

Graduation Rates of Division I Student-Athlete Special Admits: Fact vs. Fiction

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents.

Without you, discovering my passions and achieving my dreams would not be possible.

ABSTRACT

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) manual, a student-athlete may be admitted to a university under special exception to the normal entrance requirements. Currently, the NCAA does not require data to track the outcomes of specially admitted student-athletes. Social Cognitive Theory, within the context of education, examines the bi-directional relationship between person, behavior, and environment. The purpose of this mixed-methods study, which utilized an exploratory approach, was to develop a better understanding of previously obscure graduation rates of Division I student-athlete special admits within a single FCS Conference. This study examined progress towards graduation, or lack thereof based on entry into the professional leagues, dismissal from the team for academic reasons, dismissal from team for reasons other than academic, voluntarily withdrawing from school, and/or transferring to another school. The goal of the study was to provide an in-depth look at the demographics, incoming academics and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits in order to suggest what current practice looks like and, more broadly, how it might evolve in the future to support academic best practices. Findings showed that irrespective of the fact student-athlete special admits had significantly lower high school GPAs and SAT scores in comparison to the student body cohort within FCS institutions as a whole, they were found to have the same six-year federal graduation rate of 55% for the 2017 year. Student-athlete special admits who were redshirted their freshmen year had the poorest academic outcomes. Those making admissions decisions should be cautioned against assuming the relationship between the standard admissions criteria and graduation outcomes apply similarly across regularly admitted students, student-athletes, and student-athlete special admits. The study provides a foundation for further research to investigate which academic services are of greatest benefit to this population in order to create an evidence-based understanding of best practices for helping special admit student-athletes succeed.

PREFACE

“The big question isn’t whether athletes are as qualified as other students when they enroll, but whether, given help, they can obtain degrees. What you are really looking for is whether the student-athletes who are being accepted have the capability of graduating from that institution with the academic support they have available.”

- Former NCAA President Myles Brand

I am a firm believer that participation within collegiate athletics has the power to change lives. It allows individuals access to obtain a college degree. Many of which, would not have been able to do so otherwise as a result of economic, personal, or academic reasons. For this reason, specially admitted, conditionally admitted, and academically at-risk student-athletes, may have greater grit, drive, and motivation to succeed if they are given the right tools to do so.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Collegiate athletic contests began with a race between the Harvard and Yale student-run crew clubs on Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire in August of 1852 (New York Herald, 1852). The contest was a purely commercial endeavor to mark the celebration of the newly minted Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad. Additional sporting competitions between colleges developed a series of violent and unsavory playing practices resulting in deaths during the 1905-1906 football season. The crisis led to the creation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1906 (Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States, 1906). From its inception and for well over a century, the historical model for collegiate athletes was based on the principles of professionalism as opposed to amateurism, and was generally financed commercially (Smith, 2011). More specifically, the NCAA rules evolved in order to create a level playing field. Today, the NCAA sets minimum initial eligibility requirements and continuing eligibility requirements for intercollegiate student-athletes who wish to participate in NCAA-sanctioned athletic competitions. Within the past several decades, the NCAA has increased focus on the student aspect of college sports and implemented several academic reforms to improve graduation rates of student-athletes.

Student-Athlete Special Admits

As the oversight body, the NCAA operates on the principle of academic institutional control and responsibility wherein admission policies are entirely the prerogative of the school as long as student-athletes meet a minimal set standard required of all institutions. As a result, the NCAA does not require institutions to define special admittance policies or profiles for students who do not meet their respective university's admissions policies.

According to the NCAA manual (2018-2019), "A student-athlete may be admitted under a special exception to the institution's normal entrance requirements if the discretionary authority of the president or chancellor (or designated admissions officer or committee) to grant such exceptions is set forth in an official document published by the university (e.g., official catalog) that describes the institution's admissions requirements" (p. 161). Thus, special admits are those who would not have otherwise been admitted to a university under their normal admissions process. It is worth noting that the NCAA definition of what constitutes a student-athlete special

admit does not state “A student-athlete may be admitted under a special exception to the institution’s normal *academic* entrance requirements”. The word “academic” is absent from the definition in its entirety. While it is assumed that special admits are those with lower standardized test scores and/or high school GPAs, this is not always the case. As an example, a student-athlete with a 4.0 high school GPA who does not meet the institution’s foreign language requirement would be considered a special admit at that respective institution. Admissions requirements are dependent upon state and institutional desires; thus, there is no collective standard as to what constitutes a special admit as this term and related standards varies across institutions. For this reason, a student may be considered a special admit at one institution but not at another.

Former NCAA President Myles Brand explained, “The big question isn’t whether athletes are as qualified as other students when they enroll, but whether, given help, they can obtain degrees. What you are really looking for is whether the student-athletes who are being accepted have the capability of graduating from that institution with the academic support they have available” (Knobler, 2008, para. 33). Currently, the NCAA does not require data to track the outcomes of student-athlete special admits. Thus, there is no available information as to the range of entrance requirements or graduation rates of student-athlete special admits.

Even though the NCAA was created out of necessity, the driving force behind the association has always centered on the well-being of student-athletes. The national office strives to maintain an environment wherein the varied dimensions of diversity are not only acknowledged, but also valued. This pertains to the student-athletes themselves, as the values that drive the association provide the foundation to member institutions in developing and enhancing their relationship with student-athletes on campus. Although collegiate athletics continues to be displayed in the limelight, the division between research and practice regarding best practices within academic support centers for student-athlete special admits continues to remain stagnant. Consequently, practitioners tend to be out of sync with the needs of student-athletes (Comeaux, 2015).

Comeaux (2015) argues the academic concerns of Division I student-athletes are primarily the result of “an organizational learning problem of practitioners as opposed to an individual learning problem of athletes” (p. 2). Bensimon (2015) states, “It is said that what is measured is what gets noticed. When it comes to athletics, the things that are measured routinely

are eligibility criteria, games won and lost, other indicators of athletic performance, and the likelihood of victory over rivals” (p. vii). Dowd (2005) reminds us that institutions often “report data that are never actually used to guide decisions at the institutional level” (p. 1). Many institutions collect data but struggle to utilize said data (Blaich & Wise, 2011). Without utilization, data collection becomes redundant and the goal of assessment to improve student learning cannot take place if outcomes are not used to impact current and future practices. It becomes nearly impossible to identify critical or problem areas, reveal performance gaps, or provide feedback (Comeaux, 2015).

Institutions of higher learning should continuously conduct evaluations of their academic programs for their student-athletes to determine if the current programs are effective in meeting the needs of said population and to understand the impacts of these programs on participants’ knowledge levels, attitudes, and behaviors. Evaluations provide an informed perspective about the major strengths and deficiencies of the academic processes available to student-athletes and allow for data-driven decisions to be made regarding the improvement of program goals and implementation strategies.

The Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA) suggest “campuses track the academic performance of scholarship athletes who enroll through special admissions, to permit better understanding of how successfully the campus supports the academic needs of these students and what costs to the campus this may involve” (2005, p. 2). Ingram and Huffman (2017) state, “Without data to track these academically underprepared student-athletes and understanding best practices in which academic programs are most beneficial to this population, there is no evidence to ensure institutions are meeting their mission of creating a successful future for all students enrolled within the university” (p. 5). Moreover, the NCAA and its member institutions cannot effectively provide academic support services for the student-athlete special admit population without outcome data for said population.

Importance of the Topic

When discussing student-athlete special admits, two main questions arise: Why should we care about the graduation rates of student-athlete special admits? What should we do with the results? The research on this topic is important for the following reasons:

- We know very little about this population.

- One cannot determine if the current academic programs are effective in meeting the needs of said population, nor do we understand the impacts of these programs on participants' knowledge levels, attitudes, and behaviors.
- Without data to track these student-athlete special admits and understanding best practices in which academic programs are most beneficial to this population, there is no evidence to ensure institutions are meeting their mission of creating a successful future for *all* students enrolled within the university.
- With the implementation of the NCAA Academic-Based Revenue Distribution beginning in 2020, institutions will be looking for ways to meet these academic standards in order to receive a share of this distribution. Academic best practices for their student-athletes, especially their special admit population, will begin to move to the forefront.

The big fear is that student-athlete special admits are not graduating at an acceptable rate, and possibly should not be admitted going forward. On one hand, we expect student-athlete special admits to receive more academic services and graduate at higher rates. Would this mean other student-athletes are being left behind? Not necessarily. On the other hand, we expect student-athlete special admits to face greater challenges and graduate at lower rates. Would this mean that our institutional efforts are futile? Again, not necessarily. If the results of the current study find that student-athlete special admits are graduating at similar rates as the regular student-athlete population and/or student population, perhaps these two things are offsetting. Thus, the fear of student-athlete special admits not graduating at an acceptable rate can be put to rest in a way that preserves and possibly enhances the opportunities provided through special admission.

We do not need to reinvent the wheel of academic support within intercollegiate athletics, we need to look at best practices. More specifically, what are these academic best practices comprised of and how can we enhance them? The goal of assessment to improve student learning cannot take place if outcomes are not used to impact current and future practices. By allowing for data-driven decisions to be made regarding the improvement of program goals and implementation strategies, student-athletes will not only be able to achieve excellence on the field, but within the classrooms as well. In order to do this, the first step requires that one understands the student-athlete special admit population. One must know the population they are dealing with, before they can effectively assist said population. Without knowledge of the

demographics, incoming academic characteristics, and graduation outcomes of student-athlete special admits within the current educational landscape, one cannot successfully assist this population in increasing their academic and graduation outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

From pre-kindergarten to post-secondary education, recent decades have witnessed the growing importance, influence, and staying power of data-based accountability systems. Since the 1960's, the NCAA has collected increasing amounts of data and refined academic standards to better serve the various needs of student-athletes with a particular emphasis on academic success. However, a gap in this accountability system exists for the underserved and particularly academically vulnerable classification of special admits. Individuals who are specially admitted are those that do not meet standard academic requirements for the university. Little is known about graduation rates of special admits due to a lack of data and study on the topic. As a result, few understand the best way to assist this population in reaching eventual graduation.

This informational and research gap is accompanied by a lack of systemic, cross-institutional consistency in what constitutes a special admit. Minimum admissions requirements differ across institutions, a student-athlete may meet the admissions requirements at one institution and not at another. Thus, a student-athlete could be a special admit at one institution and not a special admit at another in the same conference and/or state. This results in a failure in understanding how to best serve this population. Academic programs are provided to these student-athletes; however, to date, there is little to no evidence related to best practices regarding which programs or aspects of programs help student-athlete special admits or how. The literature on procedures for and types academic programs, services, curricular offerings, and interventions within higher education for at-risk, developmental, conditional admits, and special admits have focused on various demographics such as international students, ethnicities, gender, first-generation college students and the student population at large within public and private 2-year and 4-year institutions; however, studies have yet to focus on this population within intercollegiate athletics.

There is a vast gap in the literature in studying student-athlete special admits. Prior research has focused on studying the college experience and graduation rates of specially admitted student-athletes at single institutions (Gurney, Tan & Winters, 2010; Robenolt, 2012). Alesia (2008) states, "Because there is no national statistic on graduation rates for special admits

it is difficult to judge the degree to which schools are educating these athletes” (para. 37). Moreover, there is a gap in the literature for research that specifically looks at outcomes associated with student-athlete special admits across various institutions. Comeaux (2015) states, “Such insights are critical for forging deeper and creating more authentically responsive intervention strategies for athletes. In the absence of these materials, aspiring practitioners cannot be adequately prepared to fully develop the academic talents of college athletes” (p. xii).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory and descriptive mixed-methods study was to develop a better understanding of previously obscure graduation rates of Division I student-athlete special admits within a single FCS Conference. In relation to graduation rates of specially admitted student-athletes, this study examined progress towards graduation, or lack thereof based on entry into the professional leagues, dismissal from the team for academic reasons, dismissal from team for reasons other than academic, voluntarily withdrawing from school, and/or transferring to another school. The goal of the study was to provide an in-depth look at the demographics, incoming academics and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits in order to begin to fill the gap in our understanding of who student-athlete special admits are. A deeper understanding of this population provides a foundation in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating targeted evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits are a severely understudied, and theoretically high-risk, student population. The goal of creating best practices is to positively impact the academic performance of student-athletes and student-athlete special admits that will lead to eventual graduation within six years. Understanding this sub-population of student-athletes may aid in a better understanding of how to best help those with academic deficiencies, especially since the NCAA’s academic redshirt policy went into effect in 2016.

This study added new understanding to the literature regarding the impact of demographics and incoming academic characteristics on six-year graduation rates of student-athlete special admits within higher education. In doing so, the researcher hopes to begin a discussion that will ultimately lead to better academic outcomes for this previously understudied population of student-athletes. The resultant discussion will aid the NCAA and its member institutions to better serve student-athletes and to spark further interest and research to better

understand and support this at-risk group of student-athletes. Additionally, the researcher hypothesized the findings will aid in the development of establishing a clear understanding of what this unique population needs in order to develop a roadmap of best practices to maximize student success in graduating within six years.

Athletic administrators within a NCAA Division I FCS Conference ($N = 10$) were invited to participate in the study to answer questions regarding their student-athlete special admit population. Questions regarding student-athlete special admits were delimited to those who were specially admitted in the Summer and/or Fall of 2011 at these member institutions. This cohort was strategically chosen because the student-athletes in this cohort would have spent at least six years as college students at the time of this study. Additionally, the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) and Graduation Success Rate (GSR) measure graduation rates over a six-year period. This study consisted of two data collection parts:

- **Publicly available data:** Data obtained through publicly available data sources were taken from sources such as the NCAA Searchable Database, institution websites, press releases and data published by the US Department of Education. Data collected included single-year data for institutional Academic Progress Rate (APR), student-athlete eligibility rates, student-athlete retention rates, student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, student body FGR, and average incoming academic characteristics (e.g., high school GPA, standardized test scores).
- **Student-Athlete Special Admit Survey:** Each institution selected an individual to complete the online survey created by the researcher via QuestionPro, a web-based survey software tool. Data collected included the number of first-year student-athletes admitted in the Summer and/or Fall of 2011 on a “special admit” basis; and individual-level data for each student-athlete special admit (demographics, incoming academic characteristics, and graduation outcomes).

Collecting demographic and academic data for the overall student-athlete population as well as demographic and academic data at the individual-level for student-athlete special admits, allowed the researcher to compare student-athlete special admits to their overall student-athlete cohort within and across institutions. Chapter 3 provides a fuller, detailed description of the data collected, procedures, and analysis.

Research Questions

Based on an analysis of the gaps in the literature, the following five research questions and their sub-questions guided the study:

RQ 1: Are high school GPA and standardized test scores correlated with institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, and student-athlete eligibility rates?

RQ 1 Sub-Question A: Are high school GPA and standardized test scores correlated with student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR and student body FGR?

RQ 2: What are the reasons for determining a student-athlete is a special admit?

RQ 2 Sub-Question A: How do the demographic features and incoming academic characteristics of those that are student-athlete special admits compare to the overall student body cohort?

RQ 3: What is the graduation rate for student-athlete special admits who graduate within six years at each of the sampled universities?

RQ 3 Sub-Question A: Is the percentage of student-athlete special admits who graduate within six years significantly different from that of the percentage of regularly admitted student-athletes who graduate within six years and the student body cohort who graduate within six years?

RQ 4: For the student-athlete special admits who did not graduate, what are the reasons for not graduating?

RQ 5: Is there a significant relationship between demographics, incoming academic characteristics and six-year graduation outcomes for student-athlete special admits?

Theoretical Framework

The nature of this study merges the fields of academics within higher education and sports psychology as the focus of this study relates to the academic advancement of student-athlete special admits. Social cognitive theory (SCT), serves as the guiding theoretical framework on which the data from this research is approached and analyzed, and is introduced and explained below. Two of the three nodes within SCT (person and behavior) are explored in detail within this study. The third node (environment) can be explored within future studies that look at the specific types of academic services, programs, curricular offerings, and interventions that are employed within student-athlete academic centers. This section serves to provide a framework to rely on when making recommendations for addressing issues and needs

as identified in the discussion section.

Introduction

Educators use theory and research as a guide to understanding what individual students may need, in addition to how they develop and learn. The 21st century has brought a new era of focus for educators—the creation of learning and program standards. Effective educators are those that understand student growth and development and are able to use this understanding as a guiding tool when teaching subject matter and skills. The ways we currently see, understand, and deal with learners are influenced by historical theoretical frameworks. Accordingly, the philosophical framework of social cognitivism was chosen as the lens through which to evaluate the impact of individual-level factors and institutional-level factors on the graduation rates of student-athlete special admits and student-athletes in general by providing a new perspective for student growth and development. SCT, developed by Albert Bandura in 1986, postulates learning, and human functioning occur in a social context which feature dynamic and reciprocal interactions between an individual's cognitions and personal factors, environmental variables, and behavior (Bandura, 1986). Moreover, SCT emphasizes one's social influence on social reinforcement (internal and external).

Prior to the creation of SCT, the process of learning occupied a central position within the theory of behaviorism, the prevailing analysis of learning focused exclusively on learning through the effects of one's actions (Bandura, 2005). Behaviorism was introduced by John Watson in 1913 in attempt to explain the behavioral processes of people and animals. Behaviorism was founded on the belief that all behavior is learned, and that training was the way to change behavior. Essentially, the explanatory mechanisms consisted of connections between stimuli and response at the outward level through consequences such as rewards and punishments.

Bandura was unsatisfied with the current behavior theory and his work grew from there to include self-efficacy, reciprocal determinism, and observational learning. Belief in these ideologies, led Bandura to introduce a precursor to SCT, the social learning theory (SLT) in the 1960's which included 4 constructs: Reciprocal determinism, behavioral capability, observational learning, and expectations. SLT developed into SCT in 1986 to include a fifth construct, self-efficacy.

Social Cognitive Theory

SCT postulates learning and human functioning occur in a social context which feature dynamic and reciprocal interactions between an individual's cognitions and personal factors, environmental variables, and behavior (Bandura, 1986). SCT highlights social influence and its emphasis on internal and external social reinforcement by considering the unique way in which individuals acquire and maintain behavior, in addition to considering the social environment in which individuals perform the behavior. The theory accounts for an individual's past experiences, a factor into whether a behavioral action will take place. Past experiences can influence one's current expectancies, expectations, and reinforcements. Combined, these three concepts not only determine whether an individual will engage in a specific behavior, the concepts also serve as a reasoning that helps to explain why an individual may choose to engage in a particular behavior or not. SCT adopts an agentic perspective to self-development, adaptation, and change (Bandura, 2001). An agentic perspective means an individual intentionally influences their day-to-day behavioral functions, and ultimately their life circumstances. This viewpoint posits individuals are "self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting" (Bandura, 2001, p. 4). In essence, we are contributors to our life circumstances, not just products of them.

SCT Elements

The overarching goal of SCT is to explain how individuals regulate their behavior through control and reinforcement to achieve goal-directed behavior that can be maintained over time (Schunk, 1989). Six constructs represent the major classes of processing and behavior-generation elements. These cognitive units dynamically and continuously interact with one's environment and social world around them to generate an individual's distinctive patterns of behavior. The first four constructs were developed as part of SLT; when the theory evolved into SCT, the construct of self-efficacy was added.

1. *Reciprocal Determinism*: The dynamic and reciprocal interaction of person (individual with a set of learned experiences), environment (external social context), and behavior (responses to stimuli to achieve goals).
2. *Behavioral Capability*: An individual's ability to perform specific behaviors as a result of knowing what to do and how to implement essential knowledge and skills.

3. *Observational Learning*: Individuals observe a behavior conducted by others and are able to reproduce those actions (e.g., modeling of behaviors). Successful demonstrations of a behavior allow individuals the possibility to successfully complete this behavior.
4. *Expectations*: Derived from previous experience, expectations allow individuals to anticipate the consequences of their actions prior to taking part in behaviors. Anticipated outcomes have the ability to influence one's ability to successfully complete behaviors. Subjective to each individual, the value one places on specific outcomes are known as expectancies.
5. *Self-efficacy*: The level of one's confidence in his or her ability to successfully perform a behavior. Self-efficacy is influenced by a person's specific capabilities, individual factors, and environmental factors (barriers and facilitators).

To demonstrate the implications of the SCT model for understanding best practices as it relates to the academic advancement of student-athlete special admits within higher education, the following section includes examples that are interwoven throughout each element.

