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THE PERCEPTION OF SUPPORT SERVICES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE
STUDENT-ATHLETES AT A DIVISION I UNIVERSITY

by

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THE PERCEPTION OF SUPPORT SERVICES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to the following people that inspired me to become the person that I am today: Bishop Leroy Woodard, Sr (Pastor), Gladys Jackson (Nanny), Sis. Perkins (Godmother), James Tate Sr. (Grandfather), Clarence Boyd (Uncle), Doris Boyd (Aunt), Alvin Brinson Sr. (Uncle), Eddie Lee Smith (Uncle), Patricia Ann Nelson (Cousin), Donald Ray Smith (Cousin), Dr. Grigsby (Professor @ UHCL).

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ABSTRACT

THE PERCEPTION OF SUPPORT SERVICES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENT-ATHLETES AT DIVISION I UNIVERSITY

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore perceptions of the influences of student support services, and other factors that contributed to African American male football players' ultimate success in academics, at a public Division I institution. The qualitative study used online interviews, archival data, and contextual information. The researcher interviewed an associate athletic director, academic advisor, learning specialist, tutor coordinator, tutor, two mentors and personal experiences from 12 student-athletes to provide an understanding regarding support services assisting with student-athletes' academics. The study focused on the evolving themes between the support service staff and student-athletes which consisted of the most important themes: (a) Recruiting all-around student-athletes with effective communication, (b) Hiring more support service staff (more staff and more diverse staff members, (c) Having trained support staff that can work with student-athletes with disabilities such as various learning disabilities and providing accommodations, and (d) Additional resources available to assist student-athletes with mental health issues. Through interviews from the support staff and African-American male student-athletes, the researcher was able to gain important data that has the potential to improve support services at division I institutions for African-American male student-athletes.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Many African American males are interested in athletic competition and aspire to play professionally like the athletes they watch on television (Bailey, 2017). Student-athletes are interested in becoming professional athletes because of the lucrative salaries and some see it as a way out of poverty for their families, however, student-athletes have a two percent chance to make it to the National Football League (NCAA, 2015a). The transitional programs for student-athletes leaving high school and entering college assist them with balancing their academic responsibilities and athletic obligations to successfully graduate with a degree. This study will explore the efficiency of academic support services on the academic improvement of African-American male student-athletes at Division I universities.

Research Problem

African-American student-athletes participating in university football programs have a disproportionate graduation success rate (GSR) compared to other student-athletes in the same program (NCAA, 2015a). Not all the African-American student-athletes are completing their degree programs and graduating with degrees. Many African-American student-athletes obtain athletic scholarships but have the lowest graduation rate among Division I football programs (Perry, 2014).

Shaun Harper, executive director, and professor at the University of Southern California, conducted a study on the low graduation rates of African-American student-athletes from numerous universities (Harper, 2018). As reported by Harper (2018):

Over the past two years, 40 percent of these Power Five conferences (Big Ten Conference, the Pac-12 Conference, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big 12 Conference, and the Southeastern Conference (SEC)) which include 65

universities have actually had black male student-athlete graduation rates that have declined (p.1).

Harper (2018) advocated that university programs endorse multiple policies and elevated levels of responsibility for athletic departments to support higher graduation rates at Power Five conferences. According to Harper (2018), coaches and athletic directors should consider balance plans to enforce racial equality on campus and hold greater expectations of academic achievement for African-American male student-athletes. Furthermore, Harper (2018) suggests that athletic departments provide career guidance to assist student-athletes after graduation.

Low Graduation Rates

According to Harper (2018), African-American male student-athletes are struggling to graduate compared to other students and student-athletes. Harper discovered approximately 55% of all African-American male student-athletes, regardless of sports, graduated within six years, compared to approximately 60% of all African-American males in general, 69.3% percent of all student-athletes, and 76.3% of all undergraduate students (Brenneman, 2018). Hosick and Durham (2017) discovered that approximately 55% of African-American male student-athletes are graduating at Division I universities; by comparison, Caucasian male student-athletes have a 66% graduation rate. Based on present research, there is discrepancy between African-American and Caucasian male student-athletes' academic performance and administrative support. The GSR for all student-athletes at Division I universities was approximately 84% (NCAA, 2015a). The Federal graduation rate (FGR) for all male student-athletes in the Football Bowl Series (FBS) is 62% (NCAA, 2015a). Moreover, there is still a 22% gap between all student-athletes and student-athletes participating in football at a Division I institution. Finally, the average football adjusted graduation gap (AGG) for African-American

student-athletes mean is -21.8 compared to Caucasian student-athletes mean of -1.9 attending a university in the Power Five conferences (Southall et al., 2019). According to this research, some of the student-athletes at Power Five conferences are not graduating, and African-American non-graduation rates are still higher than other Division I institutions.

Caucasian male student-athletes have greater diversity in career options after college in comparison to African-American male student-athletes because more of them are graduating with a degree, which increases career options for their future (Hosick & Durham, 2017). Additionally, more Caucasian male student-athletes can transition into different careers, because they are graduating with degrees (Hosick & Durham, 2017). African-American male student-athletes who do not graduate are limited to certain careers (Hosick & Durham, 2017). African-American male student-athletes are not prepared to enter various careers due to not graduating with an associates or bachelors degree. Student-athletes will enter a competitive job market with non-athletic students, and they will take advantage of career development opportunities (Stout, 2018).

Conflicts with Student-Athletes' Commitments

Student-athletes face significant time commitments, intensive workout schedules, and demanding expectations (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). On average, student-athletes spend anywhere from 4.4 to 8.6 hours daily on athletics respectively (NCAA, 2015a). Of the remaining 19.6 hours per day, 19.2 are given to extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, and sleep. Notably, athletic hours often vary during the year. For example, two-thirds of Division I student-athletes spent more time in athletic activities during the offseason than the competitive season due to professional workouts for National Football League (NFL) teams (NCAA, 2015b). Student-Athletes are participating in strength and conditioning, supplemental workouts; practice, and

reviewing the spring football game (NCAA, 2015b). Given their demanding schedules, many student-athletes encounter conflicts that impede progress towards graduation (Stokowski, Rode, & Hardin, 2016). For instance, athletic time commitments may conflict with course offerings required for graduation. Student-athletes often have less time for their academics due to the athletic demands of their programs and scheduling demands of their coaches, such as meetings, practices, and mid-week game schedules (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Preparation for College and Beyond

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) demanded use of the term “student-athlete” when referring to a college athlete, noting student-athletes are college students like any others (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Urban African-American male student-athletes who perform well in sports and are the first generation to attend college; are often not prepared for the academic challenges they face and therefore struggle academically (Moore III, Bennett, Graham, & Hodge, 2015).

Beamon (2014) noted the significance of athletic accomplishment by African-American male student-athletes resulted in an undervaluing of learning and ignored preparation for future careers. Alarming, research has shown that many student-athletes entered college unprepared and major in programs that do not positively affect their post-secondary outcomes (Gurney, 2011). Many of the student-athletes entering college are ready for competition on the field; despite this, they are missing academic requirements and struggle to keep their grades up in the classroom. Reports have demonstrated athletic directors intervene with student-athletes and faculty, in the case of athletes struggling academically. The athletic directors will spend around two million dollars on tutors; reading experts; and learning experts for their program (Gurney, 2011). Athletic administrators spending this amount of money may jeopardize the integrity of

the campus and may cause universities to lose money if students do not graduate (Gurney, 2011). Gurney (2011) discovered that the NCAA will assign punishing actions such as loss of financial aid for the student-athletes, banning from postseason bowl games, restraining on NCAA affiliates, and invoking public disapproval for schools that do not meet requirements for eligibility, retention, and completion.

Student-Athletes Athletic Scholarships

Nationally, many students rely on scholarships to access higher education. When a scholarship is awarded for an athletic skill, the student enters a college as a “student-athlete,” a person participating in athletics in a post-secondary school sport program in the United States (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005).

Previously, the athletic scholarship policy consisted of institutions paying the educational and living expenses of amateur athletes during their enrollment (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). The NCAA opposed scholarships for athletes stating they were regular students and not athletic experts attending school for only their athletic talents (NCAA, 2015a). Staurowsky and Sack (2005) advocated student-athletes be identified as students on scholarships and accountable to coursework before athletics.

Choice of Major for Student-Athletes

Navarro (2015) found that some student-athletes felt they were forced into certain majors due to schedule conflicts between practice time and classes. Many universities encourage student-athletes to major in athletic friendly majors to ensure their eligibility on the team and encourage them to become professional athletes (Ridpath, 2010). Furthermore, some student-athletes choose to major in general studies, granting them the option to enroll in more elective courses which will lead to more time for athletics (Gurney, 2011). Some student-athletes enter college not knowing what major to pursue and are advised to choose a major within sports medicine or sports health. Comeaux and

Harrison (2011) as well as Ferguson (2017) discovered some student-athletes felt compelled to major in Parks, Recreation and Leisure; Physical Education, Public Relations, Communications, or Kinesiology because these schedules allow more time to focus on athletics. In some cases, the time demands of athletics prevent student-athletes from majoring in engineering, business, or law (Gurney, 2011).

Student-Athletes are Isolated on Campus

Student-athletes can also be educationally and socially isolated due to living together on campus, studying collectively, and pursuing the same majors (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Some student-athletes have only lived in the athletic residential halls, eaten at the athletic cafeteria; and studied at the athletic academic support facilities. They may not socialize with other non-athletes on campus. Unfortunately, various students only acknowledge their athletic talents due to only seeing them on the football field on Saturdays. Comeaux and Harrison (2011) discovered some members of the faculty and unfriendly racial environments have created low academic opportunities for student-athletes.

Athletic Career as Priority

Due to pressure to win on the field, some student-athletes are making athletics a priority; this decision impacts their academic performance in the classroom (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Comeaux and Harrison (2011) conducted research using a conceptual model to determine student-athletes' growth and discovered student-athletes' goals shift to become elite athletes. Althouse's (2007) conceptual model contains four stages that act as the framework for understanding student-athletes' academic success; precollege, initial commitments, college environmental factors, and commitments. Additionally, student-athletes spend more time preparing for athletics in comparison with academics (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011). Some student-athletes come to college primarily to

advance their athletic careers, rather than to focus on maintaining their grade point averages (GPAs) and earning a degree (Ridpath, 2010).

Recruitment

Recruitment has become important for coaches at Division I universities to maintain a successful program and generate more revenue for the institution (Ridpath, 2010). Some Division I universities coaches are more concerned with winning games by recruiting student-athletes because of their athletic abilities; however, many student-athletes are bringing low GPAs and negative labels (Ridpath, 2010; Stokowski, Rode, & Hardin, 2016). Various coaches are recruiting student-athletes at any cost if they can perform well on the football field. Ridpath (2010) found that some influential coaches can falsify transcripts and admission test scores, ensuring high-demand student-athletes gain admission to their institution, also, student-athletes are therefore meeting the NCAA requirements.

Retention and Graduation Data

Retention is a key problem with African-American student-athletes within the post-secondary society (Jackson, 2018). African-American student-athletes are entering college; conversely, not all of them are completing their degree program. One issue affecting retention with student-athletes is attrition (Ridpath, 2010). Attrition is defined as the reduction brought about by student-athletes leaving college to pursue a professional sports career (Ridpath, 2010). Student-athletes that attend high profile universities with excellent football programs often focus on their future athletic careers, resulting in lower grades; increased rates of attrition; and higher probability of non-completion of undergraduate programs (Adler & Adler, 1985; Cross 1973; Edwards, 1984; Gurney, Tan, & Winters, 2010; Nyquist, 1979; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982; Ridpath, 2002; Sack & Thiel, 1979). The attrition rates are higher for African-American

student-athletes who are choosing to play professionally instead of obtaining a college degree.

Another factor influencing retention rates for African-American student-athletes is academic failure. (Jackson, 2018). Some African-American student-athletes are not prepared for the rigorous course load in college. Jackson (2018) found while there are fewer Caucasian student-athletes being left behind, one out of five African-American student-athletes are failing out of school. Additionally, student-athletes who enter college with poor study habits and deficits in time management skills often experience academic failure.

Retention of student-athletes determined if student-athletes was enrolled or graduated this past semester. Student-athletes must maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average (GPA) to graduate. Retention will be measured by the number of student-athletes that graduated in the current or upcoming semester.

The researcher examined the graduation rates by the number of student-athletes that received their bachelor's degree in the summer and fall semesters of 2020. The graduation success rate was determined by the total number of first-year participants and transfers that graduate who played on the football team divided by the total number of first-year participants and transfers on the team (NCAA Research, 2019). Furthermore, Ozarka University continued to graduate their African-American student-athletes at a graduation success rate (GSR) of 68% and African-American male student-athletes that play football GSR of 61% (Ozarka University, 2019). The number of African-American male student-athletes on the football team that graduated determined the GSR.

Academic Support Systems for Student-Athletes

Many institutions have improved the athletic support programs by offering programs that meet the needs of their student-athletes to improve these low graduation rates (Melendez, 2006). The support programs are designed to assist student-athletes with their academic needs. Baker & Hawkins (2016) found that recently established support programs are designed to improve African-American male student athletes' current experiences and future results in school. Institutions that have implemented support programs have experienced an increase with African-American male student-athletes in football. Numerous African-American males require effective support programs that will aid with academic success, future careers, flexible academic support schedules, and mental support for athletic commitments to prepare for college level athletics (Baker & Hawkins, 2016).

As a result of competing in sports, student-athletes that are not completing their assignments could lose their athletic scholarships, thus leading to them failing to graduate from college (Carodine et al., 2001). The requirements (see Appendix A) for student-athletes have been a challenge for football players since their graduation success rates and academic progress rates are much lower than any other sports (NCAA, 2015a).

One of the most efficient practices for recruitment and retention of student-athletes is an effective student support system (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Carodine et al. (2001) stressed the need to develop additional funding sources for academic support programs that will provide comprehensive services to student-athletes. Many universities offer tutoring, workshops, and academic support services for their student-athletes (Burns, et al., 2013). Ridpath (2010) discovered stipends are provided to some of the Division I institutions to support academic programs specific to assist student-athletes:

Many schools used this money in hiring extra counselors, tutors, and/or purchasing needed equipment like such as computers, and academic support services for athletes grew exponentially and it continues today as the pressure to win, keep athletes eligible for competition (p.256).

Student-athletes are provided with career counselors who will also assist in nurturing the athletes' emotional well-being in effective support programs. Stout (2018) conducted a metanalysis of 10 articles that focused on the transition of student-athletes leaving college sports and entering the workforce. Student-athletes that are on scholarship are preparing for a career in the NFL. The metanalysis recommended that universities aim their attention on preparing student-athletes for their future occupations and not on athletics (Stout, 2018). Additionally, institutions can provide career planning for student-athletes and assist student-athletes academically during their first year on campus to inspire graduation (Stout, 2018). A life skills coordinator can provide valuable insight to student-athletes' plans for life after college. Exceptional programs prepare student-athletes to be able to overcome problems and accept their own accomplishment (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Collaborations with mental health suppliers, psychologists, and special education specialists can establish plans for student-athletes with emotional and studying needs.

Support programs to help student-athletes with the unique challenges of rigorous academic and athletic demands have been implemented on various campuses. Unfortunately, the lack of financial resources and motivation from student-athletes has resulted in the termination of many of these same support programs (Castenel, Grantham, & Hawkins, 2018). As a result, many student-athletes have not grown satisfactorily in their academics while in college and gained far less from their athletic involvement (Castenel et al., 2018).

In addition to program supports, partnering student-athletes with upperclassmen or alumni has been found to improve student achievement (Stout, 2018). In fact, athletic departments are encouraged to offer mentoring programs to their student-athletes. Following participation, some student-athletes have returned as mentors following graduation (Storch & Ohlson, 2009).

Limited Research from Student-Athletes' Perspective

Due to the separation of student-athletes on campus, there is a need for academic support services within the athletic department (Ishaq, 2019). The views of the student-athletes' will help improve the academic services available to student-athletes and ultimately increase the graduation rate for African-American males at Division I universities. There is an absence of research from the perspective of the student-athlete as to the effectiveness of support services for their academic success. Ishaq (2019) found that not all student-athletes were aware of support services and some did not use the services. It is important to get the views of student-athletes' that use the support services and eventually graduate from their institution. Student-athletes and athletic directors have reliably confirmed the advantages of support services at a Division I institution (Ishaq, 2019). Many student-athletes have benefited from participating in support services provided by their athletic department (Ishaq, 2019). The benefits from the student-athletes' perspective being studied includes determining the support services that have the greatest or minimum impact on student-athletes graduating from college (Ishaq, 2019). The support services may provide career development for student-athletes to transition into the workforce (Ishaq, 2019).

Significance of the Study

Few studies have determined the student-athletes' perspectives of the effectiveness of support services with the athletic department (Ishaq, 2019). The

emphasis of the research focus is on African-American male student-athletes performing well on the field; however, the graduation rates for these student-athletes are low. Previous research has focused on African-American male student-athletes being able to attend college due to their athletic scholarships and support staff assisting with mentoring (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). The support services available to student-athletes include academic advisors, tutors, coaches, and additional resources provided by the institution (Huml & Moorman, 2017). Each university serves a diverse student-athlete community and student-athletes may require different support (Ishaq, 2019). Athletic departments need to focus on improving the different support services for all student-athletes and making it an excellent college experience (Ishaq, 2019). Most student-athletes have gained from the support services offered at their institution (Ishaq, 2019). Athletic directors and student-athletes felt it was necessary to add additional programs to student-athletes' support services to prepare them for their future (Ishaq, 2019).

Rubin and Moses (2017) stated that it is important for student-athletes to have the opportunity to share their experience with all the services provided at the academic support centers. The services can assist with student-athletes academic needs and provide additional academic resources. Student-athletes are willing to compete academically with teammates to make the higher grade if they are in the same class (Rubin & Moses, 2017). Academic centers are conveniently located on campus for student-athletes to use daily. Rubin and Moses (2017) conducted a study which included three focus groups of six to ten student-athletes from women's sports, revenue sports, and male nonrevenue sports. The student-athletes felt it was vital to have isolated academic resources to accommodate their hectic schedules (Rubin & Moses, 2017). The significance of improving the culture for student-athletes will assist with attrition connected to academic issues (Rubin & Moses, 2017). The academic centers are

preferred by student-athletes due to having access to tutors and study areas with no distractions (Rubin & Moses, 2017). Academic advisors and tutors can assist student-athletes at the academic centers. As a result, the academic success of student-athletes impacts the culture of the entire campus (Rubin & Moses, 2017). This study will investigate the effectiveness of academic support services on the academic progress of male African-American student-athletes during college.

There is still a need for more research on support services that will assist student-athletes with their academic needs (Ishaq, 2019). Athletic departments provide support services on campus for their student-athletes. The support services are designed to assist student-athletes throughout the year. It is important to understand student-athletes' learning styles and elements that may block their learning in the classroom (Ishaq, 2019). The tutors, academic advisors, and coaches are part of the support that student-athletes receive; in addition, support services are available within the athletic department (Ishaq & Bass, 2019). The support services are vital for student-athletes that are pursuing graduation.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore perceptions of the influences of student support services, and other factors that may contribute to African American male football players' ultimate success in academics, at a public Division I university.

The following are the research questions for the study:

Research Question 1 – What perceptions do support services staff members (athletic directors, academic advisors, tutors, and mentors) hold concerning the influence of support services for the academic success of African-American student-athletes in football within their majors?

Research Question 2 - What perceptions do African-American student-athletes that play football hold concerning support services for their academic success within their majors?

Definition of Key Terms

Academic Advising is defined as:

The act of giving an academic suggestion to student-athletes about their academic future (Carodine et al., 2001). The academic advisor will certify a student-athlete's remaining degree requirements by listing them on the graduation checklist.

Cohort is defined as:

A group of people with the same ethnicity and gender that take part in football at a Division I university within a particular year. (NCAA, 2015a).

Division I is defined as:

Universities that have the largest student population, manage big athletic budgets, and distribute the most scholarships to student-athletes (NCAA, 2015a). Schools are committed to maintaining high academic standards and opportunities for athletic participation.

Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) is defined as:

NCAA Division I football member institutions at the primary and most competitive level, determines its champion through a series of bowl games. Football programs at the FBS level can award 85 full athletic scholarships (Moses, 2019).

Graduation Success Rates is defined as:

A NCAA created measure used to measure the number of students that graduate from their cohort within a six-year period (Melendez, 2006). The GSR accounts

for transfer students, midyear enrollees, and non-scholarship students unlike the federal graduation rate (Moses, 2019).

Mentoring is defined as:

The act of teaching or providing guidance to student-athletes. For example, an important role for mentors would be assisting student-athletes' with their time management skills (Carodine et al., 2001).

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is defined as:

A non-profit member-led organization tasked with regulation and monitoring of its member institutions athletic programs (Moses, 2019).

Power Five Conference is defined as:

Big Ten Conference, Big Twelve Conference, Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Southeastern Conference (SEC) and Pacific Twelve Conference (Pac-12) all participate in the Football Bowl Subdivision. Conferences are more likely to have problematic trends with African-American male student-athletes. (Brenneman, 2018).

Academic Redshirt is defined as:

Student-athletes that are academic redshirt are not able to compete during their first year of full-time enrollment at their institution. Academic redshirts can practice and after the first semester are required to be passing all of their courses to practice the remainder of the year (Ingram, 2019).

Retention is defined as:

The act of keeping student-athletes enrolled at a university until completion of graduation (Person & LeNoir, 1997).

Student-athletes are defined as:

A student participating in athletics in a secondary or post-secondary school with athletic programs (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005).

Success is defined as:

Student-athletes completing their degree program by passing all their courses and maintaining the required grade point average (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Walk-on is defined as:

College athletes without a scholarship that play on a team that offers scholarship; preferred walk-on is recruited or just plain walk-on (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004).

Conclusion

This study explored how football student-athletes perceive the effectiveness of on campus support services, and examine a university program in a large urban area in the southeast that allow football players to graduate and transition to a successful career. Presently, African-American male student-athletes have increased their graduation rates, however, they continue to trail behind Caucasian male student-athletes' graduation rates were from ten years ago (Brenneman, 2018). Eventually, administration and coaches will be able to offer career guidance for student-athletes or student-athletes will be able to enroll in a career exploration course (Burns et al., 2013). Student-athletes will be more prepared for their transition from college to their career. A rewarding career development programs will benefit student-athletes who feel they do not have the requirements for their job or believe their career outcomes are based on family and friends (Burns et al., 2013). This study sought to discover ways that can improve African American male football players' academic success rates using their support services at a Division I university.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of African-American male athletes on the effectiveness of the academic support services at a Division I university. The support services on campuses have an impact on if student-athletes can graduate with a degree (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). The following topics will be discussed such as history of student-athletes, student-athletes on scholarships, and student-athletes academic performance. In addition, educational challenges with student-athletes, reasons for low graduation rates and academic support systems will be investigated. The factors that affect student-athletes at universities are retention, graduation rates, and support services (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Effective support services have academic advising, tutoring, and mentoring. The programs that make up the support services that allow student-athletes to graduate will be explored to comprehend the research about increasing graduation rates. Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) conceptual model of academic success for student-athletes will be the theoretical framework used in this study. The following are the research questions for the study:

Research Question 1 – What perceptions do support services staff members (athletic directors, academic advisors, tutors, and mentors) hold concerning the influence of support services for the academic success of African-American student-athletes in football within their majors?

Research Question 2- What perceptions do African-American student-athletes that play football hold concerning support services for their academic success within their majors?

African-American male student-athletes are given the opportunity to attend a Division I university, yet, few are graduating with degrees (Ferris et al., 2004). Some

student-athletes are struggling in the classroom due to not being prepared for college. Athletic programs at Division I universities have given out scholarships to talented student-athletes. “College athletics have failed to fulfill their obligation of providing genuine educational opportunities for student-athletes to graduate from college” (Ferris et al, 2004, p. 555). Unfortunately, African-American student-athletes are having a difficult time staying in school and graduating with a degree (Ferris et al., 2004). The purpose of this qualitative case study is to describe the perceptions of student-athletes, coaches, support staff, and support services available to African-American male student-athletes that play football at a Division I university, and to determine the factors that can contribute to their ultimate success in academics. Many colleges have developed programs such as academic support services for their athletes, including academic advising, tutoring, academic mentors, learning specialists, and other services (Ferris et al., 2004). Student-athletes are not guaranteed a professional sports career and will need a rewarding career development program to pursue other career options (Burns et al., 2013). The literature review will discuss the retention, graduation rates, support services, and conceptual model of academic success for student-athletes.

History of Student-Athletes

The term “student-athlete” in America is associated with athletes participating in secondary or post-secondary school sport programs (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). “The implication is that although college athletes are by definition ‘matriculating (to be enrolled at a university) students’, the placement of the word student before athlete encourages athletes to give their student role the attention it deserves” (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005, pg.105). Student-athletes are responsible for attending classes and maintaining their eligibility on the team. Student-athlete gained acceptance in America

due to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) using the term in newspapers, magazines, radios, and televisions.

History of African-American Student-Athletes

Only a few people are aware of African-American college athletes that are considered pioneers (Lapchick, 2008). The first football game in America was between Rutgers University and College of New Jersey in 1869 (NCAA, 2015b). Lapchick (2008) found that William Henry Lewis played on the football team while attending law school at Harvard University in 1892. African-American male student-athletes were not allowed to play football in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) until 1947 and faced discrimination problems on campus (Thelin, 2011).

In the 1960's, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) allowed African-American student-athletes the opportunity to play with their institution when other Division I universities barred African-American students from playing (Thelin, 2011). African-American faculty, coaches, staff, or alumni that are familiar with the struggles for African-American students at predominantly Caucasian institutions can be mentors that will bridge the gap between African-American students and student-athletes (Melendez, 2008).

In 1951, Johnny Bright, nation's leader rusher, at Drake University was injured by one of Oklahoma A&M defensive players on purpose due to segregation in Oklahoma (Lapchick, 2008). The game that expedited integration in the SEC was between University of Southern California (USC) and the University of Alabama (Lapchick, 2008). USC had an all-African-American backfield and defeated the University of Alabama with legendary coach Bear Bryant, 42-21 at Birmingham's Legion Field on September 12, 1970 (Lapchick, 2008). African-American trailblazers created

opportunities for future African-American male student-athletes to play football which consist of 45% student-athletes (Lapchick, 2008).

Student-Athletes on Athletic Scholarships

In 1957, the NCAA introduced athletic scholarships that paid for the tuition, fees, room, and board, as well as additional expenses for student-athletes with financial needs and without an academic scholarship (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). The term “student-athlete” was adopted to counter the negative publicity and pressures created by the athletic scholarship policy in the 1950s’ (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). At first, the NCAA gave out athletic scholarships to talented athletes to help assist them with furthering their education (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Division I institutions are based on having a large student population, a huge budget, and numerous scholarships for student-athletes (NCAA, 2015a). Athletic scholarships for student-athletes have since changed from a four-year award to being reviewed every year and being revoked by the institution if the student did not continue to meet qualifications (Thelin, 2011).

