

I GOT HERE AS A STUDENT FIRST: NARRATIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
ATHLETES AT A STEM INSTITUTION

by

SHAUNA LYNN NEFOS WEBB

(Under the Direction of Diane L. Cooper)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand the experiences of Black athletes who studied and competed at a STEM institution of higher education. Through the use of semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation, participants shared stories of their experiences. The interviews and photos were analyzed using thematic and structural analysis. The six themes that emerged were: it takes sacrifice, “we are the Clery alerts”: stories about race and racism, “break it down day by day”, “academics humbles us all”, “they helped me get here”, and “it’s like a business”: the politics of college athletics. The structural analysis revealed that participants used stories to share their experiences as well as to teach. The study concluded that more stories from African American athletes need to be shared. Implications for practice include the development of an affinity group, intergroup dialogue opportunities, and a Black athlete mentoring program. Further research should explore how African American athletes in other type of colleges and universities describe their experiences, as well as how other athletes with a non-White racial/ethnic identity describe and interpret the college athletic environment.

INDEX WORDS: College Athlete, Narrative Inquiry, African American, STEM, and Photo Elicitation

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and my partner, Michael. Your support of my education and belief in my ability are unwavering. To my family, thank you for the love, prayers and encouragement, and for instilling in me a commitment to work hard and do what is right. To Michael, thank you for the innumerable sacrifices and unyielding love that made it possible for me to pursue my dreams.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
PREFACE.....	xiii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Study	4
Problem, Purpose, and Research Question	5
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework.....	6
Operational Definitions.....	7
Assumptions and Delimitations	9
Significance of the Study	10
Chapter Summary	10
2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE	11
Overview of College Athletics.....	11
Race in College Athletics.....	14
STEM Environment	20
Justification for Theoretical Framework.....	20
Narrative Inquiry.....	23

Chapter Summary	25
3 METHODOLOGY	26
Epistemological Stance	26
Qualitative Research	27
The Narrative Tradition	28
Procedure	31
Data Generation	39
Data Analysis	40
Data Presentation	43
Trustworthiness	43
Chapter Summary	45
4 FINDINGS	46
Participants	47
Thematic Analysis	53
Structural Analysis	83
Photo Elicitation	92
Composite Narrative	98
Chapter Summary	102
5 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	114
Discussion of Findings	115
Implications for Practice	124
Implications for Future Research	128
Limitations	130

Final Thoughts	132
REFERENCES	134
APPENDICES	
A DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE	150
B RECRUITMENT AND CONSENT LETTER	151
C SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	153
D PHOTO ELICITATION PROMPT	154

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Participant Profiles.....	48

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Me and my family after the [rival] win	104
Figure 2: Before football practice	105
Figure 3: Today's purpose	106
Figure 4: Early morning dorm view.....	107
Figure 5: Untitled.....	108
Figure 6: A.M. practice flow.....	109
Figure 7: Studying for finals	110
Figure 8: Entrance to 'my happy place'	111
Figure 9: Me and my brother	112
Figure 10: Favorite study spot, favorite drink	113

PREFACE

The title of this study speaks to the variety of counter narratives that the participants in this study shared. Each recognized the stereotypes that shape the way that faculty, staff and non-athlete peers perceive them as Black athletes competing and studying at an athletically and academically prestigious university. Consistent with the tenants of Critical Race Theory, the counter narrative serves as an attempt to bring awareness to the experiences of traditionally underrepresented individuals, preferenceing their voice, point of view and interpretation of their experiences.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I want the public to remember me as they knew me: athletic, smart, and healthy.... Remember me strong and tough and quick, fleet of foot and tenacious”

– Althea Gibson, 1st African American athlete to win Wimbledon

“The way I figured it, I was even with baseball and baseball with me. The game had done much for me, and I had done much for it.” — Jackie Robinson

Athletics are engrained in the life of almost every college and university (Hagedorn & Horton, 2009). According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the three divisions of athletic competition allowed over 420,000 athletes participating in competition in the 2012-2013 academic year (Irick, 2011). While African American students made up approximately 15 % of the collegiate population in 2013, the college athlete population was approximately 20% percent African American overall, and in the revenue generating sports – basketball and football – approximately 50% of the athletes were African American (Irick, 2011). Athletics is a vehicle for students to pursue education as well as develop skills in leadership, self-esteem, and interpersonal skills, which will assist students in their future occupational pursuits (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Donohue, Miller, Crammer, Cross, & Covassin, 2007; Grandzol, Perlis, & Draina, 2010; Harmon, 2010; Holmes, McNeil, Adorna, & Procaccino, 2008). Periodically, collegiate athletics experience scrutiny from educational organizations, political forces, and media outlets. Those who criticize college athletics often cite a

myriad of information and research that views college athletics and the athlete experience from a deficit framework (Mangold, Bean, & Adams, 2003; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007).

A deficit view of athletes is particularly apparent in research on African American athletes. College athletics promote negative racial stereotypes (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012; Melendez, 2008), and critics argued that college athletics are unethical as illustrated by preferential treatment through the college admission process, lower academic and personal standards while enrolled in college, academic dishonesty, and poor graduation rates.

Additionally, researchers claimed college athletes are not receiving the level of the education institutions promised, and the prospect of competing professionally had a significant influence on athletic graduation rates (DeBrock, Hendricks, & Koenker, 1996; Upthegrove, Roscigno, & Charles, 1999). Scholars argued that college athletic departments use African American athletes to make money, and athletes do not benefit from athletic revenue (Hawkins, 2010). College athletics provides institutions of higher education revenue, an increase in applications after winning seasons, and a means to promote the institution on a national, and sometimes international scale (Hagedorn & Horton; Mixon, Trevino, & Minto, 2004; Toma & Cross, 1998; Wolverton, 2009). Edwards (2011) traced a history of racial discrimination and isolation, noting “clearly...Division I institutions have not figured out how to make a substantial portion of Black athletes part of the total university community or even how to make them feel like they belong on campus” (p. 26). In the face of these challenges, the experiences of African American athletes are important to understand.

The environment at science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) colleges and universities is unique. The academic rigor of STEM coursework, majors, and institutions require students to “develop polymath-like professional skills, aptitudes, and competencies (Gattie, Kellam, Schramski, & Walther, 2011, p. 521-22). The introductory course work is fast paced and high stakes. The larger course sizes and common faculty culture to “weed out” students, creates a high-pressure environment (Buchwitz et al., 2012). Beyond a well-developed understanding of a variety of scientific areas, STEM institutions emphasize real world problem solving, and practical application (Breiner, Harkness, Johnson, & Koehler, 2012).

In addition to the challenges highlighted above, many STEM institutions are primarily white institutions (PWI). Scholars found predominately white institutions cause additional stress for underrepresented populations due to the environment, systemic racism, and stereotype threat (Hawkins, 2010; Martin, 2005). Participation in collegiate athletics can intensify the above concerns. African American athletes at STEM institutions not only face difficult course work and rigorous athletic expectations, but also face additional challenges due to the environment (Harper, 2009).

College athletes are separated from the larger student body, studying and eating in athletics provided spaces, and living with other athletes. Therefore, the isolation athletes experience from non-athletic activities and organizations has a negative effect (Murty, Roebuck, & McCarmey, 2014). Athletes struggle with the conflicting roles of athlete, student, and other identities. The requirements of the athlete role compete with the other facets of life for time, energy, and commitment. There is only so much one can invest

until he or she is spread too thin, and is unable to excel at any role (Adler & Adler, 1987; Hyatt, 2003; Settles, Sellers, & Dumas, 2002).

Overwhelmingly, the studies of African American college athletics focus on the many facets discussed above, conceptualized primarily from deficit-based framework. While colleges and universities need to collaborate with the NCAA and policy makers to reform the negative attributes of collegiate athletics, scholars need a better understanding of the experiences of African American athletes. This understanding needs to consider the stories of Black athletes, in their own words, with their own interpretations, and highlighting strengths, assets, as well as challenges.

Background of the Study

My interest in this study grew out of a desire to integrate my professional environment as a college administrator into my doctoral studies. As a doctoral student in my first research methods class, the professor asked me to explore a topic that interested me. While my initial research was on how the STEM environment influences the multiple identities of college athletes, a second research course helped me narrow the topic. I decided to conduct an exploratory case study of the experience of African American male football players competing at a STEM institution. Initially, this was as a way to learn about qualitative research. What I quickly learned was that, as a White, middle class woman, I had been consuming athletics through a privileged lens. I assumed that the experiences I had as an athlete, of identity, of belonging, of comradeship would be replicated in stories I heard from my participants. Some experiences were shared, but many were not.

This topic provided a convergence of multiple areas of advocacy that I believed were important: fighting racism, supporting the agency of the underrepresented individuals as experts of their experience, and the power of stories to reach across multiple levels of difference. The exploratory case study revealed moving and powerful stories, and I wanted others to hear them.

Problem, Purpose, and Research Question

Research exists regarding multiple aspects of collegiate sports involvement as well as the experience of Black athletes in college. However, researchers overwhelmingly approach studies regarding college athletics and African American athletes from a deficit lens, and focus on specific concepts, like grade point average (GPA), rather than overall experience (Sadberry & Mobley, 2013; Steinfeldt, Reed, & Steinfeldt, 2010). While some research exists concerning athletes in academically challenging majors and rigorous institutions (Martin, 2005; Pierce, 2007), researchers know little about athletes at STEM institutions, and currently, no research exists concerning the experiences of African American athletes at a STEM institution.

African American athletes have stories that go untold, and little research exists that describes the African American athlete experiences from their point of view. The purpose of the following study is to share the stories of how African American athletes describe and interpret experiences at a STEM institution. This study presented stories based on a specific institutional context as well as offered counterstories to the deficit framework that is prevalent in research concerning college athletics. As such, this study answered the following research question; what are the stories of experiences of African American athletes at a STEM institution?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical underpinning for this study was Critical Race Theory (CRT). This study aligned with CRT through accepting the guiding tenants of the theory; particularly recognizing the authority Black athletes have in understanding and interpreting their experiences. Critical Race Theory is a lens that many researchers use to exam the systems of power and privilege that exist in society (Harper, 2009). CRT developed out of critical legal studies as a way to interpret and challenge accepted legal ideology that failed to recognize racism present within the United States legal system (Bell, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Delgado, Lawrence, Crenshaw and Matsuda (1993) discussed the assumptions of CRT, which scholars agree are the foundation to the framework. CRT assumes that racism is engrained in American society and the civil rights era exemplifies interest convergence (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Recently, researchers have used Critical Race Theory as the lens for critical examination of the lack of African American head coaches in the collegiate setting (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010). As a lens within education, Critical Race Theory challenges the assumptions that the educational system is objective, race neutral, and creates equal opportunity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Donner (2005) suggested that Critical Race Theory assists social justice advocates in developing a fuller understand of the constructed systems that cheer on African American athletes as they perform on the field, while simultaneously deny them the support needed to succeed fully as a student. As mentioned above, Critical Race Theory recognizes the legitimacy of the experiential knowledge of students of color. The communication of this knowledge can occur through storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). As such, this study focused on

the voice of the African American athletes, who shared with me about their experiences while attending and competing at a STEM institution that is also a PWI.

Operational Definitions

I defined key terms below. These terms are used at different points throughout the study, and provide key foundational knowledge for readers.

Characteristics of STEM Education

There are multiple perspectives on the attributes of a STEM education (Breiner et al., 2012), but common conceptualization includes the integration of math, science, engineering, computers, and technology, as well as social sciences such as economics and psychology (Chen & Weko, 2009). Beyond a well-developed understanding of a variety of scientific areas, STEM institutions emphasize real world problem solving, and academic rigor (Breiner, et al., 2012). In the United States, students who graduate with STEM degrees are seen as an important force for innovation and economic growth in a competitive global market (Bevin, 2012; Chen & Weko, 2009; Rask, 2010).

While the majority of students attending a technology institution seek to enter STEM fields (Institutional Research and Planning, 2012), students attending these institutions choosing not to major in the STEM fields still have a college experience that is different than those at an institution where the arts and humanities are also part of the curriculum (Rask, 2010). This difference is based on the idea of disciplinary identities, which are developed and strengthened through the academic environment where they occur (Winberg, 2008). One specific example of a disciplinary identity across institutions is that STEM departments and courses are some of the lowest grading as compared to non-STEM courses and departments (Rask, 2010). The common experience

of low grading at a technology institution creates a sense of disciplinary identity, which may not be present at other academic institutions. For the purpose of this study, an institution characterized as a STEM school is a college or university that grants more than 60% of the degrees in science, technology, engineering, or math.

Further Definitions of Terms

There were other terms used throughout the study. The following terms are defined in order to increase clarity and understanding for readers.

Black/African American. For the purpose of the study, Black/African American referred to individuals who identified as United States citizens from African ancestry. Black and African American were used interchangeably in this study.

Predominately White Institutions (PWI). A college or university where at 50% or more of enrolled students identify as White or Caucasian.

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The NCAA is the major governing body for intercollegiate athletics. Established in the early 20th century, the NCAA creates and maintains the regulations related to recruitment, scholarships, and eligibility of all athletes competing at member institutions. In addition, the NCAA organizes the national championship for member institutions across each of the three associated divisions (NCAA, 2014).

NCAA Division I. The NCAA Division I is the premier division of athletic competition within intercollegiate athletics in the United States. Most often, professional sport teams recruit new players from NCAA Division I programs. Among the criteria for classification as Division I, college and universities must offer at least seven men's sports and seven women's sports, or six men's sport and eight women's sports. In addition,

there are scheduling and attendance requirements each institution must meet to remain classified with this division (NCAA, 2014).

Athlete. In the following study, the term athlete referred to an undergraduate or graduate student enrolled in a college or university and participated in an NCAA recognized and affiliated intercollegiate athletic team or sport. Individuals who competed at a club or intramural level did not qualify for study requirements.¹

Revenue generating sports. A sport that generates income for Division I schools, the NCAA, and private corporations. Football and men's basketball are what most individuals refer to when referencing revenue generating sports.

Counternarrative. This is a concept used in Critical Race Theory. Counternarratives are stories that oppose the privileged perspective that dominates society.

Assumptions and Delimitations

I completed the study at a STEM institution located in a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. The athletic experiences occurring at academically similar institutions are not as competitive as this institution, based on the institutions conference membership as well as divisional association (NCAA, 2014). Since generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, the study focused on describing the stories and experiences of African American athletes within this specific institutional context. However, while the context was central to the study, I did not specify team

¹ For the purpose of the following study, I utilized the term athlete instead of student-athlete. In so doing, I intentionally recognized the disparity between the lived experiences of athletes competing at the collegiate level, particularly NCAA Division I, and the misleading terminology used to portray a commitment to academics, which is often superseded by the focus on athletics. While programs invest in athletes to win on the field or court, the investment in the student identity often revolves around remaining eligible to compete.

membership or sport of competition for study participation. The intersections of shared identities of athlete and African American student at a STEM, primarily white institution (PWI) created the needed universality without compromising individuality.

Significance of the Study

The following study offered an understanding of how African American athletes at a STEM institution conceptualized their experiences. While NCAA institutions provide academic and social support services to enhance the experiences of all athletes (NCAA, 2014), administrators at the research site knew little about how Black athletes described their athletic and academic experiences. The findings of this study will guide athletic administrators at the research site as they revise and enhance their Life Skills program. Additionally, this study highlighted the experiences of Black athletes in a STEM environment. Since most STEM colleges and universities offer athletic competition opportunities (NCAA, 2014), it is in the best interest of educators and athletic administrators to seek to understanding the African American athlete experience at specific institutions.

