An Investigation Into At-Risk Student-Athlete’s Experiences and Academic Performance: A Case Study at San Diego State University

by

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An Investigation Into At-Risk Student-Athletes' Experiences and Academic Performance: A Case Study at San Diego State University

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines academic performance of student-athletes who are considered academically at-risk when they enroll at San Diego State University.

To conduct this study, a mixed method research design was employed using Astin’s Inputs-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model as the theoretical framework. National Collegiate Athletic Association’s GOALS survey data and academic performance levels of the 2012-13 at-risk student-athlete population were analyzed to report significant findings. In addition, qualitative data were collected from institutional leaders that have a vested interest in the academic performance of student-athletes.

The results of the study indicated that the at-risk population’s mean cumulative GPA was less than all other student-athletes at 2.69 and 2.84, respectively. There were also statistically significant differences in mean GPA among the at-risk population with regard to gender, major, sport participation, and year in school. However, incoming eligibility index score did not have a statistically significant impact on GPA. Correlation between high school GPA, index score, and college GPA indicated a significant relationship between high school GPA and college GPA. Analysis of the survey data revealed 21 of the 90 variables as statistically significant correlations with GPA, 10 of which also correlated positively or negatively among the predictor variables. Moreover, regression modeling, including all predictor variables, accounted for 53% of the variance in cumulative GPA and resulted in seven significant predictors of mean GPA. By and large, campus leaders reported that at-risk student-athletes are supported in their quest to graduation.
This research may provide insight for institutions and athletic departments to improve at-risk student-athlete academic development.
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and unborn daughter, Tori, for their unconditional love, patience,
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I always strive to be the best man I can be every day.
CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

Tick, tick, tick. Every college student-athlete can appreciate the glowing sight of the scoreboard as the clock winds down to zero at the end of a voluminous victory. A sweet collegiate athletic victory may at the moment seem like the only reason for a student-athlete’s enrollment in school; however, seeing that scoreboard at the end of a big win and having that same level of excitement when he or she completes their educational journey with graduation may often have paralleled feelings. As the proverbial college clock ticks down to zero, will student-athletes be armed with the knowledge, motivation, and skills necessary to complete their degrees while participating in college sports?

Since the development of organized collegiate sports in the mid-nineteenth century, American culture has been increasingly enamored with the competition and excitement encompassing intercollegiate athletics. This passion for sports and the unequivocal opportunity for institutions to generate vast resources in some instances have been responsible for clouding the general public’s perception of the student-athlete. This cloudiness often leads to a stigmatized perspective of the academic role of the student-athlete, because most Americans consider that college athletics represent a university’s most significant activity (Clotfelter, 2010; Harrison et al., 2009; B. E. Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). America is unique in that we have developed commercial sport enterprises as a core function at the Division I level that have no counterpart anywhere else in the world (Clotfelter, 2010). Respectively, universities place a great deal of burden on student-athletes, as they are responsible for successfully representing their institution on the field, as well as in the classroom.
Estler (2010) stated that intercollegiate athletics in the United States has been identified as education’s “peculiar institution” (para. 1). Such a decisive description may be attributed to athletics because its overlying objective may not be well-integrated into the overall mission of the school. However, Estler noted that athletics has a major influence, both internally and externally, on an institution’s ability to gain national recognition, increase revenue, and overall respect of a school. Thelin (1994) also described American university athletics as the “peculiar institution” within higher education that maintains a pervasive presence, which prompts incessant challenges for athletes to balance academics with athletic participation (p. 1). Thelin applies this metaphor as a descriptor to the perception of what can be argued by college sports critics as the unsettled paradox of the sport-education nexus; he also noted that the proper balance remains puzzling.

In their 2009 study of the athletics-academic trade-off, Denhart, Villwock, and Vedder noted that proponents of college athletics view participation as benefiting the institution, society, and participants. They, along with Hood, Craig, and Ferguson (1992), have suggested that athletics provides scholarships to athletically gifted students, some of whom are America’s most disadvantaged youth that now have the opportunity to obtain a college degree not simply based on their academic abilities. These studies have supported the notion that extra-curricular activities, like athletics, improve overall student academic performance (Denhart et al., 2009; Hood et al., 1992). It has also been suggested that college athletics provides an opportunity to develop student-athletes’ life skills, such as healthy competition, wellness, work ethic, team building, and personal awareness (Hyman & Van Jura, 2009). Hyman and Van Jura (2009) noted that if collegiate athletic
competition fails to promote these learning outcomes, it ultimately fails in its mission and subsequently denies the student-athletes the educational experience they deserve.

Wolf-Wendel, Toma, and Morphew (2001) also argued that college athletics builds community and strengthens diversity. They noted that the models enacted within athletics may offer campus constituent groups facing the same set of challenges and seeking the same opportunities valuable learnings. In their study, Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001) noted that “intercollegiate athletics provides the most notable example in higher education of creating community among students and others who are different from each other” (p. 373). Furthermore, they suggested this achieved sense of community and embrace of diversity amongst student-athletes is achieved by recognition of the following traits:

- Sharing a common goal; engaging in intense frequent interaction; sharing adversity in the form of hard work, suffering, and sacrifice; having a common “enemy”; recognizing that each individual has something important to contribute; holding team members accountable; having coaches who guide them; and exposure to difference from an early age. (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2001, p. 376)

As much as the American public is enamored and engaged with the competitive elements surrounding college athletics as a spectacle, critics of the college athletic experience often speak to the “dumb jock” stigmatization associated with participation and the place athletics has in higher education (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001; Ferrante, Etzel, & Lantz, 1996; Holm, 2009; Hood et al., 1992; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Simons et al., 2007; Sperber, 2000; Splitt, 2006; Yunker, 2009). It is the responsibility of the institutions, their administration, and the National Collegiate Athletic
Association (NCAA) who sponsor collegiate athletics to manage their programs in a manner that is conducive to student growth in alignment with the overall mission of the school, taking into consideration both the allies’ and critics’ stance on these activities.

Regardless of the wins and losses, or dollars and cents, the focus of athletics in higher education is expected to remain engrossed in the academic development and integrity of the young men and women it serves by adhering to the overall mission of the institution. As big-time college athletics has continued to evolve in recent decades into a major financial enterprise, institutional leadership who built their athletic empires have preached a gospel asserting that athletics molds good character and moral habits while providing a strong tribute to the academic mission of the school (Flowers, 2009). The academic integrity of the student-athlete is paramount in following the mission of the institution (Holm, 2009). Institutions are not alone in following this mission; they receive assistance from the NCAA who governs intercollegiate athletics and sets the standards by which all member institutions must abide. By analyzing the NCAA success rates achieved by today’s diverse population of athletes, institutions are held accountable for their academic results and their efforts to make academics the priority. This accountability from the NCAA creates an environment within university athletic departments where balancing academic success must run parallel with the quest for winning championships.

Yunker (2009) recognizes the existence of both supporters and critics of college athletics, with the latter creating a contentious view of intercollegiate athletics’ role within higher education that often leads to robust debate regarding the educational value of big-time college athletics. To this point, Yunker acknowledges there are systemic
academic challenges faced by student-athletes, but overall this group tends to excel with leadership, self-concept, efficiency, and positive values. This notion has been supported by studies focusing on success on and off the field. Carodine et al. (2001), Ferrante et al. (1996), Hood et al. (1992), James (2010), and Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) discuss student-athletes as a unique and diverse population because of their roles on campus, time constraints, physical demands, their atypical lifestyles, and their special needs that result in a degree of responsibility towards academic success, as well as the challenge of mastering cognitive and psychosocial development.

Additionally, James (2010) posits the importance for researchers to account for multiple characteristics when investigating academic success of student-athletes due to this inherent uniqueness. Due to these variable characteristics, maintaining balancing between three challenging areas of athletic, academic, and personal responsibility is critical for an overall positive experience and subsequent academic success (Ferrante et al., 1996; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). This balance is often the most difficult obstacle for student-athletes to overcome; however, it may also be responsible for producing an overall positive experience of today’s student-athlete. Hamilton (2004) discusses the importance of balancing athletics with academics with the explanation that both require the same set of skills:

It demands discipline; it demands focus; it requires setting goals and meeting those goals; it requires being able to face adversity, and it requires meeting challenges aggressively and with integrity. Successful student-athletes approach their sport in this manner and must approach their studies and degree progress in the same way. (p. 30)
Upon entering college, student-athletes must understand the demands and eligibility standards set by the institution and the NCAA; they are recruited with the obligation to fully commit to succeed in the classroom, as well as on the field. The intent of this obligation is to develop skills in the classroom and through sport that will drive success after graduation. By engaging in school-sponsored athletic activities, athletes are holding themselves accountable to meeting the academic standards of the institution if they plan to maintain eligibility to compete. Meeting the academic demands of today’s student-athlete also creates challenges for athletic department support staff and coaches. There exist time constraints, institutional and national governance eligibility requirements, economic burden, legal and regulatory context, and social and cultural challenges (Estler & Nelson, 2005). However, by understanding the educational value in athletic participation, institutions may justify the existence of school-sponsored sports teams as a vehicle for assisting students with overall development and progress towards degree (Hoch, 2009; Holm, 2009).

**Statement of the Problem**

While there exists a great deal of debate among educators and critics of college athletics on the balance of academic and athletic performance at Division I schools, this case study will investigate the departmental and institutional support given to at-risk student-athletes and their subsequent academic performance, given their demands. Academic performance of intercollegiate student-athletes and likelihood of persisting to graduation is not a new research phenomenon, it remains a hot topic within higher education and has created concern resulting in significant research by athletic administration practitioners and their critics (Adler & Adler, 1985; Bowen & Levin,
2003; Pascarella et al., 1999; Splitt, 2003, 2004, 2006; Thelin, 1994). Although the role of athletics can be easily identified as the “front porch” of the institution by serving to create the local and national perception of the school, the athlete’s challenge remains to maintain balance between school and sports, with education being the pillar of emphasis. Weiser (as cited in Denhart et al., 2009), former athletic director at Kansas State, is often cited from his 2001 remarks addressing this issue as:

Athletics can be thought of as the front porch of a house. People will often see the university through the athletic program in a way that they might not otherwise see the university. . . . If you drive by a house and you see a front porch that is not well-kept, with shingles falling off, you are likely to draw the conclusion that the rest of the house must also be in bad shape. Conversely, if you have a well-kept front porch, the rest of the university will take on the same image. So when it is done right, athletics give people all across the country the chance to draw very positive conclusions about the rest of the University. (p. 6)

In a New York Times article by Longman (2009), Utah State athletic director Scott Barnes purported the high stakes surrounding the visibility college athletics “Athletics are the front porch of the university, it’s not the most important room in the house, but it is the most visible” (p. A1). To this point, Covell and Barr (2001) noted that the responsibility of institutional leadership and subsequent adherence to NCAA standards is paramount as a means to tethering athletics, hence securing the popularity of the game product without threat of compromising the integrity of intercollegiate athletics and its mission to serve student-athletes. Moreover, Covell and Barr suggested that building
prominent Division I athletic programs that are congruent with academic standards remains challenging:

To host an NCAA Division I athletic program, therefore, a school must provide winning teams comprised of athletes who are also students, for the entertainment of those associated with the school and its constituents—students, faculty, community members, alumni, fans—to develop prominence at the national level and to strive for financial success. . . . And to win, to achieve national prominence, to develop the constituent interest to then attain the desired degree of financial self-sufficiency also required under the Division I philosophy statement, schools need skilled and proficient players. The subsequent pressure then comes from the efforts to attract, admit, and retain players on the basis of athletic skills first and foremost, and those who possess such skills may or may not have any interest or abilities pertaining to academic pursuits. (p. 417)

Ultimately, upon entering the institution, it is the onus of the student-athlete to engage in academic practices that positively affect their scholarly performance, which may lead to a successful experience and persistence to graduation. The individual wants, needs, and desires, coupled with motivation to excel academically, are critical characteristics that will improve persistence to graduation (Ridpath, Klger, Mak, Eagle, & Letter, 2007). Student-athletes that have a narrowly focused persona, only identified by athletics, are likely to have an overall experience laden with extreme highs and lows that may hinder overall development (Hill, Burch-Ragan, & Yates, 2001).

While graduation is the responsibility of the student-athlete, Hill et al. (2001) posits that student affairs professionals are challenged with their role in fostering the
development of this unique population. By the same token, highly selective schools that choose to admit at-risk student-athletes are responsible for providing necessary academic support once recruits enter the institution (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004). Support mechanisms provided offer services and programming that hold at-risk student-athletes accountable and responsible for their actions, consequently helping them understand and value the experiences through higher education that may lead to development of comprehensive life skills by meeting their academic, athletic, and personal goals (Hill et al., 2001). Lastly, Sharp and Sheilley (2008) suggested that the value of academic achievement must be congruent with that of athletic prowess; for the academic strategies of the athletic department and campus constituents to succeed, everyone involved must instill balance towards core values that foster academic achievement, which ultimately translates to success beyond graduation.

**Measuring Student-Athletes’ Graduation and Success**

The academic success and integrity of the athletic department is paramount for the overall respectability of sport programs. Students must succeed on and off the field of play, and if they fail in one area they may be prone to fail in the other. However, classroom performance is the focus of this study, with emphasis on at-risk student-athlete challenges and their means for overcoming ever-changing dynamics within the intercollegiate athletic arena. Therefore, ‘academic success’ in this study will be measured by Grade Point Average (GPA) and supported by the following indicators: Graduation Success Rate (GSR) and Academic Progress Rate (APR). The academic performance and scholarly motivation of Division I athletes continue to be an enigma for many educators and administrators within higher education. Although many researchers
have indicated that athletic participation leads to improved academic success compared to their nonathlete peers, more research is needed to understand the mechanisms that create an increase in persistence, retention, and graduation rates for student-athletes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Hollis, 2002; Holm, 2009; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Kane & Gropper, 2010; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006; Watson, 2005). According to Astin (1984/1999), “Participation in sports, particularly intercollegiate sports, has an especially pronounced, positive effect on persistence” (p. 523). As college athletics grows in significance and becomes a dimension of the educational institution both internally and externally, its effect on student-athlete academic success and persistence warrants further in-depth investigation.

In his study of evaluating student-athlete academic success, Stansbury (2003) noted that extra-curricular activity, such as athletics, increases academic performance across the board. Although they are often criticized as “dumb jocks,” especially in the sports of football and basketball, student-athletes tend to graduate at a higher rate than the general student body, albeit by a slim margin, at 62% compared to 63% reported in the 2000-2001 academic year (Denhart et al., 2009). Nonetheless, much debate remains on student-athlete academic success, in part due to the varying reporting mechanisms that are used to measure data from the given population versus the nonathlete student body (LaForge & Hodge, 2011). The comparisons involving this issue are complicated, mostly because graduation rates are reported by the NCAA using a different formula and methodology that was supported by university presidents as a means to better reflect the mobility (transfer) of student-athletes (Denhart et al., 2009; Eckard, 2010). This formula, known as GSR, was created by the NCAA in 2003 as a key component to academic
reform and does not penalize a school for athletes that leave early if they are in good academic standing upon their departure (LaFarge & Hodge, 2011). Consequently, under the GSR metrics, an institution’s student-athlete population graduated at a higher rate than their nonathlete peers because the GSR provides a more complete and accurate look at actual student-athlete success by accounting for the entire variety of participants and tracking their academic outcomes.

In their 2011 executive summary, the NCAA (2011) reported that the national GSR for the 2004 cohort was 82%, three percentage points higher than the previous cohort. The Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) assesses only first-time full-time freshman in a given cohort and only counts them as academically successful if they graduate from their initial school of enrollment within a 6-year period. In the college athletics environment, where there exists a relatively large volume of transfer students, this rate is limited because it ignores transfer. Conversely, under the GSR model, the NCAA credits institutions for incoming transfers or midyear enrollees who graduate from a different school than the one they started, and neglects to penalize the same institutions for student-athletes that leave or transfer if they are in good academic standing at the time of their departure. However, FGR is still the only rate that allows for direct comparison between student-athletes and the general student body (NCAA, 2011). Overall, the student-athletes of the Division I cohort of 2004 equaled their highest FGR in history at 65%, which is two percentage points above the general student body of the same institutions (NCAA, 2011). As graduation is the primary objective for most students entering college, GSR serves as an ideal measure of academic success.
Examining Academic Success Among At-Risk Student-Athletes

With the myriad studies conducted by researchers on the topic of student-athlete academic performance, few have specifically addressed the academically “at-risk” population that has been recruited and admitted at the Division I level. In recent years, the NCAA has engaged in a dramatic cycle of academic reform for member institutions to ultimately increase student-athlete graduation rates. For example, GSR, PTD, and APR are metrics implemented by the NCAA that are used to measure how well institutions’ athletic departments are performing academically. These initiatives carry the common theme of setting higher performance standards coupled with creating cultural changes necessary to elevate systemic student-athlete academic performance; however, academic accountability is ultimately an institutional responsibility (LaForge & Hodge, 2011; NCAA, 2009). These efforts have been applauded by the NCAA Board of Directors and the NCAA Presidential Task Force; however, both remain emphatic that continued attention needs to be focused on student-athlete subpopulations, such as the academically at-risk in order to support this group in its pursuit of a college degree. Through the Facilitating Learning and Achieving Graduation (FLAG) report, the NCAA (2009) has sought to identify factors and characteristics that may cause a student-athlete to be academically at-risk, establish a data-based definition of what being at-risk means, and provide a system that academic support personnel can utilize to assist at-risk individuals. The FLAG report identified three modules that, if implemented correctly, will address academic challenges with the at-risk population:

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¹According to the university where this study took place, “at-risk” students are those who enter with an eligibility index score of 3,400 or below.
1. One for assessing individual student-athlete risk;
2. One for assigning suggested support services, based on the student-athlete’s specific risk factors; and,
3. One for evaluating the overall effectiveness of the institution’s student-athlete support services. (NCAA, 2009, p. 3)

Based on an extensive evaluation of the at-risk population, this working group narrowed down the risk factors to include variables within five categories with respect to the student-athlete: academic background and achievement, role of academics and effort, transfer status, personal history and family demographics, and sport-related issues with team culture and profile level (NCAA, 2009). Fundamentally, this report and the subsequent recommendations by the NCAA to address potential concepts and solutions for supporting the at-risk student-athlete population at the Division I level represent the need for institutions to collaborate to successfully address this issue. Furthermore, the FLAG report may serve as a catalyst at the institutional level to enlighten the perspective of the San Diego State University (SDSU) administration on how to best advocate for positive change in this area.

This study addressed the challenges faced by at-risk student-athletes, as well as the services and support they afforded at a Division I institution in order to glean data that may represent the ability to not only exist as a student-athlete, but excel in academia and persist to graduation. In summary, there exist gaps in knowledge about what it takes to facilitate academic success for student-athletes identified as “at-risk” when they enter the institution and how student-athletes are able to outperform the nonathlete population. This study investigated the variables that lead to improved academic success in an effort
to better understand the nuances of the student-athlete experience within their population, and give administrators information to make data based decisions on how to best support the academically at-risk individuals.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study was to examine the academic outcomes of at-risk student-athletes at a comprehensive public university in the Western United States. The research focused on the at-risk student-athlete academic outcomes and experience with regard to educational challenges, academic support, and barriers that result from sport participation during their tenure as student-athletes at the institution.

The intent of the research is to use the information gleaned to assist Division I administrators, coaches, faculty, and support staff in crafting effective systems, policy, and potential interventions that create a successful educational environment that will assist at-risk student-athletes to persist to graduation. Further, analyzing the results from the study, the goal is to provide information that will serve as a catalyst for improving academic performance of student-athletes by identifying specific challenges and sources of support that influence academic outcomes within the department. Lastly, by better understanding the nuance of college athletics and its effects on academic success, institutions may be provided with tools to enhance the overall success of student-athletes in the classroom, as well as provide training mechanisms to assist with career placement and future job performance.

**Key Research Questions**

Based on the purposes outlined in the preceding section, the following research questions guided this study:
1. What are the academic outcomes of student-athletes who are identified as at-risk when they enter the university?
2. What (if any) significant differences exist in academic outcomes for student-athletes identified as at-risk when data are disaggregated by gender, major, sport, year in school, and eligibility index?
3. What factors serve as barriers and/or sources of support that facilitate academic progress among at-risk student-athletes identified as at-risk at San Diego State University?
4. What strategies can be implemented at the departmental and institutional levels to improve retention, academic performance, and Graduation Success Rate (GSR) for student-athletes, specifically the at-risk population?

**Research Methodology**

This research used a case study approach to gathering data in a bounded system in response to the aforementioned research questions. This was achieved through a mixed methods approach of qualitative and quantitative investigation so the overall strength of the study is greater than if only one method were used (Creswell, 2009). Research was conducted by collecting and analyzing data from a criterion sample within the diverse population of student-athletes from various sports within the department, as well as campus administrators, athletic administrators, student service providers, and other key informants who can provide insight into the academic experiences of student-athletes. To explore and analyze the challenges and outcomes of the student-athlete experience, the NCAA’s Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Learning of Student in College (GOALS) survey instrument was administered to student-athletes who were identified as
at-risk when they entered the institution. The criterion sample of at-risk student-athletes consisted of those who entered the institution with a below average eligibility index score of 3,400 or less. Eligibility index scores are determined by the university utilizing a combined calculation of data pertaining to the students’ high-school academic record (GPA) and SAT scores; subsequently, “at-risk” status was determined by an index score below a threshold of 3,400. Nonprobability sampling methods were utilized to investigate the diverse at-risk population of student-athletes within the department. Specifically, due to the size of the studied population, it was necessary to exercise quota sampling to explore gender and demographic backgrounds.

At the same time, qualitative data were collected through interviews with the director of Student-Athlete Academic Support Services (SAASS), the university president, the associate vice president of admissions, the associate vice president of student affairs, the faculty athletic representative, and the chair of the Intercollegiate Athletic Committee. These interviews not only investigated university and departmental challenges related to student-athlete academic success, but also sought to better understand in detail the strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats faced by Division I institutions in their pursuit for graduating athletes.

The NCAA’s GOALS survey instrument was chosen for this study (see Appendix A). It was developed, tested, and implemented by the NCAA and has proven to be a useful tool for administrators to evaluate at-risk student-athletes. Questions included in this survey focused specifically on decisions to attend college, learning and study strategies, time commitments, satisfaction of academic support services, feelings of stress, academic aspirations, relationships with faculty, and respect and inclusion within
the team setting. The GOALS survey also included several internally-derived questions that will seek to investigate at-risk student-athlete experience as it pertains directly to their participation in sport and the array of SDSU support services they receive as members of their perspective team. Specifically, these questions, written by the researcher, focused specifically on dynamics of the athletic department and the support offered to student-athletes to glean data that are specific to the student-athlete experience at SDSU. The GOALS survey was administered to gather data pertaining to the student-athletes’ experience with regards to athletics, academics, and social integration.

Lastly, relevant departmental and institutional documents, such as data pertaining to GSR, student-athlete support services, and APR—along with other academic reports, strategic plans, student and staff handbooks, academic policy guides, and other materials that guide how the department operates—were included in this analysis, and extant student outcome data were examined to support this study.

**Significance of the Study**

Now, more than ever, universities at the Division I level have come under heavy internal and external scrutiny from the NCAA, sport critics, faculty, and the public to place heavy emphasis on the academic well-being of student-athletes. This scrutiny comes at a time when America remains enamored with college athletics as an entertainment and commercialized product that, in some instances, provides fiscal resources that fund and subsidize athletic departments, as well as the university. Some critics, especially in California where higher education is fiscally deficient, argue that precious resources should be used to support academia for the entire student body rather than funding extracurricular activities, such as college athletics. This reality places
enormous responsibility on the university to keep the “student” in student-athlete. Hence, athletic departments and institutions are charged with the task of supporting the academic mission for this unique population that represents their school. In addition, the academic performance initiatives recently brought about by the NCAA, and their subsequent penalties sanctioned for underperformance in the classroom, make athletic departments susceptible to sanctions, such as loss of scholarships, ineligibility for postseason play, and limits to practice time. Specifically, the NCAA’s academic accountability mechanism, APR, which is the newest system that focuses on two factors of eligibility and retention, monitors and penalizes schools in an effort to improve classroom performance. “The intention of the APR is two-fold. First, to insure accountability that student-athletes are students first, and second, to attempt to force coaches to recruit student-athletes who are likely to stay in school and graduate” (Holm, 2009, p. 44). The challenge remains that coaches at the Division I level, where wins and losses are paramount and often highly criticized, need to be cognizant that student-athletes are students first.

This study aims to provide information to the SDSU athletic department and university about the academic performance of at-risk student-athletes. By better understanding the nuances of at-risk student-athlete success, the athletic department and university can provide valued services to assist this student population towards graduation. By investigating the academic support systems within the department and at the university level, it will be advantageous for administrators to understand the challenges student-athletes must overcome to perform academically, both in terms of institutional factors versus individual factors. The student-athlete data that were collected not only to analyze direct factors for success, such as grade point average, GSR, retention,
and persistence, but also examined other direct factors, such as eligibility index score, institutional academic support, and utilization of student-athlete academic services. The results of this study serve as a valuable guide for athletic and academic administrators by offering suggestions as to the effective ways of providing the best possible support for assisting student-athletes in their quest for graduation.

**Definition of Terms**

Throughout this document, certain terms appear that need to be clarified to assist in better understanding the information provided.

*Academic Progress Rate (APR):* The NCAA developed the Academic Progress Rate, a system that provides a snapshot in time for each academic term, allowing schools to intercede and help academically challenged student-athletes. The rate is team-based and accompanied by a penalty system that includes sanctions for teams falling below a prescribed benchmark (National College Athletic Association Academic [NCAA] and Membership Affairs Staff [MAS], 2009).

*Admission Eligibility Index Scores:* This academic measurement tool is used to determine the eligibility for acceptance into the institution. The eligibility index is determined by calculating high school grade point average (GPA) in combination with SAT Reasoning Test or ACT scores. For reference, the incoming freshman average is above 4,000.

*Advisors:* Trained individuals who are committed to the holistic development of each student-athlete during their collegiate experience. Upon entering school, each student-athlete is paired with an advisor who coaches them through their collegiate career to graduation.
At-Risk Student-Athlete: For the purpose of this study, an at-risk student-athlete will be defined as any current student-athlete who enters the institution as a member of their cohort with an incoming eligibility index score below 3,400.

Faculty Athletic Representative (FAR): The FAR is a member of the faculty at an NCAA institution. He or she has been designated by the institution to serve as a liaison between the institution and the athletic department and also as a representative of the institution in conference and NCAA affairs. The FAR’s role is to ensure that the academic institution maintains the appropriate balance between academics and athletics.

Federal Graduation Rate (FGR): The FGR assesses only first-time full-time freshmen in a given cohort and only counts them as academic successes if they graduate from their institution of initial enrollment within a 6-year period. It makes no accommodation for transfers into or out of an institution. The rate is very limited because it ignores the large number of transfer students in higher education, but it is still the only rate that allows a direct comparison between student-athletes and the general student body (NCAA, 2011).

Front-Porch: A metaphor used to symbolize a glance into the public perception athletics creates for the institution.

Graduation Success Rate (GSR): Graduation Success Rate begins with the federal cohort, and adds transfer students, mid-year enrollees, and nonscholarship students (in specified cases) to the sample. Student-athletes who leave an institution while in good academic standing before exhausting athletics eligibility are removed from the cohort of their initial institution. This rate provides a more complete and accurate look at actual
student-athlete success by taking into account the full variety of participants in Division I athletics and tracking their academic outcomes (NCAA, 2011).

Mentors: Trained individuals who work with first-year, new transfer, and other select groups of student-athletes. The mentors assist student-athletes in balancing their athletic and academic endeavors during weekly meetings providing counsel on time management skills, appointment scheduling, status of currently enrolled courses, and other academic and personal challenges.

Progress Toward Degree (PTD): To be eligible to represent an institution in intercollegiate athletics competition, a student-athlete shall maintain progress toward a baccalaureate or equivalent degree at that institution as determined by the regulations of that institution. Eligibility for competition is determined by completion of 24 semester or 36 quarter hours of academic credit prior to the start of the student-athlete’s second year of enrollment; 18 semester or 27 quarter hours of credit since the beginning of the previous fall term or since the beginning of the certifying institution’s preceding regular two semesters or three quarters; and 6 semester or 6 quarter hours of academic credit during the preceding regular academic term in which the student-athlete has been enrolled full time at any collegiate institution. In addition, Section 14.4 of the NCAA manual (NCAA MAS, 2009) also specifies the requirements of fulfillment of Percentage of Degree Requirements (PDR) to be considered eligible to compete. Percentage of Degree Requirements must be met to be eligible per the PTD criteria and is determined by student-athletes achieving 40% of the specific degree program upon entering their third year of enrollment, 60% after their fourth year, and 80% their fifth year (NCAA MAS, 2009).
National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA): Established in 1906, the NCAA is the governing body over college athletics that establishes and enforces regulations for participating member institutions including eligibility, recruitment, financial aid, and championships (NCAA, 2011).

Student-Athlete Academic Support Services (SAASS): Internal to the athletic department, SAASS consists of a qualified group of educational counselors and advisors who are dedicated to meeting the challenging demands faced by student-athletes through a proactive support system.

Tutors: Trained individuals who assist student-athletes with subject-specific material by reviewing and clarifying course material. Tutors also work with student-athlete study habits including creation of flash cards, reading, assisting with creation of outlines for papers/assignments, note taking, and holding exam review sessions.

Delimitations

This study was limited to student-athletes who entered SDSU with an eligibility index score of 3,400 or lower. Student-athletes who did not meet this criteria were not included in this study. The study was also limited to interviewing SDSU campus administrators and leaders who played a key role in shaping institutional policies and practices that impacted the success of student-athletes.

Organization of the Study

A five-chapter model was used for this dissertation to guide readers through the problem, research, and conclusions of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of literature and relevant research associated with the problem addressed in the study. Chapter 3 outlines the study being done, along with the methodologies, procedures, and instruments
used for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 reports an analysis of the research data
and presents the results. Lastly, Chapter 5 offers a summary and discussion of key
findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2—LITERATURE REVIEW

College sports are significant in defining the essence of the American college and university. Higher education in the United States has never been just about the classroom or laboratory, but has embodied a romanticized collegiate ideal where academic endeavors coexist with the pursuit of campus community through customs and rituals, events and activities, and residence life and recreational facilities. Particularly at institutions with a substantial number of full-time, traditional-aged students—like most flagship state universities and large private institutions—institutional life is often as much about student activities and residence life as it is about the production and dissemination of knowledge.

(Toma, 1999, p. 82)

Toma’s (1999) assertion provides a glimpse into the world of college athletics and the role it plays in our nation’s universities. No other county in the world has anything resembling America’s collegiate sports, and there is little doubt that college athletics have a major impact on the culture of the United States (Ridpath, 2008; Shulman & Bowen, 2001). In addition to impacting the culture of American society, this unique population of high visibility students, and their subsequent athletic performance with on-field success or failure, can often influence the formation of an institution’s image (Zimbalist, 1999). Shulman and Bowen (2001) noted that college athletics in America is not an abstract subject; in fact, it is no longer a simple extracurricular activity, rather a highly institutionalized system within higher education that evokes high emotions for advocates and critics as to its alignment with the overall mission of the institution, which can often be glibly understood. It has been suggested that institutions equate college athletics with
their overall mission of higher education with the redeemed academic and social values that can be supported by the ability to develop a sense of completion, leadership skills, work ethic, and character (Flowers, 2009). Intercollegiate athletics is not just about the engagement in sports themselves, it is an integral part of developing the student and enhancing their overall experience. However, it is often argued that athletics falls outside the traditional disciplines of the institution, which may require justification as to its analogous relationship to the mission of the school (French, 2004). Additionally, Simon (2008) argued that “academic values and athletic ones can be mutually reinforcing and hence intercollegiate athletics should be utilized to teach fundamental human values rather than disparaged” (p. 41). To this point, Umbach et al. (2006) argued that student engagement in educational purposeful activities, such as athletics, is an individual and institutional function that has direct impact on students’ learning and their overall experience. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggested that participation in institutional athletic programs can have a profound effect on those who participate. To this point, in their study of 930 student-athletes surveyed at 18 Division 1A institutions, Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) investigated whether participation in college athletics is considered an asset or a liability. Of those surveyed, 47.4% expressed that their participation very much contributed to their overall development while in college, another 34.8% stated it contributed quite a bit.

Some critics, internal and external of higher education, may challenge the notion that participation in college athletics may limit the student-athletes’ overall experience on campus (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). However, in their study, Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) posit that opponents may need to re-assess their conclusions regarding the impact
that participation has on student-athletes. Regardless of the supporter or critic’s perspective, literature has indicated that what we know as college athletics in today’s society is deserving of continued research in an effort to understand the variables that lead to student-athletes academic success, athletes overall experience as students, and how institutions and collegiate athletic governing bodies can work in tandem to address the priorities and challenges within intercollegiate athletics and higher education (Autry, 2010; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Toma, 1999). Furthermore, by better understanding the nuances of college athletics and its effect on academic success, institutions may be provided with tools to enhance the overall success of student-athletes in the classroom with the overarching goal of preparing this group for the workforce upon completing their degrees so they can be productive workers that contribute to advancing society (Denhart et al., 2009).

Academic performance of student-athletes has undoubtedly raised questions resulting in copious literature apropos to this highly debated topic. The following literature review will investigate several studies, performed by various researchers, using several methods of inquiry, to shed light on this educational performance phenomenon. Specifically, the following topics will be explored: Historical perspective into college athletics, governance and reform, institutional impact of athletics, financial implications, recruitment and institutional access, effects of athletic participation, institutional approaches to facilitating academic success, and academic success and variables affecting performance.
Historical Perspective Into College Athletics

To truly understand the complexities and challenges of the current state of college athletics, a brief summary of its unique historical evolution may assist sport administration and educational practitioners. With history rooted back to the elite public schools in England, collegiate athletes have evolved into primarily an American educational initiative. Myriad scholars, including Flowers (2009) and Thelin (1994), have confirmed that America is unique in its focus on athletic participation at colleges and universities, with direct correlation to the function of higher education and its fundamental premise. This is not the case throughout the rest of the world where little or no athletic participation is sponsored at the varsity level as we experience in America (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Most of the athletic participation outside of America is in the form of intramurals, clubs, and private lessons (Hoch, 2009). In his study, Hoch (2009) reiterated the integral presence of athletics in American education due to the subsequent value it represents for the student-athletes. Initially organized by student groups themselves in colonial America, athletic activities were no more than extracurricular events aimed at providing students with a sense of community and diversion from their otherwise monotonous lives (Flowers, 2009).

