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A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ACADEMIC, ATHLETIC, AND SOCIAL DOMAIN PERCEPTIONS OF DIVISION I FOOTBALL PLAYERS

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The purpose of this study was to assess the results of a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I football team in terms of male student-athletes' (N = 78) perceptions of identity development and the athletic career transition process in the context of student engagement research literature in higher education. Previous research with the Life After Sports Scale (LASS) (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2003, 2004; Lawrence & Harrison, 2011), a 58-item mixed method inventory, has focused on the Division II male and female student-athlete experience. Using validation theory (Rendon, 1994) and student engagement frameworks, we found three major findings that are unique to previous literature in this area: a) there was cultural uniformity (Allport, 1954) between white and non-white student participants; b) student-athletes who are the first in their family to attend college are more likely to perceive faculty members as encouraging them to plan for a career after sports; and c) student-athletes who are the first in their family to attend college are more likely to have more non-athlete friends on campus as compared with student-athletes who are not first-generation college students. Future research directions and best practices are recommended for scholars and practitioners.

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Student-athletes' educational experiences, engagement on campus, academic and athletic identity development, and preparation for life after sport continue to be important issues with respect to intercollegiate athletics. The business of college athletics is a current hot topic on college campuses. Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) spending is on an upward trajectory, with colleges spending an average of \$104,000 per student-athlete in 2012 (Knight Commission, 2014). However, the academic spending for First Time in College (FTIC) students has seen only minimal increases, with the 2012 total at \$14,533 per FTIC. The total number of student-athletes in the NCAA's three divisions is increasing each year. Since the 2004-2005 academic year, athletic participation has increased by roughly 75,000 student-athletes (NCAA, 2011). On the athletics side, universities are being held accountable, through the NCAA's progress toward graduation and graduation success measures. Thus, it is becoming increasingly important for universities to keep their student-athletes on track while in school. However, research has found large academic achievement gaps between sports, gender, and race (Lapchick, 2009; Lapchick, 2011). According to the NCAA's research, almost 20% of student-athletes are considered first-generation students (NCAA, 2014a). In addition, from the 2008-2009 academic year to the 2013-2014 academic year, the percentage of white student athletes in Division I decreased from 67% to 61% (NCAA, 2014b). Advising this particular group of students means that advisors not only need to know the ins and outs of their institution's graduation requirements, but also be fluent in the NCAA's eligibility and amateurism rules.

As a result of the shifting demographics in college athletics, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of race and generation in college on student-athlete engagement and identity development as well as student-athlete perceptions related to

life after sports and career transition. Harris & Lester (2009) remind us that, "at the heart of the issues concerning college men and identity development is the pressure men face to conform to narrowly constructed and stereotypically masculine behavioral norms" (p. 102). One of the prime locations of hyper-masculine behavior is high-profile (for example, NCAA Division I) football on American college and university campuses (Coakley, 2007; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Messner, 2002; Schulman & Bowen, 2001). Even with the realities of these masculinity dynamics, Martin (2009) observes that

student-athletes are winners when their communication and critical-thinking skills improve from one year to the next; when they graduate and enter the workforce with competencies that enable them to be effective; and when they have had opportunities to develop holistic identities. (p. 284)

Thus, these student-athletes win inside the classroom and off the fields of play. With this in mind, three research questions motivated our examination of one Division I football team.

1. Is there a difference in academic, athletic, and social experiences based on race?
2. Does being the first in the family to attend college influence perceptions of faculty members' encouragement for student-athletes to plan for a career after sports?
3. Does being the first in the family to attend college affect whether friends are student-athletes or non-athletes?

Review of Relevant Literature

The scope of college athletics and the student athletes who are impacted is large. Currently there over 460,000 students participating in intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, 2014b) and over 1,000 institutions make up the NCAA's three athletic divisions (NCAA, 2010). Examining the experiences and

identity of this growing population on college campuses is important in order to better support and service them. The topics of both persistence and learning fulfill the NCAA's core purpose of integrating "inter-collegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student-athlete is paramount" (NCAA, 2012, p. 1) as well as the mission of universities to learn, teach and generate knowledge.

Student-Athlete Identity Development

Student-athletes juggle a multitude of time and emotional demands and identities during college: full-time athlete and full-time student (Chen, Snyder, & Magner, 2010; Eitzen & Sage, 2003). Several researchers have identified the following three interrelated spheres of influence on student-athletes: athletic, social and academic (Adler & Adler, 1991; Chen et al., 2010; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Miller & Kerr, 2002). For example, Comeaux and Harrison (2011) developed a culturally inclusive conceptual model of academic success for student-athletes, which "presumes that a student-athlete's academic success will be based primarily on a set of individual characteristics and dispositions, with effects from the social and academic systems within which the student-athlete operates" (p. 237). In order to be successful in college, student-athletes need to balance these multiple spheres or roles along with the corresponding systemic effects (Aries, Banaji, McCarthy & Salovey, 2004; Bell, 2009; Chen et al., 2010; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Dawkins, Braddock & Celaya, 2008; Killea-Jones, 2005; Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010). Based on a typology created by Dawkins et al. (2008), the ideal balance of academic and athletic identities is described as an integrative relationship, where athletics and academics have a cooperative relationship. Each factor reinforces the importance of the other. Skills and values can easily be transferred from one venue to the other (Dawkins et al., 2008). However, two-thirds of