Chapter Summary

The following study sought to amplify the stories of African American athletes at a STEM institution. I positioned the study within the theoretical construct of Critical Race Theory, which align the goals of countering the deficit lens that most scholars use to approach research on college athletics. In the following chapter, I explored the athlete experience and offer a synthesis of the existing knowledge on college athletics. In addition, I discussed the history of race within college sports, and established a case for the use of narrative inquiry.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“Equal rights, fair play, justice are all like the air; we all have it, or none of us has it. That is the truth of it”. — Maya Angelou

“Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.” — bell hooks

Overview of College Athletics

Currently, the NCAA dominates collegiate athletics with over 1,000 colleges and universities participating as member institutions (NCAA, 2014). While other athletic organizations exist, the NCAA is the flagship organization. The overall purpose as stated by the NCAA (2014) is to “protect student-athletes through standards of fairness and integrity”. In addition, this organization requires member schools to adopt the eligibility rules established by the NCAA as well as the organization’s values, which include sportsmanship, excellence in academics and athletics, and leadership (NCAA, 2014). Today the NCAA governs the majority of intercollegiate athletics, however, this was not always the case.

Historical overview. Researchers traced athletics in collegiate setting to the mid-eighteenth century. Upperclassmen students utilized athletics as a method for initiation into the institution. From inception, collegiate athletics were a student-led pastime.

Students organized their own games and competition during free time to relieve stress from academic pursuits (Smith, 2014).

Organized college athletics started in the mid-nineteenth century at Ivy League institutions through boating clubs at Yale University and Harvard University, but other sports quickly followed, including football, baseball, and lacrosse (Smith, 2011; Watterson, 2000). As college athletics developed and popularity increased, administrators took control of athletic operations. Simultaneously, the idea of amateurism transitioned from England to the United States (Oriard, 2012).

Colleges and universities sought oversight of athletics because administrators viewed athletics as a potential source of revenue for the institution. The concept of amateurism dictated that students could not receive compensation for their work on the athletic fields. Administrators perpetuated the idea that students played sports for the love of the game and competition, but not for money. The four criteria for eligibility that emerged from amateurism were that athletes: (a) could only compete for four years, (b) had to be full-time students, (c) were in good academic standing, and (d) were pursuing a degree (Oriard, 2012; Smith, 2011). However, no system existed to enforce the code of amateurism, and colleges often paid athletes under the table; some athletes did not enroll in the institutions where they competed. In addition, the common injury or death of players sparked President Theodore Roosevelt to encourage reform within college football (Smith, 2014).

After President Roosevelt's expressed concerns, various college and universities participated in meetings to change the rules of football as well as develop the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS). In 1906, the member

organizations officially established the IAAUS, which officially became the NCAA in 1910 (Oriard, 2012).

While the NCAA, established guidelines such as the “Sanity Code” to regulate college sports, scandals continued. From its founding, the NCAA recommended policies for collegiate athletics, but it was in the late 1940s when the association gained the power to enforce the regulations (Oriard, 2012). College presidents and athletic directors feared college athletics would crumble and money would be lost. Out of this fear, the administrators of college athletics programs decided to provide free tuition, room and board, so the athletes would not be as inclined to take money under the table. By 1956, athletic scholarships were taking off, and the contract of a free education for exchange of service on the field of competition was born (Oriard, 2012).

In the 1950s, Walter Byer, the NCAA executive director coined the term ‘student-athlete’ in order to enhance the principle of amateurism and to combat the workers compensation lawsuits injured football players were making, claiming to be employed by the university (Sperber, 2000, Van Rhee & Atwood, 2014). Today, the commitment to amateurism continues largely unchanged. Each year athletes are required to resign scholarship papers that they will obey the rules, that they are amateurs, and will not receive financial compensation for their performance on the court or field. To some, the term student-athlete is synonymous with the definition of indentured servants (Branch, 2013), others argue the term student-athlete is a misnomer, used to leverage benefits from athletes without having to share those benefits with the athletes (Branch, 2011).

Race in College Athletics

Scholars argued that college athletics at NCAA Division I, primarily white institutions (PWI), are a reflection the climate of the United States as a whole, and offer a barometer for racial progress (Hawkins, 2010; Sage, 1998). Sports have long been a method for obtaining upward mobility, escaping from oppression, and developing racial and masculine identity within the African American community (Hawkins, 2010). While some praise athletics for accepting more quickly African American participants in relation to other areas of society, the history of racism that exists in the United States also plagued college sports. Overwhelmingly, College and universities excluded African American athletes from participation at PWIs until the second half of the 20th century (Lumpkin, 2013).

Mid to Late 1800s to Mid-1900s

During the late nineteenth century, African American individuals' access to higher education and athletic competition was primarily through enrollment in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Very few Black students attended PWIs. The exceptions were stellar athletes, at a small number of colleges in the North and Midwest. The hostile environment required these black athletes to excel athletically and academically, as well as remain steadfast in character, mental, and emotional toughness. These athletes regularly faced racism and exploitation (Lumpkin, 2013; Spivey, 1983).

During World War II era, segregations continued to plague the United States, even though the US military drafted African Americans to serve in a fight for freedom they did not yet enjoy. Prior to World War II, racism was overt, but as the

commercialization of college athletics continued, racism began to transition to more covert in nature (Davis, 1995). The transition took place after the war, when PWIs began to see African American athletes as an “untapped resource for athletic talent” (Lumpkin, 2013, p. 32; Spivey, 1983). College coaches began to recruit African American athletes to help their team win.

While integrated collegiate teams developed after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the collegiate teams, administrators, and politicians from the southern United States remained staunch in their refusal to compete against African Americans (Lumpkin, 2013). In the mid-1950s, many northern colleges and universities were, at the very least, minimally integrated, however, stacking and other practices continued as covert racism and discrimination. Stacking refers to assigning solely African American athletes to certain positions, therefore making these athletes compete with only other African American athletes for positions. Ultimately, segregation in college athletics began to end because schools wanted help winning. Martin (1993) proposed that recruiting African American athletes become a turning point for the South concerning race relations.

1960s and 1970s

By the mid-1960s, many of the conferences in college athletics were desegregated (Harris, 2000), but the quota system of limiting African American players continued to persist (Lumpkin, 2013). Additionally, as African American athletes continued to prove capable on the field or court, racism and prejudice turned to discredit the academic performance of these college athletes. It was during the 1960s civil rights movement, that African American athletes confronted discrimination on college campus through

boycotts and protests. Coaches promised changes, but athletes had few choices if they wanted to continue to compete (Spivey, 1983).

In addition to social isolation and hostility, African American athletes had difficulty performing in the classroom as racism created barriers to success (Hawkins, 2010). The struggle to succeed academically resulted in coaches directing African American athletes to courses that would keep athletes eligible for competition, but did not meet requirements for degree programs. Many institutions did not maintain their commitment to providing Black athletes an education, many neither received academic support nor earned degrees (Davis, 1995). The exploitation of African American athletes at PWIs resulted in treatment of these students as commodities. Scholars criticized college athletics for creating a plantation system, which used African American athletes as slaves to benefit an institution and system that failed to compensate the athletes for their work. Once a Black athlete was no longer eligible, coaches ignored or discarded him to make room for someone else (Hawkins, 2010).

While the climate was hostile and isolating, one athletic conference began to pave the way for academic and social support for African American athletes. In the early 1970s, the Big Ten Conference set up an exploratory committee to investigate instances of racism and preferential treatment on campuses as well as provide recommendations for changes. The conference offered academic counseling, communication seminars, and even additional financial aid to assist African American athletes with degree completion. Additionally, the conference worked to establish a list of qualified African American coaches, administrators, and other athletic professionals to assist in addressing the disparity of representation on and off the field (Lumpkin, 2013; Wiggins, 1991).

1980s through Present

At the beginning of World War II only 10% of African American college students attended PWIs; by 1984 80% of Black college students enrolled in PWIs (Hawkins, 2010). The focus of many coaches was the athletic performance of African American athletes, which undermined the pursuit of an education. During the 1980s and 1990s, critics called on the NCAA to address academic standards for athletes.

Academic standards and eligibility. In response to the disparity between athletics and academics, the NCAA developed and passed Proposition 48 in 1983 (Howard-Hamilton & Watt, 2001). The NCAA used Proposition 48 to solidify the argument that all college athletes were student-athletes, and institutions should work to develop individuals academically as well as athletically (Lumpkin, 2013). Opponents of Proposition 48 argued that it was racist and exclusionary (Clark, Horton, & Alford, 1986), and did not account for underrepresented students, who historically score low on standardized test and graduate out of underfunded high schools unprepared for collegiate coursework (Hawkins, 2010). The NCAA updated eligibility requirements in 1995 and amended in 2003 to include a sliding scale that allowed for lower standardized test scores if those scores were accompanied by a higher GPA in specific coursework (Martin, 2005).

Experiences at PWIs. The literature that focused on Black male participation in college athletics largely described the experiences of students studying and competing at four-year, NCAA Division I institutions, which are also PWIs (Harper, 2009). Often research described the differences in educational outcomes for Black males compared to the White male counterparts. The racist, master narrative often depicts African American

athletes as failures, deficient, or dysfunctional in terms of academics (Martin, 2005), but a valued commodity for the institution's athletic pursuits (Donner, 2005). The exploitation of Black athletes in intercollegiate athletics is what some scholars referred to as the plantation system (Edwards, 1969, Harrison, 2000; Hawkins, 2010). Through the lens of the plantation system, Hawkins (2010) categorized the research on Black athletes at PWIs into three major themes: racism, alienation, and racial/social isolation.

There is interplay between Hawkins' (2010) three themes. Racism within collegiate athletics is characterized by experiences of racial stereotyping (Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010), and low faculty expectations for Black athletes (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). Racism within the academic, social, and athletic environments lead to the alienation – being alone – and isolation – feeling alone – of Black athletes. Important to note, is not only do overt acts of racism demonstrate a hostile climate, but also unintended acts of ignorance, or microaggressions contribute to an overall racist campus climate (Foster, 2005). The result of the academic, athletic, and emotional stress is low degree completion of for Black athletes, specifically those in revenue generating sports (Harper, 2009).

Athlete identity. Researchers also explored the social construction of the athlete identity for Black college athletes. An agreed upon definition of athletic identity is the degree to which a student identifies with the athletic role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011; Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010). The more a student engages in sports, the greater their athletic identity (Busseri, Costain, Campbell, Rose-Krasnor, & Evans, 2011). Identity conflict occurs for African American athletes, and can amplify environmental stress. Scholars expanded on Du Bois' (1903)

double consciousness of being both Black and American to the African American athletes' experience of Black and an athlete (Bimper & Harrison, 2011).

Unionization and college athletics. The topic of unionization of college athletics is not a new discussion (Johnston, 2003), but recently the efforts of some college athletes to unionize college athletics has elicited controversy. Within the news, writers argued for and against unionization, basing information on polls, interviews, and data regarding profit margins for colleges, the NCAA, and private corporations (Branch, 2011; Miller, 2014; Porto, 2014). While the issue of unionization is complex and controversial, key facts remain true: (a) there is an over representation of Black athletes in revenue generating sports, (b) coaches and corporations are making millions of college athletes, and (c) the 'market value' of college athletes often exceeds the value of the athletic scholarship (Branch, 2011; Johnston, 2003).

College athletics and STEM institutions. As discussed in chapter one, for the purpose of this study, a STEM institution was a college or university that granted more than 60% of its degrees in science, technology, engineering, or math. Based on the above criteria, STEM college and university athletic programs differ significantly from other colligate athletic programs and from each other. For example, some STEM institutions compete in the NCAA at the Division I level, but many are associated at the Division II or Division III level. The type of sport athletes are competing at differs, and the revenue generating sports of football and men's basketball are not represented consistently across this institutional type. Of the institutions that graduated 60% or more students with STEM bachelor degrees in 2012, only one competes in Division I sports (Morse, 2013; NCAA, 2014).

STEM Environment

The environment at science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) colleges and universities is unique. Scholars categorized STEM environments as individualistic, rigorous and competitive (Foor, Walden, & Trytten, 2007; Hewitt & Seymour, 1997). The academic rigor and competitive nature of STEM educational settings, can led to lower self-esteem (Hewitt & Seymour, 1997). Beyond the fast paced and high stakes introductory level course work, harsh grading diminishes collaborative learning between students. There are larger course sizes and the common faculty culture to “weed out” students, creates a high-pressure environment (Buchwitz et al., 2012). Beyond a well-developed understanding of a variety of scientific areas, STEM institutions emphasize real world problem solving, and practical application. These characteristics often promote high involvement in co-ops, internship, and undergraduate research (Breiner, Harkness, Johnson, & Koehler, 2012).

Justification for Theoretical Framework

Within higher education and student development, race and racism has, for the most part been ignored by theorist (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). The seminal theories of student development either portrayed African American individuals as deficit (Erikson, 1968; Patton, McEwen, Rendon & Howard-Hamilton, 2007), or failed to offer discussion on how race influences the other tenants of identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Patton et al., 2007). Instead, theorist pointed readers to other models and theories of racial identity development, such as Cross (1971). Other noteworthy theories relating to college student development lack participants from traditionally underrepresented populations (Baxter Magolda, 1992), and

fail to consider the institutional and societal structures that are racist. For example, Kohlberg (1975) neither considered how race influences the development of rules, laws, and morals, nor explored the experiences of people of color in light of such structures (Patton et al., 2007). As such, Critical Race Theory offered a framework that legitimized the realities on traditionally marginalized individuals.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory developed in the 1970s out of critical legal studies and radical feminism. Scholars recognized the advances of the civil rights era had slowed, and desired to combat the subtle racism occurring in the United States. The goal of Critical Race Theory is to end all forms of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). While some CRT scholars diverge in disciplines beyond legal studies, the basic tenets of Critical Race Theory offer a common foundation.

The first tenet of Critical Race Theory is racism is common and normal in the daily experiences of people of color. Within society, CRT scholars believe those with power exhibit a white-over-color preference, which influences how system operate and serves the dominate group. The rules that exist to require equal treatment of all people only solve overt discrimination, not covert acts of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Since racism is a “permanent fixture” in American society, issues of race and individual, structural, and institutional racism must be centered (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Interest convergence is the second tenet of Critical Race Theory. The concept of interest convergence posits that racism benefits white individuals from elite and working-class statuses. Therefore, advancements for racial equity only occur when there are benefits for White individuals (Bell, 1980) For example, scholars argued the civil rights

era exemplifies interest convergence (Ladson-Billings, 1998) as well as college recruitment and admission, and intercollegiate athletics (Donner, 2005).

The third tenet, the “social construction” thesis, offers the concept of race as developed by society, not as an objective or biological reality. Genetically, people of common origin share some traits, but overwhelmingly there is more in common than different in regard to human biology. Furthermore, one’s personality, intelligence, and behavior have little to do with the genetic makeup of the individual (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Differential racialization is the fourth tenet. Essentially, differential racialization highlights the way in which privileged groups attribute stereotypes to minority groups based on the needs and interests of those in power. The way in which a group is depicted related to labor market needs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

The fifth tenet is the intersectional and interdisciplinary nature of Critical Race Theory. As Delgado and Stefancic (2012) stated, “No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity” (p. 10). Critical Race scholars recognize the ways in which multiple identities interact and influence experiences of privilege and oppression within society. Researcher and activists utilize intersectional and interdisciplinary thinking to avoid oversimplifying another’s experience, while simultaneously striving to seek justice for a broad demographic of individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

The last tenet of Critical Race Theory is recognition the legitimacy and authority of the experiential knowledge of people of color (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw, 1993). Non-white individuals are able to provide knowledge about history, oppression, and experiences of being a person of color to the white community, which

otherwise would remain unknown. In so doing, people of color are creating counternarratives to the stories that widely told and accepted by the privileged – the master narrative. The counternarratives disrupt the master narrative and provide a new way of seeing and understanding history, law, education, and other disciplines (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Recently, researchers have used Critical Race Theory as the lens for critical examination of the lack of African American head coaches in the collegiate setting (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010). As a lens within education, Critical Race Theory challenges the assumptions that the educational system is objective, race neutral, and creates equal opportunity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Donner (2005) suggested that Critical Race Theory assists social justice advocates in developing a fuller understand of the constructed systems that cheer on African American student athletes as they perform on the field, while simultaneously deny them the support needed to succeed fully as a student. In addition, Critical Race Theory recognizes the legitimacy of the experiential knowledge of students of color, which can occur through storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). As such, this study focused on the voice of the African American athlete participants regarding their experiences at a STEM institution that is also a PWI.

