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The Impact of Peer Mentoring on Freshmen Student-Athlete Retention and Experience

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by

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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

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Acknowledgements

I read on the internet that a doctorate is a measure of persistence rather than intelligence. While there are many highly superior intellectuals out there with their doctorates, I can attest to the persistence piece. I am ecstatic to have finally persisted (or "peristed" as we sometimes say in my office)! Thank you to my chair, Dr. Nasser, for believing in me before I even applied to this program and throughout my time here. If you had not agreed to be my chair, I may have quit and not made it here. Thank you for supporting me through my qualitative fears, passive voice woes, data meltdowns, and for willing me to the finish line. Thank you to my other committee members Dr. Winslow and Dr. Hudgins. Dr. Winslow for making statistics not only understandable but also kind of fun! Dr. Hudgins has helped me more professionally than she knows, and I am incredibly grateful that we ended up at the same place at the same time. Shout out also to the rest of the Lindenwood EdD faculty for all your support and preparation along the way. Especially Dr. Elder, who buoyed my writing skills and confidence my during my final semester.

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Abstract

Retention is a universal issue for institutions of higher education in the United States. Students face many challenges in the transition to college, which can contribute to a student's decision to transfer. On top of the traditional obstacles faced by college freshmen, student-athletes encounter additional stressors associated with competing in intercollegiate athletics. College student-athletes must adjust to team dynamics, coaches and coaching changes, time management, and threats to athlete identity. The newly introduced NCAA transfer portal now allows student-athletes to transfer once during their undergraduate careers without losing a season of eligibility, which also impacts retention by making it easier for student-athlete to seek more athletic opportunities elsewhere (NCAA Division I Council, 2021). Institutions cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to keeping students and student-athletes on campus and must employ a variety of interventions to help students have a positive experience and persist to graduation.

Athletic departments continued to invest in student-athlete development and life skills programming in order to help engage student-athletes and keep them connected during their college careers. My research involves a mixed methods study that examined the impact of participation in a peer mentor program on freshmen student-athlete retention at a private NCAA Division II in the Midwestern United States. Little research exists on the impact of student-athlete development programming on retention, with even less overall research on the NCAA Division II student-athlete experience. The study examined retention data from 39 freshmen student-athletes who participated in a peer mentor program in Fall 2019. While the researcher did not find any significant difference in retention of student-athlete in the peer mentor program, surveys and interviews

conducted revealed the peer mentor program had an overall positive impact on participants' experiences. Themes that emerged from the study included expansion of personal networks, orientation to resources, a better sense of connection to the athletic department and university, and an overall increased sense of belonging and self-confidence. Participants also expressed an increase in growth mindset, empathy, and a desire to serve as a peer mentor in order to "pay it forward" to future freshmen student-athletes. While the peer mentor program did not prove to be an effective tool for retention, it is a cost-efficient model that could be implemented at athletic departments of any size to help improve student-athletes' sense of community, connection, and overall experience.

Keywords: NCAA, Division II, peer mentoring, peer mentor program, retention, student-athlete, student-athlete experience

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter One: Introduction

Retention of college students is a universal problem for institutions of higher education both in America and abroad. Every student that departs causes an institution to lose income from tuition, future gifts and investments, and the irrecoverable cost invested through recruitment and teaching students until they leave. Retention efforts in higher education are critical to keep students engaged, connected, and ultimately enrolled. Retention should be the job of every institutional staff member (Farrell, 2009). Reasons for student attrition are highly personal and difficult to box into any one specific category (Berger et al., 2012). Student development theories, such as Astin's (1977, 1984) Theory of Student Involvement or Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure are still frequently applied to address general student departure. Research on specific student identity and their relationship to academic success and persistence is growing. Ball (2013) outlined necessary steps to create campus environments that were inclusive of LGBTQ students. Ortega (2021) found that class participation and positive faculty interactions were tied to Latinx college student-athletes' GPAs. Individual identity and student experiences strongly influence student persistence. Institutions must be creative in addressing the variety of needs of their unique students to give them the best chance of remaining in school.

Student-athletes are a special population with a host of intersecting identities. While multiple theories may be used to address individual threads of a student-athlete's identity, there is a lack of overall research and development theory on student-athletes. What little research exists mostly focuses on National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I student-athletes. With more student-athletes funding their own way

through school outside of athletic scholarship (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2021c), there is opportunity for institutions to intentionally invest in student-athletes, to engage beyond sport, and possibly help keep student-athletes dialed into school long enough to get them to graduation, in addition to or regardless of their athletic experience. Peer mentoring is a cost-effective way to help students build relationships and connections outside of their teams (Muller et al., 2018). Relationships built through a positive peer mentor experience may impact a student-athlete's decision to remain at an institution. This study examined how a peer mentor program affected retention and overall experience of freshmen student-athletes at a private Midwestern university.

Background

Institutions lose more than tuition dollars and future donors in the long-term when students fail to retain. Other potential losses include grants or government funding that may depend on the number of students who are enrolled at an institution; the loss of student fees that help fund amenities and programming; and expenses related to the initial recruitment of students (Simpson, 2005). Colleges and universities have staff members dedicated to calling, visiting, or meeting with potential recruits, which also costs money. Some level of turnover is natural in any business. However, when too many students leave, the recruitment costs for individual students end up in the red, creating a deficit for the institution. Johnson and American Institutes for Research (2012) estimated an unfinished bachelor's degree at a public four-year institution cost approximately $27,000 and $15,000 for an unfinished two-year degree from a public institution. These costs come from recruitment expenses, lost tuition and fees, time faculty spent on teaching students who did not complete, and student support services invested towards helping

students succeed. Every student who leaves an institution without a diploma also leaves the school with a loss on their investment in the short and long-term.

Reasons for student departure are as varied as clouds in the sky: ever changing and highly personal, depending on the perspective ("Major Theoretical Perspectives on Student Success in College," 2007). Many institutions attempt to explain retention issues using a theoretical lens. Tinto's (1993) Theory on Student Departure is widely cited and links student involvement beyond the classroom with persistence and retention. Tinto (1993) theorized that students who engage in extracurricular activities and build relationships with faculty, staff, and other students outside of classwork are more likely to persist through graduation. Student-athletes engage in activities, such as community service, pep rallies, or athletic department social events on their campus, making them more likely to stay at an institution according to Tinto's (1993) theory. Tinto believed that students must be emotionally vested into an institution on some social level in order to have the best chance of making it to graduation. A lack of loyalty, investment, and attachment allow students and student-athletes to remain distant enough to make ending the relationship with a university much easier. Institutions must work to create engagement and build allegiance to strengthen retention.

Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory is also a popular retention theory in higher education. Schlossberg believed that students lacking in support or experience in navigating transitions contributes to student attrition. Schlossberg (2011) articulated three main types of transitions across the lifespan: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. For new college students, many may be prepared to move out of state away from family for the first time (anticipated), but may not be self-disciplined enough to stay

academically focused with the lack of supervision and structure, which might result in a low term GPA (unanticipated). Students earning a low GPA their first semester might expect to lose a scholarship or damage relationships with family members back home, but this may not actually materialize (non-event). Successfully navigating the transition from living with family at home to on their own or the transition from high school academics to the rigor of college level coursework contribute to a student's resilience level and ability to reach the finish line. This may be especially pertinent when experiencing challenges of multiple identities, such as roommate, new teammate, or partner, etc.

Both Tinto (1993) and Schlossberg's (2011) theories paint with a broad brush. They are applicable generally to all individual experiences, regardless of individual identities. However, theories that focus on unique identifiers, such as race, ethnicity, spirituality, disabilities, intellect, and psychosocial behavior can also be used to explain retention issues. Helms' 1990 White Identity Model (WIDM) for example, tracks the shift of White people's awareness of their personal role in enabling racism to taking active steps towards a non-racist society (Patton et al., 2016). Students who come from heavily segregated high schools and hometowns may struggle through the stages of Helms' (1990) WIDM, which can have a profound impact on their White and non-White peers (Moschella, 2013). Helms' (1990) WIDM may be widely applicable to college students; the researcher was unable to find studies that applied the WIDM specifically to student-athlete identity and experience.

College student-athletes have diverse layered identities outside of athletics that fit into many existing theories, such as Helms' (1990) WIDM. However, the research lacks the student-athlete identity theory and how that identity may impact a college student-

athlete's experience and retention. While Helms' (1990) WIDM explores the racial reckoning of a student, it does not explain the student-athlete identity and experience the individual student has, including their experience as a Caucasian teammate in their sport. Student-athlete specific theory development is sparse at best, and most student-athlete specific research comes from generally applying universal student development theory. With nearly half a million college students participating in NCAA athletics at four-year institutions across the United States and Canada (NCAA, 2021h), learning why student-athletes do not retain is critical for overall university retention rates.

Playing time, coaching changes, and a myriad of other sport-related issues are all top reasons why student-athletes transfer, particularly at large Division I institutions. Though Division I (DI) does not have a corner on athletic-related reasons for transferring, the smaller percentage of athletic scholarships awarded at the Division II (DII) and Division III (DIII) levels may also impact student-athletes' decisions to transfer (Swingle & Salinas, 2020). Similar to other relationships, there are times when circumstances related to their sport do not work out as anticipated, and a student-athlete must make the choice whether to stay or go. However, if institutions commit to student engagement and retention, a third option may be presented: stay as a student but quit the athletic team (DeVries, 2019). A student-athlete's decision to stay at a school but no longer compete in a sport is impacted by financial aid and cost of attendance, especially if the student-athlete was receiving a significant athletic scholarship. Beyond financial cost, what else are institutions doing to help integrate student-athletes to the campus culture? How are universities and athletic departments fostering relationships and connections outside of sport to help keep student-athletes around if athletics is no longer a viable option or fit for

them? Retaining student-athletes is beneficial to the university's bottom line, which should make it both a benefit and priority to a university's athletic department. As DeVries' (2019) found, athletic departments need to prioritize connecting student-athletes to other individuals and opportunities outside of sport to give student-athletes the best chance of staying in school, regardless of whether they continue to play on a team through graduation.

Statement of the Problem

Regardless of the intended pedagogical mission and values a university espouses, institutions who cannot retain student customers are unable to stay in business. Building on theoretical frameworks, such as Astin's (1977, 1984) Theory of Student Involvement and Tinto's (1993) Theory on Student Departure, athletic departments have started to invest in programming and staff aimed at connecting student-athletes to meaningful experiences outside of sport, such as career preparation, leadership development, and mental health care. Life skills, or student-athlete development, have become such a priority that the professional organization for student-athlete support services changed its name from the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics to the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) in 2017 (National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals [N4A], 2021). Programming for student-athletes ranges from non-existent at some schools, to an entire curriculum designed by a small army at other institutions. For example, the University of Pittsburgh, has 11 staff members dedicated to academic success, and an additional eight full-time staff members who work in the Cathy and John Pelusi Family Life Skills Program (University of Pittsburgh Athletics, 2020). As schools

make the decision to invest so many resources (both money and human capital) into student-athlete development, institutions need to determine exactly what impact life skills programming has on student-athlete retention.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Hypothesis 1: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in a peer mentoring program.

Hypothesis 2: Female student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than female student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Hypothesis 3: Male student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than male student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Hypothesis 4: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program have a higher first-semester GPA average than freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Hypothesis 5: International student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than international freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Hypothesis 6: As a result of participation in the peer mentoring program, the Men's Lacrosse team will have an above average rate of retention for freshmen student-athletes whose first semester was Fall 2019.

Hypothesis 7: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than general freshmen students who do not participate in a peer mentoring program.

Research Question 1: How does participation in a peer mentoring program affect the overall experience during a freshman student-athlete's first semester in college?

Research Question 2: How does participation in a peer mentoring program influence freshmen student athletes' connection within the athletic community?

Research Question 3: How does participation in a peer mentoring program enhance freshmen student-athletes' connection to their institution?

Research Question 4: How does participation in a single semester peer mentoring program impact freshmen student-athletes beyond their first semester?

Purpose of the Study

College student-athletes face a number of complex issues, such as strenuous time demands (Gayles & Hu, 2009), self and social management within their teams, and even feeling undervalued and underpaid as student-athletes (Landry & Baker, 2019). Additionally, with the introduction of new legislation in 2021 that allows NCAA student-athletes the ability to transfer one time without any loss of eligibility (NCAA, 2021f), disconnected student-athletes may be looking to transfer at higher rates than ever before. Not only is losing students expensive for a university (Johnson & American Institutes for Research, 2012; Simpson, 2005), but it is a disruptive process for students, as well (Berger et al., 2012). For example, transfer students may face social and psychological hurdles in adjusting to a new campus culture. Institutions have unique class and credit requirements, which may result in students losing credits, which also makes changing

institutions tough (Duis et al., 2016). In addition to general retention initiatives, institutions need to support student-athletes through their transition out of their sport to help them determine the best path forward. Colleges and universities who build a strong relationship with student-athletes outside of sport have the best chance of retaining those student-athletes through graduation, regardless of their decision to remain on a team.

The purpose of this study was to research the effects of a peer-to-peer mentoring program on student-athlete retention from freshman to sophomore year at a private Midwestern university. To make student-athlete development programming more efficient and purposeful, this study examined if there was a significant difference in the retention rates of first-time, full time freshmen student-athletes who participated in a peer mentoring program compared to those who did not. Peer mentoring is a cost-effective way to build relationships among student-athletes outside of their sport, fostering their connection to the department and university. The peer mentoring program used in this study is also a program that could be implemented in athletic departments of all sizes across the country, regardless of budget. In addition to the quantitative measures to compare overall retention rates, various demographic categories were compared to determine any significant relationships. Gender, visa status, and grade point averages of student-athletes who participated as mentees were compared with retention rates of students and student-athletes with similar classifications who did not participate. Qualitative data collected from freshmen student-athletes who participated as mentees were examined to determine if the peer mentor program aided in enhancing their overall experience during their first semester of college.

Importance of the Study

Research on student development applied specifically to student-athletes is very small in proportion to retention data applicable to many other special populations studied through scholarly research. Recent research on student-athletes tends to focus primarily on the NCAA Division I. This is likely true due to the exposure, or notoriety in some cases, of Power 5 Division I institutions. The University of Alabama, the University of Kentucky, and the Ohio State University are a examples of well-known Power 5 schools known amongst college sports fans, particularly for their success in football and men's basketball. Power 5 schools dedicate the most resources to their athletic departments in comparison to other DI institutions (Hoffer et al., 2015). There can be no comparison of Power 5 resources to DII and DIII schools. Although Division I may be seen as the pinnacle to certain fans, student-athletes, and many athletics professionals, Division II and III combine to make up approximately 60% of NCAA student-athletes in the NCAA (NCAA, 2021f). As a result, Division II and Division III institutions should not be left out of retention research. With waning resources and increasing expectations, it is imperative that athletic support staff prioritize decision-making based on a solid research-based foundation. The research will fuel informed decision making and better usage of resources. With a growing number of athletic departments adding staff dedicated to the student-athlete experience, professionals lack in theoretical foundations that apply specifically to student-athletes to aid with retention. This research will contribute to the small body of Division II student-athlete research and ultimately help professionals with their informed decision-making process.

Definition of Terms

Freshman: Defined for the purposes of the study as attending college full time for the first time, regardless of the number of college credit hours that a student may enter college with.

NCAA student-athlete: A student-athlete who is listed on the roster of and actively participates in an NCAA sponsored athletic team at a university.

NCAA Division II: As determined by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, institutions competing in this division must have a minimum of five sports for men and five for women, (or four for men and six for women), with maximum financial aid awards determined and fewer restrictions on contest and participant minimums. NCAA has three divisions, with the most financial requirements for supporting programs found at the Division I level (NCAA, 2021c).

Peer mentoring: A relationship between two individuals of similar standing with a focus on the more experienced individual helping the newer and less experienced individual (Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

Peer mentoring program: Defined for the purpose of this study as a program that pairs selected student-athletes with incoming freshmen student-athletes in a mentor-mentee relationship. Upperclassmen student-athletes applied to serve as mentors and incoming freshmen student-athletes were selected for the program by their coaches.

Retention: Defined for the purposes of the study as freshmen students who remain enrolled at a higher education institution from their first to their second year of school.

Student-athlete: Defined for the purposes of the study as a full-time college student who is listed on the roster of and actively participates in a school-sanctioned NCAA athletic team.

Limitations

The research examined data from a single cohort of freshmen mentee participants. The mentor program launched in Fall 2017 and has evolved from a large catch-all attempt at mass participation to a selected group of trained mentors working one-on-one with mentees nominated by coaches. With such a short lifespan and rapid evolution of program format, the researcher chose a single cohort to study. The small data sample limits the overall reliability of the findings, which will hopefully be overcome in the future once the mentor program completes a few more years. Mentee participants were also selected to participate in the peer mentor program by coaches, which also has a few implications on the study. Mentees may have been reluctant to participate in the mentor program because they did not voluntarily sign up. This could impact student-athletes' overall view and experience of the program in a negative manner. On the contrary, a potential positive impact on mentees' view of the program could have been their own coaches' views of the program. In order for student-athletes from various sports to participate, coaches had to agree to promote the program and help support and/or nudge struggling mentees. With coach buy-in from the start, mentees may have formed an opinion of the program before it even began.

Another limitation of the study is the relationship between the researcher and the participants. The researcher is in a position of authority over the participants through the nature of her full-time job overseeing academic and life skills support for student-athletes

at her institution. In addition to overseeing the mentor program that participants were placed in their first semester of school, the researcher also worked with several of the participants on athletic academic eligibility and academic success. Many of the participants also went on to serve as peer mentors in the program, which meant spending more time with the researcher, as mentors attended class taught by the researcher throughout the semester. Participants may have felt an obligation to assist the researcher out by participating in the study that they may not have for a stranger. Due to the dedicated time and amount of work spent creating the peer mentor program, the researcher may have also been biased towards the research overall. Student-athlete development and leadership programming have been a growing passion for the researcher for several years, and the opportunity to combine scholarship with professional practice undoubtedly pushed the researcher to look for positive correlations or outcomes with the data.

Enrollment in the Fall 2020 semester determined one-year retention rates for participants in the program. With the entire world shutting down due to a global pandemic in early 2020, many college-bound and continuing students altered their college plans. While most institutions moved forward with opening their doors to students, strict social and physical distancing restrictions were implemented along with a complex schedule of online, hybrid, and hy-flex classes. This closed off and isolated set-up was the opposite of the social campus experience traditional students desire, which left many students staying at home for an extra semester or two. Retention outcomes of participants in the study could have been negatively impacted by the pandemic due to economic, social, and other various personal circumstances. For those students who did

attend school during the 2020-2021 school year, the experience was challenging at best. Participants in the research may have had some lingering effects from surviving their second school year, which could have affected their memory of participating in the program, as well. The pandemic touched every physical and emotional experience of people world-wide, and it would be hard to imagine that this study was not impacted in some real or perceived way.

