated with success in their high school academic and playing career. The opportunity to play is a multifaceted factor. It is an immediate part of their identity, as opposed to not participating at a university level or being relegated to a sitting on the bench. The participant is immediately playing and representing their school. This difference for a participant is between being on the team and being immediately recognizable as a contributing member of the team. Therefore, this

continuation of roles was familiar as they had experienced success in obtaining their high school degrees, and this allowed an easier transition to their college role. Their politics of identity were seen as an asset when they attended community college, and that provided them confidence to continue their studies

Denise indicated the importance of her identity as an athlete:

The pull was volleyball. I wanted to keep playing. Even though I was forty-five minutes away from a university I was attending, it wasn't a fit. I didn't like dorm life. I didn't find my niche. When the coach pulled me back to play volleyball, I could get the general education courses out of the way, and save money. Being back in my home town, being born and raised, I knew my peers. I knew people in my classes. Just having that team...group setting.

Nancy also valued the status of being a college athlete. She stated "People say now you played college ball that is so cool. Oh My God you played college volleyball... that is so cool. No one looked at it as a lower level or Division III...you were a college athlete." Denise echoed that in the focus group as she said "I feel like being an athlete on the community college setting, the teachers know. They know rather than at a university when they carry the book bag they have...we don't have that. The personal level...they know."

Harry expressed that playing time was the main reason he wanted to attend a community college. He explained:

When I was coming out of high school, I didn't have any good looks. Coach got in touch with me and after I figured out what community college was, I figured it was a good start to get where I wanted to go and get to a higher level. It worked out for me. When you get out of high school and even go D1, you are going to ride the bench as a freshman. At

a junior college, it helped me out as I got to play immediately. I was recognized as a student-athlete.

For Wendy, identity as a student-athlete pushed her to overcome some difficulties of her athletic and academic life. For instance, she cited that time management was a huge concern as sometimes their matches were scheduled three hours away and then she had an 8:00 am class. She stated “This isn’t a thing you wanted to do if you did not have good time management. I worked too so life was a balance with athletics. However, I could immediately play and not sit the bench. When people saw me, they recognized I played a sport on campus. I wasn’t going to give that feeling up.”

Charles saw his time with golf as having passed, but being an older student, this was a second chance to play as well as be a stronger student. He offered:

Well I always played through high school, and golf was my main thing and I always enjoyed it. For me it definitely helped, I wasn’t the greatest high school student so I didn’t have the greatest grades. So this was a fresh start with doing something familiar, get a new GPA, helped me grow up a little bit, I ...really helped me to grow and get more serious about school. People saw me as an athlete and that raised the stakes a bit.

Hank summed his immediate opportunity to play stating “Come get a great education and play basketball too! That was the golden ticket!”

The participants’ immediate sport participation is a large part of the reason they instantly have a larger support network than just family and peers. Again, this continuation of roles was familiar as they had experienced success in obtaining their high school degrees and this allowed an easier transition to their college role. Subsequently, that comfortability of being a student-athlete led to a continuation of their support network as their parents, teachers, coaches and peers

adjusted into the participants' identity roles that led to their success in athletics and gaining their degree. Again, their politics of identity were seen as an asset when they attended community college, and that provided them confidence to continue their studies.

Social life at a community college. Nine participants identified the social connections they formed among peers, teammates, coaches, faculty and staff as being integral to their persistence. Charles indicated that he had a social experience at the community college level as his friends hung out, played video games and engaged in the usual activities friends do together. However, he indicated, "My friends at the time were getting degrees. This is what I need to do in the future." He said this hung over his social life as he was older than most traditional students, and this age disparity pushed him to get his degree. Nancy described her social life at CCC as meeting "people who work there and stuff made it feel like a second home to me." Denise asserted that her "teammates and her friends from high school made this time even better as we continued to play together, study together, and have fun together."

Social life was not completely positive for all the participants, however. Sarah acknowledged that her friends were an important part of her academic life, but she emphasized that she wished she would have had better time management with her peers as she needed to have focused more on her studies.

While friends and peers were defined differently by some of the participants, they were important to the college experience. Bill described his social time as either in the cafeteria or in the library, but he went on to say "My friends kept me motivated. My peers kept me going. I wanted to be a part of something...a family being a part of something. The same guys keep in touch today and stay in touch even to this day." Similarly, Jimmy also acknowledged his friends' support of his goals, and said "They wanted me to do good." Interestingly, Laura considered her

coaches as friends or peers. She said, “For two years I was with my coaches every day. They were my friends. I was glad I had coaches there for more than just volleyball.”

Socially, Harry indicated that it was great that his community college was located so close to home. He said, “They loved it in that I got to go home every weekend and play ball with them. They helped out a lot and got to go to a lot of my games. We hung out afterwards.” Hank had a similar experience but added social media as part of his peer interaction. He offered, “I had a few high school friends that would try to come to a game or two and kept up with me online. Sophomore year Facebook was blowing up. People reaching out...being positive no negatives. People watching me outside of my family.” Jimmy, a self-described introvert who liked to keep to himself, observed that it was great after games to hang out with friends and to connect. He said “I was the only one to go off and play college basketball. So everyone came and I was for a moment the center of attention after the games.”

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question. The central research question was: What are the experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution? Participants’ responses related to this line of inquiry comprised the main themes of Parent Support, Push to Succeed, Love of Sport, and Not Ready for a University. All of the participants shared of their desire to play their particular sport as well as their family support for this decision. Subsequently, they acknowledged their own self-motivation to continue to play their sport as well as obtain their college degree. All recognized their skill set and a desire to not only compete in their sport at a higher level, but also to subsequently use that as a tool for persistence to their four-year university goal. All of the participants used the words

“push,” support,” and “love” to describe their experiences while enrolled at their respective community colleges.

Participants candidly shared that they persisted from community college to their four-year university degree pursuits due to parents, coaches, teachers, and peers that provided support as well as a push to succeed. As Bill claimed:

Teachers would work with you whenever they could outside of school...giving you their extra. As far as the coaches they would continue to push! Especially the assistant coaches...it was motivation. He kept pushing me and motivation. If you don't do what you need to do in the classroom, this could be it for you. Aware of if you don't stay on your toes, this could be it!

Subsequently, these student-athletes' love of their particular sport and their opportunity to play their sport resulted in their being able to retain their identities as student-athletes at their respective community colleges. As Denise stated in the focus group “People see you as a role model. You're doing school ...you're doing sports.” Furthermore, by being able to attend a community college, they received a familiar supportive environment that they were accustomed to in high school as most were attending a community college within a thirty-minute drive from their parents' homes. Wendy stated that she was able to work and save by attending community college. She said “While I was at CCC, I worked all the time. I didn't have any free time. I was in the process of saving for an apartment. I didn't want to stay on campus when I got to university and I wanted an apartment with my own space. I worked full time outside of school and athletics.” Each participant cited the lower cost in comparison to a university and close proximity to their homes. Consequently, they were able to save money for their university degree pursuit.

Sub-Question one. Sub-Question one was: How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their social experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? Participants' responses related to this line of inquiry comprised the main themes Push to Succeed and Not Ready for a University. All of the participants shared that their college journey had included positive peer interactions. All of the participants used the words support, teammates, push and family in regards to their social interactions while at their respective community college.

Participants vividly shared the support they received from the social interactions from their peers and their teammates. Sarah recalled:

I had a lot of friends involved in different majors than I was because I was involved in the business organization, they were very supportive. My volleyball girl friends were a support system and keep our good grades.

Nine participants identified the social connections they formed among peers, teammates, coaches, faculty and staff as being integral to their persistence. Participants often cited that the support they felt from all of these parties was one of the main reasons they were able to achieve their goal of transferring to a university to get a four-year degree. Hank stated:

I was a very sociable guy and student life was very fun to me. I was also able to get a work study position and my work study supervisor insisted I network and meet with people and have a working relationship. In turn, they always asked me about my grades, basketball. It was a real family.

The essence of the participants' experiences provided a comprehensive understanding of the social connections they felt were formed through their peers, teammates, coaches and faculty as that reinforced their ability to persist to their next level of education at a four-year university.

Sub-Question two. Sub-Question two was: How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their athletic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? Two themes emerged to explain these reasons: Push to Succeed and Love of Sport. All of the participants shared that their college journey had included positive peer interactions. All of the participants used the words support, teammates, push and family in regards to their social interactions while at their respective community college. In the case of these student-athletes, they made up a very small percentage of the student body as Division III NJCAA athletes at their respective colleges were approximately fifty student-athletes whereas the entire student body was in the range of 5,000 students.

Participants shared that the athletic competition provided a normalcy that they had while in high school. Consequently, the bonds formed with teammates aided both socially and academically as they were in similar classes together, studied together, and socialized together. Furthermore, the coaching staffs understood the need for student-athletes at the NJCAA level to focus on academics rather than athletics for both eligibility and for their players to persist to the next level of their academic pursuit. As Bill wrote in his response to the prompt:

Most people lack that push and that is the reason for many down falls. So of course the normal is to make sure you go to classes, attend study hall and do your best on the court, something I am sure you are somewhat use to being an athlete in high school.