Narrative Inquiry

Stories and narratives are ways human beings communicate and understand experiences. Scholar in multiple disciplines utilized narrative inquiry to advance understanding of human experience and behavior. Anthropology, psychology, and organizational studies all provide a foundation for narrative research within the field of education. In the context of educational research, narrative is a phenomena scholars study

and a methodology for research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000),

Education ... [is] a form of experience... narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it. In effect, narrative thinking is part of the phenomenon of narrative. It might be said that narrative method is a part of aspect of narrative phenomena. Thus...narrative is both the phenomenon and the method of the social sciences (p. 18).

In fact, narrative inquiry is the study of the particular, and within this methodological approach, researchers bring the context and the details into focus with the purpose to understand rather than explain. As a research method, narrative inquiry is both a process and a product of a study (Kramp, 2004; Riessman, 2008).

Narrative Approaches

Narrative inquiry began as an anthropological research approach (Riessman, 2008). The methodology evolved into an independent approach, which scholars operationalize differently based on discipline. Chase (2013) outlined various foci within narrative inquiry. The first is the interplay between the quality of an individual's life experience and the stories he or she tells. In this approach, researchers attend to what the stories are about and the structure of the stories, such as sequence. The "story and life narrative" (Chase, 2013, p.56) is bound to everyday experiences with the goal of collaboration with participants to improve the quality of everyday life experiences. From this slice of narrative, researchers also study the relationship between an individual's

stories and well-being as well as identity development (Chase, 2013; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006).

Practice and environment narrative inquiry is rooted in reflexive interplay (Gubrium & Holstien, 2009), which is the relationship between told stories and the environment. The practice and environment approach is tied to ethnography. The approach requires attention to specific contexts, relationship, and cultures as well as how individuals tell and derive meaning from stories (Chase, 2013).

For the purpose of this study, I utilized the approach of “storytelling as lived experience” (Chase, 2013, p. 57). In this approach, there is a mutual interest in the story and how one tells the story. How individuals tell their stories are the practice of constructing identities and realities. Within a research context, linguistic cues as well as the interplay between the participant and the researcher provide insight into the lived experience of the narrator within his or her social, cultural, and historical context. (Chase, 2013; Riessman, 2008).

Chapter Summary

This chapter offered a brief history of college athletics as well as an overview of race within intercollegiate athletics. In the chapter, I highlighted important concepts that influence the Black athlete experience, including athlete identity, and academic eligibility. For African American athletes competing at a PWI, there can be more challenges. As the literature confirmed, Black college athletes must manage the rigor of the athlete role as well as a potentially hostile PWI environment. Additionally, I discussed STEM education, reviewed the tenants of Critical Race Theory, and introduced narrative inquiry, which provide foundational information for study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

“I just knew there were stories I wanted to tell.” — Octavia E. Butler

The following chapter outlines methodological aspects of the study. Included in the chapter is the philosophy that guided the study, information regarding the specific qualitative research tradition, location where I completed the study, participant requirements, and research procedures for data generation and analysis. In addition, the chapter addresses researcher subjectivity and methods used for trustworthiness.

Epistemological Stance

An epistemological stance offers a framework for understanding the researcher’s philosophy regarding the nature of knowledge. Knowing a scholar’s epistemology allows the reader to anticipate what the scholar sees as legitimate. In constructivist epistemology, individuals construct meaning rather than discover it. As such, people develop meaning in different ways, even concerning the same phenomenon. These differences allow for researchers to recognize multiple realities as legitimate (Crotty, 1998). In this narrative inquiry, participants constructed accounts of their own experiences, which offered a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Based on the epistemological stance outlined above, a qualitative research methodology aligned with the goal of the study. The following study utilized narrative inquiry as a methodological approach. The purpose of the following study was to share the stories of how African American athletes described and interpreted their experiences

at a STEM institution of higher education. This study offered stories based on the environment context of a STEM institution and the shared identities of African American and athlete. In addition, the participants shared counterstories to the deficit framework that is prevalent in research concerning college athletics.

Currently, there are no studies that describe the experience of what it is like to be an African American athlete at a STEM institution. As such, this study answered the following research question; what are the stories of experience of African American athletes at a STEM institution?

Qualitative Research

Within the field of education, the use of quantitative methods dominated many research agendas; however, qualitative inquiry has garnered a great deal of support over the last three to four decades. Qualitative research strives to make sense of the meaning individuals ascribe to a phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). In an effort to account for individuals' manner of making meaning, qualitative researchers bring the voice and experiences of participants to the fore of the research agenda. Qualitative research traditions recognize that individuals develop an understanding of phenomena through observation and interpretation of a phenomenon in its natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hays & Singh, 2012; Riessman, 2008). Additionally, a qualitative research methodology approach allows scholars to move beyond a positivist research paradigm to interpretive, emancipator, and deconstructive approaches (Lather, 2004).

These research paradigms allow researchers to name biases and the lenses through which they view the world. In qualitative research, one does not have to remove his or herself from the research process, rather many qualitative methodologies recognize that

everyone has preferences and biases, and seeks to manage, rather than ignore those assumptions. Learning and insight occur through self-reflection of responses and reactions to the researched phenomena (Creswell, 2009).

The Narrative Tradition

The stories that individuals tell offer insight into how they make meaning out of circumstances and experiences. Society uses stories to communicate meaning and perpetuate the values of those who have power. Individuals construct meaning through the experience of telling and retelling stories (Riessman, 2008). Individuals, communities, and society as a whole communicate values and meaning through stories. Stories organize our lives and influence many facets of life, including relationships and politics. However, Riessman (2008) cautioned researchers on the popularization of stories, noting, “All talk and text is not narrative” (p. 5). The concept of a narrative is complex, but at the basic level, narratives form a sequenced and organized story of events, connected by a storyteller to highlight deeper meaning or values to an audience. Narratives are universal and timeless.

Aristotle originated the modern understanding of narrative through his examination of Greek tragedy, recognizing that narratives mirror society and offer a moral take away. From Aristotle, narrative theory moved through multiple iterations (Riessman, 2008). Narratives represent specific cultures within a specific context, at a moment in time. Additionally, writers construct narratives for particular audiences, with a focus on the cultural values and discourses, often unnoticed, in society. Individual’s construction of narratives in this manner support the idea of “narrative knowing”. Essentially, humans think and communicate the meaning they attribute to experience

through stories (Kramp, 2004; Riessman, 2008). Through this cognitive process, individuals make sense of themselves, their experiences, and the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995).

The definition of narrative inquiry as a research method is deceptively simple; a type of qualitative research describing human action utilizing stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). The narrative approach began in the fields of anthropology and sociology during the first few decades in the 1900s, however, the “narrative turn” during the civil rights movement brought the experiences of traditionally underrepresented individuals to the attention of the larger society (Riessman, 2008). The history of narrative inquiry matches the constructivist ideas of multiple realities and the differences of how individuals attribute meaning to the same phenomenon (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Riessman, 2008).

Narrative Urgency

Narrative inquiry offers a window into the lives of others, as well as a possibility for progress toward social justice through the research. Chase (2013) highlighted narrative urgencies, which are needs or personal and social change that motivate narrative research. According to Chase (2013) there are four urgencies are: (a) urgency of speaking, (b) urgency of being heard, (c) urgency of collective stories, and (d) urgency of public dialogue. I believe this study most closely aligned with the urgency of being heard or the urgency of storytelling, which is the desire of sharing a story with the goal of amplifying others’ voices.

This urgency aligns with the Critical Race Theory framework. The Critical Race Theory tenant of counterstorytelling offers a vehicle to access the values and experiences of traditionally underrepresented individuals and communities. Through this study I

sought to amplify (Riessman, 2008) the voices of African American athletes as an effort to counter the deficit narratives discussed earlier. As such, the use of narrative inquiry aligns with the larger goals of social change and action that Critical Race Theory and narrative inquiry espouse, including the need for White individuals to pay attention to and believe the experiences underrepresented peoples communicate.

Narrative Strand

The stands of narrative inquiry vary based on discipline. In this study, I utilized Riessman's (2008) approach to narrative research, which is based in human sciences. Riessman noted (2005), "As nations and governments construct preferred narratives about history, so do social movements, organizations, scientists, other professionals, ethnic/racial groups, and individuals in stories of experiences" (p. 1). Through stories we interpret the world, and communicate personal experience. Since this study was based on the personal experiences of African American athletes, Riessman's focus on stories of experiences was a natural narrative approach to use.

Photo Elicitation

While narrative theory originated as examining text and literary material, other medium also offer narratives, including visual documentation such as photographs (Riessman, 2008). Harper (2002) outlined the various ways researchers utilized photo elicitation for scholarly work, highlighting the idea that this method of data generation produces different information than verbal interviews. Elicitation research stemmed from a study completed in the 1950s by an anthropologist and sociologist utilizing the medium of film. Collier (1957) and his research team coined the term photo elicitation in the same decade. Since inception, scholars used photo elicitation for four different areas of

research: social class organization and family, community and historical ethnography, identity, and culture and cultural studies (Harper, 2002).

This study included photo elicitation to enhance the stories participant shared regarding their experiences. I chose this data collection method because of the different kind of information that participants can share through visual means. In this study, participants provided picture of their experiences that enhanced the stories each told about being a college athlete. I discussed more detail of my use of photo elicitation in the data generation section.

Procedure

I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board before participant recruitment and data collection began. The study complied with all the requirement of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Georgia as well as the IRB of the institution where I completed the study. I followed all appropriate policies and procedures.

Next, I contacted the director of the Student-Athlete Success Program and advisor of the Student-Athlete Advisory Board as well as the Associate Athletic Director. The email described the study, the requirements for participation, and a suggested a timeline for interviews. Additionally, I embed an email that the SAAB members and advisors forwarded to possible participants. In the participant email, I inserted a link to short demographic questionnaire, a participant recruitment letter explaining the study, and asked qualified students to join the study (see appendices A and B). The demographic questionnaire served as the informed consent for the study. The director of the Student-Athlete Success Program and advisor of the Student-Athlete Advisory Board agreed to

disseminate the letter to athletes as well as allowed me to visit a SAAB meeting to recruit. When an athlete contacted me to confirm his/her interest in the study, I scheduled an individual interview. I met with the participants in neutral locations including reserved study rooms in residence halls and academic conference rooms. Each participant completed a 45 to 90 minute, semi-structured interview, which was audio recorded.

Since the study was a narrative inquiry utilizing photo elicitation, at the end of the interview, I gave instructions to participants who agreed to visually document their experiences over the course of two weeks. Athletes who agreed to participate in the visual documentation texted their photos to me using the provided phone number and email address. I arranged a second interview with participants in order to review the photographs and expand my understanding of the participants' experiences.

I developed an interview protocol based on the purpose statement, research question, relevant literature, and theoretical conceptual frameworks for the study. Questions focused on eliciting stories from the participants. Furthermore, since Critical Race Theory was the conceptual framework for the study, I asked participants about their experiences as they relate to all of their identities. The interview protocol is located in appendix C. For the photo elicitation, I developed an explanatory prompt and instructions to assist participants in their effort in documenting their everyday experiences as an African American athlete at a STEM institution that is also a primarily white institution (PWI). See appendix D for this prompt.

Location

The research location for this study was STEM University (pseudonym), a mid-sized higher education institution in the southeastern United States. There is a long

tradition of athletics at this university. While the institution was established in the late 1800s, it was less than five years college athletics became central to the student experience. Additionally, STEM University integrated in the early 1960s peacefully and without court order.

Unlike other colleges and universities that compete in the same NCAA division and conference, STEM University is located in a major metropolitan area. The city surrounds the campus, but does not exist because the university is located there. The metropolitan environment offers access to resources and communities that schools in rural or smaller urban areas may not encounter, including museums, historic sights, and professional athletic teams.

According to institutional statistics, the majority of students entering the institution intend to pursue science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) degrees, and over 80% of the degrees granted by this institution are in STEM fields (Institutional Research and Planning, 2012). Another key characteristic of this site is an athletic program called the Student-Athlete Success Program. A former athletic director developed this program to help student-athletes reach their full potential while enrolled in this institution, and it served as a precursor to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) wellness and life skills focused programs. The director of the Student-Athlete Success Program as well as the Associate Athletic Director collaborated with me to gain access to participants.

STEM University was the sole research sight for a number of reasons. First, the long history and growth of athletics is valued by the institution. Additionally, there were no other academic institutions that qualified as STEM (60% of more degrees conferred in

STEM fields), who compete at the same athletic level. At the time of the study, STEM University conferred approximately 80% of its bachelor's degrees in the STEM fields. The next closest institution that competes at the same athletic level conferred approximately 50% of its bachelor degrees in STEM related disciplines (Morse, 2013).

Participants

I used criterion-based sampling (deMarris, 2004, Patton, 2002) to recruit participants for this study. This method was appropriate because the study sought to hear stories from individuals that met specific criteria. Similar to other scholars (Bimper & Harrison, 2011), the criteria emphasized the shared experience as African American athletes with the specific educational context of PWI and STEM institution. Participants were (a) athletes that identified as African American/Black, (b) college athletes who studied and competed at the identified Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) institution, and (c) completed at least one year at the institution where the research occurred. I included athletes from any sport recognized by the NCAA. While these participants were enrolled at a STEM institution, the students' were not required to indicate a STEM major in order to qualify as participants. I recruited participants through the Student-Athlete Advisory Board (SAAB), direct communication, and a recruitment email sent out by the Associate Director of Athletics, described above. Participation in the study was elective and no athletes were required to partake in the study.

Protection of participants. Throughout the course of the study, participation was voluntary. In addition, each participant had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. I password protected all study materials, and locked the recordings in a file cabinet

when not in use. Additionally, each participant had a pseudonym and I did not reveal any personally identifiable information.

Researcher as Instrument

In the qualitative methodological approach to research, the researcher is the instrument, collecting and generating data as well as offering interpretation (Hays & Singh, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, I had personal experiences, assumptions, and beliefs that influenced the qualitative research experience. Below I included a subjectivity statement in order to recognize the knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions I brought to the current study.

Researcher subjectivity. As a college administrator, understanding and advocating for students is essential to how I view my career as well as calling. Finding a balance between the advocate role and the learner role was tricky. I wrestled with the question: how do I use my privilege to speak on behalf of, while simultaneously honor the stories and realities of those whom I want to serve. It involved leading and following, on behalf of and with; it was empowering others and being empowered. It is from this place of tension that I researched and wrote about the experiences of African American athletes in college.

Prior to entering a doctoral program, I was naïve concerning the experiences of athletes who compete at the intercollegiate level. I am an avid fan of college athletics, especially football and basketball. The excitement of game day, the commitment of the athletes to train as well as attend classes, and the immense heart for team and institution are all ways that college athletics stand out to me. Early in my doctoral studies, a professor challenged to research something that interested me. The first area that came to

mind was college athletics and athletes. It was here that my dissertation journey began. The stories of others have always been meaningful to me, and as I grew as a social justice advocate I realized that the stories of underrepresented populations reveal a whole new world that privileged individuals need to learn from. It is from this place of learning that I approached this research study.

White woman studying African American athletes. Even as a white woman, I connected to the African American individuals who shared their experiences with me, because I also knew the experiences of others discounting me based on an identity that I neither chose nor wanted to change. It was important that I did not co-op the stories of those I desired to amplify. For this reason, I chose a narrative inquiry. Through this methodology, this study amplified the experiences of African American athletes at this specific type of institution. While scholars like Grillo and Wildman (1997) indicated a strong belief that White individuals cannot “speak validly for people of color” (p. 623), I argue that by using narrative inquiry I did not speaking for the participants, rather I am highlighted what the African American athletes said. For this study, the strategies for ensuring trustworthiness were paramount for offering true and accurate narratives of how the participants experienced sport and academic environments.

Personal experience regarding athletics. As an athlete through elementary and secondary education, I develop a love for sports. While I did not compete in intercollegiate athletics while in college, I have always considered myself an athlete. Throughout college and my adult life, I have played on teams and completed individually in different athletic endeavors. Additionally, I enjoyed being a spectator at athletic events, especially at the college level. The love of athletics and my location of

employment was the starting point for a research area that has expanded over the last three years.