Delimitations

When choosing the parameters of the study, the researcher decided to narrow the focus to a smaller cohort from one particular peer mentor program. The Fall 2019 semester was the third year in existence for the mentor program and second year of requiring peer mentors to enroll in a concurrent leadership development class. With a few years of growth under its belt, Fall 2019 seemed to be an appropriate starting spot, especially with the program shifting to a virtual format in Fall 2020 due to the pandemic. Additionally, the researcher chose not to compare retention data of the peer mentor program in this study with data from student-athlete mentor programs across the country. With such a vast landscape of structure, staff support, history, and participation, to name just a few factors, comparing institutional programs seemed more like comparing apples and tomatoes. Similar in general shape and outward appearance but very different on the inside. As discussed in Chapter Five, this could make for an interesting future study. Staying focused on retention is also why the researcher limited the survey and interview questions for participants. There are skill sets, experiences, and a number of other follow-up questions that could be asked of mentees after they complete the program, but the

researcher needed to keep connection and retention as the central targets for the study. Again, many opportunities for future research that are discussed in Chapter Five.

Summary

Attrition is bad for the business of higher education, and athletic departments need to work alongside university staff to do their part in retaining student-athletes. Losing students results not only in immediate lost income but also in potential donations and long-term investments. Reasons for student departure are personal and varied, which means there is no one-size-fits-all approach to keeping them in school. Research on student-athlete retention is sparse, which leaves a lot of room for this study and future research. The professional field of student-athlete support services will also benefit from additional research to support informed decision-making to help validate the significant investment by athletic departments into student-athlete development. This mixed-methods study explored peer mentoring as a cost-efficient way to build connection beyond sport to help with retention of freshmen student-athletes. While there is little research on the NCAA Division II student-athlete development programming, Chapter Two explores existing literature on retention, student-athletes as a unique population, and peer mentoring.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Students are the primary focus of retention concerns for institutions, even more so than retaining quality instructors or staff. Without students to consume the product and, more importantly to pay for the product, colleges and universities cannot remain in business. Institutions measure success through retention, enrollment numbers, graduation rates, and transfer rates, to name a few. The researcher focused on retaining students from their first to second year for this study. While there is extensive research and theoretical perspectives on student attrition, such as Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure or Alexander Astin's (1977, 1984) Theory of Student Involvement, the research on student-athlete specific departure is small. Most existing research focuses on Division I transfers in the revenue sports of football and men's basketball. With 68% of NCAA membership made up of Divisions II and III student-athletes (NCAA, 2021g), plus the thousands of Division I student-athletes playing sports that are not football and men's basketball, there is room for extensive future research. Student-athletes are a special population facing unique challenges. With high stakes and low resources, colleges and universities must be deliberate with the implementation of retention strategies, recognizing unique attributes, and reasons for transferring. Peer mentoring provides a cost-efficient option to support and build a connection with students and student-athletes, ultimately improving retention rates.

Measuring Retention

As access to American higher education has expanded over the years to diversify the type of students seeking postsecondary education, retention has also become a more complex issue (Berger et al., 2012). With retention focusing on an institution's ability to

graduate students who enroll successfully, retention numbers and strategies can look wildly different across the vast landscape and types of colleges and universities. “As the concept of retention has evolved, so has the recognition that one size does not fit all in terms of retention rates and the policies and interventions needed to improve retention on any one campus” (Berger et al., 2012, p. 9). Higher education used to be available only to an exclusive, privileged student population, typically to wealthy White males at the start of American history. Berger et al. (2012) wrote about the social, political, and economic influences on creating a broader student population. In addition to shifting demographics, downturns in the economy traditionally increased college student enrollment (pp. 9-10). As women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other underrepresented groups slowly gained access to higher education, institutional efforts expanded to help retain increasingly diverse student populations.

A college education is synonymous with economic opportunity, which explains why so many students seek access to higher education. Carnevale et al. (2018) pointed towards “globalization, automation, upskilling, and the shift in good jobs away from manufacturing” as four primary reasons driving interest in postsecondary degrees, which many jobs require (p. 5). Carnevale et al. (2018) defined good jobs as “one paying a minimum of $35,000 for workers between the ages of 25 and 44 and at least $45,000 for workers between the ages of 45 and 64” (p. 1). As of 2016, almost 75% of jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree were considered good jobs, which nearly doubled from 25 years prior (Carnevale et al., 2018, p. 11). With such a clear pathway to a higher paycheck, improving economic standing serves as a clear reason why potential students from all socioeconomic backgrounds aspire to be college graduates. However, dreams do not

automatically equate to success, which is why retaining students does not have a one-size-fits-all solution.

The United States' higher education system evaluates graduation rates on a six-year completion rate, or roughly 150% of the time it takes to complete an average bachelor's degree. Retention rates are another popular indicator for success and examine the percentage of students who return to an institution following their first full-time term as a freshman. The Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act (1990) requires all post-secondary institutions to report graduation rates for first-time, full-time undergraduate students and students receiving athletic-related financial aid. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), the six-year graduation rate for students who began their full-time undergraduate college careers in the Fall 2012 semester was an overall average of nearly 62%. Graduation rates varied slightly by type of institution, with private nonprofit four-year schools coming out on top at 70%.

In 2002, the NCAA created its own calculator for measuring student-athlete graduation rates, called the Graduation Success Rate (GSR). The GSR does not penalize an institution for students who transfer out if the student-athlete left school academically eligible. The federal rate penalizes institutions for any student who transfers, regardless of reason or standing. With college students' transient nature, particularly student-athletes, the NCAA believed the GSR could give an accurate but fairer picture of graduation rates. While the GSR calculates graduation rates for Division I student-athletes on scholarship, the Division II and Division III rates account for participating student-athletes who do not receive athletic aid due to the different athletic scholarship models. Division II and Division III use a measure called the Academic Success Rate

(ASR). However, it includes additional non-scholarship student-athletes in the equation. Division I and Division II institutions must report their GSR and ASR numbers annually. Division III schools are not required to report their ASR, because they do not offer any athletic financial aid, though the NCAA highly encourages participation (NCAA, 2021e).

After each academic year, NCAA institutions report their respective GSR and ASR rates for student-athletes who completed degrees within six years of their first full-time semester. For example, schools completing their report in 2021 looked at students who started their full-time college career in August 2014. In 2020, the NCAA examined data submitted by member institutions for student-athletes who began their college careers in Fall 2013 and reported that 90% of Division I student-athletes earned their degrees within that six-year timeline (Brutlag Hosick, 2020, para. 1). However, an analysis comparing the federal graduation rate of student-athletes to general students showed student-athletes graduating at a rate of 69%, which is on par with the general student rate reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2020).

Breaking down the NCAA report by demographic groups, student-athletes outpaced their peers to pursue a college degree in every major group, except for white males. “Black male student-athletes had a 56% federal graduation rate, while 44% of Black males in the student body graduated. Black female student-athletes [were higher] . . . by 12 percentage points (66% to 54%)” (Brutlag Hosick, 2020, para. 15). Student-athletes who competed in the sports of men’s basketball and Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football, the highest level of college football, graduated at lower rates than the general male student population. However, male student-athletes who identified as black

and competed in basketball and FBS football reported higher graduation rates than the black male general student rate (Brutlag Hosick, 2020, para. 16).

For NCAA Division II institutions, the 2020 Academic Success Rate (ASR) data aligned much more closely with the federal graduation rate for the general student population. Division II reported an overall ASR of 77%. NCAA Division III institutions reported an 87% ASR rate (Brutlag Hosick, 2020). The Division III ASR rate reports an annual four-year average to accommodate the voluntary reporting requirement and varying levels of participation each year. One possible explanation for the difference between the Division I GSR and the ASR for Divisions II and III is another measurement the NCAA calculates called the Academic Progress Rate (APR). APR only applies to Division I and is meant to keep "institutions accountable for the academic progress of their student-athletes through a team-based metric that accounts for the eligibility and retention of each student-athlete for each academic term" (NCAA, 2021b, para. 1). Each team calculates their APR score based on the number of student-athletes who remain in school and are academically eligible. Teams lose APR points if students become academically ineligible or transfer out without meeting a minimum GPA requirement. APR calculations only include student-athletes receiving athletic-related financial aid, and teams who fail to meet the minimum APR standards may be banned from post-season competition.

NCAA Division I reported a six-year Graduation Success Rate (GSR) of 90% in 2020 (Brutlag Hosick, 2020). Higher APR scores should theoretically result in a higher graduation rate, as Division I academic eligibility requirements keep students on track to graduate within five years (NCAA, 2021c). With conference and national championship

play at risk from deficient APR scores, athletic departments may invest more resources by means of support staff and tutoring to help student-athletes maintain their eligibility. While APR is required for post-season participation, institutions utilize calculations, such as the ASR and GSR to demonstrate academic success.

Theoretical Perspective

Decades of research directed to explain student attrition has produced several widely used student development theories. Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure connects the likelihood of student departure with the level of integration with the social culture of a college or university. The more a student connects to a university outside of the classroom, the more likely the student will remain in school. From Greek life to athletics to student clubs and organizations, Tinto (1993) believed that students who built relationships and made contributions in addition to their role as a student had a better chance of making it to graduation. As noted in "Major Theoretical Perspectives on Student Success in College" (2007), both academic and social integration are crucial to student satisfaction rates. Personal ties with friends, family, and mentors outside of an institution can also have a big influence on student persistence. Milem and Berger (1997) also pointed out that a critical part of Tinto's theory on students integrating into campus "occurs when students successfully navigate the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation" (p. 388). Separation includes some form of disassociation from past norms or relationships, including athletic identity. Separation requires a transition of some kind, which ties into Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory that examines how individuals cope with changes throughout their adult lives (as cited in Bailey-Taylor, 2009). For student-athletes, a transition into college comes with extra pressures that non-student-

athletes generally face (Pauling, 2017), which adds to the already challenging transition of beginning post-secondary education.

Individuals often experience changes through their own unique lens, which means a significant shift only happens when an individual defines it as such (Goodman et al., 2006). Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory focuses on three main transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events (as cited in Patton et al., 2016). While the transition into college may be anticipated, in that going to college is a predicted event that occurred, the challenges students face while transitioning in may be unanticipated. New college students take on different roles, enter new relationships, and are suddenly in a different routine, all of which takes time to adjust. Schlossberg (2011) highlighted situation, self, support, and strategies as the 4 Ss System, which are all important ways to successfully navigate through transition. While Schlossberg (2011) studied how adults can better cope with transitions, transition theory has also been applied to college students. In the 4 Ss System, situation refers to an individual's situation considering outside factors that influence their experience at the time of transition. For student-athletes, the situation includes coaches, whether a coach recruited them, how many student-athletes are in their incoming class, and practice times, etc. Student-athletes must adjust to a new training system, new schedule, new equipment, and much more. Self looks at a person's mental strength and resiliency to make it through challenges. Attitudes can change over time, but many students arrive at college without the psychological tools to breeze through such a massive transition. Supports are the people and systems available to help transitioning individuals connect to feel less alone or out of place. For student-athletes, teammates, coaches, and athletic department staff are major components

of a successful support system. Athletic trainers, strength coaches, and academic professionals help to support student-athletes just as much personally as they do competitively. Support staff helps to provide student-athletes with different strategies to be successful, which is the final "S" in Schlossberg's (2011) system. New college students who do not have the right mixture of situation, self, support, and strategies are at-risk for struggling through transitions, including remaining in college.

As Schlossberg mentioned in her 4 Ss system, unexpected challenges can derail student success if they are not properly supported throughout the journey. Sanford's (1966) Challenge and Support Theory examined the necessary formula needed to help students grow forward. Sanford (1966) believed that students' personalities could influence individual resilience and ability to persist. However, the change tolerance students have is more of a reflection on the type and amount of support available. When a student's personal environment is not set up to support change, individuals are more likely to fail (Patton et al., 2016). Factors that influence personal environment include home life, personal relationships, and time dedicated to work. Even if students are supported through their transition into college and through all the changes and challenges they face, Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering may also explain why a student is not successful. Marginalized students often feel a lack of belonging, believing that they do not fit in (Patton et al., 2016). First-year students also experience aloneness, including student-athletes transitioning to a new athletic team. Student-athletes competing at the NCAA must adjust and transition to their new role on a new team. As the research suggests, hopefully, student-athletes have enough support to survive the challenges and make a successful transition.

Scholars also frequently cite Alexander Astin's (1977, 1984) Theory of Student Involvement for student retention in higher education. Astin's (1977, 1984) theory relies on student behavior to stimulate growth and development; students must take an active role in the education process and opportunities in order to be truly involved. The more a student becomes involved in campus life, dedicating both physical and psychological investments, the more a student will experience personal growth and achievement (Patton et al., 2016, pp. 34-35). A student-athlete's academic dedication and involvement can positively affect their overall experience as a means of involvement, just as much as extracurricular activities (Njororai Simiyu, 2012). Counter to Astin's (1984) Involvement Theory, while athletics can help forge a stronger bond to an institution, being a student-athlete is also isolating, particularly in Division I and II (Woods et al., 2018). Schroeder (2000) found that NCAA Division III student-athletes often embodied Astin's (1977, 1984) ideal balance of student involvement, as Division III student-athletes are often involved in extracurricular activities beyond just sport, which also expands their social circles.

While college is a time for vocational training, researcher Kuh (2018) found that cultivating soft skills helped students achieve higher levels of success beyond simply curating intellectual development. Kuh (2018) also found that employers also wanted college graduates with strong soft skills in areas, such as "curiosity, resilience, self-regulation, conscientiousness, flexibility, and the ability to work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds" (p. 54). For years, Kuh (2018) preached the need for college students to learn more than just the necessary hard skills to be successful, noting that in the 21st century, "a college degree has replaced the high school diploma as a mainstay for

. . . responsible citizenship" (Kuh et al., 2008, p. 540). To develop responsible citizens of the future through post-secondary learning, students need to persist through their education. Kuh et al. (2008) found that student engagement in purposeful educational activities increased the likelihood that students would return to school after their first year of college. Athletics may not be exactly equivalent to an educational activity, but successful sports teams deliberately develop soft skills that Kuh (2018) mentioned, such as resilience in learning how to overcome defeat and the ability to work with a diverse group of teammates (as cited in Weight et al., 2020). Student-athletes need specific skills to shoot a ball or pass effectively, but a lack of team cohesion can derail even the most talented athletes. College teams dedicating time and energy to purposeful engagement and development could contribute to student persistence, fostering a sense of belonging and demonstrating a level of care and concern for student-athletes beyond the court, just as Kuh (2018) suggested.

Retention Interventions

Successful retention strategies should be student-centric, considering the needs of each learner rather than focusing solely on organizational structures (Roberts, 2018). Retention efforts begin before the first day of classes, often with new student orientation. An orientation experience helps students get acclimated to campus life before getting swept up into the semester and can be critical to a student's success and welfare (Masterson, 2017). Summer bridge programs are seen as an extension of orientation and are also an important tool to help students successfully transition into college. While bridge programs can serve any population, programs aimed at helping underprepared or minority populations, such as first-generation students have grown in popularity in recent

years (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Topics, such as academic preparedness, diversity and inclusion, orientation to support services, promotion of self-efficacy, and overall integration into the social community all aim to improve students' overall long-term success at an institution (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019, p. 36). Academic readiness, is critical; however, it can be tricky to address in the short period of time that a bridge program lasts. Cançado et al. (2018) studied the effects of a summer program aimed at engineering students who did not meet the minimum math placement levels. While the program did help raise the math placement score of underprepared students, the summer program did not significantly improve retention of students in the engineering program. Cançado et al. (2018) concluded that even though the program did not meet engineering-specific retention goals, it may have been helpful in the overall college experiences of participants.

Intervention strategies to help retain students can be simple. Strategies can include something minor like a shift in language used to describe student outcomes. Instead of using negative language that emphasizes dropping out, failing, or falling below standards, Roberts (2018) suggests focusing on the positive, intended outcome. For example, instead of talking with a student about how they are in danger of failing, the conversation shifts to what is needed to succeed (Roberts, 2018). Lynch and Lungrin (2018) suggested that academic and career advisors can engage students with positive language and nudge them along the path toward graduation. Many students express career uncertainty, and instead of focusing on the lack of direction, advisors should shift their language to the opportunity for career exploration. Sticking to a graduation timeline is important but

addressing career exploration can also be extremely helpful for the 20% to 50% of students who start school as undecided majors (Lynch & Lungrin, 2018, p. 69).

While retention aims at keeping individual students in school, it is a process that requires all hands on deck, so to speak, starting with students' support systems at home. Studies suggested that conversations surrounding college and career plans should start in middle school in order to improve student success and outcomes in college (Manson et al., 2015). Family support during college is critical to success for families who did not start talking about college early. Perceived social support from family members who provided encouraging communication helped improve psychological and physical well-being of students already in college, especially when dealing with stress (MacGeorge et al., 2008). Dorrance Hall et al. (2020) also found that students whose families communicated often and placed a lower value on fitting in with others had an easier time transitioning to college. Regardless of how often students call or send messages home, even the perception of having someone available to talk with positively affects students' levels of loneliness and their resiliency in adjusting to college (Dorrance Hall et al., 2017). Institutions can also improve at-home support by directly engaging with families. Schools should be mindful of cultural differences and potential barriers to participating in family events, just as they should when considering individual student support needs, to best help families support their students (Implications and Recommendations, 2015).

Students who choose to stay with their families while attending school and either commute or participate fully in distance education learning are another special population who need unique retention interventions (Brown, 2015). While family support can be instrumental to success, some studies show that first-time commuter students who

enrolled at a four-year institution were more likely to leave school than students who lived on campus (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Intrinsic motivation may be a better indicator of distance student success than competence or skills (Brubacher & Silinda, 2019; Diefenbeck et al., 2016). Brubacher and Silinda (2019) wrote that in order to enhance the online experience, educators must be deliberate with their creativity and investing in building student motivation to help inspire students to reach their full capacity. Relationship building, especially with faculty, is also important to engaging distance students (Baxter, 2012), and opportunities to create deliberate interactions with faculty have been shown to improve commuter student experiences (Dwyer, 2017). Though online students may not express a strong desire to engage socially with the brick-and-mortar campus (Wesseling, 2016), it does not mean students living off campus do not desire any connection (Baxter, 2012; Commuter Students, 2006). For commuter students who do spend time on campus, it is essential to offer class time or additional social opportunities to engage with fellow commuter students and build community (Pokorny et al., 2017).

Faculty also play a key role in the experience of students, serving as a strong motivator (Dwyer, 2017), which ultimately aids in student retention (Niemi & Johnson, 2017). Students interact with faculty more regularly than most other positions on a college campus (Hempel et al., 2019). Even the perception of a positive connection with a faculty member can have a bigger impact on student success than grit (Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019). This statement shows how profoundly important faculty members are to the student experience. Faculty members who engage their students through inclusive practices are better able to empathize and impact student outcomes (Dewsbury, 2020). A

one-size-fits-all approach does not always work, and professors should be mindful of how they interact with students who are different. For example, some faculty members interacted more regularly with student-athletes than they did with non-athletes, potentially due to student-athletes' visibility or status (Woods et al., 2019). Although these interactions help retain student-athletes, this may be a turnoff to general students. Good, bad, and otherwise, faculty have a significant impact on student outcomes and institutions should invest in educating all employees on how to serve unique student populations so everyone can be successful (Sachar et al., 2019).