Matthews (2007) found that 30% of African-American male student-athletes are on scholarships at Division I universities. “In Division I sports, a black male is often many times more likely to be on a football or basketball scholarship than a white male” (Jackson, 2015, pg.1). However, thousands of high school athletes continue their athletic participation at the college level and receive almost one trillion dollars annually in scholarship money (Czopp, 2010). African-American student-athletes have received athletic scholarships, however, their graduation ratio is the lowest for football programs at Division I institutions (Perry, 2014). African-American student-athletes can get athletic scholarships to attend college but student-athletes on the football teams are not earning degrees (Perry, 2014).

Division I student-athletes should maintain their academic performance and are celebrated by the campus community when they perform well on the field (Melendez, 2008). Students pack football stadiums in the Power Five Conferences to support the student-athletes on their campus. Most of the African-American male student-athletes enjoy benefits of being on an athletic scholarship and are more accepted on campus (Melendez, 2008). Some student-athletes are treated like celebrities if the football team is victorious. Melendez (2006) found that African-American student-athletes were 13% more likely to graduate than non-athletic African-American students.

Student-Athletes Academic Performance

The athletic requirements that student-athletes encounter on campus ultimately affects their academic and personal growth (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Moreover, student-athletes exam scores and grade point averages are significantly lower than potential students accepted for their academic standing (Ridpath, 2010). A number of student-athletes' academic goal is to graduate with a degree in four years. Student-athletes are responsible for maintaining their grades to stay academically eligible throughout the season. Within the first semester of college, some student-athletes struggle balancing attending classes and practicing for their sport (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Several student-athletes will invest more time to their athletic commitments and neglect their academic workload. As a result, student-athletes often use most of their time on athletics and consequently there is minimal time for academic interests (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Student-athletes are perceived to only care about their sport and will do the minimal to pass a course. "Stereotypes of student-athletes as "dumb jocks" or as "not serious about their education" have consistently plagued the collegiate community, and have emanated from both the student body and the faculty" (Melendez, 2008, pg. 424). Some of the pressures that student-athletes encounter during a season

are due to an extensive travel schedule that usually impacts their attendance in class (Ting, 2009). Ridpath (2010) found that even student-athletes who are academically ready still encounter issues balancing their academics and athletics daily.

Ethical issues with student-athletes and coaches

Some student-athletes do not have the skills to perform well in their college academics and depend on academic misconduct to stay eligible on the team (Gurney, 2011). Several student-athletes are therefore using unethical practices to be successful in their courses (Gurney, 2011). Consequently, certain student-athletes have not rightfully earned the credits received for their courses taken toward their degree plan. Cole (2016) noted several such examples, including a student-trainer who attended Notre Dame University who provided student-athletes with answers to assessments and completed their assignments. Several student-athletes will have their girlfriends complete their assignments for them. Some professors give athletes credit without assignments being completed correctly and/or some tutors are completing the assignments for the student-athletes (Cole, 2016). Because of this reason, African-American male student-athletes are not graduating due to academic violations within the programs.

Ridpath (2010) discovered that influential coaches at some institutions are engaged in behavioral practices such as altering transcripts to ensure that the student-athlete is granted admission to the university. Some coaches are ignoring the admission rules regarding the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) (Ridpath, 2010). Consequently, some student-athletes are admitted by the institution under special circumstances from the coaches and require academic support amenities (Ridpath, 2010). Ridpath (2010) found that some student-athletes graduated while others pursued other endeavors.

Low Graduation Ratio for Student-Athletes

The graduation rate for all student-athletes obtaining a bachelor's degree in 2019 was around 89% and only 78% for African-American student-athletes (NCAA Research Staff, 2020). Departments within some universities require all student-athletes to maintain a GPA that will allow them to stay within their degree plan. While many student-athletes are taking advantage of this unique educational opportunity; graduation rates among African-American male student-athletes remain considerably lower than their Caucasian counterparts (Czopp, 2010).

Academic accountability among student-athletes is still an issue with minimal consensus (Wyatt, 1999). Additionally, if athletes' goals are to meet the minimum grade point average (GPA), they will fail to meet the necessary GPA for some majors and be limited to majors with low GPA requirements (Byrd et al., 2011). Student-athletes will not be able to graduate with a degree plan if their GPA is below 2.0 (NCAA, 2015a). Athletic departments along with NCAA need to improve upon helping student-athletes navigate their path into future careers (Byrd et al., 2011). Furthermore, the low graduation rates for African-American student-athletes raise questions about the institutional commitment and individual student's priorities (Simiyu, 2012).

Ridpath (2010) found that the NCAA created a system to determine student-athletes' Graduation Success Rate (GSR). The GSR was designed to not penalize institutions if a student-athlete graduated from another university (Ridpath, 2010).

Perry (2014) found that at some Division I institutions African-American student-athletes make up 3 % of the total student population and 60% of the football team. The dream of attending college is a reality for African-American student-athletes; in spite of that, graduation may still not be a priority. "Conversely, in the past two decades 42% of student athletes overall still have not graduated from college" (Ridpath, 2010, pg.255-

256). Many student-athletes are dropping out of college if their professional career in the National Football League (NFL) is hopeless (Perry, 2014). Some athletic departments have African-American male student-athletes put on a pedestal; however, they may not be accepted academically by some faculty (Perry, 2014).

Additionally, some of the African-American males are not prepared for college due to receiving special privileges in high school (Perry & Steele, 2003). Only 50.2% of African-American male student-athletes graduated from college within six years compared to 66.9% of student-athletes overall (Perry, 2014). Perry (2014) reports that 96.1% of NCAA Division I schools graduated African-American male student-athletes at lower counts than other student-athletes. While in high school, some African American males are more interested in sports and less prepared for college or careers (Moore III et al., 2015). Unfortunately, 97.4% of universities have graduated African-American male student-athletes at rates lower than the undergraduate population across-the-board (Perry, 2014).

Intercollegiate sports programs are required to publish their student-athletes' graduation rate (Thelin, 2011). Lapchick and Kuhn (2011) found that African-American student-athletes participating in football have lower graduation rates than Caucasian student-athletes. The African-American males' student-athletes graduation rate has increased by 17% in comparison with when data was first gathered (Petr & McArdle, 2012). However, 96.1% of NCAA Division I institutions have a lower graduation rates among African –American males in comparison to all student-athletes (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). Hosick (2018) noted that African-American male student-athletes graduated at 52% compared to only 41% of African-American male students.

Comeaux and Harrison developed a conceptual model of academic success for student-athletes at Division I universities (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The goal of this

model is to explain the progression of exchanges that lead to student-athletes staying in school and graduating with a degree (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The model explores the student-athlete experience, examines the plan and purpose of the conceptual model, and look over information on student-athletes' academic accomplishment (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Comeaux and Harrison (2011) found that talented student-athletes tend to have optimistic academic goals each semester. However, after two semesters, student-athletes' goals shift to becoming elite athletes, including doubling the amount of time spent preparing for athletics in comparison to less time dedicated to academics (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Ridpath (2010) analyzed the motivations of student-athletes to use support services by incorporating the Victor Vroom's Expectance Theory of Motivation (1964). The Vroom's expectance theory observes the correlation and motivation of academic support services for student-athletes and determines factors that encourage a student-athlete to want to graduate from college (Ridpath, 2010). The study had 191 senior student-athletes (males and females in all sports) from Division I Football Bowl Series (FBS) universities (Ridpath, 2010). Ridpath (2010) examines the inspirational influences of academic support services for student-athletes on campuses. Student-athletes are motivated to attend institutions with support services to assist with their academics (Ridpath, 2010). As a result, some of the student-athletes' grade point averages are increasing and they are completing their four-year degree plans due to the support services (Ridpath, 2010). The support services for student-athletes can result in a college degree while accomplishing athletic aspirations on the field (Ridpath, 2010).

Standards for Student-Athletes

The standards include student-athletes graduating from high school before enrolling into college (NCAA, 2015a). High school student-athletes will need to have

completed 16 core courses, maintain a 2.30 grade point average, and received a high school diploma (NCAA Eligibility Center, 2015).

Student-athletes need to earn a combined Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT) score that matches their core course GPA. Student-athletes are required to maintain a minimum 2.30 grade point average (GPA) to stay on the team (NCAA, 2015a). The student-athlete is putting himself at risk of losing his athletic scholarship with a minimum grade point average. Student-athletes should complete sixteen core courses and at least 10 courses should be completed before the seventh semester (NCAA, 2015b). Ridpath (2010) found that a student-athlete will not be able to participate in athletics if they are not following a degree or academically qualified.

Educational Challenges with Student-Athletes

African-American male student-athletes are faced with educational challenges that limit their opportunities to be successful in college (Comeaux, 2008). College athletes can spend more than 40 hours a week engaged in their particular sport and usually eat, sleep, live, and share the same majors as other athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Comeaux and Harrison (2011) realize that student-athletes spend more than 40 hours towards athletics and stated, “As a result, student-athletes have less time available for their academic pursuits and other educationally productive activities” (p.236). Some of the African-American male student-athletes are not able to attend tutoring sessions offered by support services that would increase their academic achievement (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Some of the African-American male student-athletes are fatigued after practice and are choosing to not receive assistance from their academic support services on campus (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Additionally, some African-American male

student-athletes are choosing majors that require more time (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). For example, student-athletes that are majoring in engineering or law will need additional hours outside of the classroom to complete their assignments. Student-athletes will need the addition time outside of instruction to complete projects or study for assessments. However, many student-athletes have majors such as Parks and Recreation and communication that are less time intensive (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The student-athletes will need fewer minutes outside of academics due to the less challenging curriculum with these majors.

Some of the challenges that student-athletes encounter throughout the season include an extensive practice schedule, unique lifestyle, and pressures to meet expectations (Carodine et al., 2001). Some of the student-athletes are faced with the unique challenges due to the demands of college life (Ting, 2009). For example, the time management problems and absences from classes due to the competitive travel demands can contribute to athletes falling behind in their coursework (Ting, 2009). In addition, some student-athletes are not performing well due to missing instructional time from tardiness and absences (Ting, 2009). Across the country, around 82% of student-athletes spend at least 10 hours practicing their sport and 40% devote more than 10 hours on their sport (Jolly, 2008). Melendez (2006) discovered that some student-athletes were disengaged from their academic destinations due to over reinforcement of the student-athletes' athletic goals by coaches.

Many student-athletes are trying to juggle between athletics and remaining in good academic standings (Ting, 2009). As Division I institutions focus on athletic achievements, results in student-athletes conflicting with academic honesty and academic inspirations to graduate from college (Ridpath, 2010). Numerous student-athletes encountered peer pressure regarding academics and athletics, unrealistic expectations

from their faculty or coaches, and underutilizing the counseling amenities at the institutions (Ting, 2009). All student-athletes are required to maintain a minimal grade point average to stay on the team and remain academically eligible. Some student-athletes that are not able to balance their academics and athletics are dropping out of school. Several student-athletes are not ready for the rigor assignments and assessments in the college classrooms (Ridpath, 2010).

Student-Athletes with Disabilities

Institutions should offer extracurricular activities for student-athletes with disabilities (DeMartini, 2016). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prevents any type of discrimination for student-athletes with disabilities (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Research has shown that institutions should implement some type of pre-assessment to determine assistance for student-athletes with a learning disability or Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity- disorder (ADHD) (Manderino & Gunstad, 2018). Universities are required to accommodate student-athletes by providing proper equipment, monitoring their behaviors, accommodating their assessments, appropriate training, and know their teaching style (DeMartini, 2016). Student-athletes with learning disabilities have higher behavior infractions, failing more courses, low graduation percentage, and high dropout rate (DeMartini, 2016).

Retention of African-American Male Student-Athletes

Moore III et al., (2015) recommended that college coaches should make academics a priority when recruiting African-American male student-athletes to play for their program. The coaches can mention about the different degrees that student-athletes can earn as they transition into their future career. “The research on Black male has offered us great hope, yet little progress has been made to change their public and

educational standings compared to their White male counterparts” (Moore III et al., 2015, p.35). Moore III et al. (2015) note that African-American male student-athletes focus predominately on athletics.

African-American male student-athletes graduation rates are lower than other student-athletes and men pursuing their bachelor’s degree (Moore III et al., 2015). Researchers have noticed obstacles surrounding African-American male student-athletes with their scholastic and individual development (Moore III et al., 2015). Stuart (2012) found that the graduation gap could widen for African-American student-athletes if they are not able to meet the new higher academic standards imposed by the NCAA. Student-athletes that were able to gain support from teammates, professors, and family were able to stay in college (Ting, 2009). African-American student-athletes in their prime concentrate on their sport commitment and need to still attend classes, workouts, practices, games, travel, and team meetings (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Furthermore, the additional time commitments due to sports results in these athletes having a more difficult time being successful academically and thusly have a harder time staying in school (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

One of the most effective practices for retention and recruitment of student-athletes is a strong student support system (Stork & Ohlson, 2009). Gurney (1990) stated that academic support programs should be evaluated based on retention and graduation rates of college athletes. Student-athletes being delivered educational support is a challenging task assigned to the academic support staff (Moore III et al., 2015). Many African American student-athletes are remaining in college due to the social support on campus (Melendez, 2008). The important elements of an effective retention plan for student-athletes would consist of assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and reformation (Person & LeNoir, 1997). The results of a retention plan will lead to

providing academic support for student-athletes at NCAA Division institutions. The academic support staff should be flexible to meet with student-athletes on their schedules and provide academic resources to assist with challenges (Bennett et al., 2015).

Support Systems for Student-Athletes

A model of student support programs for student-athletes in college includes academic support services, personal development guidance, and career counseling (Carodine et al., 2001). Additionally, the support services have assisted student athletes' with balancing their academic workload with athletic commitments at the university (Carodine et al., 2001). Tutoring services and additional teaching is available for most student-athletes on campus (Carodine et al., 2001). Mentor programs are a vital part of the student support services for student-athletes (Carodine et al., 2001). The mentor is responsible for meeting with the student and the academic support staff to assess student-athlete's growth (Carodine et al., 2001).

Ridpath, Zullo, and Gill (2009) stated that some athletic administrators are in support of services that will provide extra assistance to student-athletes to ensure academic success to balance the athletic demand with their studies. The majority of all institutions participating in NCAA Division I athletics provide some level of academic assistance to their student-athletes such as advisors, tutors, and mentors to help student athletes balance the demand of academics and athletics (Watson, 2006).

An effective student support system at an institution can greatly improve the odds of that student-athlete attending and graduating from the university (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Furthermore, Carodine, et al. (2001) found that colleges need to gain more funds to provide exemplary student support systems for their student-athletes. Many of the universities with support systems at their institutions offer mentoring, academic tutoring, advising with an academic advisor, and academic workshops (Burns et al., 2013).

Some institutions have improved the athletic support programs by offering programs that meet the needs of their student-athletes (Melendez, 2006). The NCAA has implemented Propositions 16 and 48 which include changes to the criteria for student-athletes leaving high school (Melendez, 2006). The requirements for incoming freshmen entering college have risen since Proposition 48 in 1986 (Sailes, 2017). Sailes (2017) noted that Proposition 16 requires high school seniors to have a 2.0/2.5 (Sliding Scale) GPA along with an ACT score of 17/21 or SAT score of 700/900.

Improvement in graduation rates for student-athletes can be attributed to heightened student athlete academic support programs, growth in social support in the student athlete community, changes in the NCAA requirements for high school student-athletes, and increased psychological support services for student-athletes (Melendez, 2006).

Social Support.

Some of the African-American student-athletes have perceived support from teammates, mentors, and tutors as an important predictor for college retention (Melendez, 2006). Student-athletes form a social network that will be able to assist them with their transition from high school to college (Melendez, 2006). African-American student-athletes have a higher retention rate when the institution is providing social support for all students (Melendez, 2006). The social support systems provide African-American student-athletes the opportunity to feel part of the institution (Melendez, 2006). Some coaches at institutions encouraged student-athletes to use the academic support services to assist with coursework (Keim & Strickland, 2004).

Melendez (2006) suggested that sports participation can increase social and emotional experiences that will assist with the transition into college for student-athletes.

African-American student-athletes are able to handle stressful situation due to support from the athletics department (Melendez, 2006).

The culture and environment at the institutions are factors that affect student-athletes' performance in the classroom. "A theoretical model devoted exclusively to Division I student athletes can lead to an understanding of their process of interaction within the college environment" (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011, pg. 235. Most of the Division I universities need to provide a supportive and comfortable environment for their student-athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The interventions strategies that are provided to student-athletes can allow them to be successful in the classroom and allow them to continue to compete on the field (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The university may provide a stipend for student-athletes to purchase professional clothing for their career night (Ishaq, 2019). Some institutions are eliminating support services to compensate their head football coach's salary; however, services to support student-athletes are important for the program (Ishaq, 2019).

Academic Support.

Universities have recognized that college student-athletes are at risk of having their academic and career developments stalled, and have implemented tutoring, workshops, and advice through academic support services (Burns et al., 2013). College athletes that were satisfied with their school's academic support services had higher levels of career decision-making self-efficacy (Burns et al., 2013). The services are geared to accommodate all of the student-athletes' needs. The career developmental programs were most beneficial to those student-athletes who generally were unsuccessful or based their career outcomes on outside influences rather than intrinsic motivation (Burns et al., 2013).

Athletic academic centers play a vital role for the development of student-athletes at an institution (Ishaq, 2019). The academic centers are on campus to support student athletes with tutoring, academic advising, and mentoring. Student-athletes prefer to study at the academic centers to avoid outside interruptions (Rubin & Moses, 2017). Most academic centers are opened late to accommodate all student-athletes after going to their classes. Ishaq (2019) found that academic centers accommodate student-athletes and allow them the opportunity to focus on their academic concerns. Student-athletes can utilize the support services within the academic centers.

Storch and Ohlson (2009) found well-executed support programs can help student athletes with their study and academic preparation skills. Effective support services are expected to assist African-American male student-athletes to successfully complete their degree (Stout, 2018). Ultimately, more African-American male student-athletes that play football may take advantage of these services and graduate. Some schools have implemented programs for their student-athletes, however, there is not an all-encompassing program that will prepare every Division I, II, and III student-athlete (Stout, 2018).

The academic support centers were established due to the fury over the shortage of resources for student-athletes in college (Huml, Hancock, & Bergman, 2014). Athletic directors and coaches were in need of support for student-athletes on their team. Student-athletes that are talented athletically are not performing well academically and are uncertain about their future careers (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Tyrance, Harris, & Post, 2013). The academic support centers are there to assist student-athletes with the transition to college. An increase in African-American student-athletes staying in school and graduating is due to academic support centers (NCAA, 2015a). However, African-American male student-athletes that participate in football still have the lowest

graduation rate in college. If student-athletes are not staying in school or graduating, it will affect the student-athlete and university in a damaging way (Huml, et al., 2014).

Some of the academic support services for student-athletes at Division I universities will include tutoring, mentoring, advising, career counselor, and life skills coordinator (Carodine, et al., 2001). The following sections will discuss each of these areas in detail.

Tutoring. Universities recommend that academic advising resources and tutoring centers are made available to student-athletes to ensure that they make satisfactory progress toward their current degree and future endeavors (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Most support programs provide tutoring for all student-athletes individually or group appointment formats (Etzel, Ferrante, and Pinkney, 1996). The tutors are typically graduate students, upperclassmen, volunteers, and school staff identified by professors or departments as having the expertise in a specific discipline (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). The tutorial services are designed to support student-athletes that are often confronted with scheduling conflicts that impact their attendance in class and participation in academic enrichment opportunities (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Program tutors will track the progress of the courses designated by the student-athlete support staff, because of a history of the students struggling in these classes (Carodine, et al., 2001).

Mentoring. Mentors are the catalyst to ensuring an effortless transition for student-athletes between high school and college such as through effective communication with faculty, experiencing academic success, obtaining organizational skills consistently. A mentor could be a student services advisor, faculty, former student-athlete, or coach (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Mentor programs are a very important aspect of the student-athletes support program. An important role for mentors would be assisting student-athletes with their study skills, time management, overall organizational

skills (Storch & Ohlson, 2009; Carodine et al., 2001). It is recommended that a mentor meet at least once a week with the student-athlete and meet with athletic support staff periodically to summarize and evaluate the student-athletes' progress (Meacham, 2000).

Mentoring has proven to be successful in retaining African-American male student-athletes on campus (Person & LeNoir, 1997). It is important for athletic programs to have mentors that look similar to their African-American male student-athletes. It is important for mentors to convince student-athletes that instructors will assist and support them academically (Person & LeNoir, 1997).

Academic Advising. The National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) objective is to ensure that student-athletes stay academically eligible and they complete their degree (Gayles, Crandall, & Jones, 2015). Academic advisors assist students by helping them achieve their post-secondary goals (Academic Advisor, 2015). Additionally, academic advisors aid students with identifying their strengths, examining programs, and choosing their major (Academic Advisor, 2015). Advisors work closely with university administrators and professors in order to stay updated with program changes (Academic Advisor, 2015). An academic advisor is recommended to support student-athletes with various academic situations that will be encountered throughout the year (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Academic support centers focus on student-athletes staying qualified, eliminating low academic potentials, and attaining a degree (Gayles et al., 2015). Some academic advisors working with athletic departments are encouraged to attend an additional training to equip them with advising skills needed to meet the needs of the student-athletes (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Academic learning specialists, who work in the capacity of a tutor, equip student-athletes with the skills to be successful and increase their motivation to perform well academically (Gayles et al., 2015). Some academic programs that support athletics programs require the major advisor to certify a

student's remaining degree requirements by listing them on the graduation checklist (Carodine et al., 2001).

Moses (2019) conducted a study at NCAA Division I institutions on athletic academic advisors' desired guiding style that assisted with African-American males continuing in school and progressing with a degree. A survey was piloted with counselors to resolve some of the challenges African-American males encountered on campus (Moses, 2019). There is limited research on advising style preferences for athletic academic advisors that assist African-American male student-athletes (Moses, 2019).

The GSR for student-athletes made it clear that professional academic advisors on staff are available to assist with the support programs at Division I universities (Ridpath, 2010). With the additional time commitments due to sports, student-athletes have more of a difficult time being successful in school. Some colleges are encouraging student-athletes to create an academic plan that is related to their future career goals (Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). Student-athletes need to be aware that knowledgeable advisors are available to work closely with them (Price, 2008).

Career Counselors. Career counselors are essential for assisting student-athletes with choosing the career path that would allow them to have prosperous careers (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Student athletes should focus on a planning for a strong career after graduating with a degree (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). The career counselors should be accommodating and reachable working with student-athletes (Moore III et al., 2015). Career counselors are expected to assist with the demands of every student on campus while preserving the university's interest (Moore III et al., 2015). It was found that during the 2012-2013 school year, around 9% of African-American males worked as either an academic advisors or career counselors (Moore III et al., 2015). Additionally,

some African-Americans males are not qualified due to not having a bachelor degree or they are choosing a well-paid career (Moore III et al., 2015).

Life Skills Coordinator. A life skills coordinator at a university is responsible for providing student-athletes with valuable information for their life after college (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). The life skills coordinators run seminars ranging from financial literacy to career searching process for student-athletes (Storch & Ohlson, 2009).

African-American males that are part of the academic support staff who have participated in college athletics will be able to share their college experience, understand the African-American culture, and assist with their future career aspirations (Moore et al., 2015).

Life skills coordinators that are former African-American male student-athletes can build relationships based on trust with student-athletes due to common past encounters (Moore III et al., 2015). Lastly, African-American male faculty associates play a vital role in the recruitment of African-American male student-athletes to their institutions (Moore III et al., 2015).

Funding for Academic Support Programs

Stipends were provided to some of the Division I institutions to support academic programs specific to student-athletes (Ridpath, 2010). Athletic directors used the stipends to focus on student-athletes' academic services and resources. "Many schools used this money in hiring extra counselors, tutors, and/or purchasing needed equipment like such as computers, and academic support services for athletes grew exponentially and it continues today as the pressure to win, keep athletes eligible for competition" (Ridpath, 2010, pg.256).

Retention Programs for Student-Athletes

The Vitamin University (pseudonym) has their Gateway Scholars Program to assist students with their transition to college (Gateway Scholars, 2020). The Gateway

Scholars program had a retention rate of 98% with a grade point average of 3.12 (Gateway Scholars, 2016). Person and LeNoir (1997) found the Gateway program to have a better tracking system; it identifies needs early, and increases the number of academic advisors available to work with student-athletes. Vitamin University has seen an increase in retention with African –American males participating in the Gateway Program (Person & LeNoir, 1997).

Additionally, the life skills program Challenging Athletes’ Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS) has addressed the student-athletes’ needs such as academically, socially, and personally (Person & LeNoir, 1997). Many institutions have implemented the CHAMPS/Life Skills program on their campus to have optimistic endings for African-American male student-athletes (NCAA, 2009). However, each program is uniquely based and does not focus on all the challenges that African-American male student-athletes will encounter (Cooper, 2016).

Academic Progress Rate (APR) and Graduate Success Ratio (GSR)

The main focus of retention for student-athletes may lead to an academic reform such as Academic Progress Rate (APR) and GSR to ensure that all student-athletes are given the opportunity to not only succeed but also to graduate (NCAA, 2007). The APR is a measure introduced by the NCAA and organizes the athletic programs to maintain the eligibility and retention of student-athletes that will be used to track their graduation rates (NCAA, 2012). The GSR will allow institutions to claim student-athletes that have transferred from another university or college and successfully graduated. Athletes are graduating due to the services available to them and their focus on academics.

Student-Athletes’ Future After College

As a result of student-athletes not earning a degree, some are not prepared for life after college or the end of their professional careers in the National Football League

(NFL). African-American male student-athletes are advised to devote their time to graduating from their institution; developing career goals outside the athletic playing field, and creating a marketable brand that will separate the student-athlete from everyone else (Moore III et al., 2015). Comeaux (2008) found that student-athletes that have attended high schools with effective college readiness programs and earned high grade point averages are more likely to graduate from college with a degree. When the college academic support programs are effective, student-athletes are satisfied with the collegiate experience and are motivated to graduate with a degree (Comeaux, 2008).

As the student-athlete continues to focus on sports, consequently, this leads them to not being prepared for their career transition after college (Sandstedt et al., 2004). A minority of student-athletes make preparations for their career after sports and usually struggle with this transition (Sandstedt et al., 2004). Most student-athletes plan for their future career to be in the NFL as a professional athlete. Burns et al. (2013) stated the importance of student-athletes being prepared for a career, “Student athletes with low levels of career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE) are more likely to avoid career decision-making tasks such as choosing a major, learning about their own skills and interests, and seeking out relevant career information (pg.162).”