Hank echoed a similar statement about his coaches in his interview:

Coaches made sure the rest of our teammates knew that that school came first.

Sometimes we wanted to put basketball first. They pushed us on the court and off!

And Laura provided a best case scenario for what she described as her “family”:

Most of my friends were my team mates and they made things really fun. We studied together and went out together. We built a family there! It was great to have good teammates not just from volleyball but the Basketball team as well. It was just good...a good experience.

And again, Denise reaffirmed that both her love of the game and the push to succeed came together as she remarked:

We had classes together, go to volleyball practice together. Being an athlete you had that competitive type role. It was academic and we pushed and on the court we pushed too. We loved it!

Nine of the participants indicated a love for their sport, and that love provided an outlet for competition and also provided a push to continue in their respective sport while disciplining their time for their studies. Laura offered:

Volleyball has been a part of my life since I could remember. I just wanted to play volleyball somewhere and I was aiming high, but honestly playing at FCC made me a better athlete, a better person and I could not imagine not playing volleyball at FCC. For two years I was with my coaches every day. They were my friends. I was glad I had coaches there for more than just volleyball.

Nancy reaffirmed as well her love for the sport:

I really grew up with the college volleyball coach since I was 12. So I liked how he coached and then my Dad was a big one because I grew up with CCC sports, so I grew up at the college. I grew up saying I was going to play here! I want to play on this team!

Participants' love for their particular sport and the push from their teammates, coaches, friends and family benefitted their persistence as well as added to their value as a person.

Sub-Question three. Sub-Question three was: How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their academic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? Participants' responses related to this line of inquiry comprised the main themes: Parent Support, Push to Succeed and Not Ready for a University. All of the participants shared that their college journey had included a positive push and support from their parents, peers, coaches and teachers. Subsequently, there was an admission of all that there was a need to be at the community college to obtain a more personable touch to their education. All of the participants used the words support, parents, teammates, push and small in regards to their academic experiences while at their respective community college.

Participants shared of their support from their family in regards to their academic pursuits. Charles shared that his family "offered for [him] to stay at home so [he] would not have to worry about finances" and Nancy admitted she needed "lower class sizes" and "no debt" was a priority for her. Denise stated that she was happy about saving money, and Bill stated, "it was easier at CCC than the four year! I am not going to say I wasn't looking for a challenge, but it was easier at CCC to get the classes out of the way that I would eventually take at a four year." Laura admitted "I would recommend going to a two-year school first than a four year especially if you don't know what to major in yet."

But even with the admission of lower class sizes and affordability, teachers and coaches were the personal touch that each student-athlete needed. Sarah wrote "We didn't know what we were doing, so it was nice to have the teachers and advisors to help us out!" And Wendy stated, "I had multiple teachers that would help me after class. They wanted you to succeed." Laura stated, "I was glad I had coaches there for more than just volleyball."

All of the participants admitted that whether their parents had gone to college or not, they

all were supportive of them to go. Denise admits her parents were a big reason she continued as she said “There was so many days that I wanted to quit, so my parents pushed me to not give up. Athletics...you know as an athlete you never give up.” Jimmy stated “At first I was hesitant about going. But she [his mother] was there for me.”

And as many admitted, peers, parents, teachers, and coaches provided a push academically for competition, eligibility to play their sport, and to reach the academic goal of transferring. As Denise stated “I needed that bachelor’s degree!”

Sub-Question four. Sub-Question four was: How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their personal experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? Participants’ responses related to this line of inquiry comprised the main themes of Parent Support, Push to Succeed, Love of Sport, and Not Ready for a University. As each of the participants shared personal details about their life as a student-athlete, they offered that their college journey had included a positive push and support from their parents, peers, coaches and teachers, but also that their love of their sport and their need for being at a community college from the start of their college was a perfect fit for them. All of the participants used the words support, success, love, push and comfortable in regards to their personal experiences at their respective community college. Hank frequently used the term “family” and subsequently said “Definitely my family pushed me to complete, on my Dad’s side, younger siblings were watching me. I wanted to keep it going and wanted them to see I could do it, and make Mama proud. Basketball is not forever.” Wendy shared from her personal view on how her sport and how community college was a great fit for her. She stated, “The whole process It felt natural. It’s just something I loved doing.”

And Sarah recounted that "It was nice to come from a coach and hear keep your grades up, keep doing this or that, stay and play, even if athletic career was not in the future. They cared about us."

Charles admitted to not being the best student, and that both college and his sport was delayed for him as he came back to college a bit later after high school. He stated:

I loved all my teachers. I could not complain about any of them. My coach as well always made sure how we were doing in our classes. With him asking and teachers being able to be reachable, I appreciated that. This experience really helped me to grow and get more serious about school.

Overall, participants named instances where a family member, peer, faculty member, coach or teammate provided the push, the support to succeed in their sport and in the academics.

Textural descriptions. The horizontalization step of the phenomenological reduction process involved describing in textural language what was seen as it appeared during each of the in-depth interviews, revisiting the experience free of presuppositions, and describing it again and again (Moustakas, 1994). During analysis, statements were identified that related to the phenomenon and each statement was treated with equal value. Then, statements irrelevant to the topic and question and those that were repetitive or overlapping were removed from the list. Next, the horizon statements were used to develop units of meaning, which were clustered into themes. These themes were used to write textural descriptions for each participant. The next step, imaginative variation, allowed the researcher to derive structural themes—descriptions of the experience for each participant—from the textural descriptions achieved through phenomenological reduction. The identified themes of (a) Parent Support, (b) Push to Succeed,

(c) Love of Sport, and (d) Not Ready for a University were also used to write a description of the context or setting that influenced how participants experienced the phenomenon.

Structural descriptions. Moustakas (1994) explained that following phenomenological reduction, the next step in the research process is imaginative variation. The aim of imaginative variation is to arrive at structural descriptions of the experience, to describe how the experience of the phenomenon came to be what it is. “We imagine possible structures of time, space, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and to others” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). Creswell (2013) also described how the significant statements and themes identified during the analysis process are used to write a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Employing the process of imaginative variation, as described by Moustakas (1994), revealed the structures - the conditions that must exist for something to appear - of the participants' experiences. Imaginative variation was used to describe the essential structures that influenced how Division III NJCAA student-athletes came to experience the phenomenon of persistence to a four-year university. This process included a reflective phase in which many possibilities were examined and explicated reflectively (Moustakas, 1994).

A review and careful reflection of each textual descriptions of the participants provided that the pervasive structures were relationship to self and others, time, space and materiality. These structures revealed how the Division III NJCAA student-athletes experienced their academic, athletic, personal, and social experiences at the community college level, and how they felt about their student-athlete experiences. For instance, Denise's experience with being a volleyball player for her middle school, high school and community college career reflects the materiality structure that made it possible for her to experience the phenomenon of persistence to

a four year university. Her relationship to self and others is a structure exemplified in her passion for competing with her teammates, and her relationship with her parents, peers, coaches and teachers. These two structures were prominent in how her experiences of her persistence to a four-year university came to be.

Synthesis. The next step in the analysis process entailed reflection on the textural and structural descriptions and a synthesis of the meanings and essences. As described by Moustakas (1994), from the individual textural-structural descriptions, a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience was developed, representing the group of participants as a whole. The following composite description passage “focuses on the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). It was written in such a way that others will understand what it is like for a Division III NJCAA student-athlete to persist to a four-year university.

Composite description. Throughout the participants’ experiences, there are many similarities between their experiences as well as experiences that are outliers, which speak to their uniqueness and individual nature of the phenomenon of being a NJCAA Division III student-athlete. Kaylee reflected “It was always a goal to continue playing my sport at a collegiate level, but I did not know if I could afford college nor did I know if I had what it took to be recruited or even contribute to a collegiate team.” Echoing a similar sentiment, Nancy stated, “I knew all along that I wanted to attend college and get a four-year degree, but I was intimidated by the size and cost of a university.” Hank agreed and stated “Fortunately, I was provided the opportunity to play my sport at the community college level and begin my college education at a community college.”

Harry said, “At the community college level, my parents were immediately able to see me play my sport, which was something they were accustomed to in high school. While I might

not have been the best athlete on my team, I was solid enough to play my college sport at this level.” Similarly, Denise stated “My coaches and teachers were very supportive from the beginning and they had my best interest at heart as they constantly pushed me to be my best both in the classroom and in competition. They understood the importance of good grades to achieve my overall goal of obtaining a four-year degree.” Nancy concurred and offered “While my friends may not have understood at first where I was going, they eventually understood that I was now a college athlete and they were supportive of me in every way.”