Reciprocal Determinism. Moving away from the idea that human behavior consists of unidirectional determinism wherein one's behavior is solely shaped and controlled by internal dispositions or environmental influences, "Social cognitive theory favors a model of determinism involving a triadic reciprocal determinism" (Bandura, 1989, p. 2). Reciprocal determinism posits the factors within the model, person (individual with a set of learned experiences), environment (external social context), and behavior (responses to stimuli to achieve goals) operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bi-directionally. In relation to the study at hand, each of the three nodes of SCT are as follows—Person: Division I student-athletes; Environment: Student-athlete academic centers; and Behavior: Academic outcomes. It is important to note that reciprocal determinism does not mean each element are of equal strength, nor do these influences occur simultaneously. Bandura (1989) states, "It takes time for a causal factor to exert its influence and activate reciprocal influences (p. 3).

Behavioral Capability. An individual's ability to perform specific behaviors as a result of knowing what to do and how to implement essential knowledge and skills is known as behavioral capacity. SCT posits that individuals not only learn by doing, but the mechanisms used to explain such leaning impacts this behavior as well as cognitions that may accompany

behavioral change but are not the sole cause of it (Schunk, 1989). Learning consists of a change in behavioral potential or change in behavior that is brought about by intervening experiences. Although some individuals are more athletic than others, nobody simply becomes a world-class athlete without practice. Any Olympian will tell you they did not get to where they are by simply watching professionals, rather, they engage in intensive practices wherein they receive corrective feedback from qualified instructors. The same can be said for learning. Student-athletes are used to receiving immediate feedback from their coaches and fans during practices and games. Consequently, student-athletes may struggle in courses that do not offer immediate feedback regarding course participation and/or grades.

Individuals who struggle academically may do so as a result of an undiagnosed learning disability, a lack of knowledge or experience in implementing effective study skills, or due to a lack of understanding course material. In any capacity, all three can be mediated through the reception of feedback from a qualified individual. Student-athletes with undiagnosed learning disabilities, may be referred to the office of disability center or to an in-house psychologist for further testing and evaluation. Rectifying this aspect allows the student-athlete to (at least) be on the same academic playing field as others, so-to-speak. Student-athletes with a lack of knowledge or experience in developing and implementing effective study habits or time management skills may participate in weekly meetings with an academic mentor who teaches these skills to the student-athlete with the goal of enabling the student to successfully implement these learned behaviors on their own. Student-athletes experiencing difficulty in understanding course material may be paired with a course-specific tutor or attend the office hours of their professor for remediation as needed.

Observational Learning (i.e., modeling). Observational learning, otherwise known as modeling, refers to “cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes that derive from observing others” (Schunk, 1989, p. 86). Modeling may reflect acquisition of a new behavior, the performance of previously learned behaviors by means of being prompted to do so, or the strengthening and/or weakening of behavioral inhibitions (Schunk, 1989). Cognitive modeling has been shown to be more effective in enhancing perceived self-efficacy and cognitive skills as opposed to the traditional tutorial methods (Gist, 1989; Gist, Schwoerer & Rosen, 1989; DeBowski, Wood & Bandura, 2001). Modeling is comprised of four sub-processes: Attention, retention, production, and motivation (Bandura, 1986).

First and foremost, a student-athlete must pay attention to relevant environmental events in order for the event(s) to be perceived meaningfully. Retention activities “include coding and transforming modeled information for storage in memory, as well as cognitively rehearsing information” (Schunk, 1989, p. 87). Cognitive rehearsal is used a great deal within athletics in regard to athletic performance enhancement, particularly during pre-game rituals and when “blocking” out the crowd as one is shooting from the free throw line (Meyers, Whelan, & Murphy, 1996; Wrisberg & Anshel, 1989; Hagen & Schack, 2017; Hagan, Pollmann & Schack, 2017). Production involves translating these visual conceptions of modeled events into overt behavior (Schunk, 1989). Lastly, motivational attributes involve incentives and values the individual places on a particular behavior. For example, athletes who participate in individual sports (snowboarding, cycling, boxing, etc.) may be less likely to see the value in learning to communicate with teammates as opposed to athletes who participate in team sports (i.e., football, basketball, soccer, etc.).

Self-Regulation. Theories of socialization must be able to explain how one’s control over behavior is able to shift from external sources to the individual (Grusec, 1992). The element of self-regulation answers this question. Self-regulation is defined as a process whereby an individual “guide[s] his/her goal-directed activities over time and across changing circumstances” (Karoly, 1993, p. 25); it is a purposeful act whereby individuals “initiate, adjust, interrupt, terminate, or otherwise alter actions to promote attainment of personal goals, plans, or standards” (Heatherton & Baumeister, 1996, p. 91). This element is comprised of the anticipated consequences of one’s behavior which consist of outcome expectations and expectancies. Both are largely derived from previous experience; however, expectancies also focus on the value one places upon the outcome itself, which is subjective to the individual (Bandura, 1977). Self-regulation is comprised of three sub-processes: Self-observation, self-judgement, and self-reaction (Bandura, 1986). As with the idea of reciprocal determinism, these sub-processes are not mutually exclusive; they continuously interact with one another and one’s environmental influences.

Failing to meet an academic goal, whatever it may be, may have a greater impact on student-athletes as they tend to be competitive by nature. One’s motivation will not improve if one believes they lack the necessary skills to succeed; consequently, no amount of effort will help them improve their performance until this is remediated (Schunk, 1989). Nicholls et al.

(2016) state, “Understanding more about athletes’ responses to unattainable goals may be useful in maximizing well-being during periods of difficulty, by helping athletes deploy the most effective strategies (p. 47). As with all forms of athletics, individuals have strengths and weaknesses. Athletes who fail to improve upon their weaknesses will find themselves sitting on the bench during games. Transferring a student-athletes’ skillset in applying self-regulation and goal-setting within athletics to academics, is something that can be learned. One can argue, once student-athletes have the necessary toolset to self-regulate study habits, time management, and setting realistic goals for enrolled courses, this competitive drive to do better can be a game-changer.

Self-Efficacy. A key concept within SCT, was introduced in Bandura’s seminal article, published in 1977. Perceived self-efficacy consists of “beliefs concerning one’s capabilities to organize and implement actions necessary to attain designated performance levels” (Schunk, 1989, p. 88). In addition, “self-efficacy as a judgment of personal capability is not self-esteem, which is a judgment of self-worth” (Bandura, 2005, p. 26). Within reciprocal determinism, efficacious beliefs impact a person (goals, attribution, and problem solving), behavior (effort and persistence), and affect (anxiety, arousal, depression and confidence) (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy within academic achievement can be influenced by a variety of factors such as attitudes towards learning, ability levels, prior experiences, instructional factors, and social factors (Schunk, 1989). As previously stated, self-efficacy is continuously influenced by one’s self-regulation processes.

The positive correlation between self-efficacy and academic outcomes is not a new concept (Lent, Brown & Larkin, 1984; Multon, Brown & Lent, 1991; Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001). Student-athletes tend to step on campus with low levels of academic self-efficacy, translating into the possibility of allowing one’s “athletic role to engulf them and accept merely maintaining a 2.0 to stay eligible for competition as their primary academic goal” (Jolly, 2008, p. 150). One suggestion as to the best way to remediate this problem is through the collaboration with higher education faculty members as there is “perhaps no group on a college or university campus as well-positioned or qualified as faculty to help student-athletes fully form their identities as students and achieve true (long-lasting) student success” (Jolly, 2008, p. 149).

In relation to SCT, the two nodes with the data aspects that were measured and

collected were as follows:

- *Person (Division I student-athletes)*: Demographics of student-athletes (publicly available data); demographics of student-athlete special admits (student-athlete special admit survey); incoming academic characteristics of student-athletes in general (publicly available data); incoming academic characteristics of the student body cohort (publicly available data); incoming academic characteristics of student-athlete special admits (student-athlete special admit survey); overall number of student-athletes (publicly available data); number of student-athlete special admits admitted Summer and/or Fall 2011 (student-athlete special admit survey);
- *Behavior (graduation and academic outcomes)*: Student-athlete single-year GSR (publicly available data); student-athlete single-year FGR (publicly available data); student body single-year FGR (publicly available data); incidence of student-athlete special admits who graduate within six years (student-athlete special admit survey); reasoning for student-athlete special admits non-graduation within six years (student-athlete special admit survey); single-year institutional APR (publicly available data); student-athlete single-year retention rate (publicly available data); and student-athlete single-year eligibility rates (publicly available data).

Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 has provided an introduction to the current academic landscape surrounding intercollegiate student-athlete special admits, the proposed challenges associated with this population, the importance of studying the graduation rates of special admits, and the guiding theoretical framework on which the data from this research is approached, analyzed, and relied on when making recommendations. What follows is a series of chapters that systematically expand on the ideas presented above and is organized into five chapters.

Chapter 2 presents the literature that sustain our collective understanding of the problem addressed in this dissertation, first providing some history about the admission of underprepared college students, components of special admission programs and the types of students they serve, followed by a detailed presentation and discussion of aspects that underscore the dilemmas institutions and athletes face, including special admissions within collegiate athletics, graduation rates of said population, and services provided within student-

athlete academic centers. Due to the lack of studies on the topic, the researcher has drawn from parallel literature within higher education that encompasses various studies that focus on at-risk student populations. The review of the literature takes an in-depth look at various aspects of academic support services, programs, curricular offerings, and interventions that contribute to success in graduating specially admitted student-athletes.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the methodology used to answer the questions posed in this study, along with the data collection and analytic approaches used. The use of a multiphase sequential mixed-methods (quantitatively dominant) design was selected in order to answer the overarching questions of “what are the variables involved?” and “what are the precise relationships between variables?” A mixed-methods study that included an exploratory approach and utilized descriptive methods allowed for the provision of detailed descriptions, subjectivity, and understanding of underlying reasons and motivations that influence behavior during the qualitative phase.

Chapter 4 includes the findings of the study in relation to each of the research questions. Chapter 5 builds from the thematic results developed in the previous chapter and applies those themes to build an understanding of the affordances and constraints affecting the graduation rates of student-athlete special admits, takes a deeper look at the affordances and constraints as applied to a central paradigm developed through exploratory analysis, and utilizes the SCT perspective to offer insight into the thematic analysis of the data. The findings in Chapter 5 will be compared to the existing literature presented in Chapter 2. The dissertation will conclude with a series of recommendations for practitioners and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To provide a background for this study, this chapter examines the history and literature relevant to conditional admission programs and the college students they serve. Due to the lack of studies on the topic of student-athlete special admits, the researcher has drawn from parallel literature within higher education. The literature encompasses studies that focus on at-risk populations such as underprepared students (Haynes & Johnson, 1983; House & Wohlt, 1991; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012; Sanchez, 2003; Sriram, 2014; Walpole et al., 2008; Woodruff, 1998), special admits (Gurney, Tan & Winters, 2010; Ingram & Huffman, 2017; Robenolt, 2012), conditional admits (Wildman, 2016), conditional admit programs (Donnelly, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Nisbet et al., 1982; Parisi, 2012; Stewart & Heaney, 2013), and students enrolled in developmental courses (Attewell et al., 2006; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Johnson, 2000-2001; Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013; Tinto, 1993) as these populations often overlap with student-athlete special admits. The chapter begins with a review of the history of the admission of underprepared college students. The literature takes an in-depth look at various aspects of academic support services, programs, curricular offerings, and interventions that contribute to success in graduating students. Quantitative research focusing on college GPA, retention rates, and graduation rates is discussed along with qualitative studies which focus on conditional admission programs in terms of the services they provide and the students they serve.

History

American universities began admitting special admit students in the 1940s and 50s due to World War II and Korean War veterans taking advantage of the G.I. Bill after they returned from fighting overseas (Astin et al., 2012; Thelin, 2011). Many of these veterans had not finished high school before they were drafted. Without a high school diploma, these students were deemed to be special admits by their respective institutions. As a direct result, remedial courses were developed to ensure these special admit students were prepared to enroll in “official classes” (Lincoln, 1959). Special admission students who showed academic promise within these non-credit courses were then able to matriculate as regular students. It is important to note that special admits are those who would not have otherwise been admitted to a university under their normal admissions process.

“The Gamble Project” at Harvard is one such example wherein they admitted an experimental group of special admit students who did not meet academic standards for their admissions in the 1960s. This experiment was unique in that its participants and their peers were not aware they were specially admitted. Research showed these special admits were more likely to make the dean’s list than regularly admitted students (California State Department of Education, 1963). An additional special admit study conducted at the University of Southern California in 1933 showed that 47% of the special admits within their program received a C or better in their courses while 33% equaled or exceeded the academic obtainment of regularly admitted students (Libby, 1935).

Students who do not meet institutional admissions processes have always been a part of higher education. What appears to have changed is the interest of universities in increasing retention and graduation rates (Astin et al., 2012). Coupled with increased numbers of college students, academic programs specifically designed for special admits and non-traditional students were developed to mitigate low retention and graduation rates. While the number of special admission programs have grown over the past several decades, these programs have been found to vary in the number of services offered as well as the kinds of services.

Components of Special Admission Programs

Conditional admission programs and special admission programs tend to focus on the first year of college and are comprised of students who do not meet regular admission requirements (Donnelly, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Nisbet et al., 1982; Parisi, 2012; Stewart & Heaney, 2013; Wildman, 2016). Students may take classes together (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Stewart & Heaney, 2013); have access to academic services such as tutors, mentors, and counselors that meet one-on-one with students (Parisi, 2012); and contracts that stipulate conditions of one’s admissions (Adebayo, 2008; Donnelly, 2010; Hodges & White, 2001; Holland, 1999; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012). Program requirements such as specific courses (Bryson, Smith, & Vineyard, 2002; Clark, 2009; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Parisi, 2012; Woodruff, 1998) and participation in meetings (Donnelly, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Parisi, 2012) are often utilized.

Conditionally admitted students may be required to sign a contract that outlines the conditions of their admissions (Adebayo, 2008; Donnelly, 2010; Hodges & White, 2001; Holland, 1999; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012). Specified requirements within these contracts

may require the student to live on campus (House, 1992; House & Wolht, 1991; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005); sustain a minimum course-load (Donnelly, 2010; Hodges & White, 2001; Holland, 1999; House, 1992; House & Wolht, 1991; Johnson, 2000-2001; Legutko, 2006; Parisi, 2012); and/or maintain a minimum GPA (Hodges & White, 2001; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005; Ting, 1997). The last two requirements can be found within NCAA bylaws which state a student-athlete must be enrolled full-time; maintain good academic standing; and make progress-toward-degree (NCAA Division I Manual 2018-2019). See Table 1 for specifics.

Courses

Conditional admissions programs typically require participants to take specific courses (Bryson, Smith, & Vineyard, 2002; Clark, 2009; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Parisi, 2012; Woodruff, 1998). The overarching goal of these courses focuses on bridging the gap between high school and college by emphasizing academic preparedness, improving study skills, enhancing academic support through awareness of support programs and services offered, and establishing career consciousness to promote successful matriculation.

Summer bridge programs, taken prior to one's first semester of college, serve to acclimate students to college while allowing students to take courses to boost credit hours or provide remediation in order to "catch up" to regularly admitted students (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Borland, 1973; Copeland, 1991; Holland, 1999; Klompier, 2001; Legutko, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Stewart & Scappaticci, 2005; Suzuki, Amrein-Beardsley, & Perry, 2012; Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, & Albano, 2008). Many conditional admissions students participate in learning communities, wherein these individuals take courses together (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Holland, 1999; Johnson, 2000-2001). Coupled with a summer bridge program, this becomes known as a living learning community (Stassen, 2003).

First year seminar, a course designed to orient first year students to campus and teach them skills for college success, are often components of conditional admissions programs (Donnelly, 2010; Hodges & White, 2001; Johnson, 2000-2001; Legutko, 2006). Workshops and basic skills courses, offered outside of one's college coursework, may be another requirement for conditionally admitted students (Borland, 1973; Bryson et al., 2002; Haynes & Johnson, 1983; Hodges & White, 2001; Woodruff, 1998).

Table 1

Division I Progress-Toward-Degree Requirements

Academic Requirements	Prior to the Second Year of Enrollment	Prior to the Third Year of Enrollment	Prior to the Fourth Year of Enrollment	Prior to the Fifth Year of Enrollment
Regular Academic Term	6 semester/6 quarter hours of credit	6 semester/6 quarter hours of credit	6 semester/6 quarter hours of credit	6 semester/6 quarter hours of credit
Regular Academic Year	18 semester/27 quarter hours of credit	18 semester/27 quarter hours of credit	18 semester/27 quarter hours of credit	18 semester/27 quarter hours of credit
Degree Credit	Credits accepted toward any degree offered at the institution	Credits used must go toward the designated degree	Credits used must go toward the designated degree	Credits used must go toward the designated degree
Annual/Percentage-of-Degree	24 semester/36 quarter hours of credit	40-percent of the designated degree must be completed	60-percent of the designated degree must be completed	80-percent of the designated degree must be completed
Grade Point Average	90-percent of the minimum GPA required for graduation (1.8 if a 2.0 is the minimum)	95-percent of the minimum GPA required for graduation (1.9 if a 2.0 is the minimum)	100-percent of the minimum GPA required for graduation (2.0 if a 2.0 is the minimum)	100-percent of the minimum GPA required for graduation (2.0 if a 2.0 is the minimum)

NCAA Eligibility Center

Meetings

Along with required courses, many conditional admissions programs require individuals to participate in some form of meetings to be completed individually and/or on a group basis. Types of meetings range from mentoring (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Bryson et al., 2002; Donnelly, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Parisi, 2012); tutoring (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 1997; Roszkowski & Goetz, 2009); academic advising (Donnelly, 2010; Hodges & White, 2001; Holland, 1999; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012); and supplemental instruction (Hodges & White, 2001; Johnson, 2000-2001).

Demographics of Special Admissions Population

Individuals who are specially admitted or conditionally admitted are those that do not meet the specific incoming requirements for a given institution (i.e., SAT score, ACT score, high school GPA, high school course credits, etc.). DiMaria (2006) reported seven factors associated with students being “at-risk” for not graduating:

- Academically underprepared,
- First-generation college student,
- Part-time enrollment,
- Working more than 30 hours a week,
- Aged 25 or older,
- Financially independent, and
- Not enrolling directly out of high school.

Within higher education, minority, first-generation and first-year students have been found to represent the best return on investment regarding retention practices (Talbert, 2012). Similar to affirmative action programs, institutions may also look for certain characteristics within potential conditional admits. Examples include student-athletes (Gurney, Tan & Winters, 2010; Ingram & Huffman, 2017; Robenolt, 2012); those with interests in specific majors (Hornberger, 2010; Mapes, 2011; Mattson, 2007); first generation college students (House, 1992, 1995; House & Wohlt, 1991; Mapes, 2011; Roszkowski & Goetz, 2009; Walpole et al., 2008); or individuals from targeted locations (i.e., specific neighborhoods, low-college attending high schools, states or countries) (House, 1992, 1995; House & Wohlt, 1991).

While special admits may share the same academic criteria (i.e., do not meet institutional academic requirements) and tend to vary in characteristics as described above, in comparison to

their student body counterpart, the vast majority of individuals who participate in conditional admissions programs tend to be male students of color from low-income families and are first-generation college students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Mapes, 2011; Wildman, 2016).

Demographics are a vital component to understanding this unique population. One of the most important differences between regularly and conditionally admitted students deals with “the predictive value of admissions standards themselves” (Wildman, 2016). In theory, pre-admission characteristics such as standardized test scores and high school GPA are generally predictive of one’s academic success in college and lead to eventual graduation. However, studies have shown despite poor academic records, *individuals who are conditionally admitted not only tend to do well in college, they graduate* (Ingram & Huffman, 2017).

Students who take remedial/developmental courses tend to be less academically prepared and consequently, at-risk for not graduating college (Bettinger & Long, 2009). Studies have shown students who participate in developmental courses are less likely to matriculate than those who are not required to take such courses; however, once academic background was taken into account, participation in developmental courses has been associated with improved persistence rates (Bettinger & Long, 2009). Amongst four-year college students, developmental courses in reading were associated with lower graduation rates, whereas developmental courses in math and writing were not (Attewell et al., 2006). Irrespective of low placement scores, the majority of academically underprepared students have the ability to not only pass classes, but graduate (Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013). Within four-year colleges, one-third of students who took three or more developmental courses were able to complete college within eight years (Attewell et al., 2006). Those who fail to graduate rarely do so for academic reasons as many have family issues and/or financial issues as well (Johnson, 2000-2001; Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013; Tinto, 1993).

Graduation Rates and Retention Rates of Special Admits within Higher Education

Few institutions offering specialized programs and services to special admits have yet to demonstrate the effectiveness of individual components and the overall impact of these programs on participant retention and graduation. Most of the research on the retention of special admit students have focused on student characteristics such as incoming academic characteristics and demographics. However, the institutional environment can be just as important as a student’s academic background (Keels, 2013). Few studies have compared outcomes between various conditional admissions programs within their institutions, by offering different interventions to

conditionally admitted students. However, some authors have used matched control groups (Haynes & Johnson, 1983; House & Wohlt, 1991; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012; Sanchez, 2003; Sriram, 2014; Walpole et al., 2008; Woodruff, 1998).