The low levels of CDSE consist of student-athletes not being pleased with the academic support services on campus and not experiencing success when it comes to career exploration (Burns et al., 2013). Likewise, some of the student-athletes are not prepared to make great decisions regarding their career and are likely to go in a different direction within their career when experiencing problems (Burns et al., 2013). There are some student-athletes that are not concerned about their future careers after college and are unlikely to pursue other career options (Sandstedt et al., 2004). Due to student-

athletes extensive schedule with athletics, this validates why career exploration is not a priority (Sandstedt et al., 2004)

Athletic directors and coaches are focusing more on career development options for student-athletes. In reference to societal influence, Lubker and Etzel (2007) note, “while the development of a reliable and valid measure can be quite an undertaking, with athletics becoming more of a central focus in our society” (p. 477). The benefits of being a student-athlete includes improving your time management skills, becoming an effective leader, and being able to work with others to accomplish a common goal (NCAA, 2015a). Student-athletes will have the opportunity to work at internships around the world and this will open doors for many student-athletes to obtain a job outside of sports (NCAA, 2015a).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the present study is Comeaux and Harrison’s (2011) conceptual model of academic success for student-athletes. The model attributes to college student-athletes educational achievement, an area that is under examined (Comeaux, 2015). The model comprises four stages: precollege (e.g., family background, educational experiences, preparation, and individual attributes); initial commitments (e.g., goal, sport, and institutional commitments); college environmental factors (e.g., social and academic systems); and commitments (e.g., goal, sport, and institutional commitment). The different phases outline important aspects in student-athlete admission to college and displays a framework for comprehending student-athletes’ academic success (Comeaux, 2015). Faculty and directors can use this model to assist with interventions and plans that will help student-athletes navigate each of the stages that will lead to an increase in enrollment.

Precollege Characteristics

The important precollege characteristics associated with academic success for student-athletes include family background, educational experiences, preparation, and individual characteristics. Family background characteristics focus on student-athletes' interactions with peers and anticipations about college (Astin & Antonio, 2012; Lang, Dunham, & Alpert, 1988). Sellers (1992) found that student-athletes with a higher social economic status (SES) were more likely to experience academic success compared to student-athletes in low SES category. Student-athletes' family encouragement and beliefs of college are more vital than athlete's own expectations about their future (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

The high school grade point average (GPA) is a major factor in the precollege educational experiences and preparation for student-athletes (Comeaux, 2005). Student-athletes need to maintain a minimum GPA to stay on their team in high school. In addition, a quantitative study of student-athletes at Division I found that the GPA has a positive relationship with future post-secondary success (Comeaux, 2005). Some student-athletes are not inspired to complete college due to not having taken privileged to advanced placement courses, classes similar to undergraduate courses, and other university equipped amenities while in high school (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Oakes, Rogers, Siler, Horng, & Goode, 2004; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Most student-athletes are enrolling in remedial courses due to their low GPA and college placement exams. Most student-athletes are not prepared for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT). Some student-athletes are not able to attend college trips and selected teachers are encouraging them to focus on athletics instead of preparing for college entrance exams. Many future student-athletes met NCAA requirements for competition; however, student-athletes are not meeting admissions criteria for universities (Ridpath, 2010). Furthermore, not all teachers are getting student-athletes prepared for higher education in socially economic challenged campuses (Kozol 1992; 2005). All of these elements are critical

for determining a student-athletes' precollege experience in the conceptual model (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

A student-athlete's individual attributes contributes to their academic success in high school (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Individual attributes would include the student-athletes being a leader and scholar in the classroom. The noncognitive variables that impact student-athletes educational success include athletic and academic obligation, potential failure excuses, and scholastic self-esteem (Simons & Rheenen, 2000). The demands of student-athletes' athletic schedules can affect their performance in the classroom causing them to fail out of school. For instance, Brenneman (2018) found that only 55 percent of African-American male student-athletes graduated compared to 69 percent of all student-athletes. Some coaches demand student-athletes to practice more throughout the week, however, decreasing their time to focus on their academics.

Additionally, some African-American student-athletes are not as ready for higher education due to growing up in deprived neighborhoods with low performing schools (Eitzen, 1988). Student-athletes attending at-risks institutions are not exposed to college preparatory courses that can assist with college entrance exams. Unfortunately, the characteristics about student athletes have remained stable after more than 20 years in regards to specific personalities of student-athletes and academic success (Dilley-Knoles, Burnett, & Peak, 2010; Comeaux, 2005; Comeaux, Speer, Taustine, & Harrison, 2011; Eitzen, 2009; NCAA, 2009; Sellers, 1992; Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1999). In Comeaux's research (2015), football student-athletes are expected to perform worse than other student-athletes academically because of the underprivileged education provided in middle and high schools (NCAA, 2009; Sellers, 1992).

Levels of Commitment

Subsequently, the precollege characteristics of student-athletes, is imperative for their commitments to academic success, sports, and their campus when they get to college (Comeaux

& Harrison, 2011). The commitments appear twice in the model, the initial obligations and after becoming student-athletes along with connections at their institution with colleagues (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Student-athletes in search of a doctoral degree are more likely to graduate from college in comparison to a student-athlete just pursuing a bachelor's degree (Sedlacek & Adams-Gatson, 1992). Curtis (2006) found that a student-athlete's educational success story is directly related to if they plan on completing their degree plan. Athletic programs that enforce academics will support their student-athletes with resources for completion. In addition, more research is necessary regarding student-athletes' short- and long-term academic goal commitments at a Division I institution (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Many student-athletes attending Division I universities are more devoted to sports rather than their academics (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Some student-athletes' dreams have become a reality playing football at their favorite university. Commitment to sports is increased for student-athletes, due to individual status and how well they perform during the season (Stevenson, 1999). Division I student-athletes are performing in front of NFL recruiters on a weekly basis and in certain cases academics become less of a priority. Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) found that admiration from close peers and family members also have a significant influence on student-athletes' sports commitment. Families that support their student-athlete at the games are committed to his athletic career. In a qualitative study, male student-athletes attending income-producing schools were hopeful about their academic goals; however, after two semesters, they were not able to partake in instructionally focused events due to the high demands of their sport (Adler & Adler, 1991). In some cases, student-athletes declared for the NFL and did not finish their degree plan. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) examined student athletes from 18 Division I campuses and found that student-athletes considered themselves more of a competitor than a scholar. Various student-athletes are more committed to the sport because of the high expectations for the program.

Sport commitment is an imperative feature of the theoretical model due to the descriptions of student-athletes' involvements at their university (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Student-athletes should consider attending meetings, practices for the upcoming game, and workout sessions in the fieldhouse. Coakley and Pike (2001) found that obligation to institutional athletics is a collaborative activity that involves student-athletes' own talents and mindset for triumph in their sport. Student-athletes are responsible for staying eligible and displaying their talents for NFL recruiters. Furthermore, coaches that are under pressure to win to maintain another contract have an impact on student-athletes' sports dedication at their college (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011). In fact, a few student-athletes are committed to transferring and graduating from another campus (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011).

Tinto (1975) defined institutional commitment as the level of significance attributed to finishing student's bachelor degree at a university. Some student-athletes are focused on their grade point average and completing their degree plan on time. A student-athlete that has an above average institutional commitment is further expected to realize academic success during their experience on campus (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Regrettably, early inquiry has not influenced for institutional commitments when converging on student-athletes. Research is needed for the rapport between scholastic attainment and institutional commitment for student-athletes at Division I colleges (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The social and academic systems are important surroundings characteristics to ensure the success of student-athletes.

Environmental Characteristics: Social and Academic Systems

Similar to precollege characteristics, student-athletes dealings with their institutional surroundings also effects enrollment and attainment (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The realization of student-athletes performing well in the classroom depends on their assimilation into the social and academic environments of their university. Previous research has shown that environmental characteristics portray an essential part for this theoretical model (Astin &

Antonio, 2012; Hu & Kuh, 2002, 2003; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1987). Moreover, the faculty interactions with student-athletes will impact their performance in the classroom. Some programs provide academic advisors to help student-athletes accomplish their academic goals. Studies have shown that the more student-athletes devoted energy to learning and being engrossed in the social and academic atmosphere on campus, the better the probability for personal fulfillment with their scholastic experience and perseverance was in school (Astin, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Coaches that stress the importance of graduating to their student-athletes allow for a smooth transition into their future career. The combination of social and academic structures of university time is a critical characteristic of this theoretical representation (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Comeaux and Harrison (2011) suggest that social integration occurs for student-athletes when they are intermingling with staff and associates that are not on their team. Some student-athletes participate in campus activities and network with other students. Most Division I student-athletes experienced academic achievement due to social interactions with students on campus (Comeaux, 2005). Some of the students tutored student-athletes with their coursework and collaborate with them on team projects. Gayles and Hu (2009) observed, on average, student-athletes' positive interactions with classmates helped communication skills and provided a better understanding of the course. The non-athletic students can see student-athletes during the week in class and on the football field on Saturdays in the fall. National Survey on Student Engagement found that student-athletes had comparable connections with nonathletic cohorts which consisted of mutual knowledge and exchanges with professors (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). Most student-athletes are more likely to graduate having positive interactions with faculty.

Conversely, faculty assisting student-athletes with learning skills and career targets allowed Caucasian student-athletes rather than African-American student-athletes to feel confident within their major (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The campus communications on some campuses with African-American student-athletes are fading due to adverse race atmosphere and negative academic outlooks by campus staff (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). In 2010, 5,500 Caucasian men enrolled in colleges compared to only 1,100 African-American men (Harper & Harris, 2012). Several student-athletes are not treated appropriately by students and professors such as being called inappropriate names (e.g., “dumb jock”). As a result, student-athletes are dropping out of college or pursuing a career in the NFL. Most student-athletes that participate in football concentrate on their professional sports career and are more interested in sports than Caucasian student-athletes (Beamon & Bell, 2002, 2006; Edwards, 2000; Eitel & Eitel, 2002; Hoberman, 2000).

In summary, the interactions that student-athletes form with personnel and friends not on the team are related to their academic success story (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Student-athletes are not able to attend supplementary events and college amenities due to the burdens of their sport (Eitzen, 2009; Wolverton, 2008). The Scholar-Baller curriculum is promoting student-athletes to accept the encounters of balancing athletics and academics (Harrison et al., 2010). Harrison and Boyd (2007) found the execution of the Scholar-Baller curriculum may inspire student-athletes' commitment in the academic and social domains. The Scholar-Baller program is designed for student-athletes to keep their athletic skills and perform well academically in college. At a specific institution, a Scholar-Baller was a student-athlete that obtained a GPA of 3.0 or above (Harrison et al., 2010). The Scholar-Baller initiative allowed student-athletes to stay qualified throughout the season. Some student-athletes in football contacted their coaches and counselors about getting Scholar-Baller acknowledgment (Harrison et al, 2010).

Academic integration is determined in terms of student-athletes' grade point average (GPA) and academic progress towards graduation (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Student-athletes are more concerned with their academics when the coaches emphasize the importance of graduating. There is a positive association between the cumulative college GPA and athletic success (Foltz, 1992; Lance, 2004; Maloney & McCormick, 1993; Sack & Thiel, 1985). Student-athletes need to maintain their GPA during the season and some coaches stay in communication with their professors every week during the season. Research has shown that football student-athletes perform better educationally during the athletic season and have lower GPAs in the off season (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Division I student-athletes GPA's were not affected due to their set schedules during the season. For instance, student-athletes daily schedule at Pacer University consists of waking up, eating breakfast, working out, going to class, eating lunch, working out again, eating dinner, completing homework, and then sleeping (Chavanelle, 2015). Student-athletes have more of a responsibility to maintain their grades during the season to stay on the team. In conclusion, academic integration is a key factor of student-athletes' academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Conclusion

The conceptual model explains the accumulative development and guides forms of academic success for student-athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). The model builds on existing theoretical frameworks; however, modification of the intangible model may be necessary for extra study on student-athletes utilizing support services for academic success. Student affairs leads, academic consultants, and therapists are those who profit from this model and can assist Division I student-athletes foster gifts regardless of their ethnicity, sex, or sport. Additionally, perceptions of student support services benefit from this model due to student-athletes eventually performing successfully academically. Student-athletes enter college with diverse traits and involvements, and student affair leaders can correspond about special issues

that hinder or expedite their own progress (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). In conclusion, student-athletes that utilize the model for college student-athlete success and support services will contribute to their ultimate accomplishments in the academic and athletic domain.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The goal of this qualitative study was to explore perceptions of the influences of student support services and other factors that contributed to African American male football players' ultimate success in academics at a public Division I university. The first research question asked, "What perceptions do support services staff members (athletic directors, academic advisors, tutors, and mentors) hold concerning the influence of support services for the academic success of African-American student-athletes in football within their majors?" The second research question asked, "What perceptions do African-American student-athletes that play football hold concerning support services for their academic success within their majors?" Chapter three presents the research design, population and sample description, participant selection, and operational definitions and measurements of variables. Then, the data collection and analysis were examined. The chapter closes with dialogue on ethical issues, limitations, and implications.

Research Design

The research design was a qualitative case study that explored the African-American male student-athletes' perception of support services and how they influence their academic success. A case study focused on a specific research topic using an individual case to understand an issue (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). Yin (2003) noted, "You would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions-believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study" (p.13). Given the surroundings of this research, it was prudent for the researcher to go with the case study model for this research design. In this study, the researcher determined the effectiveness of support services for student-athletes at a Division I university. This case study was based at Ozarka (pseudonym) University. The

support services at Ozarka have helped student-athletes with their academics. The procedures for the qualitative case study included all the following steps. The researcher used archival data and contextual information from Ozarka University to determine the effectiveness of the support services for student-athletes. Furthermore, the researcher interviewed football student-athletes, tutors, the associate athletic director, and academic advisors individually via video-conference (Zoom). Next, the researcher interviewed 12 student-athletes (eight) that were on scholarships and (four) that were not on scholarships about their experiences with the support services. Alternate candidates were chosen by the researcher if any issues arose or if a participant withdrew from the research. Additionally, the researcher collected physical artifacts such as pamphlets, handbooks, and articles about the academic support services for athletes at Ozarka University. Lastly, the researcher analyzed the number of student-athletes that graduated in the previous semester and Fall semester.

Population and Sample Description

Ozarka University is in a large urban area in the southeast. The public university was minutes from the downtown area with a diverse student population (Ozarka University, 2019). Ozarka University provided undergraduate majors and minors in 15 academic colleges and one interdisciplinary Honors college (Ozarka University, 2019). Additionally, Ozarka University offered over 150 graduate and professional programs for students at all educational levels (Ozarka University, 2019). The student population included Hispanic-30%, Caucasian- 20%, Asian-American-20%, African-American- 10%, International- 8%, Multiracial- 6%, Unknown- 4%, Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander- 1%, and Native American- 1% (Ozarka University, 2019). The population at Ozarka University included 90% of domestic students from within the country and 10% international students (Ozarka University, 2019). Ozarka's student-athletes participated

in 15 men's and women's sports in the Dasani Conference (Ozarka University, 2019). In addition, Ozarka University is part of the NCAA Division I institutions. The student-athlete population on the football team at Ozarka University included African-American- 66%, Caucasian- 21%, Multiracial- 10%, Native American- 1%, International- 1%, and Unknown- 1% (Ozarka University, 2019). As of 2020, the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) at Ozarka University was 81% for all student-athletes and 69% for student athletes (2009-2012 cohort) on the football team.

Ozarka University offered the following services for their student athletes such as priority registration, placement testing, career counseling, structured study hall, tutors, and meetings with learning specialists (academic advisors) (Ozarka University Athletics, 2020). Furthermore, student-athletes have access to the academic counselors, the learning specialists, the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), student-athlete lounge, and learning labs across the campus (Ozarka University Athletics, 2020). Ozarka University has an academy for leadership training for all their student-athletes within the program (Ozarka University Athletics, 2018). The student-athletes participated in leadership luncheons and learned to improve their academic skills (Ozarka University Athletics, 2018). The career mentoring and development program consisted of preparing student athletes for life after college by providing tools that allowed them to be successful (Ozarka University Athletics, 2018). The mentor program connected current student-athletes with former student-athletes to form a bond due to common goals, shared experiences, and values (Ozarka University Athletics, 2018).

Participant Selection

Scholarship student-athletes were chosen for this study because of the high expectations on the playing field and services to supported them in the classroom. Student-athletes not on a scholarship were chosen for this study because of their pursuit

to earn a scholarship and utilized support services to maintain their eligibility academically. The researcher used purposive sampling to select participants for this study. The learning specialist contacted a total of 12 African-American student-athletes (one international student-athlete) eight who were on scholarship and four who were not on scholarships to receive permission for the researcher to contact the student-athletes via email, phone, or text to discuss the purpose of the study. Once student-athlete permission was granted, the learning specialist provided the researcher contact information for the student-athletes. The researcher then communicated with the student-athletes via email to confirm their participation. Once confirmation was received, the researcher sent student-athletes the consent form to sign and return. The associate athletic director contacted eight supporting services staff members via email to determine any athletic support service staff who were interested in participating in the study. Those who were interested, emailed the researcher regarding their interest to participate in the study. The researcher then sent the consent form via email for participants to sign and return. Each student football athletes who participated in the study is described below:

Student-Athlete Participants

The following are descriptions of the student-athletes at Ozarka University include (a) student-athlete I, (b) student-athlete II, (c) student-athlete III, (d) student-athlete IV, (e) student-athlete V, (f) student-athlete VI, (g) student-athlete VII, (h) student-athlete VIII, (i) student-athlete IX, (j) student-athlete X, (k) student-athlete XI, and (l) student-athlete XII that participated in the interviews:

Student-Athlete I. Senior football player on scholarship. He is not a first-generation college student and his uncle played at a Division I university. Student-Athlete I chose Ozarka university because he was recruited by them, and it was his last

choice. He played on the defensive line this past season, and his major is Sociology with a minor in Health.

Student-Athlete II. Junior football player on scholarship. He is a first-generation college student in his family. Student-athlete II played last season and he chose Ozarka University due to it being a great fit. He competed on the defensive line. Student-athlete II is majoring in Agriculture.

Student-Athlete III. Graduate football player on scholarship. He is a first-generation student to attend college in his family. He red-shirted (a sophomore who sat out the last year due to coach's request or an injury; although the student-athlete sat out his freshmen year he will still have his full four years of eligibility to play football) last season and selected Ozarka University since it was close to home. Student-athlete III is a running back. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in Human Resource Development and is seeking employment as a Personal Trainer.

Student-Athlete IV. Freshman football player on scholarship. He is an international student-athlete. Student-athlete IV is not a first-generation college student in his family. He red-shirted last season and chose Ozarka University due to it being a nice place. Student-athlete is an offensive lineman. He is currently pursuing a degree in Psychology.

Student-Athlete V. Senior football player that walked-on (college athletes without a scholarship that play on a team that offers scholarships; preferred walk-on or just plain walk-on) to the team. He is not a first-generation college student and his dad played at a Division I institution. Student-athlete V is a wide receiver on the offensive team. He played last season and selected Ozarka University since it was close to home. Student-Athlete V is currently pursuing a degree in Sports Administration.

Student-Athlete VI. Graduate football player on scholarship. He is not a first-generation college student, however, his brother and cousins played at Division I universities. Student-athlete VI played last season and chose Ozarka University due to proximity to home. He is a running back on the team. Student-athlete VI has received a bachelor's degree in Kinesiology and Exercise Science. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in Sports Administration.

Student-Athlete VII. Senior football player that walked-on to the team. He is not a first-generation college student and his dad played on the college level. He red-shirted last season and selected Ozarka University due to it being a great fit. Student-athlete VII played on the offense as a wide receiver. He is pursuing a degree in Sales and is becoming a Realtor.

Student-Athlete VIII. Senior football player on scholarship. He is a first-generation college student in his family and his cousin played at a Division I institution. Student-athlete VIII played last season and chose to attend Ozarka University with family living near the campus. He is another wide receiver on the football team. Student-athlete VIII is pursuing a degree in Sports Administration.

Student-Athlete IX. Senior football player that walked-on to the team. He is not a first-generation college student. He chose Ozarka University since it was close to home and left the team due to unspecified circumstances. Student-athlete IX was a running back at Ozarka. He is majoring in Liberal Studies and planning to become a Business Owner.

Student-Athlete X. Graduate football player on scholarship. He is not a first-generation college student in his family. Student-athlete X played and was injured last season. He chose Ozarka University due to this being his only Division I offer to play football. Student-athlete X played on the offensive line on the football team. He has

received his bachelor's degree in health and Science. Student-athlete X is currently pursuing a master's degree in Human Development and Physiology.

Student-Athlete XI. Junior football player on scholarship. He is a first-generation college student in his family. He played last season and chose to attend Ozarka University since it is close to home. Student XI position on the team is a running back. He is majoring in Consumer Science and would like to become a realtor.

Student-Athlete XII. Sophomore football player on scholarship. He is a first-generation college student in his family. Student-athlete XII played last season and selected to attend Ozarka University because it is close to home. He plays on the offense as a wide receiver. Student-athlete XII is majoring in Retail Consumer Science and Production Management.

Athletic Support Service Staff Participants

The following are descriptions of the support service staff roles at Ozarka University include (a) associate athletic director, (b) academic advisor, (c) learning specialist, (d) counselor, (e) tutor, (f) mentor, and (g) career development specialist that participated in the interviews:

Associate athletic director. The associate athletic director is responsible for keeping the coaches informed about their players, ensuring that student-athletes remain eligible to continue playing, and graduating with degrees. The associate athletic director has a staff to assist all the student-athletes with the athletic department. The associate athletic director has over 20 years of experience at Ozarka.

Academic advisor. The academic advisor is responsible for advising student-athletes with their schedules, assisting with getting books, directing them to tutors, and answering student-athletes' questions. An academic advisor shared her role as the advisor, "Advising students on the majors that would be right for them, advising students

on which courses to take, registering them for those courses so as not to interfere with practices and their athletic performance.” The academic advisor has almost 19 years of experience at Ozarka university.

Learning Specialist. The learning specialist is responsible for addressing the special educational needs for student-athletes at risk, assist with remediation for academic success, and work with individual and group of student-athletes to teach and develop successful academic skills in reading, writing, organization, time management, testing, and learning strategies.

Counselor. The counselors are responsible for assisting student-athletes with any issues or problems they may encounter on campus or at home.

Tutor. The tutor coordinator is responsible for scheduling appointments for the student-athletes with their tutors. The tutors are responsible for assisting the student-athletes with clarifying or reviewing content of courses and help students solve specific problems.

Mentor. The mentors are responsible for answering questions, reminding student-athletes of their obligations, finding appropriate support services or campus resources, and providing motivation and encouragement to new student-athletes. A mentor with the athletic department explained the importance of having a mentor, “So you can leverage their wisdom and insight, you know, to take you a long way and avoid pitfalls in life that, you know, destroy people's lives.” The mentor has over two years of experience at Ozarka university.

Career development specialist. The career development specialist is responsible for assisting student-athletes with their resume, cover letter, reference page, and thank you letter. The career development specialist assists student-athletes with the job searching process for their future career and conducting mock interviews.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed interview protocols based on the review of literature used in the study. Interview protocols were developed for student-athletes (see Appendix C), associate athletic director (see Appendix G), learning specialist/academic advisors (see Appendix D), mentors (see Appendix E), and tutors (see Appendix F). After approval from the Committee for the Protection of the Human Subjects (CPHS), the researcher interviewed participants regarding their roles working with African-American student-athletes.

The researcher used codes for the participants to protect their identities. Additionally, the researcher piloted the interview questions by asking an African-American student-athlete and academic advisor from Vitamin University (pseudonym) which determine the validity of the interviews.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, the researcher gained approval from Ozarka University Committee for the Protection of Human subjects (CPHS) and approval from Ozarka University athletic department. After approval was received from UHCL and Ozarka University athletic department, the researcher contacted the associate athletic director to inquire about academic support services for student-athletes who play football. The researcher used pseudonyms to protect the names and institution that are part of the Dasani conference.

The researcher conducted individual Zoom interviews with student-athletes (appendix C), associate athletic director (appendix G), academic advisors (appendix D), mentors (appendix E), and tutors (appendix F) to gain information about support services provided to student-athletes and of the staff which provide the services. Also, the researcher used eight student-athletes who were on scholarship and four non-scholarship

athletes to determine how student support services were utilized at Ozarka University. The researcher used codes for the student-athletes to ensure identities of the participants remain confidential throughout the study. Zoom was used to audio record the interviews with all participants. Each individual audio recording was transcribed verbatim to capture the participants' exact sentiments. The online interviews will be saved in a password protected file folder and remain secure for five years by the researcher.

Student-Athlete Individual Interviews. The researcher interviewed 12 African-American male football student athletes (one international student-athlete); eight on scholarships and four non-scholarship student-athletes from various football positions at Ozarka University. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes and were conducted through Zoom. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and later transcribed. Appendix C provided an interview protocol for student-athletes. College student-athletes' interviews captured their perceptions about career goals, academic advising, mentors, and tutors. In addition, the interviews allowed the researcher to inquire about the student-athletes' academic goals and graduation plans. The participants were given time to answer questions and offered additional information about the academic support services provided to student-athletes at that institution.

Academic Advisor Interviews. The researcher interviewed two academic advisors that assisted the student-athletes at Ozarka University. The interview was approximately 30 minutes which was audio recorded through Zoom. The academic advisors' interviews provided their perceptions of academic services available to student-athletes and programs that are offered. The participants discussed their experiences and how advising contributed to student-athletes academic success. Appendix D provided the interview protocol for academic advisors.

Mentor Interviews. The researcher interviewed two mentors who assisted the student-athletes at Ozarka University. The interview was approximately 30 minutes and was audio recorded through Zoom with the participants' permission. The mentors shared experiences regarding assisting student-athletes academically. Appendix E provides the interview protocol for mentors. For this interview, the researcher analyzed and determined the impact of mentoring which contributed to African-American student-athletes staying in school and graduating from the university.

Tutor Interviews. The researcher interviewed two tutors that assisted the student-athletes at Ozarka University. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes, was conducted through Zoom, and recorded with the participants' permission. The tutors shared their relevant experiences that contributed to student-athletes' academic growth and completion of graduation. Appendix F provided an interview protocol for tutors.

Artifacts. The researcher collected artifacts such as website information and online documentation regarding academic advisors, mentors, and tutors that support student-athletes academically that are part of the football program at Ozarka University. Artifacts that were selected was used to cross reference with the support services that was advertised, what was offered on campus, and with what the participants expressed. Artifacts determined that student-athletes are truly aware of services offered to them as represented in the handouts given to support them academically.