Division I student-athletes view themselves as athletes more than students (Weinberg, 2008). That may not be surprising given the average time a football player spends on his sport is 44.8 hours per week (Sack, Park, & Thiel, 2011).

The athletic role begins to be defined during the recruitment process. Before and after arriving on campus, coaches stress the expectation that student-athletes must remain at their athletic best (Adler & Adler, 1991; Ridpath, 2006). For most student-athletes, the athletic role is the organizing principle in their life (Adler & Adler, 1991; Eitzen & Sage, 2003). In other words, the other roles the student plays are often influenced by the athletic role. However, when the athletic role outweighs or overpowers the academic role, this can be defined as maintenance (Dawkins et al., 2008). In this sense, academics are merely a medium for the student-athlete to remain eligible to compete athletically. Chen et al. (2010) found that student-athletes were very accepting of their role as an athlete. Their study showed, however, that most student-athletes did not view sports as "the only important activity in their lives" (Chen et al., 2010, p. 183).

In addition to their athletic lives, student-athletes also engage in a social life. Adler and Adler (1991) observed that when student-athletes arrived on campus "they expected to receive, immediately, the noticeable trappings of success: a fancy dorm room, good food, the latest sports equipment, shoes and attire and a lifestyle complete with cars, girls and money" (p. 105). They believed that like high school, they will be able to make lots of friends, be known around campus, and be a part of mainstream college life (Adler & Adler, 1991). Student-athletes want to participate in the social sphere of the university, but are unable to participate due to a lack of time and energy (Adler & Adler, 1991). A strong conflict between athletic and social role exists.

Most student-athletes are optimistic

about their chances of academic success in college (Adler & Adler, 1991; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Chen et. al., 2010). When student-athletes find there is not enough time to be fully immersed in both the athletic and student roles, the latter role suffers (Meyer, 1990; Parham, 1993). This is primarily due to scheduling conflicts associated with practice and travel. Another contributing factor is the role of the coach. Once the season is in full swing, the focus of the coach is on winning, not the athletes' academic progress (Adler & Adler, 1987). For example, a student-athlete interviewed by Singer (2008) did not feel the term "student-athlete" accurately described their experience at the university or the role they played in the university. This finding is similar to Staurowsky and Sack's (2005) article condemning the inappropriate use of the term student-athlete. In the struggle to balance their athletic and academic roles, the athletes referred to themselves as athlete-students or scholarship athletes (Singer, 2008). The competition between the athletic, social and academic roles causes student-athletes to reconsider their goals of being at the university. As student-athletes progress through the university, some begin to accept less and less academic success, and look to achieve only the minimum grades to keep their athletic eligibility. Their early sense of optimism and idealism is sometimes abandoned (Adler & Adler, 1985).

Student-athletes achieve academic success in a myriad of ways. Student-athletes at four large universities viewed time management as the key to their success (Martin et al., 2010). Athletic time commitments, and most notably traveling, can easily erase the limited amounts of free time a student-athlete has. In order to be a successful student, these student-athletes believed that one needed to be able to successfully balance his or her multiple roles and carried the commitment displayed on the field and into the classroom (Martin et al., 2010). Additionally, the most success-

ful student-athletes are those that are able to see the connection between the variables that allow them to be successful on the field and apply those to the classroom (Simons & Van Rheenen, 2000). Student-athletes who demonstrate a "strong academic self-worth" (Simons & Van Reheen, 2000, p. 178) are more likely to attain academic success.

Student Engagement with Implications for Athletics

What students do and how students spend their time largely influences their academic outcomes (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Kuh, 2009). Student-athletes are no exception. "One of the most important factors in student learning and personal development is student engagement" (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009, p. 316). Student engagement is a product of an individual's quality of effort (Pace, 1984), as well as the institutional environment (Astin, 1999; Kuh 2001, Pace 1984, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and educationally purposeful engagement activities (Comeaux, Speer, Taustine, Harrison, 2011). While research has shown that student-athletes, as a whole, are equally or more engaged than their non-athlete counterparts, the ways in which display engagement are often different (Crawford, 2007; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Hathaway, 2005; Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010; Symonds, 2006; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). Student-athletes have been shown to spend more time on group work (Hathaway, 2005) and give more presentations in class (Symonds, 2006) than non-athletes. In addition, student-athletes were less likely to discuss readings outside of class than their non-athlete counterparts (Umbach et al., 2006). However, student-athletes have been shown to interact more with administrators than non-athletes (Symonds, 2006; Umbach et al., 2006) and student-athletes who participated in revenue sports were more likely to seek guidance and discuss their plans for the future

with a faculty and advisor than student-athletes participating in non-revenue sports (Crawford, 2007).