Studies that looked at the overall effectiveness of these program types have found participants tend to have similar (Copeland, 1991; Legutko, 2006) or increased (Johnson, 2000-2001) retention rates in comparison to regularly admitted students attending the same institution. Depending on the institution and programs offered, graduation rates and time to graduation vary (Copeland, 1991; Houston, 1980; Laden et al., 1999; Legutko, 2006). For example, special admit students who participated in Summer Bridge programs graduated earlier (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Murphy, Gaughan, Hume & Moore, 2010; Strayhorn, 2011).

Learning communities (Barefoot, 2004; Johnson, 2000-2001) and formal mentoring programs (Salinitri, 2005) have been found to increase student retention and graduation. Students classified as academically at-risk who participated in a mentoring program, had higher rates of retention and graduation than those within a control group (Vivian, 2005). Comprehensive intervention programs consisting of mentoring and block registration showed participants had higher graduation rates in comparison to those who had chosen not to participate, regardless of the fact these participants were of increased academic at-risk status based on admissions factors (Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab, & Lynch, 2002-2003)

Analysis of a federally funded retention program consisting of a first-year seminar, academic skills training, social activities, and academic advising found participants had higher rates of retention in comparison to the student body cohort and those who were eligible for the program but chose not to enroll (Colton, Conner, Schultz, & Easter, 1999-2000). Similar results were found for an Intensive Learning Experience program for academically underprepared students implemented at California State University at San Bernardino. The program consisted of a specialized curriculum, advising, social activities, and smaller class sizes. Participants had higher rates of retention in comparison to students with similar academic backgrounds that attended the same institution prior to the implementation of the program (Clark & Halpern, 1993).

The University of Wyoming's Synergy Learning Community Program is a conditional admissions program for students who do not meet the high school GPA requirement of 2.50 for in-state residents and 2.75 for out-of-state residents. The program is comprised of approximately

150 students yearly with cohorts of 37 to 38 students each (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). As a cohort, participants take three general education courses in the fall and one in the spring, enroll in reading and writing sessions with lower enrollment caps, and participate in peer-mentoring provided by student mentors who have successfully completed the Synergy Program (Wildman, 2016). Stewart and Heaney (2013) found program participants to have increased persistence rates in comparison to students with similar academic profiles admitted to the university prior to the implementation of the program.

Johnson (2000-2001) studied four retention programs at the University of Southern Maine wherein two included conditional admissions programs. One program utilized learning community groups (i.e., participants attended group tutoring sessions and took courses together) whereas the other utilized contracts and participation in regular meetings with an advisor. Students in the learning community group had lower academic profiles and thus, were less academically prepared than those in the contract group. Johnson (2000-2001) found those participating in the learning communities conditional admissions program had increased rates of retention in comparison to those in the contract group conditional admissions program *and* the regularly admitted student body cohort.

Resources and Programs for Special Admit Students within Higher Education

As with the research on the graduation rates of conditional admits, due to the lack of studies focusing on academic outcomes within collegiate athletics programs, the literature regarding resources and programs was widened to include academic programs designed to increase the academic achievement and/or retention of college students in general. Specifically, the literature review includes students that were considered to be an increased risk for failure due to at-risk status (academically underprepared or economically disadvantaged), specially admitted, or those that were on academic probation.

A 2004 ACT Policy Report reviewed the correlation between retention rates in regards to academic and non-academic factors and found the strength of relationship between individual factors and retention were strongest for academic-related skills (time management skills, study skills, and study habits such as note-taking), academic self-confidence (level of confidence in being successful in the academic environment), and academic goals (level of commitment to obtain a college degree). Factors with moderate strength included institutional commitment, social support, high school GPA, contextual influences (financial aid, institution size and

selectivity), socioeconomic status, social involvement (connection to campus, faculty, peers, and campus activities), and ACT assessment score.

Based on ACT's survey conducted in the spring of 2009, Burkum, Habley, McClanahan, and Valiga looked at the diverse retention practices employed at 2-year public institutions (N=303), 4-year public institutions (N=255), and 4-year private institutions (N=434). One aspect of the study included a stepwise regression analysis of the relationship between retention practices and first-to-second year institutional retention rates. The top 15 types of retention programs ranked regarding mean contribution to retention can be found in Table 2.

Noel-Levitz (2011) conducted a national electronic poll of representatives from 296 colleges and universities. Respondents included information from 130 four-year private institutions, 66 four-year public institutions, and 100 two-year public institutions. The ten most effective retention practices at four-year private and four-year public institutions included programs specifically designed for first-year students, at-risk students and conditionally admitted students; academic support program or services; early-alert and intervention systems; mandatory advising (one-on-one and face-to-face) between faculty and students; and learning communities.

Valentine et al. (2011) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of studies focused on retention programs aimed towards at-risk college students. The researchers determined nine of the studies could be considered "best practices" regarding the employment of programs aimed at boosting academic achievement. Programs with the best academic achievement outcomes included: Remedial coursework, small classes, academic and career advising (Clark, 1993); peer tutoring (Sanders, 2000); mentoring (Salinitri, 2005); cooperative learning in remedial classes (Dees, 1991); a study skills curriculum integrated into course instruction (Cox, 2002); study skills seminar (Milligan, 2007); learning communities (Scrivener, 2008); student success course on transitioning to college, career and life development (Stovall, 1999); and courses aimed at fostering time management and problem-solving skills in addition to increased awareness of university resources (Fry, 2007).

Table 2

*Top 15 Types of Retention Programs**

Program	4-year public	4-year private	2-year public
Academic Advising Center	1	1	11
Increased Number of Academic Advisors	2	3	6
Advising Interventions with Selected Student Populations	3	2	10
Comprehensive Learning Assistance Center/Lab	4	5	2
Supplemental Instruction	5	-	14
Program for First Generation Students	6	7	9
Required On-Campus Housing for Freshmen	7	-	-
Reading Center/Lab	8	4	1
Tutoring	9	9	3
Summer Bridge Program	10	-	-
Extended Freshman Orientation Program (credit)	11	11	-
Programs for Honors Students	12	-	-
Integration of Advising with First Year Program	13	6	13
Math Center/Lab	14	-	8
Freshman Seminar/University 101 (credit)	15	13	-
Early Warning System	-	8	-
Pre-Enrollment Financial Aid Advising	-	10	-
Faculty Mentoring	-	12	-
Internships	-	14	-
Summer Orientation	-	15	-
Mandatory Placement of Students in Courses Based on Test Scores	-	-	4
Remedial/Developmental Coursework (required)	-	-	5
Writing Center/Lab	-	-	7
Recommended Placement in Courses Based on Test Scores	-	-	12
Remedial/Developmental Coursework (recommended)	-	-	15

*Note. Adapted from Practices with the Highest Mean Contribution to Retention by Institutional Type and Control, 2009 which reports the mean contribution data only for those practices that were implemented by at least 20% of the institutions within each institutional type/control group.

While there was not enough variation within these aforementioned studies that measured retention, odds ratios show the following programs are associated with increased retention: Student success course focused on transitioning to college, career development, and life management (Stovall, 1999); mentoring (Salinitri, 2005); study skills and adjustment courses (Cone, 1991); tutoring (House, 1992); one credit college orientation courses, tutoring, or remedial coursework (Alderman, 1998); small classes, academic and career advising (Clark, 1993); study skills seminars (Milligan, 2007);] and a course aimed at fostering time management, problem-solving skills and awareness of university resources (Fry, 2007).

Studies with negative outcomes to academic achievement were related to administrative limitations placed on extracurricular activities, setting a maximum number of course credit hours, participation in courses with big class sizes, the requirement of a body of general education courses, and/or included behavior modification programs (Abadie, 1999; Esterbrook, 2006; Hecker, 1995).

Within the past several decades, the NCAA has increased focus on the student aspect of college sports and implemented several academic reforms to improve graduation rates of student-athletes. Many of these have impacted the procedures of and types of academic programs, services, curricular offerings, and interventions offered to student-athletes and student-athlete special admits.

NCAA Academic Reforms

In 1965, the NCAA passed a 1.60 grade point average (GPA) minimum requirement for freshman eligibility to participate in athletics. This was later repealed in 1973 and replaced by a 2.00 high school GPA. Following this repeal, a series of academic reforms were created and modified throughout the next 30 years: Proposition 48 (created 1983, operational 1990, modified 1996), Proposition 42 (created 1989), Proposition 16 (created 1992, operational 2003, modified 2008), and the APR (created 2004, operational 2005, modified 2011).

Proposition 48

Freshmen must have a minimum 700 SAT or 17 ACT, and a high school GPA of 2.00 in eleven core courses in order to be eligible for competition. The reform was criticized for paying little attention to the problems associated with student-athletes from low-income and minority families and was considered to “penalize low-economic students and is an unnecessary restraint pertaining to whether or not a student can do college work” (Mishoe, 1983). As a result, the

NCAA added a partial qualifier to its freshmen eligibility. Those who met either the 700 SAT or 2.00 high school GPA would be eligible to receive athletic scholarship but could not practice or compete their first year (NCAA Proceedings, 1983). Once the respective school deemed the student-athlete made satisfactory progress during their first year, they became eligible for competition.

Following the termination of the 1.60 rule in 1973 and the implementation of Proposition 48 in 1986, the number of African Americans participating in revenue producing sports skyrocketed. Many institutions implemented an “open admissions” policy in order to increase the number of minority and low-income students admitted. It was during this timeframe, one began to see the rise in the admittance of “special admits”. The director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society, Richard Lapchick, stated that more than one-fifth of Division I-A male basketball players and football players were presidential special admits as opposed to only three percent of all students considered to be special admits (Lapchick, 1991). In addition, grade inflation within American colleges and universities, which had begun in the 1960s, grew at an unprecedented rate and continued for more than a decade (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012).

Proposition 42

Following Proposition 48, a controversial Proposition 42, sought to eliminate scholarships for partial qualifiers (student-athletes that either met the minimum GPA requirement or the minimum SAT/ACT requirement, but not both). Opposition from African American leaders and coaches referenced the rule as a “racist rule” as standardized testing discriminates against minority student-athletes from homes with low socioeconomic income. A series of class action court cases revolving around discrimination ensued (*Cureton v. NCAA*, 1996; *Pryor v. NCAA*, 2002).

Proposition 16

Presidents, not faculty, continued to press for increased academic standards to the original Proposition 48 (Smith, 2011). Proposition 16, an amendment to Proposition 48, was adopted in 1992 and became effective in 1996. The amendments included raising the number of high school courses from eleven to thirteen and the introduction of a sliding scale between high school GPA and SAT/ACT scores for freshmen eligibility as opposed to the former single-cut SAT/ACT score. NCAA research shows high school grades are better predictors of success than standardized test scores, specifically, two to three times more predictive than test scores (Petr &

McArdle, 2012, p. 30). Studies have shown that a combination of grades and tests are a better predictor of academic success as opposed to using the two in isolation (Petr & McArdle, 2012).

The number of high school core courses necessary for participation was raised to 14 in 2003 and later to 16 by 2008. There has been no additional change in the requirement since then (see Table 3). NCAA research has found that using a core-curriculum GPA provides better prediction than using overall high school GPA (Petr & McArdle, 2012). Furthermore, “prediction accuracy has improved as we have increased the number of courses included in the core-curriculum requirement” (Petr & McArdle, 2012, p. 30).

Academic Progress Rate

The NCAA believes access to championships is a privilege that is earned based on two factors: Athletic performance and classroom performance. For this reason, the Academic Performance Program (APP) developed the APR in 2003 (implemented in 2005). It included increased academic standards for student-athletes, improved measurements for academic success, and a three-level system of increased penalties for each year the APR benchmark is unmet. The APR is a term-by-term calculation of academic eligibility (i.e., meets the minimum grade point average and progress-toward-degree requirements) and retention. It is important to note that the APR only consists of academic eligibility and retention points for *scholarship student-athletes receiving athletics scholarships within their first year*. Transfers, mid-year enrollees, walk-ons, recruited walk-ons, and those receiving athletics scholarships after their first year of enrollment are not included in the APR calculations. Student-athletes who are specially admitted, are typically those who receive athletic scholarships. Thus, student-athlete special admits directly impact team APR points.

A score of 1000 means every student-athlete on a team remained eligible and continued to stay enrolled at their institution. Teams must meet the four-year multiyear APR benchmark of 930, which predicts a 50% graduation rate in order to participate in post-season championships. Failure to consecutively reach the 930 benchmark can result in reductions in weekly team practices to be replaced by academic practice hours; reductions in competitions; coaching suspensions; athletic financial aid reductions; and restricted NCAA membership (Gurney et al., 2015, p. 14).

Table 3

NCAA Eligibility Center Division I Core Courses

Core Course	Years Required	Notes and Examples
English	4	American Literature, creative writing
Mathematics	3	Algebra, geometry, statistics
Natural/Physical Science	2	Biology, chemistry, physics, 1 year of lab (if offered by school)
Additional Course	1	English, mathematics or natural/physical science
Social Science	2	American History, civics, government
Additional Courses	4	Foreign language, religion/philosophy, or any course listed above

NCAA Eligibility Requirements**Current Initial Eligibility Requirements**

Effective August 1, 2016, the NCAA raised minimum high school GPAs and standardized test scores for student-athletes initially enrolling in a collegiate institution as a full-time student (i.e., must pass 12 credit hours per fall and spring semesters) (NCAA, 2018-2019). The decision to change the initial eligibility requirements was the belief that student-athletes have “much more control over their GPA day-to-day and less control over a one-time test score” (Hosick & Sproull, 2012). The three classifications of student-athletes include full qualifier, academic redshirt, and non-qualifier.

Full Qualifier. Full qualifiers can compete, receive athletic scholarships, and practice in their first year as a result of meeting the following requirements:

- Graduate from high school;
- Meet the minimum cumulative GPA of 2.30 in the 16 core-courses outlined in Bylaw 14.3.1.2;
- Complete ten of these 16 core-courses before their senior year of high school wherein seven of the ten must be in the area of English, math, or science; and
- Meet the minimum combined score of 900 on the SAT critical reading and math sections or a minimum sum score of 75 on the ACT (NCAA manual, 2018-2019, p. 161).

Academic Redshirt. As part of the new initial eligibility requirements, the NCAA developed a new term “academic redshirt”. Student-athletes who are academic redshirts would have been considered a full qualifier under the former GPA/test score sliding scale. Academic redshirts cannot compete during their first year of full-time collegiate enrollment but are eligible to receive athletic scholarships during this timeframe and may practice during their first semester. After the first semester is complete, the student-athlete must be academically successful (i.e., successfully complete nine credit hours) at their institution in order to continue to practice for the rest of the year. Academic redshirts are those who meet the following requirements:

- Graduate from high school;
- Meet the minimum cumulative GPA of 2.00 in the 16 core-courses outlined in Bylaw 14.3.1.2; and
- Meet the minimum combined score of 1020 on the SAT critical reading and math sections or a minimum sum score of 86 on the ACT (NCAA manual, 2018-2019, p. 161).

Non-Qualifier. Student-athletes who have yet to graduate high school or have not successfully completed the required core curriculum or has not met the required minimum core-curriculum GPA and/or corresponding SAT/ACT score required for qualifier or academic redshirt status are considered non-qualifiers. Non-qualifiers cannot compete, receive athletic scholarship, or practice during their first year. However, they can receive non-athletic financial aid within their first year if it is based on financial need only (NCAA Manual, 2018-2019, p. 161).

Current Continuing Eligibility Requirements

Progress-Toward-Degree Requirements. NCAA research determined “while high school grades and test scores were the best predictors of freshman academic outcomes, first-year college outcomes are much better predictors of eventual graduation” (Petr & McArdle, 2012, p. 35). This realization led to the focus on freshmen eligibility as the primary policy initiative for student-athlete academic success to a broader look at academic policy. For this reason, progress-toward-degree requirements were established in 2003 to include minimum percent-of-degree regulations (40-60-80 advancement standards) and minimum continuing GPA standards for student-athletes as they progress through college. See Table 1 for specifics.

Academic Accountability

There are many assumptions regarding student-athlete special admits in their ability to compete in the classrooms based on standardized test scores and high school GPA; however, there is little research indicating that student-athlete special admits with lower scores are graduating at a lower rate than other student-athletes or the general student population. NCAA managing director of research, Todd Petr, and consultant John McArdle of the University of Southern California found

“Predictors of academic success are better if the behavior on which the prediction is based on is closer in time to the academic outcome desired. For that reason, much of the NCAA initial-eligibility research is couched as being predictive of first-year collegiate success, not eventual degree attainment” (Hosick & Sproull, 2012, p. 33).

Situational factors have been shown to impact academics. Research has shown that when student-athletes truly feel as if they are part of a team, it can positively impact individual self-efficacy and subsequent individual performance (Hanton & Jones, 1999). One could argue, decreased self-efficacy in sport has the ability to negatively impact academics, especially if a student-athlete had previously held high levels of self-efficacy within the athletics realm over academics. Ingram and Huffman, (2017) noted the “academic redshirt policy could have unintended consequences similar to the effects student-athletes experience when they are injured” (p. 6). Injured student-athletes can experience negative psychological effects such as depression when one does not feel like part of the team due to significant loss in playing time, participation in workouts and/or practices, or traveling with the team for games. Models have shown that merely increasing admissions selectivity does not result in increased graduation rates (Francesconi, Aina, & Cappellari, 2011). Without outcome data that reveals student-athletes who are admitted at the lower end of the academic spectrum are those who are not graduating, significant changes to increase the minimum initial eligibility requirements and implementation of the academic redshirt policy may be an inefficient academic reform.

The NCAA refers to APR and student-athlete graduation rates as the main measures of academic success. Two measures that are employed are the FGR and GSR. The former is part of the Higher Education Act of 1972 and applies to all students whereas the latter was developed by the NCAA in 2003 and applies only to student-athletes.

Federal Graduation Rate

The FGR is the only rate wherein a direct comparison between the general student population and student-athletes may be drawn. The FGR measures first-year, full-time student-athletes in a cohort who receive financial aid within their first year of enrollment. Student-athletes are considered an academic success if they graduate in six years from their institution of initial enrollment. The FGR makes no accommodations for transfers, mid-year enrollees, “walk-ons or recruited walk-ons who might eventually receive an athletic scholarship after their first year of enrollment” (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004). The 2015-2016 Division I APR cohort showed approximately 20,400 (12%) student-athletes were transfers (NCAA Research, 2017). Lifetime transfer rates will be higher as some of the student-athletes in this cohort are first-year college students who may eventually transfer. Moreover, walk-ons and recruited walk-ons consist of approximately half of the student-athlete population for revenue and non-revenue sports alike (Ferris, Finster & McDonald, 2004).

Graduation Success Rate

The GSR begins with the FGR cohort and adds transfer students, mid-year enrollees, and non-scholarship student-athletes to the calculation (NCAA, 2015a). Student-athletes who leave the institution in good academic standing (i.e., maintained a GPA of 2.60 if transferring to a 4-year college or 3.30 if transferring to a 2-year college) and would have met NCAA progress-toward-degree requirements before exhausting athletics eligibility) are removed from the cohort of their initial institution; however, if they transfer to another institution, they are added to the new institution’s GSR (NCAA, 2015a). Student-athletes who leave their institution in good academic standing are not counted against the institution in the GSR calculation (NCAA, 2015b). In the FGR calculation, these student-athletes are considered non-graduates. Student-athletes who leave an institution in poor academic standing (i.e., student-athlete GPA or credit accumulation does not have them on-track to graduate in six years or less; does not meet the 2.60 GPA requirement for transferring to a 4-year college; or does not meet the 3.30 GPA requirement if transferring to a 2-year college) are deemed non-graduates by both the FGR and GSR (NCAA, 2015b).

Special Admissions within Collegiate Athletics

Due to poor educational outcomes prior to coming to college as evidenced by high school GPA and standardized test scores, the provision of academic interventions for Division I student-

athletes has continued to rise over the past decade (Comeaux, 2013; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Southall, Eckard, Nagel, & Hale, 2012). The inequalities in educational outcomes impact underserved groups such as student-athlete special admits. In dealing with underserved groups, the focus should be on improving the deficits and equalizing the academic playing field so-to-speak. However, one cannot do so without first establishing an understanding that education is not a one-size-fits-all. Not only is collegiate athletics a culture in and of itself, what works for one student-athlete may not work for another. Data-driven best practices within intercollegiate athletics are limited.