Researcher's notebook. A researcher's notebook was kept recording the researcher's thoughts, questions, concerns, ideas, and notes throughout the study. The notebook allowed the researcher to document information from the interviews on the student athletes, associate athletic director, academic advisors, tutors, and mentors.

Data Analysis

Following the interviews, the participants provided the preliminary results to review. The transcribed data was loaded into NVivo software for coding and analysis. The researcher analyzed data taken from the interviews at Ozarka University. Relevant data was collected through interviews, documents, archival records, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2009).

Triangulation. The researcher used triangulation of archival data, interviews, and relevant artifacts related to the athletic program determined if different types of data support one another or if they differed from one another (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Additionally, the more similar types of data obtained from different sources, the more certain the researcher is that what is found is what really happens with the support services for student-athletes at the institution. The researcher used triangulation to compare between information contained in artifacts, interview protocols, and archival data from Ozarka University. The outcome of triangulation led to similar findings- archival data, participants interviewed, and collected artifacts from Ozarka University. The researcher used triangulation to compare these types of information and to ensure that the data were reliable. Triangulation produced converging conclusions from the data obtained from the archival data, individual interviews, and online artifacts.

Constant-Comparative Analysis. The researcher used the constant-comparative data analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The researcher transcribed all participants' interviews. Next, the researcher examined the interview and coded for common themes. Through open coding, the researcher identified patterns and themes until the data was saturated. After open coding, the researcher dived deeper into the data through axial coding. Along the way, the researcher constantly compared all participants' interviews found similarities and differences within the interviews. Then,

the researcher organized the common themes into an over-arching theory. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) stated one way a researcher can compare the participants' remarks on each theme and use a matrix to organize the data. The researcher organized the participants' interview responses under different themes in the matrix. Finally, the researcher collected all data to gain knowledge of the multiple perspectives of all participants.

Ethical Issues

The researcher applied to the Committee for Protection Human Subjects (CPHS) to obtain permission to complete the study. Once the researcher was given permission to do the study, the researcher obtained consent from the associate athletic director, student-athletes, academic advisors, mentors, tutors, and staff with the academic support services that will be selected to participate in the study. The researcher created a letter describing the purpose of the study that was given to the associate athletic director, student-athletes, academic advisors, mentors, tutors, and staff. The participants completed the consent form to participate in the study. The participants were made aware that participation was confidential and voluntary. The researcher used pseudonyms for the participants and site to protect names and identities. After CPHS approval was obtained, the researcher began the study once all participant forms were completed, signed, and returned. The researcher will keep all data securely locked for at least five years after the completion of the study, after which it will be destroyed.

Limitations

The limitations for this study included only focusing on one university, Ozarka. However, other universities in a large urban area in the southeast had academic support systems that increased the number of student-athletes that graduate from a Division I university. African-American student-athletes made up 51.6% on the football teams at

Division I universities (Hosick, 2014). However, there was still 48.4% of other student-athletes on these football teams. Caucasians, Hispanic, Native Americans, and other ethnicities student-athletes need to improve their graduation rates at Ozarka University. The academic support systems enhanced the other student-athletes' performances in the classrooms; as a result, increased the amount of all student-athletes graduating and pursued other careers such as engineering, business, medical, and education. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic resulted in another limitation to this study. Due to the COVID-19 and Ozarka University being closed to on-campus activity for students, interviews had to be conducted remotely through Zoom. The researcher was not able to do on site observations of the student-athletes and academic support staff interactions within the various support services.

Implications

The results of this study can be used to assist student-athletes academically at a Division I university. It also has implications for universities to enhance their support services to African-American male football athletes. Student-athletes are required to maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average to be eligible for NCAA Division I football. If student-athletes are not successful in the classroom, failing out of college becomes a reality. As a result, there is a lot of pressure on coaches, professors, advisors, mentors, and tutors to ensure that student-athletes completed their programs and graduated with degrees. By recognizing effective support services for student-athletes, this study can provide important awareness of programs that allow student-athletes to manage their schedules and be productive in the classroom. Implications are discussed in detail in chapter five.

CHAPTER IV:

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore perceptions of the influences of student support services, and other factors that contributed to African American male football players' ultimate success in academics, at a public Division I university. The research questions that led to this study are the following:

What perceptions do support services staff members (athletic directors, academic advisors, tutors, and mentors) hold concerning the influence of support services for the academic success of African-American student-athletes in football within their majors?

What perceptions do African-American student-athletes that play football hold concerning support services for their academic success within their majors?

The qualitative data collected consisted of interviews with student-athletes and support service staff, archival data, and contextual information from Ozarka University (pseudonym). The researcher interviewed 12 African-American student-athletes that play football, one tutor coordinator, one learning specialist, one associate athletic director, two academic advisors, and two mentors for a total of seven academic support staff within the athletic department. Each support services staff member interviewed held a particular role in assisting and supporting student athletics throughout their academic years at Ozarka university.

Athletic Support Staff Perceptions of Student-Athlete Support Services

Research question one stated, "What perceptions do support services staff members (athletic directors, academic advisors, tutors, and mentors) hold concerning the influence of support services for the academic success of African-American student-athletes in football within their majors?" Research question one provided a detailed overview of the different support services personnel and their roles followed by the data

collected over the course of the study. Additionally, question one discussed the support service staff perceptions regarding assisting student-athletes academically. The results uncovered advising, tutoring, mentoring, and additional resources to support student-athletes. The subsequent categories of that data that emerged in research questions one: (a) support service staff obligations at a division I university, (b) nature of support services available for student-athletes, (c) role of support services in recruiting student-athletes at division I universities, (d) strong models and frameworks for getting freshmen student-athletes off to a “strong start” from the beginning of their degree, (e) advantages of providing support services for student-athletes to assist with their academics, (f) importance of academics for student-athletes to graduate at division I university, and (g) challenges in providing support services to all student-athletes. The support services provided support to student-athletes in various domains.

Support Service Staff Obligations at a Division I University

The tutor coordinator and learning specialist provide academic support services to student-athletes. One academic advisor is assigned to work with the offensive players on the football team, while the other academic advisor works with the defensive players. The academic advisors are responsible for registering student-athletes for class, assisting with getting their books, and assignments to a tutor coordinator, and a mentor. The associate athletic director is responsible for hiring the support services staff and implementing academic support programs for the athletic department. The programs are designed to assist all student-athletes at Ozarka with their academics and planning for their future career after sports.

Nature of Support Services Available for Student-Athletes

There are several support services and personnel available for student-athletes at Ozarka University. The support services consist of academic advising, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, career development, and learning assistance. The study halls and learning services are available for student-athletes at Ozarka institution. The academic advisors and tutors would meet with their student-athletes at Bai athletics academic center (pseudonym). The student-athletes have access to Bai athletics academic center 24 hours a day. The associate athletic director shared the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the support services at Ozarka by offering virtual services. Support service staff members were not able to meet with student-athletes in person due to COVID-19 restrictions. The support services staff utilized Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Facetime to communicate with their student-athletes. Due to the pandemic, the athletic department instituted a modified study hall for student-athletes and Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to keep the student-athletes organized.

Importance of Academics for Student-Athletes to Graduate at a Division I University

The perceptions of support staff regarding African-American student-athletes in football reinforced the impact of these services for student-athletes' academic success while pursuing their degree. The athletic academic centers are instrumental in the progress of student-athletes (Ishaq, 2019). The themes that developed related to focusing on academics include: (a) maintaining student-athletes' eligibility, (b) making graduation a priority, (c) preparing student-athletes for careers, (g) focusing on impact of education for student-athletes, (h) addressing race issues in support services, (i) addressing challenges working with student-athletes, and (j) assisting student-athletes not on scholarship.

Maintaining Student-Athletes' Eligibility

Student-athletes attending Ozarka are required to maintain a 2.0 grade point average (GPA) starting their second year. The support service staff members primary responsibility is to ensure that all student-athletes are eligible to remain on the team. Two out of the seven support service staff members explained ways to recover from failing grades and increase their grade point average (GPA). Even though, academic support services are used by student-athletes to complete assignments, projects, and assessments, student-athletes will face controversy and obstacles such as missing class and not submitting their course work. A mentor at Ozarka shared ways to get off academic probation, "There are ways to get off probation and into good standing just by simply getting your GPA up obviously and getting the right credit hours towards your degree by the next school year." The mentor recommended student-athletes taking courses that will earn credits towards their current degree plan to graduate in a timely matter. The support service staff members encourage the student-athletes to turn in assignments and create a plan for them to get back on track. Furthermore, the mentor also acknowledged that failure was not an option for student-athletes, "You can recover and stay on track for graduation and participating in football." Athletic support services staff assist student-athletes with their academics for them to continue playing on the team.

Making Graduation a Priority for Student-Athletes

Two out of seven support service staff members emphasized the importance of student-athletes graduating with a degree. Some student-athletes are preparing to go professional and are completing the rest of their degree plan. An academic advisor references student-athletes' questions about completing their degree before the draft:

Do I want to go pro? Do I want to take this semester off to train, and try to [be] attractive to the NFL [National Football League] teams, versus finishing my last few classes I have with the university? If we can get them graduated before they finish their eligibility [it] is a lot easier.

The support service staff at Ozarka are dedicated to ensuring that student-athletes complete their degree plan before going to the NFL. The athletic director discussed the NCAA changes to graduation requirements for student-athletes, “The academic structures and requirements they put in place do contribute greatly to student-athletes graduating.” The NCAA has seen an increase in student-athletes’ graduating from division I universities. Student-athletes are made aware of graduation information from their support service staff. The associate athletic director is aware when every student-athlete is scheduled to graduate and said, “I do this whole spreadsheet for football on exactly which semester every student is going to graduate.” All data is collected and submitted to the National Collegiate Athletic Association by the university’s athletic director. Some student-athletes leave their institution early due to being drafted by a professional football team but are still committed to graduating with a degree. The academic advisor discovered some student-athletes returning on campus to complete courses after being drafted:

I have had some students who have gone pro before, or even some students that used to be pro, it was a long time ago, and they will come back, and they will take like that one class during like the off-season of the NFL or NBA just to chip down at it.

Student-athletes that go on to become professional athletes and earn a degree increase the institution graduation rate. Additionally, the academic advisor observed former student-athletes remaining committed to graduating and responded, “We guide them [former

student-athletes] the entire time and they just come [back and] chip away at their classes. [As a result,] that increased the graduation rate.” One of the goals of the support service staff is to ensure that student-athletes are completing their degree plan to graduate.

Preparing Student-Athletes for Careers. Four out of the seven support service staff assisted student-athletes with preparing for careers after sports. Support services have reminded student-athletes about other career options available to them with a degree. A mentor stated more degrees will lead to better occupations, “There are opportunities post playing if you have the grades to still stay in the athletic field while as we all know a lot of times the more degrees you have the more your income is going to be.” Student-athletes can pursue different careers based on their interest and degree plan. The second mentor explained the importance of an education, “Academics can lead to success as well, meaning that, you know, doctors, lawyers, engineers, there are a lot of jobs that you can get through a quality education that will lead to success financially.” Student-athletes will be able to have a rewarding career after earning their degree. Moreover, the support service at Ozarka hired a full-time career development specialist to assist student-athletes with their resumes, finding a career, and conducting mock interviews. Ozarka has added to their support services and the associate athletic director said, “[We] hired a full-time career development specialist. She follows them [student-athletes] from freshman year all the way through till they get employment.” The career development specialist prepares student-athletes for their transition from college to their career. The support service staff advises student-athletes to graduate to secure a rewarding profession. A learning specialist explained the significance of obtaining a degree, “You are going to [earn] a degree that [will allow you the opportunity to] apply for a job [in order to] survive.” Support service staff reminded student-athletes to have a plan for life after sports. Furthermore, that same learning specialist also mentioned about

how to gain tools to assist with life, “You want to give them the tools that they need to do it on their own because they are going to graduate college and they're going to be in the real world.” Several student-athletes are working on their master’s degree at Ozarka University.

Focusing on the Impact of Education for Student-Athletes. The support service staff have informed student-athletes about the impact of education for their future. Two out of the seven support service staff members explained why student-athletes should focus on getting their education. A learning specialist replied that he tells student-athletes about the importance of getting an education, “Education is going to make you more money in the long run.” The learning specialist reminded student-athletes about their long-term financial goals. Additionally, the learning specialist stated that education will provide more opportunities:

And it is important to get that education now and to actually care about what you are learning, because that is going to provide you a world of opportunity when you get out of here, especially if you do not make it into professional sports.

The importance of education with student-athletes will provide them with more options instead of depending on sports. A mentor communicated to student-athletes about having career options outside of sports:

It is like not everyone is going to be an early draft pick, not everyone is going to be an undrafted free agent, some of you are not going to receive interest and I do not mean that in a negative way but let us take advantage of this and get that degree.

The mentor reminded student-athletes to take advantage of earning a degree and being prepared to pursue other opportunities after college.

Role of Support Services in Recruiting Student-Athletes at Division I Universities

The recruitment of student-athletes is an important process for the athletic department at Ozarka University. Support services play a role. Three out of seven support service staff members discussed the importance of recruiting student-athletes. The category of recruiting student-athletes was divided into two categories: (a) the rationale for providing student-athlete support services and (b) support for student-athletes as a form of recruitment.

The Rationale for Providing Student-Athlete Support Services

The rationale for providing student-athletes with support services includes increasing the graduation rate by recruiting student-athletes that are prepared for college. One out of the seven support service staff explained how the graduation rate has increased due to recruiting academically prepared student-athletes:

We have to be really conscious of who we are bringing in to keep that graduation rate going. It is not nearly as high as it needs to be, but it has improved due to the support programs and the constant vigilance in terms of recruiting students that are prepared for college.

In summary, some student-athletes are more prepared for college due to their high school curriculum and support from parents, staff, and students.

Support for Student-Athletes as a Form of Recruitment

The support services are an important part of the recruitment plan at Ozarka University. Two out of the seven support service staff members explained their role and support services available to student-athletes. The associate athletic director described how her staff was able to help student-athletes:

We meet with all recruits, talk to them about the academic support services provided for student-athletes to come discuss their courses. Cover the other

academic support services that are open to all students. People can come and talk about their courses, their departments, and what support services are available on campus.

In addition, the support service staff can assist student-athletes with their academic schedules. A learning specialist explained the process of developing a degree plan for student-athletes:

It starts at the at the very beginning, you know, when someone is being recruited into the program to the time that they are going to select their degree plan. What it is that they [student-athletes] want to do for the next four years or however long? We are going to have this individual [student-athlete] at the university [with an] advisor who [will] then have to place these students in [their] classes.

The learning specialist at Ozarka assists student-athletes with meeting with an advisor to enroll in specific classes for the following semester. The learning specialist and advisor will ensure that student-athletes are taking the correct courses based on their degree plan. Some student-athletes are recruited for their athletic skills; however, they are not academically prepared for higher education. The associate athletic director at Ozarka commented, "It doesn't do any good to recruit the superstar who can't read and write, as sad as that is, because he won't make it in college." Ozarka is focused on recruiting student-athletes that are performing well academically and on the field. Support staff perceived that the services that student-athletes contribute to increase graduation rate.

“Strong Start” to Help Freshmen Student-Athletes Achieve

Some division I institutions support first year student-athletes academically with their support services. The following categories ensure student-athletes are prepared for the next level; (a) assisting first year student-athletes; (b) monitoring student-athletes progress; and (c) building meaningful relationships.

Support Service Staff Assist First Year Student-Athletes

Several support services staff members assisted freshmen student-athletes with planning study time. The support service staff was responsible for informing the coaches if the first-year student-athletes attended mandatory study hall. The following categories explain the student-athletes' academic schedule: (a) making time to study and (b) attending mandatory study hall.

Making Time to Study.

The support service staff plan meetings with student-athletes to discuss their academic progress for the current semester. The athletic department at Ozarka has requested for the support service staff to assist student-athletes with incorporating study time on their schedules. Three of the seven support service staff members discussed the importance of making time for student-athletes to study. The freshmen student-athletes meet with their mentors to discuss a plan to study and complete assignments. Mentor Two explains the importance of study time for first year student-athletes and shared, "Athletic department is having study time required [for] student-athletes, especially the freshmen, to participate in study periods in which they are required to go meet with tutors and so on and so forth." Tutor Two explains the importance of keeping track of the freshmen student-athletes progress in their classes and said, "[Student-athletes become familiar with] how they are tracking [their] quizzes [and] assignments. [Tutors] know if they [student-athletes are] turning in [their work]. [Student-athletes share with their tutors] how that made them feel." Tutors at Ozarka stay in communication with the faculty regarding their student-athletes' academic progress. Mentor Two also communicated that he met with some of the student-athletes every day and stated, "Students should, you know, be really encouraged by their mentors to make time to learn

how to study.” Student-athletes used advice from their mentors to create their study habits and attend mandatory study halls.

Attending Mandatory Study Hall.

The support service staff take attendance of the student-athletes that are present in study hall. One out of the seven support staff expounded the study hall procedures for student-athletes at Ozarka. The study hall is available to student-athletes during the week at specific times. Student-athletes are required to check in with a support service staff member to verify their attendance in study hall and Mentor One explained, “Coaches do want [student-athletes to attend] certain mandatory study halls where they have to be there at a certain time. [The study halls are open on] Sunday [s] [from] 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. [The remaining] six day[s] [are from] 4:00 to 6:00.” The student-athletes check in with a support service staff to confirm their attendance in study hall.

Monitoring Student-Athlete Progress

The support service staff at Ozarka are responsible for monitoring their student-athletes progress throughout the semesters. Three of the seven support service staff members explained the significance of daily monitoring student-athletes academic progress. The support service staff are immediately made aware of student-athletes struggling academically on the team. The resulting themes are (a) keeping student-athletes organized and (b) ensuring resources are available for student-athletes.

Keeping Student-Athletes Organized.

The support service staff at Ozarka helped student-athletes keep track of their deadlines. There was one out of seven support service staff members that clarified the importance of using task sheets and calendars to stay organized. The tutor assisted student-athletes with organizing their daily agenda and stated, “I’ll make them calendars. I will make them this weekly task sheet every week. That’s sort of just outlines

everything in their schedule, what they need to be working on every hour of the day.”

The calendars are usually distributed electronically from the tutor to the student-athletes at Ozarka.

Ensuring Resources are Available for Student-Athletes.

The support service staff provides the following resources to student-athletes such as tutoring, mentoring, and checking out devices. One of the support services staff member indicated how student-athletes have the necessary resources to stay academically eligible on their team. The academic advisor described all the resources available for student-athletes to check out on campus:

So, there are lots of resources [such as] tutoring [and mentors.] [Student-athletes are able] to talk to [mentors and get the] support [they] need[.] Sometimes [student-athletes need to check out] equipment. [The equipment includes] laptops [and] anything [else] that [student-athletes] needs to be success[ful]. At the end it is the athlete’s work, but the athlete needs support and resources. [Some student-athletes] can [come to study hall] and borrow a laptop. [Student-athletes at Ozarka can] get a laptop and check it out [using] their ID. So, there are no excuses [for not having a device].

The resources are available for over 400 student-athletes at Ozarka that compete in 17 sports to complete assignments or projects. Tutor One shared how some new student-athletes were feeling on campus, “They're nervous. And, you know, college seems like this big crazy thing in front of them. And, you know, sometimes they just need someone to be patient with them and say, like, it's OK.” The support service staff assist student-athletes with their transition to college.

Building Meaningful Relationships

Student-athletes have mentors available on campus to assist them with anything. Four of the seven support service staff members are aware of the importance of meaningful connections with the student-athletes. The themes that emerged include (a) connecting appropriate personnel to work with student-athletes and (b) attending student-athletes' games.

Connecting Appropriate Personnel Working with Student-Athletes.

It is essential for student-athletes to have the right personnel assisting them during their college experience. Two of the seven support service staff members explained the value of having the appropriate personnel assisting student-athletes. The tutor coordinator at Ozarka explained about the importance of having supportive services for student-athletes. The tutor coordinator clarified the responsibilities of support service staff checking in on student-athlete daily regarding their academics:

[The support services are more] effective when you have, you know, of course, the right management in place and you have the right supports [staff]. The support [with the] tutor coordinator position or even as a as a tutor [at Ozarka]. Dr. Miller you know, she is in an advisor position [with the athletic department]. All [the services are] intertwined [to assist all the student-athletes at Ozarka].

Most student-athletes are familiar with their tutor, advisor, and mentor at Ozarka. The support service staff know how to work with that specific student-athlete due to knowing their learning style. An experienced tutoring coordinator should determine the student-athletes learning style, so they are more comfortable in learning and retaining information. Tutor One explains the importance of figuring out the student-athletes' learning style and shared:

I will [have student-athletes complete their] learning style questionnaires to figure out their learning styles. [It determines] if they [student-athletes] are more auditory [or] if they are more kinesthetic, which is [more] hands on learning. Most of the students tend to be kinesthetic learners. They are athletes. So, they are really physical, you know. So, a lot of them like to hold something in their hands or play with something while in [their] tutoring session.

Support services staff are responsible for building positive relationships with their student-athletes by knowing their learning style. The learning specialist mentioned: “Setting them up with hands on things and actually like someone there who genuinely cares about where they have been and where they are academically.” Some of the support service staff are familiar with their student-athletes’ past and concerned about their future academic goals.

Attending Student-Athletes’ Games.

The relationship continues to grow each time the support service staff, and student-athlete meet regarding their academics. Two of the seven support service staff expressed their relationship with the student-athletes at Ozarka University. The learning specialist mentioned that student-athletes attended the study sessions, “You know, but I rarely have students who dodge my sessions with me just because they feel like they can come in and they are like, I want to be here.” The support services staff tracked the student-athletes’ attendance and provided the logs to the coaches. Another way in which staff members can show support for their student-athletes is by attending their games. Tutor One explained about the importance of attending some of the games to support their student-athletes, “It’s like when a parent, you know, goes to a kid’s recital or something. [The parent being there] makes all the difference in their confidence, and it makes your relationship with them grow.” The student-athletes will attend the study

session since the tutor was at their last game. Tutor One described the relationship with student-athletes, “And it's humanizing. You don't just see them as like, you know, these jock types. They're people, you know, and they're gone through it, too.” The support service staff is there to assist student-athletes with any issue they may encounter with their academics.

Advantages of Providing Support Services for Student-Athletes to Assist with Their Academics

The support service staff contributes to student-athletes by offering relevant services to improve their academics. The support services include offering academic tutoring, academic advising, learning specialist, and mentoring to all student-athletes (Ferris et al., 2004). In summary, the resulting themes include (a) support service staff reminders and (b) perceived benefits of support services.

Support Service Staff Reminders

The support service staff can assist student-athletes with their assignments and appointments by sending reminders on their devices. Two out of the seven support service staff members described how they remind student-athletes about important tasks such as text, phone call, and Teamworks. The tutoring coordinator mentioned the different reminders sent to student-athletes, “We text, we remind them, we plug in their tutoring appointments into Teamworks.” Teamworks is a software that is used to assist student-athletes with scheduling appointments and providing reminders for submitting assignments. The support service staff will remind student-athletes about their upcoming tutoring sessions. An academic advisor stated how they frequently remind student-athletes about various task they need to perform, “Have you done this? When you're going to do it? You have your resources, you've missed tutoring, we just constantly bug

them about everything.” Ozarka has provided tutoring for student-athletes to use to support them with their academics.

Perceived Benefits of Support Services

The student-athletes benefit from the staff, services, and other resources available to them at Ozarka. Three out of the seven support service staff members justified some of the benefits such as providing resources, staying organized, and assisting student-athletes with classes. The support service staff is responsible for ensuring student-athletes are academically prepared and provide them with the necessary resources to be successful. The learning specialist mentioned about providing student-athletes with a support service staff that is concerned, “Setting them up with hands on things and actually like someone there who genuinely cares about where they've been and where they are academically.” The support services personnel advise all student-athletes to stay organized in all their courses. The support service staff reminded student-athletes about upcoming sessions. The learning specialist with the support service staff commented, “You start to care, and you start to sort of connect with these students and then they start to connect with you.” Division I universities implemented tutoring programs to assist student-athletes with their classes. The tutoring coordinator discussed the implementation of the NCAA tutoring programs, “They and NCAA rolled out this whole tutoring programs in the university and all this jazz, that's great and it's improved.” Furthermore, the same tutor coordinator also described her role with the student-athlete as, “The tutor coordinator who then has to be aware of these degree plans and what the core requirements are and the classes, and then to be able to sit down adequately to support that.” At Ozarka, the tutor coordinator is responsible for assigning student-athletes with a tutor.

Challenges in Providing Support Services to All Student-Athletes

Some student-athletes are struggling due to disabilities preventing them from understanding the content. Manderino and Gunstad (2018) discovered that student-athletes with a learning disability or ADHD will still underperform even with their best effort. The following categories discuss the different challenges for student-athletes such as; (a) assisting student-athletes' with learning disabilities, (b) aiding student-athletes on academic probation, (c) lacking academic motivation with student-athletes, (d) focusing on race issues in support services, (e) working with international staff and student-athletes, and (f) examining student-athletes not on scholarship.

Assisting Student-Athletes' with Learning Disabilities

The support service staff assist all student-athletes including those with learning disabilities at Ozarka University. Four out of seven support service staff members explained the challenges of working along with student-athletes with learning disabilities. One of the learning specialists at Ozarka discussed the issues working with certain student-athletes:

They come in and they are that way because they have an undiagnosed learning disability. And I am sitting down with them. I am like, you have a processing disorder. You are not hearing things correctly or you have Dyslexia. I see you mixing your D's and your B's and you know, but they have just been told that they are stupid, and they are only good at sports.

The support service staff have systems in place to support student-athletes; however, according to the staff, they need more ways to test student-athletes for learning disabilities. A few of the student-athletes with diagnosed disabilities are held to the same standards as student-athletes without disabilities. An academic advisor stated all student-athletes should not have the same expectations, "I think it's unfair, sometimes for us to

expect that student who struggles with a disability [have] to perform the same as a general education [student-athlete].” Moreover, a few student-athletes felt providing more training for support services staff assisting student-athletes with a disability is needed at Ozarka. The learning specialist explains the resources available to student-athletes with disabilities, “We can give you accommodations and we can get you set up with extra testing time. Or, you know, we can record all your lectures in class. You [Student-athlete] can have the permission to do that.” However, various student-athletes are frustrated due to the high academic demands from their professors. The academic advisor acknowledged several student-athletes academic challenges during sessions:

We are trying to tackle every assignment and he looks at the page, he looks at the questions and, he is resistant because of his disability, and he looks at the blank page, he tries to avoid writing at all in front of me, and it is just I guess because he is embarrassed.

Student-athletes are afraid to respond to their support service staff due to being confused or lost with their coursework. A tutor at Ozarka explained the struggles of reading and writing with student-athletes, “Reading comprehension and writing. A lot of them struggle with that, especially the ones who have dyslexia or, you know, auditory processing disorder.”