Bill stated “I recognize now that through the supportive push of my parents, coaches, teachers, and friends, this allowed me to take chances I would not have taken and it contributed to my going from the community college level to a university.” Collectively, these participants provided experiences and commentary that others will understand what it is like for a Division III NJCAA student-athlete to persist to a four-year university

Summary

This chapter provided the results derived from the data acquired by the ten participants who shared their experiences as Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. Participant descriptions were provided for all ten individuals who contributed to the study, and this was followed by a description of four themes and multiple subthemes that emerged from the data. The themes that emerged included: (a) Parent Support, (b) Push to Succeed, (c) Love of Sport, and (d) Not Ready for a University. The participants’ experiences were shared through textural and structural descriptions, which allowed for presentation of the stories of the individuals while also providing a composite description of the participants and the phenomenon that was examined. After detailed

descriptions of the themes, narrative answers were provided to each research question using these themes and participant quotations to support the responses to the research questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. This chapter provides a summary of the research findings, as well as a discussion of the findings as they relate to the literature review presented in Chapter Two. Implications of the study are discussed, followed by delimitations and limitations of the study. The chapter is concluded with recommendations for future research and a final summary.

Summary of Findings

In order to examine these research questions, ten former Division III NJCAA student-athletes who attended three different small, small rural community colleges in central North Carolina participated in this study. Data was gathered through three methods of data collection, including one-on-one interviews, written documentation, and a focus group. Data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) methods of data analysis. Using an analysis software, NVivo 11, data was organized from significant statements into themes to facilitate interpretation of the essence of the data and the understanding of what participants experienced as well as how they experienced it (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). After analyzing the data, four themes emerged that addressed all of the research questions. The themes included: (a) Parent Support, (b) Push to Succeed, (c) Love of Sport, and (d) Not Ready for a University.

Sub-Question One

The first sub-question was about how Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their social experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-

year institution. All participants in this study had a variety of social experiences that contributed to their persistence to their senior institution. All of the social experiences were described as being positive, supported, and a push towards achieving more. All ten of the participants experienced social exchanges that resulted in a push towards success from their peers. Participants provided examples of their friends and teammates providing support in classes as well as a push in practice in drills. One participant cited negative behaviors by his peers as supporting his choices to excel both academically and athletically. Participants who were provided support and encouragement by their peers in all of their pursuits all described their persistence as easier.

Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two was about how Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their athletic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution. Similar to the findings for research question one, participants shared that they received support from coaches and teachers that inspired them to push themselves in both the classroom and in athletic competition that resulted in a better path to persistence to their eventual four year institutions. Participants cited that the physical presence of teachers at sporting events meant that the institution was supporting them in both the classroom and on the court. And the small environment of the community college resulted in instructors knowing they were student-athletes which resulted in providing necessary travel time away from class to represent the college as well as adjusted due dates to aid them in meeting class learning objectives. Subsequently, student-athletes relayed instances where the coaches provided the necessary push to excel in their sport as well as in the classroom. Common conversation topics among coaches and student-athletes were their academic performance, persistence to a four-year university,

academic eligibility, and athletic pursuits.

Sub-Question Three

Sub-question three was how do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their academic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? Participants asserted after reflecting on their academic experiences that they were pushed by both their teachers and coaches to perform in the classroom. As exemplified in sub-question two, the role of coaches and teachers blended in pushing the student-athletes to excel in the arena of competition, but also a recognition that a degree was important to each of them. Nine of the ten participants provided instances of support from teachers in their academic pursuits, and that support was echoed from coaches who emphasized the need for their academic degrees due to the level of collegiate competition they were competing at. Participants emphasized that the attendance by teachers to their games or matches as well as their teachers' general recognition that they were representing their college in athletics provided support they needed to persist.

Sub-Question Four

Sub-question four addressed how Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their personal experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution. Participants provided that after reflecting on their personal experiences they were supported and positively pushed towards persistence. They relayed accounts of support in the classroom, during time away from studies, athletic completion, and times where neither their sport nor academics were involved. All ten of the participants stressed the importance of their family, friends, teachers, coaches and teammates in their personal journey towards persistence.

Participants' experiences were examined to achieve understanding of what they believed were the reasons as to why they persisted to a four-year university.

Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persist to a four-year institution. A transcendental phenomenological design was used in this study to examine the essence of the participants' experiences. This study relied on an ontological assumption in order to fulfil the purpose of the study, which was to convey the experiences of the participants. The problem guiding this study was that community college students, especially community college student-athletes at the Division III NJCAA level who are enrolled to both complete their degree pursuits as well as participate in their sport, are at great risk of not completing their programs of study (Balduf, 2009; Baldwin, Bensimon, Dow, & Kleiman, 2011; Beauchemin, 2014; Beck, 2017; Bentley, 2017; Connolly, 2016; and Cooper, 2017).

The purpose of this section is to present the results of this study in relationship to the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The literature for this study consists of two broad categories: empirical and theoretical literature. Chapter Two detailed the empirical literature on community colleges, college student-athletes, post-secondary retention and post-secondary persistence. Chapter Two also presented the theoretical underpinnings for this study. From a theoretical position, Tinto's (1975) student integration model formed the basis of framework with which to examine Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persist to a

four-year institution. This discussion section is organized so that the findings are first compared with the empirical literature and then the theoretical literature.

Empirical Literature

As stated previously, because this study focused on a distinct group of students, it extends the current literature to support the applicability of prior studies in persistence to the specific population of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. Also, this study provided a contribution to the current field of research in the themes of parent support, love of sport, community colleges, and persistence. Current research stresses the importance of college student-athletes persisting in their degree pursuits (Astin, 1993; Christensen, 1990; Lang & Nora, 2001; Peltier, Laden & Matranga, 1999; Stage & Hossler, 2000; St. John, Kirshstein, & Noell, 1991; Welch, 2014; Wood & Williams, 2013; York, Gibson & Rankin, 2005). This study illustrated that student-athletes who received support while being pushed in both their academic and athletic goals were more likely to persist in their goal towards obtaining a four-year degree.

Overall, the themes that emerged from the study supported the current empirical literature related to the phenomenon examined. However, the majority of existing empirical literature refers to general college students (including those in four-year institutions), rather than specifically NJCAA Division III student-athletes. Only a few empirical sources focus specifically on the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes. Given that this study focused on a distinct group of students, this research extends the current literature and supports existing literature on persistence to the specific population of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduate or transfer to a four-year institution

All participants were Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. Researchers suggest that community colleges are most appealing to diverse student populations (e.g., students of color, low income, first-generation, women and adult learners) because of their “open door admissions, low tuition rates, flexible course scheduling, and their close proximity to a student’s home or place of employment” (Ma & Baum, 2016, p. 21). This diversity was exemplified by the ten participants in this study, as their composition were five females and five males with Caucasian, Puerto Rican, African-American and Hispanic representation.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded that there was consistent evidence that initial attendance at a two-year rather than a four-year institution lowers the likelihood of a student’s attaining a bachelor’s degree by fifteen to twenty percentage points. Demas (2017) asserted that community college student-athletes face more obstacles in obtaining their college education than students starting in their four year institutions due to absence of focused support programs. Moreover, Tinto (1997) indicated that since the end of the 20th century, student attrition has grown in America’s post-secondary institutions of higher learning. Tinto (1993) recorded that only a third of all beginning full time students at community colleges earn associate degrees or certificates. Considering this study addressed persistence, and each of the ten participants persisted to a four-year university, this study cannot reinforce nor deny Tinto’s (1997) assertion and Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) conclusion. However, there is a recognition of Demas (2017) assertion as the participants in this study did not have the focused support programs that higher level of collegiate sports participation are able to utilize.

Beach (2011) asserted that what was once seen as a tool to limit access to higher education, the community college is now a tool for increased social mobility, community

organization, and regional economic development. Based on the participants' experiences, the study findings confirm the position that a community college was an appropriate beginning for them as student-athletes. All of the participants shared that despite their wanting to start at a four-year university, the community college was right for them due to their participation in their sport, smaller class size, more attention by their coaches and teachers, and affordability.

The results indicated that the participants generally described their experiences as a Division III NJCAA student-athlete as positive. This is inconsistent with current research, as community college students in particular often face many challenges after admission that lead to departure from their schools, such as socioeconomic conditions, failure to complete developmental courses, the inability to succeed academically while working in a place of employment, the struggle to pay tuition and fees, and the stress of raising a family while taking classes (Everett, 2015; Stewart et al., 2007). The participants in this study experienced aggressive class loads, job demands while involved in playing their extracurricular sports and other responsibilities such as family obligations, campus clubs, and off campus volunteer work. However, participants did not have a poor experience in their road to persistence. All ten participants had parent support, ten out of the ten participants experienced a positive push to succeed, ten out of the ten participants loved their sport, and ten out of ten participants acknowledge the need to begin their academic journey at a community college. This does not mean that all Division III NJCAA student-athletes will be successful, but it is plausible that others will have similar experiences when these conditions are present. Others can use the findings from this study to help future student-athletes, particularly at the Division III NJCAA level, have a better understanding of a successful journey towards persistence as the participants in this study had.