Though often scorned by the faculty and forbidden at some colleges, sports became, for the most part, tolerated affairs that were viewed as an opportunity for students to “let off a little steam” before settling into more important intellectual matters. (Flowers, 2009, p. 345).

Flowers (2009) added that, during these early times, athletic event participation received no institutional support from campus administration, and there was little or no control or
policy for the events. With regard to faculty perception of athletics, Smith (1988) noted “there exists an obvious tension between students’ love of athletics and faculty’s concern for educational integrity” (p. 118).

Dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, intercollegiate athletics has been depicted as a major component of the nation’s postsecondary educational system. Before 1850, intercollegiate sports played a marginal role for those who attended college, individuals who participated in extracurricular activities did so through student devised contests that were elaborate and often brutal (Estler, 2010). During this early period, college officials struggled to lessen the violence involved in these student sanctioned activities; however, intramural athletic activities persisted and eventually became sanctioned and refereed events where institutions competed against one another. Starting with the first intercollegiate event in 1852, a crew regatta between Harvard and Yale, America would be on its way to changing how society participated and viewed college athletics. Subsequently, campus leaders remained skeptical regarding the value in athletics and did not support the belief that participation contributed to intellectual development, academic success, or improved character traits. As early as the 1890s, prominent educational leaders questioned the influence of athletics on the academic life of college athletes and decried the presence of “tramp” athletes who were not “bona fide” students (Ferris, Finster, & McDonald, 2004).

The opportunity to participate in college athletics has been examined and debated by educators and athletic administrators since the early 1900s. The call for reform in the early days of athletics has remarkably seen little change in the focus of the problems that are argued today: academic integrity, eligibility, professionalism, commercialization, and
fiscal responsibility (Benford, 2007; Holm, 2009). Holm (2009) suggested that the series of scandals that shook the collegiate athletic landscape in the 1980s led to today’s athletic reform and the intervention of the NCAA and Knight Commission. Copious research has well documented the need for academic reform in college athletics with regard to these areas of concern. Benford (2007), Meyer (2005), and Petr and McArdle (2012) have suggested that considerations for new reform are needed as the college athletic landscape continues to evolve into a commercialized entity in which institutions are challenged with bridging the gap between academics and athletics. Specifically, the NCAA, which currently governs college athletics with laws and policy that are complex and controversial, the use of data gleaned from research, such as the GOALS survey conducted by said association may assist with future reform initiatives that will provide a lasting impact on the culture of intercollegiate athletics. Benford has identified previous reform initiatives (Table 1) that provide a glimpse of previous efforts to mitigate issues with athletics.

Continued debate over academic integrity within athletics has witnessed political intervention over the years and sparked interest as to the relationship between college sports and education, to the extent that two U.S. Presidents took an active role in establishing and maintaining the integrity of college sports. President Gerald Ford, a former football student-athlete at the University of Michigan, stated:

> Broadly speaking outside of national character and an educated society, there are few things more important to a country’s growth and well-being than competitive athletics. If it is a cliché to say that athletics builds character as well as muscle, than I subscribe to the cliché. (Miracle & Rees, 1994, p. 29)
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President Theodore Roosevelt, who played a major role in the creation of the NCAA and supported the development of organized college athletics, mentioned the importance of balancing education with play. In his address delivered at the Harvard Union, Roosevelt stated:

> I trust that I need not add that in defending athletics I would not for one moment be understood as excusing that perversion of athletics which would make it the end of life instead of merely a means in life. It is first-class healthful play and is useful as such. But play is not business, and it is a poor business indeed for a college man to learn about nothing but sport. (Wilhelm, 1910, p. 81)

On April 23, 1910, regarding “Citizenship In A Republic” at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, Roosevelt performed one of his most noteworthy addresses where he used athletics metaphorically to symbolize the man in the arena:
It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat. (Roosevelt, 1910, p. 4)

Although Roosevelt was not speaking directly to athletics in this historic announcement, his passion and involvement in the athletic development phenomenon that was occurring during this time was quite evident providing a glimpse of the influence that athletics has on the individual. Even today, we have seen our current president, Barack Obama, publically supporting college athletics with his interest in March Madness and his expressed desire supporting a college football playoff system.

As noted in Table 1 intercollegiate athletics have experienced significant evolution since its early inception over 150 years ago. With the evolution of college football during 1920-1940 witnessing widespread commercialism, professionalism, and brutality, athletics in the educational system was beginning to be questioned on several levels and was often reported by the media as deplorable (Johnson & Acquaviva, 2012; Thelin, 1994). Managing these challenges has created the need for intervention where college athletics has holistically encountered several restructuring periods to address the
balance between academic and athletic performance (Benford, 2007; Duderstadt, 2003; Ferris et al., 2004; Thelin, 1994; Zimbalist, 1999). Several researchers on athletic reform, including Benford (2007), Roberts (2002), and Thelin (1994), posit the efforts of college athletics reformists where most significantly witnessed during three major initiatives: The Carnegie Report in 1929 (as cited in Smith, 2011), George Hanford’s (1974) American Council on Education study, and the Knight Foundation Commission study in 1991 (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics [Knight Commission], 2001), all of which alleged that intercollegiate athletics are critically flawed. Notably, in 1929 the Carnegie Foundation commissioned Howard Savage to study and report on irregularities in college athletics to establish a reform movement that included deemphasizing football in an effort to bring credibility and integrity back to the institution with emphasis on educating students as the priority (Savage, Bentley, McGovern, & Smiley, 1929). Thelin (1994) concluded that the report diagnosed the problem in college athletics as commercialism and stated:

The heart of the problem facing college sports was commercialization: an interlocking network that included expanded press coverage, public interest, alumni involvement and recruiting abuses. The victim was the student-athlete in particular, the diminishing of educational and intellectual values in general. Also, students (including non-athletes) were the losers because they had been denied their rightful involvement in sports. (p. 26)

Nevertheless, although the 350-page published report criticized practices within college athletics including commercialization, recruiting methods, abandonment of amateurism, and subsidizing fiscal resources and was successful in confirming anomalies and
inconsistencies in athletics’ role at the institution, it was fruitless in creating systemic change (Smith, 2011). Specifically, Roberts (2002) and Thelin (1994) noted that Savage et al.’s (1929) report generated attention with respect to reform from a media perspective, and contributed to several institutions re-evaluating their athletic programs; however, it had no lasting impact on bridging the gap between athletics and academics and was mostly considered “a boulder that created no ripple when tossed into a still lake” (Roberts, 2002, p. 500). Today, these same issues still resonate with college athletics reform activists. Despite the effort to mandate much needed balance within the American educational system, the problems have worsened as athletics have become a highly lucrative revenue producing entity (Benford, 2007; Zimbalist, 1999). Facing vast differences from the previous century, there exists profound need for governance of sport, due to the dynamics it commands (Holm, 2009; Knight Commission, 2010). From eligibility requirements, academic performance rates, compliance, progress towards degree, graduation success rates, and increased commercialization, the need for systemic governance is paramount (Knight Commission, 2010). This governance is administered by the NCAA, which was founded in 1906 as a way to protect student-athletes from dangerous and exploitive practices by instituting rules that are to be followed by member institutions (NCAA, 2012a). Today, this governing board continues to implement that principle with increased emphasis on both athletics and academic excellence. The NCAA’s core purpose is to govern competition in a fair, safe, equitable, and sportsmanlike manner, and to integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student-athlete is paramount (NCAA, 2009). To this point, the 2009 NCAA manual states in Bylaw 1.3.1:
The competitive athletics programs of member institutions are designed to be a vital part of the educational system. A basic purpose of this Association is to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body and, by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports. (p. 1)

Although the NCAA is the governing body of college athletics that is responsible for establishing and enforcing policy, it is also imperative that the institution at its leadership police their own activity as to not tarnish the “front porch” of the university which may ultimately affect attraction for potential students, donors, marketing dollars, and alumni support (Covell & Barr, 2001; Denhart et al., 2009). Specifically, the 2009 NCAA manual in section 2.2 and 2.2.1 stipulates that:

Intercollegiate athletics programs shall be conducted in a manner designed to protect and enhance the physical and educational well-being of student-athletes . . . and it is the responsibility of each member institution to establish and maintain an environment in which a student-athlete’s activities are conducted as an integral part of the student-athlete’s educational experience. (p. 3)

Despite a concerted effort to effectively manage the academic integrity of college sports, the late 1980s and early 1990s experienced widespread corruption that tainted the perceived mission of the NCAA (Sander, 2009b). Consequently, it was deemed necessary by various university leadership and critics of college athletics that the NCAA have its own watchdog to ensure adherence to their policy and overall goal of graduating successful student-athletes, hence the development of the Knight Commission. Since
the Knight Commission was founded in 1989, by the John S. and James L. Knight
Foundation, the current NCAA watchdog has been advocating positive change in college
athletics with focus on education first. Their mission would be restoring the sanity back
in intercollegiate athletics by putting the values of higher education above athletic
participation (Knight Commission, 2001). Part of this restoration process would involve
changing the culture of college sports to more educationally driven, instead of win driven
(Holm, 2009). This process would not be easy, before the establishment of the Knight
Commission, among the 106 institutions at the Division I-A level; 48 had graduation
rates under 30% in men’s basketball and 19 schools were under 30% in football. Also,
57 of the institutions found themselves on NCAA probation. With their 1991 landmark
report, the commission established the “one-plus-three” model to regain focus on
academics. This model launched significant strides in reconnecting college sports with
the educational mission of universities by directing “one” presidential control to “three”
areas of focus: academic integrity, fiscal integrity, and NCAA certification (Knight
Commission, 2010). Sander (2009b) stated that since its inception, the Knight
Commission has been charged with leading the way towards reform in college sports by
collaborating with the NCAA to create impactful policy change with regard to academic
standards and expectations. These reform initiatives speak to the importance of athletics
at the institutional and societal level with the notion that the historical perspective of
college sports in America can inform constituents on the current challenges in the system
and how these activities have evolved over the years (Duderstadt, 2003).
Governance Impact and Reform: Mechanisms for Change

Numbers play a key role in college sports; Hamilton (2005) stated that college sports are “full of so many calculations—batting average, free-throw percentages, BCS [Bowl Champion Series] and RPI [Ratings Percentage Index] scores—that keeping them all straight can be a full time job for a sports program” (p. 28). Whether it’s the win-loss column or the student-athletes’ report card, evaluating the success of athletic programs, especially in terms of academic success, remains the focus of the NCAA (Holm, 2009). However, Roberts (2002) warns that numbers translated into charts and graphs may not be the best method to discern the overall quality of education and college experience, given the nonquantifiable attributes gleaned over the course of a student-athlete’s education. Hardy and Berryman (1982) noted that the missions of national organizations in college sports have evolved over time to defining and monitoring game and eligibility rules, sponsoring championships, and serving as centers that house athletic administration and coaching professional organizations. With guidance from the Knight Commission, the past decade has witnessed the NCAA’s creation of mechanisms to not only assist schools with tracking academic success, but to also hold them accountable for keeping student-athletes on the track towards graduation (Knight Commission, 2001).

The NCAA took rather aggressive steps towards college athletics reform in 2003 when they eliminated the minimum SAT “cut score,” which was formerly 820 and required for participation at the college level. This move was initially questioned by educational leaders as a means to lower entrance standards for athletes. However, on the contrary, the NCAA coupled the move with increased high-school core classes and the grades the students must achieve in those classes eventually resulting in more stringent entrance
policy for incoming freshman recruits (Hamilton, 2005). That same year, the NCAA took a revolutionary step that some argue was the driving force in increasing academic success of student-athletes. In 2003, they revised the PTD criteria that determines an athlete’s eligibility to compete. The model is comprised of three numbers, formerly 25-25-75, and currently 40-60-80, which represent the completion percentage student’s earn in years 3, 4, and 5, respectively (NCAA, 2010). As students progress towards degree attainment, these increased percentages hold them accountable to academic standards of the institution; if they fail to comply, they will be deemed ineligible by the NCAA.

In an increased effort to change the culture of member institutions, 2003 saw another action by the NCAA to put the “student” back into “student-athlete,” which was the addition of APR. Formerly, the NCAA focused on Graduation Success Rate (GSR) to evaluate the academic performance of member schools; now APR is carrying most of the load with regard to evaluation standards. Also publically reported are the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR), which unlike GSR do not account for transfer students, thus making FGR the lower scoring numbers of the two reports because about one in four athletes transfer colleges at some point (Wolverton, 2006). In analyzing GSR data, Scott, Paskus, Miranda, Petr, and McArdle (2008) postulate that the results indicate conflicting impacts of college athletic participation. Moreover, the data illustrate that although student-athletes graduate at higher rates than their nonathlete peers, student-athletes in high-profile sports, such as football and basketball, tend to graduate at lower rates than other student-athletes. Scott et al. (2008), who conduct research for the NCAA and are involved in the association’s governance, noted that significant expansion in academic data collection over the past decade, such as APR, has been a vital component in
addressing academic performance of student-athletes and assists member institutions in exploring nuanced data-driven policies. The implementation of APR and the subsequent evaluation of its data, which provides a “real-time” assessment of academic performance of student-athletes by using objective measures of eligibility and retention, was an initiative carried out by the NCAA in a proactive manner to address institutional academic concerns (Scott et al., 2008, p. 223). The APR formula is based on points awarded for eligibility and retention, two factors that are the key indicators of the student-athlete’s likelihood of graduating. The APR metric was developed to track academic achievement of each team by term by awarding points based on this criteria with each scholarship student-athlete earning one retention point and one eligibility point for remaining academically eligible. The total points earned are divided by points possible and then multiplied by 1000, and the cut score is 925. Teams whose APR falls below the 925 minimum face contemporaneous penalties, such as loss of scholarships, restrictions of practice time, and loss of postseason competitions (NCAA, 2010). The GSR and APR are potentially very effective measurement tools in enhancing academic standards and student-athlete achievement towards their educational goals (LaForge & Hodge, 2011; NCAA, 2012a). The key is the implementation and enforcement of the NCAA penalties for schools that neglect to meet the standards.

Since the early 1990s, athletic reform has taken progressive steps in increasing the academic integrity and graduation rates of student-athletes. This has been achieved through institutional accountability represented by APR and GSR, two measures which make coaches, staff, and ultimately the athletes, responsible for their academic performance (LaForge & Hodge, 2011). LaForge and Hodge (2011) argued that,
although the NCAA is the enforcer of regulation, they also correctly advocate for institutional responsibility accountability for academic reform. They also concluded that the evolution of APR has resulted in positive change with athletic departments monitoring freshman course progress, establishing liaisons between advisors and faculty, monitoring class attendance, minimum GPA requirement to maintain scholarships, and reduction in traveling for road games. However, the combination of FGR, GSR, and APR may lead to better institutional policymaking and understanding of student-athlete academic performance.

With these aggressive standards and mechanisms established to enhance academic performance of student-athletes, the national GSR’s increased three percentage points to 82% from 2003 to 2004 for NCAA member institutions (NCAA, 2010). These increases, as reported by the NCAA, demonstrated positive strides in academic performance since the inception of modern reform. The NCAA also maintains that student-athletes, as a group, graduate at higher rates because they are more efficient with study time due to the confines of increased time commitments with practice, travel, and competition (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). This is indeed the case, as indicated in the NCAA’s 2001-02 freshman cohort report, which saw student-athlete FGR at 64% and nonstudent population at 62% (NCAA, 2010). Although these numbers are key indicators that institutions are doing a better job graduating athletes, there remains concern among NCAA researchers and administrators as to why specific populations are succeeding at a lesser rate. For instance, between 1995 and 2002, female athletes graduated on average at a GSR 15% higher than their male counterparts. The same holds true with ethnicity, seeing that nearly 20% more white student-athletes graduate compared to African
American athletes during the same period. Moreover, although Black men represent 2.8% of full-time undergraduate students, they constitute 58.4% of the football and basketball teams at the six major Division I conferences, two sports that generate the most revenue and garner vast media attention (Harper et al., 2013).

Harper et al. (2013) investigated the phenomenon of academic success of minority student-athletes using Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) data, specifically Black male performance at six major Division I athletic conferences, to draw transparent conclusions as to why this group is underachieving by providing data that are necessary to improving academic success and curbing longstanding racial iniquities in college sports. They noted that across four cohorts from 2007-2010, only 50.2% graduated within 6 years compared to 66.9% of student-athletes overall. These numbers, combined with underrepresentation of Black men at predominately white institutions and overrepresentation on revenue-generating Division I sport teams, constitutes pervasive problems within major college athletics (Harper et al., 2013). Their data driven research concluded recommendations for action steps in policy and accountability standards in five areas including NCAA and conference commissioners, college and university leadership, coaches and athletic departments, journalists and sports media, and families of Black male student-athletes. First, they recommended that the NCAA and conference sports commissioners produce a series of research reports that disaggregate data by race, sex, sport, division, and particular subsets of institutions within a division. Also, it was recommended that the NCAA establish a commission on racial equity that investigates and responds to racial inequities, thus developing programs and policies to narrow racial gaps. Second, college and university
leadership should demand disaggregated data reports and respond proactively to inequities, such as racial differences in GPA, thus holding athletic personnel accountable to improvement. Also, leadership should commit to providing fiscal resources to fund academic support programs that serve this group and also engage in substantive conversations and developmental exercises that raise awareness about the ongoing issue of inequity. Third, coaches and athletic departments must collaborate to devise strategies based on disaggregated data for overcoming gaps in racial academic performance and create internal committees to address racial equity. It was also recommended that merit based reward incentives be established by presidents and athletic directors to improve racial equity and student-athlete engagement. Fourth, it was recommended that journalists and sports media go beyond highlighting athletic prowess of Black male student-athletes and include vignettes that include nonathletic accomplishments. Lastly, the researchers recommended that Black male student-athletes and their parents make decisions to attend select institutions based on criteria above and beyond that of athletic involvement and consider other aspects of education that will provide skills useful in their lives after graduation.

Beamon (2008) noted “while student-athletes often fulfill their obligation to the university by performing athletically and bringing notoriety to the universities, all too often Black students do not see the benefits of their labor by playing professionally or earning a degree” (p. 354). Moreover, in her qualitative analysis of 20 former Black student-athletes at the Division I level, of whom 17 were football and 3 were basketball athletes, Beamon noted that although athletic ability opened the door to a college education, this group left the university feeling exploited and unprepared for their careers.
outside of sports. To this point, Simiyu (2012) argued that campus administration must take an active and aggressive role with combating the stigma that follows Black student-athletes by integrating faculty with the athletic enterprise to reduce misperceptions by both parties, which may lead to improved academic success, graduation, and career preparation. Ultimately, the onus is on the leadership of the institution, including faculty, athletic department personnel, and administrative staff, to work collectively to promote parity for all without discriminating against skin color or gender (Simiyu, 2012).

Harrison et al. (2009) performed a quantitative analysis to measure the role of gender identities and stereotype salience with academic performance of student-athletes who often represent a stigmatized group. They studied test results of 88 college student-athletes enrolled at two large state universities in the southwestern United States to better understand the effect of gender identities and stereotypes associated with athletic participation. Specifically, their study utilized a pseudo SAT and GRE classroom testing environment in which they randomly primed the identity of the participants prior to the completion of the test into categories, such as neutral where no reference was made to athletic participation, Division I student-athlete, and scholar athlete. As predicted, their data supported that female student-athletes performed more poorly when their athletic and academic identities were explicitly linked, while male student-athletes performed significantly better when only their athletic identity was primed prior to the test.

These findings suggest both the positive and negative impact of stereotypes on academic performance and may offer insight into how faculty and administration can work consciously to induce or reduce identity threat for this stigmatized population of students, which may ultimately lead to improved academic performance. Moreover,
B. E. Martin et al. (2010) contend “few researchers have yet to empirically document the prevalence and consequences of the biased lens through which student-athletes are perceived and/or how they successfully cope with being stereotyped as an inferior target” (p. 133). Respectively, the academic challenges associated with negative stereotypes associated with athletic participation deserve further attention in developing systemic cultural strategies to improve classroom performance for this marginalized group (B. E. Martin et al., 2010). In addition to gender and race, specific sport participation also plays a role in academic performance with Olympic style sports (nonrevenue in most cases), far outpacing the academic performance of football, basketball, and baseball by nearly 10-15% GSR in some instances from 1995-2002 (NCAA, 2010). These discrepancies are deserving of further research that may lead athletic programs to develop effective measures to promote higher degrees of success to athletes with varying demographic background, gender, and sport participation.

**Institutional Impact and Integration of Athletics**

From major college basketball and football games seen on national television to smaller scale Olympic style events, America’s love for sport continues to flourish, which inherently adds to the complexity of how the system can best be administered and governed. Given the abundant attention college athletics receives on a national level, Thelin (1994) supported the challenges that must be embraced from an institutional, governance, and administrative perspective to cultivate reform because the priority level of intercollegiate athletics at the university is blurred:

There is a slippery quality that characterizes the justifications that university presidents and athletics directors invoke when they are asked to explain the
connections between college sports and higher education. At one time, college sports are described as an educational activity, often praised for their power to “build character”; at another time, intercollegiate athletics are conveniently endorsed for having contributed to institutional publicity and prestige, or they are depicted as helpful to university fund raising, with benefits supposedly accruing to the entire institution. On closer inspection, these separate, shifting claims constitute a liturgy, not substantiated conclusions. The rationales are not wholly convincing because they are untested claims and, if taken together, are often inconsistent, even conflicting. (p. 2)

Embraced by many who support the underlying principles for which it stands, and often equally criticized for exploitation of the student-athlete, college athletics is a mainstay in American society, regardless of one’s position on the topic (Splitt, 2006). Irrespective of popular belief, Ferris et al. (2004) contended that the purpose of college athletics was not to create an athletically focused university, but to harness excellence between academics and athletics. Despite the appreciation and admiration for the games themselves, often lost in the limelight of the on-field heroics are the academic, social, and intangible benefits students obtain while participating in college athletics (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Watson (2005) noted that throughout their careers, student-athletes have been conditioned with such axioms of “no pain, no gain” and “there is no I in team” (p. 443). Consequently, this attitude may lead to harboring of personal needs or issues that may potentially damage their chances to succeed in the demanding athletics environment by weakening their self-efficacy and neglecting the necessary balance between athletics and academics.
Often disputed are the priorities of today’s student-athletes (Denhart et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 1999). Advocates of college athletics may support the notion that participants utilize sport to gain institution access and achieve academic success, while opponents may argue that athletic participation supersedes the academic mission of the school (Carodine et al., 2001; Duderstadt, 2003; Ferrante et al., 1996; Holm, 2009; Hood et al., 1992; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Yunker, 2009). “Critics argue that the NCAA is a cartel whose regulations constitute, in effect, monopolistic collusion by member universities designed to minimize the price paid for sports team labor inputs” (Eckard, 2010, p. 45). Duderstadt (2003) raised concern that intercollegiate athletics, in its current state, poses great challenges with balancing academia and athletics; inherently these activities may threaten the overall purpose, mission, and significance of higher education:

Big-time college sports has entertained the American public, but it has all too frequently done so at the expense of our colleges and universities, their students, faculty, and staff, and the communities they were created to serve. They have infected our academic culture with the commercial values of the entertainment industry. They have distorted our priorities through the disproportionate resources and attention given to intercollegiate athletics. They have distracted and in some cases destabilized the leadership of our academic institutions. They have exploited and, on occasion, even victimized players and coaches while creating a sense of cynicism on the part of the faculty and broader student body. Most significantly, big-time college sports have threatened the integrity and reputation of our universities, exposing us to hypocrisy, corruption, and scandal that all too
frequently accompany activities driven primarily by commercial value and public visibility. (p. 11)

In recent decades, the NCAA, the governing body of college sports, has embraced the challenge of ensuring the academic integrity of its member institutions by holding coaches accountable for graduating student-athletes. By implementing the NCAA’s core values and high levels of academic integrity, athletic programs are graded on their ability to graduate their students and place them successfully in the workforce (Eckard, 2010). However, under this paradigm of governance, college athletic programs have not been able to completely eradicate the stigma associated with their participation (Simons et al., 2007). Simons et al. (2007) posit that stigmas can often be the basis for undesirable perceiver expectations and effect how stigmatized student-athletes are perceived and treated by faculty, nonstudent-athletes, and public in general. Moreover, Aries et al. (2004) posit that athletic participation may further the separation of student-athletes to faculty and the rest of the student body, given the perceived negative academic competencies that often accompany their unique role on campus. Engstrom, Sedlacek, and McEwen (1995) added that “fear, conscious and unconscious prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, patterns of misinformation, and stereotyping toward student-athletes all may be instilled and perpetuated by members of the campus community” (p. 218).

To address this issue of negative stigma associated with athletic participation, Simons et al. (2007) conducted a paper and pencil study with 538 student-athletes at a large Division I institution. Their participants were representative of the 800 student-athletes at the university including 167 freshman, 133 sophomores, 140 juniors, and 95 seniors; 108 were revenue sport athletes (men’s basketball and football) and 430
were nonrevenue sport athletes (all other sports). Their survey consisted of open- and closed-ended questions, demographic criteria, academic experiences, and treatment by professors and teacher’s assistants when accommodations for athletic competitions were requested. For the closed ended questions, a 5-point Likert scale was used, as well as yes and no responses; the open-ended questions required a written descriptive response. The study reported that 33% of those surveyed thought they were negatively perceived by their professor; likewise, 34% experienced negative perception by teacher’s assistants, and 59.6% felt they were negatively perceived by nonstudent-athletes. Moreover, although the gathered data indicated that student-athletes feel they are not treated differently from nonathlete peers, a substantial percentage of them experienced negative stigma in the academic community. Overall, the students in this study reported unproductive ways of coping with the stigma of being an athlete, otherwise referred to in this article as “dumb jock” (Simons et al., 2007, p. 251). Undoubtedly, the most visible college sports are football and basketball, given that these sports tend to yield a lower graduation rate than other sports suppressing the myth of the “dumb jock” will be particularly challenging (Rishe, 2003).

Simons et al. (2007) discussed that student-athletes cope with stigma implicitly or explicitly by avoiding academic situations that create a feeling of inadequacy which create handicapping behaviors, such as poor class attendance, lateness, nonparticipation in class discussions, and overall lack of interest in academia or by simply accepting and concealing their athletic identity as to avoid stigmatization. Harrison et al. (2009) also support this argument, in that, stigmatized student-athletes may dissociate with education or disguise their athletic identity as a means of coping with academic climates that convey
exclusion. This isolation of identity, in part, could potentially provide reasoning as to why 68% of student-athletes responded they “somewhat agree” in viewing themselves as more of an athlete than a student (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006).

Adler and Adler (1991) researched isolation and subsequent academic detachment resulting from participating in college athletics; their 4-year qualitative study of male revenue producing student-athletes at the major Division I level confirmed that this group’s academic and athletic identities are challenged. For instance, tendencies suggest that student-athletes in this specific population entered the institution engaged in achieving academic and occupational objectives, only to acquiesce to being an athlete first as a result of the athletic subculture and social isolation influenced by athletic participation (Adler & Adler, 1991). Accordingly, as student-athletes experience impediments such as isolation, negative stigma attached to their athletic participation, and strong personal commitment to athletic performance, they can begin to devalue academics and concentrate on athletic elitism by prioritizing their athletic status over education (Adler & Adler, 1991; Coakley, 2004; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Harrison et al., 2009; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Moreover, Harrison and colleagues (2009) suggested that student-athletes who have fallen victim to negative stereotype in the classroom may experience identity threat which can lead to poor academic performance that may not otherwise occur in a stereotype neutral environment.

Engstrom et al. (1995) also investigated faculty attitudes toward student-athletes, specifically the stereotypical negative attitudes towards male athletes in revenue and nonrevenue sports at a large eastern public research university with a Division I athletic programs. They conducted their research by random sampling of 201 faculty, in total,
126 returned a usable Situational Attitude Scale (SAS) instrument that was used to access whether faculty held these attitudes. The results of their quantitative study indicated that institutional faculty do, in fact, hold prejudicial attitudes toward both groups of these student-athletes; however, there was no evidence that these attitudes led to harmful interaction. Moreover, the researchers discussed findings consistent with other studies that indicated a less positive faculty view of student-athletes’ academic competence; in addition, faculty often held disdain and anger with respect to the extraordinary privileges and services that student-athletes receive. Some educators have argued that potential isolation from the rest of the student body is a result of the unique culture created by the values and practices of student-athletes that may not align with the mission of the university (Aries et al., 2004; Shulman & Bowen, 2001).

Simons et al. (2007) recommend that in order to contest the “dumb jock” stereotype and correct the misinformation regarding student-athletes, institution’s athletic departments should prepare and widely distribute factual documents to the campus community that highlight the academic performance and qualifications, as well as rationale and justification for the existence of athletics including the celebratory contributions that athletics adds to university life. Given the challenges of managing stakeholder needs and their opinions of the university and its athletic programs, researchers and administrators must work to better understand how groups receive and interpret information (Clopton & Finch, 2012). Clopton and Finch (2012) explain:

A greater understanding of the perceptions of each stakeholder group about the school, and about the other groups connected to the university, will pay dividends
as athletic and campus administrators seek to provide succinct, cost-effective communication and messages to build the brand. (p. 92)

Overall, negative stigmas will be difficult to overcome and require vigilant intervention from the university as a whole, albeit difficult due to the highly commercialized interest in today’s college athletic landscape.

College athletic programs have evolved into major revenue sources for institutions at the Division I level and is estimated to be a $60 billion industry (NCAA, 2010). As the ability to raise monies through commercialized college sporting events has escalated, and the competition for these dollars has followed suit, concerns have mounted that institutions’ commitment to the academic experience and success of athletes has suffered as a result (James, 2010). In addition to producing revenue, college athletic programs are often responsible for creating public perception of the institution, which can carry significant impact for numerous stakeholders and offer higher education a tremendously powerful resource (Gerdy, 1997). The perceptions acquired by stakeholders, both big and small, can include the institution’s image, reputation, prestige, identity, and even potential branding (Clopton & Finch, 2012). Much has been noted about the impact of college athletics from an external perspective (Benford, 2007; Covell & Barr, 2001; Denhart et al., 2009; Duderstadt, 2003; Ferris et al., 2004; French, 2004; Gerdy, 1997; Goidel & Hamilton, 2006; Smith, 1988; Sperber, 1990, 2000; Split, 2006; Thelin, 1994; Toma, 1999; Zimbalist, 1999).

Clopton and Finch (2012) sought to narrow the gap in literature from an internal, as opposed to an external perspective, with regard to organizational identification, perceived organizational prestige, and the role of athletic success. Their study collected
quantitative survey data from a population of 934 students across 27 NCAA Bowl
Champion Series (BCS) level institutions with a 51.89% response rate giving a sample
size of \( n = 633 \); a slight majority were women (52.3%), while the remaining 47.7% were
men. Three instruments were used to collect data pertaining to institutional prestige
including Perceived External Prestige (PEP) adapted from Carmelli (2005), Collective
Self-Esteem Scale (CSES), an assessment from Luhtanen and Crocker (1992), and the
Sport Spectatorship Identification Scale (SSIS), which was developed by Wann and
Branscombe (1993) to measure the extent to which sports teams and programs resonate
with individuals. Lastly, the predictor variable of athletic success was assessed through
three specific measures including 2-year performance rates of the NCAA Directors’ Cup
Points total, which tallies points awarded for all sports in all three divisions, 2-year
winning percentages of football, and 2-year winning percentages of men’s basketball.
The researchers used hierarchical regression analysis to analyze data for the relationship
between the success of athletics and perceived external prestige. Unlike Goidel and
Hamilton’s (2006) study that postulated a positive link between athletic success and its
effect on external stakeholders’ view of the institution, Clopton and Finch found mixed
evidence that suggested current college students, as internal stakeholders, believe that
athletics actually effects outsider’s opinion of the institution. Their analysis of a single
stakeholder group, that of current students at the institution, and the given lack of
significance of basketball and football success, found that student’s perceived academic
and athletic prestige may suggest that they believe the general public does not connect
big-time athletics with the institutions overall academics or athletic programs. Overall,
Clopton and Finch found that athletic success on a broad scale impacted perceptions of
external academic prestige, while success in the high-profile sports of football and men’s basketball did not.

In his work, Benford (2007) dubbed college athletics as the “edutainment industry” (p. 12), stating that athletics must align with the fundamental mission of the institution where subsequent new reforms may be necessary to withhold the educational integrity and reputation within academia instead of performing as a vehicle for entertainment. Howard-Hamilton and Sina (2001) synthesized a perspective noting that colleges benefit from institutional attractiveness created by high performing athletic teams; however, questions remain regarding the growth and development of student-athletes as more than just athletes.

To investigate the impact that high-visibility athletics have on student and public perception of the institution, as well as value added to a university’s education, Lovaglia and Lucas (2005) conducted a study to test the idea that these high-visibility Division I programs can increase the prestige of their academic programs and, ultimately, the university’s degrees. Their study, which surveyed a convenience sample of 479 undergraduate students at the University of Iowa, a major Division I institution, examined data based on state rankings from 1-19, given 19 states that were scored based on the students’ indication of which states have the most valuable graduates (1) and least valuable graduates (19). The students were asked to rate the 19 states from 1-19 given the following question: “Please think about the main state university in each state. Then rank each state based on how important you feel its main state university is and how valuable the graduates of those universities are to the success of U.S. society” (Lovaglia & Lucas, 2005, n.p.). This quantitative study was presented as an investigation into how
effectively states support higher education; thus, college athletics was not mentioned in the survey as a means to have students demonstrate their perception of state schools with athletic activity redacted. Lovaglia and Lucas predicted a positive relationship between the visibility of an institution’s athletic program and the subsequent general impressions of the prestige of the degrees attained by graduates and their overall importance in society. Although the study was limited by the sample size at one institution, the researchers used multiple regression analysis to discern a significant relationship with prestige. The coefficient for athletic program visibility \( B = 2.54 \) was positive and significant \( p = .016 \), indicating their study supported the prediction that high-visibility athletic programs can enhance the prestige of the university’s degrees. Lovaglia and Lucas’s analysis is potentially important because it connects visibility of athletic programs to university academic prestige, which is often the center of debate amongst reformists and critics. Concomitantly, Mixon’s article and Toma and Cross’s perspective (as cited in Pascarella et al., 1999), added that “the public’s image of an institution, as well as its attractiveness to prospective students, are often influenced by the performance of its athletic teams” (p. 1).