Petr & McArdle (2012) collected multi-year data regarding the outcomes of the 2003-2004 cohort of freshmen student-athletes. The researchers compared academic outcomes of student-athletes with lower standardized test scores and higher high school GPAs against student-athletes with higher standardized test scores and lower high school GPAs than the “typical” student-athlete. Due to the 820 standardized test score minimum with Proposition 48, the first group was previously ineligible to participate as an intercollegiate athlete. In comparison, the latter group has been fully eligible under all recent NCAA initial eligibility regulations. The researchers’ findings showed the former group with lower standardized test scores and higher high school GPAs outperformed those in the latter group with higher standardized test scores and lower high school GPAs when measuring freshmen academic performance (GPA, eligibility rates, retention rates, and the number of academic failures). The researchers tracked the student-athletes throughout their athletic and academic college careers. Findings showed student-athletes with higher graduation rates were those with lower standardized test scores and higher high school GPAs (8-9%) and had a lower proportion of academic failures (7-8%) when compared to student-athletes with higher standardized test scores and lower high school GPAs.

When Proposition 16 went into effect in 1995, the proportion of minority student-athletes in the overall GSR cohort and graduates in general plummeted and remained stagnant until 2003 when the new eligibility rules went into effect. These rules removed the 820 cut-score on standardized tests. Petr & McArdle (2012) state within the 2003 GSR cohort they “saw large increases in both the proportion of African-Americans in the overall GSR cohort and among graduates” (p. 34). These trends continued for the 2004 GSR cohort as well.

Gaston-Gayles (2003) examined perceived factors that contributed to higher graduation rates and academic success. The research focused on academic support programs at institutions with four-year student-athlete graduation rates above the national average. Directors of academic support services were interviewed from seven public and private Division I institutions within six conferences including the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big East Conference, Pacific Ten Conference (now PAC-12), Southeastern Conference, and Big Twelve Conference. Perceived factors that contributed to successful graduation rates included reporting lines, institutional size and affiliation, admissions procedures, institutional support and culture, athletic department support, and intentional advising.

Findings showed six institutions reported directly to the vice president for academic affairs. This structure “keeps academic support for athletes in line with other academic support services for students in the general population” and “athletic support staff has access to faculty members and administrators” (p. 54). Many institutions employed an intrusive advising approach with student-athletes within their first two years of study.

Intrusive advising has been shown to increase retention and the overall academic performance for special populations of students with high attrition rates such as those with disabilities, academic probation, and students of color (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Holmes, 2000). Advisors using this approach seek out students for advisement, as it is believed students will not readily seek guidance and advice from advisors themselves (Holmes, 2000). Intrusive advising can be defined as “deliberate and structured student intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty in order to motivate students to seek help” (Earl, 1988, p. 28).

Other unique programming aspects included asking the faculty to annually evaluate the effectiveness of student-athlete academic support programs. An example included a bi-annual summit wherein faculty, advisors, and campus administrators met with coaches and athletic department personnel to discuss issues, build programming, and enhance relationships (Gaston-Gayles, 2003).

Ingram and Huffman (2017) conducted a study that focused on graduation outcomes of student-athletes who were admitted on a special admit basis within universities in the “Power 5” conferences. The “Power 5” conferences, consist of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference (B1G), Big 12 Conference, Pacific Coast Conference (PAC-12) and Southeastern Conference (SEC). Results revealed graduation outcomes of 66 first-year student-

athletes who were accepted on a special admit basis to their respective institution. When transfers were considered as an academic success (GSR calculation), of these student-athletes, 72% graduated within six years of enrolling at their initial institution. However, when transfers were considered as academic failures, 51% of special admits graduated within six years from their initial institution (FGR calculation). When transfers were removed from the equation and did not count as an academic success or failure, 63% of special admits graduated within six years from their initial institution (see Table 4 for how transfers affect graduation rates). When using any of the three variations of graduation rates, the majority of student-athlete special admits graduated within six years from their initial institution, 18% transferred, and 30% did not graduate. Of the 30% who did not graduate, 16% voluntarily withdrew, 6% were dismissed for academic reasons, 3% entered the professional league, and 2% were dismissed for non-academic reasons.

Although student-athlete special admits graduated at a lower rate, institutions within the “Power 5” conferences posted higher graduation rates for their student-athletes as a whole (68%) in comparison to Division I student-athletes (67%) and Division I all students (65%) according to FGR calculations. GSR calculations showed a similar trend wherein student-athletes within the “Power 5” conference institutions graduated at a higher rate (85%) in comparison to Division I student-athletes (83%). This finding is significant as larger institutions may have more student-athlete special admits (Sack, 1987). The study showed that irrespective of the fact these “Power 5” institutions may have higher rates of student-athlete special admits, they posted higher graduation rates in comparison to other conferences who may have had lower rates of student-athlete special admits.

The study conducted by Ingram and Huffman (2017) extended the literature by surveying multiple institutions when looking at outcomes associated with student-athlete special admits and focused on one cohort (the 2009 cohort) as opposed to a multitude of cohorts. Moreover, the findings of the study are similar to prior research conducted by Robenolt (2012) but are inconsistent with the findings of Gurney et al. (2010). See Table 5 for a comparison of these research studies and findings. The current study is a continuation of the previous study (Ingram & Huffman, 2017); however, the current study focuses on institutions within a single Division I FCS Conference, provides an in-depth look at student-athlete special admits (demographics and incoming academic characteristics) and explores the relationship between demographics,

Table 4

How Student-Athlete Special Admit Transfers Affect Graduation Rates

Graduation Rate (%)	How Transfers Affect Calculation	How % was Calculated
70%	Transfers Considered Academic Success (GSR Calculation)	46 graduates out of 66 total student-athletes
51%	Transfers Considered Academic Failure (FGR Calculation)	34 graduates out of 66 total student-athletes
63%	Transfers Removed from Graduation Rate	34 graduates out of 54 total student-athletes

Table 5

Comparison of Student-Athlete Special Admits Research Studies

Outcomes	Ingram & Huffman (2017)	Robenolt (2012)	Gurney, Tan, & Winters (2010)
<i>Graduated from initial institution</i>			
6 years	51%	65%	37%
<i>Transferred from initial institution</i>	18%	19%	28%
<i>Did not graduate</i>			
Dismissed for academics	6%	3%	11%*
Entered professional league	3%	N/A	14%
<i>Other</i>	3%	10%**	2%***
<i>No information</i>	11%	N/A	8%
General Student-Body Graduation Rate	65%	75%	56%
Total Number Special Admits	66	48	183
Institution(s)	Power 5 Conferences	Div. I FBS in PAC-12	Div. I FBS in Midwest
Cohorts	One (Fall 2009)	Multiple (2003-2005)	Multiple (1998-2003)

*Note. Includes those who dropped out or were academically suspended.

**Note. Includes those who exhausted eligibility and did not graduate.

***Note. Includes those who exhausted eligibility but were in good academic standing.

incoming academic characteristics and six-year graduation rates. A deeper understanding of this population provides a foundation in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits are a severely understudied, and theoretically high-risk, student population. Understanding this sub-population of student-athletes may aid in a better understanding of how to best help those with academic deficiencies, especially since the NCAA's academic redshirt policy went into effect in 2016.

The Knight Commission (1999, 2001, & 2010), the Drake Group (Splitt, 2003; Gurney et al., 2015), the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA) (2004 & 2007), and the NCAA have been at the forefront in calling for academic reforms amongst intercollegiate athletics which are often costly. Prior to investing in reforms, stakeholders, practitioners, and researchers should look at best practices. There are currently no standards or best practices in place regarding programming within academic centers for student-athlete special admits.

In 1984, Shriberg and Brodzinski provided a summary description of student-athlete academic support centers, which solely focused on scheduling and eligibility. In order to formalize the provision of academic support services throughout NCAA member institutions, the NCAA established mandatory bylaw 16.3.1.1 for Division I institutions in 1991 (revised in 2002) which states:

“Member institutions shall make general academic counseling and tutoring services available to all student-athletes. Such counseling and tutoring services may be provided by the department of athletics or the institution's non-athletics student support services. In addition, an institution, conference or the NCAA may finance other academic support, career counseling or personal development services that support the success of student-athletes” (NCAA, 2018-2019, p. 206).

This bylaw solidified academic support centers as a standard part of intercollegiate athletics. A closely related bylaw 16.3.1.2, effective in 2000, requires institutions to conduct a life skills program on its campus (NCAA, 2018-2019, p. 206).

Student-Athlete Academic Centers

In response to these aforementioned reforms, the primary purpose of academic centers shifted from scheduling and eligibility to focus on the retention, eligibility, and eventual graduation of their student-athletes (Broughton, 2015). As demands placed on student-athletes continued to grow, athletic departments have expanded their personnel to mitigate the negative effects that come with being an intercollegiate student-athlete. Personnel may include academic mentors, learning specialists, academic tutors, and team-specific advisors. As a recruitment tool within this highly competitive landscape, institutions have begun to focus on the provision of cutting-edge academic facilities for student-athletes in order to keep up with these increased demands and personnel (Wolverton, 2008). As an example, Louisiana State University was honored as a model of excellence for their student-athlete academic center, which supports “innovative, effective and interdepartmental initiatives that are bolstering student success” (University Business, 2016). While academic facilities have taken on a role of increased significance, institutions vary widely in regard to size, resources, and programming used within these academic support centers for student-athletes (Jolly, 2008).

Student-athletes often experience blurred lines between their academic demands and their athletic demands. Both require different roles, yet similar expectations. The participatory effects in one domain often spill over into the next (Browning, 2015). Academic centers provide a hybrid space wherein the academic and athletic worlds collide. In regard to branding the success of student-athletes, Juan et al., (2008) called for a system that not only highlights the positive stories of athletic success but adds more content to the narratives regarding the student aspect. I argue that the same can be done concerning academic support centers. Student-athletes who are granted special admittance into institutions, arrive with different levels of preparation. As a result, academic centers must employ programs that effectively support the varied needs of said population. Petr & McArdle (2012) explain:

“There was a realization that member colleges can only have minimal impact on what happens to student-athletes before they come to our institutions, so the NCAA should look much more closely at what happens to those student-athletes while they are on our campuses. Thus, the question becomes: How can we create policies, incentives, and best practices that inspire (and/or require) all NCAA

constituent groups to place a primary focus on the academic success of student-athletes during their collegiate careers?” (p. 40).

Summary

The purpose of this exploratory and descriptive mixed-methods study was to develop a better understanding of previously obscure graduation rates of Division I student-athlete special admits within a single FCS Conference. In relation to graduation rates of specially admitted student-athletes, this study examined progress towards graduation, or lack thereof based on entry into the professional leagues, dismissal from the team for academic reasons, dismissal from team for reasons other than academic, voluntarily withdrawing from school, and/or transferring to another school. The goal of the study was to provide an in-depth look at the demographics, incoming academics, and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits in order to begin to fill the gap in our understanding of who student-athlete special admits are. A deeper understanding of this population provides a foundation in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating targeted evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits are a severely understudied, and theoretically high-risk, student population. The goal of creating best practices is to positively impact the academic performance of student-athletes and student-athlete special admits that will lead to eventual graduation within six years. Understanding this sub-population of student-athletes may aid in a better understanding of how to best help those with academic deficiencies, especially since the NCAA’s academic redshirt policy went into effect in 2016.

In relation to the study at hand, the researcher hopes to begin a discussion that will ultimately lead to better academic outcomes for this previously understudied population of student-athletes. The resultant discussion will aid the NCAA and its member institutions to better serve student-athletes and to spark further interest and research to better understand and support this at-risk group. More specifically, the findings will aid in the development of establishing a clear understanding of what this unique population needs in order to develop a roadmap of best practices to maximize student success in graduating within six years.

Chapter 2 provided background to the current study by discussing the literature that sustains our collective understanding of the problem addressed in this dissertation. Due to the lack of studies on this topic, literature was drawn from parallel research within higher education

that encompasses various studies that focus on at-risk student populations. The chapter discussed the history of collegiate special admissions, components of special admission programs, and provided an in-depth look at various aspects of academic support services, programs, curricular offerings and interventions that contribute to success in graduating specially admitted students. Chapter 3 explores the current study in greater detail by providing a comprehensive description of the methodology used to answer the questions posed in this study, along with the data collection and analytic approaches used.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this mixed-methods study, which utilized an exploratory approach, was to develop a better understanding of previously obscure graduation rates of Division I student-athlete special admits within a single FCS Conference. In relation to graduation rates of student-athlete special admits, this study examined progress towards graduation, or lack thereof based on entry into the professional leagues, dismissal from the team for academic reasons, dismissal from team for reasons other than academic, voluntarily withdrawing from school, and/or transferring to another school. The goal of the study was to provide an in-depth look at the demographics, incoming academics and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits in order to fill the gap in our understanding of who student-athlete special admits are. A deeper understanding of this population provides a foundation in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits are a severely understudied, and theoretically high-risk, student population; thus, best practices that positively impact this population should have similar effects on the wider student-athlete body as a whole. The goal of creating best practices is to positively impact the academic performance of student-athletes and student-athlete special admits that will lead to eventual graduation within six years. Understanding this sub-population of student-athletes may aid in a better understanding of how to best help those with academic deficiencies, especially since the NCAA's academic redshirt policy went into effect in 2016.

Based on an analysis of the gaps in the literature, the following five research questions and their sub-questions guided the study:

RQ 1: Are high school GPA and standardized test scores correlated with institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, and student-athlete eligibility rates?

RQ 1 Sub-Question A: Are high school GPA and standardized test scores correlated with student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR and student body FGR?

RQ 2: What are the reasons for determining a student-athlete is a special admit?

RQ 2 Sub-Question A: How do the demographic features and incoming academic characteristics of those that are student-athlete special admits compare to the overall student body cohort?

RQ 3: What is the graduation rate for student-athlete special admits who graduate within six years at each of the sampled universities?

RQ 3 Sub-Question A: Is the percentage of student-athlete special admits who graduate within six years significantly different from that of the percentage of regularly admitted student-athletes who graduate within six years and the student body cohort who graduate within six years?

RQ 4: For the student-athlete special admits who did not graduate, what are the reasons for not graduating?

RQ 5: Is there a significant relationship between demographics, incoming academic characteristics and six-year graduation outcomes for student-athlete special admits?

Overview

The use of a multiphase sequential mixed-methods (quantitatively dominant) design was selected in order to answer the overarching question of “what are the variables involved?” and “what are the precise relationships between variables?” It is important to note that these questions do not require mixed methods research; however, they do not exclude this type of approach. This study included an exploratory approach and utilized descriptive methods. Each research question and sub-questions served to take one of these two approaches. This type of approach allowed for the provision of detailed descriptions, subjectivity, and understanding of underlying reasons and motivations that influence behavior during the qualitative aspects. An overview of the design and analysis of each research question within the study is provided within the data analysis section of this chapter.

The researcher used a purposeful sample of Division I athletic administrators through critical case sampling. Critical case sampling involved selecting a small number of important cases in order to “yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge” (Patton, 2015, p. 275). To allow for a more in-depth analysis to take place, the sample was limited to institutions within a single NCAA Division I FCS Conference. To increase inference quality, the official website for each institution within the target population was used to

determine contact information for the research sample participants (Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003).

Athletic administrators within a NCAA Division I FCS Conference ($N = 10$) were invited to participate in the study to answer questions regarding their student-athlete special admit population. Questions regarding student-athlete special admits were delimited to those who were specially admitted during the Summer and/or Fall of 2011 at these member institutions. This cohort was strategically chosen because the student-athletes in this cohort would have spent at least six years as college students at the time of this study. Additionally, the FGR and GSR measure graduation rates over a six-year period.

This study consisted of two data collection parts. The first, consisted of publicly available data obtained from sources such as the NCAA Searchable Database, institution websites, press releases and data published by the US Department of Education. Data collected included single-year data for each of the ten institutions over a six-year timespan from 2011 to 2016 or 2012 to 2017 regarding institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, student-athlete eligibility rates, incoming academic characteristics (e.g., high school GPA, standardized test score); and graduation rates (student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, and student body FGR). The researcher pulled the needed data from publicly available sources herself, thereby increasing validity of the data being collected. The student-athlete special admit survey was distributed to the director and assistant directors of the academic center for athletics at each institution. Additional staff members (e.g., eligibility specialist, faculty athletics representative, and academic coordinators) were included on the email as well to increase participant accountability. The survey was filled out and submitted by the individual(s) deemed most appropriate to answer the questions as determined by the academic director for student-athletes.

Of the ten institutions, six decided to participate in the second data collection phase, a student-athlete special admit survey that detailed the number of special admits along with individual-level demographics, incoming academic characteristics (high school GPA, standardized test score), and graduation outcomes. Open-ended questions were provided on the student-athlete special admit survey wherein participants were invited to provide supplementary information or comments regarding the “special admit” process for student-athletes at their institution.

This approach allowed for the examination of individual features in addition to institutional features which permitted the researcher to compare student-athlete special admits to their respective student-athlete cohort and student body cohort within and across institutions. The publicly available data was used to provide a longitudinal view of incoming academic characteristics and academic outcomes for the student body cohort and student-athletes at each of the ten institutions from 2011 to 2016 or 2012-2017 whereas the student-athlete special admit survey obtained the demographics, incoming academic characteristics of, and graduation outcomes for each student-athlete special admits from the 2011 cohort within the six participating institutions. The collection of this data allowed the researcher to examine the relationship between incoming academic characteristics (high school GPA, standardized test score, student-athlete special admit high school GPA, and student-athlete special admit standardized test score), academic outcomes (institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, and student-athlete eligibility rates), and graduation rates (student-athlete GSR, student-athlete special admit GSR, student-athlete FGR, student-athlete special admit FGR, and student body FGR).

Rationale for a Mixed-Methods Approach

The use of a multiphase sequential mixed-methods (quantitatively dominant) design was selected in order to answer the overarching questions of “what are the variables involved?” and “what are the relationships between variables?” Much of the research regarding conditional admissions of the regular student population has centered around quantitative approaches which have shown when it comes to understanding students, what works for regularly admitted students, does not work for conditionally admitted students (Adebayo, 2008; Copeland, 1991; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; House, 1995; Houston, 1980; Laden et al., 1999; Ting, 1997; White & Sedlacek, 1986).

Quantitative studies regarding specially admitted students within higher education have focused on the types of programs themselves (Libby, 1935; Malcolm, 1966; Pettit, 2013); persistence rates (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013); graduation rates (Ingram & Huffman, 2017; Wildman, 2016); and comparative outcomes between various conditional admissions programs within their institution by differing interventions to conditionally admitted students, and matched control groups (Haynes & Johnson, 1983; House & Wohlt, 1991; Johnson, 2000-2001; Parisi, 2012; Sanchez, 2003; Sriram, 2014; Walpole et al., 2008; Woodruff, 1998).

Qualitative studies have been conducted to provide additional information to uncover the unique aspects of the experiences of conditionally admitted students such as looking at the experiences of participants within conditional admissions programs (Lundell, Beach, et al., 2006; Palmer & Davis, 2012; Schmitt et al., 2006); factors related to persistence (Anderson et al., 2004; Palmer, et al., 2009; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2008-2009; Williams, 1991); and aspects of the conditional admissions programs (Clark, 2009; Mapes, 2011; Ries, 2005).

This mixed-methods approach allowed for the provision of detailed descriptions, subjectivity, and understanding of underlying reasons and motivations that influence behavior during the qualitative phase. The quantitative portion allowed for the classification of features, correlational analysis, and objectivity (publicly available data; student-athlete special admit survey). Conversely, the qualitative portion (open-ended questions on the student-athlete special admit survey) allowed the researcher to look beyond the numbers such as graduation rates, academic characteristics, retention rates, and eligibility rates. The experiences of student-athletes could be seen as a whole within a particular context. Combined together, the process allowed for a holistic approach wherein the qualitative data aided the researcher in better understanding the context and meaning of the quantitative data.

Rationale for Exploratory Design Methodology

Exploratory research is conducted for a problem when limited information exists. This methodology serves to help individuals better understand a phenomenon by establishing priorities, developing operational definitions, and laying the initial groundwork for future studies (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Exploratory research includes two major forms: A new topic or a new angle of looking at a topic (Kothari, 2004). This study does both as the topic of understanding the academic successes or lack thereof of student-athlete special admits has not been studied in detail, nor has a theoretical approach offering a holistic, bi-directional approach in understanding how these student-athletes graduate despite these obstacles.