Peer Mentoring

Universities dedicate freshmen orientation classes, tutoring services, workshops, and designated staff to help students make it to the finish line. For all of the students comfortable asking for help from faculty and staff in positions of authority, there are as many students too intimidated to ask for help. Peers can support students in a manner that feels tangible and time-relevant to students that staff may not be able to replicate (O'Brien et al., 2021). Peer mentoring not only provides a visual for students to see success in real time, but peer mentors also provide a more relaxed environment for students to ask questions with less fear of judgement (Muller et al., 2018). That environment of accessibility created by peer mentors has been particularly effective in overall efforts to help special populations including first generation students adjust to college life (Nepal et al., 2018).

Positive peer relationships help students endure the emotional and social transition to school and are a critical component of environmental support that students need to be successful (Dennis et al., 2005). Peer support makes a huge difference in

underrepresented or marginalized communities, especially for students who may lack support at home. Simmons and Smith (2020) found that while enrollment of African-American and Latinx has been on the rise, graduation rates of these students are well below the average overall graduation rate at most predominantly White institutions (p. 419). Simmons and Smith (2020) studied success coaching as a type of peer mentoring intervention, focusing on connection, intention, reflection, and action as guiding principles. The program trained junior and senior African American and Latinx on the four guiding principles prior to being paired with sophomore mentees. Mentors also continued to have regular meetings with full-time staff throughout the year. Mentee participants in the program indicated an increased sense of self-efficacy, belonging, and an increase in persistence rates (p. 430). Simmons and Smith's (2020) mentor training and coaching demonstrated positive outcomes of a deliberate, structured peer mentoring program.

Peer mentoring can be structured in different ways, including formal training and meeting, such as the program in Simmons and Smith's 2020 study, or something more casual with informal social events. Determining the role and requirements of the peer mentor helps more clearly define what a mentor is and is not, which is critical for a successful program. Daddona (2011) wrote about peer educators who helped facilitate mental health responses and emphasized the different expectations and outcomes between peer mentors and professional counselors. Both roles require strong, active listening and communication skills but with very different expectations and outcomes. Unlike the peer counselors in Daddona's (2011) research, some programs expect peer mentors to serve in a role requiring a specific level of expertise. Usman and Jamil (2019) found peer-assisted

learning as a beneficial experience for undergraduate medical students, where peers served as additional academic support outside of class, similar to a traditional tutor. Students who participated in the program as mentees reported feeling more comfortable asking questions of the peer educators (Usman & Jamil, 2019), aligning with the findings of Muller et al. (2018) and O'Brien et al. (2021).

Mentees are not the only individuals who benefit from participating in a peer mentor program. Peer mentors report personal fulfillment and positive feelings towards helping others (Beltman et al., 2019; Muller et al., 2018). Muller et al. (2018) examined study groups run by peer leaders, to help students successfully pass their first-year engineering classes and persist through the full program. Peer leaders of the study groups shared that their training and positions contributed to personal and professional growth that benefited them in the long-term, well after they finished school. Scott et al. (2019) found that peer mentors who served in a formal program identified communication, critical thinking, ethics, and responsibility as personal areas of growth from their experience. Graduates with a well-rounded skill set beyond the classroom can help a university stand out, which is why institutions should support peer mentoring programs (Scott et al., 2019).

Peer mentor programs are not without their downsides. One potential trouble area is retaining quality peer mentors, as the naturally high-achieving nature of most mentors can lead to overly full schedules and risk of burnout (Niemi & Johnson, 2017). Carefully managed mentor program schedules can help alleviate stress, but busy schedules may lead to high turnover rates in mentors. Managing the stress of peer mentors can be just as important as managing the stress of mentees (Daddona, 2011). Carlson et al. (2018) also

noted that peer instructors lacked the pedagogical training of teachers, which caused a subpar delivery of information to mentees. Christie (2014) wrote about further challenges of peer mentoring, including the imbalance of power in the relationship and the concern of overreliance on a mentor. “Some mentees viewed the mentor as akin to a personal tutor and expected more help than was available with assessments and coursework” (Christie, 2014, p. 962). With many peer mentoring programs pairing students together based on major, many mentees made the leap to assume their mentor’s previous academic success would easily transfer to them. However, this often resulted in the discomfort of the mentors, including a concern of overdependence. Christie’s 2014 study showed that, while peer mentor programs can achieve positive results, they should not go without critical evaluation and investigation into the potential negative effects.

Why Students Do Not Retain

Specific demographics, such as gender and field of study have been connected to student attrition. Meyer and Strauss (2019) studied a group of German students who left higher education five years prior. Their results aligned with other studies to show “that women in gender-atypical subjects show a higher drop-out risk than their male fellow students” (p. 443). Using Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure, Meyer and Strauss (2019) pointed to a gap between social and academic integration in fields traditionally dominated by males as a reason for female attrition. Gender bias is ingrained in the history of higher education in the United States, if for no other reason than wealthy White males were the first students with access to education. Murray et al. (1999) found that even with so much progress made, American female engineering students still faced significant bias at the start of the 21st century. Murray et al. (1999) found that males

generally avoided contact with their female peers. When they did interact, males often made jokes at the women's expense or expected their female classmates to only take notes instead of actively participate in labs. When attempting to address gender issues with the male students, many were uncomfortable or reacted negatively to the topic. For the few men that acknowledged or showed sympathy to the gender barriers, they still lacked an understanding on how to make changes for the better (Murray et al., 1999). Institutions of higher education must be aware of both overall campus culture and the myriad of subcultures that affect student experience, especially for special populations.

Students face barriers to completing their degrees often before they even arrive on campus. Special populations, such as adult learners, minority populations, international students, and student-athletes come with their own unique challenges in course and degree completion. Merrill (2015) found that struggles with family, careers, financial situation, and other personal challenges overwhelmed the opportunity for academic success for some adult students. The higher education experience both positively and negatively affects "how [students] see themselves, family, friends and society" (Merrill, 2015, p. 1866). Higher education often quantifies institutional success through retention and graduation rates. While institutions often view non-completion as an undesirable outcome for both financial and mission-driven reasons, Merrill (2015) argued that institutions need to broaden their definition of success for students. In Merrill's (2015) case study, one adult student did not complete their degree, but left the university with tangible growth in identity formation, critical thinking, and self-confidence. Graduation rate statistics defined this student as a failure, but from a personal development standpoint, the student considered their experience as a success (Merrill, 2015).

Institutions of higher education must examine special populations to determine what success should look like for each group. Diverse student populations not only have a variety of needs, but may also require a variety of outcomes to reach their personal definitions of success.

Farrell (2009) found that students struggling the most to complete their college degrees were primarily African American, Hispanic, and Native American, all "groups correlated with low-income" (p. 85). Lack of success has not always been the result of lacking ability but rather lack of preparation, support, or opportunity, all factors tied to low income. In order to increase access to minoritized and underrepresented communities, institutions direct more resources and staff focused specifically on student transition and outcomes. Campus offices dedicated to student involvement and student success are critical to helping students navigate a complex infrastructure. Farrell (2009) pointed out that "staff members are singularly influential in students' decisions to stay in college" (p. 89). Faculty and staff must work together as a cohesive unit, keeping student success as a guiding value for everything they do. While the daily functions of professors may look quite different than a director of residential life, for example, both staff and faculty must be "equally complicit in empowering students to succeed" (Roberts, 2018, p. 151). One small way to work towards student retention is examining the power of language. Roberts (2018) suggested that a simple shift in terminology to replace attrition/failure/withdrawal with a more positive outlook like success or empowerment can also have "an immediately positive and uplifting effect" (p. 151).

Student attrition may also be a university issue rather than a personal issue. Mansouri and Moumine (2017) cautioned taking too much focus away from student

interventions, which are sometimes more challenging to measure: “Quantitative progress is vital, but it has taken over qualitative progress and has not prevented student attrition from increasing” (p. 58). Universities focus extensive resources on meeting enrollment numbers, which can distract both funds and attention away from retention efforts. Choosing which retention effort to invest in is easier said than done. Patton et al. (2006) examined studies of several intervention strategies, including learning communities, faculty intervention, counseling, and peer mentoring programs and found that while many effective programs exist, there is no universal solution. Different populations require intervention methods as unique as the individuals who make up such groups. For American Indian/Alaskan Native students, a safe college environment for cultural expression and being able to give back to their tribal community can play a huge role in student persistence (Guillory, 2009). Students of color struggle to persist when they do not see themselves adequately represented in, and consequently supported by, faculty and staff (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Students who have disabilities face faculty who are unprepared experience-wise or unwilling to be inconvenienced by incorporating diverse teaching strategies to make their lectures more inclusive, which is a significant barrier to success (Orr & Goodman, 2010). Distance students are often disconnected and fail to make strong relationships with faculty and other students, which also contributes to their attrition (Baxter, 2012). Special populations require special attention, and student-athletes are no exception.

Why Student-Athletes Do Not Retain

Student-athletes should theoretically have an advantage within the framework of both Tinto (1993) and Astin (1977, 1984), with their strong involvement, connection, and

loyalty to an institution, but that has not always been found to be true. Bean's (1981) Student Attrition Model was formed around workplace studies to explain employee turnover. Employees who feel undervalued and underpaid, resulting in low satisfaction rates, often leave their job in search of a better experience. In a similar fashion, students who are dissatisfied with the quality of education or their overall experience are more likely to transfer, as well (Aljohani, 2016). Bolstering Bean's (1981) applicability to student-athletes is the argument that student-athletes should be treated as employees. Cooper (2011) found some former student-athletes viewed the opportunity to compete in exchange for having their college tuition and expenses covered as a blessing (p. 13). On the opposite perspective, members of Northwestern University's football team petitioned the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to gain recognition as union representatives in 2014. The regional NLRB ruled in favor of the student-athletes, maintaining that "athletes perform services for the university for which they receive compensation" and were therefore considered employees (Mans & Gibbs, 2015, p. 35). While the complex argument surrounding classification of student-athletes as employees is still in flux, collegiate athletes who are unhappy with their conditions, working or otherwise, may cite this as a reason for departing an institution.

In addition to a challenging working environment, other stress-related factors might contribute to student departures. The transition to college is inherently taxing for freshmen due to the volume of change students must withstand all at once (Towbes & Cohen, 1996). In a study conducted by Ross et al. (1999), the top five sources of stress in college students were issues with sleep, vacation, mastering eating habits, an increased workload, and additional responsibilities. The study also found that life's day-to-day

struggles created more frequent stress than major life events (para. 1). Student-athletes must adjust to all the normal student demands in addition to a new team atmosphere, new teammates, coaches, and support staff (Smith & Hardin, 2020). As a plus, student-athletes who rated their experiences with the athletic academic support team as positive also reported higher levels of overall satisfaction and emotional adjustment (Otto et al., 2019).

Student-athlete experiences with support personnel may not entirely sway a student-athlete to stay or go, but each interaction student-athletes have factor into the equation. The National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A), which describes itself as "the Global Leader for academic support and student-athlete development in athletics" (2021), aims to provide education and professional development for student-athlete support staff members. With access to best practices and a national network that lives under the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA), hopefully more student-athletes will have positive experiences with support personnel, positively impacting student-athlete retention in the future.

Multiple tools exist to measure everyday stress, but Lu et al. (2012) developed a tool to help measure student-athlete specific stress. Lu et al. (2012) noted that student-athletes faced a unique set of stressors related to sport that are important to identify and work with. At the time of the study, Lu et al. (2012) noted a need for more testing to demonstrate reliability, particularly across multiple cultures, but results supported the idea that college student-athletes have additional stressors, such as injuries, competitive performance, and relationships with coaches that general students do not face. Sanford's

(1966) Theory of Challenge and Support is critically important to provide the appropriate amount of support for students to withstand such stressors, from transitioning into school to dealing with issues throughout their college careers. Sports programs provide structure and support for students, especially for those who use sport as an outlet. However, participating in high level intercollegiate athletics can add stress to student-athletes that general students may not face (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003). Additionally, Kimball and Freysinger (2003) noted struggles with intersectionality compounds student-athletes' stress, particularly when dealing with personal identities of gender, race, and social class (p. 124). Competitive expectations for sport performance also increase levels of anxiety that many student-athletes struggle to cope with (Zeljka et al., 2017).

Students who do not remain at an institution but choose to continue their education elsewhere are considered transfer students. From stress to lack of support, and a myriad of other personal reasons, students and student-athletes transfer to other institutions or out of higher education altogether. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2018), which studies post-secondary enrollment at both two and four-year, public and private institutions, reported that 38% of students who began their college careers in Fall 2011 transferred to a different institution within their first six years (para. 1). That means over one million students moved institutions at least once within their first six years of higher education and does not address if those students completed degrees. While transfer students can be big business, especially for four-year institutions providing a pathway from community colleges (Laanan, 2007), transfer student-athletes are another unique phenomenon that has drawn a lot of attention, but lacks in research (Swingle & Salinas, 2020). The transfer system of the revenue sports football and men's

basketball have even become a mainstream culture phenomenon with the release of the Netflix series *Last Chance U*, which follows a variety of junior college student-athletes who hope to make it big at the Division I level, or in some cases, make a big return to DI (Whitely et al., 2016-2020).

Transfer students simultaneously benefit and damage the university's numbers, with one stream of students bringing in money and another taking their dollars elsewhere. In addition to the bottom line, institutions need to consider the additional challenges transfer students face on their journey to degree completion. Students who attend multiple institutions often have lower grades on average than students who complete their education at a single institution (McCormick, 2003). Students who attend multiple institutions have a lower completion rate than students who stayed at a single school (Adelman, 2006; McCormick, 2003). College preparedness is also a factor in student success, with as high as 68% of community college students requiring some type of remedial classwork (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016).

Students who transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution make a vertical transfer. Students who transfer from a four-year institution to a two-year institution and then return to a four-year school are considered swirling transfers. Swirling students are becoming more prevalent, but are studied less than traditional vertical transfers (Katsinas et al., 2019). Multiple transitions may prove too much to overcome for many swirling transfers, but additional opportunities to start fresh bolster the chance of success for some student-athletes. Student-athletes in a 2020 study conducted by Swingle and Salinas found that student-athletes who stumbled at their first institution were able to learn, regroup, and try again with much higher success rates after

gathering themselves at the community college level before returning to a Division I team. The institution in the study had extensive experience with and resources to support transfer students specifically, and certainly not all swirling transfers will be afforded a second or third chance at success. However, it is promising to see that students who travel through multiple institutions are not destined for failure, especially with the right support systems in place.

While many student-athletes dissatisfied with their athletic experience decide to transfer in hopes of finding a better athletic experience, it is possible to keep students who quit their athletics team enrolled at their primary institution. Sport-related issues occupied the top three reasons student-athletes departed their team in a 2019 study by DeVries. These reasons included coaching issues and loss of interest in and love for the sport. Participants reported that relationships built on campus, including relationships with academic programs, were the primary reasons for staying at school, even when they no longer participated in their sport. Miller and Kerr (2002) also found that relationships with teammates helped forge stronger connections, both socially and to the university, which can also help retain student-athletes who transition out of sport before graduation. DeVries (2019) wrote how sports played a role in choosing to attend the institution, ultimately creating that bridge and bond with teammates. However, sports were only part of the equation, which likely helped convince student-athletes to continue their studies. Students who participated in DeVeries' 2019 study competed in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, which is a different level of competition and structure than the NCAA. Over half of the participants received no athletic scholarship, though 42.5% received partial athletic scholarships and 2.5% had their full cost of school paid for

(DeVries, 2019, p. 19). While further study is needed to determine applicability across all NCAA levels, institutions should take note about how to keep student-athletes in school if they transition out of athletics.

Student-Athlete Challenges

Participation in college athletics provides a structured outlet for student-athletes to connect to their institution outside of the classroom. Academic eligibility measures force student-athletes to stay accountable to their studies and help many of them to the graduation finish line (Watt & Moore, 2001). However, time constraints that student-athletes face may cause them to identify more heavily with their athlete role, highlighting a set of challenges student-athletes must overcome unique to their peers (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Student-athletes are permitted to spend up to 20 hours per week on mandatory athletic activities, including practices, team meetings, and competition (NCAA, 2021a). Twenty hours is the mandatory limit, but there is no maximum amount of voluntary time student-athletes can dedicate to their sport. At minimum, participating in an NCAA sport is the equivalent of a part-time job, and many Division I student-athletes estimated spending twice that much time at an estimated 40 hours per week over a decade ago (Gayles & Hu, 2009, p. 316). Winning programs generate more money, which also adds pressure on student-athletes to dedicate more and more voluntary time to improving. As Hoffer et al. (2015) pointed out, “when revenues rise, expenditures increase in lockstep” and the big business of college athletics is a prime example (p. 577).

In recent years, revenue and exposure of college sports has increased significantly through advertising and television broadcast rights, which is a long-term effect from the *Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma v. NCAA*, 468 U.S. 85, Supreme Court

decision. The court's decision prevented the NCAA from monopolizing broadcast rights of member events and opened the door for institutions and conferences to negotiate their own media deals (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2018). Athletic events have long played a central role in American history in some shape and form, and as Bellamy (2006) wrote, media and sport have become inextricably intertwined:

> In terms of content, hundreds of television and radio programs and networks, magazines, videogames, and newspapers focus on sport, as do hundreds of thousands of Internet sites. The seemingly insatiable appetite for sports content long ago extended from game or event coverage to reviews, previews, and 'inside' information. (p. 63)

With a growing appetite for sports consumption and an open market, athletic departments have cashed in on the opportunity for additional revenue from broadcasting their games. Increased visibility also brings increased sponsorships, revenue from fans attending games, and potentially an increase in donors who want to be part of the cause. During the 2015-2016 academic year, TV partners paid Power Five conferences (the Southeastern, Atlantic Coast, Big Ten, Big 12, and Pac-12) almost $1.4 billion for broadcasting rights. During the summer of 2016, the Big 10 conference signed a deal with Fox, ESPN, and CBS that will generate approximately $440 million each year over six years' time (Lavigne, 2016, para 26).

Athletic departments do not have a shortage of areas to spend revenue generated, from coaching salaries to team travel and hiring support staff to work in ever-expanding home facilities. New buildings cost several million dollars, and while they may boost a department's image in the eyes of a prized recruit, most new facilities also create space

for student-athlete support staff (Huml et al., 2014). Academic services for student-athletes have grown not only in lip service to prop up the image of the student-athlete, but actual athletic department budgets have grown throughout the years. Wolverton (2008) found that in the 10 years prior to his research, “budgets for academic services for athletes at more than half of the 73 biggest athletics programs in the country have more than doubled” (para. 4). Designated academic facilities for student-athletes to study in are more physically accessible, often centrally located by athletic facilities where student-athletes spend the majority of their time. Athletic facilities are usually at best, located on the perimeter of campus, which can cause additional physical isolation, with all student-athletes' needs located in a small bubble. Huml et al. (2014) suggested that while these facilities were convenient, “spending time in the athletic academic center hindered [student-athletes’] ability to study, connect with faculty, and participate [in] organizations and community service” (p. 424).