The schools I attended did not compete at the NCAA Division I level, and so I romanticized the revenue generating sports through my consumption of March Madness and college football bowl games. When I moved to the southern part of the United States, college sports, football in particular, took on a new meaning. It was a lifestyle, it was exciting, and at times, it was hard to distinguish college athletes from those who played professionally. As an individual with privilege, I embraced the master narrative that sports, including the idea college athletics, embraced all individuals regardless of race, economic status, religion or other identities. Through research I continued to learn about the unjust practices of college athletics, the NCAA, private corporations, and colleges and universities that profit off athletic performance of many African American athletes who do not receive adequate compensation for their efforts.

Researcher role at institution. I was an employee of the institution where I completed this study. I was keenly aware of the possibility that some participants may feel discomfort sharing their stories with me based on my employment, as the coaches and administrators of the institution hold the power of scholarship and eligibility in their hands. Within my role, I did not have any direct influence over any aspect of the perspective participants' collegiate experience. However, informed participants of my employment at the institution, but emphasized my role as researcher, not as institution administrator.

Research reflective journaling. Researchers recommended scholars use reflective practices while engaging in research. Doing so assists scholars in developing a better

understanding oneself in the research process, which includes reactions to participants and choices for analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). In order to truly explore and understanding my own points of privilege throughout the research process I engaged in reflective journaling. Before each interview I noted my own thoughts and assumptions regarding the participant, which I gleaned through the recruitment process as well as knowledge of the sport he or she played. After each interview, I explored my interpretations of the stories, the feeling the experience elicited, and the dynamic between the individual and myself during the interview. The following is an example from my journal.

He seemed to speak in generalities, but answered specifics when I prompted or probed. I am sure part of that is because we don't really know each other, but it may also be because I am White and a women. Perhaps I won't understand. He took a while to warm up, but once he did he seemed engaged... For some reason, I feel a little down. It could be because he did not want do the photo elicitation portion of the study, but I was also left with a sense that the concerns and issues are societal problems and it is overwhelming... Maybe I feel down because his questions were checking me? I do need to be checked. I need to be intentional in ensuring the participants speak from themselves.

After I completed data collection, I wrote about my general impressions of participant stories as well as possible themes and structures that emerged. As analysis occurred, I recorded my thoughts and reflections for each interview and compared those entries to the ones written immediately after I spoke with each participant. While I wrote the findings and discussion chapters, I referred back to the journal entries to maintain

awareness of my feelings and assumptions. By engaging in the reflective process, I explored my own reactions, noted different levels of connection between participants and myself, and wrestled with how my privileged identities influenced the study.

Data Generation

In narrative inquiry, data generation seeks to understand the experiences of individuals. Maxwell (2013) suggested scholars use multiple methods to generate data. Using more than one method for generating data allows researchers to gain information about different aspects of the phenomenon one is studying, both complementing and expanding understanding. The following study generated data through semi-structure narrative interviews, photo elicitation, and follow-up interviews. I interviewed 8 participants.

Narrative Interviews

A foundational concept in the utilization of interviews for the purpose of research is that individuals' stories are interesting and have value. (Seidman, 2006). For the purpose of this study, I utilized a narrative interviewing technique, guided by a semi-structures interview protocol. Narrative interviewing requires sensitivity and an interaction between the participant and researcher, which encourages exploration of memories and feelings (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007)

In this study, the interviews focused on the participants' experiences at a STEM higher education institution. One purpose of interviewing is to understand the participant's world and the meaning individuals construct if their experiences (Kvale, 1996). In order to generate as much understanding as possible, I utilized open-ended questions and elicited as much detail as possible while the participants told their stories

(deMarris, 2004). Additionally, I used appropriate interview probes and follow up questions. In discussing qualitative interviewing, Seidman (2006) mentioned the power dynamics at play within a research study; principle investigators often hold positions of power. For the above reason, I allowed the participants to choose a location where they were comfortable, and met when it was convenient for their schedules. Additionally, I offered the background on why I believed the stories of African American athletes were important. These students' experiences provided an important, but currently unrepresented perspective of college athletics.

Photo Elicitation

Since pictures can offer deeper meaning beyond what verbal communication does (Harper, 2002), I incorporated photo elicitation into this study. I hoped that all the participants would agree to complete the photo elicitation portion of the study. While six participants agreed to take photos, only three athletes followed through with pictures and second interviews. Participants that agreed to complete the photo elicitation portion of the study were provided with a prompt, which directed them to share visual representation of their daily experiences. Each participant texted photos to me and explained the meaning behind them in follow up interviews. Once I completed follow up interviews, I reviewed the transcripts and photos for each participant to ensure I considered each individual's story in context with all the information he or she shared.

Data Analysis

Human sciences narratives have what Riessman (2008) referred to as nested uses. On the top level, listening is an interpretative process (Chase, 2013). Research participants tell their stories as prompted by the researcher, which begins analysis. The

next level consists of interpreted accounts developed by the researcher based on interviews and observations, the “story about the stories” (Riessman, 2008, p.6). The last level of narratives is what the reader constructs through reading and interpreting the participants’ and investigator’s presentation of the study’s narrative. For the second level of interpretation in this study, I utilized thematic and structural analysis.

Thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, I focused solely on the content, what was said during interviews. Scholars use stories to identity themes, but unlike other qualitative traditions, scholars seek to understand themes within the context of a complete case, rather than removed from a narrative for the purpose of theory development or generalization of findings. Thematic analysis is the most straightforward and common form of analysis within narrative methodology (Kramp, 2004; Riessman, 2008).

In the narrative inquiry tradition, the process of transcription is a practice of interpreting data (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, data analysis began when I transcribed each interview. I first transcribed interviews verbatim. Once transcribed, I read the text while I listened to the interview recording to ensure the accuracy of the transcription text. Next, I did a close reading of the transcription text. I identified themes within the entire sequence of the interview transcript as well as highlighted relevant portions of the text that match with the themes. Over the course of the analysis process, I read the transcription texts multiple times in order to engage the narrative deeply and ensure the codes were accurate according to the established themes. (Riessman, 2008). Another round of coding combined similar themes into a manageable number of categories. I wrote a descriptions of each theme category.

Structural analysis. Structural analysis concerns itself with how narratives are organized, shifting from what is told to the telling (Riessman, 2008). Structural analysis occurs in two phases. The first is concerned with the thematic focus in the development of the narrative's plot, as it concerns the overall structure of the story. The second phase focuses on the dynamics of the narrative's plot, the particular forms of speech (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The narrator's use of linguistic cues, such as word choice, hesitation, and laughter as well as how stories are embedded within the interaction between researcher and participant all provide clues to how the teller makes meaning of "personal experiences in relation to cultural discourse" (Chase, 2013, p.57).

Once thematic analysis concluded, I re-transcribed stories within each interview in a manner that emulated the work of social linguist, James Gee. This re-transcription attended to the "idea units", which organized the narrative into stanzas (Gee, 1985, 1991; Riessman, 2008). After re-transcribing the interviews, I listened to the recorded sessions multiple times to ensure I accounted for all the linguistic cues of the narrator. For both types of analysis, the unit of analysis was each individual's interview transcript.

Coding is a cyclical process, and as I coded each interview, new insights emerged. Throughout the entire analysis process, I practiced reflective journaling as discussed above. Once new insights no longer emerged from the re-reading of the text and codes, I constructed the narrative representation of the results. It is important to note, in narrative inquiry, the researcher's interpretation is one "viable interpretation grounded in the assembled text" (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 484), rather than the only possible interpretation of the stories.

Data Presentation

In narrative inquiry, researchers tell the stories of others through words, constructing narratives through poems, drama, and epic tales. Beyond stories presented through text, individuals, communities and society express narratives in visual form. Painting, sculpture, and photographs are capable of telling the stories of self and others, and scholars utilize creative outlets as a means for others to express the meaning attributed to experiences (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry's use of non-traditional methods for data presentation aligns with creative analytic practice (Richardson, 2000), which seeks not only to present data, but also choose approaches that are accessible for communities outside of academia (Parry & Johnson, 2007). For this study, I presented the stories African American athletes shared as well as photos. In addition to individual stories, I developed a composite narrative to represent the experiences and themes that emerged from research participant stories.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important to ensure the credibility and quality of the research study. Scholars use a variety of approaches to increase the trustworthiness of their studies, including multiple data sources, practicing member checking, utilizing peer debriefing, and practicing reflexivity and journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I utilized all three approaches to trustworthiness mentioned above. As discussed in the data generation section above, interviews and photo elicitation provided two different data sources for some of the participants. Additionally, once I transcribed and coded interviews, I distributed copies of the transcription text and initial impressions to the research participants. I requested feedback on the transcript and interpretation accuracy.

Participants approved transcripts, confirmed interpretations, and made some adjustments and recommendations to more clearly represent experiences and the meaning they attributed to those experiences.

Within qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument, collecting data and offering interpretation (Hays & Singh, 2012). As such, the practice of reflection is an essential part of the research process. Horan (2013) noted that without researcher reflexivity, understanding meaning is not possible. In fact, a complete reflexive journal about the method and the self throughout the research process meets all the trustworthiness criteria, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since understanding the meaning participants ascribed to their experiences is the core of this study, I practiced reflexivity and journaling during the entire course of the study.

Prior to data collection, I completed a bracketing interview. A trusted and knowledgeable colleague asked me the interview questions participants were asked. Doing so allowed me to create an awareness of my perspectives and underlying assumptions regarding the experiences of African American athletes at a STEM institution. Additionally, journal impressions, responses, questions, and feelings related to the research process kept the biases and assumptions of the research at the fore. The journal entries became a space for me to process the narratives shared by participants. The reflective journaling practice spurred me to remain aware and authentic throughout the entire process.

In addition to the above strategies, the peer debriefing process was essential for trustworthiness. I was aware of the challenges of utilizing Critical Race Theory as a

framework as well as developing counterstories of African American athletes, especially since I did not share a racial/ethnic identity with participants. In an effort to not co-opt the stories of African American athletes, I asked three individuals who identify as Black, some former athletes, to serve on the research team. One research team member dropped out, but the remaining two members assisted in checking my biases and assumptions as well as provided feedback on themes and meanings derived from the thematic and structural analysis. In addition, the research team offered feedback on the accuracy of composite narrative and ensured I accurately represented the findings of the study.

Chapter Summary

The previous chapter outlined the proposed research design and methodology for a narrative inquiry on the stories of African American athletes at a STEM institution. I presented an explanation of how qualitative methodology matches the study's purpose and goals. Additionally, there is an overview of my epistemological stance. The chapter reviewed the procedure for participant recruitment, interviews, and analysis. Furthermore, I presented an overview of the study location and participate criteria. Also included in the chapter are strategies I used for trustworthiness and an overview of how I presented the findings in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

“For a change, start by speaking to people rather than walking by them like they're stones that don't matter. As long as you're breathing, it's never too late to do some good.” — Maya Angelou

“If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.” — Toni Morrison

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to describe and understand the experiences of Black athletes who competed and learned at a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) university. Consistent with the traditions of narrative inquiry and Critical Race Theory (CRT), the focus was on the stories each participant told, and the meaning they ascribed to their experiences as athletes, students, and Black men and women (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). I asked participants about their identities, classroom experiences, athletic competition, and interactions with teammates, athletic staff/coaches, faculty and non-athlete peers.

The following chapter highlights each participant through a biographical introduction, which offers context for understanding how each athlete began participating in sports, and arrived at the institution. Next, the chapter explores the themes that emerged from the stories of each participant. In discussion of the themes, I will use individuals' stories to represent each theme. This will allow readers to consider the words

the narrator used to communicate as well as give authority to the participants' descriptions and topics and not mine.

Additionally, in an effort to explore the narratives as deeply as possible, I re-analyzed the stories in regard to structure. The structures that emerged through the telling and retelling of stories provided clues for meaning. For each participant, I presented key findings related to the structure of their stories, and a possible interpretation for what those structures mean. Next, the presentation of a composite narrative offered a first-person account of how an African American athlete experiences life at a STEM university.

Furthermore, three of the athletes participated in the photo elicitation portion of the study. In follow up interviews, participant shared the background and meaning behind the photos. I discussed the visual representation of Black athlete experience provided by the participants' pictures and words.

Participants

The eight participants in this study represent 5 different sports: football, men's basketball, women's basketball, track and field, and cross country. All participants self-identified as African American or Black and were enrolled at the university for a year or more. Six of the participants identify as male and two identify as female. In addition, all but one of the participants were raised in the south or southeastern United States. Each participant had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym and some personal information had been changed in order to protect each participant's identity.

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Participant	Sex	Year	Major	Sport
Amanda	Female	3 rd year	Business Administration	Women's Basketball
JaVonte	Male	3 rd year	Business Administration	Football
Devon	Male	3 rd year	Business Administration	Football
Xavier	Male	2 nd year	Engineering	Cross Country
Martin	Male	4 th year	Science, Technology, and Culture	Football
Trey	Male	5 th year	Building Construction (Master's degree)	Football
Brittany	Female	3 rd year	Literature, Media, and Communication	Track and Field
Christian	Male	4 th year	Public Policy	Men's Basketball

Amanda

Born and raised in the mid-western United States, Amanda has participated in organized sports since elementary school. Her athletic journey began after watching her school friends play basketball. An Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) coach recruited her to play because of her height. At the beginning, Amanda hated basketball, because she did not know the rules of the sport and was uncoordinated. However, her mother did not let Amanda quit, and through practice and hard work she began to excel.

As early as middle school, Amanda started to hear interest from local colleges and universities, but did not take the interest seriously until her junior year of high school. When July arrived, and college coaches were allowed by the NCAA to contact prospects, Amanda's mailbox overflowed with letters from interested coaches. Day after day she was contacted by schools across the United States. It was then that Amanda realized that

she could use basketball as a way to receive a quality college education while continuing a sport she had grown to love.

Amanda loved STEM University, but committed to go elsewhere due to the influence of her AAU coach. She believed it was the wrong decision, but decided to make the best of it. However, the coach where she committed retired, which allowed Amanda to de-commit, and go to STEM University. Amanda believed STEM University was the right choice for her, and was enrolled for three years as a business administration major.

JaVonte

JaVonte is from the southeastern United States and has played sports since he was five-years-old. As a child, JaVonte played baseball, but due to “racially motivated favoritism” on the team, he lost the love of baseball and transitioned to football. Sports have always been a big part of his life, and JaVonte grew up a STEM University fan.

It was in high school that JaVonte started to consider playing football in college. During sophomore year, JaVonte started to get the attention of NCAA Division I coaches. Initially, he wanted to play as a true freshman, so he committed to a different school. Later JaVonte realized that he was making the decision for college based on the coach and not the school, and changed his mind. He realized a connection to the school was more important than a coach or playing as a true freshman. JaVonte was in his third year at STEM University.

Devon

Devon grew up in the southeastern United States. He is deeply connected to his family, and was introduced to sports through his father, who was a professional athlete.

Devon played soccer, basketball, and ran track, but football was always his favorite sport. Since the age of seven, Devon saw football as the most fun, and “the ultimate team sport”.

In middle school Devon knew he wanted to go to STEM University. The connection he and his father had with multiple coaches solidified Devon’s connection to the university. While participating in a summer camp the summer before his senior year in high school, STEM University’s coach offered Devon a scholarship. The next day, Devon committed to his dream college where, at the time of the study he had been attending for three years.

Xavier

Born in the southern United State, Xavier began running to relieve the stress from academics and anything else on his mind. “In order to get stuff out, I ran...I just happened to be good at it”. He began running competitively in middle school, but did not initially consider himself an athlete. This changed once he realized the potential he has as a runner. Money was tight, and Xavier began to notice that running could open doors for a college scholarship.