Aiding Student-Athletes on Academic Probation

Student-athletes that are struggling academically can cause their GPA to fall below a 2.0. As a result, certain student-athletes are placed on academic probation with the NCAA. Two of the seven support service staff members discussed how they can assist the student-athlete on academic probation. The academic advisor with the athletic department explained the struggles of a student-athlete that is failing:

Great student on paper and then we find that he's struggling with his basic, core classes where he's not writing well, he's struggling a lot at math. He's not able to do an essay. He doesn't know what to do and those [are the] students who inevitably find themselves on probation.

Each institution should consider developing a plan to assist the student-athletes that are failing their courses to get them off academic probation. Furthermore, the academic advisor also stated student-athletes receiving additional support, “We give them even more academic support when they are on probation because we want them to get back on track and we want them to excel.” The support service staff and coaches stay in contact with the student-athlete that is struggling academically. A learning specialist explained the process of how student-athletes can get the academic help they need, “The advisor would have to talk to them and say, OK, what's going on? What support do you need? And then the dean of the advisor will filter that information back to me.” Student-athletes will receive the support they requested from the support service staff to assist them academically. Several of the student-athletes battle with being a student-athlete on the college level. Mentor Two discussed the struggles with balancing their schedule, “Athletics feels like a full-time job and academics is like a secondary tier.” Many of the student-athletes encounter academic obstacles due to athletic demands during their college experience.

Lacking Academic Motivation with Student-Athletes

Support service staff are aware of student-athletes that are not attending classes and or finishing their assignments. Two out of seven support service staff discussed some of the issues with student-athletes' lacking motivation to perform well academically. The support service staff are in constant communication with their student-athletes' professors. A learning specialist was informed of those student-athletes

that are struggling and explained, “I would get notified via email and say, OK, this student is, you know, not showing up to class or not turning in assignments or what have you.” Additionally, certain student-athletes are not willing to put forth an effort in class. The learning specialist mentioned to student-athletes that it will be challenging, “And to instill that in them is it's hard and it's sad when they when they don't want to, you know, put in effort or put in the work.” Several student-athletes are only focused on their athletics and continue to struggle academically due to no effort. A mentor will not represent a student-athlete that is not putting forth an effort at Ozarka and stated, “I am not putting my name out on a ledge saying that I am vouching for you and if you were to reach out and then act an idiot or not work hard or not even get the grades.” A few student-athletes have used their neighborhood as an excuse for not performing well at a university. The mentor explained student-athletes difficult upbringing is not an excuse for being lazy, “I do not know how to say this but bluntly coming from a poor neighborhood, demographic whatever a lot of my individual guys can be, a lot of them lack just personal self-responsibility.” Several student-athletes are from under-privileged neighborhoods and will not accept accountability for attending classes and completing assignments.

Focusing on Race Issues in Support Services

Issues of race and diversity can be problematic with relationships between the student-athletes and support staff. Two out of seven support service staff members and one student-athlete described some of the racial problems they have encountered at Ozarka University. Currently at Ozarka, 66% of the student-athletes are African-American and 21% are Caucasian on the football team; however, only 10% of the support services staff are African-American. Mentor II mentioned the addition of more diversity to the staff, “I think having black men be the counselors [is] a good start. In addition, support services

should consider having engaged black men as mentors.” Some of the student-athletes at Ozarka would prefer to see more African-American men on the faculty. Student-athlete I explained it was difficult to relate to one of the mentors:

I am not saying it is not motivation to me, but you know, like for me to see a 50-year-old white man that is rich and successful [has a different] life [from me]. Yeah, he got it that way, but it is not likely that I am going [to] get it that way too. I have to go through other obstacles, you know, and bring other people with me, so it is kind of hard, looking up to somebody like that whether they are actually somebody like you coming from [a] similar environment. For example, growing up knowing that [his] dad left when he was young, you know, and everything fell on Mom as she struggles with the kids too. [There was] nobody helping her [raise her family]. You know, [eventually] he will [be] making it out. Yeah, I can relate to that [person]. I can see myself respecting that [man] rather than a 50-year-old white man, although he is successful. He just does not have the same obstacles as me. So, it is kind of harder for me to get to know him. Yeah, he might have had to jump over one or two hurdles. I got a whole hundred yards to go. We have the whole field [to accomplish].

With greater diversity in support service staff, African-American student-athletes would be able to share their experiences with a person that may have had similar life encounters. Mentor II experienced an uncomfortable incident as a student-athlete and shared, “And, you know, I had a white player call me the N-word at practice one day.” Support service staff and student-athletes from different ethnicities can learn about the history of each other cultures.

Working with International Staff and Student-Athletes

Various student-athletes from other countries have academic struggles due to having to learn a new language. At the time of this study, Ozarka University had four international students on the football team. Two out of the seven support service staff members revealed the challenges working with international tutors and student-athletes. Tutor II explained some of the issues working with international student-athletes:

An international student, sometimes they are you know, they might have communication issues, or the student might not jive with that, you know, tutor, for instance, or perhaps the [tutor's] schedule to an [student-]athlete's schedule is a little too hectic and they cannot meet during the times [that] the tutors are there. The tutors' schedules are full due to all the student-athletes they are responsible for assisting at Ozarka University. Many of the academic tutors with the support service staff are enrolled as a full-time student. A tutor coordinator discussed the limited number of tutors available to all the student-athletes on campus, "Tutors who are working less than 20 hours per week. And then you must think about the number of student athletes that you are trying to support. You know, it is kind of difficult for sure." It has become an issue working with student-athletes due to the shortage of support services staff at Ozarka. Some of the support service staff are from different countries around the world. The tutor coordinator explained the disengagement with international support service staff and student-athletes at Ozarka, "I feel like a lot of our tutors don't connect with the different cultures and the students that we see because we have international students as tutors." Some of the student-athletes struggle with the support service staff due to communication barriers.

Examining Student-Athletes Not on Scholarship

Every student-athlete would like to be on an athletic scholarship; nevertheless, athletic programs have a certain number of scholarships for each sport. There is a total of 425 student-athletes on full or partial scholarships with Ozarka university. Three out of the seven support service staff members explains the life of a student-athlete that is not on an athletic scholarship. The ensuing themes developed which include: (a) holding responsibility for student-athletes academics and (b) identifying shortages of benefits for student-athletes.

Holding Responsibility for Student-Athletes Academics

Student-athletes that are not on scholarship are responsible for keeping their grades up. Two out of seven support service staff members mentioned about student-athletes not on scholarships maintaining their eligibility on the team. Mentor II expressed how non-scholarship student-athletes are performing well academically, “Most of them not on scholarships have the academic piece figured out because they are paying for their own school.” The student-athletes that are not on scholarship are aware of the expenses for their courses. Student-athletes that are not on a scholarship do not have the pressures of possibly losing their scholarship. Tutor One discussed student-athletes not on scholarships handling their academics, “They [Student-athletes] tend to be a lot more on top of their academics when they are not getting a scholarship.” Most student-athletes not on scholarship are present for their class and submit assignments on time.

Identifying Shortages of Benefits for Student-Athletes.

All the student-athletes that are not receiving a scholarship are liable for their financial debts. One out of seven support service staff member discuss the shortage of benefits that student-athletes not on a scholarship receive per year. Student-athletes that are not on scholarship are responsible for paying for tuition, books, food, and housing

fees. Ozarka's associate athletic director mentioned that student-athletes not on scholarship do not last on the team, "Some of them don't last all four years on the team, because they just have to pay the bills." Student-athletes that are not on scholarship prioritize paying off their debts over playing athletics. They need to attend all the meetings and practices that are scheduled by the coaches. The associate athletic director stated that student-athletes not on scholarship can earn game time, "They go through all the same rigors of the scholarship athletes with no reward, really, other than playing time." Student-athletes not on scholarship are putting in the same work and in some cases more as student-athletes on scholarship. Student-athletes that are not on scholarship can earn an athletic scholarship with their university. The associate athletic director discussed about the opportunities available for student-athletes to earn a scholarship, "A really great non-scholarship student-athlete, and then later have room on your roster to sign that person to a scholarship." Several student-athletes on the football team that are not on scholarship can get rewarded with an athletic scholarship at Ozarka.

Summary

The previous section discusses the support services staff members perceptions of providing academic support to student-athletes. The themes that were mentioned includes: (a) athletic support staff perceptions of student-athlete support services, (b) importance of academics for student-athletes to graduate at a division I university, (c) role of support services in recruiting student-athletes at division I universities, (d) supporting freshmen student-athletes with transition, (e) advantages of providing support services for student-athletes to assist with their academics and (f) challenges in providing support services to all student-athletes. The support services staff at Ozarka are committed to assisting all student-athletes with their coursework and inspiring them to

graduate with a degree. The following section describes the support services from the student-athlete perspective.

In this section, the researcher will report on the perceptions athletes held about support services. In particular, the following will be covered: the perceived benefits, types of incentives that are offered, and the perceived disparities and differences that exist for those athletes that are not on scholarship vs. those that are on scholarship.

Student-Athletes' Perceptions of Support Services

The student-athletes who attend Ozarka university and are part of the football team range in age from 20 to 24 years old and are in their first year of college through starting graduate school. The support services are offered to all student-athletes attending Ozarka. This first section will discuss student-athletes on athletic scholarships which include perceived benefits of being on an athletic scholarship. The second section will mention about student-athletes that are not on an athletic scholarship.

Student-Athletes on Athletic Scholarships

Most of the student-athletes on the football team have earned an athletic scholarship to attend Ozarka University. The following sections will explain (a) perceived benefits of being on an athletic scholarship and (b) student-athletes not on a scholarship.

Perceived Benefits of being on an Athletic Scholarship. Student-athletes attending a division I institution can attend college on an athletic scholarship. The following themes discuss the benefits of the scholarship which includes: (a) tuition, books, housing and (b) incentives – stipend, food, and classes.

Tuition, Books, and Housing. The tuition, books, and housing fees are covered by the institution for student-athletes on scholarships. Two out of twelve student-athletes

expound on the advantages of having your tuition, housing, and books provided in the scholarship. Student-athlete III mentioned about not having to pay for college:

One thing is apparent. One thing is your parents don't have to pay for school. You don't have to pay for housing. You don't have to pay. You know, everything is being taken care of as a student. You know your books are paid for, your classes are paid for and all that.

Student-athletes on scholarships have all their fees covered as long as they remain academically eligible. Student-athletes on scholarships rarely encountered any financial issues with the university. Student-athlete VIII disclosed that his scholarship has afforded him the opportunity to attend college:

Let me think, I would say advantages were, you know, having a football scholarship, getting school paid for. I did not realize how much school cost until I talk[ed] to other students. And they would or I would go to the bookstore and pay for books, and they would tell them, say the price. I just think in my head, like, you know, I really am lucky, bless, and good at football because I don't know where I would have got the money if I had to pay for school.

Student-athletes on scholarships can attend a division I institution because of being a talented college football player.

Incentives – Stipend, Food, and Priority Enrollment in Classes. Student-athletes on scholarship at Ozarka receive additional incentives such as stipend, food, and priority registration for courses. Five out of twelve student-athletes explained the additional benefits from the scholarship such as a stipend, food items, and early enrollment in courses. Student-athletes on scholarship receive benefits such as a stipend every month to assist with additional expenditures.

Student-athlete I explained how the stipends assist student-athletes every month:

We [Student-athletes] got [have] to get paid, you know, that is an edge [advantage] and every month [at] the beginning we get a stipend, [the stipend is] not going to stop until you graduate or whatever life [takes you next]. [This] is kind of an advantage, you know financial security, a lot of people struggling to make ends meet and we can say that [we are] alright [due to getting] paid. We have food in the fridge, you know for my stipend [I get every month]. [This] is a blessing. [Additionally,] we also [do not have to worry about] school [being paid], I know a lot of people walk up to me [and tell me] how good [I] got it. Even [some] girls I would be talking to [mention about how good I have it]. I mean some stuff is true, but a lot of stuff they think [I am] like over-the-top.

Yeah, we do get paid and stuff, but you all really not sacrificing what we sacrifice [as student-athletes]. This kind of life [as a student-athlete] balances itself out.

Several student-athletes mentioned the stipend assisting them financially to buy groceries throughout the year. Student-athletes are required to attend meetings, practices, study sessions, workout sessions, tutoring sessions, and classes for their stipend. Most student-athletes on scholarships can attend college without needing their parent's financial assistance. Student-athlete VI responded that the scholarship covered college expenses and he received a stipend:

At the end of the day, they [my parents] were getting a check at the end of the month. I would hear [others ask about me receiving a check]. Man, when is the check coming? Then when I started playing really well [in the games]. [By the] next year, people were asking me when the check was [going to start] coming. [The check was] financial security for my family. I know now that one they [my parents] were taking care of and I [was] handling my business as a man. I went to

school [and] I graduated [with a high school diploma]. Not only did I graduate, but I am also making sure that you all do not have to pay for anything.

Parents of student-athletes on scholarships do not have to worry about paying for their child's college education. Student-athletes from other countries come to the United States for the opportunity to play collegiate sports for an athletic scholarship. Student-athlete IV explained being fortunate to earn a scholarship while still playing sports:

Well, first thing, this was not coming from England. No, no[t] [how] university works here [in England]. We do not have anything here like you do when it comes to scholarships and college football and college sport. That is totally unique to the U.S. And this is great. Well, this was something I wanted from you when I played rugby, obviously rugby in the U.S. Coach, new opportunities were greater. So, when it comes to opportunities, especially for African-Americans. Since being honest, we dominate sports or most sports. So that gives us an opportunity to get a free education while doing what we love, which is really good. There is a lot funding in it.

International student-athletes on scholarships are traveling abroad to compete on the college level while earning a degree. Student-athletes on scholarships have their own dormitory and cafeteria to get their daily meals. Student-athlete VII commented about the advantages of being on a scholarship, "It just comes with all types of pluses. I mean, I think about it all the time. How much different my life is in [comparison to] a normal student. As far as, you know, getting three meals a day." Student-athletes at Ozarka receive breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the athletic dining hall. Student-athletes can meet with their academic advisors and select courses each term before regular college students. Furthermore, student-athlete I explained the benefits of the academic advisor assisting him with his schedule:

But yes, it's a lot of advantages, you know, you get the top tier resources you get basically the somebody [academic advisor] hand picking your classes for you. If we were doing it ourselves, we probably get thrown whatever class, you know, but most of the classes we get is get picked because it is a high success rate in the class for most students.

The academic advisor meets with their student-athletes to get them enrolled in selective courses for the upcoming semester.

Student Athletes Not on an Athletic Scholarship

Some student-athletes have to walk-on the football team and compete to earn a scholarship. Student-athletes that are not on a scholarship should adhere to all the requirements to stay on the team. The subsequent themes discuss the issues with student-athletes not being on scholarship and this includes: (a) disadvantages of not being on a scholarship and (b) challenges of earning a scholarship.

Disadvantages of not being on a Scholarship. Student-athletes not on scholarship have different expectations to adhere to in comparison with a student-athlete on scholarship. Three out of the 12 student-athletes mentioned about the disadvantages of student-athletes not being on a scholarship at a division one university.

Not Receiving Tuition Funds or a Stipend. Student-athletes that are not on scholarship have to pay for their own tuition and expenses at Ozarka. Student-athlete V clarified not receiving a stipend if you are not on scholarship, “Yes, sir. But disadvantages. Obviously. Tuition. You do not get a stipend. You know, you have to deal with like student loans and payments and things like that.” However, student-athletes without scholarships do not remain on the team all four years because they have to find employment to pay for college expenses. Most student-athletes have a set

schedule to follow that includes their courses and practice plan. Student-athlete I confirmed not being able to do what they would like to do if they were part of the team:

I mean, [the] only disadvantage would be you not being able to do exactly what you want to do[.] I mean you can say you love the game and everything, but you do not want to practice every day[.] You know, you do not want to practice six days out [of] the week [and] play one [game per] week[.] Nobody want to do that.

Student-athletes not on scholarship are required to attend all practices and games throughout the season. Another disadvantage for student-athletes not on a scholarship are the pressures of selecting less rigorous majors such as Kinesiology, Physical Education, and Recreational Parks recommended by their academic advisor. The head of academics have persuaded student-athletes to major in Kinesiology for them to prepare for the NFL too. Student-athlete X recalled being forced to join an easy degree program:

But I will say a disadvantage is some people in academics try to put you on this route for one major [for all student-athletes in the] program. They feel like all student-athletes should major in Kinesiology like if I am being honest. Take all your basics and then like, I already knew what I wanted to do so, the head of academics was just like you know do not worry about it right now. The time will come to declare your major we will get you set up right and then when it came to that time, she said yeah you know what Kinesiology is a good major and I am like that is something that I do not want to do so that is not what we are going to do. I am sorry but she was the head of academics forced it to a lot of players and I do not feel like that was right, but I have always had an issue with the head of academics there. But there are some good people definitely my counselor for sure. She was an advantage as far as like making sure I was on the right path to the

degree that I wanted. So, there are some advantages but be a disadvantage I would definitely say that student-athletes have this where people are putting them on this one minded track, they want to go to the NFL so let us put them on an easy degree program. And that is not the case for a lot of people.

Some student-athletes stated their academic advisor suggested Kinesiology as their major. Additionally, student-athletes were recommended to complete fundamentals and major in Physical Education.

Challenges of Trying to Earn a Scholarship.

All the student-athletes that are not on scholarship with the football team are competing hard to earn a scholarship. Two out of the 12 student-athletes described some of the challenges for walk-on student-athletes trying to earn a scholarship. Student-athletes that are on scholarship may get complacent in the classroom and on the field. Student-athlete VI responded about the dangers of getting relaxed and not challenging themselves:

So, it is like people sometimes a disadvantage can be you looking at, oh I am scholarship I can chill. I can relax. I can get comfortable. I feel like comfortability is the enemy of great. You should never be comfortable or if you are comfortable or you feel like you are the smartest person in the room, you are in the wrong room.

Student-athletes that are not on scholarship are having to prove themselves to receive a scholarship. Student-athlete VI stated that student-athletes that are not on scholarship cannot make mistakes and have to establish their own name:

So not being on one, obviously, just having like not a burden, but like, I know my parents are paying for me. Number one. I know it is coming out of their pocket, and that is something that kind of was a driving force in my mind, one, I just want

to make sure my parents do not have to pay for school anymore. So, getting to see that, coupled with people who you felt that you were better than that you had to maybe be behind because this is how it works. If you are not on scholarship, every like 10 things you do right. Well, everyone thing you do wrong is like a huge deal because you are a walk-on so like, let us say the scholarship guy they bring in and he fumbled the ball, it messes up a drill.

He got a little bit more slack on his rope than what you got. You cannot do that. So, you have got to go in there every day like no mistakes. I am grinding and it is tough, especially at a big school, because it is like you have got all this competition and you are kind of the guy that nobody really knows. So, my thing was, I am going to come in and put my head down and make sure they know my name without me having to tell them my name. So, my second week I got I will never forget I got offensive scout player of the week. And they gave me a hat because I won that and I said, I am about to win a hat every week. And so, I made sure to do that.

Student-athletes that are not on scholarship need to perform at their top level all season to be considered for more playing time in the future. Student-athletes face pressures such as staying eligible to remain on the team and performing well throughout the term. Student-athlete XII expounded about how student-athletes have to continue working hard to maintain their scholarship, “I say the disadvantages are you have to always stay on your grind to make sure you can renew your scholarship and stay on the team. That’s like [giving you] something to think about.” Student-athletes are required to meet the eligibility requirements to reinstate their scholarship every year.

The Student-Athletes' Perceptions of Support Services

The resulting themes includes (a) available services at division I institution, (b) useful services to support student-athletes, (c) improving services at Ozarka university, (d) lack of communication and services, (e) negative culture with the support services staff, (f) impact of positive resources to assist student-athletes, (g) problems student-athletes encounter in college, (h) student-athletes with a focus on graduating, (i) factors that contribute to a successful balance of academics and athletics, and (j) student-athletes at a division I desiring to play in the national football league (NFL).

Available Services at Division I Institution

The emerging themes explain the services to support student-athletes academically: (a) support services at Ozarka University and (b) different ways to utilize services and their perceptions of them.

Support Services at Ozarka University. The support services were implemented to assist student-athletes with their academics. The support services available for student-athletes at Ozarka include tutoring, mentoring, and advising. In addition, student-athletes can check out laptops, use the math and reading labs, and access to the library and study hall. Four out of the 12 student-athletes described their experiences using the support services on campus. Student-athlete III stated that he was surprised about the services available at Ozarka:

Yes. It is totally different. I mean, I was actually shocked that we have all these services in these areas in this college and back in high school everything is on your own. [Students] are studying on your own. They go into the library; [and] show you where the library is, but that is your choice to go there, [or use] study groups.

Student-athletes have different places to study at Ozarka University. The individual reading and writing tutoring services are available on campus for student-athletes. Student-athlete V suggested that support services are available for student-athletes to assist with any of their academic needs:

The support services for me just would be the tutoring, and that was just through football. Like we are doing study hall, and this is mandatory, but I also found out about the reading, I think there is a reading and writing, service in Bai that I was able to use. They kind of tell me about that as well.

The coaches at Ozarka require certain student-athletes to attend mandatory study hall. The associate athletic director and coaches recommend student-athletes check-in for their sessions. Student-athlete VII discussed the importance of using the support services available:

I [need to] continue doing what I am doing as far as keeping in contact with my tutors and [other support staff]. [For example,] just like they are using us to get a paycheck, [we need to] use them for their smarts. My dad would say [that] coaches use you to keep food on their table, [however,] use [your] tutors because they are there to help you. So why not use them?

Student-athletes stayed in contact with their support service staff during the pandemic. The academic advisors have a vital role in ensuring that student-athletes are enrolled in courses and completing all their assignments. Student XII stated how the support service staff assisted them to be effective in their studies:

[I] feel like everything is going good. The academic advisors [are] on top of everything, they make sure we [are] passing tests and completing our homework. [The support service staff] will make sure we can pass [our courses and eventually] graduate. We are taking everything serious now [and] showing that

we care and want to be there. They will do everything in their power to help us [succeed].

The support service staff are aware of their responsibilities with their position. Several student-athletes have completed their bachelor's degree and will continue using the support services as they start on their master's degree. They are meeting with their advisors and tutors regarding new challenges. Student-athlete III mentioned about using the services and resources to obtain another degree:

One of the toughest [challenges] for me [being in my] first year [of] grad school is [adjusting to my new schedule]. I am open minded, and I am going to [attend all my classes]. Then, [I will] attack [my course load]. I know there is going to be some setback[s]. It [is] just basically you [the student-athlete] talking to your advisors [and] peers. [I] will [set up] my room. All those things are around for you to help you succeed. So, basically you use those tools, and you should be good.

Some of the student-athletes are utilizing the support services for their post graduate degree.

Different Ways to Utilize Services. The student-athletes have different options for all the services on campus. Five out of the 12 student-athletes explain how the services are used within their daily schedules. Student-athlete IV recalled meeting the staff and touring the facilities and stated, "When we were on tour we went through the academic center. We met with the advisors that were there or the main ones at least." The support service staff introduced themselves to the student-athletes and families during the recruitment event. The student-athletes on the football team at Ozarka were assigned an academic advisor and tutors to ensure that they were successful. Student-athlete VI explained that the services contributed to him graduating:

So, [I went] through my academic advisor. I was appointed an academic advisor as soon as I got to Ozarka University five years ago. I found Dr. Miller and she is amazing [advisor]. She was so happy when I graduated because she has (been with me through) the ups and downs and [she is familiar with] how tough some of these classes can be. She was the one who helped point me in the right direction to tutors and other people [student-athletes] in the athletic department who are taking the same classes. So, [she recommended that we] study together and collaborate [for team projects]. [The tutor coordinator assisted with] assigning tutors [to our team]. If you did not like that tutor, she [tutor coordinator] will give you a new one [to work with]. The tutoring was phenomenal [at Ozarka]. That is really a resource that I feel like everyone should use [on campus].

The support service staff can assist student-athletes with academic challenges throughout the year. The athletic department at Ozarka provided additional resources to support their student-athletes in the classroom. Student-athlete VIII said the advisor assisted him with finding resources:

I always go to Dr. Miller [to assist me with problems]. She will hook [assist] me up with [resources]. I have use[d] tutors' multiple times before [to assist me with my classes]. What else? She has scheduled a test for me on multiple occasions. She will give me my schedule [upon my request]. Dr. Miller does [a lot for the student-athletes]. I used tutors and the laptops they have up there [in the computer lab]. I do not know if that counts, but that is it.

The academic advisor assists student-athletes with their schedules and additional supplies to help with their courses. All the student-athletes that are freshman at Ozarka should attend mandatory study hall and stay in communication with their advisor. Student-athlete VII discussed getting assistance from a tutor and attending study hall:

Sometimes [I would attend] mandatory study hall. Some guys [must attend] depend on your grades. They make you have a tutor. They make you go to tutoring. If you are a straight 'A' guy, you can just stay home and just wait till practice. But some guys need a little more help. I did [need the assistance]. But [you can] go to study for three or four hours. You know, you go in and check in and make sure you are on top of your stuff. Yes, that is all that matters. But they do assign some mandatory study hall and some mandatory tutoring.

Some of the student-athletes that are struggling academically are required to attend mandatory tutoring and study hall. Tutors are available at Ozarka to support all student-athletes' academic needs and assist them with being successful in their courses. Student-athlete VI explained how the tutors helped him understand the coursework:

I am taking like biomechanics, statistics and all these heavy math and science courses. I don't like any of this stuff. These tutors are already experts in these fields in chemistry and things of that nature. So, they can in a better word dumb it down, I guess. You have to understand that not everybody learns the same way. So, they are really good at adapting to your learning style and talking to you in a way that can reach you. And so that was the easiest thing. They just say it is college. So that really helped in the translation and kind of watering it down to where I could just [understand it better]. Why did they not just say that? I [could have taken] note[s] down better.

The tutors and learning specialist adjust during the sessions based on how that student-athletes interprets their course work. Ozarka university has added a career specialist to assist student-athletes with their transition from sports to their career. Student-athlete X explained the career specialist role:

I will say that somebody [is] working [for student-athletes]. She has been making a change. [For instance,] as far as trying to set up student-athletes [schedules]. [Furthermore,] trying to get them set up with a job and having career fairs [on campus]. [Providing student-athletes] the opportunity [and] resources to connect with the field [career] they want to [pursue] after college. There is somebody doing that, and it is helping [the athletic department]. That is my ideal.

The career specialist at Ozarka is aware of life after sports and the importance of preparing student-athletes for their future career. Many of the student-athletes recalled the career specialist assisting them with their resumes, searching for employment, and mock interviews.