Exploratory research was chosen as the main method for this study in addition to a qualitative component which utilized a review of the literature to shape initial ideas in determining what was important to study, what could be measured, and how the topic could be systematically studied or measured (Gal & Ograjensek, 2010). Qualitative research is unavoidable at the exploratory phase, especially when the research takes an inductive approach (Ograjensek, 2016). Thus, exploratory research is able to help identify the boundaries of the

environment in which the problems, opportunities, or situations of interest are likely to reside and to identify the salient factors or variables that might be found there and be of interest to the research (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Once the groundwork has been established, a newly explored field needs more information. Descriptive research attempts to explore and explain while providing additional information about a topic (Kothari, 2004). This type of research helps to fill in missing information and expand our understanding of a topic. Descriptive research aims to collect as much information as possible by answering the “what” and the “how” rather than answering the “why” by making guesses or establishing elaborate models to predict the future. Thus, causality is not of primary interest (Kothari, 2004).

Exploratory and descriptive methods were chosen to develop a clear understanding of what this unique population needs in order to develop a roadmap to maximize student success in graduating within six years. The literature regarding academically at-risk, conditional admits, and special admits within higher education have focused on various demographics such as international students, ethnicities, gender, first-generation college students and the student population at large within public and private 2-year and 4-year institutions; however, limited studies have yet to focus on this population within intercollegiate athletics. This study aimed to focus on the graduation outcomes of student-athlete special admits and conduct an in-depth analysis on the incoming academic characteristics and demographics of said population in order to begin to fill the gap in our understanding of who student-athlete special admits are. A deeper understanding of this population provides a foundation in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating targeted evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. to provide a foundation for the creation of academic best practices.

Participants

Athletic administrators within a single NCAA Division I FCS Conference were invited to participate in the study. This purposeful sample consisted of directors and associate directors of academic center for student-athletes, faculty athletics representatives, and the athletic eligibility officers. This specific conference was chosen due to the diversity of member institutions (football and non-football schools; public, private, and military; and student enrollment which range from 1,600 students to 19,400 students). This diversity is representative of a broader

segment of Division I student-athletes. Since there is no current data that shows whether FCS institutions have more (or fewer) student-athlete special admits than the autonomy 5 conferences (Power 5 Conferences), the researcher does not seek to generalize the overall student-athlete data and individual-level data of student-athlete special admits as representative of *all* Division I institutions, only Division I FCS institutions. The selection of one athletic conference allowed the researcher to maintain a small and manageable size of participants and data. The researcher plans to expand to other conferences in future research. As different questions utilized unique portions of the data (e.g., publicly available data and/or data provided by institutional staff), data analysis sections for each research question included more specific information about data sources.

Research Design

Data Collection

Publicly Available Data. Publicly available data was obtained for all ten of the institutions regardless if they participated in the study or not. Data obtained through publicly available data sources were taken from sources such as the NCAA Searchable Database, institution websites, press releases and data published by the US Department of Education. Data collected included single-year data for institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, student-athlete eligibility rates, high school GPA, standardized test score, student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, and student body FGR for each of the six years between 2011 and 2016 or 2012 and 2017. As a result, a total of 60 data points was collected. Since the researcher pulled the needed information herself, this served to increase the validity of the data being collected.

Student-Athlete Special Admit Survey. Each of the participating six institutions selected an individual to complete the student-athlete special admit survey portion of the research. Individuals were those with access to individual-level data for specially admitted student-athletes who were admitted to the institution during the Summer and/or Fall 2011 semester. Data was obtained for 22 student-athlete special admits wherein 16 came from the same institution. To ensure data accuracy, individuals who completed the surveys on behalf of their institution were asked to provide institution name in addition to their name. Participants completed an online survey created by the researcher and delivered electronically using QuestionPro, a web-based survey software tool. Data collected included:

- The number of first-year student-athletes admitted in the Summer and/or Fall of 2011 on a “special admit” basis;
- Demographics
 - Gender; ethnicity; revenue or non-revenue sport participation; whether the student-athlete was redshirted their freshman year; residency status (in-state, out-of-state, or international); type of high school attended; whether they were a first-generation college student; and whether they had a diagnosed learning disability;
- Incoming academic characteristics; and
 - High school GPA; standardized test score; and
- Graduation outcomes.
 - Graduated from the institution within six years; did not graduate from the institution within six years; and reason for not graduating (if applicable) (see Appendix A).

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher enlisted the assistance of the official athletics’ websites for each of the ten institutions within the target population to determine contact information. Directors of student-athlete academic programming were contacted via phone by the researcher for an informal conversation to discuss potential participation in the research study. The researcher introduced herself, gave a brief overview of the research purpose and design, and allowed for the individual to ask any pertinent questions regarding the study. During the phone call, the individual was not asked to verify whether their institution would participate in the study. The purpose of the phone call was to increase institutional participation once they received the follow-up email.

The researcher chose this approach for initial contact due to previous experience conducting a similar study regarding intercollegiate student-athletes who have been specially admitted. Ingram and Huffman (2017) found that directors of student-athlete academic programs who were contacted via phone and allowed to address their issues or concerns to the researcher before receiving an email containing an overview of the study and a link to the survey, had a 100% response rate and a 75% participation rate. All who were contacted via phone responded to the follow-up email by either stating they had completed the survey or that they were not participating in the study. During these calls, many of these directors provided the names of individuals who would serve as the best point of contact to obtain the information requested in

the study. Depending on the academic director's interest in the study, phone conversations lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. Those who were not contacted beforehand only had a 50% response rate and 25% participation rate. Generally, many academic personnel will not provide data for research studies without the approval of their director. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the researcher believed these phone calls were a critical first step to increasing the number of participating institutions.

After speaking to all directors of academic programs for student-athletes, a follow-up email was sent to each institution a week later. The reasoning for this timeframe was to allow directors ample time to discuss potential participation in the study with other academic personnel at the center if needed. The researcher emailed the director of student-athlete academic support at each university as well as his/her respective associate director, academic eligibility representative(s), and other academic personnel suggested as a point of contact by the director. Only one athletic administrator representing each university was expected to respond and/or complete the survey. The rationale for including multiple individuals on the email was to increase the participation rate due to increased accountability and to ensure the most appropriate individual was completing the survey. The email contained the purpose of the study and a link to the online survey. Participants were assured although the survey would not be completed anonymously, all information gathered would be reported anonymously. See Appendix B for an example of the language that was included in these emails.

Data Analysis

Due to increased emphasis on academic excellence for all student-athletes and the lack of prior research regarding student-athlete special admits, this study used an exploratory and descriptive approach to explore the relationship between demographics, incoming academic characteristics, and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits within a NCAA Division I FCS Conference. Specific data collection techniques, variables and analysis for each of the research questions and their sub-questions are provided below. Prior to running analyses, a series of descriptive statistics was collected regarding institutional features and student-athlete special admit demographics and incoming academic characteristics. As a result of the varied nature of data sources per question and data analysis techniques, what follows is a brief overview of data sources and analyses for each question. Further information is provided in the subsequent

sections related to descriptive statistics collected in addition to a more detailed explanation of the data analyses techniques used to address each of the five research questions.

Research Question One Overview. For research question one, publicly available data was obtained for all ten of the institutions regardless if they participated in the study or not. Data obtained through publicly available data sources were taken from sources such as the NCAA Searchable Database, institution websites, press releases and data published by the US Department of Education. Data collected included single-year data for institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, student-athlete eligibility rates, high school GPA, standardized test score, student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, and student body FGR for each of the six years between 2011 and 2016 or 2012 and 2017. As a result, a total of 60 data points was collected (i.e., ten institutions within six years of data). Since the researcher pulled the needed information herself, this served to increase the validity of the data being collected.

Correlation analyses (Spearman's Rho and Kendall's Tau) were used to examine the strength of relationships between incoming academic characteristics, academic outcomes, and graduation rates. A total of six correlations were run for each of the ten institutions wherein data spanned a total of six years (2011 to 2016 or 2012 to 2017). Therefore, each of the six various correlations contained 60 data points. Correlation analyses were run regarding the relationship between incoming academic characteristics (high school GPA and standardized test score) to each of the six dependent variables (institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, student-athlete eligibility rates, student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, and student body FGR).

Research Question Two Overview. For research question two, Boyatzis' thematic analysis was used to determine the specific reasons a student-athlete was considered a special admit. Data was collected from a total of six faculty athletic representatives from the six participating institutions via the student-athlete special admit survey.

Research Question Three Overview. For research question three, descriptive data was collected for the six-year graduation rates of student-athlete special admits. In addition, the six-year graduation rates for the institutions' 2011 student body cohort, student-athletes, and student-athlete special admits were compared. The six-year graduation rates of student-athlete special admits was collected from athletic administrators from the six participating institutions. The overall six-year graduation rates of student-athletes (2011 cohort) was retrieved for each participating institution from the NCAA Searchable Database. The overall six-year graduation

rates of the 2011 student body cohort for each of the six participating institutions was retrieved from the US Department of Education's website.

Research Question Four Overview. For research question four, descriptive data was collected regarding specific reasons student-athlete special admits did not graduate. This information was provided by participating institutions' athletic administrators via the student-athlete special admit survey.

Research Question Five Overview. For research question five, correlation analysis (Spearman's Rho and Kendall's Tau), independent t-test, and a N-1 chi square test was run to determine if there was a significant relationship between student-athlete special admit demographics, student-athlete special admit incoming academic characteristics, and graduation outcomes. Detailed information is provided in the subsequent section regarding each analysis. Data for these analyses were collected from athletic administrators from the six participating institutions via the student-athlete special admit survey. Unfortunately, two participating institutions had no special admits. Data was obtained for a total of 22 student-athlete special admits. Notably, the majority of special admits attended one of the six participating institutions ($n = 16$), one institution had one special admit; one institution had two special admits; one institution had three special admits.

Descriptive Statistics. Given the lack of information readily available in the research literature or elsewhere, descriptive analyses were used to better understand who special admit student athletes are. To aid in this, a variety of data visualization tools were used. Descriptive statistics were generated for data such as institutional characteristics; incidence rates (number of student-athlete special admits admitted in Summer and/or Fall 2011, number of overall student-athletes); demographics (gender, ethnicity, revenue vs. non-revenue sport participation, whether the student-athlete was redshirted their freshman year, residency (in-state, out-of-state, or international), type of high school attended, whether the student-athlete was a first-generation college student, and whether they were diagnosed with a learning disability); incoming academic characteristics (high school GPA and standardized test scores); comparison of student-athlete special admits to the overall student-athlete population and student body cohort; and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits. The use of various visualization tools (e.g., tables) to present these descriptive statistics allowed the researcher to evaluate the data for general patterns.

Research Question One Analyses. To address research question one, survey responses regarding outcomes for student-athlete special admits were classified into two categories: Those that graduated within six years and those that did not graduate within six years. Incoming academic characteristics were standardized (i.e., GPA; test scores consisted of the mean between ACT and SAT scores). Correlation analysis measured the strength of association between two variables and the direction of the relationship (Keith, 2015). Correlation analyses were run which used frequency data to evaluate the relationship between incoming academic characteristics and graduation outcomes. Specifically, as suggested by Keith (2015), Spearman Rho correlation was used for high school GPA analyses, while Kendall's Tau was used for standardized test score analyses. Results were deemed statistically significant at the 0.05 level. As suggested by Cohen (1988) correlation effect sizes were deemed low at the .10 level, moderate at the .30 level, and high at the .50 level.

Data included single-year data for each of the six years between 2011 and 2016 or 2012 and 2017. Publicly available data was obtained for all ten of the conference's institutions. Data were obtained from the following public data sources: The NCAA Searchable Database, institutions' websites, press releases, and the US Department of Education's Website. All six years (2011-2016 or 2012-2017) of data were included for each of the ten institutions for the six correlations. The six correlations consisted of the relationship between incoming academic characteristics (high school GPA; standardized test score) and institutional APR, student-athlete retention, student-athlete eligibility, student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, and student body FGR. Therefore, each of the six various correlations contained 60 data points (i.e., 10 institutions with six years of data).

Research Question Two Analysis. To address research question two, qualitative techniques were employed. For research question two, Boyatzis' thematic analysis was used to determine the specific reasons a student-athlete was considered a special admit. The researcher grouped the information into common themes through Boyatzis' thematic analysis approach in order to make valid inferences through inductive coding (Boyatzis, 1998; Krippendorff, 2013). The researcher coded and clustered the content through the following steps: 1) reduced the raw information, 2) identified themes within subsamples, 3) compared themes across subsamples, and 4) created a code (Boyatzis, 1998). These codes contained specific locations, perceptions, statements, and relationship-based factors (Creswell, 2009). Data for this question were collected

from a total of six faculty athletic representatives from each of the six participating institutions via the student-athlete special admit survey. Within this survey, participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on the student-athlete special admit process regarding the data collected for the 22 student-athlete special admits.

Research Question Three Analysis. For research question three, the six-year graduation rates of student-athlete special admits, student-athletes and the student body cohort were obtained. For all three populations, the six-year graduation rate was for the 2011 cohort. Data for student-athlete special admits came from the student-athlete special admit survey which was completed by athletic administrators from the six participating institutions. Data for student-athletes was obtained from the NCAA searchable database. Data for the student body cohort was obtained from the US Department of Education website. Analysis consisted of looking at the percentage of six-year graduation rates between the three populations.

Research Question Four Analyses. For research question four, descriptive data were collected regarding the reason student-athlete special admits did not graduate within six years. Data was compared across the 22 student-athlete special admits through the usage of means and frequencies. Data was collected from athletic administrators from the six participating institutions via the student-athlete special admit survey. Respondents could select from a variety of non-graduation causes described by the NCAA. The complete list is provided in Appendix A. In addition, “Other” was provided as a possible response. However, no respondents selected this option.

Research Question Five Analyses. Research question five explored whether there was a significant relationship between demographics, incoming academic characteristics, and graduation outcomes for the 22 student-athlete special admits in the study. Correlational analysis (Spearman’s Rho and Kendall’s Tau), an independent t-test, and a N-1 chi square test were run. Specifically, as suggested by Keith (2015), Spearman Rho correlation was used for high school GPA analyses, while Kendall’s Tau was used for standardized test score analyses. Correlations were run between high school GPA, standardized tests score, student-athlete special admit demographics (gender, ethnicity, sport type, redshirt freshman, residency, type of high school attended, first generation college student, and diagnosed learning disability), and six-year graduation rates (student-athlete special admit GSR). High school GPA and test scores were both standardized prior to analyses. Data was first analyzed using Kendall’s Tau and Spearman Rho

correlation. Data was deemed statistically significant at the 0.05 level. As suggested by Cohen (1988) correlation effect sizes were deemed low at the .10 level, moderate at the .30 level, and high at the .50 level.

Following correlation analyses, an independent t-test was run for student-athlete special admits to see if high school GPA and standardized test score were different between the high school GPA and standardized test score of those who graduated within six years and those who did not. Dixon (2008) noted the superiority of chi-square tests over ANOVA for examining significant differences between proportions or percentages. Chi squares were then calculated to determine if other characteristics (i.e., student-athlete demographics) predicted six-year graduation rates. Again, student-athlete special admit demographics consisted of gender, ethnicity, sport type, redshirt freshman, residency, type of high school attended, first generation college student, and diagnosed learning disability.

These analyses were repeated for the subsample of 16 student-athlete special admits enrolled at the same institution to see if the shared experience of attending the same institution influenced the relationship between demographics, incoming academic characteristics, and graduation rates. All data were collected from athletic administrators from the six participating institutions via the student-athlete special admit survey.

Ethical Considerations

As with all research studies involving human subjects, this study has certain risks. Padgett (2008) describes possible ethical issues in qualitative research which may consist of: Deception and disclosure; confidentiality and privacy; informed consent; and coercion. To assure validity of the survey content, the researcher solicited opinions of experts which included two NCAA National Office Staff Directors. To assure reliability of the survey instrument, the researcher solicited opinions from two faculty athletics representatives at institutions not affiliated with the participating conference to determine whether there is similarity in the understanding of terms used and responded accordingly. Based on the feedback from the experts, the author modified the instrument as needed by clarifying, adding and/or deleting survey questions.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed overview of the research methodology along with the rationale for the research approach and a description of the proposed sample. The research

method description follows with explanations for data collection and analysis. The data collection consisted of two distinct parts: Publicly available data and a student-athlete special admit survey. Data were analyzed through a variety of descriptive and exploratory methods (e.g., correlation analysis, thematic analysis, descriptive statistics, independent-t-test, and chi-square test for association). The next chapter includes the findings of the study in relation to each of the research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this exploratory and descriptive mixed-methods study was to develop a better understanding of previously obscure graduation rates of Division I student-athlete special admits within a single FCS Conference. In relation to graduation rates of specially admitted student-athletes, this study examined progress towards graduation, or lack thereof based on entry into the professional leagues, dismissal from the team for academic reasons, dismissal from team for reasons other than academic, voluntarily withdrawing from school, and/or transferring to another school. The goal of the study was to provide an in-depth look at the demographics, incoming academics and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits in order to begin to fill the gap in our understanding of who student-athlete special admits are. A deeper understanding of this population provides a foundation in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating targeted evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits are a severely understudied, and theoretically high-risk, student population. The goal of creating best practices is to positively impact the academic performance of student-athletes and student-athlete special admits that will lead to eventual graduation within six years. Understanding this sub-population of student-athletes may aid in a better understanding of how to best help those with academic deficiencies, especially since the NCAA's academic redshirt policy went into effect in 2016. This chapter reviews the findings of the analysis.

This chapter is separated into three sections, with each type of data collection framing this division. The first section addresses the publicly available data as provided online by the NCAA searchable database, press releases and data published by the US Department of Education. The section addresses the overarching results of the student body and student-athletes within NCAA member institutions, specifically those institutions within the single Division I FCS Conference that serve as the basis for participants in this study. The section highlights the results such as the average incoming academic characteristics of their student body (i.e., high school GPA, standardized test score), institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, student-athlete eligibility rates, student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, and student body FGR. The

aforementioned data fields are all single-year data results. Since this data is publicly available, information for all ten of the institutions within the selected conference are described. The second section provides a more in-depth look at the results of the 22 student-athlete special admits from the six participating institutions by detailing the demographics, incoming academic characteristics, and graduation outcomes. The third and final section, explores the intersection between demographics, incoming academics, and graduation rates for the 22 student-athlete special admits from the six participating institutions.

Incoming Academic Characteristics and Academic Outcomes

The first research question and related sub-questions explored the various associations between incoming academic characteristics (e.g., high school GPA and standardized test scores) to academic outcomes (e.g., institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, student-athlete eligibility rates, student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, and student body FGR). Correlation analysis measured the strength of association between average high school GPA and institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, and student-athlete eligibility rates for the years between 2011 to 2016 or 2012 to 2017. For example, the average high school GPA for incoming students (includes student-athletes and the regular student body cohort) for the 2016 cohort at Alpha Institution was compared to the 2016 single-year institutional APR, 2016 single-year student-athlete retention rate, and 2016 single-year student-athlete eligibility rate for Alpha Institution. The single-year rates for 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, and 2011 were analyzed. As suggested by Keith (2015), Spearman Rho correlation was used for high school GPA analyses, while Kendall's Tau was used for standardized test score analyses.

APR, Eligibility Rates, and Retention Rates

High School GPA. The association between average high school GPA to institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates and student-athlete eligibility rates, showed that high school GPA had the highest correlation to student-athlete eligibility rates ($r = .48$). Moreover, high school GPA had higher correlations to institutional APR, student-athlete retention, and student-athlete eligibility rates in the earlier years of analysis (i.e., 2012 and 2013). However, high school GPA has increasingly become less correlated to institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, and student-athlete eligibility rates within the latter years (2016 and 2015) (see Table 6 and Table 7).

Table 6

Spearman's Rho Correlation between High School GPA and Institutional APR

	APR 2016	APR 2015	APR 2014	APR 2013	APR 2012	APR 2011
High School GPA 2016	0.381					
High School GPA 2015		-0.011				
High School GPA 2014			0.522			
High School GPA 2013				.715*		
High School GPA 2012					.772**	
High School GPA 2011						0.473

*Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

***Note. All data field

Table 7

Spearman's Rho Correlation between High School GPA, Student-Athlete Eligibility, and Retention Rates

	E 2016	E 2015	E 2014	E 2013	E 2012	E 2011	R 2016	R 2015	R 2014	R 2013	R 2012	R 2011
High School GPA 2016	-0.065						0.526					
High School GPA 2015		0.075						-0.061				
High School GPA 2014			0.501						-0.065			
High School GPA 2013				.716*						0.426		
High School GPA 2012					.659*						.677*	
High School GPA 2011						.689*						0.313

*Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

***Note. All data field

Standardized Test Scores. SAT and/or ACT scores were consistently non-correlated to single-year institutional APR ($r = .15$), student-athlete retention rates ($r = .12$), and student-athlete eligibility rates ($r = .12$) from 2011 to 2016. The 2016, 2015, and 2014 years show that standardized test scores only contain a small correlation and/or negative correlation to single-year institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, and student-athlete eligibility rates (see Table 8 and Table 9).