Xavier knew in 9th grade that he wanted to be an engineer, and he realized STEM University had one of the best engineering programs. Since he had no way of paying for school, Xavier was hesitant to pursue admission into STEM University. However, he was offered and accepted an athletic scholarship that pays for school and opens doors for him to pursue an engineering degree. Xavier was enrolled for two years and loved it.

Martin

Martin is from the southern United States, and in 5th grade he told his parents he wanted to play football after visiting a college football camp. As a “chubby kid”, it was tough, but he always had the drive not to quit when school or sports got hard. While he played a little basketball, football was his sport of focus. Martin’s family supported his desire to play, but always stressed school and good grades above sports.

Martin was heavily recruited to play college football, 24 different colleges offered him scholarships. He chose STEM University because it felt like home, and his teammates made him feel like he was family. He was at STEM University for four years and earned a bachelor’s degree, but had a year of eligibility left and decided to pursue a master’s degree.

Trey

Born in the Midwestern United States, but raised in the South, Trey grew up playing sports with his brothers. At the age of seven he started playing football with an organized team. Playing football has always been fun for Trey and he wanted to see where playing sports could take him. Since childhood, Trey dreamed of playing in the National Football League (NFL).

Trey’s dad passed away when he was twelve, but his mom and godparents gave him the support he needed growing up. When it was time for high school, Trey’s mom gave up guardianship to his godparents so he could attend a school that had better academic and athletic standards. Trey excelled as a student and athlete, and many colleges recruited him, but going to STEM University was an easy decision for Trey, because he felt connected to the team Chaplin and the teammates he met. Additionally,

Trey knew STEM University had strong academic and athletic programs. He has enjoyed contributing to the team, and while enrolled for five year, had earned a bachelor's degree and graduated at the end of the year with a master's.

Brittany

Brittany was born and raised in the southern United States. As a kindergarten student, Brittany would always beat everyone, boys and girls in field day races. She loved sports, and encouraged by her parents she pursued athletics. Brittany played volleyball, basketball, swam, and ran track while in middle school. When high school arrived she stopped swimming, but continued everything else. Brittany stuck with track and during her junior year of high school started getting interest from colleges. At a high school meet, coaches from STEM University expressed interest.

Brittany went on her official visits, but fell in love with STEM University and the coaches there. While she saw herself as more of a liberal arts leaning person, she is good at math and science. The academic excellence, feel of the campus, and the coaches convinced her to go to STEM University. Brittany knew it was the best place for her to be. At the time of the study, she was in her third year, Brittany loved the athletic program, and the other athletes.

Christian

Born and raised in the southern United States, Christian's first experience with sports was playing tennis with his sister. Growing up he also played football and basketball. Christian's parents let him chose whatever sports he wanted to play and he stuck with basketball. While he did not start playing organized ball until 6th grade, he was gifted in speed, height, and jumping. Christian worked on his basketball skills to catch up

with other kids who started playing organized basketball earlier. By high school he transferred to an academically prestigious school where he could be challenged in the classroom and continue to play sports.

In 10th grade, Christian participated in a magnet program for students who excelled in math and science. His focus was getting to STEM University as a student. He got into the university and was participating in a summer transition program when one of the assistant basketball coaches saw him playing in the campus recreation facility. Through a conversation, Christian was invited to try out for the basketball team as a walk on. Christian made the team and has been playing for STEM University for four years. At the time of the study, the season was his last, and he graduated with a bachelor's degree.

Thematic Analysis

The participants shared stories relating to their personal and family life, as well as their experiences as athletes and students at a STEM institution. The stories demonstrated experiences of support and encouragement as well as challenges and difficulties. Within the context of each participant's story, there were common threads that each individual discussed throughout the course of the narrative. Themes consistent across participant narratives include: (1) it takes sacrifice, (2) "we are the Clery alerts": stories about race and racism, (3) "break it down day by day", (4) "academics humbles us all": characterizing the current institution as well as the participants previously demonstrated ability to excel at course work, (5) "they helped me get here", and (6) "it's like a business": the politics of college athletics.

It Take Sacrifice

Each participant indicated the necessity to make difficult choices or sacrifices in their lives in order to excel as college athletes and students. It takes sacrifice is a theme that demonstrated the challenges and difficulties that participants experienced. This theme was categorized by four types of challenges which included, physical, academic, mental and emotional, and relational. Participant often talked about more than one area where athletics effected them. For example, the lack of strong peer relationships can result in emotional or mental struggle, and physical exhaustion can affect an athlete's ability to invest as much as desired into studying for classes. While each participants did not express all of the four areas, everyone discussed multiple ways athletics created challenge or hardship.

Physical sacrifice. College athletes experience the physical sacrifice of sports in multiple ways. When asked about competition Amanda discussed the physicality on the court, *"It's a battle... It's constant banging, everybody is so tough and strong. You are getting hit and pushed around. There are constant bruises and bumps"*. Later when talking about the hard work of being a college athlete Amanda mentioned, *"your body, there's so many aches and pains that you have to go through"*.

Physical injuries resulting from athletic participation affected multiple participants' ability to compete without restrictions. Amanda commented, *"Right now I'm coming off an injury actually, with my knee. I actually had surgery on my right knee and then September I had surgery on my left knee"* Injuries are one of the reasons that college athletes choose to redshirt for a year or more, which can often extend one's time at college. Trey related his injury and subsequent redshirting experience:

Practicing for the bowl game I was injured on a freak accident. It was a light day. We were just in helmets and somebody ran into my knee and tore my ACL, MCL, LCL, almost dislocated my knee. That's my junior year about to go into my senior year. I've never been injured to that magnitude so initially I was okay, I could walk this off or whatnot then I got the MRI. Then the doctor told me what happened. He was like 'you're looking at a year minimum to recover'. So I was just blown away. I was like 'okay, football is over', that was my initial response. Then they were telling me about, [another athlete], 'he tore his ACL and bounced back you know seven months'. So I was 'okay here we go, I have hope that I can play in my senior season'. So it's bowl time, seven, eight months before the season gets here. Off-season I just you know I'm rehabbing, going hard, trying to get back well, to get my knee back right.... So the time came around, the season is getting here and I'm on the verge of playing. The first game gets here and I gave myself until the third game whether I was going to sit out last year. Then the third game came and I pushed it that week in practice and my knee got swollen. I was like all right I have to sit out... So that was when I was like 'okay now I'm about to graduate, I'll be here another year, when am I gonna do with this year?' So I looked at it like 'okay I can go to grad school. So that's what I did with my time.' But that really hurt because I didn't want to be here anymore. I already had my mind set on 3 1/2 years, I can do four, that's required. But now I've got to do five? That hurt me because you know redshirting as a senior that's backwards. You redshirt as a freshman. And you mentally prepared to go five years, but then

you're here for to have to stay another year? That hurt me, but I feel like I handled it well by using my time wisely, and not letting it get me down.

Beyond injury, the physical impact of being an athlete left individuals tired and unable to enjoy other aspects of college life. Amanda related:

You really don't want to do anything. There's no going out and hanging out with friends, you are just too tired you're just exhausted it takes a lot. A lot." Brittany echoed that experience, *"I get up at seven in the morning and go lift weights, and then I have class and class and class and then practice and then by then I don't have a meal plan so I can't go to the dining hall and see people, and then I am just tired after practice and after a full day.*

Academic sacrifice. Many athletic programs as well as the NCAA make it a point to emphasize the student role in the student-athlete dichotomy. However, participants indicated that being a college athlete does not emphasize the student role. Devon noted:

Honestly, we're athlete students, honestly. We're athlete students. I feel that way. We play on ESPN, Thursday night prime time, NFL players get that kind of treatment. We fly into different states to play football, staying in nice hotels, five-star hotels. When it comes to being a student athlete as far as advisors, I feel like their job is to just keep us eligible. You know if we're eligible, we don't necessarily have to be on track to graduate. As long as we're eligible to play that year, it's fine. That's their objective, to keep us eligible. Not to help us graduate.

Not only did athletes from revenue generating sports communicate the struggle to balance the student role, but also other athletes in other sports shared the same challenge. Amanda noted the experience of some of her teammates, *"I actually had a couple of teammates*

that wanted to be engineers, but the way our schedule is set up in the classes they have to take, there is no way it would work so they ended up switching majors”. Xavier mentioned, “I still have a solid GPA now, but it’s a lot more difficult to maintain, especially with practices... Because I’ve gotten better, practices become harder”.

Mental and emotional sacrifice. Participants recalled multiple ways that athletics taxed their mental or emotional wellbeing. The way in which a college athlete internalize criticism from coaches or fans has an influence on the athlete’s mental and emotional wellbeing. Martin recalled:

In the [competing institution] game, I got a penalty on the goal line, on a third down, and I got benched the rest of the game. I’m a pretty positive person and everything, but I made a mistake. We ended up losing the game. I didn’t say anything the whole trip. My coaches, of course they yelled at me and everything, and then I went and got on the bus and on my twitter feed, the fans were mentioning me saying ‘Hey, you effing suck.’ “Hey, you cost us the game.’ ‘You fat b-word.’ Things like that, that’s nothing for a 21-year-old kid to experience. I can only imagine what bigger players have to go through when they make mistakes like that. So I reached a low point. I never been so low in my life. Your parents can call you and everything but they were in your shoes, they were on national TV where the whole world saw you jump off-sides. I wouldn’t say that cost us the game, but that was a component of it. So to see somebody blame you.... The coach called me into the head office being worried about me because like the person I am, I wasn’t acting like myself.

Amanda discussed the mental effort of preparing for athletic competition as well as how other areas of life influence how one competes:

I work for this, it's like a job. It's like a full-time job and it takes a toll on your body and on your mind. You are physically and mentally drained. Just like we have to study for classes we have to study scouting reports, we have to remember the plays that the other teams run. We have to remember which players are shooters, which are drivers, which are penetrators. Who is left-handed, who is right-handed stuff like that we have to remember that, and then we have to go to class and remember all these terms... It's a lot of work, we put all the mental [effort] studying [for] school work, and studying plays, studying for your sport... It can really be emotionally tolling. If you are dealing with things at home, you also have to deal with your coach. And if you're dealing with something at home it may transfer onto the court where you're not having a good game or good practice and then your coach [is] ripping you I mean [coach name] can be tough... And it can just add, it all starts to have a toll on you.

Relational sacrifice. The other students who college athletes interacted with most are fellow athletes. It took effort on the part of athletes to make connections to non-athletic peers. At times, participants are discouraged by the disconnection from the rest of the student body. Devon shared:

It's kind of hard to relate to other students here. Here at institution with the academic rigor being so high and so hard, most of the students take all their time and put it into academics or they are international students and they don't know anything about football. They [non-athlete peers] find it hard to relate to us so

that makes it hard... honestly it feels like a bit lonely at times, you could get a little discouraged because most of us are generally trying to speak to others whether it's 'Hello. Hey, how are you doing? How was your day today?' we are genuine when we do that and we don't get a reply back or we get an awkward look it's like, 'dang man, you know I'm just being nice.' or you open the door for someone and they don't say thank you or they hold the door before you, you say thank you and they don't say anything back or you know they're holding the door open and you're walking up to the door and they just leave and let the door closed.

“We are the Clery Alerts”

Participants narrated a number of experiences regarding race and racism. A consistent phrase used was, “we are the Clery Alerts”, which refer to the crime notices the campus police send out whenever there is a crime reported on campus, or adjacent to campus boundaries. The Clery Alerts provide not only information about the crime, but also a description of the perpetrators. Many of the alerts sent by STEM University describe the perpetrators as Black males. Participants related emotions of hurt and frustration regarding the alerts, citing them as one explanation for racialized or racist experiences while attending STEM University. Brittany related a story of how her racial identity influenced the way she thinks about her interactions as well as prompted her to think about the meaning behind the behavior of others:

I feel like there is a bit more pressure just on me in general to say that I'm a Black woman. So I need to meet these standards and represent, like your group well because there aren't a lot of opportunities for our group to be represented

well in the world. I don't know I think maybe it just it's just me but I'm very hypersensitive to some situations. Like when I'm in a large setting and something questionable happens, it seems like somebody's following me around in the store, I latch onto things quickly. Things like that just get to me, if I'm walking out with the group of friends somewhere on a Friday night on campus, you know you are all really loud and laughing and happy and stuff like that but in my head I'm like 'guys we should be quiet' because I don't want to be like that group of loud Black girls. I think about things like that a lot, I don't know why. ... Like the other day, I left the building from a study session with a friend. It was 4 o'clock in the morning and it's me and this guy, this Black guy, and we are standing in the parking lot just talking or whatever. And this police car drives by, and then my friend was like 'watch, he's going to turn down here'. I was like 'no that's not going to happen.' The police turns and he comes back in and makes circles around the parking lot, and I was like 'that is weird.' But I didn't want to think it was like there are two Black kids in the parking lot. But as a Black woman, I'm hypersensitive to these kinds of things. I don't know why. I feel like I have a lot of faith in the way the world is working, but at the same time I'm just very skeptical of things. So situations like that, I pay a lot of attention to.

When discussing the experience of being a Black make on campus, Christian mentioned:

It has different components to it. ... I don't necessarily see that the campus is demeaning to us in any way, I think the only experience that I've had is being stopped by [campus police]. They asked for my ID. I don't know why. I don't really know the policies about doing that, I don't know about the instances in

which you can do that, but I know it was disconcerting, but at the same time that was my only, first and only dealings with something like that. As a Black male on campus you have to be conscious of how you communicate with others, you don't want to ever feel like you're pressuring others to do something for you or even to the opposites sex, you can't be demeaning in your language to them you know or be disrespectful to them, but that's one, common courtesy and two, I feel like Black males are put at a high judgment level that it's just more so because there's limited portion of us here... If anything I communicate neutrally. Being a Black male on campus you just have to tread water lightly, and allow yourself to be evaluated based on what you do.

Devon connected his experience to a larger societal context:

For me, I take it day by day. Take it one day at a time. I focus on – I control what I can control. I can't control what anyone else does. I can't control how someone else may feel. I know that stigma, I know what I'm up against as a Black male. I have an understanding of that.... You know, for the younger generation, as a kid seeing him [President Obama], it was like, 'man I can do that. I can do that'. Because you know, you don't see that on TV, and as a kid growing up, if all you see on the news is this guy killing this guy, this guy getting locked up, this guy dying, you're constantly seeing that, or even from an athlete standpoint, if you're constantly seeing just, "man we got LeBron James, we got Kevin Durant, all I can do is play basketball'. You know, that's poisonous to the brain. It's like, 'man if all I can do, if all I'm good for is playing basketball or if all I'm good for is killing somebody and going to jail or having lots of kids than man it's not

breaking the cycle'. You know I feel, in a sense, President Obama broke the cycle. He set an example for the Black culture to look up, and I look up to him for that, I appreciate that... Just looking at him as a man, and how he takes care of his family, how he cares for his kids, just setting an example, setting an example for so many young African-American men. Because another stigma for us [Black men] is we don't take care of her children, that's not the case. That's not the case. That's not the case.

Stereotyped. The stereotyped experiences that participants described were related to being athletes as well as related to their Black identity. For some, it was difficult for participants to pinpoint whether the stereotype was based on the athlete identity or the Black identity. Others saw the stereotypes as connected or amplified because of both identities. Still others saw some stereotypes as consistent across athletes' experiences regardless of racial identity. There were two main groups who the participants saw buy into the stereotypes, faculty and non-athlete peers.

Faculty. The stereotyped experiences participants attributed to the faculty interaction centered on accusations of academic dishonesty. Multiple participants related stories about being falsely accused of cheating. JaVonte shared:

Professors are ready to pull you aside and accuse you. I have been falsely accused of cheating one time by a professor and it actually took me going back and proving to her why I got the answers I got. I guess because there is a stigma attached to athletes without cheating, they [faculty] tend to think that's what we do. It kind of caught me off guard at first, that's never happened to me but like I

said it's just the reality of being here as a student athlete, it's something that you have to deal with.

JaVonte continued to share a story from a teammate who had a similar experience:

One of my teammates was falsely accused by a different professor of cheating on a test. The professor told him I think you're cheating and I need to report you to protect my reputation as a professor. So as a result my teammate ends up having to go to the student integrity office just to clear his name and prove he did nothing wrong. But then again it's that whole, he's an athlete and even if you look a little suspicious they call you out on something.... Some professors aren't like that, but you do have some who are trying to pinpoint you.