Parent support. The initial theme that emerged from the study was the importance of parent support in the student-athlete's decisions to play sports in college as well as support of their academic endeavors and furthermore, the importance of fathers in their role with their daughters and mothers in their roles with their sons. This is consistent with current research pertaining to college students (Boduch, 2019; Courtney et al., 2019; McLoud, 2019; Ramseur-Fischer, 2019). Student-athletes need the support of their parents or parent figures in order to have that foundation of persistence and a reinforcement that they can obtain their degree. Once students receive that initial guidance and support, they begin to believe in themselves and learn to have confidence in persisting in their academic journey (Beghetto, 2004; Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Knowles, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This study can be used to provide parents with an additional resource which will help the student-athlete as well as the parent see the importance of support of their child in both their sport as well as their academics. Specific examples from the current study include the experiences of Nancy, who shared that her parents stayed on top of her grades and aided her in her transition from community college to a four-year university. She shared that her father defended her choice to go to community college even when family members argued that community college was not a real college. Subsequently, her parents encouraged her to play college volleyball, as it had always been a goal to play at the collegiate level. Their support gave her increased confidence to not only play her sport but also to be a stronger college student. This was consistent with the observations of Harper (2009) and Schumaker (2017), who discussed the drawbacks when parents are not familiar with college processes and the effect when they cannot speak from a position of experience when discussing the college process. However, Nancy shared that her

parents were supportive of beginning at community college and educated themselves about the college process to be able understand more of the college process and her experiences.

Push to succeed. The second theme to emerge was a push to succeed. All ten participants provided that their parents, teammates, coaches, and peers had pushed them to succeed both in the classroom and on the court. Tinto (1999) wrote “one thing we know about persistence is that involvement matters” (p. 168). With these participants, the involvement came from the student-athletes, but also from their parents, coaches, teachers and peers who were involved and invested with them in their academic and sports endeavors.

There is a point where student-athletes are informed or inspired to know that it is possible for them to participate in athletics at a higher level and that they can accomplish their academic goals through athletic participation (Saw, Main, and Gustin, 2015). While that affirmation of their athletic ability has importance among family and peers of the student-athlete, most student-athletes will portray that point as being when a coach or a teacher inspires them to pursue their playing career past high school. And subsequently, while at those institutions, the role of a coach and teacher becomes even more important (Amarose and Sellars, 2016; Dixon, 2018; Williams, 2017).

Document analysis, interviews and the focus group revealed that peers, coaches, parents and instructors had a frequent presence of pushing the student-athletes to be something more than they felt they could be. Furthermore, for these participants, elements of their perseverance and passion for their goals began to take shape, and their role as student-athletes displayed itself in the form of being pushed and accepting that push in order to be something more than they expected. Bill recalls motivational speeches, support and tough love that he described as a constant push during practice that would spill over to the classroom. Denise described a parental

push to not only excel in the classroom but on the volleyball court. And Charles offered that by being at a community college so close to his home, his peers were able to attend games that pushed him to be the best he could be, as he was in front of his friends. These findings are consistent with Murphy and Johnson (2011), Coreia-Harker (2016) and Astin (1999), as they described particular aspects of motivation among college students and what motivates them to lead, excel in their particular field, and subsequently attain their goals.

Beghetto (2004) advocated that student motivation provides the greatest contribution to students' academic success and persistence. This study's findings demonstrate student-athletes' motivations both within themselves and from outside parties such as their parents, coaches, peers, and teachers. The push to succeed reflected by the participants' accounts of parents, peers, coaches and teachers was consistent with the research Peterson (2017), Palmer (2005) and Beghetto (2004) contributed in which they advocated that a push provided the greatest contribution to students' academic success and persistence. Bill acknowledged that he was very self-driven but also recognized he was motivated to not be like his peers who were failing. Jimmy admitted his peers pushed him to "represent." Denise acknowledges that her parents, teammates and peers in different classes pushed her to be a better student and athlete. Harry provided that he had particular teachers, coaches and his parents to provide the push he needed to persist in both academics and athletics. Overall, the experiences of the participants supported the existing literature regarding a push to succeed.

Love of sport. The third theme that emerged from the study was Love of Sport. Burgess (2017) discussed how students who are unsuccessful in transitioning to college and fail to integrate into their new environments and sports teams are more likely to drop out of college without completing their education goals. Botelho and Agergaard (2011) identified the "for love

of the game” phenomenon. They defined this phenomenon as occurring when people play competitive sport because it is their passion and they enjoy it. Therefore, this love motivates them to continue playing sports competitively. Majerus (2016) investigated factors that affect academic and athletic motivation in a mixed-methods study of two-year student-athletes. She researched 238 student-athletes and non-athlete students at a Midwestern community and technical college. Majerus found that a significant portion of the student-athletes identified that the “for the love of the game” phenomenon motivated them athletically.

Participants in this study conveyed that their love for their particular sport was an overarching factor in their persistence, as their self-identities as student-athletes and their longevity of participation in their sport provided a stable place where they felt they had normalcy in their college life. Denise spoke about her last game as a community college volleyball player and the love she had for the sport. While she wanted to play more as she moved to the university, she put those plans aside until she had a position at a middle school where she is coaching volleyball. Hank, in turn, finished his playing career at this four-year university, and his love for basketball is so strong he is now playing semi-pro as he feels he still has more opportunities awaiting him in the sport. As Pflum, Nadler, and Miller (2017) noted that community college student athletes, though involved in other areas of campus life, primarily identify with their roles as athletes for their college careers. Specific to this theme, participants’ identities were synonymous with their love for their respective sport.

Not ready for a university. The final theme that emerged from the study was the recognition that the participants were not ready to attend a university to either begin their college education or participate in their sport. Participants in this study recognized that beginning at a community college not only contributed to their persistence to obtain their four-year degree but

also allowed their goal of continuing their sport to become a reality. Tinto (2012) stressed the importance of students being motivated and goal oriented if they want to be successful in their classes. Barnett (2011) offered that while more students are entering college than ever before, large numbers leave during the first year, and a substantial proportion depart before attaining a degree or other credential. Bartlett (2011) asserted that early departure from college is much more common among some institutional types and groups of students than others. Fike and Fike (2008) reported variables that differentiate community college students from university students, including age, ethnicity, and enrollment in developmental education, because a high proportion of students entering through the open door are not college ready. However, this study extended Tinto's theory and challenged Bartlett (2011) and Fike and Fike (2008), as all of the participants recognized community college as a perfect starting point for their college career, as they had the goal of obtaining a college degree but recognized in order to achieve their goal, their journey had to begin at the community college level. They recognized they were not university ready yet they were ready for community college. For example, Nancy indicated smaller class sizes and a comfortable relationship with her instructors as having addressed her academic struggles. Jimmy explained that he didn't know that college was an option until he heard about community college. While Harry explained he chose the community college primarily for immediate playing time, the attention to his academic needs aided him the most. Similarly, Hank concluded that his instruction at the community college was much better than his four-year university instruction. He thought his instructors were much more prepared to teach than where he received his four-year degree. Overall, even though students felt they were not university-ready, they found that the quality of education, attention, and small class size at community college were beneficial.

Theoretical Literature

This study added to the existing body of research on Tinto's (1975) student integration model, which focuses on the importance of social and academic integration for students to be successful in higher education. This study examined the participants' social, athletic, and academic interactions while attending community college, therefore addressing a gap in the literature and extending the current literature. Using Tinto's (1975) student integration model as a lens, this study provided a detailed description of structural and textural experiences, which conveyed a narrative of *what* the participants experienced and *how* they experienced it.

The four themes that developed from this study included: Parent Support, Push to Succeed, Love of Sport, and Not Ready for a University. All four themes are consistent with Tinto's model. Tinto's (1975) student integration model focused on the importance of goal commitment and external factors such as time, student attitudes, and students' personal and academic backgrounds. Based on the results of this study, participants shared the support provided from their parents that positively influenced their attitudes, academic goals, and athletic goals, therefore confirming Tinto's (1975) student integration model. The study provided insight on a mother's importance to her son and a father's importance to his daughter in terms of expressed support. Participants provided that parents, peers, coaches, teachers, and teammates provided a supportive push (Push to Succeed) which is consistent with Tinto's model. Tinto (2014) expressed:

Providing students access without support is not opportunity. Without support, academic, social, and financial, too many students do not complete their programs of study. It is my view that once an institution admits a student, it becomes obligated to provide, as best it

can, the support needed to translate that opportunity so that access truly provides success.
(p. 5)

Laura affirmed this when she stated “For two years I was with my coaches every day. They were my friends. I was glad I had coaches there for more than just volleyball.” Denise acknowledged the personal interest her teachers had in her at the community college, and Bill reaffirmed that his teachers and coaches were what motivated him to continue to push in both basketball and academics.