Graduation Outcomes

High School GPA. The findings show that high school GPA had moderate to high correlations with student-athlete GSR, student-athlete FGR, and student body FGR. Although there were no negative correlations, the strength of the positive correlations has decreased over the past several years, yet remains moderately correlated (see Table 10 and Table 11). Of the three graduation outcomes, high school GPA had a moderate correlation to student-athlete FGR ($r = .42$), while high school GPA had a moderately high correlation to student-athlete GSR ($r = .46$) and student body FGR ($r = .47$).

Standardized Test Scores. In comparison to high school GPA, data regarding the correlation between standardized test score and graduation rates contained the highest correlations. The strongest correlation existed between standardized test scores with the student body FGR ($r = .58$) and student-athlete FGR ($r = .58$), which were shown to be highly correlated throughout all the years. Collegiate students and student-athletes are allowed a six-year window to graduate. Therefore, it is worth noting the average standardized test scores for 2011 and 2012 had the highest correlation to the student body FGR and student-athlete FGR at the three-year, four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation mark. The student-athlete GSR had moderately low correlations to standardized test scores (0.33) (see Table 12 and Table 13).

Student-Athlete Special Admits

Research questions two and three dealt with student-athlete special admits. Research question two addressed student-athlete special admit demographics. Prior to discussing results for these research questions, participating institutions and demographics are described.

Participating Institutions

For the purposes of this research, the ten institutions within the conference were given pseudonyms (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Romeo, Sierra, Tango, and Zulu). Of the ten institutions within the conference, six chose to participate (Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo,

Table 8

Kendall's Tau Correlation between Standardized Test Scores and Institutional APR

	APR 2016	APR 2015	APR 2014	APR 2013	APR 2012	APR 2011
SAT 2016	0.205					
SAT 2015	0.276	0.068				
SAT 2014	0.296	0.000	-0.090			
SAT 2013	0.341	0.045	-0.045	0.250		
SAT 2012	0.276	-0.023	-0.068	0.184	.523*	
SAT 2011	0.250	-0.045	-0.045	0.159	.494*	0.067

*Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

***Note. All data fields are single-year rates only

Table 9

Kendall's Tau Correlation between Standardized Test Scores, Student-Athlete Eligibility, and Retention Rates

	E	E	E	E	E	E	R	R	R	R	R	R
	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011
SAT 2016	-0.046						0.111					
SAT 2015	0.000	0.046					0.090	-0.070				
SAT 2014	0.138	-0.023	0.156				0.111	-0.138	0.090			
SAT 2013	0.092	0.023	0.200	0.315			0.156	-0.092	0.090	0.422		
SAT 2012	0.116	-0.046	0.135	0.250	0.295		0.090	-0.163	0.114	0.360	0.477	
SAT 2011	0.092	-0.068	0.111	0.225	0.315	0.225	0.067	-0.184	0.135	0.333	0.449	0.156

*Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

***Note. All data fields are single-year rates only

Table 10

Spearman's Rho Correlation between High School GPA and Student Body Graduation Rates

	Student Body FGR 2017	Student Body FGR 2016	Student Body FGR 2015	Student Body FGR 2014	Student Body FGR 2013	Student Body FGR 2012
High School GPA 2016	0.438	0.454				
High School GPA 2015	0.454	0.494	0.523			
High School GPA 2014	0.486	0.517	0.540	0.493		
High School GPA 2013	0.420	0.445	0.471	0.426	0.507	
High School GPA 2012	0.465	0.488	0.523	0.459	0.555	0.506
High School GPA 2011	0.394	0.430	0.455	0.400	0.496	0.448

*Note. All data fields are single-year rates only

Table 11

Spearman's Rho Correlation between High School GPA and Student-Athlete Graduation Rates

	GSR 2017	GSR 2016	GSR 2015	GSR 2014	GSR 2013	GSR 2012	FGR 2017	FGR 2016	FGR 2015	FGR 2014	FGR 2013	FGR 2012
High School GPA 2016	0.264	0.356					0.307	0.173				
High School GPA 2015	0.533	0.507	0.326				0.510	0.345	0.482			
High School GPA 2014	0.555	0.611	0.402	0.314			0.555	0.409	0.525	0.369		
High School GPA 2013	0.475	0.519	0.313	0.266	0.579		0.469	0.280	0.424	0.304	0.501	
High School GPA 2012	0.550	.664*	0.403	0.295	0.606	0.479	0.525	0.355	0.456	0.305	0.491	0.574
High School GPA 2011	0.586	0.610	0.372	0.289	0.567	0.407	0.517	0.347	0.433	0.287	0.493	0.524

*Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Note. All data fields are single-year rates only

Table 12

Kendall's Tau Correlation between Standardized Test Scores and Student Body Graduation Rates

	Student Body FGR 2017	Student Body FGR 2016	Student Body FGR 2015	Student Body FGR 2014	Student Body FGR 2013	Student Body FGR 2012
SAT 2016	.600*	.600*				
SAT 2015	.539*	.539*	0.449			
SAT 2014	.600*	.600*	.511*	.600*		
SAT 2013	.556*	.556*	0.467	.556*	.556*	
SAT 2012	.629*	.629*	.539*	.629*	.629*	.584*
SAT 2011	.644**	.644**	.556*	.644**	.644**	.600*

*Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

***Note. All data fields are single-year rates only

Table 13

Kendall's Tau Correlation between Standardized Test Scores and Student-Athlete Graduation Rates

	GSR 2017	GSR 2016	GSR 2015	GSR 2014	GSR 2013	GSR 2012	FGR 2017	FGR 2016	FGR 2015	FGR 2014	FGR 2013	FGR 2012
SAT 2016	0.135	0.244					.511*	0.467				
SAT 2015	0.205	0.270	0.315				.584*	.494*	.674**			
SAT 2014	0.225	0.422	0.378	0.200			.689**	.556*	.644**	.600*		
SAT 2013	0.180	0.378	0.333	0.244	.556*		.644**	.511*	.600*	.556*	.556*	
SAT 2012	0.205	0.449	0.405	0.225	.539*	0.360	.674**	.584*	.674**	.629*	.494*	0.405
SAT 2011	0.180	0.467	0.422	0.244	.556*	0.378	.644**	.600*	.689**	.644**	0.467	0.422

*Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

***Note. All data fields are single-year rates only

Foxtrot, Sierra, and Tango). Reasons for determining whether a student-athlete is a special admit included aspects such as: Below an 18 on the ACT; below a 1030 on the SAT; not meeting the sliding scale of at least a 2.85 high school GPA and 18 ACT score; or not meeting the sliding scale of at least a 2.50 high school GPA and 21 ACT score. For participating institutions, the number of student-athlete special admits admitted during the Summer and/or Fall of 2011 ranged from 0 to 16. One institution had one special admit, one institution had two special admits, one institution had three special admits, and one institution had 16 special admits. Two of the six institutions indicated they did not have any student-athlete special admits (Delta and Echo). Reasons included having a holistic admissions process or a lack of remedial coursework at their institutions. Regarding the holistic admissions process, Echo indicated they “technically” have special admits at their institution; however, due to their holistic admissions process, these students are not flagged as such within their profile/system. Bravo indicated they typically have more student-athlete special admits; however, their institution was recently coming off an APR penalty season. As a result, Bravo was risk-adverse during the Summer/Fall 2011 admissions process when it came to student-athlete special admits.

Demographics

Demographics and academic outcomes were provided for a total of 22 student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits represented 1.6% of the student-athlete population for participating institutions with special admits during the 2011 year. Findings showed that student-athlete special admits from participating institutions tend to be male (n = 19), African American (n = 15), participating in revenue-producing sports (n = 13), are not redshirted their freshman year (n = 16), tend to have a residency status of in-state (n = 14), and have graduated from a public high school (n = 20). Notably, the six special admits that were redshirted their freshman year were all out-of-state students. For these student-athlete special admits, the average high school GPA was 2.75, the average SAT score was 826, and the average ACT score was 17.

For demographics such as first-generation college student and whether they have a diagnosed learning disability, the majority of the responses were designated as “unknown” (i.e., 19 were designated as “unknown” for first generation student status; 16 were designated as “unknown” for diagnosed learning disability). For this reason, the results for these demographics are provided based on the number of student-athlete special admits who were either designated as “yes” or “no” for these two questions (i.e., a total of three special admits were designated

either as “yes” or “no” to being a first generation college student; a total of six special admits were designated as either “yes” or “no” to having a diagnosed learning disability). The findings show two out of the three student-athlete special admits were first generation college students and none were reported as having a diagnosed learning disability (n = 6).

Incoming Academic Characteristics and Academic Outcomes

Research questions three and four focused on graduation rates of student-athlete special admits, the incoming academic characteristics of special admits, reasons for not graduating within six years, and any patterns of these characteristics in the special admit sample for this study. Within the participating institutions, the FGR for student-athlete special admits who graduated within six years was 55%. This rate was identical to the six-year graduation rates of the student body cohort and similar to the six-year graduation rates of student-athletes in general.

In addition, the entering academic characteristics of the student-athlete special admits were examined. The average high school GPA of special admits was 2.75, and the average standardized test score of special admits was a 17 on the ACT and an 826 on the SAT. Of the 22 student-athlete special admits, 12 graduated from college within six years or less. Of the ten who did not graduate, seven did not graduate for reasons such as still being enrolled at the institution (n = 1), transferring to another institution (n = 1), entering the professional league (n = 1), or voluntarily withdrawing from the institution (n = 4). Conversely, three did not graduate for reasons such as being dismissed from the team and/or institution for academic or non-academic reasons. Of the student-athlete special admits who were redshirted their freshman year, five of the six did not graduate from their institution. See Table 14 below for a breakdown of this data.

Within Table 14, those highlighted in green, graduated within six years whereas those highlighted as yellow or red did not graduate within six years. The yellow designates those who did not graduate for reasons within their control (such as being currently enrolled, transferring from the institution, or voluntarily withdrawing from the institution. The red designates those who did not graduate for reasons as the result of being dismissed from the team for academic and/or non-academic reasons. This visual strategy was utilized to help identify any patterns in the data for this sample.

Table 14

Student-Athlete Special Admits Demographics and Academic Outcomes

Gender	Ethnicity	Sport Type	Redshirt Freshman	Residency	Type of High School Attended	First Generation College Student	Diagnosed Learning Disability	High School GPA	ACT/SAT Score	Academic Outcome
Male	Caucasian	Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	No	2.93	17 ACT 900 SAT	Graduated in 9 semesters
Male	African American	Revenue	No	Out-of-State	Public	Unknown	No	2.62	16 ACT	Graduated in 4 years or less
Male	African American	Revenue	No	Out-of-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	3.00	17 ACT	Graduated in 4 years
Male	African American	Non-Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	3.36	800 SAT	Graduated in 4 years
Male	African American	Non-Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.32	17 ACT 710 SAT	Graduated in 4 years
Female	African American	Non-Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.61	870 SAT	Graduated in 4 years
Male	African American	Non-Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.20	1040 SAT	Graduated in 4 years
Male	African American	Non-Revenue	No	International	Public	Unknown	No	Unknown	Unknown	Graduated in 4.5 years
Male	Caucasian	Revenue	Yes	In-State	Public	Yes	No	2.61	19 ACT	Graduated in 5 years
Male	African American	Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.92	17 ACT 700 SAT	Graduated in 5 years
Male	African American	Revenue	No	Out-of-State	Private	Unknown	Unknown	2.64	18 ACT 670 SAT	Graduated in 5 years
Female	Caucasian	Non-Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.92	810 SAT	Graduated in 5 years

Table 14

(Continued)

Gender	Ethnicity	Sport Type	Redshirt Freshman	Residency	Type of High School Attended	First Generation College Student	Diagnosed Learning Disability	High School GPA	ACT/SAT Score	Academic Outcome
Male	African American	Revenue	No	Out-of-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.80	16 ACT	Has not graduated, one class left, still playing
Male	African American	Revenue	Yes	Out-of-State	Private	Unknown	Unknown	2.74	18 ACT 810 SAT	Transferred to a 2-year college freshman year, then transferred to a 4-year college
Male	African American	Revenue	Yes	Out-of-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.57	17 ACT	Professional departure
Male	Caucasian	Revenue	Yes	In-State	Public	No	No	2.57	19 ACT	Voluntarily withdrew from institution spring semester of freshman year
Male	Caucasian	Non-Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.36	17 ACT 870 SAT	Voluntarily withdrew from institution sophomore year (spring 2012)

Table 14

(Continued)

Gender	Ethnicity	Sport Type	Redshirt Freshman	Residency	Type of High School Attended	First Generation College Student	Diagnosed Learning Disability	High School GPA	ACT/SAT Score	Academic Outcome
Female	African American	Non-Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.92	880 SAT	Voluntarily withdrew from institution junior year (spring 2013)
Male	African American	Revenue	Yes	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.68	17 ACT 730 SAT	Voluntarily left institution in their 6 th year (spring 2017)
Male	Caucasian	Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	3.55	880 SAT	Dismissed from team
Male	Caucasian	Revenue	Yes	Out-of-State	Public	Yes	No	3.31	17 ACT	Dismissed from team for academic reasons freshman year
Male	African American	Non-Revenue	No	In-State	Public	Unknown	Unknown	2.21	890 SAT	Dismissed from team junior year (spring 2014)

A comparison between student-athlete special admits and the student body cohort for the participating conference, DI institutions, and FCS institutions was made by looking at the incoming academic characteristics (from the 2011 cohort) and graduation rates (2017 FGR) through the usage of publicly available data. Average ACT scores for the general student body was not publicly available; however, SAT scores were.

Student-athlete special admits were found to have an average high school GPA of 2.75, 17 ACT mean score, 826 SAT mean score, and FGR (student-athlete transfers are counted as academic failures) of 55%. The student body averages for the participating conference consisted of a 3.35 average high school GPA, 1,053 SAT mean score, and FGR of 68%. The student body for Division I institutions as a whole averaged a 3.28 high school GPA, 1,053 SAT score, and FGR of 64%. The student body for FCS institutions as a whole averaged a 3.24 high school GPA, 1,022 SAT score, and FGR of 55% (Table 15).

The results of the N-1 chi-square test for association showed that there is no statistically significant association between student type (student-athlete special admit, student-athlete or student body) and whether the individual graduates within six years. In other words, student-athlete special admits, student-athletes, and non-athletes graduated within six years at comparably equal rates. A subsequent N-1 chi-square test for association was run for the sub-population of 16 student-athlete special admits to see if the shared experience of attending the same institution influenced the relationship between student type and whether the individual graduated within six years. No statistically significant association was found.

Correlational and Subsequent Analyses

Research question five explored whether there was a significant relationship between graduation outcomes, individual student-athlete special admit demographics and individual student-athlete special admit incoming academic characteristics. High school GPA and standardized test scores were both standardized prior to analyses. Data was first analyzed using Kendall's Tau and Spearman Rho correlation. Data was deemed statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Although the two analyses had differing number results, they had similar correlation results (i.e., the items that had moderate effects had moderate effects on both analyses and the items that had negative effects had negative effects on both analyses).

Table 15

Academic Characteristics and Outcomes Comparison

	High School GPA	SAT Score	FGR Graduation Rates
Student-Athlete Special Admits	2.75	826	55%
Participating DI FCS Conference Student Body	3.35	1,053	68%
DI Institutions Student Body	3.28	1,035	64%
FCS Institutions Student Body	3.24	1,022	55%

Following correlation analyses, an independent t-test was run to see if GPA and standardized test scores were different between the GPAs and test scores of those who graduated within six years and those who did not. No statistically significant differences were found for the 22 student-athlete special admits or for the 16 special admits who attended the same institution. Chi squares were then calculated to determine if other characteristics (i.e., student-athlete demographics) predicted graduation rates. The only demographic characteristic of special admits that presented a pattern related to graduation within six years for the 22 student-athlete special admits was whether they were redshirted their freshman year (five out of six redshirts did not graduate within six years). A subsequent chi-square analysis was run for the sub-population of 16 student-athlete special admits to see if the shared experience of attending the same institution influenced the relationship between demographics and graduation rates. This sub-population had the same findings as the 22 student-athletes special admits in general. As with the overall 22 student-athlete special admits, the only demographic characteristic of special admits that presented a pattern related to graduation within six years for the 16 student-athlete special admits was whether they were redshirted their freshman year (five out of six redshirts did not graduate within six years).

Summary of Findings

The results revealed that student-athlete high school GPA had previously been highly and positively correlated with institutional APR (2012 $r = .772$; 2013 $r = .715$) and student-athlete retention rates (2012 $r = .677$; 2013 $r = .43$). The examination of more recent years' data revealed student-athlete GPA was no longer a significant predictor of institutional APR and student-athlete retention rates (i.e., 2014-2016). However, student-athlete high school GPA was positively moderately and/or highly correlated to student-athlete eligibility rates throughout the years (2011 $r = .69$; 2012 $r = .66$; 2013 $r = .72$; 2014 $r = .50$). Student-athlete standardized test scores were not significant predictors of institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, or student-athlete eligibility rates in this study. Standardized test scores had a positive, but low correlation to institutional APR ($r = .15$), student-athlete retention rates ($r = .12$), and student-athlete eligibility ($r = .12$) rates across all six years within the analysis.

Regarding six-year graduation rates, results indicated that high school GPA had a positive and moderate correlation to student-athlete GSR ($r = .46$), student-athlete FGR ($r = .42$), and student body FGR ($r = .47$) across the six years within the analysis. Data regarding the correlation between standardized test score and graduation rates contained the highest correlations. The strongest correlation existed between standardized test scores with the student body FGR ($r = .58$) and student-athlete FGR ($r = .58$), which were shown to be highly correlated throughout all the years (student body FGR: 2012 $r = .58$; 2013 $r = .56$; 2014 $r = .60$; 2015 $r = .51$; 2016 $r = .60$; 2017 $r = .60$; student-athlete FGR: 2013 $r = .56$; 2014 $r = .60$; 2015 $r = .67$; 2016 $r = .50$; 2017 $r = .51$). High school GPA and standardized test scores were both found to have low correlations with student-athlete special admits and six-year graduation rates.

Regardless of the differences between average incoming academic characteristics of student-athlete special admits and the student body cohort for FCS institutions as a whole (i.e., student-athlete special admits average high school GPA of 2.75, 17 ACT score, 826 SAT score; student body average high school GPA of 3.24 and 1,022 SAT score), both populations were found to have the same six-year FGR of 55% for the 2017 year. Further analysis revealed that student-athlete special admits, student-athletes, and non-athletes are graduating within six years at comparably equal rates for the sample used in this study. For special admits, follow-up analyses revealed no statistically significant differences regarding incoming academic characteristics (high school GPAs and standardized test scores) for the special admits who

graduated within six years versus those who did. In other words, incoming academic characteristics did not present as a possible explanation as to why some student-athlete special admits graduated on time and others did not. The only characteristic of special admits that presented a pattern related to graduation within six years was being redshirted in one's freshman year (five out of six redshirts did not graduate within six years).

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this exploratory and descriptive mixed-methods study was to develop a better understanding of previously obscure graduation rates of Division I student-athlete special admits within a single FCS Conference. In relation to graduation rates of specially admitted student-athletes, this study examined progress towards graduation, or lack thereof based on entry into the professional leagues, dismissal from the team for academic reasons, dismissal from team for reasons other than academic, voluntarily withdrawing from school, and/or transferring to another school. The goal of the study was to provide an in-depth look at the demographics, incoming academics and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits in order to begin to fill the gap in our understanding of who student-athlete special admits are. A deeper understanding of this population provides a foundation in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating targeted evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits are a severely understudied, and theoretically high-risk, student population. The goal of creating best practices is to positively impact the academic performance of student-athletes and student-athlete special admits that will lead to eventual graduation within six years. Understanding this sub-population of student-athletes may aid in a better understanding of how to best help those with academic deficiencies, especially since the NCAA's academic redshirt policy went into effect in 2016.

This chapter explores the key findings in five sections. In the first and second section, major themes noted in the previous chapter are put into context of the current literature and SCT. The third addresses the implications of these findings for stakeholders within student-athlete academic support centers, athletic administrators, and the NCAA. The fourth and fifth sections present limitations of the study and recommendations for further study, respectively. The chapter concludes with a final reflection.

Current Findings in the Context of the Literature

Several findings were addressed in the previous chapter wherein three of those will be explored in this section. Themes include incoming academic characteristics, demographics, and academic outcomes. These key findings emerged throughout the process of analysis for the study

and were found to have a particularly important impact on the graduation rates of student-athlete special admits.