Clopton and Finch (2012) advise that universities may run the risk of luring students to their school based on high perceived academic prestige due to the success of athletic programs, this may lead to “buyer’s remorse” (p. 91), leaving students potentially jaded because of the disconnection between academics and athletics. Toma (1999) supports the notion that marquee spectator sports, such as football and men’s basketball create the majority of visibility and prestige and are often anticipated to carry the weight with the university’s public image with little emphasis on academic prestige. Moreover,
Mangold, Bean, and Adams (2003) postulate that athletics synthesizes with the larger campus community to evoke a sense of pride and identification with the institution that may not otherwise exist. Evidence suggests that the success of big-time athletic programs assists institutions with their ability to reach the public as a means to increase financial contributions and attract future students (Clotfelter, 2010). Hence, student-athletes serving as the face of the university create the potential for exploitation and raises concern on a national level—is the student focus on academics first, or the sport in which individuals are recruited to participate?

Meyer (2005) noted that perhaps new academic reforms will assist with changing the “culture” (p. 18) of intercollegiate athletics, with the focus on academics first as a priority. Although college athletes have a significant influence on the public’s perception of the institution by their performance on the field, they have an uncompromised responsibility to achieve success in the classroom, as well (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1999). In their report for the Center for College Affordability and Productivity (CCAP), Denhart et al. (2009) noted that there are institution, societal, and participatory benefits that result from college athletics. Toma (1999) noted that high-profile athletics programs add to the collegiate ideal internal to the institution and undeniably provide connections to external constituents. However, as much as athletics can positively affect student-athletes and the institution as a whole, there is a degree of internal and external responsibility and accountability for upholding the academic mission of the institution with emphasis on degree completion. Gerdy (1997) summarized this evidence noting:
If the greater purpose is not clearly understood and fully embraced by coaches and athletic administrators, college athletics will continue to be trivialized as simply entertainment, with no deeper or more compelling rationale for its existence than that it provides Saturday afternoon entertainment. (p. 6)

Existing literature on the impact and integration of athletics on college campuses is robust and often offers suggestions on how to best maintain academic integrity by using methods of reform to mitigate the commercialization and potential exploitation of student-athletes. As cited in Zimbalist (1999), Harvard University president Charles Eliot lamented in regard to public perception and stigma of college athletics on university campuses, “Colleges are presenting themselves to the public, educated and uneducated alike, as places of mere physical sport and not as educational training institutions” (p. 7). Moreover, Gerdy (1997) referenced a 1990 poll conducted by the Knight Commission on Athletics that posited that when college administrators were asked what should be the primary consideration of big-time athletic programs, 87% of presidents, 83% of trustees, 88% of athletic directors, 76% of faculty, and 93% of coaches making sure student-athletes receive an education was the main prerogative. Alternatively, in the same poll, 8% of presidents, 7% of trustees, 25% of athletic directors, and 33% of coaches agreed that this primary goal of ensuring educational advancement within big-time programs is actually occurring. Indubitably, shifting the societal and institutional paradigm of college athletics as a commitment to education, first and foremost, will continue to challenge governing bodies, institutions, and athletic programs. As the success of big-time athletic programs can enhance a university’s prestige and image, conversely their unfortunate failures can certainly shed a negative light which poses perceptual threat to the academic
integrity and educational mission of the institution. This being the case, the adherence to
NCAA and institutional policy and practice is paramount with the integration of athletics
within the university in order to maintain its existence with positive impact to current
students, faculty, staff, alumni, and future students.

**Fiscal Implications: Dollars and “Sense,” Commercialization**

**of College Athletics**

From the gridiron to the hard-court college athletics are alive and thriving,
insomuch in creating mainstay of American culture—they prompt their own newspaper
sections, television networks, internet sites, and parades. Our nation’s affinity for college
athletics has resulted in the creation of revenue producing powerhouses furnished by
full-scale television contracts, sold-out stadiums, and championship events that are
transforming college sports into more of a business enterprise than ever before.
Moreover, these commercial aspects of college sports are marked by the expansive
television contracts, high paid coaches, marketing, sponsorship deals, expensive stadiums
and facilities, video games, and the officially licensed materials that are purchased in
mass quantity by loyal fans (Benford, 2007; Clotfelter, 2010; Covell & Barr, 2001;
Denhart et al., 2009; Duderstadt, 2003; Ferris et al., 2004; French, 2004; Gerdy, 1997;
Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Smith, 1988; Sperber, 1990, 2000; Split, 2006; Thelin, 1994;
Toma, 1999; Zimbalist, 1999). Clotfelter (2010) noted that, during the 2009 academic
year, head football coaches at dozens of public universities earned an average of
$2 million; this is more than 14 times higher than the average compensation for
professors at the same school and several times more than most of their presidents.
Despite the efforts of Savage et al., who produced the Carnegie report on American college athletics in 1929 that criticized the trends of commercialization and professionalism that threaten higher education, college athletics has continued its commercial enterprise endeavors since the 1920s (Benford, 2007). Sack (2009) proclaimed that indeed, over the past 100 years, advocates and critics have weathered storms of reform that created intense debate regarding the commercial aspect of college sport and its effect on higher education. Nonetheless, what was once born from highly organized student run activities, college athletics are now a highly-lucrative business enterprise that has evolved into a multi-billion dollar industry (Sack, 2009; Woods, 2007). In recent years, intercollege athletics has witnessed its evolutionary development into a multi-billion dollar enterprise where annual budgets range from $400,000 at small schools to more than $60 million at large schools (Coakley, 2004). The NCAA research indicates that in 2009-10 collective athletic program expenditures were about $10.5 billion, while NCAA total expenses were $707.2 million in the same year (NCAA, 2013a). Wolverton (2010) noted that the NCAA predominantly funds elite athletic programs, which allows them to operate at higher fiscal levels; however, smaller programs rely on NCAA distributions to merely support daily operations and keep their programs intact. Specifically, the NCAA (2013a) reported that approximately 60% of their revenue currently funds Division I members; 2009-10 total distributions were slightly over $433 million and are typically used by institutions to fund salaries, grant-in-aid for student-athletes, facilities, and travel expense. Major beneficiaries of funding distribution are typically high powered athletic conferences; for instance, in 2009-10 the NCAA distributed $3.3 to each Big Ten institution as a result of their athletic
performance, commitment to scholarships, and various sponsorships (NCAA, 2013a).

Despite these lucrative payouts, NCAA funding only accounts for a small percentage of operating expenses within high-profile conferences, such as, within the Big Ten because their budgets can often exceed $100 million annually. Much of the NCAA funding distributions are feasible based on revenues secured from rights fees per media agreements; in 2009-10 these rights comprised 86% of total revenue, while the remaining 14% came from championship tickets sales (NCAA, 2013a). Specifically, in 2010 the NCAA made an aggressive move to shore up its financial health when it signed a 14-year $10.8 billion contract with CBS and Turner Broadcasting for the rights to televise its men’s basketball tournament (NCAA, 2013a; Wolverton, 2010). Concurrently, the sports writing community and critics of the commercial enterprise that exists within college athletics were poignant in their sentiments regarding this new symbolic figure of financial excess (NCAA, 2013a). The NCAA (2013a) noted that in reality 96%, or $740 annually, will directly fund member conferences and their programs. Jim Isch, chief operating officer of the NCAA, proclaimed, “We put our money where our mission is . . . supporting student-athletes so they can be successful in the classroom and in life” (NCAA, 2013a, n.p.).

K. L. Martin and Christy (2010) argued that since the 1980s, when big-time athletic programs became franchises in College Sports, Inc. that spawned increased debate as to its congruence with educational missions, increased revenue from broadcasting rights has only perpetuated the issue. Specifically, K. L. Martin and Christy posited that, since these lucrative broadcast contracts have been signed, “intercollegiate athletics has become a thoroughly integrated component of America’s commercial
entertainment business, prompting an almost unrelenting growth in the commercialization of education and scholarship” (p. 6). In some respects, cynicism of critics external to academia may avail with this paradigm of win for the money approach, ultimately supporting the entertainment value of athletics and leaving academic performance of student-athletes as an afterthought.

In today’s society, the entertainment value of big-time college sports is embedded in America’s culture. Splitt (2006) argued that as they exist today, the commercialized economic enterprises at Division I institutions compromise the education, fiscal, and physical welfare of our nation. In the same vein, Splitt acknowledged that in order to curb the spiraling effect of commercialization, true athletic reform may have to come by means of legislative intervention by the government, rather than the NCAA. Split acknowledged:

The key facts are these: there is no one charged with anything resembling responsibility for controlling the wretched excesses of big-time college sports; the NCAA has become expert at resisting true reform and co-opting would-be, well-intentioned reform initiatives; few, if any, college presidents can buck the system today and expect to keep their jobs; faculty members, even though protected by tenure, have little chance of making any real impact internally; and sadly, high school sports are becoming just as corroded as they are at the college and professional levels. (p. 3)

This stance clearly positions the critics of big-time athletics and suggests the bleak challenges of athletic leaders that are forthcoming as commercialization continues to evolve.
Howard and Crompton (2004) asserted, “Although critics assail the intense commercial entertainment emphasis or corporatization of ‘College Sports, Inc.,’ the indisputable reality of modern collegiate sports is that its day-to-day governance is shaped largely by financial considerations of cost containment and income generation” (p. 18). Gerdy (2006) noted that colleges will continue to use new means to financially support their athletic programs:

Corporate-sponsored research, naming rights, and the commercialization of myriad other aspects of colleges’ operations are increasingly common. And given a future economic outlook of increasing costs and declining revenues and state support, the pressure on institutions to set up partnerships with commercial entities to maintain academic excellence will only increase. (para. 22)

Respectively, institutions must ensure that commercialization of college athletics does not contaminate the mission of higher education. Shulman and Bowen (2001) further discuss this virtue stating:

As always, the hard question is how to garner the resources needed to mount a scholarly exhibition or provide a good liberal education without subverting the mission of the institution in the process. An unavoidable question is whether the norms and values associated with an athletic culture end up having an overly commercialized impact on the campus ethos, and eventually, on how an institution interprets its mission. (p. 278)

Benford (2007) acknowledged the large stakes at college athletics as an arms race for supremacy, including exorbitant coaches’ salaries and sport venue infrastructure that can cloud the perception of academic value within higher education. However, Gerdy
(1997) contends that despite the trivialization of athletics as entertainment, it has the potential to significantly impact higher education if the two can properly function in tandem. Moreover, Gerdy stated, “Because of its visibility and tremendous influence in our society, college athletics’ potential to promote educational excellence and provide educational leadership is enormous” (p. vii). Fiscally speaking, college sports are not inexpensive, but rather enterprises within higher education that carry a costly operational burden that potentially creates economic challenges that play a role in the ability for institutions to sponsor teams that perform at the highest level. Consequently, Clotfelter (2010) argued that universities cultivate high-stake commercial relationships because they rely on the monies to fund necessities to keep their teams competitive; they do so by entrusting athletic enterprises to administrators that are entirely distinct from academia. Many researchers suggest, regardless of the means, supporting college athletic participation well worth the investment due to the acquisition and development of core values, lessons, and virtues acquired by student-athletes, coupled with the subsequent effects these experiences have on life after college (Henderson, Olbrecht, & Polachek, 2005; Long & Caudill, 1991; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Hill et al. (2001) added, that the university experience is one that can shape the entire life of student-athletes; however, it takes harmonious communication and collaboration of the entire campus to do so.

Larimore and Chitiyo (2007) synthesized the effect that college athletic programs have on their athletes, institution, and society at large stating:

They create platforms for individual recognition and institutional visibility.

There are many positive externalities associated with athletic activities. Attaching
monetary value to these effects is difficult, as the value is based on societal satisfaction measures that are hard to measure. (para. 2)

Specifically, Larimore and Chitiyo noted that participation in college athletics helps with the development of intrinsic characteristics, such as lessons in behavior and self-improvement, including team-building, loyalty, commitment, moral virtues, motivation, character, leadership, and self-confidence.

Despite the high level of commercialization within college athletics and the subsequent risk for exploitation, Henderson et al. (2005), Long and Caudill (1991), and Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) suggested that college athletics help shape young student-athletes into prospering adults by providing important tools to aid them in contributing positively to society. Moreover, Potuto and O’Hanlon revealed that 95% of student-athletes believe the skills and/or values learned from participation in college athletics will positively affect their ability to obtain work in their desired occupation upon graduation. In addition, with respect to the student-athletes, their institutions, and society in general, existing literature indicates the paybacks of athletics surpass the drawbacks (Larimore & Chitiyo, 2007). Lastly, as ideologies between athletics and educational values continue to widen, creating major and unavoidable issues, it will be a necessary and ongoing effort for campus leaders to broadly address commercialization of big-time sport programs (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). As big-time athletics comes with a cost, rejection of the university’s core values may be threatened by commercialization and the win at any cost paradigm (Benford, 2007; Duderstadt, 2003; K. L. Martin & Christy, 2010; Sperber, 1990, 2000; Split, 2006; Zimbalist, 1999). As a result, the NCAA, its member institutions, and researchers will be challenged and driven to devise and implement
Recruitment and Access to the Institution

Ferris et al. (2004) posited that the decision regarding who belongs on a college campus is a “complex philosophical argument” that often accompanies the specious exploitation of student-athletes who receive special admittance and “do not belong” on campus (p. 570). Overcoming perceptual and academic challenges with student-athletes is initiated with the recruiting process. Being a recruited student-athlete immediately places the individual in a different mindset; often recruits avoid traumatic application processes that nonstudent-athletes have to overcome because they are moved through the system with the assistance of special athletic counselors (Holm, 2009). Moreover, Beamon (2008), Denhart et al. (2009), Eckard (2010), and Hood et al. (1992) noted that now, more than ever, perceived value that can be attributed to recruitment, student access, and admission at the institution that otherwise would not occur if the athlete was not given the opportunity to play sports at the college level. Specifically, Beamon (2008) suggested that the financial benefit of athletic scholarships tend to be more advantageous for Black recruits that may not otherwise have the opportunity to attend college. Gerdy (1997) stated, “The promise of a quality education is at the core of the bargain struck with the student-athlete when he or she signs a National Letter of Intent” (p. 58). Regarding the recruitment and subsequent expectations of this unique population, Hollis (2002) reported that:
Student-athletes accept an immediate quandary when they accept an athletic scholarship to financially support their college education. Students who accept an athletic scholarship are required to miss classes, exams, and, in the most extreme case, choose a major that accommodates their athletic schedule. (p. 265)

In his work, Ridpath (2008) advocates the necessity for academic reform in college athletics and notes that institutional rules often “trump” (p. 21) conference and NCAA standards when student-athletes are recruited under the paradigm of winning and revenue generation. Ideally, coaches must be held accountable for enlisting student-athletes who not only can play, but also have a life plan and have given serious thought about academics and their future. In addition to coaches, the institution also has a degree of responsibility to ensuring that recruited student-athletes, once admitted, have a realistic chance of persisting to graduation (Carodine et al., 1999; Covell & Barr, 2001; Gurney, Tan, & Winters, 2010; Ridpath, 2010). Aries et al. (2004), Hood et al. (1992), Kane and Gropper (2010), Pascarella et al. (1999), and Umbach et al. (2006) noted that student-athletes are often recruited from a population of high school students with a collection of academic experiences, aptitudes, and socioeconomic contexts that are drastically different than the nonathlete that may ultimately affect their personal involvement in academic oriented activities, class attendance, personal goal setting, transition into the college environment, and ultimately career choices as they matriculate to graduation. Umbach et al. suggested that regardless the choice of institution, the odds are that the recruit’s campus experience will not differ greatly from other students on their campus. Additionally, student-athletes are recruited from all over the world to attend American institutions of higher learning to get an education and play sports. With this in mind,
schools are challenged with the task of facilitating a productive educational environment regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, country of origin, or other demographical attributes based on their diverse pool of student-athletes. The search for the “ideal” student-athlete, especially the international student with language barriers, poses a degree of risk in accommodating the learning environment for select recruits.

Kane et al. (2008) investigated independent variables, such as high school class rank, standardized test scores, special admittance status, state/country of origin, eligibility for Pell grants, admitting college, and first generation status, that may play a factor in persistence and graduation for student-athletes, specifically those who are “academically fragile” and considered “at-risk” (p. 2). Given the vast amount of research on academic success of student-athletes, this study was particularly unique in that it focused data analysis of the at-risk population and strived to obtain and report data that would assist administration with developing critical models, strategies, and benchmarks for future success when considering admittance to the university (Kane et al., 2008). Their case study at the University of Minnesota, which used extant data from the institution and the NCAA, as well as an institutional survey data of a population ($N=1,750$) of student-athletes between Fall 1999 and Spring 2003, suggested that demographic criteria, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender of recruited student-athletes, do indeed affect academic performance because the tools and supports needed to succeed academically vary across those differing groups. For the purpose of their study, Kane et al. defined “at-risk” as an entering high school student either below the 50th percentile in their class or an ACT score of less than 20 or an SAT score less than 940. They reported, per these
criteria, that 61% of student-athletes of color entered the university in the at-risk category; respectively, 17% of females and 36.6% of males also were in this category.

To conduct their research, Kane et al. (2008) utilized a two-phase research approach for data collection and analysis, the former (phase I) established demographic and academic performance through the use of descriptive data, and the latter (phase II) employed an innovative statistical model utilizing regression analysis to identify key factors that may affect academic success of student-athletes with the dependent variable—academic success—defined as the benchmark of graduation within 6 years upon entering the institution. Phase I concluded that approximately 53.3% of at-risk student-athletes in the 1999-2003 cohorts had not met the benchmark measure of graduation; these data may suggest that the identification of those who may not graduate could potentially be revealed during the recruiting process. In addition, Phase I identified an average GPA of 2.48 for at-risk student-athletes and 3.09 for those not in this category, which suggests that this population is not performing as well in the classroom, and academic intervention may be necessary to assist them toward graduation. Phase II, which examined academic performance trends employed by “survival analysis” as a method to identify what scholars note as “dynamic factors” which influence a student-athlete’s ability to persist and graduate, analyzed entering demographic input and independent variables—such as ethnic origin, gender, tests scores, college of entry, at-risk status, and sport type—in order to help predict academic success versus departure based on specific student characteristics (Kane et al., 2008, p. 13). Specifically, these demographic variables were selected as representative of the student-athletes’ entering demographic profile and were measured on first-semester academic performance because
previous institutional studies showed strong positive correlation between the first semester performance and GSR. Phase II results indicated that only variables of ratio of units attempted versus completed, ethnic origin, number of Cs, college of entrance, and number of course withdraws correlated to academic success during the first semester.

Phase II also revealed an unanticipated, but highly significant, finding related to academic performance with the emergence of under- and overachievers based on graduation. Kane et al. found that underachieving student-athletes who were predicted to succeed sometimes did not meet expectations, while overachieving student-athletes who were predicted not to succeed did persist to graduation. Although this category of over- and underachievers only represented 2.9% of the student-athlete population, further investigation into factors that contribute to this phenomenon would prove beneficial.

Although Kane et al. (2008) were faced with significant challenges during their research, specifically gathering of data from disparate places across the university, their findings were robust and reliable, which enabled them to make five specific recommendations to university administration. In summary, these recommendations included: formalizing, standardizing, and streamlining of data by creating a centralized academic database; development of an intensive and comprehensive summer bridge program; increasing access to academic programs that are relevant to student-athletes; intensify efforts to track, engage, and provide opportunities to former student-athletes who have left the University of Minnesota without graduating; and strengthening current efforts to more fully integrate intercollegiate athletics with the broader University of Minnesota community. These recommendations were made in an effort to advance the academic success of student-athletes with diverse backgrounds to ensure that the
“window of the U” is not revealed through this group only by athletic accomplishments, but academic accomplishments as well (Kane et al., 2008, p. 27).

Due to the vast variances in academic preparedness, socioeconomic status, and educational motivation of today’s student-athletes, institution’s athletic departments are charged with the obligation to provide educational opportunity, regardless of the aforementioned criteria. Tinto (1975, 1986) investigated student persistence based on demographic criteria surrounding economic, interactional, and societal perspectives. Although based on the general student population, his studies generated large amounts of empirical attention and assessment regarding student success based on these factors. By investigating Tinto’s (1975) findings that suggest “persistence in college is, however, not simply the outcome of individual characteristics, prior experiences, or prior commitments” (p. 103), athletic departments may consider the environmental factors that prospective student-athletes will be exposed to during their collegiate experience. In addition to better understanding incoming student’s individual traits (e.g., demographics and academic achievement history) and how that will influence their overall fit and commitment to degree attainment and athletic involvement, athletic department personnel should consider experiences within the academic and social systems of the college along with the normative and structural integration that may affect college completion (Tinto, 1975). Moreover, Astin (1993), Sellers (1989), and Shulman and Bowen (2001) support this notion, recognizing that among the most significant input or precollege characteristics associated with college success are family background, educational experiences and preparation, and individual characteristics.
To address the influence of student engagement and sport participation in relation to student-faculty interaction, peer interaction, participation in student groups, and participation in academically related activities for this unique population, Gaston-Gayles and Hu (2009) sought to measure how these variables affect college outcomes. In addition, they also measured cultural attitudes and personal self-concept as two additional indicators of student affective outcomes. In their study, the following questions were used to investigate this phenomenon:

1. To what extent do student background characteristics and other factors influence student-athletes’ engagement in educationally purposeful activities?

2. Controlling for student background characteristics and other factors, to what extent does engagement in educationally purposeful activities influence cognitive and affective outcomes for student-athletes?

3. Is the influence of student engagement on college outcomes conditional on the profile level of the sport in which the student-athlete participated?

For the purpose of their study, Gaston-Gayles and Hu utilized the NCAA’s multifaceted scale instrument and data set, The Basic Academic Skills Study (BASS), to measure student-athletes’ interest, attitudes, and academic skills. The BASS is one of the few large scale datasets on Division I athletics and includes three components including: the Progress in College (PIC) subscale used to academic and social successes and failures, personal goals, and general attitudes toward college; the Social and Group Experiences (SAGE) subscale, which is used to measure detailed aspects of high school and college experiences; and the Mini-Battery of Achievement (MBA) subscale which is designed to measure current levels of academic preparedness and factual knowledge (Gaston-Gayles
& Hu, 2009). The 1996-97 survey administration resulted in a total sample of 410 freshman students-athletes from 21 Division I institutions, 25.1% of which participated in high-profile sports, while 74.9% participated in low profile sports. Variables for their study were divided into three categories including background characteristics, engagement variables, and cognitive and affective outcomes. These data were obtained from the PIC and SAGE subscales, which were developed for the NCAA by a team of educational, psychological, and sociological researchers.

Gaston-Gayles and Hu’s (2009) data analysis suggested that the activities athletes engage in while in school have a greater impact on learning and self-concept regardless of demographic factors, thus background characteristics tend to have little impact on overall engagement in educationally purposeful activities. In addition, Gaston-Gayles and Hu’s study also supports that exposing student-athletes to their nonathlete peers in constructive ways on campus assists with development of learning and communication skills. Gaston-Gayles and Hu also stated that in order to promote desirable outcomes for student-athletes, it would be beneficial to intentionally engage athletes with varying demographic backgrounds in activities, such as learning groups and team building as a means to promote desirable affective and cognitive outcomes. These activities could potentially bridge the gap between student-athletes with varying demographic history, hence creating an improved learning environment to enhance student development. Inherently, these described learning environments may impact student-athletes’ noncognitive skill set with regard to increased motivation, leadership, discipline, team building, and time management. Gaston-Gayles and Hu support this notion by stating:
Student-athletes regardless of race/ethnicity, academic major, and profile level of sport participation are equally as likely to engage in educationally purposeful activities and should be encouraged to do so because increased involvement leads to positive gains in personal self-concept and learning and communication skills. (p. 330)

In their investigation into the student-athlete experience, Potuto and O’Hanlon (2006) suggested that this population has a rich multicultural experience driven by interaction with a diverse group of students. Of those included in their study, 33% responded that their athletic participation contributed to understanding of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, two respondents in the Potuto and O’Hanlon study stated: “Learning with people of other ethnic backgrounds was an important experience,” and “Working together with a group of girls with different personalities and ethnic backgrounds taught me much” (p. 27).

Amidst numerous studies conducted focusing on analyzing and interpreting data that examines the relationship between athletic participation and student success (Ferris et al., 2004; Flowers, 2009; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Knight Commission, 2001; Mangold et al., 2003; Yunker, 2009), there exists debate as to whether the athletic participation provides a positive educational experience congruent to the educational mission of the institution. Furthermore, Intrator and Siegel (2008) noted:

The idea of connecting sports and academics is not a new one. Over the years many individuals have claimed that sports can contribute to personal development by enhancing such things as fitness, health, and well-being; social competence;
physical competence and self-esteem; moral development; aggression and violence abatement; and academic achievement. (p. 17)

Holm (2009) argued the fundamental assumption that athletic departments in postsecondary education encounter challenges with their ability to maintain the academic missions of the college and university despite the pressures of the “win” society. Ferris et al. (2004) noted that in their quest for winning championships, there exists an underlying assumption that institutions are admitting student-athletes who have lower academic credentials compared to the general student body. Consequently, it remains important for athletic department leadership to embrace the challenges of academic success first, with tapered emphasis on the win loss column second (Knight Commission, 2010; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). The Knight Commission (2010) insists that institutions must maintain transparency in their athletic departments and recruiting practices, with the center of attention being on degree completion and social gains, which inherently promote student achievement through educational growth and success. In doing so, institutions can better promote evidence pointing to their athletic program, which is adhering to the overall mission of the school when they are seeking athletes to move their programs forward (Knight Commission, 2010).

Recruitment and admittance of student-athletes to an institution is a challenging and ongoing effort in which coaches actively engage to acquire the most athletically gifted individuals who are expected to contribute to a winning program and earn a degree. Overall, the recruitment goal is two-fold: first, admit students who are academically prepared to succeed in higher education, and second, recruit athletes who can perform at a high level on the field. Moreover, “Colleges admit athletes as targeted populations in
their efforts to pursue the bifurcated goal of athletic and academic excellence” (Ferris et al., 2004, p. 570). Student-athletes make decisions to accept scholarship offers for myriad of reasons, including perceived fit with team chemistry, grant-in-aid allotments, relationship with a coach, proximity to home, and playing time (Hewitt, 2002). Although the students within this unique population are often afforded opportunity within higher education that would otherwise not exist short of their athletic talents, coaches, faculty, institutional leaders, athletic administrators, and academic support personal all have a responsibility in their role with influencing positive academic performance once they are admitted to the institution (Bell, 2009).

Effects of Athletic Participation on Athletes

College athletics provides educational opportunities for individuals who may otherwise not seek advanced education (Beamon, 2008; Denhart et al., 2009; Eckard, 2010; Hood et al., 1992; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). Through athletically awarded scholarships, students are afforded the chance to further their academic interests, enhance their overall college experience, and improve their marketability for jobs upon graduation (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). In fact, a study conducted by Henderson et al. (2005) revealed that students learn valuable life lessons from athletic participation. They noted that student-athletes learn transferable skills that will prove beneficial later in the labor market, which justifies investment in athletic programs and participation. Specifically, in their study, Henderson et al. suggested that student-athletes tend to earn a wage premium between 1.5% and 9% when entering the labor force. Although not uniform for all student-athletes, these wage premiums are most often seen in business, manual labor, and military occupations; however, 50% of student-athletes do not earn more than their
nonathlete peers upon graduation (Henderson et al., 2005). Long and Caudill (1991) also supported this notion in a quantitative analysis of student-athletes and postgraduation labor wages noting a 4% premium compared to nonstudent-athlete peers when all other factors are held constant. “The evidence of a positive income effect of collegiate athletic participation is consistent with the views that athletics produces personal traits or behaviors patterns which enhance labor market productivity” (Long & Caudill, 1991, p. 528). They argued that this enhanced performance ability is a form of human capital investment through athletic participation that teaches improved discipline, teamwork, drive to succeed, and increased work ethic (Long & Caudill, 1991).

**Institutional Approaches to Facilitating Academic Success for Student-Athletes**

As academic scandals became more publicized in the 1980s, universities began to grow and emerge their academic support services for athletes. The development of student-athlete support service programs (SASSPs) has continued to evolve today in an effort to increase graduation rates, retention, and athletic eligibility (Knight Commission, 2001). Currently, “student-athletes often enter the realm of post-secondary education with low self-efficacy as students and, hence, low academic motivation” (Jolly, 2008, p. 149). Respectively, in an effort to maximize academic performance of student-athletes, Division I membership unveiled a proposal in 1991 that mandated academic support services for every athlete (Meyer, 2005). In 1991, noting the necessity for support services as the norm, rather than the exception, the NCAA began to subsidize academic services through the Academic Enhancement Fund that provided $25,000 to each NCAA Division I program (Ridpath, 2010). In the first year of this program, the
NCAA distributed $15.25 million to enhance educational services for student-athletes; now $58,000 is earmarked for each Division I institution to assist with funding specialized academic services (Ridpath, 2010). Ridpath (2010) added that many of the institutions used this specialized funding in areas that were otherwise deficient, such as additional human capital (tutors, mentors, and counselors) and computer lab technology in an effort to uphold APR standards while performing under the pressures of winning on the field. Broughton and Neyer (2001) suggested that this increased need for support is directly linked to the additional set of complex demands and stresses that student-athletes are faced with opposed to the nonstudent-athlete population. Broadly speaking, student-athletes face similar challenges as their peers with their overall experience on campus; however, they are faced with overcoming additional obstacles because of the demands athletics places on them.

The quest for superior on-field performance, the desire for playing time, and the quest for championships often requires 40 hours of sport related activity, including time spent with modest environmental demands set by the athletic structure, such as team meals, travel, team meetings, rehabilitation, weight training, and media responsibilities, which can often result in physical and mental fatigue leading to decreased levels of academic motivation (Beamon, 2008; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Simiyu, 2010). With these demands in mind, student-athletes are provided with essential services that would otherwise need to be sought out by the general student population, such as mandatory study hall, mentoring, counseling, and academic advising. Gaston-Gayles (2009) mentioned that athletic programs at the Division I level, where the issues of time constraints are most prevalent, typically have high-quality support service programs in
place to assist student-athletes with managing academic tasks. Moreover, Ferris et al. (2004) suggested that:

Many athletic departments have developed highly sophisticated academic support services for their athletes, including academic advising, tutoring, academic mentors, learning specialists, and any number of other services. The minimal requirements and services become structural mechanisms that promote homogenous academic performance for athletes across all institutions, particularly among the less academically prepared and lowest performing athletes. (p. 569)

At the same time, as these services are offered and available to the student-athlete, there remains the challenge of ensuring they seize the opportunity and utilize the services to enhance their educational experience. In essence student-athletes, especially those who are academically at-risk, need to make these critical support systems and structural mechanisms part of their daily routine. Overall, when student-athletes are engaged in effective support services activity, in addition to their athletic participation, their experience is enhanced and they are more likely to persist towards graduation (Pascarella et al., 1999).

In support of the interaction of advisors and student-athletes, Bell’s (2009) in-depth qualitative analysis of 41 Division I student-athletes at five institutions offered findings that shed a positive light on the influence academic advisors have on their students’ experience. Particularly, Bell’s data and findings suggested that student-athletes rely on the advisors in five key areas: to answer their academic questions, to provide academic motivation, to design their course schedule around sport requirements, to enforce time management, and to identify tutors. Conversely, Ridpath (2010) argued that
specialized student-athlete support services, especially concerning high-profile sports, have become a mechanism for maintaining eligibility in lieu of true academic advisement.

Hollis (2002) examined SASSPs with emphasis on independent variables, such as services offered, staffing levels, available space, budgets, and administrative support at the Division I level to examine the relationship between student-athletes graduation rates and the services they receive. Due to the limited existing research on this phenomenon at the Division I level, there were no existing tools to measure the relationship between support services and GSR; therefore, Hollis constructed a survey instrument for this study and had it reviewed by a panel of experts to establish content validity. The population targeted for her study was the primary department heads of student-athlete support services that were active in the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A) at the time of the study in 1997; the 146 individuals surveyed yielded 91 completed surveys. Using a depended variable of GSR and independent variables of services offered, staffing, physical space, budget, and administrative support, Hollis performed multiple regression analysis with these variables and found no significant relationship between GSR and the independent variables; however, the data revealed an inverse relationship between services offered and GSR. Hollis noted that the score for services was .0048, which falls in the rejection range; however, the negative score demonstrates this relationship. Specifically, although this relationship may seem perplexing, Hollis noted that the data revealed higher student servicing scores when analyzing at-risk populations, such as football, basketball, and track. Hollis concluded that institutions are recruiting and admitting academically unprepared students, which subsequently impacts graduation rates and the need for specialized support services. Her
study also revealed that, although services were offered, they did not have a direct effect on graduation rates due to academic preparedness upon entering the institution. Specifically, Hollis’ study revealed that academic preparedness of student-athletes, not the culture of athletics or time restrictions, creates the most significant obstacle affecting their academic achievement within higher education. Hollis’ data further suggest that support services will have a greater impact on student-athlete success if they are academically equipped prior to college, with emphasis on summer school prior to their freshman year to establish constructive academic tendencies and practice. She lamented, “By helping student-athletes over these obstacles with academic services that enhance academic preparedness, college institutions can then reconstitute equal opportunities in education for their student-athletes” (p. 283).