Devon also shared a personal experience of being falsely accused of cheating:

Me and another one of my teammates got accused of cheating on the lab exercise... We did the assignment ourselves and we got something wrong, and she said we gave an answer from a different class. She threw us into a category and she also came to us and said 'as football players you guys have this name for yourselves, you all know how to cheat.' Well, you know, we didn't cheat but it's hard for you to walk into a classroom here at [institution] as a football player and not knowing if you're going to get a fair chance like the other students... I'm not sure if it bleeds into other sports. I know for fact it's with football because there's more of us, there's a lot of us, and when we go into classrooms we tend to sit with each other and which makes us venerable I guess. The professors are more inclined to think we cheat because we sit together. A way that I've tried, and some of our teammates have tried to fix it is spreading out throughout the

classroom, getting to know some of the other students, which it that hard as well but making an effort to try to get to know some of the other students.

When discussing the classroom environment Devon added:

Believe it or not a lot of professors are always looking for something to catch us with, if you are making yourself vulnerable, if you are putting yourself in a position, I feel like you're making it harder on yourself. But like I said, I feel like it's unfair from the jump, I automatically get flagged, it's unfair from the jump, just going to a professor, going to a classroom knowing that the professor is feeling some type of way about you because you're an athlete, and particularly for me as a football player, it's unfair. It's not fair because you don't know me. You just know the title that I have, and me being a football player at [institution] and you know, honestly they don't even care who you are as a person, it's sad, but it's college.

Martin shared that he did not think Black students, both athletes and non-athletes, are seen as equal and discussed the challenges within the context of the classroom environment:

I had some classes, I actually had to raise my hand because they [professors and TAs] don't call on me, because I'm not getting called on. That's not necessarily, you know, that's not on the professor, but at the same time he probably dealt with some kids before who didn't do that [participate]. So I try to breakthrough those stereotypes, you know just get away from what you would conceive as, you know, a Black male on campus. And then also on the flipside, my teacher told me the story about a girl who came up to the professor, just letting him know that she

had an interview and that she wouldn't be in class. Before she even got to him, he said okay just hemi or travel letter. The girl doesn't even play, doesn't even play any sport but that's what is perceived you know we're [African Americans] most of the [athletic] population, so they're going to make an assumption, but they don't realize how hurtful that is. Especially to a normal [non-athlete], Black, [institution] student. I've never met so many brilliant African-Americans in my life. Have so many friends, I'm like, 'oh my goodness' they're intelligent, they are amazing, and I love them to death because they're the best and brightest, and just hearing how they got through school ...more power to them.

Martin went on to say:

We get these Clery Alerts, and who's the description? That's one thing we brought up we were talking about, discussing Michael Brown, and what does it mean? We're talking about what we can do you know as a group as [institution]. We should increase communication between the [campus police] and so then we threw out one thing, 'we're the Clery Alerts. We are the Clery Alerts'. That's who you see, no fault to them [campus police] but that's what it is... But just dealing with that fact you got to work, I'd say probably got to work twice as hard here to get noticed academically. That's why I put myself in a position to network, and just don't do anything to give them a reason to stereotype you.... So that's the whole, being Black at [institution], working hard, twice as hard, doing those things. Don't give them any reason for them to stereotype you or anything like that. You just run your race. You do all the things that you can do right, and

nobody's perfect. But you have to definitely work hard. Be humble, and find a way to exceed all expectations or standards they expect you to be at.

Non-athlete peers. JaVonte mentioned: *“One thing I’ve noticed here is that there is not much of a connection between us [athletes] and the student body. They [non-athlete peers] don’t think we deserve to be here... Others are intimidated by us for whatever reason”*. Later, JaVonte discussed the stereotyped experiences related to his identity as a Black man:

There’s a lot of stereotypes that you have to overcome. One thing I’ve picked up on is that people don’t see you as being articulate for whatever reason. I guess they assume that Black men can’t articulate themselves. I speak very well and it’s something I’ve noticed catches people off guard. On top of that, my experience as a student, not just in college but overall, I’ve observed the sort of peer pressure to be a class clown and not take your business seriously in the classroom or to only be about athletics and not serious about your books. I see so many guys, so many Black athletes, come through and they’re serious about their books. Guys who got internships from Fortune 500 companies because they set themselves up in school. So that stereotype is invalid but it’s something that you have to deal with. And then on top of that you know just walking around, you kind of get a sense that people are maybe scared of you for whatever reason. That vibe is something you have to deal with on a daily basis.

Devon shared his everyday experiences:

There will be nights or days that you are walking on the sidewalk and you see a student walking, a white lady, she may cross the street. You’ll be in an elevator

and she'll be tugging on her purse a little tighter, or you're walking past someone's car and they lock their car doors and it's like, 'I'm a student here at [institution] I'm not worried about you. I'm not going to steal from you... I'm actually here for the same reason you're here, to better myself.' It's just tough because you can't control what's happened. You can't take back what other people have already done and it's sad. It's sad to turn on the news and to see an African-American male suspect, armed robbery, it's hard seeing Clery Alerts from an African-American male armed robbery. It's sad because it's like, 'dang man, there's another strike I've got on me. Now I got to make sure I'm not looking suspect'.

When asked where the stereotypes of athletes and Black athletes come from Christian said,

I think it's because deep down within every students' heart they know we have a lot to do. So with them knowing that we have a lot to do, they I guess, innately feel that we want the shortcut and not to do even more [work] ... Probably in the past it's built off certain experiences with others, that's an individual thing. As I said before I like to tear down stereotypes and try to be the best leader or best form of something [I can]. I don't want to be conformed to something that doesn't really resonate well with professors or the community of athletes. So the stereotype is there but it's up to you to break it.

Martin related, *"I had a couple of times where I was going to my door and I left my keys and they wouldn't – the regular students wouldn't let me in because they didn't think I*

was a student". He went on to tell a story of an experience he and some other athletes had:

So we were actually in between classes, all of the student athletes, we're mainly Black and we all got out of class, we're just gathered around. We didn't have any class or anything, we just had some free time so were hanging out. And one of my friends was at the of the building and he said 'hey, man you all ought to get together and take a picture' so took a picture, and somebody put on Yik Yak, 'I like how the football team' – I don't know if he said football team – 'I like how they stand on the walkway and block the way for us to go to class' or something. So I went off on Twitter, like 'hey to the jerk who said this, where the same I said were just trying to be one of the six, were out here doing the same things as you. If anything, what we're doing is even tougher than what you're doing. So don't say anything, because you don't know, were just trying to make it'. So just trying to find a voice here, especially, being part of the [student organization] we find ourselves just trying to find a voice, trying to be relevant within [institution], and you know of course there's definitely been some advancements and everything, but we still feel as if we lack that same, I want to say, equality.

Martin later shared a story of trying to go to a fraternity party:

We're still shunned by some populations here, I can relate this to being a Black football player. In college you party. They don't let us in their fraternity houses here at [institution], only a few do let us in the fraternity house houses. We'll walk to the door after, maybe after a big win, we walk up, and 'hey you know any brothers?' Okay, all right. That's fine, that's understandable. But when we walk

up there and they say, 'hey we don't want any problems'. What are you talking about? Are you going to tell me as soon as I get in there that we don't any problems? That's the perception....those things, the small things, that's what makes us... In a way, we love [institution] but at the same time, it has its drawbacks. Ever since then we really haven't gone back to the frats, because of things like that just the fact that you can even, we go, we both go to the same school. Were both struggling, dealing with these academics, and we can't have fun together? The same ones who come and cheer us on. But sometimes I have some friends in there who will vouch for us, but I mean it shouldn't be like that.

Brittany shared about the general atmosphere of cultural intolerance perpetuated by students at STEM University:

On Yik Yak, I mean it's anonymous, so of course people are going to make fools of themselves... I read once somebody wrote something along the lines of, 'if you're Black and you got into this school, it was only because of affirmative action' or something like that. And I'm like, 'you really think every Black person who got in here only did just because of affirmative action? Do they still even do that? Why do you think you're so much better than everybody else'? I think it's kind of an [institution] thing, a lot of [institution] people think they're God's gift to humanity, they can feel so smart, but I see a lot of things on Yik Yak and try not to take them seriously... There's a lot of racial intolerance.

“Break it Down Day by Day”

The participant shared information of how they are successful as students and athletes. Without a solid plan for navigating both academic and athletic roles, the

experience was more difficult. There were three main strategies the assisted participants, time management, utilizing resources, and faith.

Time Management. Utilizing time well was an important strategy for success that all participants mentioned. Since schedules are intensive, athletes needed to make the most of the time they had. This meant that schedules were rigid and highly structured. JaVonte saw cutting out distractions as important to better time management, he went on to say, “*Setting aside a schedule, setting aside time to something, stick to it. Breaking it down day by day, that way it won’t sneak up on you*”. Christian noted the structure of his typical day:

I think my daily experiences are pretty much allocated to basketball. With classes, that’s the first priority... A typical day for me would be go to class, go to study hall, lunch, go to another class, and go to practice. So with juggling all that it’s difficult at times, you might want to be like ‘I can’t do it anymore’, but you do see the end result... You know it’s all worth it... So a typical day is class, practice, try to get some type of rest, and then you get homework and do the same thing over again.

Utilizing Resources. Athletes are provided resources through the Athletic Association to help manage time, develop skills, and study for course. The academic coordinators, advisors, and tutors worked closely with athletes. While tutors and advisors were available to all university students, participants indicated these resources were easy to access, and at times utilizing them was required by the athletic program. JaVonte stated:

It's very hard, but you have a lot, we have a lot of people here, employees in academic support, and they're looking out for us, and trying to get us through as well so we have them. No matter who my academic advisor has been, I've had a good relationship with them and I sense that they are truly care about us getting through this through the school and making it out of here.

Christian mentioned:

What the athletic program is providing you from academic coordinators to substantial tutors and anything you might need for academics... Regular students wouldn't be available to these options, of course they offer them, but you have to go searching for them. As an athlete they're just kind of put your lap.

Martin echoed:

Our academic staff put you in a great position for a tutor or anything you need.... They're going to put you in the right place, and lead you to what you need to do. So it's really up to you. They're going to take you to water, but you know it's up to you drink it. But it's definitely tough. The toughest classes I've had were later in my career here, but like I said, you just [have to] make sure you learn how to study. Learn how to study and learn what works for you.... Learn how to study, what to study, and learn your professors tendencies, don't be afraid to talk to the professor or the TA.

Faith. Participants noted that their faith and church experiences were important strategies for success, not just in school, but also in life. For some athletes, faith motivated and provided a perspective for success and fulfillment. JaVonte shared, *"I look at success for more of the spiritual standpoint, hopefully, God willing, help others to see*

the importance of learning about faith. Using the platform I've been provided to be a reflection of God in my environment". Devon also discussed faith in the context of purpose:

I want to wake up with a purpose every day. I feel like it's important to wake up with a purpose. Everybody has a reason for why they're on this earth. Everybody has a divine purpose, it is up to you to find out your divine purpose, it's your gift. And your gift comes from God... Your vertical relationship dictates your horizontal relationships, so whatever your vertical relationship is with him [God] that's how you're going to impact those around you.... So for me, every day I'm waking up with the divine purpose to reach someone, whether it's through my actions, through words, whatever it may be. I feel like that's what it means for me to be here. Not just to excel in the classroom, not just to excel on the football field, not just to put myself in it into a position where I can take care of myself and my family, it's deeper than that. It's about me going to bed with no regrets, waking up with no regrets. I feel like the biggest regret I would have is for me not to have a lasting impact on someone's life.... It's that important, that's my purpose, that's my divine purpose.

For others, faith provided a foundation for addressing disappointment or challenges. When Trey shared about overcoming his injury he simply responded, "*I prayed*". Christian mentioned how the foundation of his faith instill the values that other organizations try to, which was the starting point for approaching difficult situation or people:

I feel like my faith is so important because, the simple moralistic values that everyone wants to instill, or introduce to others in school or leadership training, it's already given in church... More or less, most of the principles in church are there for you to have a solid foundation in your faith.

Still others used faith as a way to think about society. Devon discussed the influence of church in framing how he thinks about crime within Black communities, looking at the Ten Commandments as the Love Creed:

If you love your brother or your sister, you won't steal from your sister. If you love them, you won't lie to them. I feel like today within the music, within television, it's thrown us away... It's not necessarily White on Black crime. It's more Black on Black crime if anything. You know? It's just for African-Americans, we've got to wake up, because we've been killing each other off... Because the end of the day when we kill each other you're killing two. You're killing two people. The person that you killed and the person that is doing the killing. That's two for one, so now it's just another Black male in jail, and it's just another Black male in the grave. You know it all goes back to the Love Creed. If you love your brother you won't kill your brother. You won't steal from your brother. You won't lie to your brother. You won't be jealous of your brother, if you really love him.

“Academics Humbles Us All”

Participants saw STEM University different, because academically the institution had high standards and was seen as prestigious. Some participants discussed how their experience as students at a Stem University were different than friends who went to non-

stem institutions. Amanda, *“some of the classes that we take are just completely different, like some of my old teammates at other schools, they take pretty simple classes”*. Xavier commented, *“[institution], it’s a different monster, it’s challenging me. I need the challenge in order to grow mentally, and I find it hard at times, but the payoff later on that’s all I can think about”*.

Many participants previously demonstrated ability to excel at course work. Martin came to college with multiple advanced placement (AP) class credits, graduated number 25 in his class, and had a 4.2 high school grade point average. He discussed the transition from a strong academic environment to such a challenging school:

The classroom experience, it’s great at times, but just dealing with the rigor you know even though I had a good transition, it’s a different monster.... Sometimes you have to skip class to study for another one, it’s serious here. It’s just so much pressure, and you try your hardest to put yourself in a good situation and everything. Sometimes it’s not going to happen. I’ve had plenty of times where I’ve put in so much work and effort and still don’t get the results that I necessarily want or the result is lackluster. I never made a C in high school. I had to get used to seeing that on my report card and I think that’s one thing I had to tell my parents, I didn’t think they realized how tough it was. You know, to appreciate A’s and B’s. One time I came with the card when I had made maybe four B’s and they said, ‘no that’s not going to cut it’. So just trying to realize, trying to tell them that, ‘hey, this is different. Maybe this C is kind of like a B if I was somewhere else. Or this B is an A, you know, even higher than that’. So just kind of getting

them to realize that, and then at the same time, not selling myself short, me saying 'hey, I'm fine with a C', and not get complacent.

Later Martin mentioned the effect such a rigorous academic environment has on athletes:

I want to say were humbled, definitely because of the work. I think that all [the work] humbles us. That's really what brings us down to earth.... The essence of academic kind of humbles us, so everybody's equal. I think that's the best way to say it. Everybody's equal. All those other places, they are treated like gods, they think they can do anything they want. So you really see few [institution] people in trouble, because like I said I think were so worried about things dealing with school, academics, and athletics we are so busy doing that, we have nothing else to worry about.

Brittany described herself, *"I'm a very hard worker, I like to persevere... it's kind of the reason why I'm here at [institution], I like to challenge myself, and hold myself to a higher level"*. Even as a student who excelled at math and science in high school, Brittany experienced difficulty in one of her science classes:

I was really struggling in the class, and I had tutoring and I would go to the study sessions, but it's just really difficult for me, to struggle. I think at one point I broke down because I was failing and I was like, 'how am I going to get out of this?'
There was definitely support by my friends, who said 'you can do this, you're at [institution], the classes are going to be hard, don't think you're the only one doing this bad, everybody is struggling'... I think I got a C in the class. That was crazy, because it was my first C ever. But I didn't feel as bad, because I know I put all I could into it.

Toward the end of her interview, Brittany connected the difficult academic environment to a lack of attention to social issues occurring on campus and throughout the United States:

The level of difficulty this institution has with academics makes it harder for people to pay attention to social issues, because everybody is so focused on trying to pass, and make good grades. So I can see where that lack of understanding would go but I think it's important that we all just stay in touch with what's happening outside of institution, it's important to stay grounded.