Power Five schools separate themselves from other NCAA programs with big spending on athletic facilities of all kinds (Lavigne, 2016). Within the NCAA, schools are classified as Division I, Division II, or Division III, with the Power Five schools all competing in Division I in the FBS. Institutions who compete at the FBS level but are not considered Power Five are called the Group of Five. The Group of Five is comprised of the American Conference, Conference USA, the Mountain West, the Sun Belt, and the MidAmerican Conference. All other Division I institutions compete in the Football Championship Subdivision (Dodd, 2020). Membership is based on number of sports sponsored, competitions played, athletic financial aid given, and fan attendance requirements for football classification, with the largest financial commitments required

for Division I (NCAA, 2021d). The Power Five schools are separated from the rest of DI primarily by budget. While Division I programs may offer the most name recognition and perceived prestige (Berkman, 2020), nearly 750 institutions offered student-athletes the opportunity to compete in DII and DIII programs throughout the country (NCAA, 2021g).

Student-athletes face similar issues at all three levels, including time management, transition and identity issues, and the desire to be competitive at a high level (Zeljka et al., 2017). Student-athletes across Division I and Division II programs expressed a desire for similar leadership styles amongst their coaches (Beam, 2001). While athletic experiences may be similar across divisions, the additional exposure and prestige may present additional challenges for student-athletes at the Division I level. Smith and Hardin (2020) found that while the transition experiences into college between NCAA Division I (DI) and Division III (DIII) student-athletes were very similar, "DI student-athletes experienced a greater sense of identity loss transitioning out of sport, in comparison to DIII student-athletes who embraced the change and opportunity to move onto the next stage of their life" (p. 153).

Not only are there differences among student-athletes at all three divisions, private and public institutions provide different experiences for student-athletes. Huml et al. (2014) found that private school student-athletes wished they had access to more student-athlete specific resources, whereas student-athletes at public institutions felt they were missing out on campus resources, due to their athletic commitments. For student-athletes who do have access to athletic support services, their first-year experience can be highly influential on their overall satisfaction and perceived quality of experience. In fact,

the “interaction quality and environment quality demonstrated to significantly affect” freshmen student-athlete experience and overall satisfaction levels (Otto et al., 2019, p. 46). Emotional well-being was also connected to academic success, and females reported an overall better quality of experience than males. There were also varying opinions, based on whether a student-athlete participated in an individual sport. Individuals who competed in team sports perceived their experience with athletic academic support services more favorably than students who participated in individual sports (Otto et al., 2019).

How an individual perceives themself can influence emotional well-being. Greater self-acceptance of all traits, both positive and negative, has shown to boost emotional well-being (Pillay, 2016). Killeya (2001) found the tie between self-acceptance and overall success to be applicable to both the academic and athletic identities of student-athletes. While institutions use standardized tests to predict future academic success, “non-cognitive variables, such as the concept of the self as a student, are more reliable predictors of academic performance in college” (p. 94). Student-athletes with a higher level of self-efficacy also have higher performance outcomes. Killeya (2001) discovered that minority student-athletes in particular improved academic performance when they positively associated their roles as a student and an athlete.

Jameson et al. (2007) built on Killeya’s (2001) research and examined the impact of negative stereotypes on student-athletes’ performance. Their research found that student-athletes who experienced negative athlete stereotypes prior to an intellectual test performed lower than those who did not. The experiment led participants to believe their intellectual abilities were being measured when they were not, which may have

influenced the outcome. However, the results suggest that student-athletes are not immune to stereotype threat, which may also create specific additional barriers to success that general students do not face. The mental game that is critical to athletic success seems to be just as important to academic outcomes.

Summary

In 2013, the Educational Policy Institute released a comprehensive economic study of 1,669 private, public, and for-profit four-year universities and colleges examining the cost of student attrition. Overall losses in tuition for individual schools in the study ranged from $10,584 as the lowest to $102,533,338, which was the highest single school loss (Raisman, 2013). Average losses reported did not account for lost revenue in areas such as housing, dining, or other student fees not collected, nor did it cover future alumni donations. The cost of student attrition is detrimental for colleges and universities, and institutions must be deliberate in supporting students on the path to graduation. Student-athletes are a unique population that face additional barriers in connecting with school outside of sport. Student-athletes with a strong athlete identity are also more likely to transfer (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). With so much monetary and human capital invested in student-athlete support and life skills development, it is important to determine if those resources are having an impact on retention. Peer mentoring might be a cost-efficient solution in connecting student-athletes to their institutions outside of sport to improve retention rates and overall student-athlete experience. The sample population and methodology for the research to determine impact peer mentoring had on freshmen student-athlete experience and retention were outlined in detail in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Research Method and Design

This mixed-methods study examined the impact of a peer mentoring program on freshmen student-athlete retention and experience. The research sample consisted of first-time, full-time freshmen student-athletes who enrolled in their first semester of college during the Fall 2019 semester. The participants were all members of an NCAA Division II athletics program and selected by their coaches to participate in the peer mentoring program. The researcher used a quantitative analysis to test hypotheses to determine whether participants in the peer mentoring program retained from their first year to second year at higher levels than students and student-athletes who did not participate in the peer mentoring program. The researcher utilized qualitative analyses to gain a greater understanding of what kind of impact participating in the program had on student-athletes' perceived experiences during the first semester of college, their connection with the athletics department, and their overall connection with the university. The mixed methods design created clarity on the impact of participation in a peer mentor program on freshmen student-athlete retention, while still considering the overall experience of student-athletes who participated in a peer mentor program as mentees. This section outlines the profile of the study location and research participants and details the methodology used for the research study.

Null Hypotheses and Research Questions

Null Hypothesis 1: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in a peer mentoring program.

Null Hypothesis 2: Female student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than female student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Null Hypothesis 3: Male student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than male student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Null Hypothesis 4: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program do not have a higher first-semester GPA average than freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Null Hypothesis 5: International student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than international freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Null Hypothesis 6: As a result of participation in the peer mentoring program, the Men's Lacrosse team will not have an above average rate of retention for freshmen student-athletes whose first semester was Fall 2019.

Null Hypothesis 7: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than general freshmen students who do not participate in a peer mentoring program.

Research Question 1: How does participation in a peer mentoring program affect the overall experience during a freshman student-athlete's first semester in college?

Research Question 2: How does participation in a peer mentoring program influence freshmen student athletes' connection within the athletic community?

Research Question 3: How does participation in a peer mentoring program enhance freshmen student-athletes' connection to their institution?

Research Question 4: How does participation in a single semester peer mentoring program impact freshmen student-athletes beyond their first semester?

Research Location

The researcher conducted the study at a private Midwestern university located on 500 acres in the suburbs of a large metropolitan city. The institution sponsored 27 NCAA Division II athletic programs and an additional 19 club teams. Total student enrollment in the system consisted of 4,822 undergraduate students and 2,560 graduate students. In Fall 2019, the number of degree-seeking, first-time freshmen students totaled 1,165. The incoming student population was 54% female and 46% male, with 35% of the class comprised of student-athletes, including both NCAA and club (Lindenwood University, 2019). The researcher served as the Assistant Athletic Director for Academic Success and Development.

Population

The Fall 2019 cohort of NCAA first-time, full-time freshmen consisted of 150 student-athletes, according to data received from the university's Office of Institutional Assessment. The office provided two reports: one with retention risk scores and one with demographic and retention data. The researcher found seven first-year student-athletes missing from the institutional data report generated for the study, including two participants in the mentor program. The Office of Institutional Assessment attempted to locate data on the missing participants, but only found transcript and admissions information; retention risk scores as outlined in Table 1 were not located. To verify

discrepancy in the numbers reported by the Office of Institutional Assessment, the researcher manually checked roster information from the Fall 2019 semester. The researcher obtained official rosters for each team from the athletic department's compliance office, who maintained certified rosters each semester with the NCAA. The researcher compared the number of listed freshmen student-athletes the on-compliance rosters with the number provided by the Office of Institutional Assessment to determine final numbers for first-time, full-time student enrollment in Fall 2019 and retention numbers for Fall 2020.

Thirty-five percent of incoming NCAA student-athletes identified as female and 65% identified as male. The institutional data report for incoming students only identified two options for gender: male or female. As of the writing of this paper, the institution updated their applications for students who wished to self-identify pronoun preferences and gender identity. While a transgender student-athlete policy existed within the athletic department handbook at the time that mirrored NCAA best practices, the department policy stated that students should self-disclose if they identified as transgender. The university kept confidential all information regarding gender identity that did not align with the binary male or female. The researcher recorded student genders as male or female in alignment with institutional reporting. Fifteen student-athletes identified as international and 56% of the new student-athletes identified as White. Black or African American was the second largest group identified by race at 12%, followed by other race at 10%, Unknown at 7%, two or more races at 3% and Hispanic at 2%.

Prior to the start of the semester, the university assigned each new first-time, full-time student a Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL, 2021) baseline risk score, outlined in Table 2.

The university calculated RNL risk scores based on historical retention data of university students with similar demographic attributes. The RNL scores identified over half of the incoming freshmen class of NCAA student-athletes as minimum risk, with 75% of the student-athletes as minimum or low risk. Twenty percent of NCAA student-athletes placed into the medium risk category, and only five percent of NCAA student-athletes were identified as high risk. Table 1 provides a specific breakdown of first-time, full-time freshmen by NCAA team.

Table 1
Fall 2019 First-time, Full-time (FTFT) Freshmen by NCAA sport

	Number of FTFT Freshmen	Minimum through 4 risk points	5 or 6 risk points	7 thru 8 risk points	9 thru 11 risk points	12 risk points through max
Baseball	18	11	2	2	1	2
Basketball (M)	1				1	
Basketball (W)*	3	1	2			
Field Hockey*	3	2	1			
Football	25	8	5	8	4	
Golf (M)	4	1	2			1
Golf (W)	2	2				
Gymnastics*	3	3				
Ice Hockey (W)*	5	5				
Lacrosse (M)*	13	7	3	1		1
Lacrosse (W)	9	7		2		
Soccer (M)	8	5	2	1		
Soccer (W)*	5	5				
Softball*	4	4				
Swimming & Diving (M)	13	9	1		1	2
Swimming & Diving (W)	6	5		1		
Tennis (M)	1				1	
Tennis (W)*	2	2				
Track & Field (M)	7	4	2		1	
Track & Field (W)	5	4		1		
Volleyball (M)	6	3	2		1	
Volleyball (W)	4	3				1
Wrestling (M)	9	4	1	2	1	1

Note: (M) = Men. (W) = Women. * = Teams participating in Fall 19 mentor program as mentees. 39 = number of study participants. 7 = total number of students missing from institutional risk score reports. See Table 2 for explanation of risk scores.

Sample

Twenty-six percent of freshmen NCAA student-athletes participated in the peer mentoring program. To qualify for the study, participants had to meet three criteria: be in their first full-time semester of college at the university in the fall of 2019, be active on the roster of an NCAA athletics team, and be nominated by their coach to participate in the program. Thirty-nine student-athletes met the criterion. The researcher used convenience sampling for this study, with the sample size comprised of the total number of student-athletes who participated as mentees in the peer mentor program for Fall 2019. Coaches selected mentees to participate in the program through a department application process. The total number of mentors determined participation numbers for mentees to ensure a one-to-one ratio of mentors to mentees. Thirty-nine mentees participated in Fall 2019 with six NCAA teams represented: Women's Basketball, Field Hockey, Women's Gymnastics, Men's Lacrosse, Softball, and Women's Soccer. Out of the 39 mentees contacted, only 19 agreed to participated in the study. Etikan et al. (2016) highlighted the accessibility of convenience sampling, which is the primary reason the researcher chose the convenience sampling method. While the research participants were readily available, convenience sampling can result in a biased outcome (Etikan et al., 2016).

General freshmen not classified as NCAA student-athletes were excluded from participating directly in this study. At the time of the study, the institution only offered the opportunity to participate in the peer mentor program to first-time freshmen student-athletes in NCAA sponsored programs. General freshmen students and club student-athletes did not have an opportunity to participate and would not have been a reliable control group. In addition, the researcher excluded student-athletes who were not in their

first full-time semester, as they were not eligible for participation in the peer mentor program.

Data Collection & Analysis

The researcher utilized existing secondary data to answer the hypotheses. The institution's assessment office provided the athletic department with retention reports prior to and throughout the 2019-2020 school year, which served as the foundation for the research. Outside company, Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL, 2021), provided retention risk scores for students. RNL specialized in helping colleges "enroll the students they want, help more students graduate and succeed, and build lifelong relationships with donors" (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2021, para. 1). The retention reports contained a variety of demographic variables for each freshman student-athlete, such as high school GPA, how early the student applied to college, first generation status, and type of financial aid. RNL calculated retention risk scores based on the demographic variables. Students with higher risk scores were more at risk of failing, dropping out, or transferring from the institution. RNL created the risk categories based on years of historical norms and data collection from all levels of higher education institutions across the country. Table 2 outlines the breakdown of risk scores.

Table 2

RNL Retention Rate by Risk Score

Risk Points	Risk Classification	Historical Retention Rate by Risk Score
Minimum through 4 risk points	Minimum risk	90%
5 or 6 risk points	Low risk	83%
7 thru 8 risk points	Medium risk	76%
9 thru 11 risk points	Medium risk	69%
12 risk points through max	High risk	52%

The researcher manually filtered out mentee participant data from the existing RNL reports for incoming freshmen and moved the data to a new spreadsheet. Before deidentifying the data, the researcher located individual transcripts to evaluate if participants retained in the Fall 2020 semester, along with individual GPA. The newly created report contained identifiable data, such as names, e-mail addresses, and student ID numbers replaced with a randomly assigned numerical code. The institution's Office of Assessment provided data on the entire first-time, full-time freshmen class that entered college in the Fall 2019 semester. Information requested on that report included the following demographic information: name, sport, gender, term GPA for Fall 2019, cumulative GPA after Spring 2020, and visa status. The researcher deleted any remaining identifying data from the reports provided.

To test the difference between student-athletes who participated in a peer mentor program and student-athletes or general students who did not, the researcher used a two-sample *z*-test of proportions to determine statistically significant relationships. The *z*-tests were used for hypotheses one through three and five through eight. For hypothesis four, the researcher examined the mean GPAs of student-athletes who participated in the program and student-athletes who did not participate using a *t*-test of independent means. To compare GPAs, a total of quality points earned divided by credit hours attempted is the mathematically correct and preferred way to examine differences in GPA. However, the researcher was not able to obtain total quality points and hours attempted through a report and opted for a more time-efficient comparison of means rather than manually collecting data from 111 individual student-athletes' transcripts.

The researcher created an eight-question original survey instrument (Appendix A), designed to answer the research questions. The researcher used the program mandated platform *Qualtrics*. At the start of the survey, the researcher included informed consent clearly outlining the voluntary nature of participation, the lack of benefits for participating, and the ability to withdraw from the survey at any time (Appendix D). The survey began with a Likert-scale question asking participants to rate their overall experiences with the mentor program on a scale of one to five, with one being the lowest and least satisfied. The survey then asked a few questions regarding the mentees' relationship with their mentor and if they remained in contact. The final few questions were all open-ended and asked about the participants' perceived effect that being a mentee had on their relationship with the athletics department, the university, and their overall experiences beyond their first semester.

Participants received an electronic survey link through both their university email accounts and personal email accounts listed in every student profile. Contacting students via personal and school email is a common practice for staff both prior to the first semester of school and during the summers when students are away from campus. The researcher emailed participants regarding the survey three times: during the fourth week of June 2021, the second week of July 2021, and the final week of August 2021. The survey finished with the opportunity to participate in a short follow-up interview, where students could provide their email if they agreed to be contacted. If participants declined to participate in the interview, the survey allowed the individuals to remain completely anonymous, with no additional identifying information requested. Anonymity was crucial to creating the survey, as the researcher did not want the sample to feel obligated to

participate in the study. The researcher had ongoing professional interactions with several members of the sample and communicated regularly with all enrolled student-athletes as part of her job. Measures, such as the disclosure and informed consent statement, were taken to ensure no coercion occurred when communicating with participants.

The researcher checked survey responses on a weekly basis. Four participants indicated they were willing to participate in follow-up interviews. One of the responders did not include their email address and could not be followed up with. One respondent initially agreed to be contacted but then failed to respond to three follow-up emails. Two individuals agreed to an interview and followed through on their word. The researcher conducted interview virtually via Zoom for ease of scheduling, safety during a global pandemic, and ability to record. Interview questions were created, based on the research questions, with room for follow-up as conversation allowed. After each interview, the researcher downloaded and saved recordings of each interview to her computer. The researcher transcribed both interviews and examined common themes. The survey finally closed in September, after 13 weeks. The researcher transferred the survey data to a new document, grouping all responses for each question together. All eight survey questions were analyzed for common themes, which are reported in Chapter Four.

Threats to Validity

The COVID-19 pandemic threatened the validity of the study. Participants in the study completed roughly 75% of their freshman year when the pandemic arrived and sent everyone home. The university required students to complete the latter half of the 2020 spring semester virtually. Students faced barriers, such as internet connectivity, time zone confusion, and both mental and physical health challenges. Economic hardships also

caused plans to shift throughout 2020, including college in the Fall 2020 semester. Some students physically could not return to school and decided to postpone enrollment until international borders opened. For students who returned to campus, the institution conducted classes mostly virtually or restricted in-person attendance. Strict physical and social distancing rules were enforced, and the college experience differed dramatically from Fall 2019. The pandemic touched virtually every aspect of life and likely affected the results of this study.

Timing and instruments used may have also threatened the validity of the study. The researcher created an original survey instrument for the study. While the researcher's doctoral committee reviewed the survey, the instrument was used solely for the purpose of the study. A lack of vetting may have skewed results or may mean lack of consistent results in the future. The survey went out to participants in the summer of 2021, almost two years after the start of their first semester when they participated in the mentor program. In addition to the natural memory loss that comes over time, several participants went on to serve as peer mentors in the program. The additional time and energy dedicated to the peer mentor program may have influenced their responses to the survey and/or during the interview.

Demographic factors could have also influenced the study. In examining the different retention rates by sport, the researcher did not consider the historical overall retention rates of teams represented by participants in the study. It is possible that Men's Lacrosse traditionally retains at higher rates than other sports every year, regardless of participation in the peer mentor program. Coaches with student-athletes participating in the mentor program may also have historically higher retention rates, because they have

always pushed for involvement outside of their teams. Student-athletes considered at-risk by the RNL scores also received earlier intervention and touch points by the academic support team, which may have influenced outcomes in addition to participating in the peer mentor program. The peer mentor program in the study existed for such a short period of time in Fall 2019, and the continuous evolution, growth, and development of the program could have naturally impacted research outcomes, as well.

Reflexivity

It is important to examine the role the researcher played in the peer mentor program and the potential impact on the overall outcome of the study. The term reflexivity is used to acknowledge the influence of the researcher on the topic being studied (Gilgun, 2008). The researcher was mindful of her reflexivity in the study, as she served as the founder and sole steward of the peer mentor program. The researcher also conducted informal research on the peer mentor programs four years prior to the study after initially founding the program. The peer mentor program was born out of a passion project of the researcher to meet a need for leadership development and community building within the athletic department. Since its inception, the researcher evaluated the experience of participants by collecting formal feedback through surveys and informal feedback through interactions and conversations with participants. The researcher created goals for the program, such as retention, connection, and experience without prior data to support. Those goals were used to recruit participants for the program before they were ever realized.