Kane and Gropper’s (2010) research on academic support services at the University of North Florida (UNF) athletic department used questionnaire data to investigate the correlation between academic success, defined as maintenance of “good” (p. 98) standing for purpose of graduation, and services offered. Their analysis contended that SASSPs are relevant, required, and necessary in college athletics; by better selection of academically prepared student-athletes during the recruiting process, schools may be able to better utilize their support services to witness fruitful results. Overall, Kane and Gropper noted that student-athletes at UNF, despite robust time constraints, boast higher GPAs and graduation rates than their nonathlete peers. They concluded that the survey results dictated the relevance of the highly correlated service of their recruiting program, insomuch as their attention to recruiting and accepting academically prepared students.
Mangold et al. (2003) suggested that formal activities, such as freshman orientation, special advising, and transition programs can be directed at improving persistence in the context of academic goals. Their study, which sought to measure persistence and GSR of student-athletes, used IPEDS data from 97 institutions at the Division I level. Their analysis, which used precollege variables including high-school class rank and composite ACT scores, demonstrated a positive association between student academic ability given precollege variables in connection with social integration and overall persistence to graduation. However, although these variables were statistically significant, their findings did not support the hypothesis implied by theoretical models of student integration and the relationship between successful athletic programs and graduation rates. Given the perspective of formal activities, specifically with participation in intercollegiate athletics, the Mangold et al. study lends itself to both the support and critique of athletics’ role in higher education and its ability to adhere to the overall mission of the institution. Although Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) and Tinto (1997) documented that, as the integration of academic and social student activity increases, the students’ overall persistence is likely to increase respectively; however, they tend to be interdependent with academic integration having a more robust effect on persistence. Critics may argue that athletes receive more academic integration than nonathletes given support in terms of study hall, tutoring, mentoring, and advising that assists in student-athlete persistence and retention towards graduation.

Umbach et al. (2006) investigated the educational practices of student-athletes compared to their nonathlete peers to glean insight into how their experiences differ. The researchers used 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data for first-year
undergraduate students from 395 four-year institutions that included a sample population of 57,308, of whom 7,821 were student-athletes and 49,407 were not. Using a series of hierarchical linear models, they explored the effects of being a student-athlete on the overall college experience. Through their quantitative analysis, Umbach et al. concluded that, compared to their nonathlete peers, student-athletes on average are equally engaged in educationally purposeful activities. Data from the study also suggested that student-athletes are engaged and, in some cases, more engaged than their nonathlete peers, including amplified academic and social support, which may lead to enhancing their overall student experience. Finally, Umbach et al. noted that, as much as we know about the student-athletes’ performance on the field, it is incumbent on institutions to know as much about the student-athletes’ overall experience and their involvement in educationally sound activities. The implications from their study shed light on the benefits of college athletic participation and may be used as a vehicle to encourage productive dialog amongst institutional leaders with respect to improving the overall college experience of student-athletes.

Umbach et al. (2006) stated that “the debate about the proper role of athletics and student success should include more than grades and class rank” (p. 726). Although there is no conclusive research that links student-athlete support to their overall experience and graduation rates, the NCAA prescribes academic standards in which member institutions are responsible for providing an academically conducive environment to enable their students to meet their goals off the field.

Research on retention and graduate rates often focuses on the overall issue of student persistence, in other words, the degree to which an individual is
repetitively and/or continuously enrolled at an educational organization in order to achieve his or her goal of eventual graduation. (Mangold et al., 2003, p. 541) Advocates of athletics in higher education argue that athletics provides more than just classroom education; student-athletes learn noncognitive skills, such as leadership, motivation, discipline, and teamwork that will potentially lead to long-term success. Although studies performed by Comeaux and Harrison (2011), Gaston-Gayles and Hu (2009), and Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) address the aforementioned skills, they tend to be subjective noncognitive attributes and are difficult to evaluate, deserving further research to understand how they are obtained through sport participation. Whether an advocate or critic of college athletics, evidence points to a higher graduation percentage through athletic participation. Further research into the impact of SASSPs, APR, and PTD standards may enhance the institution’s understanding of the mechanisms established to systemically modify and promote student-athlete academic success. In doing so, this would help answer questions and fill in the gap as to what is causing the higher GSR of student-athletes versus nonstudent-athletes.

**Academic Success and Variables Affecting Performance**

There are many factors that contribute to the college experience for athletes and their ability to succeed despite arduous scheduling commitments. For example, Comeaux and Harrison (2011), Gaston-Gayles (2009), and Simiyu (2010) posit that this unique population of students are provided with services, such as mandatory study hall, mentoring, counseling, and academic advising, and must be harmonious with team commitments, such as practice, competitions, team meals, travel, team meetings, rehabilitation, weight training, and media responsibilities. These unique responsibilities
pose challenges with student-athletes’ ability adjust to highly-regimented rigorous schedules that are often developed and customized for them by academic support personnel. Jolly (2008) supports this assertion stating: “Time demands and rigid scheduling are factors of the student-athlete experience that stand out the most” (p. 146). With these demands in mind, student-athletes must possess efficient time management skills to enable them to fulfill their daily requirements bounded by their highly tailored schedules (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Kane & Gropper, 2010). Gaston-Gayles and Hu (2009) noted that time spent on athletic activity, which can sometimes exceed 40 hours per week despite the limits enforced by the NCAA, is troublesome because it leaves little time for academic and other educationally purposeful activity. Richards and Aries (1999) posited that student-athletes devote significantly more time to extracurricular activities compared to other student populations, thus they have developed essential time management skills that assists them in navigating their arduous schedules. As a result of their athletic participation, student-athletes encounter rigid scheduling demands and time constraints that represent two seasonal challenges when balancing dual roles as student and athlete. Specifically, the NCAA allows institutions to divide most sports into two segments—the championship season and the nonchampionship segment, which typically span two-thirds of the academic year when combined (NCAA, 2009). Regarding the debate as to whether student-athletes perform better academically during in-season periods when demands are often highly structured, versus out-of-season with less structure, Scott et al. (2008) concluded that evidence does not support this notion. They summarized that in-season time demands in some sports may be a contributing factor to
lower semester GPA, especially in sports with extended competitive seasons, such as basketball, baseball, softball, and football.

Due to the increased demands athletes face in balancing education and athletics, institutions have implemented rather sophisticated support systems, which offer highly valuable academic services (Hollis, 2002; Kane et al., 2008; Keim & Strickland, 2004; Meyer, 2005). Most Division I athletic departments offer tutoring, mentoring, and extended advising to assist their athletes in degree completion. Rishe (2003) concluded that given the academic services structure that student-athletes participate in, this support can be seen as academically advantageous, as this group tends to graduate at higher rates than their nonathlete peers. In addition, Meyer (2005) suggested that student interaction with their academic advisor is paramount for success; the marriage should include life coaching that goes beyond simply enabling the athlete to “stay eligible” (p. 18), but to thrive as a successful member of the campus community. In their study, Ferris et al. (2004) found that over the past decade, Division I institutions’ athletes graduate on average at the same rates as their student cohorts, with athlete graduation rates being less variable. Their research and numbers point to this as the Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) of the nonathlete student body in 2001-02 was 62% and that of student-athletes was 64% (Ferris et al., 2004; Sander, 2009a). However, the Graduation Success Rate (GSR), which excludes transfer students, reported that 79% of all student-athletes entering college between 2001-02 and 2003-04 earned a degree within 6 years (“NCAA Athletes Improve,” 2010). Overall, the NCAA reported that scholarship student-athletes at Division I institutions continue to graduate at a higher rate than the general student body in the same cohort (Sander, 2007).
Summary

Given the vast interest in college athletics, its relation and effect on academics, and the often debated alignment with the overall mission of higher education, there is copious research that offers criticism and support for this “peculiar institution” (Thelin, 1994, p. 1). Through research on academic persistence and the student-athlete experience, notably Potuto and O’Hanlon (2006), “It appears that those who believe that D1A student-athletes receive an inferior college educational experience should reassess their conclusions in light of how the student-athletes themselves evaluate that experience” (p. 13). Although the research about student-athlete academic performance is significant, few studies with the exception of Hewitt (2002), Kane et al. (2008), and the NCAA FLAG Report (NCAA, 2009) have investigated the academic performance phenomenon of the “at-risk” student-athlete population. Thus, the neglect of research focusing on such an expansive percentage of today’s at-risk student-athletes is deserving of further attention as a means to offer suggestions on how this population can more successfully progress to graduation. Moreover, existing literature postulated that despite significant time constraints and other variables associated with athletic participation, the student-athlete population is typically engaged in the overall student experience and often outperforms their nonathlete peers.

As noted by Zimbalist (1999), college athletics is here to stay, and its progressive evolution has commanded considerable academic challenges for institutions dating back to the early 1990s. College athletics, as an enterprise, is a highly sophisticated and debated topic, deserving of the vast literature replete with data that supports and critiques this unique institutional revenue source. The institutional race for athletic departments to
reestablish their integrity and alignment with the academic mission of higher education, despite the integration of hefty commercialization, is a topic demanding attention on a national level, thus literature also defends that both can prevail if the relationship is harmonious (Hill et al., 2001). Thus, athletic departments have experienced pervasive intervention on a national and institutional level by the NCAA and continue along the path of reform with consistency to address academic performance of their student-athletes (Benford, 2007). In doing so, the core values and mission of the institution can be established and governed by the NCAA and lead them into the future with improved academic success.

By using existing literature to make informed data driven decisions to better understand the factors attributed to higher degrees of success for student-athletes, specifically those at-risk, athletic administrators and educators can better prepare and offer essential support services in areas of concern. Some of the challenges have already been met; as athletes progress towards their degree, they are offered abundant resources and support to attain their goals. The literature supports that student-athlete support services, often funded by NCAA and other athletically related commercial revenue sources, are necessary and have proven to facilitate the learning and overall student-athlete experience. The fact remains that despite NCAA mechanisms, such as APR, ultimately the onus rests on the student-athletes to do their part after they sign their letter of intent: to graduate, perform on the field, and learn life skills (Ridpath, 2010). As much as our culture is enamored by the on-the-field heroics of student-athletes, athletic enterprises will be held accountable to support the academic mission of the institution and, ultimately, the graduation requirement of the athlete.
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to examine the academic outcomes and overall experience of student-athletes at San Diego State University (SDSU), a comprehensive public university in the Western United States. This chapter provides a detailed account of the systematic process that was used to design and execute the study, as well as an explanation of the decisions the researcher made to collect, analyze, interpret, and report data. Key sections of this chapter consist of the theoretical framework, research design, data analysis, quality assurance, limitations, the researcher’s role, and finally a summary. In an effort to ensure reliability, validity, credibility, and dependability of the research findings, this chapter discusses the application of the methods used for the problem under consideration.

Case Study Approach

This research utilized a case study approach to explore variables affecting GPA for at-risk student-athletes at SDSU. Yin (2009) argued that case studies are ideal for the exploration of the “how” and “why” questions due to operational links that can be linked over time, rather than frequency or incidence. Being that this research took place in a bounded system involving individuals, groups, and one organization, the case study methodology will serve as the ideal method to glean knowledge from data collected in order to draw conclusions to the initial research questions (Yin, 2009). The approach to inquiry for this case study was mixed methods research. Creswell (2009) supports that combining and associating both qualitative and quantitative strategies in tandem may enhance the overall strength of the study as opposed to using one single method. The
mixed methods approach was originated in 1959 by Campbell and Fisk during their study on the validity of psychological traits (Creswell, 2009). Although Creswell noted that the mixed methods approach is less well known than qualitative or quantitative methodology, it has become more prevalent in research as a means to cancel or neutralize inherent biases opposed to one single method. The mixed method approach supports both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for different forms of data collection and analysis to enhance the researcher’s ability to best understand the research problem (Creswell, 2009). Hence, the concurrent mixed methods approach is deemed appropriate because it allows investigation, in tandem, such that the overall strength of the study is greater than if only one method were used (Creswell, 2009). As such, utilization of qualitative data to support the quantitative findings in this study enhanced the overall strength of the research by synergizing the two data sets. Specifically, in this case, it was advantageous to conduct and report quantitative data that reflects numeric values to student-athlete academic success, as well as qualitative data that supports understanding and feelings as to what helps or hinders the athletes in their quest towards graduation.

This research focused on the student-athletes’ experience with regard to educational challenges, academic support, and academic outcomes during their tenure as student-athletes with the intent to inform institutional stakeholders of the inherent risks and benefits of college athletics participation. Concerns over the academic capabilities of today’s student-athletes have resulted in abundant research literature debating the impact of college athletics participation and its subsequent congruency with the overall mission of the institution (Denhart et al., 2009; Ferris et al., 2004; Flowers, 2009; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Hood et al., 1992; Knight Commission, 2001; Mangold, 2003; Thelin, 1994;
Researchers have challenged the notion that college athletics creates an environment conducive to seeking a degree. Conversely, other researchers have indicated that athletic participation leads to improved academic success compared to nonathletic peers (Aries et al., 2004; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Hollis, 2002; Holm, 2009; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Umbach et al., 2006; Watson, 2005). This wide body of research, much of which is initiated by the NCAA and Knight Commission, provides insightful information to campus administrators and coaches about how they can best prepare student-athletes for the vigor of academia given their high level of commitment to sports and the subsequent time constraints (Estler, 2005; Hoch, 2009; Holm, 2009). For example, time spent on academics can have a significant impact on performance; Astin (1984/1999) theorizes that “the extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains” (p. 522). Thus, athletic administrators and coaches must understand the time constraints that student-athletes face and cultivate systems and processes to ensure they spend adequate time on academic development, especially for those at risk.

Although much research analyzed the impact that sport participation has on academic success, there exist gaps in knowledge as to what it takes to facilitate the at-risk student-athlete population at the Division I level with respect to persisting to graduation. By analyzing the results from this study, the intent is to provide information that will serve as a catalyst for improving academic performance of student-athletes by identifying specific challenges, interventions, and sources of support that influence academic outcomes with respect to persisting to graduation. In addition, by better understanding
the nuances of college athletics and its effect on academic success, institutions may be provided with tools to enhance overall success of student-athletes.

This being the case, the researcher collected and analyzed data from a criterion sample of student-athletes at SDSU consisted of both men and women from revenue and nonrevenue sports with an initial eligibility index score of 3,400 or below. The threshold of 3,400 was used as the at-risk cutoff as determined by university academic affairs, because student-athletes that score at or below this level signify a degree of risk compared to students above this level. “Academic Success” in this study was measured by the following indicators—Graduation Success Rate (GSR) and Grade Point Average (GPA)—all of which have a cumulative effect on persistence to graduation.

The research findings were achieved by collecting and analyzing data from a diverse population of student-athletes from various sports within the department, as well as key informants with vested interest in student-athlete academic success who can provide insight into the academic experiences of student-athletes. Specifically, qualitative data were collected through interviews with relevant on-campus leaders participants and key stakeholders who have a direct influence and vested interest to athletics—specifically, the director of Student-Athlete Academic Support Services (SAASS), the university president, the associate vice president of admissions, the associate vice president of student affairs, the faculty athletic representative, and the chair of the Intercollegiate Athletic Committee. These leaders were hand chosen because of their leadership responsibility and decision making that directly impacts at-risk student-athletes. Researchers contend that qualitative inquiry is framed around properly formatted interview questions and processes to explore social and human problems
Further, Merriam (1988) and Patton (2002) acknowledged that interviews should be structured in a manner conducive to answering the research questions. In doing so, the researcher shall seek to capture and describe information pertaining to experience, behavior, opinion, feelings, knowledge, senses, and background (Merriam, 1988). To this end, the interviews not only investigated university and departmental challenges related to student-athlete success, but also sought to better understand the educational challenges and opportunities faced by today’s student-athlete.

In addition, the quantitative method of inquiry will include one survey, the GOALS survey (see Appendix A), which has been used as a research instrument by the NCAA since 2006 and most recently administered nationally in 2010. This survey was designed to provide numeric descriptions of trends, attitudes, and opinions by studying a sample from a given population (Creswell, 2009). The GOALS survey project was initiated by Potuto and O’Hanlon (2006), two professors at the University of Nebraska, who received grant funding awarded by the NCAA research committee to conduct research focusing on the student-athlete experience on a systemic level. The purpose of the survey was two-fold: first, their inquiry pursued and gleaned experiential data, allowing them to add to the information base regarding student-athletes by asking this population to describe and evaluate their overall experience, specifically the assessment and effects of tradeoffs given their participation in athletics. Second, the goal was to use the responses to enhance the student experience of the student-athletes by assuring a well-rounded and quality educational experience. Funding for the project was awarded with the stipulation that questions would be included from the NCAA Study of College
Outcomes and Recent Experiences (SCORE) survey and also the ability to allow indirect comparisons to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Potuto and O’Hanlon also sought advice from several survey experts from the University of Nebraska, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Iowa and piloted the survey with a group of University of Nebraska student-athletes and subsequently used their feedback via focus groups to make improvements for the final draft. After the development and modification of the survey instrument in 2004, it was broadly administered to student-athletes in 2006 and 2010 that had completed at least 85 credit hours toward graduation at 18 Division IA universities (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006). In total, 611 schools participated in the study with \( N = 19,967 \); the Division I institutional response rate was 66% in 2006 and 56% in 2010.

The GOALS survey measured the extent to which students are engaged in all nuances of the overall college athletes’ experience, educationally-purposeful activities, and experiences at the institution providing data from the student-athletes’ perspective that has traditionally been in short supply. In the survey, student-athletes were asked to answer questions on a 5-point Likert scale; in addition, yes or no questions and written comments were included to amplify responses to particular questions in order to provide supplementary information. Overall, the GOALS survey, created by Potuto and O’Hanlon (2006), has been responsible for providing a vast amount of empirical data that has added to the body of knowledge within college athletics. Specifically, in their quest for discerning data that may indicate positives and negatives relevant to the college experiences for student-athletes, a favorable picture emerged from survey responses by a
large majority of participants. In total, Potuto and O’Hanlon recognized six major survey findings that stood out:

First, D1A student-athletes know that their participation in varsity athletics means that they miss out on other aspects of college life, both curricular and co-curricular. Second, D1A student-athletes regret some of the things that they miss. Third, D1A student-athletes value their athletics participation and believe that it both instills values independent of those derived from other aspects of college life and enhances particular skills and the overall college experience. Fourth, D1A student-athletes know that they make trade-offs to participate in varsity athletics. Fifth, D1A student-athletes rate those trade-offs as the acceptable, or more than acceptable, cost of athletics participation. Sixth, D1A student-athletes are satisfied with their overall college experience and the outcomes of that experience, curricular as well as co-curricular. (p. 81)

As their evidence suggested, the survey responses “clearly undercut oft-stated claims of some commentators that student-athletes are exploited or denied the opportunity to be ‘real’ students” (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006, p. 82). Moreover, there were only a few areas where responses indicated problems or offered suggestions for improvements, including missing out on internship and study abroad opportunities, challenging relationships with faculty, unrealistic expectation of competing in professional sports, and discrepancy between student-athletes perception of graduation and actual graduation rates.

In additional to the original GOALS survey questions, I included (a couple) internally derived questions focused specifically on dynamics of the SDSU athletic department and surveyed at-risk student-athletes and their experience as it pertained
directly to their participation in sport and the services they received as members of their perspective team. These dynamics included experiences that student-athletes are privileged to use compared to their nonathlete peers, such as tutoring, mentoring, on-site counseling, athletic department computer labs, study hall, and class scheduling priority. Other dynamics of athletic participation were also included and may be perceived by student-athletes and administrators as a disadvantage, such as the stresses of daily competition, time constraints (lack of sleep), out-of-state travel, media attention, public perception, and the pressure of winning. The use of these quantitative tools assisted in researching tendencies, attitudes, and practices that student-athletes experience throughout their tenure. These close-ended questions specifically focused on the purpose of the study with the goal of gathering numeric driven data to determine the relationship between variables that affect student-athlete academic success (Creswell, 2009).

Lastly, relevant departmental and institutional documents were included in this study by examining extant data. Specifically, data reports pertaining to GSR, student-athlete support services, and APR, along with other academic reports, strategic plans, student and staff handbooks, academic policy guides and other materials. Investigation through these varying means of inquiry assisted with triangulation of the data through different sources, methods, and theories.

**Theoretical Framework**

Academic achievement is the most researched and analyzed topic in higher education; within this system of academia, student development is a highly complex, multivariate process within diverse and complex institutions (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) adds a myriad of ways in which students are affected by their educational experiences and
many varying curricula, programs, faculty, peer groups, and college environments that impact student development. Specifically, Astin noted that environmental activities, such as athletics, complement the academic curriculum of the university and may augment the student’s overall experience; thus, almost any type of student involvement activity outside the classroom may positively affect their individual growth and development. The conceptual framework of Astin’s Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) research guided the methodology of this study to glean insight into how athletic participation impacts academic success for at-risk student-athletes given the varying inputs and environments at SDSU. In employing the I-E-O model for studying college impact variables on student-athletes, the “inputs” refer to the student’s entering characteristics (i.e., eligibility index score, demographics, academic background), the “environment” refers to that which the student is exposed to during their experience (i.e., programs, policies, peers, faculty, academic support, etc.), and the “outcomes” refers to the student’s characteristics after exposure and interaction within the environment (i.e., knowledge, attitude, beliefs, and values, Astin, 1993).

The significance of Astin’s (1993) I-E-O model, and respective application to this study, is its ability to allow the researcher to measure student transformation during their tenure by comparing outcome characteristics with input characteristics (Comeaux, 2005). There is rather significant literature that has resulted from the investigation of Astin’s theory and its effect on the development phenomenon that occurs with athletic participation in college (Aries et al., 2004; Autry, 2010; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Kuh, 2001; Umbach et al., 2006). This framework’s purpose is to access the impact of various environmental experiences by determining varying
growth or change given varying environmental conditions and the subsequent growth or change with respect to outcome and input variables (Astin, 1993). For example, the investigation into input characteristics, such as the precollege variables of high school GPA, demographics, socioeconomic status, and first generation students may assist student-athlete support personal in better serving their students. Moreover, with regard to student-athlete support services, Autry (2010) noted that existing literature remains inconclusive in that it does not clarify what variables predict the academic success for this diverse population of students. Astin (1993) posits that studying student-athlete development with the I-E-O model will provide a better basis for understanding how to achieve desired academic outcomes. Overall, this framework is beneficial for this research because it examines the impact of numerous environments on student-athlete outcomes at SDSU, by controlling for their entering characteristics and environmental experiences. For the purpose of this study, the I-E-O framework was used to guide my research through the analysis of the NCAA GOALS survey instrument results (see Figure 1). Through this process, the maximum amount of information was sought about the possible connections between educational practices and outcomes (Astin, 1993). For these reasons, the I-E-O framework served as the foundation for design of this study and guided the methodology.

**Restatement of the Key Research Questions**

1. What are the academic outcomes of student-athletes who are identified as at-risk when they enter the university?

2. What (if any) significant differences exist in academic outcomes for student-athletes identified as at-risk when data are disaggregated by gender, major, sport, year in school, and eligibility index?

3. What factors serve as barriers and/or sources of support that facilitate academic progress among at-risk student-athletes identified as at-risk at San Diego State University?

4. What strategies can be implemented at the departmental and institutional levels to improve retention, academic performance, and GSR for student-athletes, specifically the at-risk population?

Research Design and Methods

As noted, this research design utilized a case method approach aimed at investigating student-athlete persistence and academic performance towards the ultimate
goal of graduation. Yin (2009) defines the research design as the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to the study’s initial research questions, from which I ultimately supported my conclusions.

**Research Tradition**

This case study implored a mixed methods approach as a means to collecting data, including qualitative, quantitative, and document analysis. Research participants were asked to complete the quantitative portion of the study via anonymous web-based surveys (student-athletes) or participate in the qualitative portion of the study via interviews (staff). Qualitative data were gathered at SDSU through interviews conducted with key institutional leaders lasting approximately 1 hour. No comparisons will result from this exercise; however, I sought a purposeful sample of campus administrators, including the university president, academic support staff, enrollment services personnel, relevant student-affairs administrators, and the faculty athletic representative who can provide insight into the experiences, challenges, and factors that facilitate academic success for student-athletes. Quantitative data were gathered using a survey instrument conducted anonymously from a select group of current at-risk student-athletes. The survey consisted of the NCAA GOALS survey questions which were distributed to the at-risk student-athletes through the athletic department’s Grades First system and was expected to take approximately 45 minutes to complete.

**Research Setting and Context**

This study was conducted at SDSU, specifically the Division I athletic program within the institution. San Diego State University is one of the largest public urban comprehensive institutions located in the southwestern region of the United States that
serves a diverse population exceeding over 30,000 students. The department of athletics typically houses over 550 student-athletes who participate in one of 19 sports sponsored at the institution; these students averaged a cumulative GPA of 2.6 or higher over the most recent 3 academic years. Student-athletes at SDSU are recruited nationally and internationally, some of whom receive grant-in-aids to fund their college expenses.

In April of every year, the athletic department honors a large percentage of its diverse student-athlete population as scholar athletes. Such an award is granted to athletes who earned a 3.0 cumulative GPA or 3.2 semester GPA in the previous academic year. The 2010-11, 2011-12, and 2012-13 academic years were academically prosperous for the athletic department; the number of scholar athletes within the entire population each year were 256 of 553, 275 of 601, and 305 of 604, respectively. The site was chosen due to my interest in investigating and analyzing the student-athletes academic performance within the department of athletics. In addition, due to my role within the department, I have a vested interest in seeing the student-athletes matriculate to graduation. Therefore, investigation into this topic will provide findings that will increase awareness and understanding as to how the institution and athletic department can better serve the student-athlete population with their goal of earning a college degree. By better understanding success mechanisms, or the lack thereof, my intent is to explore potential interventions that could help student-athletes persist to graduation.

The mission of SDSU is to provide well-balanced, high quality education for a diverse population of undergraduate and graduate students and to contribute to the knowledge and solution of problems through excellence and distinction in teaching, research, and service. The university imparts an appreciation and broad understanding of
human experience throughout the world and the ages, and focuses on human growth and development. San Diego State University accomplishes educational practices through its many, diverse departments and interdisciplinary programs in the creative and performing arts, the humanities, the natural and mathematical sciences, and the social and behavioral sciences. This commitment to academic excellence has created a proud community of educators, students, and public supporters (SDSU, 2011a).

Similarly, the mission of the institution’s athletic department is to support the university mission by providing a balanced, high-quality education for student-athletes, and by serving the university community, alumni, and friends through success and distinction within an environment of uncompromising integrity. The goal of the department is the same as that of the university: excellence. That excellence is to be demonstrated in graduation of student-athletes, service, and competitive success against major collegiate competition. Intercollegiate Athletics recognizes its role in promoting school pride and uniting students, faculty, staff, and alumni through shared experiences. It will strive to be recognized as a leader in diversity and inclusion, and will promote an environment of teamwork, leadership, and personal accountability (SDSU, 2011b). The alignment of missions between the university and athletics speaks of the cohesion of the two entities. This study used these parallels to assist in interpretation of data and its relevance in assisting student-athletes to persist towards graduation by means of institutional and departmental support mechanisms.

The target population for this study consisted of current at-risk student-athletes at SDSU who were admitted to the university with an eligibility index at or below 3,400. The athletic department has been trending higher in academic performance as witnessed
by the highest number of scholar-athletes since commencing the award in 1995; as previously stated, 305 individuals were honored in 2012-13. The department has also reduced probation rates by 27% from the fall of 2009 to fall of 2010, and multi-year APR increases from 10 of the 18 teams. This study is positioned to address the reasons as to how and why these increases are being accomplished given the high percentage of academically at-risk student-athletes.

During this study, there were several contextual issues that needed consideration during data collection. First, the university has experienced a major budget reduction since 2008 that has subsequently impacted the operating budget of the athletic department. As a result, they have been forced to eliminate support positions, some of which were mentors and tutors, which directly impacted the academic servicing of student-athletes. In addition, there were three major changes of leadership since 2009: the first being the athletic director, second being the university president, and lastly the director of SAASS. This change in leadership may suggest philosophical or managerial modifications to policy and procedure that may impact academic support and, in turn, affect academic performance of student-athletes. Lastly, as a result of state budget cuts, SDSU has reduced many of its class offerings creating scheduling challenges and potential delays in graduation and admittance into major field of study.

**Sampling Participants**

The subjects for this study included student-athletes from a select population of at-risk groups, identified by an incoming index score of 3,400 or below. This select group of student-athletes was chosen to investigate how this at-risk population feels about their overall college experience and the factors that help or hinder their ability to succeed
academically given its unique challenges. The university holistically analyzed historical academic performance levels based on incoming eligibility index scores to establish a threshold for determining at-risk status. They found that students with scores above 3,400 have a decent chance to actually graduate, while individuals with scores below 3,400 had much lower graduation rates. The cutoff of 3,400 was justified by the university as the at-risk group due to its vulnerability to matriculate to graduation, and, as such, it is why the athletic department adopted the same measure. By studying the overall college experience and ensuing academic performance of this group, information will be gleaned that will assist institutional and department personnel in aiding at-risk student-athletes’ matriculation to graduation. Understanding the challenges and potential intervention strategies that assist this group towards academic success may also assist similar populations or even the student-athletes with high academic credentials.

The subjects include student-athletes between the ages of 18-23, males and females from varying teams, and typically include approximately half of each first-time freshman cohort admits for a total population of \( N = 182 \), some of whom have been categorized into special admittance status upon entering the institution. Special admits fall into the following categories as determined by the university, and the athletic department is limited on how many category A and B students they can admit each year (see Appendix B, Special and Program Athletic Admissions Policy).

*Category A*—Not CSU eligible due to index below 2,900.

*Category B*—Not CSU eligible due to missing course other than English or Math, such as Visual and Performing Arts.
Program admits (formerly Category C)—not SDSU eligible, students do not meet the SDSU index (4,000+).

The recruitment source was within the department of athletics; specifically, the researcher obtained the list of student-athletes that fall into the at-risk category from the academic support services department. Once the list of subjects was obtained, I screened it for accuracy to ensure that the all subjects have an eligibility index score at or below the threshold criteria of 3,400; all subjects 3,400 or below were surveyed.

**Data Collection Strategies**

Student development is a highly complex multivariate process within a highly sophisticated and diverse institutional environment. This being the case, there are many ways that students are subjected to varying educational experiences, such as programs, kinds of curricula, peer groups, and college environments (Astin, 1993). To investigate the student-athlete academic success phenomenon within the SDSU environment, I administered one quantitative survey to the given population. The instrument I utilized is the GOALS survey (see Appendix A) and was administered anonymously to the student-athletes through the athletic department’s Grade First system where they were provided a link to Survey Monkey to anonymously complete the survey. “The GOALS survey provides objective and attitudinal data from student-athletes on possible academic and social trade-offs and sacrifices they have made in order to participate in collegiate athletics” (NCAA, 2012a, n.p.). Kuh (2001) posits that student engagement represents activities associated with learning, such as reading and writing, class preparation, and interaction with faculty and other academic support personnel. In addition, Kuh mentioned that student engagement also includes activities considered important
outcomes of college, listing peer collaboration for problem solving and working together productively within the community to enhance the educational experience. Thus, participation in educational purposeful activities, such as athletics, may directly influence the quality of student-athletes’ learning and their overall experience. The GOALS survey was used as an ideal instrument to collect and analyze data with regards to the overall experience of the select student-athlete population.

The internally derived survey questions that were added to the GOALS survey consisted of questions related directly to the student-athletes’ experience as it pertained to their athletic participation, academic support services, time-constraints, and perspective on their experience as a student-athlete at SDSU. Similar to the GOALS survey, these questions were closed-ended and investigated the overall experience of the student-athletes. Moreover, they also addressed more specific questions aimed at determining the challenges that must be overcome for the population to persist towards graduation and the support mechanisms that assist them along the way. The survey was not pilot tested prior to being fully administered because its validity and reliability have already been tested and reviewed in two previous studies conducted by a NCAA research team in 2006 and 2010. Due to the reliability of the existing survey instrument, and its use by the NCAA, the survey was not piloted, and materials can be gathered without variability with the experimental group (Creswell, 2009).

I also conducted qualitative research consisting of several interviews with key stakeholders on campus who have a direct influence and vested interest to athletics—specifically, the director of SAASS, the university president, the associate vice president of admissions, the associate vice president of student affairs, the faculty athletic
representative, and the chair of the Intercollegiate Athletic Committee. This process was used as a means to explore and understand the meaning these individuals ascribe to the student-athlete academic performance phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Each participant was interviewed one time for approximately 1 hour, all from the same set of questions. Interviews were performed in the natural setting of each individual’s office or my office with face-to-face interaction throughout the process. Each interview was digitally recorded and finally transcribed by a third party so the data could be analyzed. From the transcriptions, the data were transferred to Saturate, a web based program, where the data were categorized and coded for further analysis as a means to establish qualitative themes and subthemes.

Lastly, I collected and analyzed extant data from the athletic department (SAASS) that was utilized to test mean differences in variables affecting academic performance. Specifically, I investigated at-risk student-athlete academic performance records that contain GPA information, as well as independent variables, and GSR of previous cohorts. Information from the extant data assisted with triangulation of data from the surveys and interviews as a means to formulate findings and recommendations pertaining to the significance of the study.