“They Helped Me Get Here”

Participants had differing relationships with family member and varied connections to home communities. However, regardless of the level of understanding one's family or community had regarding their experiences as athletes, each shared stories of how home was a persisting support system that motivated, encouraged, or inspired them. JaVonte shared about his relationship with family, *“I have a very strong relationship with mom, my dad, and my three younger brothers. We grew up pretty close and we lean on each other for support”*. Similarly, Christian mentioned, *“Family is huge, they got me here, so I've got a lot to appreciate”*. Amanda shared stories of difficult experiences from home. While home was sometimes a source of guilt, isolation and worry, it also reminded her of the love and support her family and community provided so she could pursue her dream of college and being a college athlete:

It's hard, but I gotta push through if I want to be able to help them at all. The people I care about, that's what I think about. I didn't stay home because I didn't want to get caught up in that stuff, but I also want to be there for those people. At

times, I feel selfish that I left, and left them there. They're the people that I care about, so it's like I need to be able to do something so that I can help them get somewhere... Because they are the people that I care about, and I love all of them. All the people I've gone to school with, the people that I've grown to know. It's just, I have to... It's because they've helped me grow, and be the person that I am, they helped me get here. They supported me, so I have to show them the type of love.

Some participants noted how family members helped instill them with important values. Martin highlighted his dad's focus on strong academics, "*One thing my dad wanted to make sure of was grades. He stressed grades grades grades... He said he doesn't care if I don't play ball one more day. He said, 'make sure you take care of schoolwork'".* While discussing his difficult course load senior year in high school, Martin recalled his father's words, "*You should feel more self-fulfilled by finishing strong*". So when Martin did transition to such a rigorous college, he thanked his father for pushing Martin to excel academically:

Because I had such rigor and responsibility when I was in high school that transition wasn't as tough. I remember emailing him after my first day and telling him thank you for that. I just learned how to be able to balance that [football] and be able to really tune in on taking care of the academic side.

Devon shared how valuable it was to have his father involved in the college recruitment process:

My dad was kind of my bridge between me and them [college recruiters], because I really didn't like a lot of attention. A lot of student athletes don't have that

coming out of high school, and you see a lot of guys on ESPN and they don't really know what they're getting themselves into, because as a kid, I couldn't imagine my senior year, 18 years old on ESPN.... Having to answer to everyone without my dad, because I really didn't know much about the recruitment process. Because of him, because of him knowing some guys with in the recruitment process, I was able to gain knowledge about it before it started....

Later, Devon discussed his connection to the community at home, and how it served as motivation for him to keep going as well as give back:

There are a lot of kids back home in city that have a lot of talent, who had talent, who could possibly have made it to this level, but it was just their environment that got them stuck there. It's sad because a lot of guys never make it out, and when I go back home it's always humbling to hear from one of my own classmates, 'man we proud of you, you made it out', which for me, I've never struggled a day in my life. My parents are well-off, they own their own business. I never struggled, but I knew we have friends who did struggle. I had the best of both worlds, so I had an understanding of what they were going through. I didn't know what they were going through, but I had an understanding of it, and it was heartfelt. So it's always humbling going back and hearing, 'Devon, we're proud of you'. And for me, I do it for myself and I do it for my friends back home. Not just football, but school as well, that's always my reminder daily. That's what helps me wake up in the morning, that's what keeps me going. Just hearing from them, and I'm pretty sure that that'll surprise them, because I tell them all the time, when they say, 'We're proud of you'. I say, 'man I'm proud of you, you

know, just to come back home and see you doing well-off that's enough motivation for me to keep going, to keep striving and just shoot for my goals'.

Trey shared the story of how he got to the high school and sports program he did. Trey talked about the losing his dad at a young age, and how his mom, god-parents, and siblings to helped him get to where he is today:

My mom went and got me into the best school she could, so she actually gave up legal guardianship, pass it over to my godparents so I could go to school. So that I could get a good education, and their sports program was good.... When I first started playing football my God dad, he was my football coach and he has two kids that I played with, I called the my cousins so every weekend I was going there, and my dad passed away, I wear his wedding band on my hand, my dad passed away when I was 12. So by this time, I started playing football when I was six or seven so he had been in my life there for a while so my dad passed away he took the opportunity to step up and help lead me and teach me how to be a man so the day my dad passed away, he was like, the God dad, pretty much stepped up and looked and I looked at him and from there I'm not really sure how he thought the title, but it sticks, you know he's that person, that guardian Angel that protects me, he looks out for me. So after my dad passed away, he used always make sure that everything was good for me. So when school lost accreditation he talked to my mom... Mom was the one that came to him about the guardian issue. He's the one that told her that, 'it's just paper, we all know who's your real parents'. It's tough giving up guardianship, but I'm glad and I love my mom for doing that because I feel like I would not be here, because growing up I've been around a

bunch of good athletes and people that stayed in [county] who went to [high school], good athletes, but only managed to go to lower classification schools because they didn't have the opportunity, their whole system in [county] was poor, I mean the coaches never really cared about the players and there just there was just a lot of stuff going on there school area. You know, as far as drugs and gang related activity, so I'm truly blessed that I avoided that. Both of my brothers kind of went down that road. They weren't heavily involved or anything but they've done their share of work and just seeing that made me realize that's not what I want to do. So the thing is, that my brothers learned their lesson, and they taught me and spoke to me like, 'don't do this, don't do what I did', and they helped push me into becoming better. So I would say I have a good support system that kind of put me on, and made sure I remained on track so I would never fall off.

“It's Like a Business”

Not all the participants participated in revenue generating sports, but most mentioned the political nature of the collegiate athletic environment. The relationships with coaches varied based on each individual's experience, however, coaches and other systems were intertwined to create a complex political context that athletes had to learn to navigate. Amanda shared a story of how her coach leveraged her incoming class of freshmen to motivate the returning athletes to work harder and perform better, which created animosity and a negative team environment. She shared:

The way our coach talked to them before we got there, it was like, 'oh you guys, you can do whatever you want out there, I don't care, keep' – this is the nice way

that she said it, keep messing around on the court, as I have freshmen that are coming to take all your spots. They are coming to take your spots and they are starting over you'. It was more so an animosity, like 'oh you think you're going to come and take my spot in your freshman and I'm a senior? Oh you lost your mind'.

Early in his narrative, JaVonte stated, “*Whenever you play sports, there are politics involved*”. Later he discussed the approach he took with coaches:

I've always taken more of a business approach with coaches. I respect them, but I don't necessarily have a deep relationship with any of them. That's not to say these guys are just robots, they don't care about us, but at the same time it is what it is. They are here, they're getting paid to win games. They recruited us to help them win games, and so that's kind of my mindset of it. But I don't have a problem with my coaches....When I first got here, I kind of struggled with one of my coaches. I felt like he wasn't being honest with me, and honesty is a pretty big deal for me and my folks. So this coach in particular, he's not here anymore, but initially when I got to institution that was something that I had to deal with.

Devon also mentioned interactions with coaches as more of a business exchange:

Sometimes our relationships can be kind of awkward with our coaches. Because, football, college football is like a business. It's like a business and they're getting paid to coach us. They're getting paid for us to excel out there on the field, and it's like, it's kind of like 'what have you done for me lately'? ... Sometimes coaches will walk past you and won't speak. They'll recruit you the next thing you know, you get here, coaches won't speak to you and it's like, 'man, well dang'.

But you go out there and you make a play and now all of a sudden, 'well hey how you doing, Devon? What's going on? Hey how you doing'? So it can be inconsistent. It can be awkward.... But then again, you have those, some of those coaches who care about your personal life, but I feel like for us of all players, we have more of a relationship with our position coaches rather than the head coach, because we spend more time with our position coaches. When it comes to them, it's more comfortable. I wouldn't say that I would go to my position coach and share some of the stories I've been sharing with you with him, because just the business behind football and the inconsistencies. And it's kind of like, 'can I trust you'? It's scary in a sense.

Devon went on to share more of the complexities surrounding the player/coach relationship:

It's crazy because you're dealing with kids, where young men, but you're still dealing with a kid. We go out there on the weekdays and we have practice, and you turn around and you're cussing us out. Then you want to turn around and ask us how are doing, and how are families are doing? It's kind of like reverse psychology. Not everybody realizes the game. Not everybody realizes that it's a reverse psychology, and it can turn your players against you in a sense, but for me, I understand what's going on.... In a sense, our coaches are somewhat father figures for us. So for you to curse a guy out on the field, and then turn around and say, 'hey how you doing' in the hallway, if you to recruit this kid who comes from a single parent home and he comes here and now all of a sudden you act like you don't know him, it's like, 'well dang, where's my father figure'?.... You know they

have a family to take care of as well. It's their job. That's their 9-to-5 and it's how they feed their families, how they feed themselves. So for us being student athletes we take it seriously because we love the game, but right now it's not putting any money in our pockets.

Martin also discussed the business side of the coaching relationship:

I had to realize recruiting is over. They got you here now. So you're going to see their true personalities, and not saying that they're all bad, but they have a job. They brought you here, to compete, and do the things they recruited you to do. You've got to realize it's not personal, they're business, like their jobs are on the line.... Their perfectionist and they hold it to a certain standard, it gets kind of tiring, like this is all we do. That's all I receive from you is just coaching, coaching, coaching, coaching, and sometimes they lack that personal experience but like I said you can't blame them.

Structural Analysis

The way someone communicates his or her story provides important clues to meaning, but as James Gee (1991) pointed out, there is often more than one acceptable answer or interpretation. Through the structural analysis, I offered an interpretation to the meaning behind the stories told by participants. In order to do so, I re-transcribed stories from each participant in the manner of James Gee, which broke narratives down in a literary fashion and included elements such as parts, strophes, stanzas, lines, and codas. Transcribing stories in this manner allowed me to engage in the essence of what an individual is communicating through vocal cues, pitch, word choice, tone, and pauses.

Aligning with structural analysis, I considered the stories within the context the individuals' complete narrative when ascribing meaning, rather than looking for meaning in one or two specific stories. I presented highlights of the stories from each participant's narrative, focusing on the ones that occurred in the institutional context. Overall, this analysis offered a demonstration of the richness of each participant's story. However, there were narrative structures that were present in each participant's story.

One narrative structure that was consistent across participant stories was the shift from first person to second person. While this occurred with differing frequency, each participant recounted stories from the first person, but while deriving meaning from one's story each individual started using the second person as a way to provide interpretation for the presented story. I presented examples from multiple participants below.

A second structural element in participant narratives was the shifting nature of the dominate focus of time. All participants were asked to tell stories about how they came to play sports, as well as stories about their more recent experiences at STEM University. Most stories were past or future focused, with little attention to current or present experiences. While some stories were much closer to the present than others, I found the participants who opted into the photo elicitation portion of the study explored the present more than those who only participated in interviews. One possible interpretation is that the instructions for taking photos prompted those individuals to think on a daily or micro level.

Amanda

Like other participants, Amanda structured her stories with different focuses in time. However, many of her stories, past, present, and future were rooted in her home

community. Interestingly, Amanda mentioned multiple times that she did not want to stay at home for college, but throughout her stories she made connections to the influence of back home as a source of motivation for the future, guilt for her present situation, and a mix of fondness and sadness when recalling the past.

STANZA (Past)

1. I was getting in trouble / getting kicked out of school
2. But with basketball you have to do well in school
3. I had no choice if I wanted to play
4. I felt like I can honestly do anything

STANZA (Present)

1. I am constantly hearing about friends dying, going to jail, or stuff like that
2. I can't really talk to them [current teammates] about it
3. I feel selfish I left
4. They are people I care about

STANZA (Future)

1. I gotta push through if I want to be able to help them
2. I didn't stay / I didn't want to get caught up in that
3. But I also want to be able to be there for those people
4. I can help get them somewhere

Another structural element to Amanda's stories was how she closed stories. Amanda provided space for other individuals' sides or perspectives to be just as valid as hers. She accomplished this through the use of collaborative language, which validated her experience and interpretation as well as that of others. She believed in her perspective, but also saw other individuals' sides as true too.

STANZA

1. I work for this / it's like a full time job
2. But I feel like it's a struggle on both ends
3. For regular students / for athletes
4. Either way it's getting worked off / none of it is really free

JaVonte

Throughout JaVonte's narrative was a consecutive repetition of words and phrases. The repetition occurred when JaVonte emphasized a point or agreed. It signaled to take note of what JaVonte said.

STANZA

1. It's more pressure
2. It's more pressure in a sense
3. If you slip up there's more riding on you
4. As opposed to a regular student

Additionally, near the end of JaVonte's stories he flipped roles from narrator to listener. JaVonte asked questions to check on my intentions for the final research as well as learn what motivated me to pursue the research I did. His interest in the overall study demonstrated a concern for the experience of African American athletes at STEM University beyond his own experience and sport.

STANZA

1. Is this something you will publish?
2. What motivated you to do this?
3. I wish you the best / I hope it goes well
4. I'll be looking for it [final draft of the study]

Devon

When asked to share about himself and the story of how he came to play sports, Devon did not start my sharing about himself. Devon began those and some other stories about his experiences by talking about his family. This emphasized the central role that family plays in Devon's life. The influence of family was present when Devon discussed sports, his faith, his values, and his future. The closeness of Devon and his family was woven into most of the stories he told.

STANZA

1. My dad played football in college
2. My dad played in the NFL
3. He played football all his life
4. I was introduced to football by him

Another structural element in Devon's stories was the use of catch phrases to emphasize the point. Devon shared these phrases as lessons he was learning through his experience. These phrases come from family and friends as well as through the books he read for self-improvement.

STANZA

1. My parents taught me / Start strong, finish strong
2. That's my motto every semester, for every season
3. Just remembering that daily
4. Start strong, finish strong

Xavier

What stuck out about Xavier's stories was the word choice he used to talk about his teammates. The language he used demonstrated the dichotomous way he viewed his teammates. In some stories, Xavier referred to their relationship as hostile, awkward, and uncomfortable. In others, he described the team like a family, and expressed love and friendship. The changing language indicated a conflicted view of his teammates.

STANZA (Negative)

1. It's always different
2. What they say comes off a little hostile sometimes
3. I'm not saying they're bad people
4. Sometimes what they say can get to somebody

STANZA (Positive)

1. They're my family
2. It's how I look at it
3. It's like home

4. I consider them to be my brothers

Another interesting element in Xavier's stories was how he described how others saw him as well as how he saw himself. Xavier used the word role model multiple time for how people from the community back home as well as from his family saw him. He embraced that role, restating it as an identity, but expanded on other roles and identities as well. Xavier expressed the pressure he felt, since others focused on that one dimension of his identity. The term role model carried a lot of weight. It was part of what Xavier referred to in the follow up interview as the burden he carried with him each day.

Martin

In the stories that Martin told, he described his experiences in detail, using the first person. When he summarized or pulled meaning from the story he just told, Martin switched to using second person. This shows that he was able to take his own experiences and pull out the lessons that he already learned as well as the lessons others could glean from his experience.

STANZA

1. I don't want football to define me / I wanted it to be a vehicle
2. I feel you can't be one dimensional
3. I'm all about breaking the stereotypes
4. Those things can't define you and confine you

STANZA

1. I had to realize recruiting is over
2. They have a job to do
3. You got to realize it's not personal
4. You can't blame them

Another structural element to Martin's stories was the way he referred to himself, as a bridge between athletes and non-athletes. Since Martin was involved in more than

athletics, he spoke of being a person that connected others. He valued this role, as evidenced by the tone of pride and satisfaction he used when sharing stories of this role.

STANZA

1. Diversify yourself / meet different people
2. I wanted to bridge that gap between student athletes and regular students
3. I really encourage student athletes to get involved
4. I think that's something their missing

Trey

The way Trey narrated his experience stood out, it was different than the way other participants narrated their stories. One key element that stuck out is that Trey discussed his experiences from almost an exclusively athlete perspective. Even when talking about difficult or challenging experiences, those stories revolved around the athlete role. Other participants talked about other roles and identities, and what it was like to be a Black athlete, but Trey expressed that the stereotypes were due to his athlete identity and not his racial identity.