Useful Services to Support Student-Athletes

Student-athletes have access to all the support services at Ozarka University. Most of the student-athletes stayed in communication with their advisor and tutor. The following themes developed about the services to student-athletes: (a) services with academic advisor, (b) additional support services (c) adjustments of support services due to covid-19, (d) supportive coaches that assist student-athletes, and (e) academic advisor that exceeds expectations.

Services with Academic Advisor. The academic advisor helps student-athletes with their schedules, providing resources, connecting with other support service staff, and solving problems. Two out of 12 student-athletes mentioned the impact of the academic advisor at Ozarka. Strong personal relationships are formed between the advisors, tutors, and student-athletes within the support services. Student-athlete III explained the advantages of having an advisor on campus:

I think that supports services [are] well. I actually love it because I take advantage of it. [For example] my advisor, you know, I am constantly in her office 24/7.

You know, she is basically the greatest, you know, the greatest. If you need help and you need someone to talk to or you just need to chill in a place where the door [is] lock[ed]. I'm basically in Dr. Miller's office. You know, that is why she is like a mom [and] she is basically like family. I say, it is one of the best things they ever came up with [having an advisor]. And I think they should keep [offering support services] and not take that away from college students or college athletes. The student-athletes can benefit from all the services their academic advisor provides throughout the year. Student-athlete XI revealed the task of balancing their academic and athletic daily schedules:

And my freshman year, I am not going to lie I struggled [with my courses]. But Dr. Miller, she actually helped me work through that. We found the tutors that I will need [to be able to understand the concepts]. My schedule [was moved] around with everything I was doing with football and [my classes] making it just right for me. That is what helped me get through the year and actually prevailing through the year. [As a result,] making everything better.

The academic advisors will assist student-athletes with adjusting their schedules and getting them a tutor to increase their grade point average (GPA). This is, of course, one of the key factors in students having continued academic support.

Additional Support Services. The additional support services for student-athletes include tutoring and mentoring. Two out of 12 student-athletes mentioned about the benefits of more services. Many of the student-athletes at Ozarka can receive assistance from their academic advisor along with other available support services.

Student-athlete I stated the services keep him organized:

The services we get are top tier really, I am not saying can't be better because there is always room for improvement, but I mean, you know, I cannot complain.

You know, I have been getting a lot of help even for my academic advisors. You know, they hit you up. They make sure you are [following your schedule and submitting assignments]. She emails me a to do list every week. I go off that. You know that they are just here to keep you organized, you know.

Some student-athletes are given weekly lists to complete regarding their academics.

Student-athlete VII explained that all student-athletes are successful academically when they send reminder emails, assisting with schedules, and additional tasks as necessary:

I mean, they really and truly care about you [and] your well-being. You are learning the material. So, I mean, they do not go overboard and do your work for you. [Of course,] nothing like that. But just having them there. I mean, it has been a super blessing. [Staff continues] staying on top of you. [Support service staff] sending you e-mail[s]. Just kind of reminding you because it is not about you. Some guys just do not want to do work and do not have the drive. Sometimes with our busy schedule throughout the day, we just forget, or we might forget to do an assignment. I had one tutor that would make a planner for me. I mean, he would just go above and beyond [to assist me]. He would shoot me a text and remind me [about assignments]. It would just be such a blessing to have him available and helping me [be successful]. He did not have to [go above and beyond to assist me]. He would not even [be] at school when he would remind me [about certain deadlines]. That was a blessing.

The advisors and tutors assist student-athletes with planning their weekly schedule.

Some student-athletes appreciated the academic reminders such as assignments and assessments from the support service staff at Ozarka.

Adjustment of Support Services for Student-Athletes due to COVID-19

Support services staff at Ozarka assisted student-athletes with their academics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Four out of 12 student-athletes discussed the necessary adjustments made by the service support staff to utilize the services effectively. Student-athlete XI responded that he communicated with his learning specialist:

So, we had a spring break and stuff, we had to go home and then Corona happened. We had to stay a little longer [at home]. The advisors instructed us to get with our learning specialist [in regard to our courses]. Our learning specialist would call us every day. We [would] have a schedule. [For instance], tomorrow will be [meeting at] two o'clock. My learning specialist will call me, and we will go over everything that I had to do during the week.

The learning specialist maintained contact with the student-athletes reminding them about upcoming assignments. The support services were still made available to help student-athletes with their academics during the pandemic. Student-athlete XII connected with the staff using an online platform and said, “Yes, they have been available. They keep us posted with our schedules posted with Zoom online, our tutors, and stuff like that. If we need anything, we could hit them up and get everything sorted out [with our coursework].” The support service staff passed on their contact information to their student-athletes at Ozarka to remain in constant communication with the student-athletes. Several student-athletes encountered additional problems due to the pandemic. Student-athlete VIII stated that he was not able to attend his virtual classes due to assisting with family issues with COVID:

So, I missed [my classes] for a couple of weeks. The first two weeks that school kind of started that was going on. I just never even really looked at Blackboard, [I] was [not] going to worry at all [about my grades]. I came back and hit up Dr.

Miller and told her the situation [about my family]. She told me to tell my professors [about my family problems]. I told my professors [about] the situation [that] was going on and they were able to work with me. They were able to extend some things [and] reopen some things. I mean they could only do so much [to get me caught up].

The faculty at Ozarka assisted student-athletes by extending deadlines for assignments. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of uncertainty amongst student-athletes regarding if a football season was going to be played in the fall. Student-athlete X stated that he will begin graduate school during the pandemic:

Everything [was schedule to] start [even] with COVID [still] going on. The question is if the season is on the bubble [due to the pandemic]. I know for sure I will [be working on] my master's [degree] even though they have already like declared that no matter what they will pay [for] my master's degree in full.

Several student-athletes on scholarship took advantage of the opportunity to earn an additional degree at Ozarka.

Supportive Coaches that Assist Student-Athletes

The student-athletes at Ozarka are thriving on and off the field due to encouraging coaches that are part of the athletic program. Three out 12 student-athletes expressed the positive impact of supportive coaches. Student-athlete X stated that staying in contact with his coaches from high school:

So, athletically I love the coaches. [They] were nothing but supportive. I still keep in contact with my head coach to this the day. He is actually at the university now. I still keep in contact with my position coach. I just talked to him two days ago actually. He was just checking in on me [and] my new transition.

Student-athletes build meaningful relationships with their coaches for a lifetime. Various coaches have different approaches to getting their student-athletes to perform at their top level. Student-athlete VI recalled a coach wanting him to focus on becoming a better person:

Yes, that is basically my approach at it. I will never forget what one of my coaches said at Ozarka. He [said] compliments make you soft like you should not like when people compliment you because they are just trying to make you soft. So, anytime somebody would tell me I did some[thing] good, I would say thank you and be polite. [Additionally, I would] be respectful because that is how I was raised. I [would] kind of shrugged it off like I am focusing on the things I need to improve [to become better]. If you focus too much on [the fact] I am good, I am great, and I have a scholarship [then] I do not have to work hard anymore. I know [at the end of the day] it is a business.

Student-athletes need to work on becoming distinguished and not get comfortable just being good. Some of the student-athletes appreciate the coaches preparing them for life. Student-athlete XI expressed that his coaches wanting him to be an outstanding man:

The coaches are good, too. I love my coaches. They want the best for us and their first goal for us is to be great men in life. Men first, that is what they want us to be great man before anything else. I really appreciate them for that.

The coaches instilled values into their student-athletes to prepare them to be productive citizens.

Academic Advisor that Exceeds Expectations

An effective program has dedicated staff members that are committed to their student athletes being successful in the classroom. Three out of 12 student-athletes stated

that the academic advisor is performing well with her responsibilities. Student-athlete VII advocated that the academic advisor goes the extra mile to assist with any situation:

[Dr. Miller] She goes above and beyond [to assist with anything]. I do not think she [get the] credit [that] she deserves. She is probably one of the best [and] most caring academic ladies in the country. She is that good. I am not just saying [this]. She cares about [everyone and] there is nobody that she does not like [on] offense or defense. She has been assigned to offense. If a defensive player walks in [her office that] she has never met before, she will drop everything she is doing to help them locate their books or whatever [task they need assistance with]. She is [a] phenomenal [advisor].

Many student-athletes mentioned about Dr. Miller always being there to assist all student-athletes with any issue. The academic advisor serves any student-athlete that walks in her office. One of the academic advisors motivate and encourage student-athletes to complete their assignments and review important concepts. Student-athlete III verbalized that he can come to the academic advisor for whatever:

One thing[person] that really assisted me was Dr. Miller, because I feel like I can come to her [for anything]. If I need to do some work or [get] behind on some work, she totally has a plan for you to attack all your work and get it done.

The academic advisor will assist student-athletes with any problem that need to be solved. The academic advisor is approachable, and her door is always open to help.

Student-athlete I explained how the advisor goes beyond expectations to assist everyone:

So, I just felt like Dr. Miller helped me on that. She [would] be checking up on me from time to time. I [have not] seen her this whole time. She [is] always helping other people and [I] never heard [her] even raise a voice. [She] has never said one bad thing about somebody else. She always kept it cordial with

everybody. She is nice and greet you with a smile every time I walk past [her office]. She is [a] nice [and] cool [advisor].

The academic advisor will follow up with student-athletes to check in on them.

Improving Services at Ozarka University

Some of the student-athletes mentioned about the support services being good; however, the services can still be improved to make them better. The following themes emerged support services that need to be better, more support services staff available to student-athletes, lack of communication and services, and negative culture with the support services staff.

Support Services that Need to Improve

Student-athletes have used the support services at Ozarka, nonetheless, some of the student-athletes recommended suggestions for improvement of services. Two out of 12 student-athletes mentioned about the academic services needing improvement at Ozarka University. Support services need to be improved for student-athletes that are encountering unexpected mental issues. Student-athlete X stated the lack of support from institution's crisis team:

I do not feel like it was [effective] at the end of the day. You are talking to someone over the phone, but it is [a] text. [It] is not FaceTime. I [would] rather prefer face-to-face than doing that [over the phone]. [However,] my schedule did not allow me to do that. I use it all the way up until about the time that I left Ozarka. It would just [have] really lame responses or they would not [respond] until the next day. I can [only] imagine if somebody was going through depression and they were thinking about self-harm. They wanted to look out to somebody on that app and nobody is going to respond to them if need [in a timely

matter]. Especially, [if] they have set hours on there that they are supposed to be on, but they are not on all the time.

According to student-athletes, improvements are needed for crisis prevention resources for student-athletes. A few student-athletes felt like they were not receiving the proper assistance to be productive in the classroom. Student-athlete IX specified that Ozarka did not assist with academics and explained, “They are like if you wanted to use it [support services], it is not exactly the same. [For instance,] at the Naval Academy they [would] have help [you]. I feel like regular college just do not really help you that much.”

Student-athlete IV explained that the services offered to student-athletes should be optional for them if they are passing:

I heard about that maybe I was not listening enough [to] you. At first, I found them [support services staff] really annoying. I am not going to lie because they have to just kind of be on you all the time. Especially, [since] I am one person that is quite independent. So, I will do my work but you [have those who struggled]. For example, you have to go to study hall every afternoon. [Student-athletes having to attend everyday] can be[come] tiring. You want to [have the opportunity to] go back to your room and do your work. [However,] you cannot do that and [you are] stuck inside [study hall]. Even though I understand it [mandatory study hall] because not everyone is like me. Some people will not do their work if you do not monitor them in that way.

The support service staff reminds student-athletes about their upcoming sessions and monitored some of them at study hall.

Need for More Support Services Staff Available to Student-Athletes

Several student-athletes expressed a need for more support service staff members to be always available. Two out of 12 student-athletes stated that more services and staff

is needed at Ozarka University. Some student-athletes services were delayed due to not having enough staff to assist the athletic department. Student-athlete X exclaimed that additional services and staff is needed on campus:

I understand people have families too. There are people in general that take night classes or classes [during] the day and do not have [any free] time [at all]. So, I feel there need to be another service in regard to supporting students because there is only one service. I am more than likely sure it is called CAPS [from what] I remember. [In addition to], making more [support service] people available [to assist] because I know [the] time slots [are limited]. [The university should consider] making another service more available for people[student-athletes]. [I want to] make sure one person [student-athlete] is going to that same person [support service staff] consistently and not breaking it up talking to this other person [support service staff] about what is going on [with a course]. [Ultimately,] that is how you establish a connection, and [student-athletes] feel they can be completely transparent with you.

Student-athletes are interacting with different support service staff due to the limited number available. Per the tutor coordinator, the athletic department needs more tutors at Ozarka. Student-athlete VII expressed that the institution needed to recruit more tutors to assist all student-athletes:

You should come tutor at the Bai athletics academic center because we are short on tutors and they will tell you, you know, we are short on tutors. So maybe just getting a couple more tutors in there [will help]. I mean, that is all I can think about [that need improvement]. The ones [tutors] I [currently] have are pretty informed. [If] they do not know something, they are driven to go find the answer to it. So, they have some good people in there [tutoring].

The tutors will find the solution to a problem that the student-athlete may have regarding their course.

Lack of Communication and Services

The lack of communication between the support service staffs and student-athletes can lead to an unstable program. Two out of 12 student-athletes stated about the miscommunication between the support service staff and student-athletes. As a result, student-athletes will become ineligible and lose their scholarships. Student-athlete V mentioned about communication being better from the staff, “I would say definitely communication. The communication could be a lot better. [Additionally,] maybe attention [to] details and stuff like that could be better.” The support service staff providing important facts will assist student-athletes academically. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented additional communication issues between the support service staff and student-athletes at Ozarka. Student-athlete VI explained the staff maintaining communication from a distance:

[The athletic department can] continue to try to maintain communication between the services and the student[-athletes] to let them know, hey, we are still here for you. [For instance,] just because we are not in your face and cannot see you [to] give you a high five [does not mean we are not here]. We are still here to help you [be successful] because I think that was something that really helped you [achieved].

The support service staff reminded some student-athletes about communicating via email, text, phone, and Zoom. Student-athletes that are commuting from home or in graduate school would benefit from these services. Student-athlete X proposed additional support services for student-athletes living off campus:

I suggest that they should have [more services]. I mean promote more services that are off campus [for student-athletes]. I know in some cases some student-athletes do not feel safe saying stuff if they have a problem like what is going on at the facility.

Student-athletes that commute to campus want to utilize the services that are only available on at Ozarka University. Several student-athletes that live off-campus at Ozarka are currently working on their master's degree and will continue to use the academic services on campus.

Negative Culture with the Support Services Staff

Lack of confidence between the associate athletic director and student-athletes does not promote a positive climate. Two out of 12 student-athletes explained the negative culture within the support services at Ozarka. Student-athlete I did not trust the associate athletic director and said, "I felt like she [associate athletic director] would say something to me and go back and tell the coaches something different. I felt like she was playing me." Support service staff members that are not positive and willing to assist every student-athlete establish a negative atmosphere. Student-athlete I experienced another academic advisor not providing him a textbook and stated:

We got tight, [however,] she kind of messy. At any given time, you will see [her assisting] ten people [in her office]. I know like you walked by the office everybody stops talking and they will turn around and look at you like, you know, like [they are talking about you]. I do not like that. I mean not that we cannot do it on our own, but it is their job. We have to go through them to get our books [and] to get our schedules, and everything [for our courses]. I [have] an assignment [I need to] do and [I need the book]. I am tired [of waiting]. I am [going to] her [to see about the book]. [I asked] what do I do [about my book?]

She is just saying, oh it is not in [yet]. Yeah, it has not [come] in yet. So, I have not done [the assignment] yet. So, what am I supposed to take a zero and soon as I take the zero you going to go back and tell my coach Paxton [I] am not doing [my] work? You know, that is bad on me. [After receiving assistance from Dr. Miller,] then I went to the bookstore the same day [to get my book]. I mean, that is all it took but you giving me a hard time about [something that will] take you 30 seconds to do. [Support service staff is] on salary to do [their] job [which] is to help me graduate. So, you all can look good. You all can tell the recruits [about the] success rate of graduation [going] up compared to other schools. You are not even trying to do [your] job. So, if you are not even doing the bare minimum for your job, you know, no telling what else she is not doing.

As a result, the student-athletes' perception was that this academic advisor is not doing her job due to not being able to assist some student-athletes with getting their resources. A coaching staff that is not supportive and building negative relationships will lead to tension among the team. Student-athlete X clarified the importance of coaches checking in with their players:

A coaching staff that is supportive [all the time and] not just here and there when they want to be. You have to be there consistently as far as like support [does] not pick and choose when or [not wait for] when something devastated happens to a player or [his] family. You [hear about] it and then you want to reach out versus if you were talking to him [you would be aware of the situation]. You do not have to talk to them all the time but [find a good balance].

A compassionate coaching staff will stay in constant communication with their student-athletes. Several student-athletes reported that the coaches at Ozarka are not

communicating with all the players and only concerned about their athletic progression within the program.

Impact of Positive Resources to Assist Student-athletes

There are resources available to student-athletes to assist student-athletes with their academics. The subsequent themes include quality advantages to ensure student-athletes are successful, effective communication strategies to keep student-athletes academically focused, consistent daily schedules are vital for student-athletes, making meaningful connections with support service staff, and creating leaders among student-athletes.

Quality Advantages to Ensure Student-Athletes are Successful. The support services are available for student-athletes to use if they are struggling in a course. Two out of 12 student-athletes mentioned about the resources available to student-athletes. Student-athletes can use the writing centers, math labs, and computer labs to assist with their assignments. Student-athlete IV discussed the difference of college athletics in England:

It is helpful especially for those who do struggle in class and do not want to do their work you kind of need that extra push. The service is a pretty good. Again, the only thing [is] that you log into your own devices, if you fail, you fail. Even if you are part of a sports team, it is not so much a big thing over here [England]. You play [as] somewhat [of] a hobby. You play a sport and then just go back to being a regular student [on campus]. This extra stuff was necessary. So, it is really good.

Student-athletes in America can take advantage of participating in sports and earning a degree. At Ozarka, student-athletes can continue in the writing center or make an

appointment to see their tutor. Student-athlete VI discussed some of the support services at Ozarka:

They have everything. They help you set up your classes. Your adviser will set your schedule up. They will set up tutoring times. And you have mandatory tutoring that you have to go to unless like I never had mandatory tutoring, of course, I was not on scholarship before, but also my GPA was not ever in question. But I still took full advantage of the tutors and the people that they have at your disposal, like the athletic department pays very intelligent individuals to come and take time out of their day to help us. So yeah, 100 percent of the support services are phenomenal, and they are just only getting better. And I just see [it] like [if] you do fail a class that is you not trying, like you have to try to fail a class actually. You [must have] tried to [fail] because there is too many opportunities and services. There are writing people to help you with writing papers and people [in person] tutors that I have that I know by name right now that have helped me so much.

Some student-athletes take advantage of the additional resources available to them throughout the semester.

Effective Communication Strategies to Keep Student-Athletes Academically Focused. Most student-athletes are performing better academically due to the communication with various support services staff within the athletic department. Three out of 12 student-athletes explained how effective communication assisted with keeping student-athletes focus with their academics. Furthermore, student-athlete XII mentioned about the support service staff communicating that student-athletes stay focus:

[The communication exists] through the coaches and academic advisors. They keep us updated and posted about stuff [within our classes]. Oh, yeah [the] tutors

[assist me with my work]. You can say training room [when we encounter injuries]. The trainers come in handy a lot [if we need their assistance]. Well, especially the academic advisors, they keep us grounded and keep us on track. Student-athletes are communicating with their coaches, professors, advisors, tutors, and other staff regarding their academics. The communication between the support services staff and coaches is assisting to make sure student-athletes are completing assignments on time. Student-athlete X explained how the director and advisor support student-athletes with any issues:

Well, we have a Fellowship of Christian Athletes [FCA] director, Alex Rodriguez (pseudonym) he was in my corner for sure. I [would] talk to him about what was going on [in] my life. He actually texted me earlier while I was doing workouts. I have not talked to him in a while, but Alex definitely is a supporter like Dr. Miller. She definitely knows a lot [about her job and willing to assist us]. I [am aware that] she would hear me out with what was going on. [Additionally,] if I felt some type of way [her response] was genuine and same for Alex.

Many student-athletes perceive that the advisor and director care about their student-athletes at Ozarka. In addition, the coaches are concerned about their student-athletes maintaining their eligibility on the team. Student-athlete III experienced his coach monitoring him and said, “You know, our coaches are on top of it. They are always making sure that you are staying ahead of your class and not [falling] behind.”

The coaches communicate with the faculty and support service staff regarding their student-athletes progress with their courses.

Consistent Daily Schedules are Vital for Student-Athletes. Student-athletes’ schedules are different from the other students at Ozarka due to academic and athletic demands throughout the day. Three out of 12 student-athletes discussed their consistent

daily schedules involving academics and athletics. Student-athlete XI described his schedule on a particular day:

When you see the schedule [from] last fall, this is a real good example of [consistency]. The schedule last fall, we have class in the morning, so like around 11:00 [am] to 12:00 [pm] and then 1:00 to 3:00 [pm] classes [at that time]. Then we have a break when we did not have class until practice. [Next,] practice [would] start [with] meetings around 4:00 pm. Then we will get on [the] field [at] 5:00 or 6:00 pm and we will end around 9:00 pm. I feel like that was a good schedule because we have time to go home and get some sleep [for the next day].

Some of the student-athletes would meet with their advisor, tutors, or mentor after practice concluded in the evening. The academic advisors meet with the student-athletes regarding creating their schedules. Student-athlete IX mentioned about being organized due to his daily schedule:

Honestly, it is not that hard to be organized in college football, because most of the time we are running around doing what somebody tells [us] to do. Your day is set out basically for you [to] have time [with your] schedule to do this and that. So, you are following along the schedules, you know, to whatever, like a robot.

Student-athletes at Ozarka need to ensure that their schedules are balanced between academics and athletics. TeamWorks was incorporated at Ozarka University to assist student-athletes with maintaining their schedules. Student-athlete VII explained the importance of using TeamWorks:

TeamWorks has everything on it [including schedules]. So, that has been the biggest contributing factor, just because it alerts you [and] will send you [a reminder] message [on] your page. [It reminds you when] lunch is ready. [Teamwork has] everything on [it]. So, I would give all the credit to TeamWorks

and whoever is upstairs posting the individual schedules and the team's schedule and stuff [other schedules] like that.

It is important for student-athletes to get acclimated to their daily schedule to establish routines for the year. Student-athletes at Ozarka utilize their academic advisors, tutors, coaches, professors, and TeamWorks to assist with their schedules. The support services staff is committed to making meaningful connections with the student-athletes from day one. TeamWorks alerts student-athletes about their upcoming classes and submissions of assignments.

Making Meaningful Connections with Support Service Staff. The support staff at Ozarka start building a positive relationship with the student athlete and their parents during the recruitment trip. Three out of 12 student-athletes expounded on their relationships with the support service staff. Student-athletes spend significant time in their advisors, tutors, and mentors' offices for academic and personal reasons. Student-athlete VI shared that the staff was concerned about his well-being and academic performance:

I feel like ever since I have got there, it [has] felt like family and they really care. Now, I have [earned] my degree [and I am] just kind of like, wait, I have a degree now. I blinked and [the years] went by [for my undergraduate degree] and now I am about to get another degree [master]. [Staff mentioned that I am] doing a great job.

Several student-athletes have graduated with their bachelor's degree because of the support from the staff at Ozarka. Unfortunately, not all student-athletes take advantage of using the support services. Student-athlete VII explained how fortunate support services are available to them:

Some guys [complain about the services provided to them]. You obviously talk[ed] to the right guys. If you talk to some [other] guys on the team they [would] be like man, she is so annoying. She is texting me [all the time]. Bruh, I try to tell them, especially the younger guys, man, you do not know how much of a blessing this is [to have an academic advisor like Dr. Miller].

Some student-athletes have transferred to other division I institutions and recognize some of the services not being available. It is imperative for athletic programs to understand their student-athletes to help them reach their goals. Student-athlete II revealed how vital the connection between the staff and student-athletes and said, “[It is important for the staff to] understand your players and understand their stories. Again, everybody is different and have their own story. You never know what is going on [with that person] until you try to understand what they got going on [in their life]. So, I am just putting an emphasis on [programs] understanding your players and student-athletes. I wish them the best.” The associate athletic director stated that the support service staff should consider checking in with their student-athletes at least once a week.

Creating Leaders Among Student-Athletes. Every program has student-athletes that are leaders on the playing field, while some student-athletes lead in the classroom. Two out of 12 student-athletes mentioned about becoming a leader within the athletic program. Student-athletes that are entering their final year of eligibility can be a leader to the freshmen by graduating and becoming mentors.

Student-athlete III described how Ozarka is preparing him to be a leader:

In college, you can set these things up [with a leader]. [In addition,] you have team leaders [on the football team]. He [was] a natural fit [for a leader]. As we learned in college, you [should strive to] be your own leader. There is a [difference between a] follower and a leader [on any team]. Right, and basically [I

am a] leader. This college is teaching you how to be a leader or you can come along with what is going on [with other leaders].

The coaches at Ozarka prepare student-athletes to become future leaders by assigning offensive and defensive leaders within the team. The coaches on the football team have leaders that are designated as captains for each game. Some of the senior student-athletes are given the opportunity to mentor the freshman student-athletes.

Student-athlete VII recalled talking to one of his teammates and roommate about college life:

Exactly, Carl [pseudonym] moved out last week. My other teammate, Earl [pseudonym], he plays receiver [and] he just moved in. So, we kind of had a good little talk this past weekend, just talking about, you know, this upcoming season and [if] he has his head on straight. I just kind of know [that] he is young minded [individual].

Student-athletes that are selected for scholar athletic awards are leading in their classrooms. However, student-athletes continue to face challenges and obstacles while pursuing a degree at this division I institution.

Problems Student-Athletes Encounter in College

Several of the student-athletes have faced obstacles during their college experience. The ensuing themes are (a) student-athletes' academic obstacles at a division I university, (b) student-athletes not interested in performing well academically, (c) academic struggles of student-athletes with disabilities, (d) student-athletes with a focus on graduating, (e) factors that contribute to a successful balance of academics and athletics, and (f) student-athletes at a division I desiring to play in the NFL.

Student-Athletes Academic Obstacles at a Division I University. Some student-athletes are not prepared for college and encounter academic obstacles during

their tenure. Three out of 12 student-athletes discussed the challenges they encountered attending a division I university. The academic problems that several student-athletes face will impact their eligibility on the team. Student-athlete I discussed about his struggles in math and receiving assistance from his tutor:

So, I was struggling with Statistics and that is not even normal math. You [are] plugging things into this basic Excel sheet and figuring it out. You [are able to figure out the] answer. So, I just really needed to understand how to do that. Plus, I am coming from a small junior college, and you know, I am not used to that type of stuff [problem]. So, I just had to get acquainted with my tutor, and spend some time in that office with him. [I] learned [to] sit down and [figure out how to solve the problem]. Of course, if I am having trouble [with a class I will] instantly go to the tutor [or] go to my academic advisor. [I will] tell them this course is going to be difficult or it is starting to become complicated. I think I [will] need some more time [with the] tutor. [I will be] taking precautions like that [to get assistance with this course].