Masculinity is a highly complex construct, and adding further complexity to this ever-changing identity is athletic participation in a high-profile sport such as college football. Harris & Lester (2009) contend that "gender is not a fixed characteristic, but rather one that is produced, negotiated, and reinforced within social structures. Another key assumption of the [social constructionist] model is that masculinity is not experienced and is not uniformly expressed by all groups of men" (p. 107). This is an important point when considering the plight of African American male student engagement.

Specifically, Harper's (2006) analysis on African American male student-athlete engagement asks the question "Better Off Ball'n? Not Really." Harper's two major points of analysis with this population is that colleges and universities devote much of their time to recruiting student-athletes, not students or athletes. Second, Harper highlights that "[a]lthough athletics departments offer specialized resources and support services, their effects obviously differ by race" (p. 141). However, the question then becomes what about when engagement is cool and the "thing to do"—is race still a factor in cultures of football student-athletes?

Quaye, Tambascia & Talesh (2009) offer some insights in terms of engaging racial/ethnic minority students in predominantly white classroom environments, which is a key space when considering the intellectual expressions of students and student-athletes on campus (Bell, 2009). Given the increase in racial diversity of student-athletes in the NCAA, this is important. Diversity, however, should not be limited purely to race. Student-athlete demographics vary in terms of their entry point into the university. Community college and junior college students represent nearly half of the student body demographics at various in-

stitutions and, even more pertinent, community college student-athletes are some of the highest frequency transfer students in the matriculation process. In the context of community college and junior college student-athletes, their perspective is informative: "the most insurmountable challenges for this population are often created by the educational environment itself, which typically does not recognize the existence of multiple life roles or provide students with options that will help them manage shifting priorities and needs" (Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009, p. 227).

Quaye and colleagues (2009) suggest that rather than neglect non status-quo populations with culturally unresponsive pedagogy, campus leaders must recognize the strengths of racial/ethnic minority students' knowledge by validating what they bring to the table. Quaye et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of focusing on the diversity of life circumstances: "When racial/ethnic minority students speak from their vantage points, deeper understanding about their particular experiences is facilitated" (p. 164). These same researchers summarize a real-life case study of one ethnic minority student and his success by stating:

Rob was academically successful at Occidental because he purposefully formed peer and faculty relationships and found multiple, sustained opportunities to learn about his racial/ethnic identity. However, faculty and student affairs educators cannot expect racial/ethnic minority students to become engaged in predominantly white classrooms on their own. Rather, as our strategies suggest, educators must intentionally plan educational experiences that are enriching and place students' racial/ethnic identities at the forefront of the learning process. (p. 175)

Hawkins & Larabee (2009) echo this notion by stating that involvement is key as "student affairs educators need to constantly evaluate their programs to ensure inclusion

of all students and students' healthy development; through departmental collaborations, networking, and pooling of financial resources, and increased engagement" (p. 195).

Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles (2009) highlight some of the key factors impacting the lives of transfer students. In some instances, these transfer students come from low-income and first-generation situations and are coming to our institutions of higher learning in mass numbers due to recruiting and their athletic prowess. First-generation students as defined as those individuals with parents who have not earned a bachelor's degree (Gupton, Castelo-Rodriguez, Angel Martinez, and Quintanar, 2009). Gupton et al. (2009) suggest that this population focus on building up their social capital: "Although social capital is intangible, it has the ability to be productive and to facilitate action within the social structure. Networks must be constructed and maintained through strategic investment of capital, whether economic, human, cultural, or social" (p. 249).

Student-athletes from all backgrounds can maximize their time on athletic scholarship on campus by engaging with the entire breadth and depth of college life. Martin (2009) identifies the challenges of Division I college student-athletes in the following areas: academic issues, social challenges, career development & transition, faculty attitudes toward student-athletes, and theoretical perspectives on identity. Based on the psychological identity literature, Martin (2009) concludes, "individuals are more satisfied with relationships that confirm or validate their self-concept. This suggests that having an athletic identity will inevitably affect the development of self-concept—influencing social relationships, the activities one seeks, and the way one's experiences are processed" (p. 287). In the next section we examine validation theory in terms of driving the purpose of our study.

Validation Theory and the Purpose of this Study

The primary objective of this study was to examine the effects of race and generation in college on student-athletes' academic, social, and athletic self-perceptions. The study was guided by three research questions:

1. Is there a difference in academic, athletic, and social experiences based on race?
2. Does being the first in the family to attend college influence perceptions of faculty members' encouragement to plan for a career after sports?
3. Does being the first in the family to attend college affect whether friends are student-athletes or non-athletes?