Students who are able to establish personal commitments to other students, faculty, and staff tend to have a greater commitment and accountability to learning, which helps them flourish both socially and intellectually (Kuh, 2005). Students must not only be academically prepared but also able to engage socially and find meaning in their classes (Tucker, 2012). Additionally, Tinto (1975) suggested that it is important that students develop relationships with their college and other students. Students then develop a strong commitment to their educational institutions and have the desire and will to continue their studies (Tinto, 1997). Further, if college students are to be successful, they must develop and build positive attitudes to persist in their academic studies (Tinto, 1975). Based on the findings of this study, students expressed a Love of Sport which encouraged a meaningful relationship around those associated with their sport as well as academic guidance to continue in their sport, which are both vital for success, thus supporting Tinto’s (1975) student integration model. These relationships and guidance helped create and increase the positive attitudes needed for success. Relationships between students and their academic and sport network within a college are crucial, as students can utilize them when they are confronted with challenges both within and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1975).

Lastly, the results of this study confirmed that students recognized that to achieve both their academic and sports goals, they needed to begin their college career at a community college as they admitted they were not ready for a university. Students are more likely to progress as they recognize solutions to past academic performances (Beck, 2017). The participants in this study recognized that their academic and athletic performances in high school made them better candidates for success at the community college than if they went directly into a university setting. Tinto's (1975) student integration model established the principle that students develop traits that influence their commitment to the institution where they are enrolled and that a student's commitment to earn a degree and commitment to their college or university determines whether they complete college. This study provided a contribution to Tinto's (1975) student integration model in that student-athletes recognized not only their athletic ability but also their academic ability in relation to where they needed to start in order to be successful in their persistence towards their four-year degree. Overall, the themes that emerged from the study supported the current theoretical literature related to the phenomenon examined.

Implications

In Chapter Two, several concepts were presented through the literature review which were both present and not present during data collection. Through a continuous immersion in the data and data coding, four themes emerged: (a) Parent Support, (b) Push to Succeed, (c) Love of Sport, and (d) Not Ready for a University. Division III student-athletes' responses fashioned these themes through written submissions, structured one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews. In the following section, the relationship between the four themes found within the study and the literature review provided in Chapter Two is discussed. This transcendental phenomenological study produced findings that have theoretical, empirical, and practical

implications. This section addresses these implications and offers recommendations for student-athletes. This section also addresses recommendations for parents, teachers, coaches, and peers that work with student-athletes.

Theoretical

This study was based on Tinto's (1975) student integration model to provide a voice to NJCAA Division III student-athletes. The aim was to enhance the literature on Tinto's (1975) student integration model, specifically to the persistence of Division III NJCAA student-athletes to four-year institutions. The theoretical implications of this study hold importance for those who work in higher education with student-athletes. As referenced earlier, the student integration theory focuses on the importance of social and academic integration for all college students. This study and its findings substantiate Tinto's (1975) student integration model in that students who experienced support by parents, teachers, peers and coaches while enrolled in community college and participating in their respective sport established meaningful social and academic connections in their first year of college. All participants progressed through transitional phases of their educational process; were supported by parents, peers, teachers and coaches during challenging times; and recognized the community college as the most appropriate starting point for the sport they loved as well as the academic degree they were pursuing.

The results of this study affirmed Tinto's (1975) student integration model, as students who were provided parental support in their collegiate and sports endeavors were successful in persisting in their academic journey towards a four-year degree. Students who were pushed by their parents, peers, coaches, and teachers were able to see the push and the subsequent success as a result of a meaningful relationship in their academics and athletics. Students, due to their love of their sports, saw that love continue for their respective sports, but also reflected in

another route to continue their studies. Lastly, students recognized they needed to start at a community college where they would continue or establish more meaningful relationships and receive academic guidance they felt they needed based on their prior performance in high school. As Denise indicated, “There was so many days that I wanted to quit, so my parents pushed me to not give up. Athletics...you know as an athlete you never give up.”

Overall, given that the study focused on a distinct group of student-athletes, it extends the current literature to support the applicability of these existing principles to the specific population of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution.

Empirical

There is a growing concern in this country about the number of college students who are struggling in college or at risk of dropping out (AACC, 2018). One way to examine and address this issue is by listening to the voices of college student-athletes who persisted and their beliefs what they experienced in college and how they experienced their challenges in colleges (Creswell, 2013). This study examined the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. This study provided descriptions from NJCAA Division III student-athletes who persisted to four-year universities. The results of this transcendental phenomenological study have empirical implications for college students, parents of college students, faculty and coaches, as the study will add to the literature focused on working with college student-athletes.

The results of this study are beneficial to community college student-athletes that wish to persist, as these findings provide substance to validate the need for student-athletes to seek and

accept support from their parents, teachers, peers and coaches. In regards to implications for college students, the results indicated that the participants generally described their experiences in college as favorable due to parental, teacher, peer and coach support of their academics as well as athletics. While support from academic institutions as well as parents has been found in the literature, Division III NJCAA student-athletes in central North Carolina had yet to be studied; therefore, the results from this study regarding their experiences holds empirical value to parents, teachers, peers and coaches that work with student-athletes.

Ten out of ten participants highlighted the support and the push they received from parents, teachers, peers, and coaches involved as a major attribute to their persistence. This does not mean that all of the Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persist to a four-year institution will be successful with the support and push from those parties, but it is plausible that student-athletes would benefit from support and a push from interested stake-holders in their lives (Orozco et al., 2010; Stuart et al., 2014; Wood & Williams, 2013). College stakeholders such as coaches, faculty, and advisors as well as parents can use the findings from this study to help future college student-athletes to have a better understanding of how important support and push is to persistence. More importantly, they can provide faculty and coaches an additional resource which will help them see the importance of working with community college student-athletes who are in need of that additional inspiration and support.

One finding of this study was that some participants desired to begin their academic career at a community college because it was deemed by them a smaller environment, similar to the one they experienced in high school. For the participants, a smaller setting fostered a sense of belonging and fostered academic success that aided in their persistence. First-year and

unexperienced students need the support of educators to help them become academically successful (Beck, 2017; Hall, 2017). Once students receive initial guidance and support, they mature as students and learn to guide themselves in their academic journeys (Harmening & Jacob, 2015). The findings of this study provide community college faculty with an additional resource in their work as advisors as well as instructors of community college student-athletes who may not have additional family and peer support.

As stated previously, because the study focused on a distinct group of students, it extends the current literature to support the transferability of these existing principles to the specific population of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. The results of this study will benefit NJCAA-affiliated community colleges as they seek to study activities, practices, or programs that can enhance persistence of their athletes. Participants provided ample evidence of areas of support needed both in and outside the classroom as well as in and outside the athletic arena.

Also, this study provided a contribution in the field of parent support of their children, as it provided examples in which student-athletes were supported in their decisions to attend community college, to pursue their sport, to transfer to a senior institution, to select a major, and/or their decision to not complete at a four-year university. Current research has focused on stress and its myriad effects on a student's life (Eisman et. al, 2015; Latkin and Curry, 2003; Ramirez-Vallez, Zapert, & Maton, 2000). However, parental support can provide a protective factor for the mental health of students and their path towards persistence. This study suggested that students who receive parental support or support from a parental figure, such as a coach or a

faculty member, are more likely to persist than peers who are not supported in their academic journey.

Practical

The findings within this study have practical implications in the form of considerations for stakeholders, such as teachers, coaches, and college advisors who play an important role in helping students become and remain successful in college. The results are valuable to administrators tasked with providing student services to student-athletes who represent their colleges. Feedback from participants about what they believed they needed in order to be successful in their persistence informed the following recommendations for current and future community-college student athletes.

This study revealed that student-athletes should have conversations with their parents about their educational goals and sports participation at the collegiate level. The student-athletes in this study indicated open lines of communication with their parents that led to their success in persistence. According to Tinto's (1975) student integration model and the results of this study, students who are provided parental support in their collegiate and sports endeavors are successful in persisting in their academic journey towards a four-year degree. Parental support is vital for student-athletes to reach their academic and athletic goals, whether that be persisting in their degree pursuit or continuing or discontinuing playing their particular sport.

The findings in this study reflect that during the recruiting process, student-athletes should get to know their coaches as well as key faculty and advisors they will be working with in their collegiate studies. For example, during a student-athlete's first semester, a student-athlete should speak with his advisor to arrange future class schedules that work with game and travel schedules. During the first semester, student-athletes should visit each instructor and academic

advisor and introduce themselves and make them aware of their obligations as a student-athlete representing the college. Relationships between students and their academic and sport network within a college are crucial, as students can utilize them when they are confronted with challenges both within and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1975).

For future college students as well as student-athletes, the findings of this study indicated there should be peer involvement in both their academic pursuits and their sports participation so as to receive support in both of those arenas. Data suggested that students benefitted from peer support as well as from their friends pushing them to achieve both academic and athletic goals. Tinto (1975) suggested that it is important that students develop relationships with other students and their colleges. Additionally, students then develop a strong commitment to their educational institutions and have the desire and will to continue their studies (Tinto, 1997).

Feedback from participants related to the subtheme of a push to succeed from coaches and teachers produced recommendations for faculty of current and future college student-athletes. Initially, coaches need to communicate with faculty to make them aware of competition schedules as well as identify student-athletes that are representing the college in intercollegiate competition. Coaches need to reach out to their student-athletes' instructors to be aware of homework and test schedules in order to be sensitive to the academic work demands their student-athletes are undertaking. In turn, faculty need to communicate with every student in their classes and make the effort to identify student-athletes so they can be cognizant of their competition schedule for the semester. Faculty should also attempt to attend their student-athletes' games and matches so their students can see the faculty members supporting both the college as well as the student-athletes in and out of class.