In addition to the researcher's personal investment into the peer mentor program in the study, the researcher also spent much of her professional career in student-athlete

support services. The field of student-athlete development was relatively new with a lot of emphasis and investment being made by athletic departments nation-wide. The researcher's professional network was also comprised of early influencers of student-athlete development who also encouraged programming, such as peer mentoring. Leadership development was a lifelong personal interest to the researcher and student-athlete development allowed her to combine personal and professional interests. Such experiences certainly contributed to a subjective lens used by the researcher throughout her study.

Summary

The researcher examined the overall impact of participation in a peer mentor program on freshmen student-athlete experience. The researcher used a mixed methods approach to better understand not only the measurable outcomes on retention but to also examine feedback on the student-athlete experience. The researcher began with the end in mind, creating a short survey to gather qualitative feedback from participants. Additional interview questions were crafted in order to supplement the survey findings. A two-sample *z*-test of proportions was utilized to compare student-athlete demographic data from the Fall 2019 and 2020 semesters to search for any statistically significant differences between student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program and those who did not. The researcher examined results from the quantitative analyses and thematic findings from the qualitative portion of the study in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four: Analysis

This study sought to understand the impact of a peer mentoring program on freshmen student-athlete retention and experience. Retention data for first-time, full-time freshmen students and student-athletes was compared for possible significant correlation between participating in a peer mentoring program and returning to school for sophomore year. Various characteristics, such as gender, sport, and visa status were also compared to see if the peer mentoring program affected different demographic groups. In addition to studying statistical relationships, the researcher also examined the personal impact participating in a peer mentor program had on freshmen student-athletes. A qualitative analysis was done using a survey instrument created for the study and interviews of student-athletes who were first-time, full-time freshmen in a peer mentoring program during the Fall 2019 semester. The mixed-method approach was utilized to examine retention, a widely used measurable outcome in higher education, and to better understand the overall quality of the student-athlete experience.

Quantitative Results

Null Hypothesis 1: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in a peer mentoring program.

The researcher conducted a two-sample *z*-test of proportions to determine if the retention rate of freshmen student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program was greater than the retention rate of freshmen student-athletes who did not participate in the program. The analysis revealed that the retention rate of student-athletes enrolled in

the program (n=33, 86.4%) was not significantly different than the retention rate of student-athletes who did not participate in the peer mentor program (n=106, 86.2%); z = -0.25, p = 0.599. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rate of freshmen student-participating in the peer mentoring program was not higher than the retention rate of freshmen student-athletes not participating in the program.

Null Hypothesis 2: Female student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than female student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

The researcher conducted a two-sample *z*-test of proportions to determine if the retention rate of female student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program was greater than the retention rate of female student-athletes who did not participate in the program. The analysis revealed that the retention rate of female student-athletes enrolled in the program (n=22, 84.6%) was not significantly different than the retention rate of female student-athletes who did not participate in the peer mentor program (n=27, 90.0%); z = -0.61, p = 0.729. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rate of female student-athletes participating in the peer mentoring program was not higher than the retention rate of female student-athletes not participating in the program.

Null Hypothesis 3: Male student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than male student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

The researcher conducted a two-sample *z*-test of proportions to determine if the retention rate of male student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program was greater than the retention rate of male student-athletes who did not participate in the program. The analysis revealed that the retention rate of male student-athletes enrolled in the program (n=11, 84.6%) was not significantly different than the retention rate of student-athletes who did not participate in the peer mentor program (n=79, 84.9%); $z = -0.03$, $p = 0.511$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rate of male student-athletes participating in the peer mentoring program was not higher than the retention rate of male student-athletes not participating in the program.

Null Hypothesis 4: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program do not have a higher first-semester GPA average than freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

The researched conducted a *t*-test of two means to determine if freshmen student-athletes who participated in the peer mentoring program had a higher average semester GPA than freshmen student-athletes who did not participate in a peer mentoring program. A preliminary test of variances revealed that the variances were not equal. The analysis revealed that the Fall 2019 semester GPA of student-athletes participating in the peer mentor program (M = 3.55, SD = 0.50) were significantly higher than student-athletes not participating in the peer mentor program (M = 3.04, SD = 0.75); $t(38) = 4.74$, $p < 0.001$. The researcher rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that the average first semester GPA of freshmen student-athletes participating in a peer mentor program was higher than

the average first semester GPA of freshmen student-athletes not participating in the peer mentor program.

Null Hypothesis 5: International student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than international freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

The researcher conducted a two-sample *z*-test of proportions to determine if the retention rate of international student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program was greater than the retention rate of international student-athletes who did not participate in the program. The analysis revealed that the retention rate of international student-athletes enrolled in the program (n=6, 100.0%) was not significantly different than the retention rate of international student-athletes who did not participate in the peer mentor program (n=15, 83.3%); $z = 1.07$, $p = 0.142$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rate of international student-athletes participating in the peer mentoring program was not higher than the retention rate of international student-athletes not participating in the program.

Null Hypothesis 6: As a result of participation in the peer mentoring program, the Men's Lacrosse team will not have an above average rate of retention for freshmen student-athletes whose first semester was Fall 2019.

The researcher conducted a two-sample *z*-test of proportions to determine if the retention rate of freshmen members of the Men's Lacrosse team who participated in the peer mentor program was greater than the retention rate freshmen student-athletes who did not participate in the program. The analysis revealed that the retention rate of freshmen Men's Lacrosse student-athletes enrolled in the program (n=11, 84.6%) was not

significantly different than the retention rate of freshmen student-athletes who did not participate in the peer mentor program (n=106, 86.2%); $z = -1.16$, $p = 0.563$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rate of freshmen Men's Lacrosse student-athletes participating in the peer mentoring program was not higher than the retention rate of student-athletes not participating in the program.

Null Hypothesis 7: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are not retained at higher rates than general freshmen students who do not participate in a peer mentoring program.

The researcher conducted a two-sample *z*-test of proportions to determine if the retention rate of freshmen student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program was greater than the retention rate general freshmen students who did not participate in the program. The analysis revealed that the retention rate of freshmen student-athletes enrolled in the program (n=33, 84.6%) was not significantly different than the retention rate of freshmen students who did not participate in the peer mentor program (n=425, 79.9%); $z = 0.71$, $p = 0.239$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the retention rate of international student-athletes participating in the peer mentoring program was not higher than the retention rate of international student-athletes not participating in the program.

Qualitative Results

An eight-question survey was sent to 39 individuals who participated in the peer mentor program as first-time, full-time freshmen student-athletes in the Fall 2019 semester. Survey questions were primarily open-ended, asking participants to share how their experiences in the mentor program impacted their first semester of college and

beyond. While retention was an important unit of measurement, it was also imperative to understand what kind of experience student-athletes had transitioning to college and if participation in the mentor program improved freshmen student-athletes' first semester at the university. The purpose of the athlete mentor program was to provide support, camaraderie, and community for all participants, and the research indicated the mission was fulfilled. Overall, participants shared whether the program helped them with their overall transition to school, connected them to resources on campus, and contributed to a broader social network. This created a stronger sense of belonging, which boosted confidence through pushing outside of comfort zones. Finally, the experience cultivated a sense of empathy that extended to the classes that followed. Mentees who had a positive experience in the program wanted to pay that forward, creating a pipeline of future peer mentors who wanted other freshmen to have a similar opportunity.

Research Question 1: How does participation in a peer mentoring program affect the overall experience during a freshman student-athlete's first semester in college?

Theme One: Transition to College.

The purpose of the mentor program was to provide support, camaraderie, and community to student-athletes to help make the transition to college easier. Tinto (1993) believed that individuals who built strong relationships across an institution outside of the classroom were more likely to stay in school. Schlossberg (1981) shared critical work on the challenge of transitioning through major life events, including college. The mentor program was created to provide support to freshmen student-athletes during their first semester of college. Through peer mentors, the transition would be easier and relationships would organically develop, in order to retain student-athletes beyond

freshman year. Several participants indicated having a peer mentor helped them to feel more comfortable during their first semester. One participant reflected that participation in the program "helped me feel welcome on campus." A peer mentor provided an instant familiar face among the new landscape, which helped ease some transitional stress for student-athletes.

In addition to having a welcome committee, several participants expressed appreciation for the structure and required activities embedded in the program. Although participants initially resisted mandatory participation, one participant noted a positive outcome. The individual commented that the program "gave another option to become more comfortable with peers and also made offered the opportunity to be responsible for another task while at school." Student-athletes inhabit a lot of structured space, with pre-determined team activities dictating much of their schedule. The additional requirements of the mentor program felt familiar and welcomed for some participants.

Peer mentors also provided support in the academic transition to college:

> He helped me a lot with school for sure. He had one of his friends, who was an accounting major, so he got me into a conversation with him to where he could help me with my accounting if I had any questions.

Post-secondary coursework is often more rigorous than high school coursework. Peer mentors provided support to help students feel more confident academically, which aided in a successful transition to college.

Theme Two: Connection Outside of Team.

Student-athletes spend a significant amount of time with their teammates between practices, competitions, team activities, and due to overall similar schedules formed

around required team time. Participation in a peer mentoring program provided an easy way for freshmen student-athletes to expand their networks and meet student-athletes on other teams. Sentiments such as, “it helped me come in and meet new people,” were expressed by several participants. One wrote, “It was nice to have someone outside of my team who understood being a student-athlete.” Another participant stated, “I thought it was so cool to know someone from a different team!” The peer mentor program deliberately paired student-athletes from different teams to expand the student-athlete’s network beyond their team. The goal of bonding teams together was achieved by another participant, who said the program “gave me someone not from my team to talk to. I felt more open talking to other sports.”

One participant mentioned that a peer mentor was extra helpful in expanding their network because their recruiting class was much smaller than other years:

> Well, because my class was very small it was nice to have a person outside of the team as well, because we spend a lot of time as a team. So, to have another person outside of the team was nice. She also was a different person to talk to as things were going on. She also spoke about, like, the mental health aspect, she spoke about all that as well, so I knew what everything was.

Another participant discussed the importance of community building outside of their team:

> I think the biggest thing was getting to know more people. Coming in, I already had that kind of set group of people, like my soccer team. And having mine be lacrosse, I was able to know them. And one of my other friends, her mentor was a

> baseball player, so, then we were able to...know a little bit of everything, which was nice.

By pairing student-athletes from different teams, participants in the peer mentor program were able to build a stronger personal community. While bonding with teammates is important, it is critical for student-athletes to build a network outside of their team for additional support. For coaches who hesitate to encourage student-athletes to participate in experiences outside of their team, anxiety should be resolved from reading about the additive experience of growing a student-athlete's personal network.

While most participants expressed how helpful their peer mentors were, a handful shared that having a peer mentor did not enhance their social network. One wrote, "I didn't really have any relationship with my mentor. I never really needed him because I felt like I was able to make my own friends and I had my team." Preference to communicate with teammates was also the reason for an uninspiring relationship for another participant, who said, "I didn't talk to my mentor much. I felt more comfortable to ask friends questions or my team." An additional participant shared that a lack of chemistry also contributed to a weaker relationship with their peer mentor: "Our relationship was fine. It wasn't amazing and it wasn't terrible. We just met once a month and that was it." Participants in the program were required to meet five times throughout the fall semester, which suggests the pair did not meet up beyond minimum requirements. Mentors who met the status quo may have appeared less committed than the overachievers, which could have contributed to the less enthusiastic reviews.

Theme Three: Resource Guide.

Another important theme that emerged from the participants was the general wisdom that peer mentors brought to the relationship. While coaches, professors, and staff provide a wealth of institutional knowledge and life experience, sometimes the voice of a peer proves to be more valuable. From a broader sense, one participant shared, "I was better able to adjust and learn about Lindenwood because she let me learn about her experiences and what I should or should not do." Another participant wrote that having a peer mentor "helped answer questions." First year students face an overwhelming amount of new information; having a peer mentor can help ease the pressure of needing to remember every new thing.

Peer mentors also provided help for freshmen student-athletes on specific areas like navigating campus:

> She also helped me with where all of my classes were. She sent me a map and stuff for the first day, to be like 'hey, if you need help with anything, like getting to classes or anything, just let me know.'

Getting connected to other students in similar coursework within a class major was another helpful resource for a participant. One peer mentor connected a teammate with the same major to their mentee, which helped provide academic support and community:

> So, getting to know his friend, I was able to go beyond that and get into more people, and I found more friends who have the same major. So, we were able to work and communicate with other classes after my first year.

Having access to a peer mentor who successfully modeled how to balance athletics and academics as a student-athlete was also a welcome resource for a few participants. For one participant, the program "showed me that I can balance college and being an athlete. [That] was one of my biggest worries going into college." Peer mentors provided a support system for new student-athletes to utilize in facing a major transition and unknown territory. Leaning on someone who had been in a similar situation proved to be a helpful resource.

Theme Four: Confidence Boost.

Peer mentors helped their mentees feel more connected and more confident in their new surroundings throughout their first semester. Having access to someone who had "been there, done that" helped participants feel more at home during their first semester. One participant absorbed the confidence of their upper-classman mentor: "We had a positive relationship as she was a confident person and made me feel extremely comfortable."

Another participant disclosed they were an international student. Having a mentor immediately helped the participant feel more at ease in their decision to attend university outside of their home country:

> I think it just made me like, more confident to get to know other student-athletes, because she was so welcoming and nice. That I was like, well, if she has the same kind of attitude to things, other people will have that same attitude. Like, especially because my class coming in was two internationals and one American, she was also American. And so like, encouraging me to get to know more Americans and things like that.

One participant shared that having a mentor helped them to become less shy and more confident in connecting with others. They attributed a rapid growth in self-confidence to the patience their peer mentor showed while getting to know each other:

> It's easy to break out of my shell, and I didn't really think that it would! In high school it was a very different atmosphere. Coming in and having a mentor, I can break out of my shell and I didn't have to hide behind anything and that helped. And also communicating was a big one. My mentor did a really good job of asking me how I was doing and if I needed anything. I think at the beginning it was a little weird. Because being a freshman, I was very shy. And it takes me a while to get out of my shell and everything. So, the one thing that he did was...grouped our sports together. So, for our first few meetings, we all went to eat and it was a whole group of people. So, it was easier to talk to him and get to know him. And then after two or three meetings it was just me and him and it was definitely a lot easier just because I was able to get to know him personally and not just another random person, I didn't know who it was yet.

Having a peer mentor helped ease the nerves and anxiety of adjusting to a new environment for many participants in the program. Building connections and learning from peers helped increase participants' sense of belonging. An enhanced belief that they were not alone in this journey boosted participants' confidence to provide an overall positive experience as a mentee in the program.

Research Question 2: How does participation in a peer mentoring program influence freshmen student-athletes' connection within the athletic community?

Theme One: Networking.

The institution in the study sponsored nearly 650 student-athletes competing in 27 NCAA Division II athletic programs. In the Fall 2019 semester, roughly 25% of the total student-athlete population was first-time, full-time freshmen NCAA student-athletes. A few responses indicated that having a peer mentor did not have much of a personal impact. However, many participants in the mentor program felt that having a peer mentor helped them to build their network with fellow student-athletes. As one participant mentioned the peer mentor program, "gave me more connections." With many sports and student-athletes, peer mentors from different teams helped connect mentees with new people the mentees may have never met. The peer mentor program helped another participant grow their network, sharing, "I met new teams and new people." Student-athletes often remain siloed within their sports, partly due to schedule conflicts. Teams who do not share practice facilities or competitive seasons may rarely interact due to logistics. Teams who practice off-campus may experience this even further because so much time is dedicated to driving. Several participants noted the role that the peer mentor program played in overcoming the silo effect, including one person who said, "I think [the program] helped me to enjoy more of the athletics as I met new people and went and watched sports I wouldn't normally watch."

Meeting new people was the most common response from participants, as participation in the program "introduced me to other teams" and "[had] a lot of impact because I was able to be around a lot of new people." The term networking was not used in the survey nor was it articulated by participants. However, meeting new people across teams that grow into friendships or stay as casual acquaintances are both keys to networking. This kind of relationship building lays the foundation for networking as

college students graduate. Only four of the 15 participants who completed the survey indicated they were still in touch with their mentors. Of the four that were still in touch, only one participant said they were in touch almost daily. One respondent said they were in touch one to two times per semester, another said they were in touch only one to two times per year, and the fourth did not disclose how often they interacted with their mentor. Even though most participants no longer regularly communicate with their mentors, they still expressed an appreciation for the role their mentors played in introducing them to others.

Theme Two: Building Community.

Relationships that moved from casual acquaintances into friendships helped transform participants' network into a community. One participant described their experience in growing their circle, "I felt that I became more in touch with athletes on [other] teams." Building relationships also helped increase another participant's feeling of community, sharing the program made them "feel more at home." Another indicator of community was the idea of building connection with student-athletes outside of their team. As a respondent shared, participating in the peer mentor program "gave me someone not from my team to talk to. I felt more open talking to other sports." Another participant recalled an additional benefit of meeting new people outside of their teammates, stating, "my mentor [was] on the women's hockey team, and I am friends with a lot of the girls on that team now!" Previously mentioned under the first research question, one participant's mentor linked them to other students in their major, which blossomed into relationships with classmates that extended beyond freshman year.

The opportunity to meet new people outside of their team helped build participants' personal network. With nearly 650 NCAA student-athletes and a freshman student population of 1,165, a peer mentor provided an instant and safe way to meet people. The networks also provided a level of comfort to participants, meeting individuals with the similar experience of being a student-athlete. Connection to resources, friendship, and a sense of belonging are all important parts of building community that participants in the peer mentoring program experienced, which enhanced their first semester experience at the university.

Research Question 3: How does participation in a peer mentoring program enhance freshmen student-athletes' connection to their institution?

Theme One: Sense of Belonging.

There was a consistent group of three responses to the survey questions that showed participation in the peer mentoring program did not have much effect on participants' first semester in college. The lack of impact remained true for all survey questions related to Research Question Three, as well. However, there were several participants who believed that their experience as a mentee helped them feel more at home at the institution. One individual said that the peer mentor program "meant I met new people and also allowed me to settle in more easily." Another peer mentor's enthusiasm helped build excitement and encouraged involvement: "It made me want to go out and do stuff on campus because my mentor made it sound super fun and interesting." The previously shared testimony about a mentor sharing a campus map to help orient a freshman mentee before classes started also helped that participant to feel

more comfortable geographically. Assistance with learning their way around campus was a small gesture that made a big impact for that participant.

One response summed up similar sentiments on how participation in the program as a mentee helped foster a sense of fitting in, "[It] made me enjoy the school more." Belonging signaled a sense of inclusion that allowed individuals to relax and enjoy their surroundings. Another participant recalled, "I can't say it changed my overall connection. I think it was a safety net for me to bounce scenarios, problems, or questions off." While this participant did not think the mentor program helped them build a stronger connection to the university, it is unclear what the participant's experience would have been without their peer mentor serving as a "safety net".

Theme Two: Orientation to Resources.