We offer the following hypotheses:

1. There will be no differences in academic, athletic, and social experiences based on race (Allport, 1954).
2. Student-athletes who are the first in their family to attend college are more likely to perceive faculty members as encouraging them to plan for a career after sports (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007).
3. Student-athletes who are the first in their family to attend college are more likely to have more friends on campus who are students (non-athlete) as compared with student-athletes who are not first generation in college students.

In terms of validation theory, the basic tenets suggested by Rendon (1994) are based on two forms of validation: academic, educational or cognitive validation with a sincere belief in learning as a college student participant in higher education; and interpersonal validation that typically takes place inside and outside of the classroom. The second type of validation can potentially lead to high levels of personal development and social acclimation, especially when fostered by teachers and faculty members (Rendon, 1994). Rendon (1994) emphasized the importance of understanding and

embracing diversity of life circumstances and experiences of students, as well as the ability for administrators and other stakeholders on college campuses (for example, coaches) to positively impact the lives of students (including low-income, first generation students) who may not see themselves as "college material." For example, Rendon (1994) found that "faculty and staff can transform even the most vulnerable students into powerful learners who are excited about learning and attending college" (p. 46). In the current study, we investigated the perceptions of preparing for life after sport with one intercollegiate football team and conceptualize that validation theory (or lack thereof) informed the findings and results that follow.

Methodology

The goal of this research study was to explore male football players' perceptions of career transition. The research design for this study was both quantitative and descriptive. Quantitative research can be defined as a way to explain phenomena by collecting numerical data that is analyzed using mathematically-based methods (Muijs, 2004). Descriptive research examines a situation and does not change or modify the situation nor does it analyze a cause-and-effect relationship (Leedy & Ormond, 2010). These methods were chosen in order to numerically compare and correlate the responses of the large number of participants who took part in the study. In addition, a quantitative method was chosen in order to more efficiently collect data and be sensitive to the demands on the participants' time due to being a student-athlete at a Division I institution.

Participants

A convenience sample of 78 male ($n = 78$, 100%) student-athletes were used for this study. All participants were members of the same NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) program at a large

state university in the northwestern United States. The participant pool included undergraduate students and graduate students; their classifications were as follows: 4 (5.1%) freshmen, 12 (15.4%) sophomores, 32 (41%) juniors, 25 (32%) seniors, and 5 (6.4%) graduate. The participants' race was as follows: 40 (51.3%) Caucasians/Whites, 32 (41%) African Americans, 3 (3.8%) participants Other, 1 (1.3%) Hispanic, 1 (1.3%) Asian, and 1 (1.3%) Native American. The community in which the participants were raised was as follows: 41 (52.6%) in a large urban city, 14 (17.9%) in a small city, 11 (14%) in a small town, and 12 (15.4%) in the suburbs. The self-reported socio-economic statuses of the participants were as follows: 59 (75.6%) middle class participants, 12 (15.4%) upper class participants, and 7 (6.9%) lower class participants. There were 67 (87%) scholarship athletes, 10 (13%) non-scholarship athletes, and one did not respond. There were 14 (18.2%) participants who were the first person in their family to attend college, 63 (81.8%) who were not the first person in their family to attend college, and one did not respond. The top three academic majors the participants were enrolled in are as follows: Communication, Accounting, and Business.

Survey Instrument

Participants completed a 58-item *Life After Sports Scale (LASS)* (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2003, 2004; Lawrence & Harrison, 2011), designed and administered using Qualtrics web-based survey software. The scale was developed based on sport psychology literature in academic, athletic, and social identity (Brewer et al, 2000; Brown et al, 2000). Similar to previous research based on the *LASS* (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2003, 2004; Lawrence & Harrison, 2011), participants responded to a series of questions gauging their athletic, academic, and social experiences in relationship to their career aspirations. Demographic data

were collected at the end of the survey.

Procedure

Four seniors on the football team ("recruiters") solicited the participation of the other student-athletes on the football team. First, the head coach allowed the four seniors time after a team meeting to request the athletes' participation in the study. An adjacent computer lab was made available to the athletes in order to improve the response rate. Second, the recruiters each encouraged a specific group of football players to complete the survey in the computer lab, and kept track of which athletes had completed the survey with the goal of attaining 100% participation by eligible team members. At no time were participants' identities linked to their responses.

When respondents arrived in the computer lab, one of the recruiters stated that the entire survey would take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The recruiter stressed the importance of reading the student-athlete biography and reflecting upon

it by writing for approximately five minutes. Participants were not compensated or provided any tangible incentive for taking part in the study.