**Data Analysis**

As indicated, the researcher established four questions to investigate academic performance and overall experience for at-risk student athletes at SDSU. Questions 1 and 2 were investigated using extant data for this population obtained from SAASS to determine academic outcomes based on a set of variables. In an effort to demonstrate the relationship between academic outcome, in this case the dependent variable college GPA,
and independent variables of gender, major, sport, year in school, and eligibility index score, extant data obtained from SAASS was used to conduct a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test mean differences between variables. The ANOVA performed satisfied the assumptions that values in each group were normally distributed, the cases represented a random sample from the population and are independent of one another, and homogeneity of variance is the dependent variable for all factors (Hinton, Brownlow, McMurray, & Cozens, 2004). Data representing all dependent and independent variables were provided to the researcher in an Excel spreadsheet, with all names redacted to protect confidentiality of the sample population of $N = 182$; 6 individuals were rejected from the sample due to missing data for a total of $N = 176$. In some cases, ACT scores were converted to SAT scores to enable the researcher to calculate the eligibility index score of students in the sample population. The sample represented the total at-risk student-athlete population enrolled full-time during the 2012-13 academic year. Due to the sample size, several predictor variables within the model were combined to reduce statistical error and provide new measures to improve reliability. The grouping variable of major area of study was collapsed into business, communications, science technology (STEM), social sciences, and other. The grouping variable of sport was reduced into revenue and nonrevenue; in doing so, basketball, football, baseball, softball, and volleyball were identified as revenue sports, and all others were identified as nonrevenue sports. For the purpose of this study, revenue sports were categorized as such, due to paid admission requirements for their home contests. With the exception of the aforementioned five sports, admission is free to all other sports’ home contests, thus the appropriate categorization within the revenue variable. Index score was quartiled as 0
through 2,974 = 1; 2,975 through 3,146 = 2; 3,147 through 3,295 = 3; and 3,296 through 3,400 = 4 to allow for testing of predictability within these ranges. Within this quartiled scale, 1 represented the lower index scores, and 4 represented the higher scores, respectively. Data were transferred from the Excel document into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software reviewed for accuracy within each data column. To further explore the relationship between variables and their significance, Levene’s test of homogeneity of variances was used to test for differences assumptions of equal variance. In addition, the Welch test for equality of means was used for the omnibus test. Lastly, for ANOVA the post hoc Dunnett C analysis was used to test overall difference between groups consisting of three or more that showed overall significance.

Additional quantitative analysis was conducted using the results from the GOALS survey instrument that was sent to the same group of at-risk student-athletes identified as such during the 2012-13 academic year. These data were used to answer research question 3 pertaining to sources of support, factors that serve as barriers, and the overall experiences that the at-risk student-athletes face in their environment. The surveys were administered to the entire population (\( N = 182 \)) in June 2013; however, only six responses were collected due to summer break. The surveys were redistributed in August 2013 at the beginning of the fall semester via the Grades First system; it should be noted that no changes were made to the survey itself. The second survey distribution was received by a reduced population of 31 students due to departure from the university for reasons such as graduation, transfer, or other factors. Of the 151 at-risk student-athletes included in the final survey request, 97 of them completed the GOALS survey for a total rate of return of 64%. Although the extant data received by SAASS did not include ethnicity of the
Participating in the GOALS survey, the following ethnic composition was reported from the respondents: 4.1% \((N = 4)\) American Indian or Alaskan Native; 4.1% \((N = 4)\) Asian; 19.6% \((N = 19)\) Black or African American; 14.4% \((N = 14)\) Hispanic or Latino; 5.2% \((N = 5)\) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 68% \((N = 66)\) White; and 3.1% \((N = 3)\) Other. The survey responses were analyzed for accuracy, downloaded from a password protected Survey Monkey account, and then finally uploaded into SPSS. First, correlations between variables were tested to determine the relationship between predictor variables. Correlations were used to identify variables with a significant association with the outcome (GPA). A series of forward multiple regression analyses were conducted to test for predictability of the variables and academic performance. Effect size was determined using \(N^2\) with the following scale: .01 small, .06 medium, .14 large. Because I was especially interested in the differential impact of these variables and their effect on academic success, data were reported using the standardized beta.

Qualitative analysis from the in-person interviews resulted in the development of raw textual data or transcribed material that was gathered and analyzed to explore question 4 and add context to question 3. It should be noted that the proper names of the participants have been changed to protect their confidentiality, as they are all leaders at the institution. In order to validate the accuracy of the information, I first read through all of the transcripts, scanning for a general sense of the information and giving time to reflect on its overall meaning. In doing so, I made notes in the margins that speak to the ideas or message that is being conveyed. After reading through all of the transcripts, I hand coded the data by identifying salient themes and subthemes. Once major themes and subthemes emerged, I entered the information into Saturate, a web-based software system, to assist
with interrelating themes of the data. Finally, I analyzed the data from Saturate by synthesizing coded data in order to explore and report an interpretation of the findings and how they relate to the research questions.

**Risks**

There are always inherent risks involved with research that involves human subjects. My objective was to minimize the risk factors by having a well-tested set of survey questions that had been previously used by a group of NCAA researchers to collect similar data. The student-athletes, as well as the interview participants, provided information on a completely voluntary basis and were informed of the research objective before they completed the survey or interview. Due to the nature of the study, and the instruments used, the risks involved in participation will be minimal. Confidentiality of the survey participants was paramount due to their student status and their involvement in the athletic department and my role as an administrator in the same environment. At no time were the students asked to identify themselves when completing the survey questionnaire. The collected data were stored within the electronic survey instrument, transferred to an Excel spreadsheet, and finally entered into the SPSS system. Data were stored in a password protected personal PC until the completion of the study.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness of a research investigation is important to evaluating its worth and involves establishing four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Shenton (2004) summarizes that researchers should be aware of criticisms made by detractors and provision their study to address issues, such as these four criteria. In order to establish and achieve
trustworthiness in this research, it was imperative that I considered the four elements of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. In doing so, I utilized data triangulation and peer debriefing through my committee and other constituents, all the while auditing the findings with full transparency. I also ensured the validity of the study by seeking the intentions of interpreting what the challenges are for achieving academic success and how personnel can best support the student-athletes. Member checking was also used to assess trustworthiness in this study. Specifically, interviewees were offered a copy of the transcript from their interviews. Additionally, I offered each interviewee to review her/his transcript and make any changes they wish to make. The study was systematically organized through published literature and design to ensure reliability should the study be repeated in the future.

**Role of the Researcher**

I have worked in athletics for over 18 years, most recently serving in an executive management role within the department. My background includes serving as an athletic equipment manager where I was fortunate to work closely with student-athletes and observe their growth as a result of their participation in athletics. Being engaged in the athletic community during my career has created a vast respect for the student-athlete and the amount of responsibility and commitment that is required to be successful. This involvement has also prompted personal assumptions and bias as to the role athletics plays in the student-athlete experience. I believe college athletics provides a vast opportunity for student-athletes to gain valuable life skills that positivity influence their future. Skills, such as leadership, time management, determination, teamwork, and integrity can all result from athletic participation. I also believe the student-athlete
experience is one that can escalate someone from good to great. By means of this investigative case-study, I learned and acknowledge key aspects of the function of athletics on a Division I campus and explore how participation impacts the at-risk student-athletes.

**Limitations**

This study was limited due to my involvement/position within upper management in the department. As a result, the lens from which I interpreted and reported the data may have been concluded with a degree of bias. Also, although I have a direct connection to the topic, there is occasional, but not daily interaction with members of the SAASS staff or the at-risk student-athlete population. Potential problems may include, but are not limited to, confidentially of the athletes due to the researcher’s position within the organization, willingness of peer administrators and staff to participate in qualitative interviews, biased opinion of academic success, schedule challenges of interviewees, university support initiatives that assist with athletic groups, and validity of survey results based on participant bias and assumptions. Specifically, the definition of the academically at-risk student-athlete, stated at an index of 3,400, may not capture the entire population of those needing intervention to persist to graduation. Thus, the data analyzed in this research may be void of information pertaining to those at-risk with an index surpassing 3,400 that would otherwise fall into this category due to varying criteria, such as English as a second language, academic background, or various learning disabilities that may inhibit their ability to persist to graduation. In addition, due to my position within the department, I may not have received candid responses from colleagues being interviewed. To this point, due to my position, I was not able to personally
interview the student-athletes, which limited the inclusion of the student-athlete voice in the findings. Lastly, my inherent involvement in the organization being studied may have shaped the interpretations of the data.

Summary

The at-risk student-athlete population at SDSU is a diverse group of students that warrants serious discussion and, perhaps, intervention to assist in the quest for graduation. By utilizing a mixed methods approach to research, this study focused on gaining insight into the reasons for academic success, or lack thereof, for this population and the means by which departmental and institutional support can assist with matriculation towards graduation. Given the depth of information analyzed to draw conclusions to the phenomenon, proper methodological approaches and practices were paramount to obtaining credible results. As a result, the chosen methods were approached in a manner consistent with prescribed practice to ensure trustworthiness of the study. The research was designed to offer results that can assist SDSU with enabling their students to persist to graduation and offer a plan that may help peer institutions with the same problem. The following chapter reports the results of the data obtained through the previously described means of investigation.
CHAPTER 4—RESULTS

This case study sought to explore four questions presented in Chapter 1 pertaining to at-risk student-athletes’ experience and academic performance at San Diego State University (SDSU). Focused on the development of student-athletes and their ability to matriculate to graduation, as well as their overall experiences given their participation, this case study assessed the academic performance of this population and the perspective of institutional leaders with regards to college athletics. Extant data and documents collected from SDSU athletics, as well as the findings from student-athlete survey data and in-person staff interviews, are presented in this chapter.

Document Analysis and Extant Data

The researcher reviewed several documents and data sets germane to the SDSU athletic department. Specifically, these documents were relevant to academic performance of student-athletes and offered the researcher a current and historical perspective on the academic status of the area being studied. During the investigative analysis of the department’s academic documents and data, there existed a plethora of information due to the complexity of the organization; the researcher opted to report the most significant internal material pertinent to this study.

Student-Athlete Admissions Summary

The 2012-13 student-athlete admissions summary, as depicted in Table 2, lists the annual institutional admissions by sport and gender. This informal table is used to track and categorize student-athletes that are admitted to the institution in four distinct categories: (a) regular admits, (b) category A admits, (c) category B admits, and (d) program admits.
Table 2
2012-13 Admissions Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Category A</th>
<th>Category B</th>
<th>Program Admit</th>
<th>Contracts</th>
<th>Total A/B Program</th>
<th>Percent A/B/Program</th>
<th>Total Special</th>
<th>Percent Special</th>
<th>Total Admits</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Basketball</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Soccer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Tennis</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men’s Total</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>W Basketball</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lacrosse</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rowing</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>W Soccer</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>Softball</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>71</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Tennis</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track/CC</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>Water Polo</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>63</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women’s Total</td>
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<td>47</td>
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<td>55</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>122</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL SPORTS</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>192</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• *Category A*—Not CSU eligible due to index below 2,900.

• *Category B*—Not CSU eligible due to missing course other than English or Math, such as Visual and Performing Arts.

• *Program admits (formerly Category C)*—not SDSU eligible, students do not meet the SDSU index (4,000+)

The admissions summary provides an easy to read snapshot that lists the total number of admits by sport and the percentage of each team’s incoming students that fall within one of these categories. In the 2012-13 academic year, 70 male and 122 female student-athletes were admitted; the summary reported the following breakdown: 81 regular, 11 category A, 20 category B, and 80 program admits. The total number of special admissions within category A was 11, 7 males and 4 females. The total number of category B admits was 20, 7 males and 13 females. As indicated on Table 2, these admissions data indicated a low percentage of overall special admissions. As a result, the athletic department is not using a full allotment of their special admissions allowed by the institution. Appendix C includes the official admission policy signed by the president and states the number of allowable special admissions annually granted to the athletic department.

The data included in this summary are used internally by the department and also shared with university admissions, the FAR, and the Intercollegiate Athletics Committee to track regular and special admits to ensure athletics is not allowing a high number of special admits in one particular sport. This summary reflects the department’s efforts to monitor the varying admissions categories as to not exceed the university’s established threshold for special admission of potentially at-risk student-athletes.
Graduation Rates Report

The 2003-06 Graduation Rates Report is prepared by the NCAA based on data provided by the institution in compliance with NCAA Bylaw 18.4.2.2.1 (admissions and graduation-rate disclosure) and the federal Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act (NCAA, 2011). This report provides information about two groups of students at the college or university: (a) all undergraduate students who were enrolled in a full-time program of study for a degree, and (b) student-athletes who received athletics aid from the college or university for any period of time during their entering year. The report reflects graduation data by percentage from 2006, the most recent graduating class in which the required 6 years of information is collected including sport category and self-reported racial or ethnic groups. The report reflected a 2006-07 cohort Federal Graduation Rate (FGR) of 62% for all students and 62% for student-athletes, indicating both groups are graduating at exactly the same rate. However, the Graduation Success Rate (GSR) of the student-athletes population in the same year was 75% when midyear admits and transfers are considered, as well as those subtracted from the cohort due to allowable exclusions or departure from the institution while in good academic standing. This report is utilized by the department and the institution to review graduation data for the general student population and student-athletes to communicate graduation success to internal and external groups. Although GSR is a more forgiving calculation of degree completion, the numbers indicate academic achievement of the student-athlete population is encouraging all else considered.
APR Summary

The APR summary, depicted in Table 3, is an internal document generated by SAASS that reports all of the athletic teams’ 4-year APR totals. Figure 2 also provides a graphic representation of these data. In addition to reporting APR scores, this report also notes APR benchmarks for postseason eligibility and APR benchmarks to avoid penalties as stipulated by the NCAA. With APR now being the benchmark on how athlete teams are performing academically, this document is used by SAASS, athletic administrators, and coaches to monitor each team’s academic performance and the need to support at-risk students that may negatively impact these team scores. The report displayed the single year APR scores from the 2009-10 academic year to 2012-13 and also included the multi-year APR scores for all inclusive years. This report is especially useful because it depicts APR points lost in the most previous year and the maximum number of points that could be lost by teams in the 2012-13 academic year in order to avoid NCAA penalty. In addition, the report provides bar chart data specific to overall eligibility and retention points earned by all sport teams. This data set provides a useful overview for coaches, SAASS leadership, and athletic administration to monitor APR status and establish academic improvement plans if the index scores fall around the 930 benchmark warranting program intervention.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The following section reports at-risk student-athlete statistical data obtained from SAASS for the 2012-13 academic year, as well as survey data collected from the at-risk population during the same year. As described in Chapter 3, the extant data obtained from SAASS was used to analyze academic outcomes. Subsequently, the NCAA
# Table 3

*Academic Performance Rate*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>2009-10 single yr APR</th>
<th>2010-11 single yr APR</th>
<th>2011-12 single yr APR</th>
<th>2012-13 single yr APR</th>
<th>2012-13 multi yr APR</th>
<th>Points lost in 2012-13</th>
<th>2012-13 max pts that could be lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>881</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>980</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Basketball</td>
<td>958</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>958</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Golf</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Soccer</td>
<td>948</td>
<td>989</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>962</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Tennis</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>973</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Basketball</td>
<td>921</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>948</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W X-Country</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Rowing</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>982</td>
<td>976</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Golf</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacrosse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>934</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Softball</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>972</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Soccer</td>
<td>923</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swim/Diving</td>
<td>953</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>982</td>
<td>991</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Tennis</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor Track</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Track</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>945</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>948</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Volleyball</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W Water Polo</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>980</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept Avg</td>
<td>949.94</td>
<td>961.67</td>
<td>958.89</td>
<td>975.58</td>
<td>963.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2. Academic performance rates.
GOALS survey was used to gather investigative data pertaining to the overall experience of the at-risk student-athlete population at SDSU. In both cases, this statistical data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software to investigate academic performance of this unique student population.

**Academic Outcomes**

Academic outcomes of the at-risk population were tested by conducting one-way ANOVA to investigate mean differences between variables. The purpose of this analysis is to determine if these are differences in the dependent variable of GPA and the independent variables of student status within the population including gender, major, sport, year in school, and eligibility index score. The data set used for this ANOVA exercise was provided by SAASS from the 2012-13 academic year and was inclusive of the aforementioned dependent and independent variables. The data set provided a population sample of \( N = 176 \), all of whom were categorized as at-risk due to an incoming eligibility index score at or below 3,400.

Table 4 shows the mean GPA for gender, females 2.71 (\( SD = .535, N = 85 \)) and for males 2.55 (\( SD = .437, N = 91 \)). The minimum and maximum GPAs for females ranged from 1.20 to 3.80 and for males .92 to 3.90. The Levene test of homogeneity of variances was significant difference \( p = .043 \). As such, the Welch test for equality of means was used. This test indicated there was a significant difference between females and males, asymptotic \( F = 4.443, p = .037 \). The \( n^2 \) was .03; this represents a small effect size. Figure 3 depicts the mean plots of female and male GPA.

Table 5 shows the mean GPA for at-risk student-athletes depending on their major: business 2.91 (\( SD = .451, N = 17 \)), communications 2.75 (\( SD = .396, N = 22 \)),
Table 4

*Gender Descriptives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Std. error</th>
<th>Lower bound</th>
<th>Upper bound</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>2.7075</td>
<td>.53497</td>
<td>.05803</td>
<td>2.5921</td>
<td>2.8229</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>2.5516</td>
<td>.43732</td>
<td>.04584</td>
<td>2.4606</td>
<td>2.6427</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>2.6269</td>
<td>.49176</td>
<td>.03707</td>
<td>2.5538</td>
<td>2.7001</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3.* Mean plot gender.
Table 5

Major Descriptives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Std. error</th>
<th>Lower bound</th>
<th>Upper bound</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.9135</td>
<td>.45101</td>
<td>.10939</td>
<td>2.6816</td>
<td>3.1454</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.7518</td>
<td>.39637</td>
<td>.08451</td>
<td>2.5761</td>
<td>2.9276</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.5790</td>
<td>.68356</td>
<td>.14917</td>
<td>2.2679</td>
<td>2.8902</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2.4791</td>
<td>.39050</td>
<td>.04539</td>
<td>2.3886</td>
<td>2.5695</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.7300</td>
<td>.52817</td>
<td>.08150</td>
<td>2.5654</td>
<td>2.8946</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>2.6269</td>
<td>.49176</td>
<td>.03707</td>
<td>2.5538</td>
<td>2.7001</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STEM 2.58 (SD = .684, N = 21), social sciences 2.48 (SD = .391, N = 74), and other 2.73 (SD = .528, N = 42). The minimum and maximum GPAs by major ranged from 2.68 to 3.15 for business, 2.57 to 2.93 for communications, 2.27 to 2.89 for STEM, 2.39 to 2.57 for social science, and 2.57 to 2.89 for other. The Levene test of homogeneity of variances was significant, p = .045. As such, the Welch test for equality of means was used. This test indicated there was a significant difference between majors asymptotic F = 5.070, p = .002. The $n^2$ was .28; this represents a large effect size in GPA between these majors. The Dunnett C post hoc analysis was used, due to the type of data employed, as well as the large sample size, and revealed there was significant difference (.43) in GPA between business and social sciences majors. This indicates that business majors have a higher GPA than social science majors and accounts for the largest
difference in GPA between majors. No other significant differences were identified.

Figure 4 depicts the mean plots of major and GPA.

![Figure 4. Mean plot major.](image)

Table 6 shows the mean GPA for athletes that participate in revenue 2.53 (SD = .398, N = 93) and nonrevenue sports 2.74 (SD = .562, N = 83). The minimum and maximum GPA for revenue sports ranged from 1.81 to 3.90 and for nonrevenue sports .92 to 3.8, respectively. The Levene test of homogeneity of variances was significant p = .007. As such, the Welch test for equality of means was used. This test indicated there was a significant difference between sport participation asymptotic, F = 5.070, p = .006. The $n^2$ of .05 was approaching a medium effect size in GPA between participation in revenue or nonrevenue sports. Figure 5 depicts the mean plots of participation in revenue and nonrevenue sports and GPA.
Table 6

*Sport Participation Descriptives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Std. error</th>
<th>Lower bound</th>
<th>Upper bound</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revenue</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>2.5302</td>
<td>.39800</td>
<td>.04127</td>
<td>2.4482</td>
<td>2.6122</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonrevenue</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2.7353</td>
<td>.56203</td>
<td>.06169</td>
<td>2.6126</td>
<td>2.8580</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>2.6269</td>
<td>.49176</td>
<td>.03707</td>
<td>2.5538</td>
<td>2.7001</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5.* Sport participation mean plot.
Table 7 shows the mean GPA for athletes by year in school: freshman 2.79 ($SD = .604, N = 50$), sophomore 2.51 ($SD = .556, N = 83$), junior 2.55 ($SD = .365, N = 47$), and senior 2.63 ($SD = .310, N = 37$). The minimum and maximum GPA for year in school for freshman was 2.62 to 2.96, sophomore 2.34 to 2.69, junior 2.46 to 2.66, and senior 2.53 to 2.73. The Levene test of homogeneity of variances was significant, $p = .001$. As such, the Welch test for equality of means was used. This test indicated there was no significant difference between year in school and GPA for student-athletes, $p = n.s.$ Figure 6 depicts the mean plots of year in school and GPA.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Std. error</th>
<th>95% confidence interval for mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2.7912</td>
<td>.60447</td>
<td>.08549</td>
<td>2.6194</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.5119</td>
<td>.55587</td>
<td>.08577</td>
<td>2.3387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2.5534</td>
<td>.36474</td>
<td>.05320</td>
<td>2.4463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.6289</td>
<td>.31042</td>
<td>.05103</td>
<td>2.5254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>2.6269</td>
<td>.49176</td>
<td>.03707</td>
<td>2.5538</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 shows the mean GPA for quartiled index score 0 through 2,974 = 1; 2,975 through 3,146 = 2; 3,147 through 3,295 = 3; and 3,296 through 3,400 = 4. The mean GPA in the quartiles were Q1 2.54 ($SD = .459, N = 43$), Q2 2.53 ($SD = .567, N = 44$), Q3 2.68 ($SD = .432, N = 45$), and Q4 2.74 ($SD = .492, N = 40$). The Levene test of homogeneity of variances was not significant, $p = n.s.$ The ANOVA also revealed that the difference between groups was no significant $F = 1.8, p = n.s.$ Figure 7 depicts the mean plots of quartiled index and GPA.
Figure 6. Year in school mean plot.

Table 8

Eligibility Index Score Descriptives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Std. error</th>
<th>Lower bound</th>
<th>Upper bound</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2.5433</td>
<td>.45901</td>
<td>.07000</td>
<td>2.4020</td>
<td>2.6845</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.5300</td>
<td>.56649</td>
<td>.08540</td>
<td>2.3578</td>
<td>2.7022</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2.6769</td>
<td>.43249</td>
<td>.06447</td>
<td>2.5470</td>
<td>2.8068</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.7363</td>
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<td>.07782</td>
<td>2.5789</td>
<td>2.8936</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>2.6197</td>
<td>.49335</td>
<td>.03762</td>
<td>2.5455</td>
<td>2.6940</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This research also examined the relationship between college GPA, high school GPA, and incoming eligibility index score. Given that index score is a function of high-school GPA (HSGPA) and SAT/ACT test scores, the researcher expected to see a significant relationship; the correlation between HSGPA and index score was strong, \( r = .751, p < .001 \). Of most interest was the relationship between cumulative GPA (CGPA) with HSGPA and index score; HSGPA was significantly related to CGPA, \( r = .148, p = .049 \). However, index score was not significantly related to CGPA, \( r = .131, p = .084 \). These relationships are shown in Table 9.
### Table 9

**CGPA, HSGPA, and Eligibility Index Correlation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>CFPA</th>
<th>HSGPA</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CGPA</strong></td>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HSGPA</strong></td>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>.148*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>182</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.751**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation Among Predictor Variables and CGPA**

A total of 90 items were examined to determine whether or not they were correlated to CGPA; of the 90 items only 21 were found to be significantly associated with the outcome. The primary outcome of interest in this study was college GPA for academic success of at-risk student-athletes. Students’ perceptions of the unlikelihood to become a professional or Olympic athlete were positively correlated with CGPA, \( r = .298, p = .005 \). Students who considered themselves a dedicated student were positively correlated with CGPA, \( r = .227, p = .035 \). Student-athlete’s perception of how other students’ viewed them, as more of an athlete than a student, were negatively correlated with CGPA, \( r = -.374, p = .000 \). Student-athletes who felt like their professors viewed them as more of an athlete than a student was negatively correlated with CGPA, \( r = -.337, p = .002 \). Student-athletes who felt their professors discriminated against them...
because of their sport participation was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.212$, $p = .050$. Student-athletes who felt some of their professors favored them because of their sport participation was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.248$, $p = .021$. The following correlations describe student-athlete’s classroom or study experiences so far in college: putting off studying more than I should was negatively correlated with CGPA $r = -0.075$, $p = .529$; finding it hard to pay attention during lectures was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.051$, $p = .670$; when work gets difficult I either give up or study the easy parts was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.276$, $p = .015$; my mind wanders a lot when I study was negatively correlated with CGPA $r = -0.289$, $p = .010$; I feel panicky when I take an important test was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.356$, $p = .001$; I worry that I will flunk out of school was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.343$, $p = .002$; when I take a test I realize I have studied the wrong material was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.245$, $p = .031$; and during class discussions I have trouble figuring out what is important enough to put in my notes was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.326$, $p = .004$. Student-athletes that believed their athletics participation had an effect on their overall grade point average was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.260$, $p = .021$. Satisfaction with institutional academic and career support services, specifically tutoring offered in the athletic department was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.287$, $p = .011$. The decision to attend SDSU with respect to proximity to home, family, and friends was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.362$, $p = .002$. Likewise, the decision to attend SDSU with respect to the expectations of parents, teachers, and community was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -0.243$, $p = .041$. Athletic activities, such as practicing, training, and competing, performed in a
given week during the season was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -.335, p = .005$.

Extracurricular activities performed during the academic year when sports are not competing was positively correlated with CGPA, $r = .246, p = .042$. Finally, average missed classes per week for any given reason (e.g., practice, travel, competition, or skipped) was negatively correlated with CGPA, $r = -247, p = .040$.

**Correlation Among the Predictor Variables**

Table 10 depicts the correlation among predictor variables. There was a positive correlation between student-athletes’ feeling that other students view them as an athlete more than a student and hours spent on athletic activity during the season, $r = .315, p = .008$. There was a negative correlation between student-athlete academic preparation, challenges, and study habits and those who consider themselves to be dedicated students, $r = -259, p = .019$. There was a positive correlation between proximity to home, friends, and family and the expectations of parents, teachers, and the community, $r = 352, p = .002$. There was a positive correlation between satisfaction with the institutional support services, specifically tutoring in the athletic department and the expectations of parents, teachers, and the community, $r = .279, p = .016$. There was a negative correlation between average missed class time during the season and time spent on extracurricular activities out of the sport season, $r = -235, p = .047$. There was positive correlation between proximity to home, friends, and family and time spent on extracurricular activities out of the sport season, $r = -253, p = .032$. There was a negative correlation between the student-athletes’ view that other students see them as a more of an athlete than a student and time spent on extracurricular activities out of the sport season, $r = -253, p = .032$. There was a positive correlation between averages missed
Table 10

*Correlation Among the Predictor Variables*

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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Revised GPA</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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*Table continues*
Table 10 (continued)

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<td>-.089</td>
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*Variable key:
1. Hours spent on athletic related activities during the season.
2. Do you believe that your athletic participation has had an effect on your overall grade point average (GPA)?
3. I consider myself a dedicated student.
4. Expectations of parents, teachers, community, etc.
5. During the academic year, time spent on extracurricular activities when sport is not in season.
6. XFaculty perception and interaction.
7. Average missed class time during the season for any reason.
8. Likelihood of becoming a professional or Olympic athlete.
9. Proximity to home, family, friends.
10. Academic preparation, challenges, and study habits.
11. I feel that other students view me as more of an athlete than as a student.
12. Satisfaction with institution academic career support services, specifically tutoring in the athletic department.

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
class time during the season for any reason and faculty perception and interaction, 
\( r = 302, p = .010 \). There was a positive correlation between academic preparation, 
challenges, and study habit and faculty perception and interaction, \( r = 339, p = .002 \). 
There was a positive correction of student-athletes’ view that other students see them as a 
more of an athlete than a student and faculty perception and interaction, \( r = 494, p = .000 \). 
Table 10 summarizes this information.

**Regression Results**

Given that there was a total of 21 variables correlated with the outcome, in a 
limited sample size of 97 participants, there was a need to reduce the total number of 
predictor variables for the model. Prior to running the regression, several interrelated 
questions were combined into one scale; the variables were logically grouped based on 
the topical areas from which they were addressed. A test was performed in SPSS to 
check for reliability as indicated by Cronbach’s alpha, which measures internal 
consistency and dimensionality of the scale within the model. The first scale created was 
**academic preparation, challenges, and study habits**; this scale included the following 
eight items pertaining to classroom and study experiences: “I put off studying more than I 
should”; “I find it hard to pay attention during lectures”’ “when work is difficult I either 
give up or study only the easy parts”’ “my mind wanders a lot when I study”; “I feel 
panicky when I take an important test”; “I worry that I will flunk out of school”; “when I 
take a test I realize I have studied the wrong material”; and “during class discussions I 
have trouble figuring out what is important enough to put in my notes.” Cronbach’s 
alpha provided reliability for this scale at .84, indicating a high degree of internal 
consistency. The second scale of variables created was faculty perception and interaction;
this scale included the following three items pertaining to relationships with faculty: “I feel that some of my professors discriminate against me because I am an athlete”; “I feel that some of my professors favor me because I am an athlete”; and “I feel that my professors view me as more of an athlete than as a student.” Cronbach’s alpha provided reliability for this scale at .71, indicating adequate degree of internal consistency. Table 10 depicts the final 12 items included in the regression after the combination of 11 other variables were combined into two separate scales in the model.

The final model was run with the 12 remaining variables; these 12 predictor variables accounted for 53.7% of the variance in CGPA based upon Adjusted R Square ($R = .77, R^2 = .59$). Using a forward multiple regression procedure the model included seven variables; five of these seven variables were significantly predictive of the outcome. The regression analysis used the strongest seven variables within the model to improve reliability and validly of the study; thus, five variables were omitted including “do you believe that your athletic participation has had an effect on your GPA”; “expectations of parents, teachers, community, etc.”; “average missed class time during the season for any reason”; “I feel that other students view me as more an athlete than a student”; and “satisfaction with institutional academic and career support services, specifically tutoring offered in the athletic department.” The strongest predictor of CGPA was proximately to home, family, and friends. This variable was negatively predictive of the outcome, $St.b = -.375, p < .001$. This suggests that at-risk student athletes who do not care about living close to home, family, or friends have a higher GPA. Two other negative variables were negatively predictive of the outcome; they included number of hours spend on athletic activities, (e.g., practicing, competition, training during the
season; St.\( b = \) -0.256, \( p = 0.004 \) and negative faculty perceptions of student-athletes (St.\( b = \) -0.250, \( p = 0.007 \)). This finding suggests that as student-athletes spend more hours on athletic activity, their GPA may suffer as a result. Additionally, if they are stigmatized by faculty due to their athletic status, their GPA may also suffer. The remaining variables were positive predictors of the outcome. The student-athletes that spent more time out of season on extracurricular activities had higher GPAs (St.\( b = 0.257, p = 0.005 \)). The student-athletes that felt they were less likely to become a professional or Olympic athlete had a higher GPA (St.\( b = 0.263, p = 0.003 \)). Table 11 summarizes this information; these findings are analyzed and further discussed in Chapter 5 to draw conclusions on the predictors of GPA for the at-risk population.

**Participant Interviews: Major Themes and Subthemes**

The qualitative portion of this mixed method study helped provide context for understanding and making sense of the quantitative findings. Astin’s (1993) I-E-O theoretical framework offered interpretive analysis of academic success based on a range of precollege and environmental variables. These variables were discussed with campus leaders during the interviews and analyzed as a means to evaluate output in terms of various inputs and environmental factors that may affect at-risk student-athletes (see Appendix B, Interview Protocol). These data were used as a means to better understand the complexities and intricacies of Division I athletics at a large public institution and their ability to serve the at-risk student-athlete population. Although the participants’ capacity at the university varied, each individual holds a leadership position that has an impact on athletics. Interviews were performed with key stakeholders on campus who have a direct influence and vested interest to athletics including, the director of SAASS,
Table 11

**Coefficients Model**

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<th>Model</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. error</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Lower bound</th>
<th>Upper bound</th>
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<td>Hours spent on athletic related activities during the season</td>
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<td>I consider myself a dedicated student</td>
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<td>.156</td>
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<td>-.033</td>
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<td>.257</td>
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<td>Likelihood of becoming a professional or Olympic athlete</td>
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<td>.411</td>
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<td>Proximity to home, family, friends</td>
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<td>-.101</td>
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</table>

Dependent variable: revised GPA.

the university president, the associate vice president of admissions, the associate vice president of student affairs, the faculty athletic representative, and the chair of the Intercollegiate Athletic Committee. Interviews with these campus leaders resulted in insights from their unique perspectives with regard to the strengths, challenges, weaknesses, and opportunities of institution-sponsored college athletics and its at-risk participants. These findings presented a rich and robust take on the risks and rewards universities encounter on their quest to develop championship programs on and off the
playing field. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the six interviewed employees, pseudonyms of differing names are used in lieu of their actual names or position titles. Through the process of interpretive analysis with initial and focused coding of the interview transcripts, three major themes emerged. These themes include: (a) risks, challenges, and rewards; (b) support mechanisms; and (c) student-athlete development. Data analysis using Saturate, a web based analytical tool, produced a total of 285 code applications, which resulted in 11 categories. The categories of coded data were analyzed for cohesiveness with each other and finally labeled into three major themes and subthemes. Each one of these themes and its family of codes or subthemes, are described in the following section by using quotations from interviewees to support emergent themes. Table 12 lists the themes and subthemes that emerged.

Table 12

*Interview Themes and Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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| 1. Risks, Challenges, and Rewards | 1.1 Balancing Demands  
                                   | 1.2 Academic Challenges  
                                   | 1.3 Program Success  
                                   | 1.4 Rules and Governance  
                                   | 1.5 Financial Resources |
| 2. Support Mechanisms          | 2.1 Mission & Institutional Support  
                                   | 2.2 Coaches’ Involvement  
                                   | 2.3 SAASS |
| 3. Student-Athlete Development | 3.1 Student-Athlete Growth & Development  
                                   | 3.2 Scholar Athlete Model  
                                   | 3.3 Professional Aspirations |
Major Theme 1: Risks, Challenges, and Rewards

As reported in the literature review in Chapter 2, hosting intercollegiate athletics does not come without its unique set of risks, challenges, and rewards. This paradigm became quite evident and evolved strongly from analyzing the interview transcripts. The researcher chose to group these three ideals into one major theme because they are interrelated, often creating a cause and effect relationship for Division I institutions that host athletics, as noted during the participant interviews. Through analysis of the transcripts, five subthemes emerged in relation to the risks, challenges, and rewards that institutions assume as a result of the at-risk student-athletes presence within athletics including: balancing demands (1.1), academic challenges (1.2), success of programs (1.3), rules and governance (1.4), and financial resources (1.5).