Like the theme that peer mentors served as a valuable resource guide during the first semester of college, participants shared that the program also provided useful knowledge on campus resources. Learning from others' experiences, both good and bad, proved to be helpful to several students. One individual said, "I learned all of the good things and not so good things. I also got to know more about the campus and life as a Lindenwood student." Similarly, another individual shared, "my mentor explained everything that I should do as an athlete and what Lindenwood requires of me." Timely advice from peers who had walked a similar path was helpful to participants, in a way that advice from a coach or other trusted adult may not have been.

Guidance on academics and various other offices and programs on campus were also mentioned as benefits from having a peer mentor. The participant previously mentioned whose mentor connected them to other students in their major was one

example. Another participant mentioned earlier in the findings also shared how their mentor talked about access to the mental health resources on campus: “She also spoke about, like, the mental health aspect, so I knew what everything was.” Sharing mental health resources was a required topic for peer mentors to cover during the Fall 2019 semester. Mentors were required to talk through counseling services available on campus and share a list of resources available online and by phone. Having a peer validate the importance of mental health resources proved to be valuable for at least one participant during their first semester.

Theme Three: Growth Mindset.

Dweck (2016) identified individuals who believe their skills and abilities can be developed over time through hard work as having a growth mindset. Dweck (2016) showed that people with a growth mindset emphasized learning and progress, sought input from others, and used challenges as an opportunity for self-improvement. Dweck’s (2016) research demonstrated more success personally and professionally for individuals who demonstrated a growth mindset over the fixed mindset, which embodies a failure as fatal attitude. For participants in the research study, several responses described how the mentor program pushed them outside of their comfort zone with positive results. Even though the exact term ‘growth mindset’ was not found in any of the responses, responses such as, “I was able to get out of my comfort zone” indicate the use or development of a growth mindset.

One participant shared how the early part of the mentor/mentee relationship was a little uncomfortable being paired with a stranger. However, as the pair built rapport, the participant realized how they grew through the discomfort:

> The awkwardness of the first meet-up, I don't think it was negative, but it was definitely a thing to learn from, that I don't have to be shy. They don't have to be the first to say anything. I'm able to communicate first or even ask them how they're doing or how their day is going and just have them be the mentor...it goes both ways.

Another participant also found that having a peer mentor pushed them to try activities they normally would not have joined:

> It encouraged me to go to things like I wouldn't normally go to. Like, I went to a softball game, I went to football games. I did more of the community stuff than I would have done, I think. I think otherwise I probably would have just not gone to those things. I would have just stayed in my dorm on weekends when I had weekends off. So, I think it kind of encouraged me to get out a little more.

Having a mentor helped one participant to feel braver socially through patience and leading by example:

> It was easy to break out of my shell, and I didn't really think that it would be. In high school it was a very different atmosphere. Coming in and having a mentor, I could break out of my shell, and I didn't have to hide behind anything and that helped. And also communicating was a big one. My mentor did a really good job of asking me how I was doing and if I needed anything. It wasn't just a h'y, let's go meet up, I need a picture because it seems like that's kind of like what some of my teammates had.

The program required mentors to take pictures with mentees during their meet-ups as part of the assignment requirements. The experience for participants with mentors that were

interested in doing only the bare minimum was less positive, and did not contribute to a growth mindset. As one response mentioned, “I only really met with my mentor 4 times, which I believe it was the minimum requirement. And sometimes those meetings consisted of just passing by and taking a picture.”

Participation in the mentor program provided first year student-athletes a connection to human and physical resources, increasing their overall belonging. By introducing mentees to people who shared majors, interests, and experiences, mentors helped ease a lot of stress. While the mentor program resulted in an easier time fitting in on campus, the process was challenging. Involuntarily pairing up with a stranger sometimes made for a subpar experience. However, many participants agreed that the program pushed them outside of their comfort zone. The experience encouraged mentees to attend events and meet people they likely would not have without the peer mentor. An increased sense of belonging, assistance with orientation to resources, and growing through discomfort contributed to participants’ strengthened bond to the institution.

Research Question 4: How does participation in a single semester peer mentoring program impact freshmen student-athletes beyond their first semester?

Theme One: Enhanced Empathy.

For many of the participants, having a built-in mentor made the transition to college easier in some capacity, as previously summarized. Nearly two years later, many realized the experience made them more aware of what other new students may be going through their first semester of school. One respondent shared, “I have learned the importance of making anyone and everyone feel welcome.” Students who had the support of a peer mentor while adjusting to life as a college student-athlete seemed to have more

empathy for their fellow freshmen as they became experienced upperclassmen. Another participant said, “I think that it made me think of others and what my now current underclassmen may be going through.”

When asked about the lasting impact of peer mentor program beyond their first semester, many participants indicated that it did. Several explanations were similar to the response of, “yes for sure, because I wanted to do the same for other freshmen.” Recognizing the transition to university can be difficult and wanting to ensure others have support to navigate challenges showed an external awareness. Compassion that arises from awareness builds empathy, which was expressed multiple times. However, consistent with the responses of participants who seemed to have had a mediocre experience in the mentor program, a few answers said there was no lasting for them personally beyond their first semester of college. These responses were in the minority, with only three respondents indicating a subpar experience throughout the survey.

Theme Two: Future Mentor Pipeline.

The empathetic responses from participants influenced many to take action by applying to the mentor program to serve others as their peer mentors did. Being a peer mentor provided an easy path to give future freshmen student-athletes a positive first semester experience. Multiple responses shared the sentiment that participating in the peer mentor program directly influenced them to become a peer mentor as well, including one response that being a peer mentee “made me want to be a mentor myself, and I did!” Another participant shared, “I have learned the importance of making anyone and everyone feel welcome, which is why I chose to join AMP as a mentor.” Two additional former mentees echoed the feeling that their positive experience as a mentee directly

influenced them to join the program. One said, “Having a mentor as well helped me, and that’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to figure out how to do it and become a mentor,” while the other mentee mentioned, “It made me want to keep doing [the program] so that I could give incoming freshmen the same experience I did.”

Participants who applied to be mentors their second year of school were part of the mentor class of Fall 2020, which was impacted by the COVID pandemic. Most classes at the university were either fully virtual or a hybrid mix of in person and online. In-person activities were limited to groups of 20 or less, and the entire mentor program was conducted virtually. While some mentors were one-and-done after a tough school year, others were encouraged to try again:

> Well, I’ve joined AMP both times now, so I’ve done that for two years. And like also, [my former mentor] had some of my teammates I think, that second year, so then she connected with a couple of us. And I had softball girls my second year, that was kind of a bit of connection there now, which was nice. So yeah, I think it had just encouraged me to do it because I thought it was a good program and getting to know people and welcoming them in.

Another participant shared how they persisted as a mentor through the virtual program from Fall 2020 to a different experience in person during the Fall 2021 semester:

> I’ve definitely found that being a mentor last year and this year...I had two very Different experiences. Because with COVID, it was hard. I struggled with my mentee, trying to communicate. And it was saying, “Hey, how was your day” and I didn’t get a response. But this year, I texted my mentee and within seconds I’ve already had a response, and I talk to her every single day right now. I think it’s a

very different atmosphere from last year to this year but I think COVID impacted that for sure.

The experience participants had as mentees impacted not only their desire to serve as peer mentors but also their approach to welcome new student-athletes on campus in the future. One positive experience grew into multiple positive experiences in the future, which helped fulfill the mission of the program, as discussed in Theme Three.

Theme Three: Support, Camaraderie, Community.

The mission of the athlete mentor program is to support incoming student-athletes during their first semester of college. By pairing student-athletes from different teams, the program aims to build camaraderie among programs and strengthen the overall sense of athletic community. Overall, the responses from participants indicated that the mission of the mentor program was met. For the participants who agreed to be interviewed, both also strongly agreed that the peer mentor program created support for new students and enhanced the sense of camaraderie and community within the athletic department. Student-athletes shared they felt supported through the program in a multitude of ways, such as “it helped me feel more welcome on campus,” and “it helped answer questions.”

As mentioned in the results of the second research question, participation in the program also enhanced participants’ network and sense of community. Mentors introduced mentees to different peer groups and expanded their social circles. As one participant shared, “I met new teams and new people.” Another participant said the program “helped me come in and meet a lot of new people.” Similarly, an additional response stated the program “gave me another option to become more comfortable with

peers." With each new person a peer mentor introduced to their mentee, mentees enhanced their own social networks, support, and community.

Camaraderie built on shared experiences also contributed to building community within the peer mentor program. Several participants noted how the program increased their sense of belonging and support, both key components of camaraderie and community. One participant articulated how having a peer mentor made them feel more at home. Similarly, another individual shared how the peer mentor program "meant I met new people and also allowed me to settle in more easily. The transition and creating a sense of belonging was not instantaneous for participants, but that also meant an additional growth opportunity. One response articulated that being pushed allowed them to "get out of my comfort zone and meet others." Finally, a participant also explained how the opportunity to participate in a shared experience created a stronger community: "I think [it] helped me to enjoy more of the athletics as I met new people and went and watched sports I wouldn't normally watch." Overall, even though the exact language may not have been present in the responses, the overall sense of the mentor program mission of support, camaraderie, and community seems to have been satisfied by participating in the program.

Summary

The researcher examined statistical relationships between first-time, full-time freshmen student-athletes who participated in a peer mentor program and freshmen student-athletes who did not participate in the peer mentor program. The researcher compared a variety of demographic variables, such as gender, international status, grade point averages, and risk scores. The researcher did not to find any statistically significant

relationship among most of the data and failed to reject nearly every null hypothesis. First semester GPA was the lone hypothesis with statistical significance, as participants had a higher average first semester GPA than freshmen student-athletes not participating in the program. While the quantitative portion of the mixed methods study proved unsuccessful, the qualitative data gathered showed an overall positive impact on freshmen student-athletes.

Participants shared that the program helped with their transition to college; helped them feel more connected to student-athletes outside of their team; oriented them to resources, and boosted their confidence their first semester of college. Participants felt more connected to the athletic department through an expanded personal network and sense of community within the teams. An increased sense of belonging, assistance with becoming oriented to resources, and an increase in growth mindset helped participants feel more connected to the institution. The lasting impact of the program included enhanced empathy for future freshmen teammates, a pipeline of peer mentors to serve in the peer mentor program in upcoming semester, and an overall fulfillment of the mentor program mission of support, camaraderie, and community. Overall, while the peer mentor program did not significantly impact retention, it did enhance the freshmen student-athlete experience their first semester and beyond. Implications for the future of the mentor program and for future research are discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to better understand the impact of participation in a peer mentor program on freshmen student-athlete retention and experience. The study added to the limited field of research on NCAA Division II student-athlete retention and experience, with no research found on peer mentor programs for DII student-athletes. In addition to overall retention, other demographics such as gender, sport, and visa status were examined to see if participation in a peer mentor program had any significant impact on retention. The researcher also examined semester GPAs for any differences between participants and non-participants. From a qualitative lens, the researcher examined the impact of participating in a peer mentor program on the transition into college, relationship with the athletics department and university, and lasting effects beyond the first semester. The researcher used existing data collected from the institution's Office of Institutional Assessment to test the hypotheses, using primarily the two-sample *z*-tests of proportions and one *t*-test of independent means. For the qualitative analyses, the researcher created an eight-question original survey instrument. The survey went to the 39 current and former NCAA student-athletes who were first-time, full-time freshmen in the Fall 2019 semester and participated in a peer mentor program for student-athletes. Two of the 39 participants agreed to share additional feedback in an interview.

No significant relationships were found between participation in the peer mentor program and retention rates of student-athletes and general students who did not participate in a peer mentor program. The researcher failed to reject the hypotheses on gender differences and visa status for retention of mentor program participants and

student-athletes who did not participate. The researcher found semester GPA as the only significant difference between freshmen student-athletes participating in the peer mentor program in comparison to those not participating; program participants had a statistically significant higher GPA than non-participants. In reviewing the research questions, the researcher found an overall positive impact of participating in a peer mentor program on freshmen student-athletes. Participants indicated the program helped their transition to college by providing a connection to resources and community. The experience bolstered participants' overall self-confidence, growth mindset, empathy, and overall sense of belonging. While the peer mentor program did not significantly impact retention, it did enhance the student-athlete experience for freshmen during and after their first semester.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Hypothesis 1: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in a peer mentoring program.

Retention and graduation rates are two of the most common ways higher education measures success. Students who return to an institution for a second year not only bring their tuition money back, but are more likely to persist to graduation. Graduation is the goal, and with national six-year graduate rates ranging from 62% to 70% based on institutional type, schools are anxious to increase rates (National Center, 2020). The peer mentor program in the study launched in the fall of 2017 with a purpose of building better relationships among student-athletes and increasing retention. Participants in the study began their college careers as first-time, full-time freshmen in Fall 2019, the third year of the mentor program. In three short years, the program evolved

from requiring all freshmen to participate, working with volunteer upperclassmen to a much smaller group of mentees and a highly select group of mentors required to enroll in a course for credit. Beginning in Fall 2019, coaches applied for the mentor program so their freshmen could participate as mentees; freshmen were unable to participate without a coach's application.

The researcher analyzed secondary data collected from the Office of Institutional Assessment to determine any statistical significance between retention rates of mentor program participants and student-athletes who did not participate in the program. The retention rates of mentor program participants were calculated at approximately 85%. Non-participant retention totaled around 86%. The *z*-test of two proportions confirmed no significant difference between the two rates, causing the researcher to fail to reject the null hypothesis. With only 26% of first-time, full-time freshmen NCAA student-athletes participating in the mentor program, the sample size in the study was relatively small in comparison to the total population. The total number of participants allowed Fall 2019 equaled 39 because that was the total number of mentors available. In the first two years of the program, mentors were responsible for three to five mentees each, which created logistical challenges for each mentor. The first year to cap mentee numbers to create one-on-one pairings was 2019.

As such a young program with a rapidly evolving structure, the overall quality of mentors could have impacted a freshman student's experience their first semester positively or negatively. A subpar experience did not likely cause a student to depart the institution but also did not give them a reason to stay. Alternatively, it is hard to say that a strong connection to a peer mentor caused the student to stay at the institution. Retention

outcomes were calculated during the fall of 2020 semester, which was in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID disrupted every facet of life and could have been the reason for students not returning to campus. Lack of sports that fall or even previous conflicts with the team, with the institution, or a host of other personal reasons could have prevented student-athletes from enrolling for a second year. “As the concept of retention has evolved over time, so has the recognition that one size does not fit all in terms of retention rates and the policies and interventions needed to improve retention on any one campus” (Berger et al., 2012, p. 9). As the results of the hypothesis show, the peer mentor program may not have had enough time to show its effectiveness in retention. Or, similar to the study conducted by Cançado et al. (2018), the program may not be an effective retention intervention strategy after all.

Hypothesis 2: Female student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than female student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

Historical retention rates at the university showed female students retained at higher rates than male students. The overall retention rate of first-time female students from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 totaled 80%. NCAA student-athletes also retained at higher rates than the general student population; the overall female retention rate for student-athletes was calculated at 88% in Fall 2020. While overall rates were already higher for females and female student-athletes, the researcher was curious to examine if participation in a peer mentor program affected retention rates by gender. Murray et al. (1999) and Meyer and Strauss (2019) found gender as a significant factor in retention of female students, particularly in fields traditionally occupied by men. While legislation

such as Title IX helped create equitable opportunities and experiences for student-athletes, the researcher was curious to examine any gender differences in retention of student-athletes based on participation in the peer mentor program.

Female-identifying student-athletes comprised just over one-third of the incoming class of freshmen student-athletes for the Fall 2019 semester. Retention rates of student-athletes participating in the mentor program totaled 85% and retention of non-participating female student-athletes equaled 90%. The *z*-test of proportions found no statistical significance between the two groups and the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. Based on the overall retention rate of female student-athletes, the researcher was not surprised to find a lack of statistical significance in the sample population. As mentioned, the continuity among freshmen student-athlete mentor program participants and non-participants made sense, as females historically retained at higher rates than males and the general student population. With such a small sample population, significantly higher or lower in retention rates may be difficult to find. It may not be possible for the mentor program to have much impact on retention rate outcomes for a population that already has a high rate, especially with such a small percentage of student-athletes participating.

Hypothesis 3: Male student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than male student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program

Along the same lines as the question of retention rates of female student-athletes, the researcher wanted to investigate if any difference existed between male student-athletes who participated in the mentor program in comparison to those who did not. Data

collected from the university indicated that males historically retained at lower rates than females, but male student-athlete retention rates were higher than the general male student population. Eighty-five percent of first-time freshmen student-athletes returned for their second year in 2020, compared to 77% of the total freshmen male student population. When separated out from the overall population, student-athletes participating in the peer mentor program retained at 85%. The *z*-test of proportions confirmed no statistical significance between the two groups. Like the female student-athlete retention rate, male student-athletes are already returning at higher rates than the institutional and national averages. Both student and student-athlete retention rates have climbed slowly in recent reporting years, and making a significant increase appears to be out of alignment with historical trends. Based on historical data and with limited space and ability to take on large numbers of first-year student-athletes, the mentor program may not be able to show statistical significance in retention rate based on gender alone.

Hypothesis 4: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program have a higher first-semester GPA average than freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

The athletic department in the study reported an overall GPA of 3.25 for the Fall 2019 semester. This included student-athletes from all 27 NCAA programs. Male student-athletes earned an overall 3.05 GPA for the semester and the women's teams tallied a 3.53 GPA. Department GPA was calculated with the total of quality points earned divided by total hours of credit attempted. Graduate student-athletes were included in the department's calculations, as well. GPA is a commonly understood statistic departments utilize to report student achievement, which is why the researcher

included this metric in the hypotheses. Department GPAs were calculated internally to include graduate students through a custom report created by department staff. When attempting to calculate freshmen student-athlete GPAs from Fall 2019, the researcher found only a manual option to extract the data. Because of a limited timeline, the researcher decided to compare GPAs of mentor program participants and non-participants through a *t*-test of independent means.

The mean GPA of first-time, full-time freshmen student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program was 3.55. For freshmen student-athletes who did not participate in the mentor program, the mean GPA was 3.04. The *t*-test revealed a significant statistical difference between the two groups, causing the researcher to reject the null hypothesis. Student-athletes participating in the peer mentor program earned a higher average GPA after their first term than student-athletes not participating in the program. While the GPA finding was significant, the historical performance of the teams participating in the peer mentor program needed to be considered. Peer mentors could have had a positive effect on freshmen academic success, but it is also likely that teams who participated were historically higher performers in the classroom. Coaches who applied for the mentor program may have a higher overall emphasis on success outside of sport, including academics and opportunities for life-skills programming, such as the peer mentor program.

Six teams signed up their freshmen to participate in the peer mentor program in Fall 2019: Women's Basketball, Field Hockey, Women's Gymnastics, Men's Lacrosse, Softball, and Women's Soccer. The lone men's team, Lacrosse, earned a 3.17 overall GPA during the fall of 2019 semester; higher than the men's overall GPA of 3.05. On the

women's side, Basketball earned a 3.70, Gymnastics tallied a 3.82, and Soccer reported a 3.65, all of which were above the overall women's total GPA of 3.53. Softball was the only team just below the women's total, earning a 3.32. While the mentor program curriculum promoted academic success, nearly all participating teams were high academic performers anyway. Astin's Theory (1977, 1984) of Student Involvement tied student participation to personal achievement. Teams participating in a peer mentor program promoted involvement, which contributed to students' accomplishments. As mentioned, the mentor program likely did not act as the primary cause of a higher GPA; the push for personal growth could have been a More influential factor to overall success.