Data Analysis

Quantitative methods were employed to analyze the data collected in this study. Data collected from the *LASS* (Harrison & Lawrence, 2002, 2003, 2004; Lawrence & Harrison, 2011) were collected and analyzed using *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)*. After initial collection of data results were entered into *SPSS version 20.0*, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze data. A test for reliability was run for each category of questions. The overall reliability of the instrument was .80. A composite variable was created for each question domain: athletic, academic, and social. The athletics domain was defined as questions related to the student-athlete's athletic goals and commitment. The academic domains included questions surrounding the student-athlete's

Table 1		
Self-Reported Athlete Identity for White and Non-White Student-Athlete Participants		
Race	M	SD
Non-White	2.411	.676
White	2.702	.669

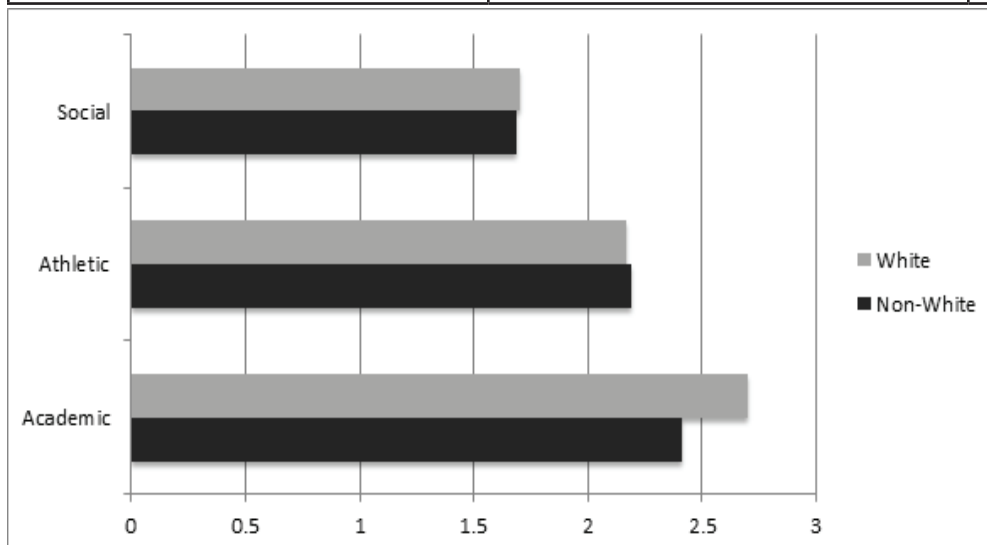


Figure 1. Average Composite Scores of Non-White and White Respondents

academic goals, achievement of academic success, and those who provide academic support. Finally, the social domain examined the personal relationships the student-athlete had with other students, other student-athletes, and their family.

The study’s participants were sorted into two categories: white and non-white. Several racial groups only had a few respondents. Independent t-tests were run with white and non-white participants on each of the domains. In addition, Independent Samples t-tests were run using generation in college as the grouping variable.

Findings

Hypothesis 1

There was no statistically significant mean difference ($t = -1.91, df = 76, p > .05$) in athletic composite scores between white and non-white football players. The 95% confidence interval indicates the true mean difference (.29) may range from -.012 and .595. On average, white football players had a mean score of 2.702 ($SD = .67$)

on questions pertaining to the athletic domain, while non-white football players had a slightly weaker athletic identity mean score of 2.411 ($SD = .68$) (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

There was no statistically significant mean difference ($t = .15, df = 69, p > .05$) in academic composite scores between white and non-white football players. The 95% confidence interval indicates the true mean difference (-.02) may range from -.26 and .22. On average, white football players had a mean score of 2.17 ($SD = .39$) on questions pertaining to the academic domain, while non-white football players had a slightly stronger academic mean score of 2.189 ($SD = .59$) (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

There was no statistically significant mean difference ($t = -.126, df = 76, p > .05$) in social composite scores between white and non-white football players. The 95% confidence interval indicates the true mean difference (-.009) may range from -.141 and .161. On average, white football