Subtheme 1.1: Balancing demands. As a subgroup within Division I institutions, student-athletes are responsible for managing a considerable number of tasks on a daily basis. For example, student-athletes must attend various mandatory functions above and beyond class sessions, including study hall, practices, competitions, team meals, weight training, travel, film sessions, and physical therapy. These responsibilities may create a risk of academic and/or athletic underachievement, as well as numerous challenges and demands they must balance to be successful during their academic career. This subtheme, especially with regard to time management and other constraints due to athletic participation, reflected the academic and athletic balance that is necessary for at-risk student-athletes, given their demands. The challenge of time constraints and subsequent management of student-athletes schedules repeatedly surfaced in each of the interviews. Len acknowledged this challenge:
Time constraints are the biggest ones. Their schedules are so locked up.

Traveling, practicing, doing film, the demands on their time are just so intense now. . . . Our kids have different challenges than the regular students do. Our student-athletes have, you know, really, really constricted schedules and time constraints that they have to deal with.

This sentiment of time constraints explains some of the added pressure that may hinder the already volatile study habits for at-risk student-athletes. Emery explained, “There are psychological, physical, and time demands about being a student-athlete that for most normal people would simply be completely overwhelming.” Emery continued by stating the importance of supporting this group by “thinking about the athletic students in the same context of growth and development, as we do for all our students, but with a particular concern for how they are able to balance the many demands of their programs.”

Balancing the demands of their class work and athletic responsibilities, student-athletes may be deprived of educational experiences because they are often limited in their participation outside of these two areas. Shane stated that student-athletes “could take advantage of all kinds of things, but given their time constraints it is another case of balancing.” Shane also noted that opportunities exist for “everything the campus has to offer but they don’t have time for it,” hence their lack of participation in other areas that could ultimately affect their academic performance and overall experience. Len posited a similar stance in that student-athletes simply do not have time for outside activities; it is “tough for the student-athletes to engage in, things that would be huge growth opportunities for them outside of the classroom.” These missed opportunities for growth
and development may be a significant liability for the at-risk students that may otherwise benefit from outside programming.

Though the interview data clearly stated that all student-athletes experience time constraints and significant demands due to their athletic participation, it was also noted that certain teams are more affected than others. Len explained this scenario is evident “especially in the high level revenue sports like football and men’s basketball, not that the other sports don’t work their butt off too, but the time demands are just huge.” To this point Shane added: “It is hard to be an athlete, especially basketball, when you’re out on the road all the time and missing classes and trying to catch up if you’re not a strong student.” Shane also stated being a student-athlete “is like having a job, and you know the pressures; you know, I think it does vary by sport.” When asked about balancing academics with athletics Francis offered:

When you’re talking about men’s basketball and football, and then there is the other answer is everybody else. So, I think with all the other sports, at least San Diego State, I think that—I have a sense that there is a pretty good balance. The athletes by and large are doing fairly well academically, and they’re doing well athletically, as well.

The confines student-athletes face with participating in activities separate from their standard schedules present limitations in their overall growth and development. These limitations present undue obstacles for the at-risk group that could particularly benefit from participation in outside activities, such as study groups, clubs, Greek life, or student organizations.
Both the literature and the participant interviews support the notion that balance is critical to achieve academic and athletic success. Francis suggested, “If you don’t make academics you’re not gonna make it in athletics because you’re gonna be ineligible.” The threat of being ineligible to compete may be a factor that entices that student-athlete to manage their time wisely while balancing their demands. This commitment to balance was explained by Peyton:

If a student is not graduating and being prepared to take their education to the next level as far as being able to get a job, then the balance is off. If they come here, they play sports, they get a degree but they then they can’t function once they leave then that is another example that the balance is off.

In the end, this balance proves vital if the student-athlete is expecting to fully meet their potential and participate in their sport, persist to graduation, and obtain a job in the workforce. Additionally, time constraints and the overall demands that student-athletes face could create additional barriers, such as stress, fatigue, relationship issues, and overall diminished health that could be especially troublesome for the at-risk group and their ability it succeed academically. Clearly, the interviewed participants all expressed concern that without the presence of balance in the student-athletes’ life, they would encounter struggles both academically and athletically.

**Subtheme 1.2: Academic challenges.** This subtheme explored the academic challenges that result from athletic participation. The researcher posed questions to the participants focusing on academic challenges for at-risk student-athletes; hence, there was a high number of appearances within this subtheme indicating the interviewees understood the student-athletes’ academic challenges. This subtheme resulted in robust
dialog that enabled the researcher to glean the campus leaders’ perspective on various academic challenges faced by student-athletes, as well as the institution. Interviews with participants included responses directly connected to academic challenges, including at-risk status, admissions, GSR, course work, work ethic, and students’ major. Emery acknowledged academic challenges stating, “A student who comes to a major university like San Diego State who is not academically prepared, they really have to reorient themselves to the purpose of their participation in athletics and what their long term future can be.” Riley asserted:

If you’re an at risk student here at this campus when eligibility index is at or below 3,400, that has a lot to do with skill deficits you have, whether it’s math, writing, or whatever it may be, you need to put in the time and the work to raise your skills.

This gap in academic preparation that often exists between students who enter the institution at-risk and those who do not, creates the need for concerted effort towards academic work. Shane described academic pressures at-risk student-athletes’ may face: “It is easy for a very talented athlete who doesn’t like school to concentrate more on the athletics and less on school.” This intentional focus on athletics, instead of academics, could indicate that at-risk student-athletes are more comfortable performing in their areas of strength. The challenge for the at-risk student-athlete is to understand that with effort and the right support from academic personnel, they can be equally successful in both areas. Shane discussed the task with understanding the academic challenges depending on the student-athlete’s background: “We probably don’t even understand” what they believe to be the normal world outside athletics.
Addressing academic challenges, Peyton noted the “relative term” of at-risk status:

They [student-athletes] certainly have to take their studies seriously, but all students do. . . . I would hate to stigmatize somebody and say you’re an at-risk person because the data doesn’t necessarily show that . . . it just depends on what the student does once they’re here, not what they had done in the past. . . . I think all students are at risk no matter what their academic background is. This comment suggests that even though someone may be categorized as at-risk by the institution, they are able to overcome assumed shortcomings with intentional focus on academics while in school. However, lack of effort and focus in the classroom by gifted athletes may create stigmatization that student-athletes are more concerned about their athletic prowess than academic success. Many of the interviewees discussed the stigmatization of student-athletes, but specifically articulated that they avoid labeling them because often they are successful students. Peyton added, “I wouldn’t try to label somebody and put a letter on them or something as soon as they walked in the door. I think they all need to be treated the same.” These comments suggest that, although some at-risk student-athletes may struggle with academics, they may benefit if they are given an equal chance to succeed and not negatively labeled.

During the participant interviews, the researcher often probed for stories of success among student-athletes who were considered at-risk when they enrolled. The interviewees suggested that admission standards were directly related to academic success for this population. Shane noted, “Because of APR and things that have evolved, they’re not gonna put someone forward that is that they think they can’t graduate. So that has
made it a lot easier.” This comment is a direct reflection of recent APR legislation that penalizes teams and coaches for poor academic performance. Coaches are increasingly hesitant to recruit and admit at-risk students that are unlikely to succeed academically, because eventually their team will suffer if these students struggle. Shane also reported, “Athletics are the only ones who get special admission on this campus, period. . . . it is up to athletics to recommend who they want because they only have so many special admissions and they decide. I don’t decide.” This being the case, coaches and athletic administration must make careful academic evaluation of recruits before they suggest them to be admitted to the institution. Ultimately, the onus is on the student-athlete to succeed academically when they arrive to campus; however, the coach must be careful not to put the student in a position where they are likely to fail. Peyton asserted, “It’s how they handle it once they’re admitted. . . . they have to utilize the opportunities.” Much of the academic progress for this population has to do with the work put into their studies from the moment they arrive on campus. Likewise, Francis suggested, “If you’re already behind, it makes it hard to catch up. . . . as you progress through your academic career you just continue to build on what you’ve had.”

Some of the leaders acknowledged the use of support mechanisms, such as advisors, tutors, and mentors that play an integral role in the success of all student-athletes, particularly those who enter the institution at-risk. Academic advisors have a significant influence on addressing the academic challenges for this population prompting their scholarly accountability. Shane discussed that sometimes the support mechanisms provided by academic advisors may be relied on too heavily by some at-risk student-athletes. Shane also noted that the advisors “check that someone’s going to class, check
the grades; it would be nice if the students just understood that contract is that you’re a student-athlete.” Peyton acknowledged that the advisors are often under pressure to keep the students eligible, noting “the stronger at-risk part is not keeping them on the team.” Although the advisors are responsible for assisting, tracking, and fostering academic development of their students, at-risk students must understand that they must overcome their academic challenges if they expect to persist to graduation.

Overall, the interviewees’ comments supported the academic development of at-risk student-athletes given the academic challenges they face given their status. Although many challenges were noted, such as lack of preparedness, lack of motivation, stigmatization, and overall academic ability, the rewards of participation were said to outweigh the risks for the athletes.

**Subtheme 1.3: Program success.** During the interviews, it became quite evident that all participants agreed that San Diego State athletic programs are performing successfully in both areas of academics and athletics. Peyton explained, “If you look at the numbers, and you compare the student athletes to the general student body, the 5-year graduation rates are nearly identical.” He continued to explain the academic success of the student-athletes: “What really stands out are the students that complete their 4 years of eligibility; their graduation rate is over 90 percent.” This is particularly impressive in that it includes the at-risk population as part of the overall population that is graduating. These success rates represent that the faculty, staff, and students understand the academic challenges that result from athletic participation and work to overcome them in order to succeed in the classroom. This may suggest that the institution is rightfully supporting at-risk student-athletes, or the criteria for at-risk status is flawed considering the input of
high school GPA and test scores to establish index scores. Moreover, index score may not be an ideal representation of at-risk status, given that so many of these students are persisting to graduation.

Winning and success on the field can often cloud the perception of the academic mission for student-athletes, especially those at-risk who may prefer to focus more on sports than academics. Several of the applicants shared a common message of “win it the right way,” which is used universally around the campus when referring to athletics. Emery stated:

- We recognize that winning it right is a significant challenge, and we want to manage that challenge and make sure both that our teams are competitive and that our student athletes make significant progress in their personal development. . . .
- we are focused on winning, we want to be competitive, we want to have national championship caliber athletic programs. And we want to do it in the right way.

Emery also addressed concerns about potential risks, especially for those at-risk, if too much focus on winning exists, stating “if there is an overreliance or an excessive focus on winning at all costs, then those, those costs, have to be borne and that means the institution doesn’t perform as well in graduating its student athletes.” A couple of the interviewees commented on the risks associated with heightened emphasis on winning teams. Winning on the field was mentioned as an important characteristic of the athletic programs, but not without inherent risks if the institution’s educational mission was secondary to a team’s success. Emery added a comment regarding a potential negative impact of excessive focus on winning “what you often see is that there is a tension between the dynamic of athletic team and the desire to win.” This tension can create
undue hardship for at-risk student-athletes, thus adding athletic performance pressures that dampen academic focus. Pressures to win may often shadow the importance of academic performance if the coaches do not communicate and demand balance between the two aspects.

Although success of the programs was a common theme during the interviews, the discernment between effective balance with winning and academic stability appeared to be evident with all the leaders. Most of the leaders maintained that the athletic department is embracing their on-the-field success, but continue to have appropriate focus with ensuring academic development with at-risk student athletes. This essential balance substantiates Peyton’s remark that “in the last 3 years the [academic] numbers have been going up, up, up, up. . . . I was looking at the graduation success rates for this year . . . again seeing the numbers getting a little higher.” It was evident during the interviews that these campus leaders felt San Diego State athletics was in successful balance athletically and academically. It was also clear that this responsibility, and the risks, challenges, and rewards associated with success, are borne with the student-athletes and all those who serve them. While the university, athletic department, and community celebrate the wins on the field, the academic performance of at-risk student-athletes who contribute to these wins must remain a priority.

**Subtheme 1.4: Rules and governance.** Due to the vulnerable nature of college athletics, there are inherent risks with regard to student-athlete welfare that require substantial governance to manage. The NCAA mandates that its extensive guidelines are followed to ensure well-being for all student-athletes. This adherence to NCAA policy, along with institutional rules and regulations, results in a learning environment conducive
for at-risk student-athletes to succeed. During the interviews, the leaders’ commonly discussed that the regulations stipulated by the NCAA are immanent for the institution to follow and often have a positive effect. For example, Peyton acknowledges that college athletics’ “future is a little brighter because the NCAA is moving up the bar a bit.” Ultimately, this elevated accountability towards academics may affect coaches’ decisions to admit at-risk student-athletes. This could be perceived as a threat to the coaches who are challenged with winning games but also need to recruit student-athletes who are academically at-risk.

When prompted to discuss the most advantageous aspects of NCAA rules and governance that may affect at-risk student-athletes, many of the leaders described deregulation and adherence to APR. Len explained, “The NCAA rules are moving towards a system of deregulation where they allow the schools that have the resources to use those resources however they want.” Based on this deregulation, athletic departments can designate unlimited funds to support at-risk student-athletes by hiring additional academic resources. With regard to the deregulation and subsequent funding of institutional programs and offerings, Shane offered:

The NCAA has ratcheted up the penalties, the schools with the money have ratcheted up the resources; it is part of the arm’s race in athletics now is this type of work, you know, centers that are exploding all over the place, schools are throwing money at the academic support area and hiring numbers of individuals to work with student athletes.

This deregulation can be seen as a reward to institutions with enough resources to advance their levels of academic support; however, it is important for them to understand
how the legislation affects their overall operation. Riley commented, “When new legislation comes out, most people are oftentimes not just in shock, but maybe in a little disbelief like you really have these standards and not understanding how they impact my team.” The ability to place additional resources to support at-risk student athletes has the potential to increase their academic standing and ultimately the team’s APR.

The advent of APR, and its effect on poor academically performing teams, was the other dominant theme discussed with regard to advantageous policies enacted by the NCAA. Shane stated, “I really think the APR is a good thing. . . . You know, it is about graduating students and penalizing . . . any institution might take advantage of that.” Riley proclaimed, “Two or three years ago some of our teams were struggling with [the] APR, borderline, now the teams are doing much better or certainly doing better, if not much better.” This comment suggests that coaches’ responses to APR legislation are favorable, noting the importance of properly supporting the at-risk students upon arrival to campus. Additionally, these numbers may represent that coaches are responding to the new APR legislation by means of not recruiting at-risk athletes that could potentially earn their team punitive APR scores as a result of poor academic performance. With regard to the impact of APR, Francis suggested:

If the APR drops below a certain point, the NCAA threshold is 930. If the team drops below 940, we say that is a red flag and so we go to coach and we say we want you to work with the academic advising to come up with a plan to raise your APR.

As a result, if a team experiences APR shortcomings, there is a possibility that their APR plan may include significant limits on admitting at-risk student-athletes into their
program. The use of APR as a tool to measure academic success can be extremely beneficial to teams that have a history of recruiting and admitting at-risk student-athletes. Coaches must understand the risks associated with the at-risk population and assume the liability of NCAA sanctions if the students they recruit leave the institution or are ineligible to compete based on their academic standing. In some cases, athletic departments may consider limiting at-risk admissions if APR scores are in jeopardy of falling below the 930 benchmark. To this point, Francis supported this type of institutional control stating “we don’t want them to get into trouble; they lose a scholarship, so let’s try to address the problem before it really does affect them in that way.”

The participants provided a poignant perspective on the governance of college athletics, the risks and challenges associated with maintaining standards established by the NCAA, and the subsequent institutional impact if guidelines are unsatisfied. Their perspectives may offer suggestions on how the institution may serve at-risk student athletes by using the NCAA’s mechanisms of governance for creating positive change and stability.

**Subtheme 1.5: Financial resources.** As discussed in Chapter 2, college athletics has evolved into a big time business fueled by potential revenue generation resulting from media contracts, conference affiliation, sponsorship, and fundraising. It was quite evident throughout the participant interviews that the fiduciary responsibility of the institution with regard to the finances of college athletics has a unique set of risks, challenges, and rewards that may or may not always align with the mission of the school. All commercial advantages aside, schools that choose to recruit and admit at-risk student-athletes must
also take responsibility for providing resources that will adequately support their academic needs. Emery noted that the at-risk group requires various academic support systems and “where that support will develop is fundamentally a budget question.” He continued explaining that the at-risk group will “get the kind of support they need”; however, “fundamentally this is a budget question tied to overall financial strength.” Len commented that college athletics “is such a big business that it has taken precedent over a lot of the academic components.” This precedent of “athletics as a business” can blur the importance of the student-athlete model, especially with those already deemed at-risk by the institution.

Given the high level of commercialization and money necessary to operate a successful college athletic department, many of the participants noted the negative effects of the current college athletics paradigm. Francis proclaimed, “College athletics is taking a dangerous turn in that money has become such a driving force. To be honest, I think we might be better off without athletics.” However, without athletics it is likely that many of the at-risk student-athletes would not advance to the higher education system, further limiting their future aspirations. When probed about potential barriers within the current college athletics model that affect at-risk student athletes, Francis added:

I think money is poisoning college athletics. It is a business, and that’s what drives decisions, so I think that is the biggest barrier. . . . One of the disadvantages is you get caught up in the money, you get caught up in the prestige. You do things or allow things to be done that you wouldn’t normally allow, and so you can sort of sever your soul to athletics.
Francis did note that the financial investment of college athletics was worthy, “[Student-athletes] certainly get some life skills that they can carry with them, but wouldn’t it be better if we were putting that money into their academic preparation, their professional preparation.”

Regarding the financial future of the athletic department, and their ability to provide resources to support at-risk student-athletes, Riley noted, “It certainly cost more to operate, those cost pressures will cause us to make different decisions. . . . and where we go conference realignment . . . you know, some things will look the same but some things will certainly look different.” Many of the leaders commented on the financial future of athletics and how future separation of “haves” and “have nots” may affect the academic support offered to at-risk student-athletes. Noting the potential of separation that institutions may face in the future, Emery explained,”There is potential for greater separation between the wealthy programs and the programs that were less wealthy.” This separation may also come in terms of institutional funding for academic support of at-risk student-athletes. Len posited, “We will still have the same focus hopefully on the academic component of things. Regardless of our ‘have’ or ‘have not’ status, the athletic department will focus on academics to support our at-risk population.”

Overall, the theme for the financial impact of athletics and the institution’s ability to serve at-risk student-athletes was positive during the interviews. Francis confirmed, “I think we are doing a good job at San Diego State, better than others. But relatively speaking, we are, moneywise, budget wise, we are really pretty healthy in spite of what a lot of people might think.” This healthy financial state allows the athletic department to fund programming to support academic needs of their at-risk student-athletes. Francis
continued to explain, “If you’re gonna maintain a sport, you have to spend so much money, these issues have to be considered.” Part of these considerations is the resources that are funded to support students to succeed academically. One of the benefits of financially successful athletic departments that may affect student-athlete academic success was noted by Len: “Schools with money are hiring learning specialists in bunches to meet the needs of the students that they have.” For schools with appropriate funding, hiring additional learning specialists and other academic support personnel could be a potential reward to servicing the academic needs of at-risk student-athletes.

**Major Theme 2: Support Mechanisms**

College athletics demands support on many different levels and in many different ways, especially with regard to supporting academic needs of at-risk student-athletes.

The second thematic category explores the varying support mechanisms that are undoubtedly vital in the overall development of this unique population. Through analysis of the transcripts, three subthemes emerged in relation to the support necessary to facilitate a Division I athletic program and its at-risk population, including the mission of the institution (2.1), coaches’ involvement (2.2), and SAASS (2.3). These support variables carried a strong message throughout the interviews, noting the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic supportive factors pertaining to at-risk student-athletes. Emery described the backing of athletics:

At San Diego State there is pretty strong support for the athletics programs. I don’t see it as a major issue. I think most people recognize that the athletes have special obligations to the institution, and the institution has special obligations to them, and people are generally supportive of this.
Part of this special obligation is to support all student-athletes universally regardless of their academic standing. Understanding the methods of support, particularly with at-risk student-athletes, was commonly discussed among the leaders.

Riley suggested the support provided to at-risk student-athletes is indicative of the human capital that the university employs:

> It is all about the people. Not about the buildings, not about the chairs, not about the stuff. This place is all about the people, the students, the faculty the staff. It is about the people here. And people make the biggest difference in their experience.

This level of support and commitment, along with the skills and training necessary for supporting this group of students, is essential for supporting their academic success. The following sections explore the nuances of various backing mechanisms that were reported by the interviewees with regard to supporting at-risk student-athletes.

**Subtheme 2.1: The mission and institutional support.** Undeniably, athletic teams focus on winning championships; nonetheless academic neglect and underachievement in the quest for athletic supremacy is not central to the mission of higher education. The support given to athletic departments, and ultimately to the at-risk student-athletes, should maintain balance with regard to athletics and academics. Len explained, “There is always a balance of maintaining the university’s mission and not feeling like you’re compromising that to allow for those positives that come along with athletics.” In alignment with the mission of human growth and development through education, the university, not athletics, discriminates against supporting academically at-risk students. Francis asserted the university’s support within athletics as positive with
regard to serving the at-risk population in adherence to the school’s mission: “I think we are doing it the right way. But I say that about the entire university. I’m a big cheerleader for San Diego State because I think we are doing it right.” This claim of “doing it right,” while embracing the mission of the school, showcases the institution’s commitment to supporting at-risk student-athletes. For example, Riley acknowledged this assessment conferring the commitment to support this population: “We have continuity with the administration, coaches, and academic support staff, I think provides opportunities to really build the kind of program that really supports student success.” Peyton also mentioned athletics’ congruency with the university’s mission: “The mission of the athletic department is to have students graduate.” This congruency may become evident with the high graduation success rates of the at-risk student-athlete population.

Emery noted the challenges that may occur in sustaining the mission while serving this population: “We will continue to face the challenges of needing to balance the interest of the student athlete, their development. They are tied to the academic mission of the institution.” Riley emphasized the institutional support given to student-athletes that provides opportunity for growth and development, especially those at-risk who may need such opportunities which align well with the mission of the institution:

We are providing the resources that the kids need, whether it is in the residence halls, meals, sports medicine, academics, really looking at the supports that the campus provides so that the kids have what they need to succeed and become degree completers. . . . We have these help mechanisms that we know should be part of the students’ development and part of their university experience like
employment, internships, career resources, career exploration, study abroad, and
mentorships . . . these are really tremendous resources that don’t cost anything.

These sources of support, as described, provide beneficial opportunities that at-risk student-athletes should take advantage of in an effort to diversify their overall educational experience to promote academic success.

Adherence to the mission of the institution, while supporting the department’s need to admit at-risk students, was also discussed. For example, Francis explained, “We have tried to streamline some of our policies, or bureaucracy if you want to say that, so we don’t hold up athletics from moving forward.” This referral to streamlining and moving the department forward is evident with the institutional support given to admitting at-risk student-athletes when no other campus entities get similar privilege. With this privilege demands higher degrees of responsibility and support to ensure at-risk students are progressing academically and note creating NCAA rule infractions. Len noted that with the privileges granted to athletics comes “increased pressure to compromise the university’s mission.” Most of the responses from the institutional leaders did not suggest a compromised stance to athletics support of at-risk student-athletes and the mission of the school. In fact, they were aware of this population’s needs and felt the athletic department’s mission towards academic performance was well aligned with that of the university

**Subtheme 2.2: Coaches’ involvement.** The subtheme of coaches’ interaction and support of student-athletes emerged several times throughout the interviews. It was particularly evident that the involvement of the coaches could be the biggest difference maker with academic success of their at-risk students. Len explained this necessity:
The academic support staff and the coaching staff I think are really what drives the student athletes to be successful; they set the bar. You know if coaches and our staff are engaged in the student’s academic success, they are gonna be successful.

Based on accountability and engagement, this is a reflection of the trust, and often the relationship, that the coaches have with their at-risk students. Often this starts during the recruiting process when both the coach and the student-athletes build trust in one another knowing the academic challenges that lie ahead. Peyton discussed the importance of communicating academic expectations to this group knowing their at-risk status, “Certainly the position of the coaches and the message that the coaches send to the student athletes is fundamental.” Peyton also expressed that the coaches play a vital role in helping their at-risk student-athletes embrace, rather than avoid, academic challenges: “Coaches shouldn’t be mad if athletes are required to take a language course or required to do something challenging. . . . Coaches should embrace academic challenge in the same way that they embrace athletic challenge.” When this balance occurs from the coaches’ involvement, the at-risk student-athletes response to academic performance may be elevated as to not disappoint their coach.

Several of the leaders discussed the importance of coaches promoting an emphasis on academic success of their at-risk students. The coaches play a critical role in establishing academic accountability with their team. To this point, Francis asserted:

I don’t know how much emphasis the coaches place on academics. I mean if the coaches aren’t stressing academics then the athletes are not going to think that it is that important. I’m sure some coaches are stressing it, other coaches they’re not.
Coaches play a pivotal role in establishing academic accountability for their at-risk student-athletes; the constructive interaction between the student-athlete and their coach can prove to be a powerful variable to academic success. It was explained by several of the interviewees that coaches’ involvement is so meaningful because they are often the only ones that truly hold the students accountable for their academic performance. As a result, coaches tend to have a dominant role in affecting the decisions of student-athletes that may ultimately affect their academic progress. The coaches’ intimate involvement with the academic advancement of the at-risk student is paramount to achieving graduation. Peyton explained his view on coaches’ involvement with this population:

I see the coach is very involved with the student athletes. And a lot of that I think is because of the interaction that academic services has with the coaches. There is a very good culture here between coaches and academic services for the success of the students.

This communication between coaches and the academic advisors, as well as other support personnel who assist the at-risk students, was discussed throughout the interviews. For example, Len proclaimed, “Having coaches and academic support people that are really engaged, that is a more valuable resource than any dollar amount than we can provide.” This interaction keeps the coaches aware of progress and informs them so they can make appropriate decisions to positively affect their at-risk students. It was also noted that academic advisors are not the only means of academic support for these students. Peyton suggested: “I think the coaches have to develop that mindset, too, as far as being a resource for the academic success of their student athletes, not just the performance on
the field.” In summarizing coaches’ involvement and subsequent impact on the at-risk students, Riley reported:

Our administrators do a great job of setting the tone by hiring coaches and managing coaches that have expectations for their students-athletes to be degree completers. Not just to come here and produce on the fields or the courts, but really to come here and be really amazing citizens, to be really great students and really great athletes.

By instilling this level of academic success and development, coaches understand the expectation and their role for assisting at-risk students should they choose to recruit them as member of their team. Riley also suggested: “The coaches figure it out because now their feet are being held to the fire. . . . Now they [coaches] are gonna emphasize graduation, degree completion” because, if their at-risk students struggle academically, their team APR will suffer as a result. Consequently, when APR scores are negatively affected by ill performing at-risk students, administration may restrict a team from recruiting prospective student-athletes that fall within the at-risk category.

**Subtheme 2.3: Student-athlete academic support services (SAASS).** The final support subtheme identifies the impact of SAASS and the services they provide to this unique student population. As described in Chapter 2, SAASS is a critical element of the athletic department which houses advisors, mentors, tutors, and other support personnel who are responsible for providing necessary academic support to the student-athletes. Additionally, each one of these functions perform necessary roles in the academic development of the at-risk students. These critical support mechanisms are in place to support at-risk students, and they are required to use them in varying degrees dependent
on their academic performance. This support subtheme was constantly mentioned by participants, suggesting the important role that SAASS has on the academic performance of the at-risk students. Overall, the comments made were positive in the services being performed and reflected that the at-risk student-athletes that take advantage of this area have a benefit that other student populations do not typically experience. Len shared the importance of the at-risk student-athletes utilizing SAASS:

I think taking advantage of all the resources that they are provided. They have support and the level of resources that most students don’t have. It is tremendous the opportunities that they are afforded. . . . It always still amazes me when somebody doesn’t take advantage of it because there is so much there for them. Peyton acknowledged, “All the programs that we have here are for the benefit of the student-athlete, that is, if they utilize it properly. So if they’re not utilizing it properly, then it becomes a barrier.” Many of the participants discussed that SAASS is a necessity for supporting the at-risk group; if they choose not to participate, there will likely be negative consequences that will stifle academic progress. For example, in discussing the student-athletes’ use of SAASS, Francis commented: “You almost have got to ride them. That’s not the right approach. It really needs to be more intrinsic. And if you’re forcing them to do it, it is not quite the same thing.”

It was commonly discussed throughout the interviews that the student-athlete population, especially those at-risk, are supported at a more intentional level than other students are privileged to. For example, Francis explained:

Look at all of the academic advising assistance they are getting here. You’re making students go to study halls, and you’re staying on them . . . you have
somebody riding their ass to study and see that they’re going to class. . . . you’re comparing apples and oranges.

This assertion suggests that at-risk student-athletes are receiving enhanced support that other students may not be privileged to, thus enhancing their ability to succeed academically compared to other individuals. Shane suggested that this population requires special academic support: “You don’t address the needs of the athletes the way you address the needs of other students. Student-athlete support services are critical—you have to have good people in there, almost one-on-one supporting those students any way you can.” During the interviews, this one-on-one support was critically important to the academic well-being of the at-risk students.

Regarding the level of support SAASS offers and their role in assisting at-risk student-athletes, Shane commented, “They are responsible for keeping the student-athletes eligible and, you know, trying to do what’s right for them. So, if you have the proper people and structure in place, I think that model works.” The interviewees all indicated that SAASS’s model was effective for supporting the at-risk student-athletes if they utilize the services offered. For example, Len explained the positives of this model for assisting at-risk students:

I think we try to align what we do in supporting students with exactly what the campus does. . . . we try to educate students and make them independent, self-reliant learners and integrate them as much as we can to the campus community.

There are a significant amount of resources, mostly with personnel, allocated to SAASS in an effort to provide extraordinary services to the at-risk population. Riley
commented, “We have these resources that are available that can really help them
student-athletes] broaden their portfolio, broaden their lenses, and prepare them for their
transition.” Len described some of the services within SAASS that may promote
advancement of this population as “anything to do with academics, to personal issues, to
student conduct issues on campus that have happened. There are a lot of discussions
about making good choices and understanding where they’re at academically, personally,
socially.”

Many of the leaders suggested that SAASS’s services were critical to the
advancement of the at-risk student-athletes, and their experiences are enhanced as a result
of this interaction. Len expounded that the at-risk student-athletes “tend to engage more
with us [SAASS] than they would with somebody on campus that they don’t know.”
Riley discussed the interaction between SAASS and the at-risk population:

The first thing we have to do with kids who are at-risk is teach what does effort
mean in terms of improving your skills and improving your academic ability, no
different than we would teach somebody in a gym or on a field. . . . Having that
collection in a real significant way to really give them the opportunity to take
advantage of the resources that can help them transition.

Many of the students that participate in these services have not experienced this level of
academic support; thus, it can make a substantial difference in their development.

Regarding SAASS’s effectiveness, Len proclaimed, “You will see student-athletes
that have special, or at-risk intensive type of student-athletes that are gonna be able to be
successful because of that level of intrusive academic advising and academic support that
is provided.” The SAASS staff is charged with the challenging task of keeping at-risk
student-athletes in good academic standing; overall, the interviews reflected their success in doing so. Many of the participants acknowledged the importance of SAASS for at-risk student-athletes and recognized the effectiveness of the work of the SAASS staff in working with this population to ensure their eligibility and success. Len affirmed, “I think our people are the biggest resource that we have in this area. . . . We have great individuals on our staff.”

**Major Theme 3: Student-Athlete Development**

The overarching goal of the participant interviews was to glean perspective of institutional leadership regarding student-athlete success, especially those categorized as at-risk. Many of the participants expressed similar sentiments of the positive experiential factors that participation in athletics provides towards personal growth and development. Inclusive of these noncognitive traits was teambuilding, motivation, integrity, time management, work ethic, accountability, and leadership, all of which may prove beneficial for enhancing academic success and overall experience for at-risk students.

The perspective of institutional leaders may be used to improve systems of support that enable practitioners to enhance academic initiatives that positively affect academic outcomes and overall experience of at-risk students. These perspectives also offered suggestive means on how the athletic department can best support this population. For example, academic performance plans that follow strict guidelines to ensure adequate support and accountability for the student, increased involvement of coaches with academic support, and SAASS programs designed specifically for at-risk students. Shane commented, “I feel pretty strongly that no one should take in an athlete, no matter how good he or she is, without being sure that you’re gonna be able to support that student.
through graduation.” Emery also acknowledged this theme referring to enhancement of at-risk athlete’s experiences at the institution: “We want to do it in a way that supports student development.” In essence, the process of supporting this group of at-risk students must align with the overall mission of the institution that fosters growth and development.

Riley described the desired outcomes from student participation in college athletics, regardless of at-risk status: “The ultimate piece is that they will be productive graduates that have matured and find their productive place in life.” Ultimately, the goal of recruiting at-risk student athletes should be to place them into an environment where they can be successful academically and athletically. Thus, athletics as part of the educational process should have a balanced role with academics in an effort to provide enhancement to the overall experience.

As further discussed in Chapter 2, some educators argue that isolation often experienced by student-athletes can potentially create a subculture resulting in unfavorable behavior that may lead to academic underperformance. Contradictory to this perspective, the participant interviews provided dialog that supported college athletics as a means to not only develop academic competence, but also enhance the overall college experience of at-risk student-athletes who participate. The perspective gleaned from the interviews was the at-risk students do not operate in isolation; however, increased activities with other students may broaden their overall educational experience. Len discussed the isolation that can sometimes occur with student-athletes:

I think exposing our student athletes to other individuals and other experiences and other people would be a huge opportunity. . . . we do have the most diverse
group of students on campus; they are very similar in terms of their interests and their passions and athletics. So, they’re very like-minded; I think when they stick with their peer group of teammates it doesn’t allow them to grow as much as somebody that would be able to engage in those other groups and activities.