Student-athletes can go to their academic advisor to request a tutor for any course.

Student-athlete IV said most of his teammates sacrifice their grades due to academic struggles:

However, being honest, if you really want to do well at [a] top tier [institution], especially if you are not that in the classroom, something is going to have to give between athletics and academics. Unfortunately, a lot of the time [it] is education, even though there is a lot of resources when it comes to [academics]. [It is] not just the effort [of] wanting to do [assignments] and I am one person that does not mind the classroom but it [is a] steep [climb up the] hill.

Several student-athletes are struggling in class and on the verge of getting put on academic probation. According to student-athletes, overcoming obstacles will allow you to stay on the team. Student-athlete II explained he learned how to deal with the setbacks of college life:

Well, I kind of ran into some roadblocks myself. I have done some things I am not proud of and [some] things I knew I should not have done. [In order] for me to get some of those extra benefits and help [was due to being on the team]. I was like, well, [would I be] sitting [out of the game?]. Right. So, I figured that [part] out.

Student-athletes have resources available on campus that can assist them with their problems.

Student-Athletes Not Interested in Performing Well Academically. Several student-athletes are more concerned about their athletics and continue to struggle academically. Four out of 12 student-athletes mentioned about some student-athletes are only concerned about how well they are performing on the field and is not concerned about their academics. According to some of the student-athletes, if they do not like the course then minimal effort will be applied to assignments. Student-athlete IV responded that he had a lack of determination because of not being into the subject, “A lot of stuff really did not interest me. I am smart but if I am not interested in that subject, I did not put as much effort in(to) it.” Additionally, some participants within the study were not concerned about their grades and focused their attention on earning an athletic scholarship. Student-athletes IX explained how he did not care about his grades and focused on athletics:

I wanted to be around the smart people, but I did not want to do smart people stuff, but I just wanted to be around them. I did not want to actually do my work

in school or anything like try extra hard. I did not care [about my grades]. I knew I was going to get an [athletic] scholarship.

Some student-athletes are only able to attend Ozarka University because of their athletic talents. Corresponding to some student-athletes, athletic programs are more concerned about winning championships instead of increasing graduation ratio. Student-athlete X explained that athletic programs are focus on student-athletes generating more revenue for the university:

It is just different [for some student-athletes]. I had the opportunity to change [my outcome], and I did. So, I am happy with what I did because that is a big issue [for athletic programs]. They just do not care [about your academics] as long as you [are] making them [athletic program] millions it is fine.

Several student-athletes are making academics a priority to provide options for them after college.

Academic Struggles of Student-Athletes with Disabilities. Some student-athletes have disabilities that have not been diagnosed and which are affecting their academic performance in all their courses. Three out of 12 student-athletes discussed about their mental health issues and the need for more support to student-athletes with disabilities. Another problem would be providing the proper accommodations for student-athletes with disabilities. Student-athlete II recalled not being able to pay attention in his class, “Some people would say I could be a student athlete. I would [diagnose] myself as [having] ADHD. I am always hyper. I am [constantly] moving around [and staff would request me to] stop [to get back focus].” Ozarka is working on improving the recommendation process for student-athletes that are struggling with a potential learning disability. Furthermore, several participants stated how the mental health affected their attendance in lecture and at practice.

Student-athlete IV expounded about his own personal struggles with mental health:

So, I remember in March, I was having a tough time mentally just waking up every day, going to class, going to training, it was tough. I was thinking about quitting. It was kind of difficult, but I do not want to say there was no support because you have your coach. You can tell [if] someone [is] difficult [and if] someone [is] on it. [Do] you know [what I am talking about]?

Several student-athletes discussed not confirming of their learning disability until college. The coaches and support service staff have supported student-athletes with disabilities. Unfortunately, student-athletes with a disability are not receiving the accommodations to be successful in their course.

Student-athlete IX described more attention should be on student-athletes with mental health issues:

I think there needs to be more of the emphasis placed on [the] mental health of athletes and I do not think there is an answer for it. [Do] you know what I mean? I do not know if the answer is substantial enough for what is going on [academically with student-athletes].

Support service staff can recommend a student-athlete take a test to determine if they have a disability.

Student-Athletes with a Focus on Graduating

The main goal for some student-athletes at a Division I program would be to graduate with a degree. Several student-athletes are dedicated to maintaining their academics and graduating from Ozarka with a bachelor's degree. Two out of 12 student-athletes mentioned about establishing good study habits to graduate. Most student-athletes are using the support services and communicating with their professors about any problems.

Student-athlete X explained making your academics a priority and utilizing your time wisely:

He [Another student-athlete] would study before we would have meetings. [He studied] all the time before we had meetings in the locker room. You would see him with a binder and all his work in it. He was always making sure that he [studied] anytime he had free [time]. He was studying and I would be like you might want to get ready for the meeting. He would say just a little bit more [time]. I was like you got it you know what you are doing. So, yeah, he was about that life. He was good on the field too. Well, it is hard still, but I mean you have to make sure that you are not slacking [in the classroom]. [You are] making sure that you can get all your work done early because that will definitely help [with] procrastinating. [I want to stop] procrastinating if I can just [accomplish this goal].

Faculty work with student-athletes regarding providing them the option to turn assignments in early. Professors are working with student-athletes to get assignments and assessments completed earlier if he need to travel with the team for an away game. Student-athlete VI stated earning a degree was a requirement with parents that are college educated:

Yeah. So, academics has always been number one in my household. So, I have parents who both graduated, and they both have master's degrees. So that was a kind of understood that football was, you know, the after effect of what you do in the classroom.

Some student-athletes would use any time outside of athletics to focus on their academics. There are factors that contribute to a successful balance of academics and athletics for student-athletes at a division I university.

Factors that Contribute to a Successful Balance of Academics and Athletics

Student-athletes in college should balance their practice schedules, workout schedules, film study sessions, and game schedules along with going to class, attending tutoring sessions, and checking in with their advisor. Student-athletes at Ozarka are responsible for attending all their classes and participating in every football practice including the games. Two out of 12 student-athletes explained the factors that will assist student-athletes with balancing their academics and athletics. Most student-athletes aim to maintain good grades and passionate about winning football games.

Student-athlete VIII stated that time management was important to keep a balance:

Ok, I think what helped me a lot to find that balance was time management, to know what is important and to know that football is important, just like academics is. [Academics] are what I need to focus on for all my time and I [wanted] to win, especially when I first came to college. I need to put my [cell] phone down.

Sometimes, I need to put the controller down if I am playing the Xbox, you know.

Some of the student-athletes stated that time management was vital for balancing academics and athletics at Ozarka. Student-athletes realize that their video game systems and mobile devices can be distractions that could affect their academics and athletics.

Moreover, student-athlete XII advised about discipline and time management helping maintain his balance:

[I believe] it is discipline. You got to have discipline because, you know, football really takes a toll on you. You got to be disciplined enough to play, wake up, [and] go to class. [Additionally, you must] do your homework and be successful in the classroom. Another factor probably [would] be time management for sure. You have to know how to manage your time [to] be successful [on and off the field].

Student-athletes realize the importance of self-discipline to attend classes, participate in practices, and use resources. Several student-athletes still desire to be drafted and play professionally in the NFL.

Student-Athletes at a Division I Desiring to Play in the NFL

Some student-athletes enter college knowing they are one step closer to fulfilling their childhood dream of playing in the NFL. Five out of 12 student-athletes stated their goals of playing football professionally. Several student-athletes are only concerned about their athletic performance and are not too concerned about their academics. Student-athlete VIII explained how most players focused more on football over their academics:

I felt like I would be just adding on to [my problems]. I could tell [that] Dr. Miller would struggle sometimes having all those players [to service]. A lot of players that do not really care about academics like I do. [Do you] know what I am saying? There is a lot of players just here for football [and that is it].

Ozarka only had two academic advisors to assist all the student-athletes in all sports. Several student-athletes mentioned about only aiming to make it to the NFL. Student-athlete IV said, “I do not know if you should call me a realist or pessimist, but I like to look [at] all my options. So, it is good for me to make it to the NFL.” Ozarka only had two student-athletes make it to the NFL last season, one student-athlete was drafted, and the other student-athlete was invited to training camp.

Student-athlete X said he has the talent to get to the NFL and have a career:

So, it [would be] a dream [to make it to the NFL]. I know [the] NFL stands for Not for Long. So, I just got to make the most of it if I can get [to the league]. I have enough [talent] to get there. If I can get [on a team], I will definitely pursue [my career] to its fullest.

Student-athletes are not only competing against their teammates, but they are also competing against football players around the world for an opportunity to play in the NFL. Several student-athletes stated that the NFL would provide a financial stability for their families. Student-athlete XI described having the opportunity to play in the NFL to provide better for family:

Actually, I would really love the opportunity to play in the NFL because it would give me more opportunities to take care of my family and give back to the community. [I would] start my own family and be [in a position] to provide a little more than, you know, the average person.

Despite the odds, some student-athletes still have the desire to play in the NFL after leaving college to deliver a nicer lifestyle for their family. Student-athlete V acknowledged accomplishing a goal of making to the NFL for a prosperous way of life:

[NFL,] that is my goal. That is my dream. It is something that I work towards pretty much every day. My thoughts honestly, I want to go to the NFL [in order] to create a generational wealth [for] my family. [I want] to change certain situations within my family and to start my [own] business. I do not want to play for 15 [to] 20 years, but I want to make a good living [playing professional football]. [I want to accomplish] a goal [that] I have been chasing since I was a little kid.

Student-athletes that are in the pursuit of playing in the NFL are looking forward to the financial stability this career will bring to his family.

Summary

Research has shown the importance of effective support services for student-athletes at a division I institution (Stout, 2018). The services include the staff providing academic advising, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, learning specialist and career

development to the student-athletes. Universities are recruiting student-athletes that are talented in their sport and academically prepared for their courses. It is vital to communicate with the student-athletes daily and provide a consistent daily schedule for them to follow. Student-athletes getting off to a good start their first year will depend on the support services being available starting on their day one on campus. The support services staff is dedicated to ensuring that student-athletes have all the necessary resources that will lead to them to graduating from their institution with a degree. Student-athletes will be prepared for life after football due to assistance from the career development specialist.

However, some student-athletes are not able to perform well academically due to their learning issues and disabilities. Additionally, several student-athletes are lacking the motivation to complete their degree plan. Institutions are looking to improve their support services by hiring more staff and offering the services off campus.

Student-athletes entering division I universities can receive an athletic scholarship. On the other hand, student-athletes that are not on scholarship have to pay for the cost of school on their own. Most of the student-athletes are receiving quality services and appreciate the support from staff. Furthermore, the coaches stay in communication with the support services staff regarding the student-athletes. Due to COVID-19, the support services staff have offered their services through FaceTime, Zoom, and Microsoft teams. The support services staff at Ozarka will ensure that student-athletes are successful by any means necessary.

Student-athletes have access to resources that will be able to assess them academically. Some of the resources include helpful communication and meaningful relationships between the support staff and the student-athletes. Student-athletes are familiar with their daily academic and athletic schedules. Time management and

discipline are several factors that contribute to student-athletes maintaining a balance with their classes and athletics. Eventually, student-athletes become leaders on campus and accomplish their goal of graduating with a bachelor's degree.

Student-athletes are encountering challenges such as not being academically prepared for college and only focused on being drafted to the NFL. Some student-athletes are not motivated to perform well academically in their classes due to not understanding the content. Additionally, student-athletes may have a disability that has not been diagnosed which could be preventing them from learning the material.

The support services need to be improved by offering more services for student-athletes with mental health issues, according to some student athletes. Division I institutions should consider hiring more academic advisors, mentors, and tutors, according to support service staff and student-athletes. Several student-athletes felt like the services should be optional for those who are able to take care of their responsibilities on their own. The lack of communication and services not being available off campus to student-athletes is contributing to an ineffective program. Lastly, the lack of trust between the support service staff and student-athletes can create a stressful environment.

In conclusion, improving the support services for student-athletes will keep them eligible and on track to graduate with a degree. Additionally, offering more resources for student-athletes with disabilities will assist them with their courses. The support services at Ozarka University have offered online services to the student-athletes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Student-athletes with scholarships have benefited more from incentives compared with student-athletes that do not have a scholarship. The next chapter will examine the summary, implications, and conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore perceptions of the influences of student support services, and other factors that contributed to African American male football players' ultimate success in academics, at a public Division I university. The researcher used two research questions to complete the study.

RQ 1: What perceptions do support services staff members (athletic directors, academic advisors, tutors, and mentors) hold concerning the influence of support services for the academic success of African-American student-athletes in football within their majors?

RQ 2: What perceptions do African-American student-athletes that play football hold concerning support services for their academic success within their majors?

This research study used the theoretical framework from Comeaux and Harrison's (2011) conceptual model of academic success for student-athletes. The model includes four stages: (a) precollege (e.g., family background, educational experiences, preparation, and individual attributes); (b) initial commitments (e.g., goal, sport, and institutional commitments); (c) college environmental factors (e.g., social and academic systems); and (d) commitments (e.g., goal, sport, and institutional commitment). The different phases summarized the important aspects in student-athlete admission to college and provides a framework for comprehending student-athletes' academic success (Comeaux, 2015). Stage One (precollege) is vital for student-athlete's commitments to academic success, sports, and their college environment (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Stages two and four (initial/commitment) occur twice in the framework, first for the initial requirements and second after becoming a student-athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Stage three (sport commitment) is an essential feature of the theoretical framework model due to the

explanations of student-athletes' involvement at their college (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

A constant comparative analysis was utilized in this study to constantly compare data obtained from 19 participants, 12 student-athletes and seven support services staff representatives (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The student-athletes participants consisted of 12 African-American male football players, one international student-athlete that comprised of one freshman, one sophomore, two juniors, five seniors, and three post-graduates. The academic support services staff of seven includes one associate academic advisor, one tutor coordinator, one tutor, one learning specialist, one academic advisor, and two mentors. The results of the study are based on the experiences and perceptions of all the participants, African-American male football players and academic support services staff. As of the interview data, the researcher discovered seven themes from the student-athletes and support services staff.

Faculty and directors use the conceptual model for college student-athlete success to support students with interventions and plans that will help student-athletes navigate each of the stages that will lead to an increase in enrollment and graduation. Eleven out of 12 student-athletes arriving at Ozarka University (pseudonym) were not offered college preparatory courses that will help with college entrance assessments. Two out of 12 student-athletes interviewed were required to attend community college before attending Ozarka University. The student-athletes are committed to performing well during the season and maintaining their grade point averages for eligibility and graduation. Some student-athletes, however, discovered they were not academically prepared for a Division I institution which resulted in low grade point averages. Some student-athletes at Ozarka have graduated with their bachelor's degrees and are currently working on their master's degree. Student-athletes seeking a master's degree are more

likely to finish their degree plan from a university in comparison to student-athletes graduating with a bachelor's degree (Sedlacek & Adams-Gatson, 1992).

Ozarka is committed to providing support services to student-athletes to use on campus. The blend of social and academic systems at an institution is an essential characteristic of this theoretical representation (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). It is imperative for student-athletes to interact with faculty and other support services staff at Ozarka. Several student-athletes discussed assisting first year student-athletes advising them about their schedules and showing them around campus. Some athletic coaches stay in constant communication with their student-athletes to remind them to submit assignments in on time. Student-athletes are required to keep their grades up during the season and some coaches remain in communication with the faculty throughout the year. Most student-athletes at Ozarka use TeamWorks to assist with attending classes, submitting assignments, and upcoming assessments. TeamWorks is the software used by the support service staff to remind student-athletes about important dates for their course. Student-athletes' schedule at Ozarka consist of them attending morning practice, attending morning classes, lunch break, afternoon classes, and evening practice. As a result of fulfilling their goal, sport, and institutional commitments, student-athletes may experience academic success according to the conceptual model for college student athlete success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Student-athletes are appreciative of the support services Ozarka provides to assist them academically.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications and recommendations of this study included four developing themes. The themes that emerged include (a) Importance of academics for student-athletes to graduate at a division university, (b) Recruiting all-around student-athletes, (c) Role of support services for student-athletes (d) Helping freshmen student-athletes get off

to a “strong start”, and (e) Challenges in Providing Support Services. The implications and recommendations will improve the support services at division I universities.

Importance of Academics for Student-Athletes to Graduate at a Division University Recruiting Eligible Student-Athletes

It is important for athletic departments to recruit student-athletes that are academically prepared for college. The study supports the educational experience and preparation for student-athletes in the conceptual model for college student athlete success (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011). One of the student-athletes stated he received assistance in high school and was not being prepared for college. The student-athlete would have complete assignments and faculty were strongly persuaded to update the grade to a passing grade. The associate athletic director stated the importance of recruiting student-athletes that are academically ready for university coursework. The athletic department is recruiting student-athletes that were successful academically in high school and possibly in college. The goal for student-athletes to successful maintain their eligibility to play football, maintain their GPA, and graduate with a degree.

Keeping Their Grades up to Maintain Eligibility for Student-Athletes.

Student-athletes are required to maintain their grades to remain eligible on the team. A student-athlete that has a 3.0 or higher GPA is known as a Scholar-Baller (Harrison et al., 2010). The Scholar-Baller is designed to encourage student-athletes to perform well on the field and academically. Several student-athletes communicated with their counselor and coaches regarding being recognize as a Scholar-Baller (Harrison et al, 2010). The institutional commitment and grade performance is part of the academic system that will eventually result in academic success for student-athletes (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011). Two out of the seven support service staff members explained the importance of student-

athletes finishing with a degree. In addition, a few support service staff members commented about student-athletes completing all their courses on their degree plan.

Making Graduation a Priority and Preparing Student-Athletes for Careers.

It is important for student-athletes to earn a degree before starting their careers and not having the time to finish the last few courses. The support services staff have reminded student-athletes about all the career options available to them on campus. Ozarka University have hired a career specialist to assist student-athletes with their transition from sports to their career. The career specialist follows student-athletes from their first day at the university till graduation day. The odds are high for a student-athlete to be drafted by a professional team in the National Football League (NFL). It is important for student-athletes to prepare for their future career (Burns, et.al, 2013). Some of the student-athletes stated that the NFL stands for 'Not for Long' and realize the importance of earning a degree to establish a successful career. The support service mentioned that is imperative for student-athletes to have a plan for life after sports. Student-athletes will need a degree and skills to be prepared for a career in the real world. According to the athletic director, the coaches encouraged the student-athletes to focus on their academics to prepare them for their future careers. Five out of 12 student-athletes stated that they had an alternate career plan if they did not get drafted by an NFL team. It is important for coaches to emphasize the importance of student-athletes' graduating and transitioning to a successful career.

Aiding Student-Athletes on Academic Probation. However, student-athletes will be placed on academic probation if their GPA decrease below a 2.0. Student-athletes on academic probation are struggling academically and ineligible to play on the team. Two out of the seven support service staff members explained how student-athletes can get out of academic probation by increasing their GPA and earning credits toward their

degree. The support service staff members provide additional support for student-athletes on academic probation. An advisor will ask the student-athlete on academic probation the type of assistance needed and communicate this information to the learning specialist. The goal is to get student-athletes off academic probation and back on track to completing their degree plan.

Recruiting All-Around Student-Athletes

The support service staff expressed that the university is committed to recruiting more student-athletes that are performing well academically in classroom and playing great on the field. Furthermore, student-athletes need to be more prepared for college. The academic advisor stated that the graduation rate is increasing at Ozarka due to the institution recruiting more student-athletes that are ready for higher education. Several student-athletes discussed that they were prepared for college due to their parents being college graduates. Additionally, student-athletes received high quality instruction from their primary and secondary teachers. The coaches are having recruiters focus on student-athletes' grades, community involvement, and work experience. The incoming student-athletes have to meet certain requirements to be considered for an athletic scholarship at Ozarka university. Most athletic administration wants to recruit student-athletes that will remain eligible on the team and eventually graduate with a degree.

During recruitment, support service staff members discuss the academic support services for student-athletes and the benefits of using the services. The associate athletic director discusses about the academic center for student-athletes, math lab, writing center, and career services available for all student-athletes at Ozarka University. Student-athletes utilizing the services impact their attendance and retention on campus (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Recruiters at Ozarka University should implement inviting former student-athletes that are now playing in the National Football League (NFL) or working

in a successful career to share their college experience with incoming student-athletes. Some student-athletes that have graduated returned on campus as mentors (Storch & Ohlson, 2009).

The research mentioned support services, professors offering more teaching, and mentors being assigned to student-athletes providing necessary academic support (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). The support services staff meets with student-athletes during their recruitment to Ozarka and makes them aware of the support services available to them. The support service staff stated they start at the beginning of the recruitment process to reach student-athletes to ensure they will be academically successful at their institution. The support service staff feels that student-athletes, they are recruiting currently, are more prepared for college and are utilizing the services.

Role of Support Services for Student-Athletes

The support services are designed to help student-athletes with their academics and transition after sports. Most NCAA athletic programs at division I universities have advisors, tutors, and mentors to assist student-athletes with their academics (Watson, 2006). The associate athletic director oversees hiring support service staff and executing programs to support student-athletes on campus. Every student-athlete is assigned an academic advisor to assist with registration, getting academic resources, and providing information to the tutor coordinator. The tutor coordinator assigns the student-athlete a tutor to help with assignments and prepare for exams. A mentor is appointed to student-athletes for guidance and sharing their college experience. Additionally, effective support service programs increase the number of student-athletes graduating from college (Storch & Olson, 2009).

Several student-athletes are impressed with the support services available within the athletic department at Ozarka. Some of the student-athletes appreciated all the

support from one of two academic advisors and felt like the services assisted them with staying organized. Additionally, effective support service programs increase the number of student-athletes graduating from college (Storch & Olson, 2009). The student-athletes found the support services to be useful throughout the year. The advisor and tutors assisted with arranging the student-athletes' daily schedules. The support services staff assisted student-athletes more virtually due to COVID-19 pandemic. The support service staff made it a priority to connect with their student-athlete every day to check on their progress with their courses. Furthermore, the student-athletes communicated with support services staff daily using FaceTime, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. Several student-athletes have graduated with a degree and are continuing to use the support services for their graduate classes.

Most of the student-athletes were appreciative of the support service staff that went above and beyond to assist with any issue. One of the academic advisors would ensure that student-athletes had resources and were able to reach her at any time. The academic advisor is responsible for helping student-athletes determine their major, find their strengths, and analyzing programs (Academic Advisor, 2015). The support service staff and coaches are committed to student-athletes' academic success at Ozarka. The support services were still offered to student-athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the student-athletes were able to communicate with their advisors, tutors, and coaches regarding their academics. The social support available to African-American student-athletes are retaining them on campus (Melendez, 2008). Ozarka's support service staff followed up with student-athletes after the pandemic shut the institution down. Additionally, more student-athletes are graduating, and a few are pursuing their master's degree. Some student-athletes are returning to campus in a mentor role (Storch & Ohlson, 2009).

Helping Freshmen Student-Athletes get off to a “Strong Start” Providing Study Halls. NCAA Division I universities should provide a caring and relaxed environment for all their student-athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Some of the support staff assisted student-athletes with preparing their study schedule for each week. The support service staff reported to coaches if freshmen student-athletes reported to mandatory study hall. The student-athlete ended athletic practice in the evening around 9:00 pm and utilize the rest of their evening to work on assignments or study for their courses. Several student-athletes would meet up with their advisor or tutor in the Bai athletic academic center. Coaches inquired about student-athletes attending their tutoring sessions and communicated with the support service staff. One of the coaches contacted the associate athletic director regarding a student-athlete turning in a major assignment. Additionally, resources are available for student-athletes to remain academic eligible for the upcoming season. The Conceptual Model for college student-athlete success included their grade performance, Scholar-Baller paradigm, and intellectual development contribute to academic integration (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011). The support services are available to all student-athletes and freshmen are required to attend mandatory study hall. The student-athletes utilized the services provided by their academic advisor and tutor to assist with their academic needs. The support services can assist with keeping student-athletes eligible on the team.

Student-athletes can study and receive support services at Bai athletic academic center. The athletic academic centers are essential for the development of student-athletes (Ishaq, 2019). The student-athletes at Ozarka have access to the math and writing centers on campus. Student-athletes can study between classes and after evening practice. Several student-athletes can study in the locker room before practice begins and every moment, they are presented the opportunity to study. The academic centers

provide student-athletes the opportunity to focus on their academic and provide accommodations for all student-athletes (Ishaq, 2019). The academic advisors and tutors use the academic centers to meet with student-athletes at their designated scheduled appointment. The freshmen student-athletes are required to attend study hall inside the Bai center. The library and student center are other options for student-athletes to study while on campus. The athletic academic center is open to student-athletes before and after practice to help with balancing their academic and athletic schedules. Student-athletes with study routines are usually maintain their grades and committed to performing well in the course. Student-athletes attending study hall and their tutoring sessions are committed to doing well academically.

Monitoring Student-Athletes Progress. Some student-athletes' teachers at low socioeconomic status campuses have not prepared them for college (Kozol 1992; 2005). Some student-athletes are challenged with the transition of attending a university. Furthermore, some student-athletes struggle to balance their academic and athletic schedules during their first semester at a university (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011). Several student-athletes mentioned that their athletic schedule consumed most of their day and only spend several hours working on their academics. The advisors and tutors are limited by the number of hours to assist student-athletes daily due to their high demand. Some student-athletes are not ready for the college coursework because of their academic gaps from high school. In summary, some student-athletes struggle academically during their first semester and can lead to being placed on academic probation.

Student-athletes are not prepared for college due to their past experiences in elementary and secondary education. Some student-athletes are only concerned about their athletic performance and disregard their academics. Several student-athletes main

purpose for going to college is having the opportunity to participate in the National Football League (NFL) draft. Most student-athletes are quitting school due to their NFL career becoming bleak (Perry, 2014). The support service staff are dealing with student-athletes that are not concerned about their academics.

Most of the support service staff remind their student-athletes about the importance of education when football is over. African-American student-athletes can deal with academic struggles due to the support from the athletic department (Mendez, 2006). The support service staff is responsible for verifying with their student-athletes about their academics. Student-athletes mentioned having discipline and time management assisted with keeping a balance with their academics and athletics. Several student-athletes have parents with college degrees, and they are expected to finish with their degrees.