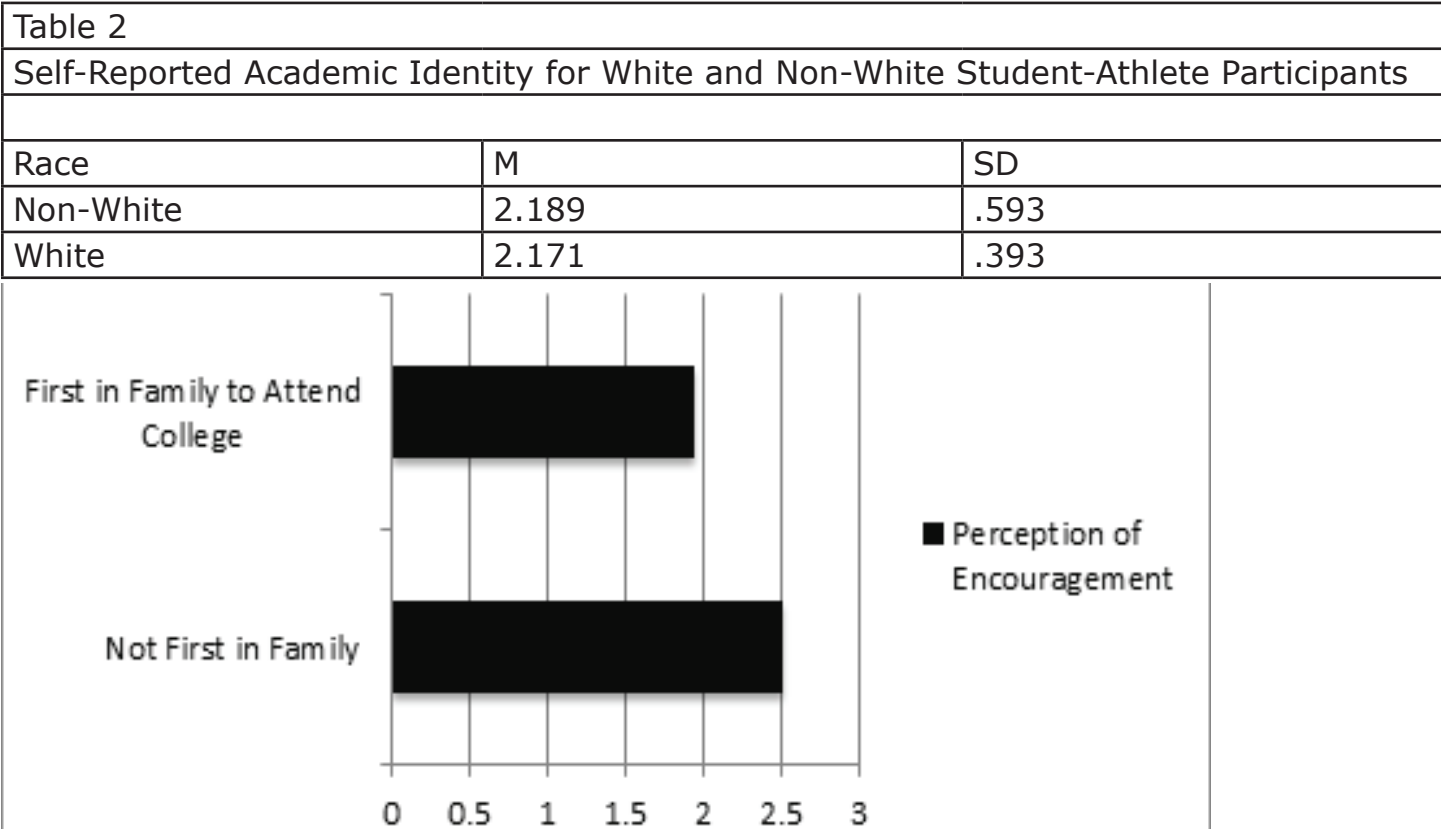


Figure 2. Perception of Faculty Encouragement by Generation in College

Table 3		
Self-Reported Social Identity for White and Non-White Student-Athlete Participants		
Race	M	SD
Non-White	1.693	.056
White	1.703	.051

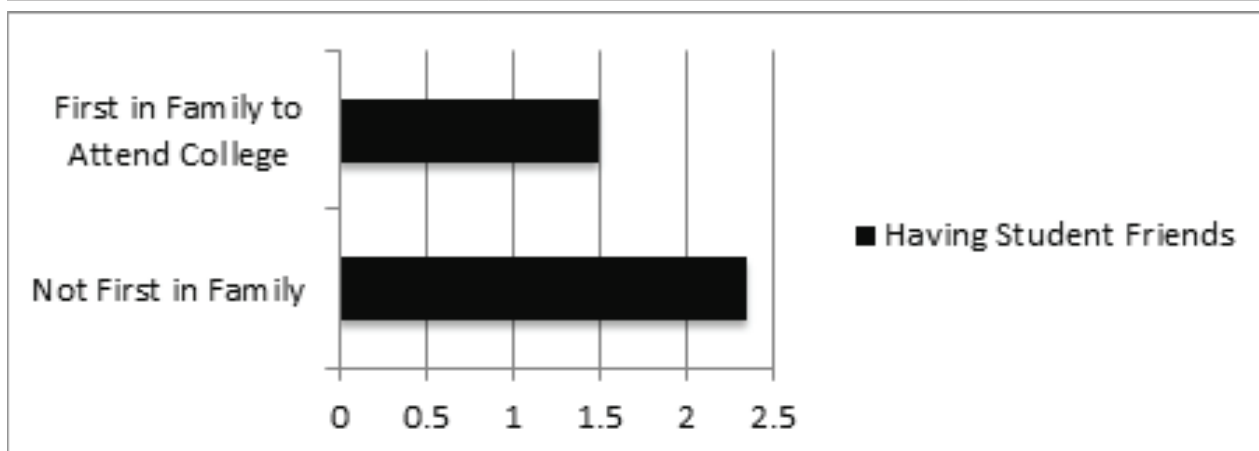


Figure 3. Having Students as Friends by Generation in College

players had a mean score of 1.703 ($SD = .0511$) on questions pertaining to the social domain, while non-white football players had a slightly weaker social mean score of 1.693 ($SD = .056$) (see Table 3 and Figure 1).