Furthermore, college advisors need to recognize travel demands and practice demands of student-athletes and work in concert with the student-athlete in creating class schedules that provide support for both their academic goals and their sports participation. Faculty and coaches need to encourage their students to achieve their particular educational and sports participation goals. They need to provide both support and an encouraging push when student-athletes experience setbacks in their educational and sport journeys. Pflum, Nadler and Miller (2017) indicated that “faculty should be cognizant of their role as mentor and use this role as an opportunity to cultivate in students the best that academics and sport offers: dedication, commitment, perseverance, and teamwork” (p. 535). The participants in this study affirmed that faculty support is a necessary component of persistence.

Evidence from this study can assist with recommendations for college leadership and administration to better support persistence of their student-athletes. Colleges should be encouraged to provide academic advising that focuses on providing student-athletes with a push to achieve their degree within their two years of participating in sports at a NJCAA Division III institution. Colleges should also be encouraged to provide advising and scheduling of classes that works in concert with both the academic goals as well as the sports participation schedule of student-athletes as well as provide focused academic advising that addresses persistence to the four year universities for both academics as well as sports participation. Past studies have offered that community colleges have embraced providing their student body with orientation courses or freshman seminars to address topics such as academic advising, interpersonal leadership, social skills, support services, and career decision making (Coleman, Skidmore & Weller, 2017; Keim, & Strickland, 2004; Robertson, 2016; Torgerson, 2016). Evidence from this study suggests success can be found in a concentrated student-athlete orientation program.

A college can then foster a culture that is celebratory of successes by all students that achieve their academic goals as well as their sport participation goals

Delimitations and Limitations

This study has delimitations that limit the scope of and provide boundaries to the phenomenon under investigation. Delimitations are purposeful decisions that a researcher makes to limit or define the boundaries of the study. Because a rich description of the experiences was sought from Division III NJCAA student-athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution, the choice was made to include student-athletes who were 20-26 years of age. This study was delimited to this particular age group as the study investigated student-athletes that had persisted since 2013. This choice negated any potential participants that did not fall in that time criteria, as an accurate description of the total experience should be recalled within this five-year span of time.

A second delimitation was that the Division III student-athlete should be currently enrolled at a four-year university or recently graduated from a four-year university. Again, the time frame of an accurate description of the total experience was necessary and a five-year span of time was required. A third delimitation found in this study was the exclusion of NJCAA Division I and II student-athletes as they are afforded, by definition, collegiate scholarships and other opportunities that their Division III counterparts do not receive. A fourth delimitation found in this study was the exclusion of NJCAA student-athletes who were currently enrolled at their respective community college. As persistence is what was being measured, the investigation of the community college student-athlete at this level would have not contributed to the emphasis of this study. A fifth delimitation to this study was that persistence to a four-year university was the emphasis of the study, but not persistence to play their particular sport.

Although it would have been interesting to study solely student-athletes who had persisted in both their academics and their sport, this would have narrowed the potential participant pool significantly.

Limitations are potential weaknesses of the study that cannot be controlled. This study has several limitations. The first was that there were only six Division III NJCAA affiliated colleges in North Carolina and three of these six were located in central North Carolina. Therefore, it is possible that the other three institutions not examined may have had participants that would have answered questions differently than the participants in this study.

This study was limited to a certain time frame for its participants in that they had to have persisted in a five-year window. This study was also limited to a small sample size. In the case of this study, had it included a greater number of participants the study could have been challenged by repetitive information from participants that offered no new valid information based on examination and analysis of the data. With ten total participants, the study provided sufficiency in data and a clear understanding of the phenomenon. Arguably, had there been a few more participants, the study may have provided greater insight into the problem.

Qualitative studies are evaluated by a specific set of criteria. One criterion by which qualitative studies are evaluated is transferability (Patton, 2002). Transferability is the degree to which a reader is able to interpret research results as relevant and meaningful (Patton, 2002). Findings are specific to each situation in small samples in qualitative research. Therefore, findings in qualitative research are not generalized to larger populations (Patton, 2002). To increase transferability, the researcher achieved saturation of themes and codes with additional analysis of participants as needed and provided detailed descriptions that may aid in the reader's understanding. Qualitative methodological literature suggests that between six and ten

participants is a reasonable estimate to achieve saturation (Moustakas, 1994). Saturation was identified during the data analysis process when new themes or concepts were no longer being discovered

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited to three Division III NJCAA-affiliated community colleges in the Southeast region of the United States. Researchers in the future could replicate this study at multiple community colleges in various geographic regions across the nation. Future studies could also examine the interface of race and gender on the experience of students in this population as well as parent presence in the household or first-generation college students.

This study was based on data from participants during a two- to four-year period. Future researchers could expand this time frame to examine students' experiences over their entire college careers to capture a broader range of experiences and investigate how students' perceptions may change over the course of their academic career.

Only one of the participants in this study started his college career following high school graduation, stopped, and then started again. Given that a large portion of first-year students enroll in college directly after high school, future researchers could examine the experiences of student-athletes who do not attend college directly after high school graduation (Balduf, 2009). It would be informative for future researchers to conduct a cumulative case study with three groups: Division I NJCAA student-athletes who persisted to four-year colleges or universities, Division II NJCAA student-athletes who persisted to four-year colleges or universities, and Division III NJCAA student-athletes who persisted to four-year colleges or universities. A case study with a cross case analysis could be used whereby one could examine each NJCAA

Division and determine whether there are any major differences related to persistence among the three groups.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. This study addressed the gap in the literature involving the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes who successfully persisted to a four-year institution. To address the gap in the literature, one central research question and four sub-questions guided the study: What are the experiences of the Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully graduate or transfer to a four-year institution? How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their social experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their athletic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their academic experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? How do Division III NJCAA student-athletes describe their personal experiences while at a community college that led to graduation or persistence to a four-year institution? For this study, three data collection methods were used: interviews, participants' written documents, and a focus group. Data was gathered from ten participants and Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology were used to analyze data. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: Parent Support, Push to Succeed, Love of Sport, and Not Ready for a University. An examination of these themes in relation to the existing theoretical and empirical literature was

conducted, and the themes were used to formulate implications and suggestions for future research.

Looking toward the future, it will greatly benefit community college student-athletes and the coaches, faculty, advisors, and peers working with them for other researchers to continue to examine the identified gap in the literature. Based on this study and future studies, community college student-athletes will have an opportunity to learn from the experiences of previous community college student-athletes, which ideally will provide a greater knowledge base with strategies which can help students attain their academic and athletic goals. This research provides a basis for community colleges affiliated with the NCJAA and their faculty, coaches, and staff to implement best practices, programs, and services that meet student-athletes' needs at the time of enrollment and help them ultimately reach academic and athletic success as they persist in their academic careers.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Letter to Athletic Directors

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persist to a four-year institution, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you know of any prospective participants that would meet the following criteria listed below, I would appreciate their name, address, email address and phone number so that I may ask for their participation in this study. The following is the email that will be sent to the prospective participant.

‘If you are 18 years of age or older, have been a Division III NJCAA student-athlete for two consecutive years at your respective Division III NJCAA community college and subsequently transferred to a senior institution since the 2012-2013 academic year, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in an online demographic survey, one individual interview, submit a response to a written prompt, and participate in one focus group session (if you are one of the first six to respond that you wish to be a part of the focus group session) with a follow-up transcription review. It should take approximately one hour for a one-on-one interview to be conducted, thirty minutes for a written prompt response, approximately one hour for focus group participation and twenty minutes for a transcription review for a total of a three

hour investment of your time. . Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but this information will remain confidential.

Please sign the attached consent form and return it to the researcher at cbryan@liberty.edu. In the body of the email, please include your name and the best contact information, which includes your telephone number and email address. Once I receive your email, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research, please sign the consent document and return it via email, cbryan@liberty.edu, within a one week period of receiving this letter if you would like to participate in this study.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card for the participation in the interview and written response, and the first six to affirm their response for the focus group will receive an additional \$25 Amazon gift card.”

Thanks in advance for any prospective participants you can direct my way.

Sincerely,

Carl Bryan

Doctoral Student

cbryan@liberty.edu

APPENDIX B: Student Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of Division III National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) student athletes in central North Carolina who successfully persist to a four-year institution, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, have been a Division III NJCAA student-athlete for two consecutive years at your respective Division III NJCAA community college and subsequently transferred to a senior institution since the 2012-2013 academic year, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in an online demographic survey, one individual interview, submit a response to a written prompt, and participate in one focus group session (if you are one of the first six to respond that you wish to be a part of the focus group session) with a follow-up transcription review. It should take approximately one hour for a one-on-one interview to be conducted, thirty minutes for a written prompt response, approximately one hour for focus group participation and twenty minutes for a transcription review for a total of a three hour investment of your time. . Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but this information will remain confidential.