Keeping Student-Athletes Organized. The support service staff helped student-athletes meet deadlines for assignments and projects. The support service staff help student-athletes with being organized and reminding them about important due dates. One out of the seven support service staff member provided calendars and weekly task sheets for student-athletes to use for their courses. Most freshmen student-athletes received their electronic calendars from their tutors. The weekly task sheet allowed student-athletes to organize their schedule by the hour. Student-athletes using these resources extend the literature on the importance of student-athletes staying organized in all their courses. Support service staff members are adjusting their schedules to compensate for their student-athletes academic demands throughout the year. The coaches have been supportive to their student-athletes by checking in with them in study hall and following up with their tutors. Some student-athletes' schedules are organized for student-athletes to be able to attend all of their courses and practices throughout the

week. The increase of support services for student-athletes is assisting with meeting deadlines and being prepared on and off the field. On the other hand, student-athletes encounter a different lifestyle, mandatory practice schedule, and fulfilling expectations (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001). Student-athletes would utilize any free time to work on their assignments for class.

Having Available Resources for Student-Athletes. Additional resources offered to all students at Ozarka include the writing center, math lab, and computer labs. Athletic directors used the additional funding with athletics to hire additional tutors, counselors, and resources to support the student-athletes (Ridpath, 2010). One of the support services staff members indicated student-athletes could check out devices and other resources to assist them academically. The research study supports the literature regarding providing additional resources for student-athletes at Ozarka university. Student-athletes can use their Ozarka's identification card to check out a laptop to complete their online assignments. The academic resources will contribute to student-athletes performing successfully and could potentially result in earning a degree. Some student-athletes are using the math labs, computer labs, and writing centers to complete their projects.

Building Meaningful Relationships with Student-Athletes. The support service staff is dedicated to establishing meaningful relationships with the student-athletes. The student-athletes were appreciative of their academic advisor and tutor for always being there to assist with any problems. An effective student support system will help student-athletes with recruitment and retention to stay on team (Stork & Ohlson, 2009). The student-athletes stay in communication with the support service staff throughout their years at Ozarka. The support service staff assists student-athletes with balancing their workload between academics and athletics (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto,

2001). Some of the student-athletes work with the support service staff to develop a productive schedule. The implications of making meaningful connections with the staff will attract talented student-athletes and increase the graduation rate. The appreciation from close staff and friends has a significance impact on student-athlete's commitment to sports (Gaston, 1992). The support service staff at Ozarka support their student-athletes by attending their games. Some of the student-athletes do not miss their session with their advisor, tutor, or mentor. African-American student-athletes have a higher retention rate due to inclusion from the support service staff (Melendez, 2006). The support services staff remind student-athletes to stay organized and focus on their academics. Professors work with student-athletes to get assignments or exams completed for the games away from their home stadium. The appreciation from close staff and friends has a significance impact on student-athlete's commitment to sports (Gaston, 1992). The support services staff members at Ozarka are committed to meaningful relationships with student-athletes and they can assist with challenges that may come their way.

Challenges in Providing Support Services

Academic Struggles for Student-Athletes with Disabilities. The support services staff have identified several student-athletes that are struggling academically due to undiagnosed learning disability. The environmental factors consist of support staff and commitment to support some student-athletes academically with accommodations will lead to academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Several student-athletes recommend additional training for support service staff assisting student-athletes with disabilities. Due to the athletic budget at Ozarka, support service staff is limited to selecting a limited number of student-athletes to be tested for a disability. Some student-athletes with learning disabilities are frustrated with their professors due to the high academic demands for their course. Student-athletes with learning disabilities are

struggling with reading and writing comprehension within their classes. A few student-athletes with disabilities have been told that they are not smart and are used to struggling academically in their classes. There are some student-athletes that have mental health issues that are affecting their performance in the classroom.

Some student-athletes are struggling academically due to an undiagnosed learning disability. At Ozarka, the support service staff can recommend testing for a student-athlete for a disability upon approval from the student-athlete. Several student-athletes have agreed to the recommendation; however, they did not show up on testing day. According to the associate athletic director, athletic departments are limited to the number of student-athletes that can be tested due to their budgets. A few student-athletes admitted to having mental health issues and requesting assistance from the university. Student-athletes with disabilities are held to the same standards as all students. The disabilities that student-athletes may have include learning, emotional, mental, and psychiatric (NCES, 2019). One of the support service staff observed a student athlete mixing up their letters and recommended testing for dyslexia. Manderino and Gunstad (2018) discovered that student-athletes that have a learning disorder or ADHD are performing at a lower level than a normal functioning student-athlete.

Trained Support Staff working with Learning Disabilities and Providing Accommodations. One of the academic advisors recommended the NCAA partner up with the NFL to provide financial assistance for student-athletes that need testing for a disability. Future student-athletes will need to complete a pre-assessment that will allow the support service staff to determine if they need testing. Research has shown that pre-assessment should be conducted on all student-athletes for verification of a learning disability (Manderino & Gunstad, 2018). Institutions should implement policies that require student-athletes to have accommodations for their disability and staff that would

be able to assist them with any issues. NCAA universities should consider collaborating with mental health services to provide additional resources to student-athletes. The associate athletic director stated that athletic departments hire additional counselors to assist student-athletes. Learning assistants, academic advisors, tutors, and mentors play a vital role in ensuring student-athletes are successful in college (Ridpath, 2010). Some student-athletes with disabilities are struggling with the course content and not able to complete their assignments. Several student-athletes with learning disabilities are failing their courses and eventually dropping out of college (DeMartini, 2016).

More Specialized Training for Staff. Athletic directors at NCAA Division I universities should consider providing more training for faculty working with student-athletes with disabilities. In addition, more funding is needed to test student-athletes that may have an undiagnosed learning disability. Athletic departments should consider providing more training to support service staff members on working with student-athletes with disabilities. Some student-athletes will continue to struggle academically due to not being provided the proper accommodations from faculty for their undiagnosed disability. Universities are required to provide the appropriate training, accommodating their exams, proper equipment, and monitor student-athletes with disabilities (DeMartini, 2016). The training for support service staff should focus on accommodating student-athletes during their study sessions. Student-athletes performance in the classroom should start to improve after receiving proper accommodations from their professors.

Additional Resources for Student-Athletes with Disabilities. The associate athletic director recommended that the NCAA incorporate more resources to assist student-athletes with disabilities which would include requiring all staff members to participate in a professional development on how to assist student-athletes with disabilities. Student-athletes would like to see more information available on how to get

assistance if they are struggling in a class during their freshmen orientation. Several support service staff recommend having systems that will assist student-athletes with improving their academic progress and maintaining a high-GPA. Nearly all institutions provide some academic assistance to their student-athletes by offering a mentor, tutor, or academic advisor to meet their academic demands (Watson, 2006).

Ensuring Student-Athletes with Disabilities are Receiving Accommodations.

The tutor coordinator suggested Ozarka University working with high schools to ensure student-athletes are diagnosed earlier and receiving the proper accommodations. The admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) committee which consist of parents, teachers, special education coordinator, testing coordinator, and student-athlete will be able to determine the accommodations based on grades, observation, and previous test data. The student-athletes' accommodations may consist of receiving additional testing time, extended days to complete assignments, or accelerated instruction. Universities are responsible for accommodating student-athletes with disabilities by providing proper training, observing their behaviors, ensuring correct equipment, and becoming familiar with their learning style (DeMartini, 2016). Several student-athletes stated that professors have the same expectations for all students in their course.

Assisting with Mental Health Issues. Additional resources are available for all student-athletes attending Ozarka University. Student-athletes can check-out laptops in the Bai athletic academic center. Student-athletes mentioned about having more resources and services available to assist with daily issues. Student-athletes felt it was important to have secluded additional resources (Rubin & Moses, 2017). The support service staff use a survey to determine the student-athletes' learning style for their study session. As a result, the support services staff can assist student-athletes with understanding their content. Student-athletes have access to the math lab and writing

center to assist with assignments and projects. Student-athletes can contact Ozarka's crisis line if they need assistance with any issue. The crisis line is available to all students seven days a week and 24 hours a day.

Ozarka University needs to improve their response to a student-athletes that may be thinking about harming themselves or other crises. Several student-athletes mentioned about the crisis team not responding until the next day. One of the student-athletes discussed about having a mental break down before practice and the institution crisis team not getting back to him until the following day. Student-athletes are faced with the daily challenges in the classroom and on the football field. Some student-athletes are trying to meet the high expectations from their coaches and are disconnected from their academics (Melendez, 2006). Ozarka University have counselors on campus, yet several student-athletes stated about the difficulty of setting up appointment due to their schedule. An academic advisor recalled some of the student-athletes talking about some of their mental challenges during their session. The academic advisor recommended that the student-athletes get in touch with a counselor at the institution. Mental health issues may attribute to student-athletes eventually dropping out of college due to struggling in the classroom and not performing up to their expectations with the team. A few student-athletes with a disability will struggle academically even with their greatest effort (Manderino & Gunstad, 2018).

The student-athletes recommended that the institution add more services that will be able to assist student-athletes within the same day. All division I universities should implement a crisis hotline for all students to be able to call, text, or email at any time. Athletic departments should identify all their student-athletes with mental health problems and assign a counselor to assist them throughout the year. Furthermore, student-athletes encountering mental health issues should be checking in with their

physician. Athletic department staff and support service staff can be provided a training that will assist them with handling a student-athlete with mental health challenges.

Lacking Academic Motivation. The support service staff is aware of those student-athletes that are only focused on their athletics. The lack of financial resources and student-athletes not utilizing the support services have led to the programs being removed from campus (Castenel et al., 2018). Two out of seven support service staff stated that several student-athletes were not attending class, submitting their assignments, and lacked effort to succeed in their courses. In addition, several student-athletes coming from less privilege neighborhoods were not the reason they were struggling academically in college. One of the mentors at Ozarka recommended that student-athletes assume responsibility for not attending classes and turning in their coursework. The implication of student-athletes not performing well academically will lead to academic probation and loss of their athletic scholarship. The student-athletes that are not motivated should be encouraged to meet with their academic advisor and mentor at least three times in a week. The associate athletic director should have a conversation with the coaches regarding the student-athletes struggling academically and follow-up with the student-athletes to ensure they are attending classes and study hall. The academic advisor should consider reminding student-athletes about not being eligible to play if they are not passing all their courses.

Focus on Race Issues. Several student-athletes preferred to have mentors that looked more like them and could relate to their challenges during childhood. There is a limited number of African-American males working at a division I university. Additionally, only nine percent of African-American males worked as a counselor or advisor in 2012-2013 (Moore III et al., 2015). The support service staff at Ozarka did not have any African-American males working with the student-athletes. The African-

American males play a major role in the recruiting process at the division I level. In addition to, only one out of seven support service staff was an African-American male at Ozarka university. On the other hand, African-American males play an important role in the recruitment process on the collegiate level (Moore III et al., 2015). The athletic department has hired more African-American males as part of their coaching staff at Ozarka university. The implications of hiring more African-American males will attract more African-American student-athletes and faculty to those specific universities. African-American males that are former student-athletes will be able to assist by sharing their college experience, discuss the obstacles that was overcome, and future career opportunities for student-athletes (Moore et al., 2015).

At Ozarka, only 10% of the support service staff member is African-American and most of the football players are African-American. A student-athlete mentioned that is difficult to listen to a mentor that does not look like him or have similar past experiences. Several universities need to increase the number of African-American males on faculty that would be able to assist student-athletes. Additionally, hiring African-American males to be mentors or be a counselor can assist with student-athletes that are struggling academically or thinking about dropping out of college. Universities are eliminating support services to compensate for the head football coach's salary within the athletic department (Ishaq, 2019).

Research has shown mentoring to be effective for African-American male student-athletes from support staff (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). The student-athletes discussed about the mentor being able to relate to living in a single parent household, crime infested neighborhood, or overcoming life challenges. The student-athlete stated that the mentor would be able to relate to what they were talking about and assist them with issues. Most of the football team at Ozarka is African-American and only a few

African-Americans are part of the support services staff. Student-athletes suggested institutions starting with athletes that graduated from the university to serve as mentors for the current student-athletes.

Division I universities should increase their athletic department budget to be able to hire more diverse support service staff. According to the support service staff, there is a lack of personnel and staff struggle to assist all the student-athletes on campus. The athletic director should add to their staff by hiring more academic advisors, tutors, and mentors. Numerous universities are using extra funds to hire tutors, counselors, laptops, and other academic resources to ensure student-athletes maintain their grade point average (GPA) (Ridpath, 2010). Several support services staff members at Ozarka stated that additional staff was necessary to support the student-athletes and additional funding to them. Furthermore, the search committee decided to add more support service staff members and could invite a student-athlete to the interview sessions to ensure that the applicant is a good fit for the institution. The athletic department can get the student-athletes' perspective by having them on the interview panel. The applicant will get the opportunity to see the type of student-athletes at that institution.

The search committee for the university should include diverse applicants for the role of a support service staff member. It is important for institutions to have a diverse staff for all the different student-athletes that will be part of their athletic program (Ishaq, 2019). Moreover, student-athletes are being recruited from all over the world to attend universities in the United States. The diverse support service staff will be able to relate to all the student-athletes at the university. Most student-athletes will require unique assistance for a diverse group of learners on campus (Ishaq, 2019).

Working with International Staff and Student-Athletes. The support service staff was not able to assist some international students due to conflicts with schedules and

communication issues. Several of the tutors are international students and they are not able to connect with some of the student-athletes on the football team. One of the international student-athletes had to return home due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it was a struggle for him academically and impacted his conditioning for football. The support service staff should consider attending additional training working with student-athletes and determine their learning style. The student-athletes may take into consideration attending a training learning about different cultures from around the world. The international support service staff can join the intramural league and learn more about football.

Examining Student-Athletes not on Scholarship. The support service staff noticed that student-athletes not on scholarship are more focused on their academics and performing well on the field. The student-athletes not on scholarship can earn a scholarship from the athletic department. Student-athletes that are walk-on mentioned about the pressures of ensuring that you are always performing well due to the possibility of being dismissed from the team. One out of 12 student-athletes talked about his experience of earning a scholarship as a walk-on student-athlete by practicing hard and showing the coaches he was ready when his name was called. The support service staff may want to continue assisting student-athletes academically not on scholarships. Several student-athletes have quit the team due to having to find a job to support all his college expenses. The associate athletic director and coaches should continue to work together to award a walk-on student-athlete an athletic scholarship.

Recommendations for Future Research

The research study was conducted to provide the perceptions of the support services staff and the services they provide for African-American male student-athletes to increase the graduation rate at a division I university. The researcher focused on African-

American student-athletes who play football. Future research studies should focus on male student-athletes from various ethnicities such as Hispanic, Asian, Caucasian, Pacific Islander at an NCAA Division I institution. This research would allow Division I universities to have a broader perspective from all athletes who play football to enhance their support services program to increase the graduation rates for all athletes. This research could determine if support services are provided to all athletes or certain athletes. Division I universities could use the data to ensure equity among the athletic programs and increase graduation rates. The researcher will be able to investigate if more student-athletes from other ethnicities are graduating from college in comparison to African-American male student-athletes. Furthermore, the researcher will determine if student-athletes from other ethnicities have a desire to play in the National Football League (NFL).

Furthermore, research can be conducted at Division II and III universities focusing on the effectiveness of their support services contributing to their student-athletes graduating with their bachelor's degree. Most student-athletes at these levels are fulfilling a dream of playing sports at the collegiate level. Division II and III institutions have less student-athletes on an athletic scholarship as it is more challenging to earn one. Due to the increase odds of playing professional sports for Division II and III student-athletes, the researcher could find out if the student-athletes are more equipped to earn a degree and transition into a career. The researcher can verify if student-athletes attending Division II and III universities are more prepared academically for their transition from high school to college.

Moreover, research can be conducted at Division I universities comparing the different types of support services provided to both male and female student-athletes and comparing the graduation rate with the usage of those support services. Most research

has shown female student-athletes to have higher GPA which result in a higher graduation rate. In 2020, the graduation success rate (GSR) for African-American females are 87% compared to 77% for African-American males and the federal graduation rate (FGR) is 66% compared to 56% for African-American males (NCAA Research Staff, 2020). The research can examine the effectiveness of support services with the female student-athletes compared to the male student-athletes. Research will be able to investigate the career readiness between the female and male student-athletes. The researcher could examine how both female and male high school student-athletes are being prepared for the challenges that occur to become an academically successful college athlete. The researcher can examine if female student-athletes are better prepared for their transition after sports in comparison to male student-athletes at Division I institutions. Concentrating on female student-athletes college experience during this transition from sports brings a unique perspective (Saxe, Hardin, Taylor, & Pate, 2017). This data can be used by division I university to determine how to fill in the learning gap for female and male student-athletes in college.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study was performed to explore the perceptions held by athletic personnel and student-athletes about the effectiveness of support services for African-American male student-athletes at division I university. African-American student-athletes continue to trail Caucasian student-athletes regarding graduating from college (Brenneman, 2018). The study determined support services and other factors that contributed to potentially increasing the graduation rate for African-American student-athletes at Ozarka University. The conceptual model provided the initial commitments, social system, academic system, and commitments that led to academic success. Support services benefited from this model due to student-athletes performing well academically.

As an outcome, student-athletes that utilize the support services and model for academic success can potentially accomplish their goals. The results are based on support service staff and student-athletes' insights and personal encounters. It is important to have support services available for student-athletes to ensure a great start academically. Prior research has shown the significance of having support services at division I institutions (Stout, 2018). Some student-athletes are successful with their courses because of effective communication with their support services staff and their coaches. However, some student-athletes are struggling in their academics due to learning disabilities and lacking the commitment to want to graduate with a degree. The support services are available for student-athletes, on the other hand, more services need to be available for student-athletes with mental issues. The summary of findings from the interviews with the support service staff and student-athletes discovered the resulting themes: (a) need for additional support service staff, (b) additional resources for first year student-athletes in college, (c) negative culture within the support services staff, (d) student-athletes are struggling balancing their academic and athletic schedules, (e) lack of consistency with the coaching staff, (f) more training for support service staff working with student-athletes with disabilities, (g) positive attributes for the support services at Ozarka, and (h) need for in-person off-campus support services. The implications and recommendations of this study revealed the following themes: recruiting all-around student-athletes with effective communication from coaches and support service staff, hiring more diverse support service staff and offering additional services, training staff to work with student-athletes with disabilities and providing the proper accommodations for student-athletes with learning disabilities, and additional resources available to assist student-athletes with mental health issues. The recommendations for future research included universities

focusing on other sports, observing student-athletes at division II and II campuses, and support services available to male and female student-athletes.

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APPENDIX A:
DIVISION I ELGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Table 1 Division I Eligibility Requirements

Academic Requirements	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	5th Year
Academic Terms	18 hours of credit (Fall/Spring)	18 hours of credit (Fall/Spring)	18 hours of credit (Fall/Spring)	18 hours of credit (Fall/Spring)
Academic Years	24 credits	18 credits	18 credits	18 credits
Credits (Toward Degree)	Credit accepted toward any degree at university	Credits must go toward degree currently being pursued.	Credits must go toward degree currently being pursued.	Credits must go toward degree currently being pursued.
Completion of Degree (%)	36 quarter hours of credit	40% of degree should be completed.	60% of degree should be completed.	80% of degree should be completed.
G.P.A.	Must maintain 90% of minimum G.P.A. 1.8/2.0	Must maintain 95% of minimum G.P.A. 1.9/2.0	Must maintain 100% of minimum G.P.A. 2.0/2.0	Must maintain 100% of minimum G.P.A. 2.0/2.0

Table 1 standards that help student-athletes earn their degree by NCAA, (2015).

APPENDIX B:

INFORMED CONSENT: ADULT RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study or should you withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. You are being asked to read the information below carefully and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Title: *The Perception of Support Services for African American male Student-Athletes at a Division I University*

Principal Investigator(s): Click or tap here to enter text.

Student Investigator(s): *Jimmie Smith Jr.*

Faculty Sponsor: *Dr. Rebecca Huss-Keeler*

Purpose of the Study: *The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore perceptions of the influences of student support services, and other factors that may contribute to African American male football players' ultimate success in academics, at a public Division I university.*

Procedures: *Researcher will interview student-athletes and athletic support services staff. Researcher will collect physical artifacts on the support services.*

Expected Duration: *The study is expected to take place from after approval from Committee Protection Human Subjects (CPHS) through summer 2020 through spring semester 2021.*

Risks of Participation: We do not expect any foreseeable risks. If you choose to take part and undergo a negative event you feel is related to the study, please contact the Faculty sponsor, Dr. Rebecca Huss-Keeler.

Benefits to the Subject

There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator(s) to better understand perceptions of support services available to student-athletes at a Division I university which could possibly help your institution to serve student-athletes even more effectively.

Confidentiality of Records

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and publication purposes, however, you will not be identified by name. For federal audit purposes, the participant's documentation for this research project will be maintained and safeguarded by the Principal Investigator or Faculty Sponsor for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

Investigator's Right to Withdraw Participant

The investigator has the right to withdraw you from this study at any time.

Contact Information for Questions or Problems

{Or, Student Researcher information}

If you have additional questions during the course of this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Student Researcher, **Jimmie Smith Jr.** by telephone at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED] The Faculty Sponsor, Dr.

Rebecca Huss-Keeler may be contacted by telephone at [REDACTED] or email at [REDACTED]

Identifiable Private Information *(if applicable)*

Identifiers will be removed from identifiable private information.

Signatures

Your signature below acknowledges your voluntary participation in this research project. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(ies) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. By signing the form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, and explanation of risks or benefits have been explained to you. You have been allowed to ask questions and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You have been told who to contact if you have additional questions. You have read this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting the Principle Investigator or Student Researcher/Faculty Sponsor. You will be given a copy of the consent form you have signed.

Subject's printed name: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Signature of Subject: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Date: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed above with the subject.

Printed name and title: [Jimmie Smith Jr and Student Investigator](#)

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: *Jimmie Smith Jr.*

Date: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS HAS REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

██████████. ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

(FEDERALWIDE ASSURANCE #FWA00004068

APPENDIX C:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES

Demographics Section:

- a. Age:
 - b. Classification (Year of University):
 - c. High School Graduated From/District:
 - d. Previous colleges attended (Community College):
 - e. First Generation College Student:
 - f. Another Family Member Played College Football/University:
 - g. Scholarship/Non-Scholarship:
 - h. Red-Shirted During the Season/Played During the Season:
 - i. Why did you select Ozarka University over other Division I universities:
 - j. Major/Future Career:
-
1. Tell me about your experience as a student-athlete in high school academically and athletically (how many years on the football team)? What are your thoughts about playing football professionally after leaving college? (RQ2)

2. As a student-athlete, what are advantages/disadvantages of being on a football scholarship versus not being on a football scholarship? (RQ2)

3. What are your perceptions about the support services on campus? (RQ2)

4. What support services are provided to you and how did you find out about them?
(RQ2)

5. How have the support services for student-athletes assisted you to remain eligible to play on the team? (RQ2)

6. How have you used the support services this semester remotely as compared to how you have used it in the past compared to when everyone was on campus? (RQ2)

7. How do you plan to continue to use the support services to earn a degree at Ozarka?
(RQ2)

8. What factors contribute to you having a balance between academics and athletics?

Please provide an example of a student-athlete that exhibits a successful balance between athletics and academics. (RQ2)

9. What improvements do you suggest for the support services? (RQ2)

10. Is there anything else that the university could do to support you? Yes/No. If so, what? (RQ2)

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

6. What difference have you experienced between African American student-athletes on scholarship and those not on scholarships utilizing the support services? (RQ1)

7. Describe if a student-athlete on scholarship or not on scholarship was faced with academic probation, what support services would be put in place for them? (RQ1)

8. If you were the head of a program what would you include or improve? (RQ1)

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

5. How do you mentor your student-athletes about the importance of time management and finding a balance between academics and athletics? (RQ1)

6. What strategies do you use as a mentor to encourage your student-athlete to focus on returning the next semester and graduating from college? (RQ1)

7. How did you assist a student-athlete on scholarship that is academically failing/probation? How did you assist a student-athlete not on scholarship? (RQ1)

8. Is there any difference between how student-athletes on scholarships and not on scholarships treated on campus? If so, please explain what it is? (RQ1)

9. If you were the head of a program what would you include or improve? (RQ1)

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

6. How do you give the student-athletes the opportunities to self-assess their own progress and reflect on their learning? (RQ1)

7. What are the requirements for the student-athletes to attend the tutoring services? (RQ1)

8. How did you assist a student-athlete on scholarship that is academically failing/probation? How did you assist a student-athlete not on scholarship? (RQ1)

9. If you were the head of a program what would you include or improve? (RQ1)

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

APPENDIX G:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ASSOCIATE ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

1. Tell me about Ozarka's support services that are implemented for student-athletes at your institution. (RQ1)

2. How have these support services attributed to student-athletes graduating from Ozarka? (RQ1)

3. What are the academic challenges for student-athletes on scholarships or not on scholarships within your program? (RQ1)

4. How do the support services contribute to student-athletes graduating or remaining eligible to play? (RQ1)

5. How is your athletic program effectively preparing student-athletes for future careers after college? (RQ1)

6. Has the graduation percentage increased among African-American male student-athletes on the football team due to the support programs? If so why, if not why not? (RQ1)

7. During recruitment, do recruiters/upper grade level athletes share with incoming athletes the academic support services they have received on campus? (RQ1)

8. What conversations do you have with coaches, support services staff, and student-athletes regarding the completion of course work and remaining eligible for the team? (RQ1)

9. How do you motivate your student-athletes to make graduation an attainable goal? (RQ1)

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

APPENDIX H:

SAMPLE EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Good Morning,

My name is Jimmie Smith and I am currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL) in the department of Education. I received your contact information from your associate athletic director, Ms. Maria Pedan.

I am conducting a research study to examine the perception of persons involved in academic support services for male student athlete football players on their effectiveness in assisting these students to be successful in their university program and to graduate from college. The results of the research study may be published but your name will not be used. Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefits of participating in this study will benefit the profession of education by increasing the graduation rates for African-American male student-athletes.

The dissertation study will be approved by the Committee for Protection Human Services (CPHS) at the UHCL. In an effort to accomplish the purpose of my dissertation, I am planning to interview 12 student-athletes (six on scholarship and six that are not on scholarship), associate athletic director, two academic advisors, two tutors, and two mentors from your Division I University.

Your participation is expected to take about 30 minutes at most and will be recorded online. The interview will take place via telecommunication using Zoom. Your responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. You are under no obligation to participate and you may discontinue your participation at any time. Your participation in this study will significantly help my case study as well as contribute to our understanding of academic support services for student-athletes. I genuinely hope that you are willing to participate in this study and I am looking forward to hearing from you soon. If you need additional information regarding my dissertation study, please don't hesitate to contact me per the information below. Again, your cooperation and participation with this study is greatly appreciated. Have a great day and stay safe!

Respectfully,

Jimmie Smith Jr.

Email: [REDACTED]

Mobile #: [REDACTED]