Hypothesis 2

There was a statistically significant mean difference ($t = -2.08$, $df = 75$, $p < .05$) in perception of encouragement of professors between first generation in college student-athletes and student-athletes who were not first generation in college (see Figure 2). The 95% confidence interval indicates the true mean difference ($-.579$) may range from -1.13 and $-.024$. On average, student-athletes who were the first in their family to attend college had a mean score of 1.93 ($SD = .917$), while student-athletes who were not the first in their family to attend college had a stronger perception of encouragement mean score of 2.51 ($SD = .948$).

Hypothesis 3

There was a statistically significant

mean difference ($t = -2.517$, $df = 75$, $p < .05$) between first generation college student-athletes and non-first generation college student-athletes in the number of friends who were student-athletes (see Figure 3). The 95% confidence interval indicates the true mean difference ($-.849$) may range from -1.521 and $-.177$. On average, student-athletes who were the first in their family to attend college had a mean of 1.50 ($SD = .650$), while those who were not the first in their family to attend college had a higher mean of 2.35 ($SD = 1.220$).

Discussion and Conclusions

The current study makes several contributions to the higher education student engagement and first-generation student-athlete literatures. One contribution is that our study found cultural uniformity (Allport, 1954) and no racial differences between non-White and white football players. This is novel considering racial differences across the board for student-athletes of color and whites with graduation rates (Lapchick, 2012), APR scores (Lapchick, 2012), attrition rates (Harper & Quaye, 2009), and

validation (see Rendon (1994), noting that some minority students explained how their friends made them feel like the minority students were wasting their time attending college).

Second, the impact of generational differences has been focused primarily in the higher education and student affairs literature. However, based on our current findings, in the context of intercollegiate athletics male student-athlete football identities are more informed about generational differences. While not specific to low-income first generation students, the student-athletes in the current study who were first-generation displayed more engagement with faculty and peers than non first-generation student-athletes.

Two of our major contributions to the literature on first-generation student-athletes are that these male students had more positive interactions with peers and faculty than non-first-generation male student-athletes on one Division I football team. The next few sections will synthesize some of the literature on why this was the case in the current study at a single-institution.

These two key findings support and run counter to some of the literature in student development, higher education and student affairs in relationship to first generation student matriculation. Student-athletes are part of that first generation attending college nomenclature, but there are some key nuances as to why the current study found more interaction by first generation male student-athletes with peers and faculty than non-first generation male student-athletes. It should also be noted that half of the student-athletes in the study on the football team were African American male student-athletes. In terms of some of the challenges for academic and athletic success, the current study indicates no racial differences between White and African American student-athletes. This empirical finding is significant when considering the plethora of campus climate issues

at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) between White and African-American student-athletes. More research should examine the racial differences and similarities of first-generation and non-first-generation student-athletes.

Our two key findings make a pertinent contribution to the literature and have implications for student affairs stakeholders and related leaders on campus. Previous literature has indicated, "university administrators need more information about first-generation students to provide appropriate services. However, relatively little information is found on how the students' background and problems relate to their performance and retention in college. Also, little has been written on first-generation students from an ethnic minority background" (Ting, 2003, p. 2). This same author (2003), while over a decade ago, accurately forecasted where the attention of the literature would be focused and relates to the student-athlete experience on and off the fields of play. According to Ting, (2003): "Studies have found that a number of non-cognitive factors are related to academic achievement and student retention of nontraditional students. These include a positive self-concept, a realistic self-appraisal system, preference for long-term goals, a strong supportive person, leadership experience, demonstrated community service, and acquired knowledge in a field" (p. 2). Student-athletes in general compete in athletics, which enables many participants to develop a positive self-concept, constant feedback in terms of self-assessment of their performances, goal setting, healthy support systems, constant leadership development, community service by student-athletes is a mainstay in higher education & athletics, and specified knowledge as athletic individuals who attend a university. While much of the literature on first-generation students from various backgrounds and origins has focused on their deficits (GPA, SAT/ACT scores, attrition etc.), some schol-

ars have found positive attributes from first generation students coming from different racial, ethnic and social class contexts than the traditional White middle class student (or student-athlete) on campus at PWIs. (Nasim, Roberts, Harrell and Young (2005) summarize from previous literature that one of the major non-cognitive factors, a positive self-concept, is characterized by such terms as strength of character, motivation, independence, confidence, and a strong feeling of self. The current study's data indicate that our first-generation student-athletes may be more resilient based on these non-cognitive factors when it comes to connecting with peers and faculty. These same authors (2005) found that "another factor that emerged as a predictor of cumulative GPA for students at PWIs was the availability of a support person" (Nasim et al., 2005, p. 355). The current study took place at an institution where the football program has a saying based on non-cognitive factors and variables as positive attributes as previously discussed. "We recruit OKG's (Our Kind of Guys). These are guys that have good character and are coachable and will compete in all aspects of their student-athlete experience" (Major, L., personal communication, 2011).