This isolation, particularly with at-risk student-athletes that often feel more comfortable around their peer group could result in academic complacency, because they are not surrounded by students that may challenge them in a varying capacity. Thus, practitioners should advise at-risk student-athletes to explore opportunities outside of athletics to broaden and enhance their educational experience, as well as foster academic development. The researcher noted three subthemes that emerged within this theme, including student-athlete growth and development (3.1), scholar athlete model (3.2), and professional aspirations (3.3).

**Subtheme 3.1: Student-athlete growth and development.** This subtheme includes purpose, outcomes, and the overall experience of the at-risk population as a result of participation in college athletics. Participation in college athletics provides an opportunity for personal growth and development with the goal of improving the overall educational experience of the students. Many of the participants acknowledged that involvement in extracurricular activities, including athletics, can enhance the overall college experience, while providing much needed support mechanisms to at-risk students. Emery stated, “The purpose of their [student-athletes] being here is their personal development and growth.” Athletics provides an opportunity for advanced education that many at-risk students may not otherwise experience. With this comes the responsibility
to embrace the opportunity for academic development that can affect the rest of their lives.

Francis discussed that growth and development is often the onus of the student-athlete: “They have to accept some responsibility for succeeding or failing on their own.” Although this population receives substantial academic support, they are responsible for their own academic success and must manage their student life in a manner that promotes academic well-being. This offering suggests that at-risk student-athletes that may be predisposed to academic challenges must be diligent and intentional with the academic pursuits in order to perform in a successful manner. Riley acknowledged the academic responsibilities that at-risk student-athletes must understand in order to be successful: “A lot of what happens with academics has to do with effort and attitude; that is not very different from being an athlete at this level or any level.” For example, Riley continued to express the extra effort necessary for at-risk student-athlete success:

I don’t just mean showing up, because sometimes kids think if I sit in a classroom for an hour or sit with a tutor for an hour I put in the effort, and my response is hell-to-the-no because showing up doesn’t mean showing up. You just showed up. So you have to put in the effort.

Again, this sentiment speaks to the extra effort that at-risk students should present on a daily basis to perform at their highest academic potential.

By opening the door to education through athletics, at-risk students have the opportunity to hone life skills that may enhance their career aspirations and marketability in the workforce. Peyton explained at-risk student-athletes “are students that chose to be
athletes as part of their educational experience in an effort to enhance their overall experience”; thus, the dual role of the student-athlete model must be supported by educational practitioners. In doing so, an environment conducive of educational advancement must be embraced in balance by at-risk students, and accountability must be initiated by SAASS and coaches.

Athletics, as part of the overall educational experience, provides development opportunities that may positively affect at-risk students. Peyton explained these benefits:

The central goal of college athletics is to offer these students this opportunity to participate in college sports . . . . it is a very strong integrity builder for the students, for team building, it is just a good . . . . Well, I see probably the experience as an athlete as a very strong component of general education . . . they are building life skills, being team players, and learning time management.

These noncognitive sets of skills learned from sport participation may improve academic potential for at-risk students, particularly those who may be lacking such personal characteristics. Riley also discussed the positive outcomes this population may experience and how it can enhance them as individuals:

I think the central goal has to be graduating outstanding young men and women . . . preparing them for the next phase in their life. Whether it is graduate school or the work force or professional sports . . . we’re in the business of human development, so helping students develop into responsible, productive, engaged human beings that leads to degree completion which leads to the next stage in their lives and along the way hopefully they develop their athletic skills.
Shane described the student-athlete experience as “holistic” education placing athletics within the educational process that advances students, which may be beneficial to this population. As part of this holistic experience, Francis explained, “It is important that student-athletes realize that there is more to life than just being good athletes.” This holistic view of education, with athletics being a major component, may advance at-risk student-athletes on their path to graduation, while enhancing their overall experience.

**Subtheme 3.2: Scholar athlete model.** The interviewees indicated the value of maintaining a scholar athlete model within the institution that embraces academic steadfastness for at-risk student-athletes. Specifically, the participants acknowledged that the scholar athlete model represents balance between athletics and academics, with emphasis on academic development of all students. This subtheme revealed the benefit of having such a model to ensure that the at-risk student-athletes are advancing educationally while they participate in sports. Francis noted that the scholar athlete model is “really important” to maintaining balance and focus on the academic component of the at-risk student-athletes’ experience. Thus, this model represents accountability for at-risk students, as well as those who create and maintain programming to support them.

Riley suggested that this model has paid off noting, “We have matured . . . if you just look at the number of scholar athletes as an example that we have today that we had 10 years ago, it looks very, very different.” This increase in scholar athletes is an indication that the at-risk population is also succeeding under this paradigm. Although specific graduation numbers were not discussed, GSR scores represent that over 75% of the student-athletes are graduating, inclusive of the at-risk population. Shane emphasized the significance of the model in assisting at-risk student-athletes: “I believe in the scholar
athlete model. . . you guys work the athletes to death in some sports and we have a responsibility to give them an education.” This notion supports that balance between athletics and academics is perceived to be in place, which will ultimately prove beneficial for at-risk students. Peyton noted this institutional responsibility given this model: “My job is to focus on the student-athlete, that they’re here as students, they’re getting their education, and they’re graduating.” This leadership responsibility and follow through represents intentional focus that creates accountability towards adherence to the scholar athlete model.

Riley suggested that the dual experience of the scholar athlete model promotes athletic and academic success regardless of incoming status. Specifically, Riley said that SDSU is fortunate to have “really great students and really great athletes.” Peyton discussed the “tremendous benefit” of the scholar athlete model with respect to GSR; he further explained, “The graduation rate is around 65% here, but if you’re a student athlete and you compete for 4 years it’s 93%.” These percentages indicate that at-risk student-athletes are also persisting to graduation under this model.

Interviewees made program-related comments connecting the impact of summer school to the scholar athlete model and academic preparedness, especially the at-risk group. Francis shared, “We have done some things like requiring all of the incoming students who come in with deficiencies have to go through this early start program. . . . they have to get off to a good start” Moreover, Francis suggested that “how they [at-risk student-athletes] do in their first year” ultimately affects graduation rates. Thus, these perspectives suggest the importance of providing summer school opportunities as a means to enhance academic success of the at-risk population. Riley asserted the
importance of acclimating the at-risk group during the summer to get them off to a good start:

I think the more that we can do to get students integrated into the academic experience before they start practices, before they have the pressure of learning the teams, the plays, the routine of the athletic experience, we can get them integrated learning the routine, the practice and the pace of the academic experience, the better the kids are because when they start in September there [are] 34,000 other students here.

With regard to institutional programming that thrusts the scholar athlete model and advancement of at-risk student-athletes, Emery stated:

I think a summer bridge-like program can be very beneficial for students with a focus on academics. So, for the students who face challenges who are athletes, we often see that they don’t necessarily have the same opportunities in the summer bridge program that students who are coming to the university primarily for academics alone have.

Riley explained that these programs assist at-risk student athletes with embracing the scholar athlete model:

There are these very small communities that are launching in the summer. . . . I look at that as an opportunity that we are beginning to take advantage of. . . . I do believe how kids start has a lot to do with how they finish.

It was very evident throughout the interviews that summer school programming should be used to enhance academic development of the at-risk population. As a means to purposefully engage at-risk students in year round school, summer programming during
both summer sessions may be suggested as a mandatory component for those deemed at-risk. Participation in summer school will also require students to stay on track for graduation by completing coursework that may be considered too difficult during busy times of the playing season.

Participant comments on the value of the scholar athlete model and the programs that support it demonstrate the institutional commitment to educational advancement for at-risk student-athletes. The scholar athlete principles help build programs and opportunity across various campus entities and departments to advance the educational experience of at-risk student-athletes. This perspective supports development of individuals and teams, while building trust that the mission of athletics is not skewed with that of the university.

**Subtheme 3.3: Professional aspirations.** Participants shared comments about the ubiquitous aspirations that many student-athletes have about going pro in their sport and the potential pitfalls this may create. This subtheme was especially evident when discussing big-time revenue sports, such as football and men’s basketball where a high-percentage of the population are academically at-risk students. Several of the interviewees discussed that professional aspirations can be a significant academic distraction for at-risk student-athletes in revenue sports. Francis asserted, “Few will go into professional sports, but a lot more of them are looking at college athletics as their opportunity to make it to the pro’s when [the] reality is few of them are gonna make it.” Emery discussed:

Many students are under the misimpression that it is likely they will become a professional athlete, and there are enough students who actually do become
professional athletes at a university like San Diego State, that this kind of view, which is generally erroneous, tends to persist in students’ minds. Emery also explained the negative effect that professional aspirations can have on student development of this population: “Unfortunately, when the focus is on specific game outcomes or on supporting the careers of others and other’s aspirations . . . the student’s development is not as much a focus, and that proves significant challenges.” The academic challenges that result in overly focusing on professional aspirations can pose additional threats to at-risk student-athletes, such as scaling back effort during their senior year. Riley commented on leadership’s responsibility to inform the student-athletes of the likelihood of making it to pro and preparing for them life after sports:

   Getting them to understand that less than 3% of college seniors will play football professionally. Less than 2% of college basketball players will play professionally on a paycheck. Ninety-eight percent of seniors aren’t gonna go to the NBA, 97% of seniors aren’t gonna play in the NFL, so are we getting kids ready for life after their sport.

Presenting this probability of going pro to at-risk students may potential elevate their desire to graduate and improve their effort in the classroom. Speaking of the importance of maintaining focus on academics, rather than professional aspirations, Emery reported: “If they intend to be a professional athlete for a brief time, they need to think about what they will do for the rest of their life and how their academic preparation will fit into that.” Overall, this subtheme was not extremely dominant in the discussions, but did add value by pointing out the importance of at-risk student-athlete’s academic focus while participating in high-exposure sports. The leaders expressed their concern that too many
of the participants in revenue sports, who may already be at-risk, have a false impression that they will be professional athletes, and this can become a significant barrier.

Summary

The findings in this chapter, revealed through qualitative, quantitative, and extant data analysis provide considerable insight into academic performance and overall experience of at-risk student-athletes at SDSU. Quantitative investigation revealed several input and environmental barriers that are predictive of GPA. Additionally, support variables were also revealed that could be used to enhance the overall experience and academic output of at-risk student-athletes. Qualitative data from interviews with institutional leaders resulted in themes and subthemes that will support quantitative findings of the study. These findings, as well as analysis of each variable affecting academic performance, will be discussed in the following chapter to draw conclusions and recommendations from this body of work.
CHAPTER 5—SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This chapter provides a summary of the study, including an analysis of the problem being investigated, significance of the findings, seminal observations from the review of relevant literature, and discussion of the methodology used to explore answers the four research questions presented. Based on the key findings and existing research previously performed in the field, this section will also provide conclusions and recommendations for practice and future research pertaining to at-risk student-athletes.

The purpose of this study was to assess the academic performance of at-risk student-athletes at San Diego State University (SDSU) and their experiences as part of this unique population. To address the problem, the researcher sought to understand how educational challenges, academic support, and barriers experienced by at-risk student-athletes during their tenure at the institution affected academic outcome. This study contributes to the needed research pertaining to the educational experience and academic performance of student-athletes identified as academically at-risk. A large majority of the research conducted in this field has investigated academic performance and challenges faced by the intercollegiate student-athletes at-large. However, minimal research has been presented that addresses academic performance of at-risk student-athletes specifically. Of the few studies investigating similar phenomena, there is evidence in the literature supporting that precollege characteristics, such as academically at-risk status, are salient factors that may affect the academic outcomes of student-athletes (Autry, 2010; Hewitt, 2002; Kane et al., 2008; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006). The academic at-risk
status of student-athletes not only has implications for the students themselves, but also coaches, faculty, and staff who can be adversely impacted in their effort to support this population (Hollis, 2002). This study advances the understanding of how the at-risk student-athlete population performs academically given their unique set of challenges. Specifically, in addition to providing insight into academic performance levels of this population, this study identifies systems and practices college athletic departments can employ to support the development of their at-risk population.

A review of literature was presented in Chapter 2 which provided a discussion of the academic structure within college athletics and the subsequent challenges and interventions that exist in supporting student-athletes. It was very clear in the literature that college athletics is uniquely American, thus challenges must be addressed central to the premise of the nation’s educational premise (Flowers, 2009; Thelin, 1994). A historical perspective of athletics was investigated as a means to understand the dynamics and challenges of supporting academic advancement of at-risk student-athletes. This analysis offered perspective regarding how to best support this population given their increasing demands over time. Much of the literature discussed the importance of governance models and reform interventions necessary to keep athletics aligned with the mission of higher education (Benford, 2007; Meyer, 2005; Petr & McArdle, 2012). In recent years, critics of college athletics have scrutinized college athletics; consequently, much research has been conducted to evaluate systems, policy, and practice that address academic success and the student-athletes’ experience (Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Scott et al., 2008). As previously mentioned, there is robust literature that indicates that student-athletes academically outperform their nonathlete peers (Comeaux & Harrison,
2011; Hollis, 2002; Holm, 2009; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Kane & Gropper, 2010; Umbach et al., 2006; Watson, 2005). However, there are only few studies that focus on the academic outcomes of at-risk student-athletes. Of the few studies focusing on academic performance of at-risk student-athletes, mixed results have been reported regarding their performance and the services required to enhance their overall experience (Hewitt, 2002; Kane et al., 2008; NCAA, 2009). Thus, in an effort to add to the limited existing research on this topic, this study will report on significant variables that effect academic success for at-risk student-athletes.

To perform the research, a mixed methods case study was employed to explore “how” and “why” at-risk student-athletes perform academically within their environment (Yin, 2009). This approach to inquiry was employed with exploration through quantitative methodology and enriched using qualitative methods within the design in an effort to utilize both strategies to enhance the overall strength of the study (Creswell, 2009). A criterion sample of at-risk student-athletes at or below an institutional eligibility index score of 3,400 was used to investigate academic and experiential outcomes; additionally, a purposeful sample of institutional leaders was used to provide context for understanding and making sense of the quantitative findings. Furthermore, this study employed the theoretical framework of Astin’s (1993) Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) concept to guide interpretation of how athletic participation impacts academic success for at-risk student-athletes given the varying inputs and environments. This model was particularly appropriate to the study, due to the use of leading indicators of college graduation rates, such as high school Grade Point Average (GPA), serving as input variables that predict academic performance (Astin & Oseguera, 2005).
Statistical analysis, including analysis of variance (ANOVA), Pearson Correlation, and multiple regression analysis, were conducted to predict academic success. To perform the ANOVA, extant data provided by SAASS was used to investigate significant differences in the dependent variable GPA and independent variables such as gender, major, sport, year in school, and incoming eligibility index score. Further analyses were conducted using GOALS survey data to understand how input and environmental factors affect overall GPA.

There were 176 student-athletes categorized as academically at-risk in the study group, of whom 97 completed the GOALS survey. Extant data reflecting academic performance of the entire student-athlete population was also explored as a means to understand the overall academic success within the department inclusive of the at-risk students. Additionally, qualitative analyses were conducted from data obtained during interviews with six institutional leaders, the director of SAASS, the university president, the associate vice president of admissions, the associate vice president of student affairs, the faculty athletic representative, and the chair of the Intercollegiate Athletic Committee to provide context for understanding and making sense of quantitative data. The study addressed the following research questions using the aforementioned methods and data:

1. What are the academic outcomes of student-athletes who are identified as at-risk when they enter the university?

2. What (if any) significant differences exist in academic outcomes for student-athletes identified as at-risk when data are disaggregated by gender, major, sport, year in school, and eligibility index?
3. What factors serve as barriers and sources of support that facilitate academic progress among at-risk student-athletes identified as at-risk at San Diego State University?

4. What strategies can be implemented at the departmental and institutional levels to improve retention, academic performance, and Graduation Success Rate (GSR) for student-athletes, specifically the at-risk population?

The results of the analysis indicated that at-risk student-athletes have varying levels of academic performance based on input characteristics, but overall they are performing at a level that may enable persistence to graduation and not threaten their status at the university. The analysis of cumulative GPA for the at-risk population resulted in a mean GPA of $M = 2.62$, this in comparison to the overall cumulative GPA of all student-athletes, $M = 2.84$. Significant differences were reported in GPA based on variables including gender, major, sport, and year in school; however, eligibility index was not found to be a significant predictor of GPA. Based on an examination of the effect sizes, most of the differences identified were trivial except for major. Grade Point Average differences across major illustrated a large effect, with business majors having a higher GPA than their peers in the social sciences.

Correlations were used to assess relationships between index scores, high school GPA, and college GPA. Although eligibility index score was not found to be a significant factor in predicting GPA, the relationship between high school GPA and college GPA was significant. Given that the index score is used as a barometer to determine the likelihood of an athlete’s academic success in college, this finding is compelling.
Further analysis conducted to ascertain the relationship between academic success and experiential factors and other inputs yielded several key findings that align with the aforementioned findings. Of the 90 items examined within the GOALS survey, 21 were found to be significantly correlated with the academic outcome of GPA. To reduce the number of items in the model, 11 items were logically grouped and combined into reliable scales. A forward multiple regression analysis of these predictor variables resulted in a final model with seven variables, five of which were significantly predictive of the outcome (GPA). The model accounted for 53.7% of the variance in GPA based upon Adjusted R Square ($R = .77$, $R^2 = .59$). The strongest negative predictors of GPA were proximity to home, family, and friends. The other two negative predictors were hours spent on athletic related activity during the season, and faculty perception and interaction. The two positive predictors of GPA included time spent on extracurricular activities when sport is not in season and the understanding of the minimal likelihood of becoming a professional or Olympic athlete.

Analysis of the qualitative data to support the aforementioned quantitative findings revealed three major themes and several subthemes. The major themes included (a) risks, challenges, and rewards, (b) support mechanisms, and (c) student-athlete development. Overall, institutional leaders reported that as a subgroup within Division I institutions, student-athletes are responsible for managing a considerable number of demands. Given the demands and time constraints of student-athletes, many of the interviewees expressed the critical balance between academics and athletics necessary for at-risk to successfully perform in the classroom. Furthermore, with a large majority of at-risk student-athletes requiring academic intervention the leaders asserted the support
mechanisms, such as SAASS, that are critical for this population. The leaders noted that academic support and subsequent development of the at-risk group should align with the overall mission of the institution. In doing so, essential involvement of key individuals, such as coaches, should actively engage in the academic development of their at-risk students to assist them towards graduation (Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1999). Finally, the leaders acknowledged the central goal of athletics as enhancing the growth and development of the students; as such, involvement was suggested as a component of at-risk student-athletes’ overall experience that may elevate academic performance. A more detailed discussion and connection of the qualitative findings to the quantitative findings is provided in the discussion and conclusion sections.

**Discussion of the Results on Academic Success**

Three of the four questions guiding this study were related to the academic outcomes and success of at-risk student-athletes based on cumulative GPA. Different variables affecting this measure were investigated to glean insight as to what supports and/or obstructs the academic outcomes of this population. The fourth and final question presented an opportunity to suggest strategies and methods, perceived as important components by institutional leaders, which may positively affect academic performance of at-risk student-athletes.

Although the intent of this study was not to compare academic performance of the at-risk population to that of student-athletes with an index score above 3,400, the variance in GPA ($M = 2.62$, $M = 2.84$) provided baseline data to the researcher that suggests this population is academically underperforming compared to student-athletes who are not deemed at-risk upon entering the university. This suggests that at-risk student-athletes
may benefit from support systems to enhance academic performance which will ultimately improve their educational experience (Hill et al., 2001; Hollis, 2002; Kane et al., 2008; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). The difference in mean GPA between the two groups within the population, although not necessarily statistically significant, is an indication that those student-athletes with an index score below 3,400 may in fact be academically at-risk as evident by their lower cumulative GPA (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Regarding academic performance of this population, extant data used in the analysis of academic performance revealed several findings that may help institutions discern appropriate methods of support and identify which individuals could benefit the most.

**Academic Outcome—Student-Athlete Variables**

When data were analyzed to investigate academic outcomes of at-risk student-athletes by gender, major, sport, year in school, and eligibility index, several statistically significant findings were revealed.

**Gender.** First, the differences in GPA based on gender was significant \( F = 4.442, p = .037 \), although representing a small effect size \( r^2 = .03 \). Figure 3 (p. 121) depicts this relationship between mean GPA and gender. This variance suggests that females represented in the sample perform better academically than males; however, the magnitude of this difference is negligible within the population. This suggests that although there is significant difference in the GPA by gender, one gender may not always outperform the other. The 2012-13 single year APR scores also reflect that women perform better than men, with average scores among teams of 967 and 954, respectively. Understanding the factors that contributed to this significantly higher variance in mean
GPA of women and men ($M = 2.71$, $M = 2.55$) may prove critical in establishing academic improvement plans for men’s sports. Many of the institution leaders interviewed suggested that at-risk athletes performing in high-profile revenue sports, such as men’s basketball and football, often experience heightened academic challenges than those in nonrevenue sports.

**Major.** Second, differences between GPA and students’ majors was significant ($F = 5.070$, $p = .002$) and represented a large effect size ($r^2 = .28$). Figure 4 (p. 123) depicts this relationship between mean GPA and major. The most statistically significant difference was between business and social sciences majors (.4344), indicating that business majors ($M = 2.91$) have higher GPAs than social science majors ($M = 2.48$). This variance suggests that at-risk students’ major impacts academic performance as measured by GPA. This finding is particularly relevant because at-risk students majoring in areas that are typically more demanding, such as business, produced higher mean GPA than students in perceivably less demanding majors. As such, academic counselors and advisors should be mindful of recommending majors based on the student athletes’ preference, not necessary precollege variables used to establish their index score. Additionally, student-athletes should be placed in majors based on their career and academic interests, rather than based on majors that are assumed to be easy or less challenging in order to simply remain eligible to compete in athletics (Jolly, 2008; Suggs, 2003). Institutional leaders suggested that demands placed on student-athletes by participation in athletics often impact their ability to succeed in certain majors, such as engineering and nursing. Thus, they are advised into majors, such as social science opposed to engineering, to offer a higher probability of graduation.
Sport. It is important to note that due to sample sizes in this study, softball, women’s basketball, and volleyball were included in revenue sports because albeit small, revenue is generated from these activities. Third, differences in GPA in relation to the sport the athlete participates in was significant \(F = 5.070, p = .002\) and approached a medium effect size \(n^2 = .05\). Figure 5 (p. 124) depicts the relationship between mean GPA and participation in revenue and nonrevenue sports. This variance suggests that participation in revenue sports, such as football, basketball, baseball, softball, and volleyball opposed to nonrevenue sports, accounts for moderate measurable effects in the difference in GPA, \(M = 2.53, 2.74\), respectively. Thus, it is reasonable to consider that student-athletes in revenue sports have lower GPA due to the demands placed on them within the high-profile sports environment. Several articles in the literature noted that participation in revenue sports is often associated with poor academic performance, thus requiring additional support services to assist these students (Hollis, 2002; Rishe, 2003; Scott et al., 2008). Institutional leaders suggested that participants in revenue sports of men’s basketball and football are especially prone to academic struggles; therefore, additional support mechanisms to help with their studies may prove beneficial. Additionally, this finding supports NCAA reports that specific sport participation plays a role in academic performance. The NCAA found that in some instances between 1995-2002 Olympic style sports (nonrevenue in most cases) far outpaced the academic performance of football, basketball, and baseball by nearly 10-15% GSR (NCAA, 2010).

Year in school. Fourth, differences in GPA in relation to students’ year in school was significant \(p = .001\); however, there was no significant difference between year in school and GPA \(p = \text{n.s.}\), which approached a medium effect size \(n^2 = .05\). Figure 6
(p. 126) depicts this relationship between mean GPA and year in school. This finding is noteworthy because freshman students reported the highest GPA, $M = 2.79$, followed by seniors, $M = 2.63$; juniors, $M = 2.55$; and sophomores, $M = 2.51$. This variance suggests that year in school accounted for a moderate difference in GPA, but the academic outcomes between class years was not significant. Further, the initial success of freshman may indicate that the incoming at-risk students are being supported by SAASS and coaches during their transition period, and they are benefiting from mandatory study hall and other services focused on acclimation to college education. This finding aligns with research by Mangold et al. (2003) that suggests formal activities, such as freshman orientation, special advising, and transitional programs can improve the academic outcomes of student-athletes. Institutional leaders asserted that freshman transitional programs, such as summer bridge, can prove beneficial for fostering academic development of at-risk student-athletes by helping them acclimate to the college environment and get a head start academically. Additionally, the seniors may be performing at a higher level because they are entrenched in their major course of study and have learned to utilize resources offered to them to improve academically.

Understanding the factors that contribute to varying academic outcomes, based on year in school, may have implications on the way institutions support at-risk athletes upon entrance to the school, during the middle of their academic career, and when they become seniors finishing up their major.

**Index score and high school GPA.** Lastly, variance in GPA and eligibility index score was not found to be significant ($p = n.s.$). Figure 7 (p. 127) depicts this relationship between mean GPA and index scores. This finding was of significant statistical
importance because the researcher expected to see a significant difference in mean GPA and index score variable. Given that index score is a function of high-school GPA (HSGPA) and SAT/ACT test scores, the researcher expected to see a significant relationship; the correlation between HSGPA and index score was strong, $r = .751$, $p < .001$. Of most interest, was the relationship between cumulative GPA (CGPA) with HSGPA and index score. High-school GPA was significantly related to CGPA, $r = .148$, $p = .049$; thus, unlike HSGPA the effect of admittance test scores may not be significant predictor of college GPA. Several researchers, including Astin (1993), Kane and Gropper (2010), Sellers (1989), Shulman and Bowen (2001), and Tinto (1975) have also examined the relationship between current academic success and precollege input variables upon entrance to the institutions and found that HSGPA demonstrated a significant academic impact on performance in college. Index score was not significantly related to CGPA, $r = .131$, $p = .084$. Based on this finding, although index score may be used at the institution as a means to categorize student-athletes as at-risk, it does not result in statistically significant impact on students’ CGPA. However, although findings did not suggest a significant relationship between college GPA and index scores, the data were congruent in representing precollege variables, thus lower quartiled indexes predicted lower GPA respectively, except between quartile one and two.

**Academic Outcome—Predictor Variables**

Additional quantitative analysis was conducted using predictor variables found to be significantly correlated and associated with GPA outcome from the GOALS survey instrument data. Results from the correlation among predictor variables are summarized in Table 10 (p. 131). It is important to note that the survey data were collected from the
same group of at-risk student-athletes identified as such during the 2012-13 academic year. These data from the survey were used to answer research question 3 pertaining to sources of support, factors that serve as barriers, and the overall experiences that the at-risk student-athletes face in their environment. To perform the analysis of the survey data, a forward multiple regression model consisting of predictors with the strongest utility was employed. The model accounted for 53.7% of the variance in GPA, suggesting that over half of the variability of the data either positively or negatively affects outcome of GPA. Within the model, five of the seven variables were found to be significantly predictive of the outcome. Table 11 (p. 136) summarizes the regression model. As previously discussed, delimitation of variables from the correlation based on overall sample size enabled the researcher to examine the strongest predictors of GPA.

**Proximity to home, family, and friends.** The strongest negative predictor of GPA was the student-athletes’ proximity to home, family, and friends (St.b = -.375, \( p < .001 \)). Although this predictor represented a weak relationship overall, it suggests that at-risk students tend to have higher cumulative GPAs when proximately to their support network is of lessor concern. This finding suggests that the at-risk group may be independent self-starters who benefit from such intrinsic characteristics that ultimately help them succeed academically. For example, this aligns with previous research by Larimore and Chitiyo (2007) and Ridpath et al. (2007), which noted high motivational level, desire to succeed, and ability to focus may be considered beneficial traits in at-risk student-athletes ability to succeed academically.

Additionally, this group may benefit from fewer distractions from family activities and be more apt to stay around campus on weekends, thus making the college community
their family during the season. Also, it may indicate that participation in college athletics has given these students an educational opportunity that they want to take advantage of because they may not have had this same opportunity in their home environments. Thus, this predictor may be a significant indicator that higher grades will help at-risk students stay in school and not be forced to go home where educational opportunities are limited. This aligns with previous discussions indicating that college athletics provides educational opportunities for individuals who may not otherwise seek advanced education (Beamon, 2008; Denhart et al., 2009; Eckard, 2010; Hood et al., 1992; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). This finding may enhance the confidence of coaches and administrators to recruit at-risk student-athletes from areas outside southern California.

**Athletically related activities.** Hours spent on athletic related activity during the season was negatively predictive of GPA within the model (St.b = -.256, p = .004). Much emphasis within the literature was placed on time constraints of student-athletes and the subsequent academic challenges that ensue from participation in this demanding extra-curricular activity (Beamon, 2008; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Estler & Nelson, 2005; Gaston-Gayles, 2009; Kane & Gropper, 2010; Knight Commission, 2001; Simiyu, 2010). Studies have reported that activity including time spent with modest environmental demands set by the athletic structure, such as practice, competitions, team meals, travel, team meetings, rehabilitation, weight training, and media responsibilities, which can often result in physical and mental fatigue leading to decreased levels of academic motivation (Beamon, 2008; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Simiyu, 2010). Additionally, institutional leaders acknowledged time constraints due to athletically related activities as a potential barrier for academic success if the two are not balanced.
effectively. As obvious of an impact this predictor may exhibit, leaders within athletics must consider the hours spent on athletic activities during the season as a potential threat to academic success of the at-risk athletes.

**Faculty perception and interaction.** Faculty perception and interaction was negatively predictive of GPA within the model (St.b = -.250, \( p = .007 \)). As previously discussed, the variables within this scale included the following items pertaining to relationships with faculty: I feel that some of my professors discriminate against me because I am an athlete, I feel that some of my professors favor me because I am an athlete, and I feel that my professors view me as more of an athlete than as a student. This finding suggests that at-risk student-athletes may be affected by negative interaction with their professors; consequently, their GPA may be impacted if they feel professors do not support them in their role as student-athletes and their ability to succeed academically. This finding aligns with Smith’s (1988) claim regarding faculty perception and the inherent tension that exists between the role of student-athletes and faculty’s concern for academic integrity. Moreover, this finding is consistent with previous research performed by Engstrom et al. (1995) that indicated a less positive faculty view of student-athletes’ academic competence created by disdain and anger with respect to the extraordinary privileges and services that many student-athletes receive. Noteworthy is the lack of evidence in this study, as well as the research conducted by Engstom et al. that indicated the attitudes held between student-athletes and faculty lead to harmful interaction.

Institutional leaders also suggested to the researcher that faculty interaction was important to supporting academic outcomes of at-risk student-athletes; however, there was uncertainty about how many students actually sought out the help of professors.
Thus, as noted by Jolly (2008), informal interaction between at-risk population and faculty may enhance academic output of this population if they feel comfortable reaching out and supported given their status as athletes. This finding suggests that at-risk student-athletes should establish a positive working relationship with their professors; this may require initial meetings at the beginning of the semester to communicate desired outcomes given their commitment within athletics. Additionally, it may behoove SAASS staff members and coaches to recommend that their at-risk students establish frequent and mandatory meetings with their professors to build working relationships that may prompt progression with efficacious academic tendencies.

**Likelihood of becoming professional.** The at-risk student-athletes’ belief that they were not likely to become a professional athlete or Olympian was positively predictive of GPA within the model ($St.b = .263, p = .003$). The NCAA (2009) maintains that athletics is an integral part of the educational process and a clear line of demarcation between college athletics and professional sports must exist. However, several of the interviewees participating in this study discussed that professional aspirations can be a significant academic distraction for at-risk student-athletes, particularly in revenue sports. This assertion aligns with other studies, such as Holm (2009), Potuto and O’Hanlon (2006), and Simons et al. (1999) that indicate potential academic challenges student-athletes may face if they possess unrealistic expectations of competing at the professional level. Specifically, Simons et al. (1999) reported higher GPA’s for females than males because males in revenue sports are more prone to professional aspirations due to extrinsic rewards which lessens their academic motivation. Additionally, Benford (2007) and Zimbalist (1999) argued that college sports may serve as a training ground for
professionalism, thus further distracting student-athletes from their academic responsibility.

The student-athletes’ understanding that they are not likely to become professional athletes is a significant predictor of GPA. Student-athletes in the sample who assumed they would not be professional athletes had a higher mean GPA compared to others with strong professional aspirations. This finding may indicate that the at-risk population is better prepared academically and produce higher GPAs, when not focusing on professional aspirations, because they are depending on their degree to enter the workforce. Thus, this finding may suggest their understanding and respect for the importance of their education with enhancing their career opportunities outside of sports. Finally, with the scant chance of going pro, at-risk student-athletes should maintain focus on classroom performance in the pursuit of graduation that will enhance their marketability and advancement in the workforce.

The now famous mantra coined by the NCAA’s Dennis Cryder states, “There are over 450,000 NCAA student-athletes, and most of us will go pro in something other than sports” (NCAA, 2010, n.p.). Moreover, the NCAA (2012b) reported educated calculations depicting the marginal probability athletes in men’s basketball, women’s basketball, football, baseball, and men’s soccer had of becoming a professional athlete at 1.3%, .9%, 1.6%, 9.7%, and .7%, respectively. This message paints a rather poignant picture of the negligible probability of student-athletes actually making it to the professional level, and dominantly the interview participants supported this notion. This finding sheds light on the importance of coaches, academic support personnel, and former student-athletes discussing professional aspirations with at-risk students. Thus,
reinforcing the minimal probability of going pro to at-risk students may potentially elevate their desire to graduate and improve their effort in the classroom.

**Time spent on extracurricular activities.** During the academic year, time spent on extracurricular activities by at-risk student-athletes during the off-season was positively predictive of GPA within the model (St.b = .257, p = .005). The GOALS survey did not specify particular types of extracurricular activities; however, involvement activities within the institution, but outside athletics, may be considered. For example, involvement in clubs, organizations, student government, study groups, and Greek life are potential educational purposeful activities that may enhance the overall student experience that positively affects GPA.