Incoming Academic Characteristics

Many post-secondary education institutions rely on incoming academic characteristics as a main method of determining whether a student should be admitted to the institution (Ingram & Huffman, 2017; Wildman, 2016). Incoming academic characteristics such as high school GPA and standardized test scores are also employed by the NCAA to determine initial athletics eligibility. The discussion surrounding these data and related findings is an important first step in framing the discussion of the overall study findings.

Student-Athlete APR, Eligibility Rates, and Retention Rates. The findings from the publicly available data show high school GPA had a greater correlation to institutional APR, student-athlete retention rates, and student-athlete eligibility rates. In contrast, standardized test scores consistently had a very small and sometimes negative correlation to academic outcomes throughout all years included within this particular analysis. Thus, not only did standardized test scores have a weak relationship to academic outcomes; in some years, lower incoming academic characteristics actually led to more desirable academic outcomes. This sample's data revealed a trend wherein high school GPA has increasingly become less correlated to institutional APR, student-athlete eligibility rates and student-athlete retention rates. A moderate, even negative correlation effect has been seen within the past three years (2014, 2015, and 2016).

These findings are consistent with the findings of Petr and McArdle (2012), as high school GPA was shown to be better predictor of academic success in comparison to standardized test scores. Petr and McArdle (2012) collected multi-year data regarding the outcomes of freshmen student-athletes from the 2003-2004 cohort. The researchers compared academic outcomes of student-athletes with lower standardized test scores and higher GPAs in high school against student-athletes with higher standardized test scores and lower high school GPAs than the typical student-athlete. The researchers' findings showed the former group with lower standardized test scores and higher GPAs outperformed those in the latter group with higher standardized test scores and lower GPAs when measuring freshmen academic performance (GPA, eligibility rates, retention rates and the number of academic failures). It is believed the reason for this finding is due to the idea that students (and student-athletes) have greater control over their day-to-day GPA, as opposed to a one-time test score as indicated by standardized test

scores. However, the current finding that over the period for which data was retrieved for this study and for our sample, even GPA has become less indicative of student success. A possible reasoning for this could be due to the increased pressure to successfully graduate student-athletes, wherein the usage and types of academic services for student-athletes has also increased, leading to a mitigation of the role of high school GPA. It is important that future research better explore this issue to understand national trends, trends within conferences, and trends within different institutions, with careful consideration of multicultural issues.

Again, the findings revealed that for this study, high school GPA and standardized test scores have increasingly had low and/or negative correlations to institutional APR and student-athlete retention rates over the past several years (i.e., 2016, 2015, and 2014). One reason for this inconsistency in comparison to the findings from Petr and McArdle (2012) could be due to the academic cohort used for their research (i.e., 2003 – 2004 cohort) versus the 2011 cohort for this study. However, the findings from the earlier years within this study (i.e., 2011, 2012, and 2013) indicated an increasing consistency with the findings of Petr & McArdle (2012). It is worth noting the results of this study revealed a trend of increasingly strong correlations retrospectively (i.e., stronger correlations the older the data) between incoming academic characteristics with institutional APR and student-athlete retention rates. Further research is needed to determine if this tendency continues in future years and to examine what may be contributing to this emergent trend.

If future research confirms that incoming academic characteristics are less predictive of institutional APR, student-athlete eligibility, and student-athlete retention, what does the current research hold for suggestions about what may need to be examined? It may be that student-athlete academic services, programs, curricular offerings, and interventions could possibly be the missing link. Due to poor educational outcomes prior to coming to college as evidenced by high school GPA and standardized test scores, the provision of academic interventions for Division I student-athletes has continued to rise over the past decade (Comeaux, 2013; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Southall, Eckard, Nagel, & Hale, 2012). The inequalities in educational outcomes impact underserved groups such as special admit student-athletes. When dealing with underserved groups (e.g., academically at-risk, first-generation college students, non-traditional students, etc.) the focus should be on improving the deficits and equalizing the academic playing field, so-to-speak. Within intercollegiate athletics, especially for student-athlete special admits, it

seems to be the wild west of academic services. While there are some guidelines from the NCAA stating that student-athlete academic centers must provide student-athlete development and academic services, the types of services available vary widely from institution to institution regarding the specific resources and mechanisms these student-athletes are receiving. To date, no information was found regarding any means of tracking services used by student-athlete special admits and if those services contributed to graduation rates, retention rates, or eligibility rates for students.

Student-Athlete Graduation Rates. The findings revealed that high school GPA was moderately correlated to six-year FGR for the student body cohort and for student-athletes in general. High school GPA was found have a low correlation with six-year FGR for student-athlete special admits. It is important to note that the correlation between high school GPA and graduation rates was higher for student-athlete GSR in contrast to student-athlete FGR. One reason for this finding could be due to the fact that the NCAA does not take into account the average GPA of all high school courses completed, only the grades for 16 core courses are counted towards a student-athletes' average high school GPA (see Table 3 for specifics). NCAA research has found that using a core-curriculum GPA provides better graduation rate predictions than using overall high school GPA (Petr & McArdle, 2012). Furthermore, "prediction accuracy has improved as we have increased the number of courses included in the core-curriculum requirement" (Petr & McArdle, 2012, p. 30).

Of the various aforementioned correlation analyses, standardized test scores had the strongest correlation to six-year graduation rates. Standardized test scores had a significantly high correlation to the FGR for the student body cohort and for student-athletes in general. However, standardized test scores were not found to be significantly correlated to graduation rates for student-athlete special admits within this sample. Collegiate students and student-athletes are allowed a six-year window to graduate. Therefore, it is worth noting the average standardized test scores for 2011 and 2012 are highly correlated to the student body FGR and student-athlete FGR at the three-year, four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation mark.

The fact that standardized test scores had significantly high correlations to student-athlete FGR, but not to student-athlete GSR is an interesting finding. The only difference between student-athlete FGR and GSR is that the former counts student-athlete transfers as "academic failures" (regardless of whether they eventually go on to graduate from the institution they have

transferred to) and the latter counts student-athlete transfers as “academic successes” if they are in good academic standing (GPA is above a 2.60 if transferring to a 4-year college; GPA is above a 3.30 if transferring to a 2-year college) when they transfer. This finding shows that standardized test scores may be used to predict the graduation rates for more traditional students and student-athletes (i.e., they do not transfer from institution of initial enrollment). More research is needed to determine whether similar findings can be found within other samples as well.

Findings showed that standardized test scores had moderately low correlations to student-athlete GSR. Models have shown that merely increasing admissions selectivity does not result in increased graduation rates for student-athletes and student-athlete special admits (Francesconi, Aina, & Cappellari, 2011; Ingram & Huffman, 2017; Sullivan & Nielson, 2013). While the findings of this study show this is true regarding high school GPA for student-athletes in general and the student body cohort within this study, standardized test scores reveal a different story. The findings of this study revealed that an increase in admissions criteria, specifically standardized test scores, led to an increase in FGR for the student body population and student-athlete population, but not for student-athlete GSR. Since the only difference between FGR and GSR is whether student-athlete transfers are taken into account, this finding could point to the fact that standardized test scores are only correlated to traditional students (i.e., those who do not transfer from their institution of initial enrollment). Further studies regarding this finding are needed to determine if this is a unique finding for student-athlete transfers.

Student-Athlete Special Admits

Two findings stood out during this particular section of the data analyzation process. The first is that *all* of the student-athlete special admits who had an out-of-state residency status, participated in revenue producing sports. This is something that should be explored in further detail within future studies. This sub-population may require additional monitoring by academic staff members in order to ensure these student-athletes are graduating at similar rates as other student-athlete special admits. Secondly, out of the various demographic groups of student-athlete special admits, those who were redshirted their freshman year ($n = 6$) had the poorest academic outcomes. Only *one* of the six student-athlete special admits who was redshirted their freshman year, graduated. Of the remaining five individuals, one transferred their freshman year, one had a professional departure, two voluntarily withdrew from the institution (freshman year

and 6th year respectively), and one was dismissed from the team for academic reasons their freshman year. This finding is consistent with previous studies that show that student-athletes who are redshirted their freshman year, have an increased likelihood of not graduating and/or poorer academic outcomes as opposed to those who are not redshirted their freshman year (Browning, 2015; Robenolt, 2012). Further exploration of this issue will be of increasing importance as the NCAA academic redshirting policy takes hold.

Robenolt's 2012 study at the University of Washington showed that of the 15 student-athletes that did not redshirt their first year, nine (60%) were specially admitted and six (40%) were priority admits. Compared to the football players who redshirted their first year, football players who did not redshirt graduated at a higher level (67% vs. 73%), fewer left the institution (18% vs. 13%), fewer exhausted eligibility without graduating (12% vs. 6%), and none of them were dropped from the institution for academic reasons (vs. 3% of first-year redshirts who were dropped from the university). Similar to findings to Browning (2015), Ingram and Huffman (2017) explain:

“The NCAA academic redshirt policy could have unintended consequences similar to the effects student-athletes experience when they are injured. Negative psychological effects such as depression can occur when one does not feel like part of the team as a result of a significant loss in playing time. Without outcome data that reveals whether or not student-athletes who are admitted at the lower end of the academic spectrum are those who are not graduating, significant changes to increase the minimum initial eligibility requirements and implementation the academic redshirt policy may be an inefficient academic reform” (p. 6).

Regarding this research study, the academic redshirt policy was not yet in effect for the particular cohort being studied (the 2011 cohort). The new academic redshirt policy is based on an academic sliding scale wherein the higher a student-athlete's high school GPA, the lower the standardized test score needs to be to meet the NCAA initial eligibility standards. Academic redshirts are those who have a high school GPA between 2.00 and 2.30, in addition to meeting the minimum combined score of 1020 SAT for critical reading and math sections or a minimum sum score of 86 on the ACT (combined score of the math, English, science, and reading sections wherein the max score for each section is a 36) (NCAA Manual, 2018-19, p.167). It could be possible that those who

were deemed student-athlete special admits for this study would now be considered NCAA academic redshirts.

Of the 22 student-athlete special admits within this study, only two had high school GPAs that fell in-between 2.00 and 2.30, the remainder had GPAs higher than 2.30. When comparing these high school GPAs to the minimum standardized test scores needed in order to be considered a full qualifier as deemed by NCAA initial eligibility standards (i.e., can compete, receive athletic scholarships, and participate in practices their first year), almost half did not meet the minimum SAT score to qualify (combined score of 900 on the SAT critical reading and math sections) and would have been considered an academic redshirt or non-qualifier if this policy had been in effect. This aspect was not able to be calculated for those who only submitted their ACT score, as the score provided by the institution did not consist of the sum score between the four sections (English, mathematics, science, and reading), only the overall ACT score. Freshmen redshirting (whether they are an academic redshirt, medical redshirt, or athletic redshirt) is an added layer that must be examined by future research when looking at student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits who are also redshirted their first year may present an additional risk in comparison to student-athletes special admits who are not redshirted their first year. Additionally, future research could operationalize ‘special admit’ for research reasons as those who do not meet the NCAA requirements of being an academic redshirt (i.e., are a non-qualifier). This would allow the term to be standardized across institutions, as special admits are not always those who are considered non-qualifiers due to the varying admissions standards required by institutions.

Incoming Academic Characteristics and Academic Outcomes. Incoming academic characteristics are an important component to understanding student-athlete special admits. One of the most important differences between regularly and conditionally admitted students deals with “the predictive value of admissions standards themselves” (Wildman, 2016). In theory, pre-admission characteristics, such as standardized test scores and high school GPA are generally predictive of one’s academic success in college and eventual graduation. However, studies have shown despite poor academic records, individuals who are conditionally admitted not only tend to do well in college, they graduate (Ingram & Huffman, 2017).

Irrespective of low placement scores, the majority of academically underprepared students have the ability to not only pass classes, but graduate (Ingram & Huffman, 2017; Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013). What we do not know yet is why. Within four-year colleges, one-third of students who took three or more developmental courses were able to complete college within eight years (Attewell et al., 2006). Those who fail to graduate rarely do so for academic reasons, as many have family issues and/or financial issues (Johnson, 2000-2001; Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013; Tinto, 1993).

The current study showed that high school GPA was not a significant predictor of six-year FGR for student-athlete special admits. High school GPA was only found to have a moderate correlation to student-athlete FGR and GSR. Furthermore, standardized test scores had significantly high correlations to the six-year FGR for the student body cohort and for student-athletes in general. Test scores were not found to be significant predictors of graduation rates for student-athlete special admits. These findings provide support that the special admit population is a unique population. Individuals should use caution when assuming the academic predictors and outcomes for the regular student-athlete population and/or non-athlete population can be transferable to student-athlete special admits. Furthermore, one should not assume that student-athlete special admits have a higher risk of non-graduation.

Future research should explore how these results may be generalized to other student demographics, conferences, and sports. The provision of specific types of academic support programs available for student-athlete special admits could be the missing link to use as a determinant as to whether a student-athlete special admit should be admitted to an institution. As previously stated, participation within collegiate athletics has the ability to change lives. It allows individuals the opportunity to obtain a college degree. Many of which, would not have been able to do so otherwise as a result of academic, economic, or personal reasons. For this reason, student-athletes who are specially admitted, may have greater grit, drive, and motivation to succeed if given the right tools to do so (i.e., specific academic services and programs). Again, further research is needed to understand if this phenomenon translates to other populations, and if so, why.

When breaking down the incoming academic characteristics of the 22 student-athlete special admits and ranking them by specific results (i.e., ranked by high school GPA; ranked by ACT Score; and ranked by SAT Score), the lack of the impact between incoming academic

characteristics and graduation rates is clearly observable for this sample of students (see Figure 1 below). Within Figure 1, those highlighted in green, graduated within six years whereas those highlighted as yellow or red did not graduate within six years. The yellow designates those who did not graduate for reasons within their control (such as being currently enrolled, transferring from the institution, or voluntarily withdrawing from the institution). The red designates those who did not graduate for reasons such as being dismissed from the team for academic and/or non-academic reasons.

Regarding the incoming academic characteristics and graduation rates, one may expect to see those in green at the top of these tables, followed by yellow, and then red. It is typically believed, those who graduate tend to be those with higher incoming academic characteristics. Figure 1 reveals this is not the case for student-athlete special admits, as the data indicate no clear pattern. It is worth noting that two of the three special admits with the highest high school GPA, are non-graduates who were dismissed from their team (one was dismissed for academic reasons). In addition, two of the top four with the highest SAT scores, are also non-graduates, both of which were also dismissed from their team.

The findings further indicated there was no difference between the graduation rates of non-athletes, student-athletes, and student-athlete special admits. One reason for this finding could be due to the additional support mechanisms (i.e., the provision of academic services and mandatory participation in some academic services) available to student-athlete special admits. As was seen in Figure 1, another reason could be that student-athlete special admit status is not informative of potential graduation. If so, this finding would make the argument that student-athlete special admits are not a risk for non-graduation, even stronger. Future research needs to examine what academic resources are utilized, to what degree they predict the variance in student-athlete GSR, and what other variables are possibly contributing to the variance of student-athlete GSR (e.g., the motivation to remain eligible in order to play or to earn a degree that was otherwise not a possibility).

When comparing the student-athlete special admit population to the student body population for the participating conference, DI institutions, and FCS institutions, several findings emerged (Table 16). However, it is critical to note that the majority of student-athlete special admits only attended one of the FCS institutions in this study. This is a limitation that will be further discussed below. While the findings show there are differences between student-athlete

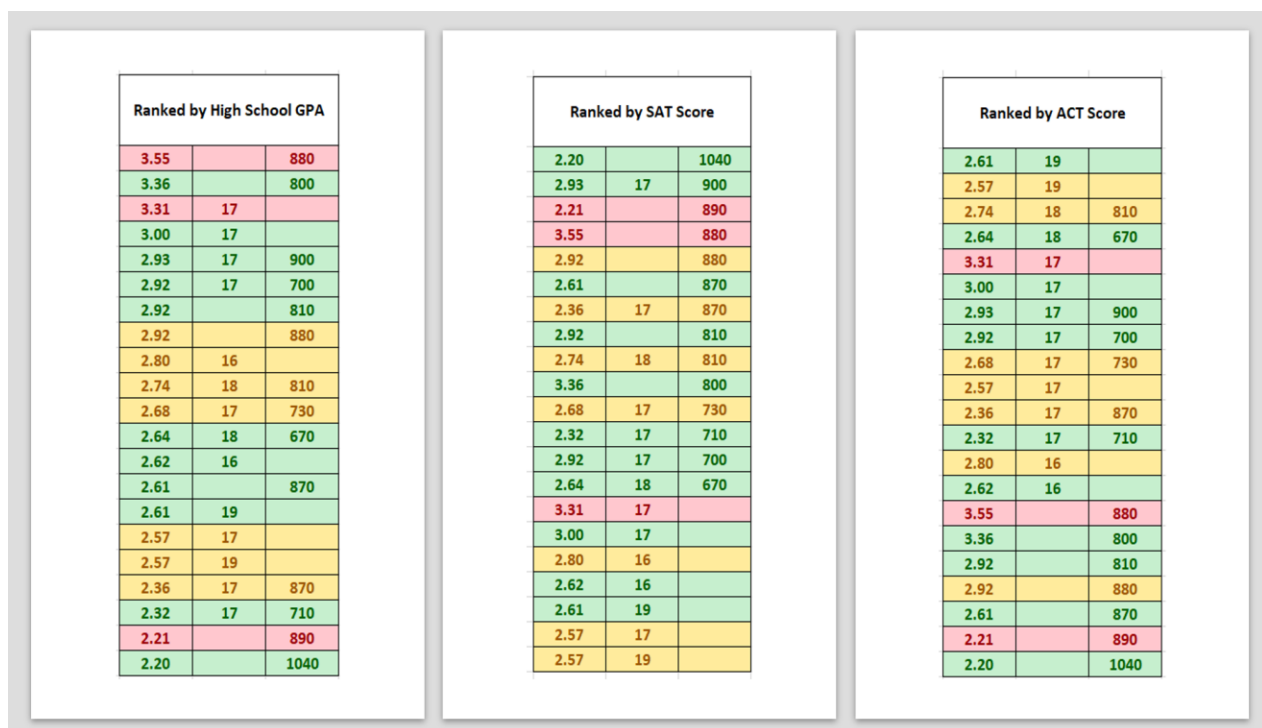


Figure 1: Student-Athlete Special Admits Academic Rankings

special admits and the participating conference's student body regarding academic characteristics and graduation rates, the differences between the two populations were found to be greater than usual. The reason for this is because the participating conference chosen for this study has consistently had averages for high school GPA, SAT scores and graduation rates higher than that of other FCS Conferences as a whole and DI conferences as a whole.

Currently within higher education, the big fear is that student-athlete special admits are not graduating at an acceptable rate and are being exploited for their athletic ability and income generativity for the institution, and possibly should not be admitted going forward. The findings showed that irrespective of the fact student-athlete special admits had significantly lower high school GPAs and SAT scores in comparison to the student body cohort within FCS institutions as a whole (i.e., student-athlete special admits average high school GPA of 2.75, 17 ACT score, 826 SAT score; student body average high school GPA of 3.24 and 1,022 SAT score), they were found to have the same six-year FGR of 55% for the 2017 year. With the findings showing that student-athlete special admits are graduating at similar rates as the regular student body population, the fear of student-athletes not graduating can be put to rest in a way that preserves

and possibly enhances the opportunities provided through special admission for those who attend institutions within this particular conference.

This finding is somewhat similar to the findings of Robenolt's 2012 study of 48 student-athlete special admits. Robenolt (2012) found the academic profiles for specially admitted football student-athletes were significantly lower than the priority admitted football student-athletes and the combined group was significantly lower in comparison to the general student body cohort. However, the graduation rates of the football student-athletes who were specially admitted was only 3% lower than the football student-athletes who were priority admitted and the combined group was 5% lower than the overall graduation rate of their student-cohort in 2009. It is possible the academic services offered to these student-athlete special admits mediated the academic success of these individuals who were deemed academically underprepared when admitted. However, there is limited research within this area in general, especially as it relates to student-athlete special admits. Thus, it is imperative that future research explore the role that academic services, programs, curricular offerings, and interventions play in the academic success of student-athletes and student-athlete special admits.