Finally, in relationship to our two key findings in this area is support from Simons and Van Rheenen (2000) who explored the athletic-academic relationship and achievement motivation. Our data indicate in the current study, the same conclusions these same authors (2000) found in their study of 200 Division I student-athletes examining the role of non-cognitive variables in predicting academic performance: "Academically successful student-athletes appear to be able to respond to the increased demands and transfer the qualities of hard work, discipline, and perseverance, traits necessary for successful athletic performance, to their academic lives" (p. 178).

In addition, the current study is supported by recent data in the Student-Ath-

lete Climate Study (SACS) (N= 8,018). Although LIFG students typically report less interaction with faculty than their non-LIFG peers (see Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), we found that faculty-student interaction was more influential than student-profile characteristics. While faculty-student interaction is a predictor of academic and intellectual development and persistence, the amount of variance attributed to it is minimal. Faculty interaction, concern, and perception explained one-half to nine times as much variance as the student-athlete profile characteristics, which builds upon Donovan's (1984) assertion that college experiences are more important than background characteristics when predicting the success of low-income students of color. Our study reiterates the potential impact of meaningful faculty involvement in terms of strategic student-athlete empowerment.

Future research with validation theory and student engagement with athletic populations has the potential to create new knowledge with practical applications. With respect to validation theory, Rendon (1994) found that the "effect that out-of-class validation agents have on students is incalculable" (p. 45). More investigation is needed in terms of what Martin (2009) terms "readiness" for future roles. For example, the current study indicates that first-generation students were more engaged with faculty and peers of a non student-athlete background on campus. Does this mean that their athletic aptitudes (for example, leadership and confidence) developed on the field of play and gridiron enabled them to tap into their personal resources that are non-cognitive? Martin (2009) argues that "student-athletes possess many attributes important to their success in future employment: commitment, confidence, team-building skills, and determination" (p. 290).

Empirical studies that use quantitative and qualitative approaches to measure the synergies between sports skills, life skills and student engagement may help inform

researchers and practitioners of identity and personal development which can help student-athlete populations become more successful during their campus socialization. This is the type of cultural capital that student-athletes can turn into tangible rewards for life.

In terms of recommendations, it is important to note that this academic institution employed engagement strategies that mirror the suggestions of scholars and researchers (see, for example, Harper & Quaye 2009). For example, faculty and other stakeholders such as coaches should receive systematic training with respect to strategies aimed at validating students so that these administrators are able to develop a validating campus culture based on the strengths and needs of culturally diverse student-athlete populations (Rendon, 1994). In addition, Martin's (2009) student-athlete engagement recommendations parallel the approach of the single-institution's research engagement project (see content in parentheses per each item below) in the current study, which includes:

1. Exposure to Leadership and Engagement Opportunities (Student-athletes took on roles as researchers, collaborators, participant observers and individuals and groups invested in all research engagement project aspects created by one communications professor).
2. Utilizing Offices and Support Services Outside of Athletics (Student-athletes maximized the communication department's resources, athletic department resources and other useful connections across campus).
3. Connecting Classroom Learning to Other Experiences (Student-athletes learned to apply the lessons learned through the research engagement project to other contexts both inside and outside the classroom).
4. Self-Reflective Opportunities for Identity Development (Student-athletes involved in the research engagement

project reflected on their own identity by assisting with research instruments, data collections and practical programs that impact future student-athletes who will allow engage in academics and athletics on the same campus they experienced).

5. Enhancing Readiness for Future Roles (Student-athletes transitioned from the research engagement project since 2005 and used those skills from athletics in their various careers).
6. Increasing Engagement with Diverse Others (Student-athletes from various backgrounds participated in the research engagement project since 2005).
7. Systemic Assessment (Matriculation and graduation rate patterns of all student-athletes engaged with one communications professor's research engagement project have been tallied since 2005 with a near 100 percent success rate).

In the final analysis, student-athlete engagement can transcend some racial and ethnic boundaries, lead to healthy faculty and student-athlete professional relationships, and allow the general student body of peers to connect with athletic populations during college and view student-athletes as valuable peers as well as individuals who possess athletic attributes.

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