Hypothesis 5: International student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than international freshmen student-athletes who do not participate in the peer mentoring program.

International students are a special population that need additional support with things such as visa paperwork, economic adjustments, and cultural adjustments (Zhang, 2016). Twenty-four new international freshmen began their college careers in Fall 2019 at the institution in the study, making up 16% of the first-time student-athlete population. Six international student-athletes participated in the peer mentoring program. Both groups make up a relatively small portion of the overall student-athlete population compared to other demographic factors. However, international student-athletes had a strong presence in the athletic department and were an important part of the overall student-athlete population; 100% of the six international mentor program participants retained and 83% of the 18 international student-athletes returned in Fall 2020. The *z*-test

of proportions found no statistical difference between the two groups, though the *p*-value was closer in significance than most of the tests run at 0.142.

With a larger sample size, the difference between the two groups may have resulted in rejecting the null hypothesis. While every international mentee retained, 15 of 18 non-participant student-athletes re-enrolled for a second year of school during a global pandemic. Retention did not measure if students physically returned to campus but rather examined if students took classes during Fall 2020. The institution allowed all students to decide what method of attending class they wanted, including remote and asynchronous. This allowed international students to be retained, while remaining in their home countries. Some international students were unable to travel back or chose not to chance being banned from traveling home. Fall sports were postponed in 2020, and other students decided to remain home, because they did not want to return to campus without the opportunity to compete. The COVID-19 crisis may have caused domestic and international students to stay home the fall of 2020 semester, but for international students, it may have helped bring student-athletes back to campus. While competitions were posted, some form of practices, exercise, and distanced team activities occurred. Many student-athletes reported that the limited environment was more enticing than the strict lockdowns in their home countries, which at times limited outdoor travel to grocery store trips and pet care. The overall international student-athlete retention rates of freshmen who participated in a peer mentor program were not significantly different than the overall retention rates of international freshmen who did not participate in the program; combined, the retention rate of international student-athletes totaled 87%.

International students retained at a slightly higher rate than the overall freshmen student-athletes, and future testing is needed to determine any significant differences.

Hypothesis 6: As a result of participation in the peer mentoring program, the Men's Lacrosse team will have an above average rate of retention for freshmen student-athletes whose first semester was Fall 2019.

The researcher did not find any existing literature on the retention of Men's Lacrosse college student-athletes. Men's Lacrosse comprised 33% of the freshmen student-athletes participating in the Fall 2019 peer mentor program. The lacrosse team also represented the only men's team participating in the mentor program in 2019. As such a large class and percentage of mentees, the researcher wanted to examine if the Lacrosse team retained at higher rates than the overall freshmen student-athlete population. Nearly 85% of Lacrosse student-athletes returned in Fall 2020, with 86% of all other freshmen student-athletes returning, as well. The *z*-test of proportions confirmed no significant difference between the two retention rates, and the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. While Men's Lacrosse represented a large portion of the mentor program participants, the overall numbers were likely too small to create any statistical impact. Recommendations on future studies are found at the end of Chapter Five, including suggestions on research design to study Lacrosse student-athlete retention rates over multiple years to determine more accurate impact of mentor program participation. In addition to Lacrosse, there is an overall lack of published research on sport-specific retention outside of Men's Basketball and Football. While institutions may be tracking individual team retention internally, the results of this study provide a start to

filling a massive gap in available research on retention of non-revenue sport student-athletes.

Hypothesis 7: Freshmen student-athletes who participate in a peer mentoring program are retained at higher rates than general freshmen students who do not participate in a peer mentoring program.

Including student-athletes, the institution in the study reported 79% of first-time, full-time freshmen returned for their second year in Fall 2020. Eighty-six percent of all freshmen NCAA student-athletes retained in Fall 2020, along with 84% of students in the peer mentor program. After removing student-athletes from the overall freshmen retention numbers, the campus retention rate still totaled 79%. The *z*-test revealed no statistical significance, though the *p*-value of 0.239 was closer to the 0.05 alpha than several of the other tested hypotheses. Out of curiosity, the researcher tested the difference in retention of freshmen student-athletes and general freshmen and found that freshmen student-athletes do retain at significantly higher rates than freshmen non-athletes. Historical data from the university showed student-athletes historically retained at higher rates than the general student population, and a *z*-test confirmed statistical significance for freshmen retention in Fall 2020. The sample size of 39 mentor program participants was too small to create any significance. However, the tested difference in retention of student-athletes and non-athletes is a statistic the athletic department has proudly shared for many years.

One explanation for higher retention rates is the support staff available to monitor academic achievement and athletic eligibility. Student-athletes not achieving minimum eligibility standards do not compete and may be more motivated than the general student

to achieve standards of success. Huml et al. (2014) and Lavigne (2016) found that academic facilities and support staff were often included in athletics' arms race to showcase the biggest and best opportunities for prospective recruits. While most of the big-time spending on athletic academic support occurs at the Division I level, the resources available at the institution in the study may have bolstered retention numbers. Another factor could have been the overall academic profile of the student-athletes recruited to the university. As mentioned in the previous analysis of participants' GPA, five of the six peer mentor program teams earned a higher average GPA than the overall department GPA for Fall 2019. While GPA does not automatically equal retention, it signals a student's ability to successfully navigate the academic rigor of college. While the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis, the higher retention rate of student-athletes opens multiple future research questions, as discussed in the implications and future research sections at the end of Chapter Five.

The quantitative portion of the study did not reveal any significant impact from participating in a peer mentor program on student-athlete retention. The researcher found a difference in mean GPAs of freshmen student-athletes participating in the program, but a small sample size and short lifespan of the program potentially influenced outcomes. While retention is an efficient outcome to report, the student-athlete experience as a mentee is also an important factor to consider. The researcher found that most participants in the study had a positive experience in the peer mentor program during their first semester of college. Participants shared the program made their transition to school easier by connecting them to human and academic resources on campus. The

experience helped student-athletes feel more at home on campus and created a pipeline of future peer mentors to sustain the mentor program.

Research Question 1: How does participation in a peer mentoring program affect the overall experience during a freshman student-athlete's first semester in college?

First-time, full-time college freshmen face many challenges their first semester, including orientation to resources, adjusting to academic rigor, and making new friends. Student-athletes face additional changes such as new teammates, coaching styles, and physical and mental requirements that create additional stressors during the first semester of college (Pauling, 2017; Smith & Hardin, 2020). The purpose of the mentor program was to provide support, camaraderie, and community to freshmen student-athletes during their first semester to help ease the stress of transitioning to college. The researcher contacted student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program as freshman mentees during the fall of 2019 semester. Out of the 39 mentees contacted, 19 agreed to participate in the study, 15 individuals completed the study, and two participants agreed to a follow-up interview. Twelve of the 15 participants responded with overall positive feedback on the program, while three individuals consistently rated their experience as relatively uninfluential.

Theme One: Transition to College.

Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory focused on three types of transitions that individuals navigate: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events (Patton et al., 2016). Attending college is usually an anticipated transition, but some of the challenges faced, such as social adjustments are unanticipated. Schlossberg (2011) shared a 4Ss System to help individuals better deal with all three types of changes: situation, self, support, and

strategies. The peer mentor program targeted all four Ss in Schlossberg's (2011) system to aid freshmen during their first semester at the university. Situation refers to outside factors influencing a transition. In the program, peer mentors created a situation meant to positively impact the freshmen experience. For self, peer mentors validated their mentees by relating to the struggles of being a first-year student-athlete. Mentors were required to meet up with mentees throughout the semester and serve as both an ear to listen and a resource to offer advice. As the mentors continued to show up for their mentees, they provided important support throughout the first semester. The mentor program overall served as a strategy for helping freshmen mentees, though each individual mentor engaged in different personal strategies such as in-person meeting locations, how often mentors communicated with mentees or choosing to meet up with mentees outside of the required times.

The support provided by a peer mentor helped students feel more comfortable during their first full-time semester of college. Sanford's (1966) Challenge and Support Theory has withstood the test of time, due to its consistently applicable argument that individuals can withstand challenge as long as they have proper supports in place to grow. Freshmen student-athletes participating in the peer mentor program may have experienced support from family members, professors, teammates, and athletic department staff all in addition to support from peer mentors. While the researcher is unable to conclude that the peer mentor program alone contributed enough support to fully sustain freshmen student-athletes' through their transition to school, it is clear the mentor program made significant contributions.

Theme Two: Connection Outside of Team.

Strong peer relationships are an important form of support to help students navigate the social and emotional transition to a university (Dennis et al., 2005). Peer mentoring is an effective strategy to increase student success, particularly with specific groups, such as racial minorities (Simmons & Smith, 2020) or undergraduate medical students (Usman & Jamil, 2019). Peer mentors provide real life examples of students who have persisted, allowing mentees to better visualize their own success (Muller et al., 2018). Much of the research on peer mentor programs for college students focused on helping special populations or improving retention in fields traditionally perceived as more academically rigorous like engineering, nursing, or medical programs. The researcher did not locate any literature specific to student-athlete peer mentor programs. However, feedback collected from peer mentor participants aligned well with the existing research on the benefits of peer mentor programs, including building connections with others.

Student-athletes spend so much time with their teammates through required conditioning, practices, game preparations, and competitions. With similar schedules and a bond created through exposure time and shared goals, it is easy for student-athletes to remain in a bubble within their team. Participating in the peer mentor program created an accessible avenue for freshmen to meet fellow student-athletes outside of their immediate circles. Having a peer mentor to introduce mentees to other student-athletes of all classes helped grow individual connections to people and resources. Student-athletes are a special population with unique needs, not unlike international students or minoritized groups. Student-athletes may hold a multitude of intersecting identities along with that of

their sport, and special consideration and support is needed to help with their transition to college. As mentioned previously, peer mentoring is an effective way to support student-athletes through someone who deeply understands the life and challenges of being a student-athlete.

Theme Three: Resource Guide.

Peer mentors can provide support in a way that feels more comfortable or accessible to students who may be less inclined to ask for help from professors or staff (O'Brien et al., 2021). Participants in the study noted that peer mentors were extremely useful as a resource to provide advice on how to navigate campus and connect mentees to social and academic resources. Even though student-athletes in the study had access to support staff through the athletic department and on campus, peers provided support that was both timely and relatable. Muller et al. (2018) explained that success modeled by a peer who has more recently gone through the transition from high school to college may be more effective than taking advice from a coach or professor who is further removed from that experience. An academic advisor might be a good person to ask about changing majors, but an advisor may not be available to have that conversation at all hours of the day. Additionally, an advisor or other staff member may not be best suited to help students figure out what station serves the best food in the cafeteria or when the best time to eat with friends is. Peer mentors served as a guide to the inner workings of campus in a way that non-residential staff could not.

Resources also included academic support. Connecting a mentee to someone else in the mentee's major helped with academic support and with building additional community for the mentee. Two years after participating in the mentor program, one

mentee recalled academic connection as an important event in their educational journey to success. While a few mentees reported not receiving much assistance from their mentors, most participants believed their peer mentors provided useful resources. Even though not all mentors served in an academic capacity, like Usman and Jamil's 2019 research on medical students, peer mentors still oriented their mentees to campus geography or academic support such as tutoring, which was helpful enough.

Theme Four: Confidence Boost.

Scholssberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering highlighted the need for individuals to feel like they mattered in order to succeed. People who feel marginalized experience a lack of belonging, creating additional barriers to success (Patton et al., 2016). For first-time freshmen, finding community is important to fostering belonging and boosting confidence in a student's belief they can succeed. One participant recalled having a self-assured mentor helped increase their own level of self-confidence. Peer mentors also helped their mentees feel braver about getting outside of their comfort zone and talking with their peers. Mentees learned about new sports and attended campus events that they may have avoided otherwise, because staying home was easier. Peer mentors were required to bring mentees to events on campus and having someone to try new things with boosted mentees' confidence to venture out and create new experiences, as well.

Peer mentors helped ease the anxiety of adjusting to a new environment and to new opportunities for personal growth. One participant disclosed having a mentor helped boost their self-confidence through patience and kindness in allowing the mentee time to grow on their own timeline. As Dennis et al. (2005) showed, positive peer relationships

are a critical component of environmental support that students need to be successful. Strong relationships with peer mentors added to freshmen student-athletes' sense of self-confidence and helped mentees with their first semester transition to college.

Research Question 2: How does participation in a peer mentoring program influence freshmen student-athletes' connection within the athletic community?

Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure tied student involvement to a higher rate of retention. Tinto believed that students who invested energy into relationships in a college outside of the classroom were more likely to feel connected and remain on campus. Similarly, Alexander Astin's (1977, 1984) Theory of Student Involvement emphasized the need for students to take an active role in creating physical and psychological bonds with their institutions in order to enjoy a positive experience. The more students become involved in campus life beyond the transactional exchange of coursework, the more students will experience personal growth (Patton et al., 2016). Student-athletes were already invested in extracurricular activity through their sports, and the peer mentor program provided an additional opportunity to connect with others, building personal networks and a sense of community. Being in close contact with fellow student-athletes who could relate to the unique life of an intercollegiate athlete helped to enhance the connection with the athletic department itself.

Theme One: Networking.

Networking is an important personal and professional development tool. Bean's (1981) Student Attrition Model focused on correlating employee reasons for turnover with student reasons for departure. Employees who felt unappreciated reported low satisfaction and higher turnover rates. Similarly, students who were not satisfied and felt

undervalued were more likely to leave an institution. While networking is often an important part of professional advancement, it is also key for helping students create a sense of community. Participation in the peer mentor program created direct access for freshmen student-athletes to meet other student-athletes from different teams; individuals that may not have met as quickly or ever in the future. With such many athletic programs spread out across three competitive seasons, multiple practice facilities, and varying practice schedules, student-athletes are easily siloed among their teams if for no other reason than geographic proximity. The peer mentor program provided a comfortable avenue for freshmen student-athletes to meet new people and grow their network.

Participants did not talk directly about networking, but rather articulated key pieces to growing a network: meeting people and building relationships based on common interests. A stronger network contributes to deeper ties to people, places, and resources within an institution. The strong network connects back to the framework of Astin (1977, 1984) and Tinto (1993), who believed greater involvement within the campus community led to a stronger chance of student retention. While the data analyzed in the study did not signal significant correlation to retention, survey results showed that the peer mentor program did contribute to freshmen student-athletes' networks.

Theme Two: Building Community.

The strongest network connections that freshmen student-athletes created as part of their time in the peer mentor program transformed into meaningful relationships, contributing to a sense of community. Relationships helped freshmen student-athletes to feel more at home. Friends of friends ultimately became direct relationships; mentees talked about having friends across multiple teams because of introductions made by their

mentor. Much of the connections from peer mentors involved people and resources unrelated to coursework. Again, involvement and investment in something other than a student's degree enhances the student experience, according to Astin (1977, 1984) and Tinto's (1993) theoretical frameworks. The mentor program provided opportunities to connect with social networks and get involved outside of their own teams. Friendships contributed to a sense of comfort and belonging. The combination of all such connectors resulted in freshmen student-athletes building community as a result of participating in the peer mentor program.

Research Question 3: How does participation in a peer mentoring program enhance freshman student-athletes' connection to their institution?

In alignment with the results found under the previous research question, participation in the mentor program enhanced freshmen student-athletes' connection to the university in addition to the athletic department. The peer mentor program encouraged freshmen student-athletes to get involved with people or events outside of class and required team time. Creating a strong network and community helped student-athletes become better oriented to resources and feel like they belonged on campus. The transition was not always quick or smooth but pushing student-athletes outside of their comfort zones allowed them to cultivate a growth mindset. The diversified investments mentees made in a variety of friend groups through their peer mentor helped cultivate the strong ties that Astin (1977, 1984) and Tinto (1993) believed were necessary to retain students. As mentioned, although the numbers did not support the hypothesis that participation in the peer mentor program increased retention, data from most participant surveys indicated an improved experience during the first semester of college.

Theme One: Sense of Belonging.

Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering highlighted the need for an individual to feel others cared about their success and overall well-being in order to cultivate a sense of belonging. Schlossberg's theory applies to the university setting, where institutions continuously seek out ways to personally connect with students. Students who feel they are more than a tuition payment may be more likely to stick around. Peer mentors in the study served as unofficial ambassadors of the university. Mentors were sophomores, juniors, and seniors who had already committed to staying at the institution. Not only did they serve as resource guides and connectors, the program required peer mentors to devote time and energy to help their single mentee feel welcomed on campus. The mentor program meet-ups took place at an on-campus event or location, such as sharing a meal at the dining hall or attending an event hosted by the student involvement office. The program requirement of connecting on campus helped foster a sense of belonging and overall connection to the university, as mentees recalled wanting to get more involved in campus life thanks to the push provided by the peer mentor.

One of the participants self-disclosed as an international student on the survey. For the international student, the mentor program significantly impacted their sense of belonging and integration on campus. The participant recounted how their peer mentor's positive attitude was contagious and even represented a larger, welcoming culture on campus. The experience of having an automatic friend helped freshmen student-athletes who participated in a peer mentor program feel more at home. Whether it was a friendly

face on campus or someone to occasionally be social with, peer mentors helped mentees feel like they mattered, increasing mentees overall sense of belonging at the university.

Theme Two: Orientation to Resources.

Muller et al. (2018) demonstrated the benefits of peers modeling positive behavior. Peers can appear to be more approachable than people in positions of authority, such as staff or professors, and thereby encourage individuals to seek out assistance more often. For special populations, having access to someone with a shared identity or experience is even more important (Nepal et al., 2018). One participant remembered how helpful it was having access to someone who had already overcome the obstacles of being a successful student-athlete. Another individual also shared how their peer mentor connected them with other individuals in the same major, which had both short and long-term effects. The connection helped the student build their network and get help in classes immediately, and it also helped the student make long-term friends within their major. Merrill (2015) found academic rigor to be one of many personal reasons that students depart an institution. Thanks to a peer mentor, at least one individual found academic help early on to help them achieve success and feel more connected to the school.

Peer mentors also oriented mentees to geographic layout of campus and to support services offered to students. One participant recalled that her peer mentor reached out with a campus map and offered to be a tour guide even before classes started. Another individual discussed how their peer mentor talked about access to mental health resources, which helped to immediately destigmatize a sensitive topic. For personal topics, such as health, talking with a peer mentor not only oriented the new student to the

physical location of resources but also normalized utilizing campus' resources for all kinds of needs. Transitioning to college is a unique experience for student-athletes (Smith & Hardin, 2020). Having a peer mentor helped freshmen student-athletes learn more about resources available, boosting the feeling of having a home away from home at the institution.

Theme Three: Growth Mindset.