Please sign the attached consent form and return it to the researcher at

cbryan@liberty.edu. In the body of the email, please include your name and the best contact information, which includes your telephone number and email address. Once I receive your email, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research, please sign the consent document and return it via email, cbryan@liberty.edu, within a one week period of receiving this letter if you would like to participate in this study.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card for the participation in the interview and written response, and the first six to affirm their response for the focus group will receive an additional \$25 Amazon gift card.

Sincerely,

Carl Bryan

Doctoral Student

cbryan@liberty.edu

APPENDIX C: Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
1/9/2019 to 1/8/2020
Protocol # 3588.010919

CONSENT FORM

A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Persistence Among National Junior College
Athletic Association Division III Student Athletes
Carl Bryan
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that will describe the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduate or transfer to a four-year institution. You were selected as a possible participant because you meet the criteria of having been a Division III NJCAA student-athlete for two consecutive years at your respective Division III NJCAA community college and subsequently transferred to a senior institution since the 2012-2013 academic year. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Carl Bryan, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences that you had as a Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in one individual interview that should last no longer than 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed.
2. Respond to the following writing prompt "What academic, athletic and personal advice would you provide to a high school athlete based on your experience as a NJCAA Division III student-athlete?" This writing prompt should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.
3. The first six participants to respond will participate in a focus group session. The focus group will last up to 60 minutes. Your participation in this focus group will be recorded and transcribed.
4. Participate in a review of a transcription of your interview for accuracy as well as a transcription review of the focus group if selected.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this study.

Indirect benefits to society may include providing advising, retention, and persistence recommendations for stakeholders, such as academic advisors, success coaches, faculty, financial aid specialists and athletic personnel that play an important role in Division III student-athletes' academic journey to their degrees. Understanding any practical information that may arise from this study that can contribute to the student-oriented practices of a college may reveal significant

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areas for growth and improvement within the institution. It can also help ensure that faculty, staff, student support personnel, and athletic department members are motivated to persist in their roles, continue to effectively work with students, foster innovation in higher education, and provide support to all vested parties.

Compensation: Participants will be given a \$50 Amazon gift card upon completing their interview and submitting their written responses to the writing prompt. The first six that affirm that they wish to be included in the focus group interviews will be provided an additional \$25 Amazon gift card upon completion of the focus group interviews.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and the colleges being examined. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- All transcripts, participant documentation, and notes from the study will be stored digitally on a password protected computer at all times. All records from this study will be destroyed three years after the study has been completed.
- Interviews and the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Audio recordings for the interviews and focus group and all written transcripts and documentation will be stored securely for three years in a locked office at the personal residence of the researcher and will then be shredded and/or erased and destroyed. Only the researcher and the professional transcriptionist will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Carl Bryan You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 919-770-0057 or at cbryan@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Sarah Pannone, at sjpannone@liberty.edu.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
1/9/2019 to 1/8/2020
Protocol # 3588.010919

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and/or Go To Meeting video record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 1/9/2019 to 1/8/2020
Protocol # 3588.010919

CONSENT FORM

A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Persistence Among National Junior College Athletic Association Division III Student Athletes

Carl Bryan

Liberty University

School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that will describe the experiences of Division III NJCAA student-athletes from three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduate or transfer to a four-year institution. You were selected as a possible participant because you meet the criteria of having been a Division III NJCAA student-athlete for two consecutive years at your respective Division III NJCAA community college and subsequently transferred to a senior institution since the 2012-2013 academic year. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Carl Bryan, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences that you had as a Division III NJCAA student-athlete in central North Carolina who successfully persisted to a four-year institution

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in one individual interview that should last no longer than 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed.
2. Respond to the following writing prompt “What academic, athletic and personal advice would you provide to a high school athlete based on your experience as a NJCAA Division III student-athlete?” This writing prompt should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.
3. The first six participants to respond will participate in a focus group session. The focus group will last up to 60 minutes. Your participation in this focus group will be recorded and transcribed.
4. Participate in a review of a transcription of your interview for accuracy as well as a transcription review of the focus group if selected.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this study.

Indirect benefits to society may include providing advising, retention, and persistence recommendations for stakeholders, such as academic advisors, success coaches, faculty, financial aid specialists and athletic personnel that play an important role in Division III student-athletes’ academic journey to their degrees. Understanding any practical information that may arise from this study that can contribute to the student-oriented practices of a college may reveal significant. The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 1/9/2019 to 1/8/2020
Protocol # 3588.010919

areas for growth and improvement within the institution. It can also help ensure that faculty, staff, student support personnel, and athletic department members are motivated to persist in their roles, continue to effectively work with students, foster innovation in higher education, and provide support to all vested parties.

Compensation: Participants will be given a \$50 Amazon gift card upon completing their interview and submitting their written responses to the writing prompt. The first six that affirm that they wish to be included in the focus group interviews will be provided an additional \$25 Amazon gift card upon completion of the focus group interviews.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and the colleges being examined. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

All transcripts, participant documentation, and notes from the study will be stored digitally on a password protected computer at all times. All records from this study will be destroyed three years after the study has been completed.

Interviews and the focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Audio recordings for the interviews and focus group and all written transcripts and documentation will be stored securely for three years in a locked office at the personal residence of the researcher and will then be shredded and/or erased and destroyed. Only the researcher and the professional transcriptionist will have access to these recordings.

I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Carl Bryan. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 919-770-0057 or at cbryan@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Sarah Pannone, at sjpannone@liberty.edu. The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 1/9/2019 to 1/8/2020 Protocol # 3588.010919

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and/or Go To Meeting video record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Investigator Date

APPENDIX D: Interview Invitation Email to Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Persistence among National Junior College Athletic Association Division III Student Athletes*. Please reply and let me know which day and time during the next two weeks is the most convenient for you to meet to conduct your interview. After the interview has been completed, I will also make a request for you to submit a written reflection based on a prompt that relates to the study. These documents will be analyzed and reviewed to help me understand how you reflected upon your experiences during the study.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

Doctoral Student

cbryan@liberty.edu

APPENDIX E: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

Project Title: *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Persistence among National Junior College Athletic Association Division III Student Athletes*

1. Please tell me a little about yourself?
2. What made you decide to attend community college? (SQ4)
3. What role did your parents have in your community college academics?(SQ3)
4. What role did your peers have in your community college academics? (SQ3)
5. What role did your parents have in your community college athletic participation? (SQ3)
6. What role did your peers have in your community college athletic participation? (SQ1)
7. Looking back on your time as a student-athlete, what could have contributed more to your success in graduation or transferring? (Central Research Question)
8. What concerns, challenges, or reservations did you have when choosing to attend a community college for academics? (SQ3)
9. What made you decide to play the sport you participated in as you attended community college? (SQ2)
10. What concerns, challenges, or reservations did you have when choosing to attend a community college for athletics? (SQ2)
11. What role did your teachers and coaches have in your community college academics? (SQ3)

12. What role did your teachers and coaches have in your community college athletic participation? (SQ2)
13. As you went through your community college athletic and academic career, please describe your experiences as a student that did not involve athletics or the classroom. (Central Research Question)
14. How did attending a community college contribute to or detract from your attending a four-year institution? (Central Research Question)
15. Describe your decision in continuing or finishing your athletic career after completion of community college. (Central Research Question)
16. To what or to whom do you attribute your ability to persist to completion? (Central Research Question)
17. I appreciate the time you have provided to this study. What else do you think is important for me to know about your journey as a NJCAA Division III student-athlete?

APPENDIX F: Participant Written Document Instructions

Dear [Recipient]:

The research project will require that you respond to the following writing prompt: “What academic, athletic and personal advice would you provide to a high school athlete based on your experience as a NJCAA Division III student-athlete?” Specifically, you should address your personal experiences that relate to the topics of social, personal, academic, and athletic experiences that contributed to your journey in persistence. You will be asked to email me the letter after our one on one interview. Your written submission should be between 300-500 words and should be emailed using your college or personal email account.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

Doctoral Student

cbryan@liberty.edu

APPENDIX G: Focus Group Interview Invitation Email to Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group video conference via Bb Collaborate for the research study

A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Persistence among National Junior College

Athletic Association Division III Student Athletes. The focus group will meet at 1 p.m. on

February 1, 2019, at the address listed below. Please send me an email if you have any questions.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

Doctoral Student

cbryan@liberty.edu

Cougar Community College

Student Learning Center – Room 9000

123 Academic Way

Central, NC 34567

APPENDIX H: Focus Group Questions with Probes

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

Project Title: *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Persistence among National Junior College Athletic Association Division III Student Athletes*

Introduction:

The purpose of this study will be to describe the experiences that you have had as a Division III NJCAA student-athletes from one of three community colleges in central North Carolina and who has successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution. This interview is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the group at any time. Your participation in this group will be recorded and transcribed. Your names and the name of your school will not be shared to ensure confidentiality; this study will use pseudonyms to ensure your privacy. All copies of this session will be kept digitally and password protected at all times.