Results from this study indicated the previously held assumption that student-athlete special admits are not graduating at an acceptable rate might be an institutional myth. Clearly, further research is needed to explore the validity of this claim for larger samples of the student-athlete special admit population. However, the current findings are promising for this unique population and may be important for future student-athletes who are redshirted their freshman year. Based upon the data provided by institutions within this particular FCS Conference, the findings of this study offer information for stakeholders who work directly and indirectly with student-athletes and student-athlete special admits. Results suggest that those making admissions decisions should be cautioned against assuming the relationship between the standard admissions criteria and graduation outcomes apply similarly across regularly admitted students, student-athletes, and student-athlete special admits. However, more research is required to provide much needed clarity to this issue. The current findings begin to provide insight that student-athlete special admits are capable of graduating at the same rate as the regularly admitted student body cohort and student-athlete cohort.

Future research should investigate if and which academic services are of greatest benefit to this population in order to create a collection of evidence-based best practices for helping

student-athlete special admits, and for the potential upcoming wave of academic redshirts. For example, researchers could examine which academic services are most beneficial to those that have the highest academic need (i.e., those that fall within the lowest academic quartile of incoming students at the institution). Moreover, best practices that positively impact this population should have similar positive effects for the student-athlete body as a whole.

Comparison of Academic Outcomes. Regarding the six-year graduation rates of student-athlete special admits, the findings for this study align well with previous research conducted by Ingram and Huffman (2017) and Robenolt (2012), but the findings are inconsistent with the findings of Gurney et al. (2010). The current study found the six-year graduation rates of student-athlete special admits was 55%, whereas other studies found rates of 51% (Ingram & Huffman, 2017), 65% (Robenolt, 2012), and 37% (Gurney et al., 2010). One reason for this inconsistency could be due to the span of years that the researchers used as a focus. Ingram and Huffman (2017) focused on 66 student-athlete special admits within the “Power 5” Conferences from the 2009 cohort; Robenolt (2012) focused on 48 student-athlete special admits who were admitted to the University of Washington from 2003 to 2005; Gurney et al. (2010) focused on 183 student-athlete special admits at a NCAA FBS university in the Midwest from 1998 to 2003. Results from the current study extend the literature by surveying multiple institutions when looking at outcomes associated with student-athlete special admits and focused on one cohort (the 2011 cohort), as opposed to a multitude of cohorts.

The findings from the current research also showed 5% of student-athlete special admits transferred from their initial institution. Prior research found 18% (Ingram and Huffman, 2017), 19% (Robenolt, 2012), and 28% (Gurney et al., 2010). Lastly, this study found that only 5% of student-athlete special admits were dismissed for academics. Prior research regarding academic dismissal found this number to be 6% (Ingram & Huffman, 2017), 3% (Robenolt, 2012), and 11% (Gurney et al. (2010). One thing to note is that the 11% reported by Gurney et al. (2010) includes a combination of student-athletes who either dropped out or were suspended for academics (see Table 16).

Although this study consisted of 22 student-athlete special admits, wherein 16 came from the same institution, results revealed student-athlete special admits had the same six-year graduation rates as the student body cohort within FCS institutions as a whole. While there was no difference in the graduation rates between the student body cohort, student-athletes, and

Table 16

Comparison of Student-Athlete Special Admits Research Studies to Current Study

Outcomes	Ingram (2019)	Ingram & Huffman (2017)	Robenolt (2012)	Gurney, Tan, & Winters (2010)
<i>Graduated from initial institution</i>				
6 years	55%	51%	65%	37%
<i>Transferred from initial institution</i>	4%	18%	19%	28%
<i>Did not graduate</i>	41%	30%	N/A	27%
Dismissed for academics	5%	6%	3%	11%*
Entered professional league	5%	3%	N/A	14%
Voluntarily withdrew	18%	17%	N/A	N/A
Other	13%	3%	10%**	2%***
<i>No information</i>	N/A	11%	N/A	8%
General Student-Body Graduation Rate	68%	65%	75%	56%
Total Number Special Admits	22	66	48	183
Institution(s)	Div. I FCS Conference	Power 5 Conferences	Div. I FBS in PAC-12	Div. I FBS in Midwest
Cohorts	One (Fall 2011)	One (Fall 2009)	Multiple (2003- 2005)	Multiple (1998-2003)

*Note. Includes those who dropped out or were academically suspended.

**Note. Includes those who exhausted eligibility and did not graduate.

***Note. Includes those who exhausted eligibility but were in good academic standing.

student-athlete special admits, this is not to say that student-athlete special admits are otherwise similar to these sub-populations. While student-athlete special admits are similar regarding six-year graduation outcomes, this population is different from the general student body and student-athlete cohorts, as the incoming academic characteristics across these populations are vastly different. As a result, it is important for future studies to take these findings one step further by looking at the specific academic support programs available to student-athlete special admits, and which programs are most effective for this sub-population. Future research should parse out students who are specially admitted for significant academic deficits (i.e., lower GPA or test scores) rather than other admissions weaknesses (e.g., lacking sufficient foreign language credits). Furthermore, results of this research effort suggest that additional research must explore why student-athlete special admits who are redshirted their freshman year are particularly vulnerable to not graduating within the accepted six-year period. Subsequently, athletic departments should develop, employ, and further validate evidence-based, best practices for supporting these students' academic success and timely graduation.

The findings of this study offer information for stakeholders who work directly and indirectly with student-athletes and student-athlete special admits. While many individuals who work with collegiate student-athletes may benefit from these findings, the clearest implications are for programs serving academically at-risk student-athletes and/or those who are specially admitted. The basis of this study was to provide an in-depth look at the demographics, incoming academics and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits in order to begin to fill the gap in our understanding of who student-athlete special admits are. A deeper understanding of this population provides a foundation in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating targeted evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. Student-athlete special admits are a severely understudied, and theoretically high-risk, student population. The goal of creating best practices is to positively impact the academic performance of student-athletes and student-athlete special admits that will lead to eventual graduation within six years. Understanding this sub-population of student-athletes may aid in a better understanding of how to best help those with academic deficiencies, especially since the NCAA's academic redshirt policy went into effect in 2016.

In relation to the study at hand, the researcher hopes to begin a discussion that will ultimately lead to better academic outcomes for this previously understudied population of student-athletes. The resultant discussion will aid the NCAA and its member institutions to better serve student-athletes and to spark further interest and research to better understand and support this academically at-risk group of student-athletes. More specifically, the findings will aid in the development of establishing a clear understanding of what this unique population needs in order to develop a roadmap of academic best practices to maximize student success in graduating within six years.

Limitations

Because of the boundaries set for this study, some limitations exist. Due to the participation rate associated with the dataset in this study (22 student-athlete special admits, wherein 16 came from the same institution), the findings should not be regarded as conclusive for this conference, because it does not account for institutional differences such as size, public vs. private, and institutional definitions and/or interpretations of a special admit. It is likely that more generalizable information will be generated by greater participation. The expectation is that a greater number of student-athlete special admits can be assisted to achieve academic success and eventual graduation once more detailed and specific information regarding common outcomes associated with this unique population are uncovered.

Another limitation of this study is that there is currently no agreed upon definition of special admit from institution to institution. Institutions vary widely in the types of student-athletes they admit (i.e., a student-athlete may be considered a special admit at one institution wherein they may be considered a regular admit at another). The NCAA initial eligibility requirements simply serve as guidelines, not something to be generalized to all universities. This challenge is intensified by the fact that “the NCAA eligibility requirements are more restrictive than the admission requirements of approximately 25% of Division I-A universities” (Ferris et al., 2004, p. 568). Placing parameters on the term “special admit” would be one way to alleviate this problem (e.g. student-athletes who scored one or two standard deviations lower than the average standardized test score for the incoming cohort). This recommendation would allow for the results to be comparable across various institutions.

An additional limitation consisted of the fact that 16 of the 22 student-athlete special admits that we obtained data from, came from the same institution. Thus, they may have a

certain shared experience that makes them different from the six student-athlete special admits at the other participating institutions. Future research should explore these issues with student-athlete special admits across a wider variety of institutions and conferences. Lastly, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the Division I student-athlete special admit population, this study was limited to one cohort of student-athlete special admits. Future studies should look at several cohorts across one institution or one cohort across several institutions.

Recommendations for Future Studies

In spite of the low response rate, this study provides data that begins to fill in the gap in the literature regarding outcomes associated with student-athlete special admits across various institutions. Some findings associated with these variables have important implications. Taking into consideration the findings of this study, the following recommendations for future research are offered:

First, the findings from this study provide information regarding common outcomes that are associated with student-athlete special admits across multiple schools. While there is room for improvement when it comes to increasing the graduation rates of student-athlete special admits, further research should be conducted on the types of learning environments provided by athletic departments in order to improve the academic success of the special admit population and related academically at-risk sub-populations (e.g., first generation college students and freshman redshirts). By developing a better understanding of previously obscure graduation rates of Division I student-athlete special admits and conducting an in-depth analysis on the types of academic support programs available for this population, a more developed picture of what current practices look like and how they might evolve in the future to support academic best practices can be achieved.

The second recommendation is that the admissions standards and processes for special admits should be considered for further research because they vary widely amongst institutions. This type of research would inform administrators of best practices regarding recruiting, enrolling, retaining, and graduating student-athlete special admits to ensure they have a meaningful educational experience.

Within this study, it was found that institutions disliked the term “special admit” and its related terms. To prevent institutions from stating they do not have special admits due to a holistic admissions process, future studies should request that participating institutions provide

data for those who fall under a specific academic cut-off (e.g., those below NCAA initial eligibility standards). A specific cut-off such as the aforementioned one, would allow institutions to accurately state that a student-athlete would not have been admitted to their institution if they solely used an academic admissions process as opposed to a holistic process. The usage of this criteria along with access to the National Clearinghouse Database would allow for the NCAA or alternative researchers to conduct a wider and more comprehensive study regarding incoming academic characteristics and graduation outcomes.

The third recommendation is to conduct similar studies within other Division I FBS and FCS institutions for future comparisons. This study only included the institutions within one FCS Conference. Understanding demographics about each institution would also be valuable to future studies (e.g. private vs. public; total number of student-athletes enrolled in a given fall cohort). Finally, it will be useful to examine future cohorts of special admits beyond 2011 and academic redshirts beyond 2016 in order to permit comparisons between the academic performances of these sub-populations longitudinally. Due to the findings regarding student-athlete special admits who were redshirted their freshman year, this data is needed to determine if raising initial eligibility requirements (i.e., high school GPA and standardized test scores) will impact the outcome of raising graduation rates for student-athlete special admits.

Conclusions

Results from this study indicate that the previously held assumption that special admits are not graduating at an acceptable rate might be an institutional myth. Based upon the data provided by multiple institutions within this particular FCS Conference, making academic exceptions for student-athletes is justified when using the theoretical framework of social cognitivism. The majority of student-athlete special admits graduated from their respective initial institutions within six years, while only a small minority (5%) of student-athlete special admits were dismissed for academic reasons. The findings showed that student-athlete special admits had the same six-year FGR as the student body cohort of all FCS institutions (55%). Therefore, it may be argued that student-athlete special admits are, in general, capitalizing on their opportunity to earn a college education culminating in a degree (for personal gain) rather than being exploited as mere disposable labor with a short shelf-life (for the institution's gain). This is a mutually beneficial relationship in which all parties appear to benefit.

Research has shown a trend for Division I institutions to increase their investment and operating budget for academic support services for student-athletes (Wolverton, 2008). At first glance it appears these particular types of academic programming is, at a minimum, justifiable as the incoming academic characteristics of student-athlete special admits were not shown to be correlated to graduation rates. At any rate, further research is needed in order to lead the way for next steps in research that may assist in creating targeted evidence-based best practices in relation to academic programs, services, interventions, and procedures to facilitate the success of student-athlete special admits. Moreover, research is needed regarding evidence-based practice to see if specific academic programs are more effective and/or beneficial for specific types of students (i.e., student-athletes vs. student-athlete special admits). This type of research will assist in helping athletic departments operate more efficiently using their current resources and to make way for future academic support programs.

More specifically, results from this study suggest focusing on the “means” of retention which will ultimately mitigate the epidemic of voluntary withdrawals and freshman redshirting, which were the leading deterrents of graduation in this sample. If institutions agree that the value specially admitted student-athletes add to their campus is worth the search to enroll the well-rounded class instead of the well-rounded student to ensure the students of the institution, as a group, would be sufficiently diverse, then admitting student-athletes on a special admit basis are a pragmatic conclusion from a social cognitivism standpoint.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Student-Athlete Special Admit Survey Questions

1. Survey Information
 - a. Institution Name
 - b. Individual Name and Title Completing Survey
2. How many student-athletes at your institution were admitted during the Summer and/or Fall 2011 semester on a “special admit” basis?

“Special admit” is defined as a student-athlete who was admitted under a special exception to the university’s normal entrance requirements (see NCAA manual, 2018-2019, p. 161). A “special admit” is NOT necessarily a “non-qualifier.”

3. For each student-athlete that was admitted on a special admit basis during the Summer and/or Fall 2011 semester, please provide the following...
 - a. Demographics:
 - i. Gender (Male or Female)
 - ii. Ethnicity
 - iii. Sport participation
 - iv. International student (Yes or No)
 - v. Redshirted freshman year (Yes or No)
 - vi. Residency (In-state or Out-of-state)
 - vii. Type of high school attended (Public, Private, or Homeschool)
 - viii. First-generation college student (Yes, No or Don’t Know)
 - ix. Diagnosed Learning Disability (Yes or No)
 1. If yes, what were they diagnosed with?
 - b. Academics
 - i. High school GPA
 - ii. SAT and/or ACT score
 - c. Graduation Outcomes: Select which category the student-athlete falls under...
 - i. Graduated from the institution
 1. In 4 years or less
 2. In 5 years
 3. In 6 years
 4. In more than 6 years
 - ii. Transferred from the institution
 1. Were they in good academic standing when they transferred? (Yes or No)
 - a. Good academic standing meaning they were academically eligible to compete as mandated by NCAA guidelines (i.e., 2.0 GPA and maintained progress-toward-degree).
 2. Type of institution transferred to?
 - a. DI FBS Institution
 - b. DI FCS Institution
 - c. DI No Football Institution
 - d. DII Institution

- e. DIII Institution
- 3. Reason for transferring?
 - a. Dismissed from team for academic reasons
 - b. Dismissed from team for non-academic reasons
 - c. Voluntarily withdrew from the team
 - i. Mental health reasons
 - ii. Health related injury
 - iii. Academic major discontinued at institution
 - iv. Financial reasons
 - v. Extenuating circumstances
 - vi. Religious
 - vii. Other (please specify)
 - d. Dismissed from institution for academic reasons
 - e. Dismissed from institution for non-academic reasons
 - f. Voluntarily withdrew from the institution
 - i. Mental health reasons
 - ii. Health related injury
 - iii. Academic major discontinued at institution
 - iv. Financial reasons
 - v. Extenuating circumstances
 - vi. Religious
 - vii. Other (please specify)
 - g. Other (please specify)
- iii. Did not graduate from the institution?
 - 1. Dismissed from team for academic reasons
 - 2. Dismissed from team for non-academic reasons
 - 3. Voluntarily withdrew from the team
 - a. Mental health reasons
 - b. Health related injury
 - c. Academic major discontinued at institution
 - d. Financial reasons
 - e. Extenuating circumstances
 - f. Religious
 - g. Other (please specify)
 - 4. Dismissed from institution for academic reasons
 - 5. Dismissed from institution for non-academic reasons
 - 6. Voluntarily withdrew from the institution
 - a. Mental health reasons
 - b. Health related injury
 - c. Academic major discontinued at institution
 - d. Financial reasons
 - e. Extenuating circumstances
 - f. Religious
 - g. Other (please specify)
 - 7. Entered professional league
 - 8. Other (please specify)

4. Please feel free to offer any information or comments regarding the "special admit" process for student-athletes at your institution.

** If the respondent answered "0" to question 2, the survey skipped question 3 and showed them a modified version of question 4 which stated, "Please feel free to offer any information or comments as to why your institution does not have student-athletes who are admitted on a special admit basis."

Appendix B: Language of Follow-up Email

Good afternoon _____,

My name is Alexandra Ingram and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in the Learning Environments and Educational Studies program with a specialization in Sport Management. I am conducting a study regarding graduation outcomes of first-year student-athletes who were admitted on a “special admit” basis to institutions within the (redacted) Conference in the Fall of 2011. I have spoken to the conference commissioner regarding this study and he is in full support of institutional participation.

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to develop a better understanding of previously obscure graduation rates of Division I student-athlete special admits. The goal of the study was to provide an in-depth look at the demographics, incoming academics and graduation rates of student-athlete special admits in order to suggest what current practice looks like and, more broadly, how it might evolve in the future to support academic best practices. Student-athlete special admits are a severely understudied population; thus, best practices that positively impact this population should have similar effects on the wider student-athlete body as a whole. Insights gained through this study will aid in the development of establishing a clear understanding of what this unique population needs in order to develop a roadmap of best practices to maximize student success in graduating within six years. Findings can aid in the development of academic best practices which may also serve to increase the chances of meeting the NCAA academic-based revenue distribution requirements.

The ____ of you have been contacted because of the vital roles you play in the success of your student-athletes. If your institution decides to participate in this anonymous survey, only one person needs to complete each survey on behalf of your institution. If you feel someone else is better equipped to respond to either of the questionnaires, then please feel free to forward this email to them.

All information gathered will be held confidential and anonymous and presented only in group/pooled form. No questions will ask specific identifying information, such as school, conference, and/or personal demographic information. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study. All questions are voluntary, and you have the option to skip any question(s) and/or quit the survey at any time.

A link to the survey is provided below. The online questionnaire will take less than 5 minutes to complete. Data from the student-athlete special admit survey may either be uploaded to a secure folder (located here) or may be manually uploaded into the survey link provided below. Please complete both surveys prior to _____. If you would like to view the questions prior to accessing the online surveys, the questions are provided in the attached documents within this email for your convenience.

Student-Athlete Special Admit Survey: [Survey link provided here]

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, please do not hesitate to contact the researchers, Alexandra Ingram at aingram9@vols.utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-7697.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. I wish you all continued success.

[Slogan related to institution here]

Alexandra Ingram

VITA

Alexandra Ingram is from Chattanooga, Tennessee. She attended Tennessee, where she received a Bachelor of Science and later a master's degree in education. After receiving her teaching certificate, Ingram began to pursue a Ph.D. in the Learning Environments and Educational Studies program at Tennessee, with a concentration in instructional technology and the impact of culture on students. It involves a collateral concentration in sports management and a certificate in evaluations, statistics and measurement. The primary focus of her research has been the student-athlete special admit population. She completed a study regarding graduation outcomes associated with student-athlete special admits within the autonomy conferences. Her dissertation is an extension of this study.

For the past seven years, she has worked within collegiate athletics, serving various different roles in the process. She spent four years working for the University of Tennessee, Knoxville athletics department as an academic mentor in their student-athlete academic success center. Ingram worked one-on-one with international and/or academically at-risk student-athletes in developing weekly plans and goals to help them become successful in the classroom and in life. She facilitated and monitored the academic transition of student-athletes across a variety of sport teams, assisted in the administration of initial academic screenings for incoming student-athletes and the compilation of the data, and developed learning profiles for student-athletes with learning disabilities. She taught a course in cultural studies in education that focused on the impact of economics and culture on education around the world. She also worked as managing editor for the editor-in-chief of an international research journal and taught overseas at Tsinghua University in Beijing as a conversational English instructor.

As part of the NCAA's postgraduate program, Ingram spent the 2017-18 year working at their headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana with the NCAA Accelerating Academic Success Program. Her main area of focus related to student-athlete well-being, the student-athlete experience, institutional performance, academic best practices, research, and analytics. She conducted site visits, monitored the usage of grant funds and the progress of proposed initiatives, measured the impact on academic outcomes (i.e., student-athlete academic progress, retention, graduation rates), and served as a liaison to institutional grant recipients. Ingram worked closely with the NCAA Inclusion department and occasionally with NCAA Research department. She organized and facilitated aspects of event management for the 2018 NCAA AASP Conference,

the 2018 NCAA Inclusion Forum, and directed external communications and logistics for the 2018 American Council on Education Fellows visit to the National Office.

Ingram is currently working at the student-athlete academic success center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville as Assistant Coordinator of Data Projects. She collaborates with the Director to conduct necessary research projects to aid in the advancement of student-athlete success by managing ongoing projects primarily related to institutional performance, student-athlete academics, diversity, and impact projections. Ingram collects, analyzes, and develops data-driven reports to be communicated internally to the athletic administration by collaborating with various campus offices to obtain data as needed. She also serves as Editor-in-Chief for the International Journal for Contemporary Education. She hopes to one day become an athletics consultant for academics for NCAA Division I institutions.

In her spare time, Ingram enjoys spending time with her friends, family, Nick, and their four-legged child, Skallywag. She can typically be found outside, near the closest body of water. She also enjoys hiking, traveling, and painting.