As new freshmen students navigate both anticipated and unanticipated challenges during their transition to college as Schlossberg's (1981) Transition Theory studied, students experience many opportunities to wander outside of their comfort zone. As Sanford's (1966) Challenge and Support Theory illustrated, individuals are more likely to triumph in challenges provided they have adequate support. Support looks different based on someone's past experiences, as does the perception of challenge. Another framework to support freshmen through the trials and changes of their first year is explained through Dweck's (2016) growth mindset. A growth mindset emphasizes learning and progress over winning or losing. Dweck's (2016) research showed individuals with a growth mindset achieved more personal and professional success over people with a fixed mindset, who believed failure was final. Participants in the study did not articulate the specific term of growth mindset, but responses, such as "I was able to get out of my comfort zone" lean towards Dweck's (2016) work.

Embracing discomfort is a hallmark of a growth mindset, and one interview participant spoke at length about being forced to be friends with a stranger eventually worked out really well. After overcoming some initial awkwardness after first meeting their peer mentor, the participant reflected that the peer mentor's patience and persistence

helped the participant to be less shy. This experience also encouraged the participant to serve as a mentor in the future, which is discussed more in-depth in Research Question Four. Another individual recalled how their peer mentor helped them try new things they may have missed out otherwise. Not only did the participants experience new things, they recalled being pushed as a positive thing. Mentees met new people, attended different events, and eventually became more integrated into campus life as a result. Feeling an increased sense of belonging, better oriented to resources, and personal growth through discomfort all led to a stronger connection to the university.

Research Question 4: How does participation in a single semester peer mentoring program impact freshmen student-athletes beyond their first semester?

Strong peer relationships provide immediate support that helps students overcome the emotional and social challenges of transitioning to school (Dennis et al., 2005). Peer mentoring is a cost-efficient strategy to support student engagement and retention. Peer mentor programs can be structured formally with a specific curriculum or can be more flexible; both can be effective in engaging at-risk groups. First-time, full-time freshmen student-athletes participating in peer mentor programs gained access to resources, built personal networks, and experienced an increased overall sense of belonging. Participants in the study experienced a lasting impact of having a peer mentor that influenced their future behavior and decisions. While the survey did not ask participants if they were still enrolled at the institution, it is likely that most or all the respondents were still enrolled at the university at the time of the study. Out of 39 potential participants, only 19 individuals started the survey with 15 completing the survey. Thirty-three of 39 student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program during the fall of 2019 semester

returned in Fall 2020. The researcher hypothesized that the six student-athletes who did not return in Fall 2020 likely did not feel inclined to help their former institution with the research. For the participants still enrolled at the school, the campus community benefited from the mentees' participation in the program and research.

Theme One: Enhanced Empathy.

As O'Brien et al. (2021) showed, peer mentors provide support from a source that is relatable and relevant. Participants in the study shared that their peer mentors facilitated the transition to college through introducing them to people and support, boosting self-confidence, and helping them feel part of the community. Individuals with positive memories of the peer mentor program generally recalled the opportunity as a privilege and many wanted to pay that forward. Student-athletes who had a peer mentor to help overcome insecurities or challenges as freshmen wanted to make sure other student-athletes did not feel alone in the future. Individuals spoke about how their experience as a mentee helped them be more empathetic to their current freshmen teammates' challenges. Merrill (2015) pointed out that students do not retain for widely varying and extremely personal reasons. Participants in the study recognized that everyone faces different battles and having a friend to face the fire with can be life changing. Compassion for others, as expressed through multiple responses, helped to cultivate empathy. Participants demonstrated empathy through wanting to make sure future freshmen experienced the support during the transition to college. The mentor program became the starting point for at least a few participants to commit to helping student-athletes transition to college in the future.

Theme Two: Future Mentor Pipeline.

Growing empathy led several participants in the study to pay it forward in a literal way, volunteering to serve as a peer mentor themselves. The peer mentor program does not exist without student-athletes continuing to apply to volunteer time and energy towards improving the first semester experience of incoming freshmen. Seven participants disclosed they had served in the program one or two times as a peer mentor since their freshman year, with several citing their experience as mentees as a reason for applying to mentor. The cultivated sense of empathy, as previously discussed, led to action by the participants in the study. Being a mentor provided a direct path to helping new first-year student-athletes find their way. Participants who had a positive experience with their peer mentors also had an easier time seeing the benefits of the program, as opposed to participants who felt they did not benefit from the mentor program.

The researcher did not study how many peer mentors went through the program as mentees or if a positive experience significantly influenced a mentor's decision to serve, as the study focused on the experience of first-year mentees. Nonetheless, focusing on mentor experience could be another opportunity for future research. Additionally, former mentees did not need to join the peer mentor program to help new students with their transition to campus. Simply remembering the experience of being new and applying an empathetic lens would be useful. However, the study showed that having a positive experience in the peer mentor program was strong enough to affect a change in behavior resulting in a pipeline of future mentors to sustain the program.

Theme Three: Support, Camaraderie, Community.

The mission of the program is to support new student-athletes through their transition to college. By purposefully matching student-athletes with peer mentors outside of their teams, the program intends to build camaraderie and strengthen the overall sense of community. As each campus holds unique populations, opportunities, and challenges, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to retention (Patton et al., 2006). Retention efforts should remain student centered (Roberts, 2018), and a peer mentor program does exactly that. The one-to-one ratio of mentor to mentee helped mentors focus their time and effort into one concentrated effort rather than having to divide their attention. Participants felt supported by their mentors who helped answer questions, introduced them to new people, and made them feel at home on campus. Peer mentors also built camaraderie by bringing mentees into their own networks, introducing them to friends and teammates. Pushing through the discomfort of being in a new space also created solidarity, and participants felt the peer mentor program helped them to settle in more easily. Meeting new people and acclimating to resources resulted in a stronger community of student-athletes.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1977, 1984) and Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure are both applicable to student-athletes participating in a peer mentor program. Astin (1977, 1984) and Tinto (1993) emphasized the importance of students participating in activities outside of schoolwork. The more a student invests emotionally and physically into extracurricular organizations or social events, the greater the bond to the institution. For freshmen student-athletes, participation in a peer mentor program created opportunities for personal investment. Student-athletes built relationships that

lasted beyond their first semester, which helped create empathetic future peer mentors. Dedication to improving the experience of first-year freshmen ultimately helped fulfill the mission of the mentor program.

Implications

The mission of the peer mentor program is to support first-year student-athletes during their transition to college by building relationships with fellow student-athletes, establishing a sense of shared purpose and camaraderie, resulting in a tighter community. The researcher hoped participation in the peer mentor program also boosted retention, but the data did not support the hypotheses. While increasing retention is a popular measurable outcome for higher education, qualitative data is important to consider in measuring results. As Mansouri and Moumine (2017) summarized: "Quantitative progress is vital, but it has taken over qualitative progress and has not prevented student attrition from increasing" (p. 58). Feedback collected from student-athletes who participated in the peer mentor program as mentees suggested that the program did fulfill its mission of support, camaraderie, and community. Most participants shared a multitude of benefits received from participating in the program and believed their mentors contributed to a positive first semester experience. Transitioning to college can be a stressful experience, and without the proper support, some students do not persist through the struggles. This study confirmed what Muller et al. (2018) and O'Brien et al. (2021) showed: a peer mentor can relate to a mentee, often on a more personal, timely, and less stressful manner than a coach or staff member can. Even though the program did not impact retention, the benefits on helping many freshmen student-athletes have a better first-semester experience make a strong case for peer mentoring in the future.

A few responses in the study showed that while the mentor program was not a negative experience, it was not significantly positive. This could have been caused by a subpar mentor, maybe a resistant mentee, or just a lack of chemistry between two individuals. The researcher has already implemented a more rigorous application to find strong and more committed mentors for the program. Hopefully in the future, the researcher can also match mentors and mentees based on commonalities beyond just hometown or major. Stronger matches may help to improve relationships and the overall experience for both mentees and mentors in the future. Allowing mentees to sign up individually to participate in the mentor program may also improve the experience in the future. Coaches are currently responsible for signing up and promoting the peer mentor program to incoming freshmen student-athletes. New student-athletes may be resistant to mandatory programming and may be more willing participants if they sign up voluntarily on their own. However, previous mentees expressed in the past that while they were not excited about the program at first, they realized how many benefits they experienced later in the semester. It is possible that student-athletes who could benefit the most from the peer mentor program may not be brave or open-minded enough to volunteer. The researcher will consider a combination of methods in the future to continue creating an impactful experience for new student-athletes in the future.

Student departures continue to be highly personalized, leaving institutions without a one-size-fits-all approach to retention (Berger et al., 2012). The peer mentor program could have helped keep certain student-athletes at the institution but was not a strong enough tie to convince other student-athletes to stay. Additionally, students who leave often do so for multiple reasons, rather than one single factor. Connections made through

a peer mentor program may help the pro or con columns out but are not likely to sway the argument. Although the program is not able to influence retention yet, the positive impact on the student experience suggests that the peer mentor program should continue in the future. The primary cost is sweat equity, with extensive time and effort going to training and teaching the peer mentors. With budgets still recovering from a global pandemic, the peer mentor program is a cost-efficient way to continue building on the student-athlete experience outside of sport.

Even though there is room for spending to enhance the peer mentor program on things such as t-shirts, food, or social events, the peer mentor program in the study is a low-cost curriculum that could be implemented at any institution across the country. While NCAA Division I institutions may have a larger staff to share the responsibility more easily, the peer mentor program in the study was implemented at a Division II institution. Athletic departments need to evaluate current commitments to create space for a peer mentor program or even collaborate with campus partners to move forward. Time is an invaluable resource and is the most expensive part of implementing a peer mentor program. Feedback from peer mentors was not included in this study but has consistently been positive and continuously advocates for the continuation of the peer mentor program. If an institution is looking to improve the student-athlete experience and build a stronger community, a peer mentor program may be a worthwhile solution.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The peer mentor program in the study launched in Fall 2017. The researcher studied student-athletes who participated in the program in Fall 2019, its third year of existence. As a fledgling entity, the mentor program was still growing and finding its

identity in 2019. There is a plethora of future research opportunities to examine after the program gets a few more years under its belt. One recommendation is to test the same hypotheses in this study for multiple years and turn the research into a longitudinal study. Future research could also examine individual team outcomes compared year over year as well, expanding on the hypothesis regarding retention of Men's Lacrosse student-athletes.

Even in 2021, both long and short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still unknown. Questions regarding the impact of the pandemic on student-athletes' experiences in college have not been answered yet, which could also influence retention and the impact of the peer mentor program. Pandemic aside, retention may eventually increase due to participation in the peer mentor program as the program and mentors grow and improve in the future. More invested or better trained mentors may make stronger connections with mentees, playing a more significant role in a student-athlete's decision to stay in school. A larger pool of mentors will also increase the pool of mentees, if the mentor program continues to offer one-on-one mentor pairings. More mentees increase the pool of data to examine, which could lead to different results in the future.

Another improvement on future research is modifying the survey instrument. The researcher did not ask for any identifying data to help protect participants' identities. The researcher already knew the sample population from her role in overseeing the mentor program, but she did not know who completed the survey. In the future, asking for a few demographic details such as gender or team may help with better understanding individual experiences in the program. It may also help to understand if student-athletes paired with a mentor of a different gender had different experiences than mentors and

mentees of the same gender. Mentors are asked on their application if they are comfortable being paired with mentees of a different gender, but mentees are not currently asked any preferences or requests in their mentors. The more the researcher can break down specifics on why the mentor program was a positive or negative experience, the better the peer mentor program will be in the future. Another tweak to the survey would include asking participants how much they believe participating in the mentor program affected their decision to stay or transfer from the institution. It may be challenging to track down departed students, but would be an interesting question to ask.

Future research could also be conducted by someone who is not so closely connected to the program. The researcher created and oversaw all aspects of the peer mentor program throughout the study. The researcher also served in a position of authority over participants in their full-time position overseeing academic support and life skills programming for student-athletes at the institution. Bias and the feeling of coercion could have impacted the outcome of this study, no matter how greatly the researcher tried to prevent each influence. Participants in the program may have felt the need to participate in the study as a favor to the researcher. An outside observer may collect different qualitative data or interpret different results, which could enhance the findings of the research.

Finally, it would be interesting to compare the research in this study to other peer mentor programs across the country, for both student-athletes and general students. With differing structures and levels of support, comparing peer mentor programs may be challenging. It is also unknown how many peer mentor programs exist, especially student-athlete specific programs. Retention data would also be tough to generate

conclusive evidence, as each institution offers unique support to sway students' decisions to stay or leave. Additionally, each individual student carries their own experiences and circumstances that also dictate the decision to persist or transfer. However, it would be interesting to compare retention rates of students and student-athletes to search for any significant differences for individuals participating in a peer mentor program compared to students who do not participate.

Conclusion

Retention and student experience are the responsibilities of the entire university community. With the constant shrinking and stretching of university budgets, it is important to find creative ways to improve student retention and engagement. Peer mentoring is a cost-efficient model that may be able to address both challenges of keeping students at an institution while creating a positive experience for students. Targeting students during their first semester of college when they are going through anticipated and unanticipated transitions may help improve retention and overall experience. Student-athletes are a special population who face additional stress and challenges in the transition college during freshmen year. This mixed-methods study examined the effect of a peer mentor program on freshmen student-athlete retention. In addition to reviewing demographic factors and retention rates, the researcher also surveyed past participants in the peer mentor program to better understand their overall experience and the long-term effects of participation in the mentor program.

The data showed no significant impact on retention of freshmen student-athletes in general or based on gender, risk scores, or visa status. Average GPAs of freshmen student-athletes who participated in the program were higher than freshmen student-

athletes who did not participate, but there is not enough evidence to conclude that the peer mentor program caused the above-average grades. While the data did not support any significant impact on outcomes, it did show an overall positive impact on new student-athletes during their first semester of college. Participants believed the mentor program helped them to meet new friends and experience events they would not have otherwise. The program also brought different teams closer together that did not have previous strong ties, which contributed to an overall sense of belonging for participants. Student-athletes also shared the discomfort they initially felt being paired with a stranger ultimately helped them learn to embrace new situations better in the future, and students were committed to paying forward the support they experienced as mentees.

While the student-athlete mentor program in the study can no longer advertise it improves retention, it can continue to confidently share its mission of support, camaraderie, and community. Retaining 100% of students and student-athletes is an unrealistic goal, as life circumstances will always prevent institutions from achieving perfection. Staying at a school is not always the right answer either, and it is important to continue promoting and sharing students' stories and qualitative data. Aiming to have at or close to 100% customer satisfaction rate, however, is a more feasible pursuit. A peer mentor program helps student-athletes feel less alone during the struggles of being new, improves the overall experience, and it may be worth the time and effort to help new students feel more at home during their first year. A peer mentor program may help create a better experience and will certainly contribute to the goal of support new student-athletes by building camaraderie and community.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. One a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate your overall experience as a mentee in the Athlete Mentor Program (AMP)? Please use 1 as the lowest, least satisfied and 5 as the highest, most satisfied.

2. Please describe the relationship you had with your AMP mentor. Why do you think your relationship turned out this way (either positively or negatively)?

3a. Are you still in touch with your mentor today? (Yes or No)

3b. If yes – Approximately how often do you communicate with your mentor? (multiple choice)

a. 1-2 times per year

b. 1-2 times per semester

c.1-2 times per month

d. 1-2 times per week

e. Daily or almost daily

4. How did AMP impact your first semester experience as a student-athlete? Please explain.

5. How did AMP impact your overall connection with Lindenwood Athletics? Please explain.

6. How did AMP impact your overall connection with Lindenwood University? Please explain.

7. Did AMP have any lasting impact on you as an individual after your first semester? Please explain.

8. Could Casey contact you to participate in a follow up interview to talk more in-depth about your experience as a mentee? This would take no longer than 30 minutes and would be scheduled over Microsoft Teams at a time that is convenient for your schedule.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Are you still in contact with your mentor now? Why or why not?

2. Describe the relationship you had with your mentor.

3. How did your mentor help you during your first semester of school?

4. Did having a mentor help you meet new people?

5. Did having a mentor help you feel more connected to the university? How so or why not?

6. What did you experience or learn as a mentee that affected you beyond your first semester?

7. Was there any experience you had as a mentee that negatively impacted your first semester?

8. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about your experience as an AMP mentee and how it impacted your first-year experience?

Appendix C: Survey E-mail

Hello!

In the Fall 2019, you were selected by your current or previous coach to participate in the Athlete Mentor Program (AMP) as a mentee. I am currently studying the effects of peer mentoring on freshmen student-athlete retention as a doctoral student at Lindenwood University and am sending you this e-mail to ask for your help.

In order to better understand if AMP had any long-term effect on your first-year experience, could you please take a few minutes to fill out this short 8-question survey? (link here). The survey is anonymous, and you may stop at any time should you want.

This survey is being sent to anyone who participated as a mentee Fall 2019, even if you are no longer a student-athlete at Lindenwood University.

Participation in the survey is completely voluntary and will have no direct benefits to participating.

At the end of the survey, you will find an additional opportunity for a short interview to further aid my research. Again, this this be completely voluntary and will have no direct benefits to participating.

I truly appreciate your assistance in my research! I hope you are having a great summer, and please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any additional questions.

Thank you,

Casey

Appendix D: Survey Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a survey conducted by Casey Finnell and Dr. Mitch Nasser at Lindenwood University. We are doing this study to determine the impact of participating in the Athlete Mentor Program (AMP) on freshmen student-athlete retention. Participants will be asked to provide a brief description of your experience as a mentee in AMP during the Fall 2019 semester. It will take approximately 10 minutes to complete this survey.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time by simply not completing the survey or closing the browser window.
There are no risks from participating in this project. We will not collect any information that may identify you. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study.

WHO CAN I CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS?

If you have concerns or complaints about this project, please use the following contact information:

Casey Finnell: cfinnell@lindenwood.edu

Dr. Nasser rnasser@lindenwood.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or concerns about the project and wish to talk to someone outside the research team, you can contact Michael Leary (Director – Institutional Review Board) at 636-949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu.

By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by closing the survey browser. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age.

You can withdraw from this study at any time by simply closing the browser window. Please feel free to print a copy of this information sheet.

Vitae

Casey Finnell

Casey Finnell currently serves as the Assistant Athletic Director for Academic Success and Development at Lindenwood University. Finnell joined the Lindenwood Lions as an academic coordinator in July 2015 and was moved into the role of Director of Academic Success a few months after. In her current role, Finnell oversees the academic support and student-athlete development services for over 700 NCAA Division II student-athletes, supervises the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), and runs the Athlete Mentor Program (AMP). Finnell was a recipient of the Lindenwood University Outstanding Staff Service Award for 2017-18.

Finnell also regularly represents the Lions on a national level. She was selected as a facilitator for the national NCAA Student-Athlete Leadership Forum in back-to-back years in Fall 2017 and Spring 2019. Finnell was also selected for the 2019 Women Leaders in College Spots (WLCS) Institute for Administrative Advancement and 2017 NCAA Effective Facilitator Workshop training. Finnell is an active member of the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) and Women Leaders in College Sports (WLCS). Prior to her career in student-athlete support services, Finnell spent time as an NCAA Division I Equestrian coach at her alma mater, Kansas State University. Finnell coached the 2012 Most Outstanding Player on the Flat at the National Collegiate Equestrian Association National Championships and earned a nomination for the Coach of the Year award that same year. In 2016, Finnell was honored as a Distinguished Alumna in the field of Education by the National Collegiate Equestrian Association.