Consent:

Instructions:

I will ask multiple questions throughout our group session that relate to the experiences that you have had as Division III NJCAA student-athletes from one of three community colleges in central North Carolina who successfully graduated or transferred to a four-year institution..

Please be sure to use pseudonyms during our focus group.

Standardized Open-Ended Focus-Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves to the group and share your community college, the college where you are now enrolled, and your sport you participated in at the community college.
2. What advice would you give to those thinking about attending a community college to participate in athletics ?(SQ2)

3. What advice would you give to those thinking about attending a community college for academics? (SQ3)
4. What opportunities were offered at your community college that enhanced your academic career while attending your community college?(SQ3)
5. How did your athletic participation at the community college play a part in your transferring to a senior institution? (SQ2)
6. What was your greatest feeling of accomplishment in terms of athletics while participating at the community college? (SQ3)
7. What was your greatest feeling of accomplishment in terms of academics while enrolled in community college? (SQ4)
8. Outside of the classroom and athletic participation, describe what other aspects of life contributed to your success in transferring to a four-year senior institution. (Central Research Question)
9. What other aspect of life as a Division III NJCAA student-athlete would you like to contribute that we have not addressed? Please elaborate. (Central Research Question)

APPENDIX I: Sample Memoing

The screenshot shows the NVivo interface with the 'Memos' tab selected. The 'Sources' pane on the left shows 'Internals', 'Externals', 'Memos', and 'Framework Matrices'. The 'Memos' table has the following data:

Name	Nodes	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Memos on Inter	0	0	3/31/2019 5:42 PM	CB	3/31/2019 5:42 PM	CB

The memo content is:

As I am in the midst of interviews, it is evident that parents are a major part of a college student-athlete's journey. While it is too early to see if this is a major theme, parents and their supportive push has already come up in the first three interview candidates

The screenshot shows the NVivo interface with the 'Memos' tab selected. The 'Sources' pane on the left shows 'Internals', 'Externals', 'Memos', and 'Framework Matrices'. The 'Memos' table has the following data:

Name	Nodes	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Memos on Inter	0	0	3/31/2019 5:42 PM	CB	3/31/2019 5:47 PM	CB
Memo on Focus	0	0	3/31/2019 5:47 PM	CB	3/31/2019 5:47 PM	CB

The memo content is:

Focus group wore me out in that it is very hard to not interject and steer when working on this. I had to ask questions, and then physically sit on my hands as student-athletes answered questions. It was really exciting to see how some initial themes I thought were there were echoing in their responses, but I had to maintain a stoic appearance as I did not want to lead any student-athletes to conclusions.

APPENDIX J: Sample Journaling

January 15, 2019

Today, I conducted my first interview for the research study. As I prepared to meet with each participant, I removed myself from the role of being an educator and a coach and approached each interview as a researcher. I did not address myself as a community college employee, but as a researcher from Liberty University. During the interviews, my goal was to ensure that all participants were comfortable and knew that they could be honest and share their true experiences. I was also mindful not to ask leading follow up questions, but remained neutral throughout the process.

January 30, 2019

I have completed all face-to-face interviews with participants and have started to move data into *Nvivo 11*. Now that all transcribed interviews are successfully uploaded into *Nvivo 11*, I am really excited to use this tool and to really examine the data. After quickly reading through many of the statements, I am surprised to already see similar themes among the responses of participants. However, I do not intend to draw any early conclusions about the formulation of themes. My next step is to continue to read the transcription and review my research questions to guide me in the process.

February 4, 2019

I am now entrenched in the process of reviewing and analyzing the data for interviews, written documents, and the focus group. I have learned that this is a slow and deliberate process. I have been dreaming about coding from looking at the interviews and now I have the written responses and focus group to add to this. However, I want to ensure that the data becomes saturated and

significant themes continue to develop and emerge from the data. Therefore, I have been taking numerous mini- breaks to help me reenergize to approach the data with a clear mind and fresh. However, I have a Type A goal of getting this document completed. On many days, I am coding and analyzing the data immediately after I get off from work. It has been a challenge to shift from an educator to a researcher mindset, but I am mindful of the importance of approaching the data with the mindset of wanting to examine the lived experiences of the participants, not my own experiences.

APPENDIX K: Examples of Coded Transcripts using NVivo 11 software

Memos on Interviews | Memo on Focus Group | Interview #1 Nancy | Word Frequency Query Result

Interview Guide

Elissa Neal – RNC 001. Wave – “Nancy”

Project Title: *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Persistence among National Junior College Athletic Association Division III Student Athletes*

1. Please tell me a little about yourself. Elisa is current junior at NCSU in poultry science program...I have my an associate’s degree in science from CCCC. Played volleyball....after I hurt my back and I was told I couldn’t play Until a back injury....all day tourney in Wilmington... woke up and I couldn’t move muscle spasms lost range of motion in four vertebrae...

Memos on Interviews | Memo on Focus Group | Interview #1 Nancy | Word Frequency Query Result

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
athletic	8	6	0.87
just	4	6	0.87
made	4	6	0.87
role	4	6	0.87
supportive	10	6	0.87
academics	9	5	0.73
athlete	7	5	0.73
dad	3	5	0.73
fun	3	5	0.73
knew	4	5	0.73
parents	7	5	0.73
people	6	5	0.73
volleyball	10	5	0.73
came	4	4	0.58
class	5	4	0.58

Summary | Word Cloud | Tree Map | Cluster Analysis

APPENDIX L: Sample Interview Transcript Approval Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for volunteering to be a participant in my research study. In this email, I have attached a copy of the transcript of your one-on-one interview. I ask that you please review this document within the next two weeks and let me know if you have any questions or comments. If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of weeks, I will assume that you are satisfied with the transcribed document.

Thank you again for your help!

Sincerely,

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

Doctoral Student

cbryan@liberty.edu

APPENDIX M: Sample Focus Group Transcript Approval Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for volunteering to be a participant in my research study. In this email, I have attached a copy of the transcript of your focus group interview. I ask that you please review this document within the next two weeks and let me know if you have any questions or comments. If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of weeks, I will assume that you are satisfied with the transcribed document.

Thank you again for your help!

Sincerely,

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

Doctoral Student

cbryan@liberty.edu

APPENDIX N: Audit Trail

Date	Task	Reflective Notes
	Successfully defended proposal	Began IRB application
January 9, 2019	Received IRB Approval	Provided formal IRB approval to CCC, FCC, and JCC
December 7, 2018	Received conditional IRB site approval from CCC and FCC	At the request of committee chair, I provided all three community colleges requests for a conditional IRB
Dec 10, 2018	Received conditional IRB site approval from JCC	JCC provided conditional IRB approval based on CCC and FCC approval.
January 9, 2019	Received IRB Approval	Provided formal IRB approval to CCC, FCC, and JCC
January 10, 2019	Began sending recruitment emails to athletic directors to obtain potential participants	Prior to embarking in study, athletic directors provided verbal confirmation that they had a list of potential participants but did not share list until formal IRB approval was issued.
January 12, 2019	Began sending emails to potential participants based on athletic directors' shared list.	Recruitment
January 12, 2019	Began to review emails and consent forms as response rate was immediate.	Ensured that all participants would have consent forms on file
January 15, 2019	Interviews began	Interviews were conducted on CCC campus and recorded by audio device
January 16, 2019	As one interview concludes, written prompt is provided to participants	Written prompts were then collected after each interview
January 29, 2019	Interviews concluded and were provided to transcriptionist	Interviews were completed by hired transcriptionist
January 31, 2019	Data is entered into NVivo 11 software	Preliminary review of data

February 1, 2019	Conducted Focus Group	Completed on CCC campus and recorded with an audio device
February 2, 2019	Written responses and focus group recorded transcribed	Completed by a hire transcriptionist
February 2, 2019	Started reviewing written documents, focus group notes in NVivo 11	Continued to organize forms of data and continued to look for significant statements
February 10, 2019	Completed data analysis	Focused on drafting chapters 4-5
February 22, 2019	Completed first draft of chapters 4-5	Submitted to chair for revisions
March 8, 2019	Completed revisions of first draft on Chapters 1-5	Submitted to chair for revisions
March 12, 2019	Completed revisions of second draft of Chapters 1-5	Submitted to chair for revisions
March 13, 2019	Per dates provided by Chair, it was suggested to employ an editor	Employed the use of an Editor
March 17, 2019	Completed revisions along with editor for third draft of Chapters 1-5	Submitted to chair for revisions
March 20, 2019	Chair submitted dissertation to methodologist	Chair provided dissertation to methodologist
March 25, 2019	Defense scheduled for April 12 at 10 am via Web Ex	
April 12, 2019	Defended Dissertation	Directed by chair and methodologist to prepare dissertation for submission to library

APPENDIX O: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 9, 2019

Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.

IRB Approval 3588.010919: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Persistence Among National Junior College Athletic Association Division III Student Athletes

Dear Carlton Hartsell Bryan, Jr.,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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