Although this population often has limited opportunity to participate in other student experiences outside of their athletic activity, this finding suggests that involvement activity may have a positive effect on academic performance. Accordingly, at-risk student-athletes should be advised to participate in involvement activities outside of athletics in the off-season, and supported by coaches, SAASS staff, and peers to expand their learning environment through such activities. Much of the research suggested that student-athletes avoid activities outside their comfort zone due to stigma and feelings of inadequacy associated with being a student-athlete; hence, they are isolated to learning experiences within their current environment (Adler & Adler, 1991; Harrison et al., 2009; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006; Simons et al., 2007). Additionally, some leaders within higher education have argued that college athletics creates a unique environment where the culture is not consistent with the mission of the university, and the
student-athletes are isolated from the rest of the student population (Aries et al., 2004; Shulman & Bowen, 2001).

Avoidance of activities outside of athletics may create isolation within college environment, thus limiting potential academic growth opportunities for at-risk student-athletes. Time spent during the off-season participating in clubs, organizations, study groups, or other extracurricular activities should be recommended to the at-risk population as a means to improve academic performance. Such activity may provide opportunities that would otherwise not be explored, thus limiting the overall learning experience within the college environment.

Understanding how these predictor variables affect the academic outcome of at-risk student athletes may have implications on the way institutions support this population. For example, offering counseling sessions and academic performance plans to better prepare their students given this set of predictor variables may provide much needed support that enhances probability of academic success. This proactive approach aligns with other studies that suggested the positive impact several varieties of support can have in academic success, while compensating for the extraordinary experiences of the student-athlete population (Kane & Gropper, 2010). Also, these findings may be critical with establishing best practices for recruitment of at-risk students that will better enable coaches to discern potential academic challenges before initiating scholarships for at-risk athletes.

**Practical Implication of Findings**

Given these input and environmental variables, and their effect on the academic output of at-risk student-athletes, there are several implications relevant to supporting this
group with enhancement of their overall experience and eventual graduation. Based on this study’s finding and previous literature, it is suggested that athletic administrative leaders establish new initiatives, services, and programming designed to improve academic motivation that ultimately enhances academic performance (Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Hollis, 2002). Initially, the process of supporting this population initiates with the recruiting process and subsequent evaluation of precollege variables that will affect one’s ability to succeed academically, especially high school GPA. Part of this intentional assessment may include other variables affecting academic success, for example, proximity to home and the student’s desire to compete at the professional level which may lead to distraction and poor performance in the classroom. Thus, once the institution, coaches, and support staff willingly commit to providing educational opportunity to an at-risk student-athlete, they must also assume the support necessary to assist them on the track to graduation.

The importance of establishing precollege academic thresholds that quantify actual at-risk status may prove beneficial in the evaluation and acceptance of at-risk student-athletes. For instance, the current 3,400 at-risk level may need to be reduced to a lower number that better represents that academic success potential of the population that will ultimately reduce the quantity of students in need of potential intervention. Therefore, athletic department leadership and coaches could best evaluate academic potential based on historical performance levels and make data based decisions on the probability of these athletes persisting to graduation.

Academic initiatives aligning with the overall mission of the institution should also be considered to enhance persistence and support. This may include programing
enhancements in SAASS that include intentional mechanisms that promote academic well-being. In some cases, this may include building on existing functions that currently support academic performance initiatives. For example, mentor, tutor, and advisor training specifically designed for supporting at-risk students that may include workshops, seminars, or conventions that develop skills to support this population. Furthermore, hiring additional learning specialists with prior experience serving at-risk students may prove beneficial. It is also critical for coaches to be engaged in these processes due to their extensive interaction and influence with the student-athletes.

In addition to SAASS and coaches’ professional development focused on support at-risk student-athletes, it may be beneficial to engage in meaningful dialog with the students themselves regarding their status and potential threats. This could include inclusive explanation from sport supervisors, SAASS, and coaches as to why they are identified as at-risk and the support opportunities they will need to utilize to meet academic goals. This intentionally focused counseling may assist the students with realization of their academic challenges and improve their understanding of the support mechanisms in place to assist them to progress academically.

As previously noted, the findings from this study indicate that faculty involvement, extracurricular activities supplementary to athletics, and limitation of athletic activity may improve GPA for this population. Therefore, from a practitioner’s perspective these variables should be addressed to create positive change. For example, mandatory meetings between students and faculty should be initiated with feedback given to SAASS advisors that may prompt additional counseling. Extracurricular activities external to athletics should be encouraged by coaches and SAASS and program offerings
suggested as a means to improve the students’ overall experience. Lastly, it may prove beneficial to reduce the number of athletic related activities for at-risk students their first semester of the freshman year. These reductions with be replaced with academic activities, such as study hall, seminars, or mentorship that may assist in their transition from high school to college.

**Key Findings and Conclusions**

Based on the results of this study, previous gaps in the literature pertaining to at-risk student-athlete academic success were addressed that may assist practitioners and student-athletes collectively with achievement of academic goals. Throughout the literature and this study, it was very evident that participation in athletics creates a unique set of demands that must be overcome in order to succeed academically and athletically. In addition to strenuous time constraints, pressure to win on the field, and challenges with academic preparation and study habits, input and environmental factors may especially limit at-risk student-athletes’ ability to achieve graduation.

Overall, results of this study indicated that at-risk student-athletes ($N = 176$) are producing mean GPAs lower than non-at-risk student-athletes; however, not drastically different at $M = 2.62$, $M = 2.84$, respectively. Given that the extant data were collected in the 2012-13 academic year, the researcher was able to conclude that of the 37 seniors in the study, 16 have graduated and 21 are on schedule for graduation in December 2013 or the subsequent spring. Although the data indicated that at-risk students have lower GPAs, these graduation rates suggest they are persisting to graduation. This aligns with previous research that indicated the at-risk student-athletes who were predicted to not succeed overachieved and persisted to graduation (Kane et al., 2008).
As previously discussed, academic at-risk status within the institution is established by the student’s incoming eligibility index score. Academic outcomes of the at-risk population indicated that index score was not a statistically significant input variable affecting cumulative GPA; however, the input variable of high school GPA was significantly related to college GPA. Notably, the predictor of high school GPA in this study was of most significance when considering precollege variables used established index scores. This was consistent with Astin’s (1993) findings confirming that input variables, such as high school GPA, are strong predictors of academic performance in college. This finding may suggest the need for athletics to establish a separate threshold for at-risk status based on an index score that more accurately represents potential to succeed. Additionally, admittance criteria may be increasingly considered based on high school GPA, rather than eligibility index, which is inclusive of college entrance exam scores, ultimately giving less consideration to test scores as an indicator of at-risk student’s ability to succeed. Thus, coaches and administrators may be more supportive to recruit and admit at-risk student-athletes who fall under special admission status based on high school GPA opposed to index score.

Other variables that were explored in relation to academic performance (GPA) including gender, major, sport, and year in school presented mixed results. At-risk student-athletes’ gender was found to be significantly impactful accounting for differences in GPA among males and females. Perhaps this finding is an indication that athletes in men’s sports require additional academic support or they are less focused on their academic pursuits, especially for those men participating in high-profile revenue producing teams. Higher academic performance levels of women in this study confirms
previous research suggesting negative stereotype identity of male athletes results in lower achievement (Harrison et al., 2009; Simons et al., 2007). Several of the interviewees in this study suggested that at-risk athletes participating in sports, such as men’s basketball and football, typically require additional academic support due to pressures of competing in a sport that is inherently prone to draw attention away from academics.

The student-athlete’s major was also found to significantly affect GPA. Results indicated that social science majors produced the lowest mean GPA of all categories ($M = 2.48$), with business majors leading the way with the highest mean GPA ($M = 2.91$). This suggests that students in more demanding majors are performing a higher level; however, they may also have significant input variables that enhance their ability to succeed. Moreover, this finding may also indicate that selections of major are congruent with index score, meaning lower performing students are in easier majors and higher performing students are in harder majors. From a practitioner’s perspective, SAASS staff and coaches may suggest appropriate majors to their at-risk students given their academic level; however, limitation of their growth and opportunity in a given subject must also be considered. In a similar study regarding at-risk student-athlete academic performance, Hewitt (2002) noted the importance of selecting the correct major, suggesting that this population should have the same education experience as the general student body. To this point Hewitt asserted, “They should be allowed to leave college with a meaningful degree, rather than being forced into a major just to maintain eligibility” (p. 24). Thus, selection of major must be carefully considered with this population as to not stifle education experience.
As previously discussed, revenue producing sports in this study included basketball, football, baseball, softball, and volleyball. As expected, participation in these higher-visibility programs was significantly related to lower mean GPA overall. However, when analyzing multi-year APR scores with these programs, they were all well above the benchmark of 930 with the exception of men’s basketball, which had an APR of 935. This indicates that although the at-risk students in these sports tend to produce lower GPA’s, they are staying in school and maintaining their eligibility to compete, which increased the probability of them persisting to graduation. Many of the leaders participating in this study suggested that participating in revenue producing sports can create undue academic challenges in addition to the athletes’ existing at-risk status. Participation in revenue sports has often been linked to lower graduation rates and academic performance, thus making it difficult to debunk the “dumb jock” stigma (Rishe, 2003; Simons et al., 1999; Simons et al., 2007). Thus, special attention and support must be given at the institutional and departmental level to support at-risk individuals competing in revenue sports due to predictively low academic success. This support may include additional advisors that always travel with the team, mandatory study hall regardless of year in school, peer mentorship opportunities, and special academic training of the coaches.

Year in school was another variable analyzed in this study; although results did not report significant relation to mean GPA, they indicated that freshman within the sample population had higher mean GPA than other classes. Several of the institutional leaders in this study confirmed that transitional programs, such as summer bridge, are significant factors in contributing to academic success for students, especially those at
risk. From a practitioner’s perspective, year in school may be taken into consideration when engaging at-risk athletes in support initiatives that may affect their academic experience. Specifically, these results suggest that freshmen benefit from services offered in their transition period as represented by higher GPA; thus, sophomore and junior at-risk student-athletes may also benefit from elevated support during the mid-stage of their academic career.

As indicated, the GOALS survey provided several predictor variables within the regression model that may affect GPA of at-risk student-athletes. These results are consistent with findings from similar studies investigating academic performance and experience of student-athletes (Hewitt, 2002; Kane et al., 2008; NCAA, 2009). Notably, of the at-risk survey participants \(N = 97\), exactly half of the student-athletes indicated that their GPA would be higher if they were not members of college athletics team. Thus, these findings may be used to assist this population with their academic challenges, while being an at-risk student-athlete as a means to improve the overall experience. This may include advising or mentor interventions that may help the students see athletics as a support and growth mechanism, opposed to a distraction that lessens their ability to perform academically.

The experiential factors of athletic participation, as noted in Table 11 (p. 136), suggest that the environment within athletics can generate statistically significant predictors of academic success based on GPA. Particularly, these predictors may serve as barriers to academic success for the at-risk population. For example, the relationship that students have with their faculty, the aspiration of becoming a professional, and the hours spent on athletic activities during the season that negatively predict GPA may need to be
addressed in order to improve academic performance of the at-risk population. Consequently, this establishes need for potential interventions from a SAASS staff or coaches’ to address these variables with proactive solutions. Such solutions may include, but are not limited to, mandatory meetings with faculty, counseling sessions with former professional athletes, peer mentorship programs, and time management seminars to educate on the balance of athletics and academics, respectively. Also prominent was the consistent discussion with institution leaders in the study that asserted that time demands, especially in revenue sports, created a substantial barrier that may pose additional academic challenges for at-risk students. This aligns with other studies that concluded in-season time demands in some sports may be a contributing factor to lower semester GPA, especially in sports with extended competitive seasons, such as basketball, baseball, softball, and football (Adler & Adler, 1991; James, 2010; NCAA, 2010; Rishe, 2003; Scott et al., 2008). Thus, time management skill for this population proves critical in overcoming academic barriers created by long hours on the playing field, and coaches and SAASS staff must educate accordingly given these demands (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; Kane & Gropper, 2010). For the most part, student-athletes in this study strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed that balancing academic, athletic, and social life was manageable at 23.9%, 43.7%, and 21%, respectively. This indicates that their overall experience as student-athletes is rather manageable. Additionally, proximity to home, family, and friends, which was a significant predictor of GPA, may be considered a barrier if the students live in southern California. Findings of this study suggest that those living further from home, which in some cases may ease pressure or commitment to family and friends, creates an environment for academic performance success as evident
by higher mean GPA. This finding may also indicate that those at-risk athletes that are further from home are taking advantage of the opportunity to participate in higher education, an opportunity that perhaps only exists due to their athletic talent, and they want to succeed so they do not have to go back to their home environment. By the same token, this notion is shared in other studies noting that athletics provides opportunities for some students that may not otherwise seek advance higher education (Beamon, 2008; Denhart et al., 2009; Eckard, 2010; Hood et al., 1992; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). As previously discussed, variables including gender, sport, and major may be considered potential barriers to academic success given their impact on GPA.

Although the literature regarding support mechanisms deemed to enhance overall educational experience and academic output of at-risk student-athletes was limited, it was well noted that the relationship between support and academic output is significant (Hollis, 2002; Kane & Gropper, 2010; Ridpath, 2010). Many studies have noted the importance of providing this unique population of students with support services that work in harmony with time constraining athletic activities (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Gaston-Gayles, 2009; Simiyu, 2010). Broughton and Neyer (2001) suggested that athletics programs striving to be successful require the support of well-trained staff, coaches, athletic department personnel, and the campus community.

The literature acknowledged the critical role that coaches play in the development of their student-athletes; however, self-efficacy and high levels of motivation are significant predictors of academic success (Kane & Gropper, 2010; Ridpath et al., 2007; Simons et al., 1999). Findings from interviews with institutional leaders in this study indicated that support from coaches and SAASS is critical to academic success for at-risk
student-athletes, and such support aligns well with the mission of the institution preparing them for their life after college. This supports Sperber’s (1990, 2000) acknowledgment in the value of the connection between aligning college athletics with the overall mission of the institution. Additionally, this aligns with the model and mission of the NCAA (2012a), which notes 10 immediate and lifelong advantages of competing in college athletics: (a) college education, (b) academic success, (c) scholarships, (d) student assistance fund, (e) academic and support services, (f) medical care, (g) elite training opportunities, (h) healthy living, (i) exposure and experience, and (j) preparation for life. Thus, the development and application of effective mentoring, tutoring, and advising should be closely considered when supporting this population to meet these output goals. These services may help with predictably of GPA while addressing specific variables that this group may experience.

The regression model noted the variable of academic preparation, challenges, and study habits that may be predictive of GPA. Potential challenges that most at-risk students noted in the survey as typical or somewhat typical were: I put off studying more than I should, I find it hard to pay attention during lectures, when work is difficult I either give up or study only the easy parts, my mind wanders a lot when I study, I feel panicky when I take an important test, I worry that I will flunk out of school, when I take a test I realize I have studied the wrong material, and during class discussions I have trouble figuring out what is important enough to put in my notes. From a practitioner’s perspective, addressing these challenges within SAASS may improve GPA for this population.
Based on the findings from the regression analysis, it is also critical to encourage at-risk students to participate in extracurricular activities outside athletics during the off-season. Diversifying the overall experience with participation in clubs, organizations, study groups, and other activities may change the lens in which the students view their education, thus enhancing their overall experience. Additionally, the indirect effect of academic governance models created by the NCAA may also support academic performance. For instance, many of the institutional leaders noted legislative impacts, such as deregulation and higher academic standards creating higher degree of accountability that ultimately increases support for at-risk student-athletes. Given the NCAA’s 2012-13 revised APR legislation, which penalizes coaches with potential recruiting and competition suspension in its third level of enforcement, coaches have a renewed focus on the academic progress of their student-athletes. The NCAA (2013c) noted the academic reform, including new APR standards, has resulted in real measurable impacts.

The NCAA (2013b) reported the majority of Division I sports teams are posting top grades, as evident by the most recent 4-year APR average of 973. These increases may be affiliated with the coaches’ involvement as noted in the participant interviews. Furthermore, at-risk athletes may benefit from additional support services that institutions offer in an effort to improve academic status and avoid penalties within the APR structure. Thus, these students may receive services that enhance academic performance and lowering the probability that their performance will negatively impact the team’s APR.
For the last several years, NCAA Division I institutions have become increasingly engaged in a series of reforms aimed at increasing the academic performance of student-athletes. Although the at-risk population is not addressed specifically in these initiatives, their ability to persist to graduation will be a contributing factor with institutional accountability. This study serves to offer statistically significant data that can assist educational practitioners in their quest to support this unique population. Specifically, the input and environmental factors that were discovered through data based inquiry to predict academic outcomes that may lead to successful degree completion. Thus, athletic departments and institutions may use this study as a means to develop strategies to improve the academic success of their at-risk population. Such strategies may include academic interventions focused solely on supporting this group towards graduation. These strategies will be suggested in the recommendations section to directly address the input and environmental factors aimed at fostering academic success of at-risk student athletes. The intent of this study is to provide suggestions that may prompt positive institutional change in meeting demands to establish successful degree completion for the at-risk population. Ultimately, the findings from this study may be used to develop and implement efficacious academic interventions within athletic departments to better serve and foster development of at-risk student-athletes.

**Recommendations**

The results of this study have implications for institutions that house athletic programs, especially those at the Division I level. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following are recommendations that are prudent for enhancing the educational practice of intercollegiate institutions and athletic departments. In addition,
the findings and conclusions of this study provided several recommendations for future research that could enhance the overall understanding and support for at-risk student-athletes.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The following summary of recommendations for practice should be used by the Division I athletic department in establishing strategies, methods, support, and evaluation of their at-risk student-athletes.

- Athletic departments should establish methods to gather, analyze, and utilize at-risk data based criteria as a means to create early warning systems for incoming freshman student-athletes and assess their ability to persist to graduation prior to admittance to the university. This mandatory assessment of each at-risk student athlete should assist SAASS staff and coaches with identifying risk factors that may contribute to poor academic performance. These criteria may or may not be congruent with institutional measures of the general student body and may fluctuate based on historical data that indicates academic success of the population.

- Initiate meetings to evaluate other indicators of GPA, such as stress, health issues, learning disabilities, pressure from parents and experience factors gleaned from GOALS survey data.

- Conduct focus groups and counseling sessions with at-risk students to assess academic challenges and potential support interventions.

- Develop peer mentorship groups that prompt intentional interaction between at-risk students and academically successful students.
- Establish effective means to offer summer school programming or services to continue addressing academic deficiencies of the at-risk students.

- Provide professional development opportunities to coaches in an effort to educate them on servicing of at-risk student-athletes.

- Intentionally and systematically establish interventions between faculty and at-risk students. This process may entail mandatory meetings involving each of the student’s faculty members throughout the semester.

- Provide means to establish extracurricular activities outside of athletics to enhance the educational experience of the at-risk population.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings in this study present an opportunity to explore additional issues that warrant further investigation. The following are recommendations for further research and analysis that may address the changing needs of the at-risk student athlete population. These may be carried out as a means to evaluate input and environmental predictors that affect cumulative GPA and the student-athletes’ overall educational experience.

- Conduct academic performance comparison with the nonstudent-athlete at-risk population at the same institution to investigate differences or similarities with academic output.

- Due to the researcher’s position within the athletic department, focus groups and/or interviews were not conducted to ensure confidentiality of the sample population. Thus, future studies should include qualitative methods with the students. Additionally, qualitative methods should also be utilized with
current coaches to gather perspective on supporting at-risk student-athlete academic performance.

- Use GOALS survey and focus groups with former at-risk student-athletes to investigate how and why previous at-risk cohort members did or did not persist to graduation.

- Perform a mixed method study investigating means of academic output for student-athletes considered at-risk upon entry to the institution, but use a sample of those who actually performed at the scholar-athlete level and persisted to graduation.

- Perform a study that focuses exclusively on academic performance of at-risk student-athletes in only revenue producing sports, specifically football and basketball.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

GOALS Survey

Dear Student,

By completing and returning this questionnaire, you are agreeing to volunteer for this study. You may stop the survey at any time.

The information you provide is completely confidential. That means that nobody, including the NCAA researchers, will report your responses as coming from you, your team or your school. All reported results will be in terms of sport trends or general patterns, and individual responses will never be reported in isolation.

If you are under 18 years of age, you are excused from further participation in this research study. Please return the questionnaire to the person administering the study.

If you have questions regarding the study or survey instrument, please contact Karen Cooper, study coordinator, at 317/917-6307 or kcooper@ncaa.org. For questions regarding the study procedures, please contact Michael Miranda, Research Review Board coordinator, at 317/917-4606 or mmiranda@ncaa.org.

Your answers will be read automatically by a machine called an optical mark reader. Please follow the instructions carefully:

- Use only blue or black ink.
- Make heavy marks in the circles.
- Make sure your answers are clearly legible.
- Use no other marking or comments on the answer sheet.
- Do not go back and change your answers.

If you want to add a comment or ask a question about this study, please use the space provided at the end of this survey.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS IMPORTANT STUDY ON STUDENT EXPERIENCES!

MANSING INSTRUCTIONS: Be sure to Black Ink and Readable Handwriting. Place all answers in the correct box.

PART 1: College Athletics Experience

1. What is your major sport that you are currently playing in college? (If more than one sport)
   - Baseball
   - Basketball
   - Bowling
   - Cross Country
   - Fencing
   - Field Hockey
   - Football
   - Golf
   - Gymnastics
   - Ice Hockey
   - Lacrosse
   - Tennis

2. What is your gender?
   - Female
   - Male

3. How do you describe yourself? (Select all that apply)
   - American Indian or Alaskan Native
   - Asian
   - Black or African American
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   - White
   - Other

4. Have you participated in a second sport in college?
   - Yes
   - No

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5. Based on your roster spot or frequency of competition, how would you classify your current status in your main sport?
   - First team (e.g., you start in the sport or compete in your preferred events in individual sports)
   - Second team (e.g., regular contributor to team sport, often compete in races or events)
   - Third team (e.g., participate but compete infrequently)
   - Practicing or training but not competing

6. This year, did you receive any athletic scholarship of any kind in your sport?
   - No
   - Yes, partial athletic scholarship
   - Yes, full athletic scholarship

7. Have you or your current team participated in any NCAA championships or competitions (including regional qualifiers and Division I football bowl games) during your time at this school?
   - No
   - Yes

8. Have you suffered an injury or been ill in your sport while you've attended this college due to... (Please respond to each item)
   - Medical reasons (e.g., injury, illness, pregnancy)
   - Travel
   - Severe injury
   - Coach's decision (non-medical reasons)
   - Other voluntary reasons (e.g., family, personal, academic)...
   - Other involuntary reasons (e.g., academic suspension)

9. How likely do you think it is that you will become a professional athlete/college athlete in your sport?
   - Very likely
   - Likely
   - Somewhat likely
   - Not very likely
   - Very unlikely

10. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
   - [Likert scale options provided]
20. What is your current academic standing?
- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate student

21. Did you transfer into your current college or university from another college?
- No (Skip Question 17 and go to Question 18)
- Yes, transferred from another two-year college
- Yes, transferred from another four-year college

22. If you have been asked, were your reasons for transferring from your previous college to your current college...
(please respond to each line)
- Academic reasons?
- Athletic reasons?
- Work/Internship?
- Personal reasons?
- Family/Financial reasons?

23. Which of the following best describes your current
overall grade point average?
- A+ or 4.0
- A or 3.7
- B+ or 3.3
- B or 3.0
- C or 2.0
- D or 1.0 or below

24. How important is graduation from this college or university...
- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral
- Somewhat unimportant
- Very unimportant

25. How do you feel about the classes that you have taken this year?
- I have enjoyed them all
- I have enjoyed most of them
- I have enjoyed some of them
- I haven't enjoyed any of them
22. If you have taken non-traditional courses, when did you take them? (Select all that apply)
   ○ During the school year
   ○ During the summer

23. If you have taken non-traditional courses, what were some of the reasons? (Select all that apply)
   ○ To get ahead or catch up
   ○ They were more convenient to my academic schedule
   ○ They were more convenient to my athletic schedule
   ○ My coaches recommended such courses
   ○ To remain eligible during the off-season
   ○ I prefer the structure of non-instructional courses
   ○ The course is required for my major
   ○ The course is only offered as a non-instructional course

24. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the non-traditional courses you've taken?
   a. I think that these courses are as difficult as "traditional" courses.
   b. I learn as much or more in these courses as I do in traditional courses.
   c. I spend as much time or more on these courses as I do on traditional courses.

25. How well do the following statements describe your classroom or study experiences so far in college?
   a. I put off studying more than I should
   b. Even when I don't like a course, I work hard to get a good grade
   c. When work is difficult, I either give up or study only the easy parts
   d. My mind wanders a lot when I study
   e. I find it hard to stay focused during lectures
   f. I have a positive attitude about completing my course assignments
   g. I don't care about getting a good grade in this course
   h. I feel guilty when I waste the required time
   i. I waste time I could have used to study
   j. When I take a test, I realize I haven't learned the material
   k. Ever since discussions, I have trouble figuring out what is important enough to put in my notes
36. Similar in college, how do you find about...

   a. The effort you've made in your classes? ...................................................
   b. Your relationship with the faculty? .........................................................
   c. Your ability to succeed academically? ......................................................
   d. Your overall college academic experience in this year? ................................

37. Have you, your coaches or others in the athletics department ever discouraged you from participating in an extracurricular activity that interested you?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

38. Do you believe that your extracurricular participation has had an effect on your overall academic performance?
   ○ Yes, I believe that my GPA would be higher if I were not participating in a sport.
   ○ Yes, I believe that my GPA would be lower if I were not participating in a sport.
   ○ No, I believe that participation has had no effect on my GPA.

39. How much have the following people impacted your academic success so far at this college?

   a. Your college counselor .................................................................
   b. The academic advisors in your athletic department ..........................
   c. The staff in your athletic department ..............................................

40. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following academic and career support services offered by your institution or athletics department?

   a. Academic advisors in academic and career support services ........................
   b. Study hall ................................................................
   c. Tutoring ................................................................
   d. Printing registration ......................................................
   e. Career counseling ........................................................

41. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

   a. I have myself as a part of the campus community of this college ................
   b. I have a sense of belonging to this campus ..........................................
42. How many of your closest friends are on your sports team?
- All of my closest college friends are on the team
- Many of my closest college friends are on the team.
- Some of my closest college friends are on the team.
- Few of my closest college friends are on the team.
- None of my closest college friends are on the team.

43. How do you feel that being an athlete has impacted your ability to fit in socially on campus?
- Greatly helped
- Helped somewhat
- Neither helped nor hurt
- Hurt somewhat
- Greatly hurt

44. While at this school, have your connections from other student-activities?
- Yes, I’ve been involved with student-activities since freshman year
- Yes, I’ve been involved with student-activities but not freshman year
- No, I’ve never been involved with any student-activities

45. On average over the past year, how much time have you spent taking part in service projects or other volunteer activities of any type? (Fill in only one circle.)
- One or more hours per day
- A few hours per week
- A few hours per month
- A few hours during the year
- Did not participate in service or volunteer work

46. Are you required to take part in service projects or other volunteer activities as part of your athletics participation? (Fill in only one circle.)
- Yes, my coach/mentors require it
- Yes, my coach/mentors encourage it
- My coach/mentors suggest we take part in these types of activities but do not require them
- No, we do not have to take part in such activities as a team

47. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: My participation in service projects or volunteer activities with my team was a valuable experience.
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

48. How often do you interact with people on a personal level (like having conversations, eating together, going out at places, etc.) with people of other racial or ethnic groups?
- Every day
- Nearly every day
- Most days
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never

49. Overall, how are you feeling about the experiences you have had with people of other racial or ethnic groups while at this college?
- Very good
- Good
- Somewhat good
- Somewhat bad
- Bad
- Very bad

50. Do you believe that your athletics participation has had an effect on your interactions and experiences with people from other racial and ethnic groups?
- Yes, it has had a positive effect
- Yes, it has had a negative effect
- No, it has not had an effect
### Model B: Recruitment

52. How much do you agree or disagree that each of the following reasons contributed to your decision to attend your current college?

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<th>Option</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic offerings, academic reputation, etc.</td>
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<td>Athletics participation</td>
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<td>Proximity to home, family, friends</td>
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<td>Proximity to boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse</td>
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<td>Social scene at this school or have friends attending</td>
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<td>Expectations of parents, teachers, community, etc.</td>
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53. Based on what you know now and what others (e.g., friends, coaches, alumni) told you to expect, how accurate were your initial expectations of...

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<th>Option</th>
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<tr>
<td>The athletic experience at this college</td>
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<td>The academic experience at this college</td>
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<td>The time demands of being a student at this college</td>
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</table>

54. Prior to enrolling in your current college, did you visit the campus (either on an official or unofficial visit)?

- Yes
- No

55. Were you recruited to play sports at your current college?

- Yes, a coach or other contacted me prior to when I enrolled in the school
- Yes, but not until I had already enrolled in this school
- No, I walked onto the team without being recruited

56. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I would have attended this college even if a different coach was here.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
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57. Prior to coming to this college, approximately how many colleges specifically contacted you about playing sports for their school? (NO TO THE NOT CLEARING Them Before They May Have Been Sent To Many Recruiters)
   - None (Skip Question 38 and go to Question 58)
   - 1-6
   - 10-20
   - More than 20

58. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your overall experience with college athletics recruiting?
   - The information I received about college coaches and schools had a major influence on my decision to attend college...
   - Some of the coaches recruiting me contacted me too often...
   - The coaches recruiting me talked a lot about academics...

59. How important was the advice of each of the following people in terms of your decision to attend your current college?
   - Parents or relatives...
   - Friends or mentors...
   - Teachers or school counselors...
   - High school coach...
   - Other coaches, summer leagues or club coaches...
   - Other adults...

60. Where did you attend high school?
   - In the United States or Canada
   - In another country

61. During the last 30 days, on how many days (if any) did you have the following problems or symptoms?
   - Headaches...
   - Trouble with school integration...
   - Difficulty sleeping...
   - Staying focused on school work...
   - Feeling well...

62. During your college career to this point, have you been 100% healthy or have you been in need of some assistance? Yes, more than once...
   - Yes, once
   - No

63. The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. For each, please indicate how you felt or thought in certain way.
   - In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way...
   - In the last month, how often have you felt that things were getting your way...
   - In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way...
   - In the last month, how often have you felt that things were getting your way...
   - In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way...

64. Serial #
68. While school was in session during the season, picture the weekday (Monday to Friday) that most fulfilled your athletic day on campus. On that day, how many hours did you spend on each of the following activities?

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<th>Number of Hours</th>
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<td>a. Attending class, lab, discussion groups, etc.</td>
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<td>e. A Job (for pay)</td>
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<td>f. Socializing, relaxing, family</td>
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70. While school was in session during your season, picture what your weekends were like.

In total (this is adding up your commitments for Saturday and Sunday), by average hours did you spend on each of the following activities during a typical weekend on campus?

a. Attending class, lab, discussion groups, etc. | | | | | | | | | |
| b. Studying or academic work outside of class | | | | | | | | | |
| c. Sport commitments | | | | | | | | | |
| i. Athletic Activities | | | | | | | | | |
| ii. Non-Athletic Activities | | | | | | | | | |
| d. Other extracurricular activities | | | | | | | | | |
| e. A Job (for pay) | | | | | | | | | |
| f. Socializing, relaxing, family | | | | | | | | | |
| g. Sleeping | | | | | | | | | |

71. During the season, how much time in a typical week (excluding weekends) did you spend away from campus due to athletic competition?

- No time spent away. I don't travel.
- One-half day or less away per week.
- 1 day away per week.
- 2 days away per week.
- 3 days away per week.
- 4 or more days away per week.
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APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Interview Questions - Academic Performance for SDSU Athletics

Date:

Time:

Location:

1. How long have you been employed at SDSU? What brought you to SDSU?
2. How did you get involved in your line of work?
3. Tell me a little about your background, both educationally and professionally.
4. What does your average week look like; please share with me in detail your responsibilities.
5. Please discuss your experience during your current tenure and how it may relate to supporting athletics and its mission within the institution.
6. Can you share with me the experience you have as it pertains directly to athletics and/or student-athletes?
7. What do you believe to be the central goal of college athletics?
8. Please discuss your perspective about college athletics and the balance between academics and athletics participation.
9. What recommendations would you give to an academically "at-risk" student-athlete whose eligibility index was below 3400?
10. Please give me your thoughts about athletics, what unique challenges exist that student-athletes must overcome?
11. Discuss barriers and/or programs that you think help or hinder the development of student-athletes.
12. What areas provide opportunity for growth and improvement for student-athletes?
13. What are the sources of support that facilitate the student-athlete success with regards to GSR?
14. What does the future look like in term of student-athlete support and subsequent academic performance of student-athletes?

15. Where do you see college athletics in 10 years? What will be the major challenges during that time?

16. College athletics is often referred to as 'America's peculiar institution', similarly, it is the window or lens in which the public views the institution. Question: what do you feel are the institutional risks and/or rewards given this context?

17. If you had to describe SDSU Athletics in one sentence what would it be?

18. Anything else you would like to discuss that we haven't talked about yet?
APPENDIX C

Special and Program Athletic Admission Policy

SPECIAL AND PROGRAM ATHLETIC ADMISSION POLICY

Note: Only the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs or the President can make an admission decision. NCAA qualifying status does not guarantee admission.

Special Admission “A”

25 slots for any CSU-eligible freshman or transfer (scholarship athletes).
Up to 3 unused A’s may be “banked.”
The maximum number in the “bank” is 3.

Special Admission “B”

25 slots for any CSU-eligible freshman or transfer (scholarship athletes) who are ineligible because they are missing various A-G/VPA requirements.

Program Admission

100 slots for any CSU-eligible freshman or transfer.
Not more than 30 slots for non-scholarship athletes

Deadlines

Admission application filing periods do not apply to athletic admissions.
All other admission requirements (transcripts, intent to enroll, etc.) do apply.

Policy Exceptions

Any special circumstances that may require policy exception will be reviewed by an advisory committee made up of the Faculty Athletics Representative (Chair), the IAC Chairperson, and the IAC Academic Integrity Sub-Committee Chair. The Committee will make a recommendation to the Athletic Director, who will present the special circumstances and the committee recommendation to the President.

The President’s decision to accept, deny or modify the recommendation is final.

Stephen L. Weber  
President

June 15, 2011  
Date