STANZA

1. I can't say people act a certain way because I'm Black
2. I've seen White athletes try to talk to people on campus
3. They act the same way / they ignore you
4. I can't say it's because I'm Black / I think it's because I'm an athlete

Another way that Trey's stories were different was how he referred to himself and others. Trey used the term "fan" when he referred to non-athlete students as well as when talking about the campus police, faculty, and staff. In addition, he spoke about himself as a commodity.

STANZA

1. I look at myself as an entrepreneur
2. I am a business now

3. I am trying to make myself marketable
4. I really have to look at myself as a business / that's what I am right now

At the time of the study, Trey was the only participant who was pursuing a career as a professional athlete. Therefore, his athlete identity may have been stronger than the other participants' athlete identities. This may also explain the positive spin he put on his experiences, including the business side to college athletics and relationships with coaches.

Brittany

Consistent throughout the stories that Brittany told was the phrase, "I don't know". Brittany used the phrase in three different ways, as a verbal transition or filler, a way to protect herself, and as a manner to express confusion. She used this phrase at the beginning of many stories as well as when transitioning from one major point to the next. The phrase served as a filler, providing time for Brittany to think about what to share.

STANZA

1. I don't know
2. I think it's just my nature / in my spirit
3. I don't know
4. I'm very hard on myself

At times, when Brittany utilized the phrase, "I don't know", it was as method of protection. By saying, "I don't know" Brittany protected herself from having to be decisive or make concrete interpretations of her experiences. Additionally, the phrase protected her if I dislike what she shared. "I don't know" offered flexibility and left space for ambiguity.

STANZA

1. I don't know / I think maybe it's just me
2. I'm hypersensitive to some situations

3. I don't know why
4. I don't know / things like that kinda get to me

There were times where Brittany was confused or frustrated. The tone Brittany used was noticeably different. The use of "I don't know" during these moments were when the phrase was meant literally, Brittany was communicating true lack of understanding.

STANZA

1. I don't know
2. I guess people just don't realize
3. They don't see why we care so much
4. You should care too / it's not just Black people affected by police brutality

Christian

In the stories that Christian told, there was ownership on the front end, utilizing first person, I statements. However, when he closed stories, there was a shift in the message toward a lesson or toward teaching, seen with the use of second person, you statements. Christian discussed his experience at STEM University beginning with a summary, moving forward with the details of the story, and closing with the lesson or take away from the story. The structure of his stories showed connection to his roles as a leader on the basketball team and an older brother.

STANZA

1. I'm a natural born leader
2. I want others to see a good way of doing things
3. I always wanted to be the person to change the system
4. If you want them to make a decision, they have to first see you make a decision

The structure shifted when Christian told stories that represented more than solely his experience. When Christian told stories that may exemplify the experience of other athletes or other Black males on campus, he almost exclusively told the story from the

second person perspective. Since Christian knew the purpose of the study, to understand the experiences of Black athletes at STEM University, he seemed to take on the role of educator to myself, as the researcher as well as future readers.

STANZA

1. As a Black male on campus you have to be conscious of how you communicate
2. Black males are put at a high judgment level
3. Being a Black male on campus you just have to tread water lightly
4. Allow yourself to be evaluated based on what you do.

For certain stories, Christian set up with a preface. These were tentative approaches to stories or experiences that either, explained the intention behind what Christian told or eased me into information that I may perceive as unfavorable or unable to understand based on my own identities. It was only in these stories where there were hesitations and pauses in the delivery of information. These elements were clues to a lower level of comfort Christian had with sharing stories in an unrestricted manner. In addition, it portrayed an awareness that Christian and I did not share many identities.

STANZA

1. It had different component to it
2. I don't necessarily see
3. The campus isn't demeaning to us
4. I think I've only had one experience

Photo Elicitation

Three participants, Devon, Brittany, and Xavier, agreed to contribute to the photo elicitation portion of the study. Participants documented their experiences as athletes at STEM University, and sent three to four photos each. In a follow up interview, participants discussed each photo, and offered a description as well as meaning behind the visual representation of their experience.

Devon

The photos that Devon sent focused on three important areas of Devon's experience, family, sport, and purpose. Devon titled the first photo (figure 1), "Me and my family after the [rival team] win". Devon explained:

To me, family is everything. They are the reason why I am here at [institution], they are the reason why this is possible. I sent that picture, because I wanted to show you from the African American perspective, there are strong families out there. Because society will paint a picture that that might not be the case, that there aren't as many strong, African American families out there, but there are, there are. So I wanted to send you that picture as an illustration that there are strong African American families out there.

Devon's second photo (figure 2) was a self-portrait of himself before football practice. Devon sent the picture because beyond academics, football was a major part of the reason he was at STEM University. He explained, "*I sent the picture because I was on my way to practice, and this is a part of my daily routine. I practice every day... I sent that to show, this is what I do, this is my job at [institution]*".

The third photo (figure 3) Devon titled, "Today's purpose". When talking about this photo, Devon stated:

I do one of these every morning, and this particular one sticks out to me, His Calling, it spoke a lot to me that morning, and basically I what I got from it was, having an understanding of God's calling for my life, and praying on that daily and asking, 'what purpose do you have for me on this earth'? Because at the end of the day, that's the most important thing to me...my mom actually gave me this

book, it's called 'A Daily Walk: Proverbs for Men' and that was the devotion for that day. And it spoke to me, told me to grab an understanding of my calling for being here [institution] ... I would say my calling ultimately to become a better me, because my purpose is to give back to my hometown. But my dad told me, 'when you come back, don't come back with the same things that you left with'. So my calling is to be a better me, and also, help someone become a better them in the process.

Devon went on and shared an example of his calling from the previous semester at school:

Interacting with some teammate, talking to them, because a lot of those guys, as well as me, we all have a lot of questions [about life]. So being able to listen and give my input when needed... I've had some experience since the last time we talked... With one of my teammates, he wasn't getting as much playing time as he thought, and I was just trying to give him a perspective from it, and [provide] understanding from where he was coming from as well. Giving advice about being patient, praying for patience, because everything happens for a reason.

Brittany

Brittany sent three photos, each depicted a physical space that was part of her everyday experience at STEM University. While not in reference specifically to her pictures, Brittany offered her point of view, and described what a typical day was like:

A day in my shoes is really busy, really hectic. But there are always the small moments that remind me that everything is not so bad, that I'm here for a reason. Probably just like the typical athlete story is what a day in my life is like.

Brittany went on and talked about each photo. The first (figure 4), she titled, “Early Morning Dorm View”. In discussing that photo, Brittany stated:

I sent that one because that is the most peaceful time of the day. I wake up, and I can look at my door at the landscape and other dorms, and it's one of the most peaceful times of my day... It's the calm before all the craziness happens, before my long day ahead of me with practice and classes. It's like, 'ok, I have a minute to just breathe, and think', I guess that's why it's most peaceful.

The next two pictures were similar, but had different meanings. Brittany sent a landscape of the track area with some of the city in the background (figure 5). When describing the photo, she commented, “*I like that one because it makes me happy about my choice of choosing [institution]. When I look at the skyline and the beautiful space of the track*”.

The third picture was a picture of the track before morning practice (figure 6), titled “A.M. Practice Flow”. Brittany explained, “*I thought it was cool, because it's always a pretty sight, and it reminds me why I love my sport. Getting up early in the morning, just seeing a track, it's like, 'this is nice'. It makes it worth it*”.

Xavier

The pictures that Xavier sent were deceptively simple. However, as he explained the meaning behind each one, he revealed the intention and thought process that guided his choices. The first picture (figure 7) demonstrated not only the academic side of Xavier's experience, but also the motivation of Xavier to excel academically. He explained:

That was a time when I was study for finals, I was trying to prepare, make sure I knew the material. I had a lot on my mind and a lot to do, so I really wanted to get a picture of that, so I spread out all the work that I was doing at that time. I really enjoy the fact that in the background, there's empty computers. I felt to myself, 'I got to do this for myself. No one is going to take these tests for me'. Just making sure I can execute well... Considering I am one of the only engineering majors in my family, just being able to graduate and pass this milestone is huge. Just to see the smile on some of family's faces when I cross the stage with a diploma speaks volumes to what I'm doing on a daily basis to try to execute and do really well and exceed all expectations.... I've been called a role model, and for me to live up to that, if not exceed it, that would be a great thing.

The second picture Xavier sent was a doorway into Xavier's room (figure 8). He talked about what was like, coming home from a long day and unlocking the door to his space:

My room is a safe place, a safe haven where I can relax and unwind. I don't do any homework in my room, so for me to unlock that door, going in and relax, listen to music, watch movies, it really helps me unwind. It's made a difference in the school experience that I have now... I feel comfortable here, a temporary home, but it [the picture] is the entrance to what I call, 'my happy place'.

Xavier also took a picture of a picture (figure 9), which symbolized more than the relationship with his brother. He explained:

I carry my wallet everywhere I go, and I have a lot of pictures of family, accolades, I carry a lot around with me. Kind of like carrying the burden of what

I've been through, where I am today. This is a picture of me and my brother, I remember how innocent and happy I was, and I always strive to get back to that stage, get back to that happiness I once had, even knowing that things I do now, just seeing the smile on my brother's face. He's grown up, he's changed, but I know that tie can't be severed, we're going to be brothers for life. I take that to heart, and family is huge. It [picture] allows me to retrace my steps and remember where I came from. Remember family is always everything. I carry these pictures around with me all the time...the carrying the burden, I carry around the pictures because I know my past experiences are different than everyone else's...and those experiences have made me who I am today. The path I take, the people I've touched, and having my family there, that doesn't change. I like to carry those to know where I came from, my roots. And if I ever get off track...I can always revert back to these pictures and know that there were times when things were a lot better, and there were times when things were a lot worse. Regardless I carry all those with me because that is who I am.

The last picture Xavier sent was of a favorite spot on campus and a favorite drink (figure 10). He discussed how it reminded him of the little things in life that bring joy and relief:

The little things in life make it great. So there is this spot I love to study on top of [building] ... I always get a Starbucks and head up there to go study, and the view's always amazing, the weather is nice, and I notice all the little things that I enjoy being in that moment at that time. Regardless of what I may be going through, I know that these little things can always cheer me right up and bring out

the best in any situation. Even if I have a lot of homework or a test I can just focus on some of the little things in life that really make it special... I love that view.

Composite Narrative

As early as I can remember I was playing sports with the other kids in the neighborhood and with my siblings. It was something that was fun, and something that I was good at. My parents have always supported my involvement in sports. If I was out there, they were out there. Games, practices, camps, tournaments, there was always something going on with sports, and I played something each season. It wasn't until high school that I realized excelling at sports might provide opportunities for the future. I always knew I was going to college, it was just an expectation my parents had, but if I could go to college and still play, that seemed like the best of both worlds. I started getting looks in tenth grade, and it was exciting to have colleges interested in me. The summer of my junior year of high school, when July rolled around and the NCAA lets colleges contact prospects, I can still see the mailbox full of letters. Colleges from all over the country expressing interest in me. Luckily, my parents were there to keep me grounded.

I went on all my official visits, but felt like STEM University was the right place. It wasn't too far away from home, it was in an area that offered more than just the university, I could really see myself on the team, and the value of the degree was hard to pass up. I knew it was a hard school, but I didn't know how hard until I started my freshmen year.

That transition from high school to college was a rude awakening. As a senior in high school you are on top, just to go back down to the bottom as a freshman again. The

class I came in with got along well for the most part, but there were some who had big heads. Me, I just kept my head down, and did the work. It took me that whole first year to figure out how to survive as a college athlete. The workouts are so much harder, I am playing against people who are so much better, the coaches, well, let's just say, it's a business and there are a lot of politics involved. On top of the athletic part, school was on a whole new level. I am smart, I took AP classes in high school and got good grades, but here it's a whole new level.

It seems like it's the goal of some professors to fail as many students as possible, and being an athlete on top of that makes it feel like there is a target on my back. Some professors are understanding and try to help, but others couldn't care less that you have practice and games, and are up every day at 5am for morning work outs. There is this stereotype that some professors have of athletes, that we cheat and we don't care about school. Most of the athletes I know care a lot about school, it sucks that a few people who were athletes and made bad decisions cause everyone else to look at us like we don't belong here. As bad as some of the professors are, some of the students are worse.

No one wants to be in groups for projects because they assume that I won't do any of the work or I won't understand the material. Whenever a group project is assigned, there is a shuffling of trying not to be with the athletes in the class. Non-athletes just think we aren't smart, or they are afraid of us, I don't understand that. It hurts to know that many students think we don't deserve to be here. I remember one group project where this kid was trying to explain everything to me, he did it like I was a kid. When I finally had a chance to share what I knew, I think that made him

embarrassed, because everyone looked so surprised that I was articulate, and I did the work.

That is just how it is here, people assume things about you because you are Black, or big, or both. Like when I walk down the main drive after practice to the apartments. I see other students clutch their bag tighter, sometimes I hear car doors lock. One time, me and a teammate were walking home from the library really late, and there was a student ahead of us. He kept looking back over his shoulder, like he was scared we were going to jump him or something. Next thing we knew the campus police were driving up asking where we were going. I mean, really? We are in full on school gear, carrying backpacks, minding our own business and the campus police stop us? I guess that is because those Clery Alerts are always saying the suspects are Black. It's just another thing that we have to worry about.

I don't know what to do about that, because it is more than just a STEM University problem. It's a society problem. It makes me wonder what all those people fought for during the civil rights movement, especially when you see Black kids just being shot for now reason across the country. And people here, for the most part, they don't care. Since school is so busy and everyone is just trying to survive the class work, no one is paying attention to what is happening in the world around them. I think this place makes you more self-absorbed. I mean not everyone is like that, but it is so hard and so stressful I don't think students can handle anything else.

I'm lucky though, my family is supportive and I can tell them what is going on with school or on the team, and even if they don't quite understand, they still listen and offer advice. Sometimes they expect me to always have all A's like high school. I try to

explain to them that a B or C here is like an A at most other schools. They don't get it, but they see how hard I work, so they don't pressure too much. Really it is me, I'm pretty self-critical.

I want to be the best student and best athlete, but sometimes I am just too tired. Having to keep up with my schedule, most days I am physically and mentally exhausted. Wake up, practice, class, class, lunch, class, study hall, practice, dinner, homework, and finally bed, just to get up and do it all over again. That is what most students don't understand about being a college athlete. They assume that we have it easy, that things are given to us, and we can just coast. No, that is not true. We work for this, I work for this. And it is hard work. Yes, I get a degree and get to play the sport I love, but it's not easy like they assume. Not having loans when I graduate will be nice. I suppose other students will work for it too, just on the other end when they are in the work world, paying off those loans.

I really do love being here. My teammates are like family, it's hard for them not to be since we live together, eat together, practice together, travel together. I'm not saying I am close to everyone, but they understand what it is like. Coaches, it's their job to win, and so they treat all of this like a business, but teammates, we look out for each other. I do think my coaches care, but they are trying to feed their families and win games, and sometimes they forget that we are just kids. I mean, we are on our way to being adults, but we are also kids. I messed up in a game, and my coach yelled at me for like an hour, and then I had to go on my twitter and see all these people calling me names and telling me it was my fault we lost. That is tough. I had to learn how to use that as motivation to do better, to prove others I can do it, but no kid should be treated that way.

It's not easy, but I do think it will be worth it. I get to do what I love, and when I leave here I will have a degree that carries a lot of weight. People will see that degree, and the respect it carries. Then I can go back home and help others, show them that I got out, and they can too. If they work hard, study hard, they can go on and do good things. I think that is the ultimate goal, I want to help others. That is my purpose; that is what God had called me to do. I want to use the opportunity that I have been given to inspire and help others, maybe by opening a community center in my hometown where kids can go to stay off the streets. Maybe I will coach too. I don't know yet, but I do know that I want to provide for my family like my parents did, and instill the solid values they instilled in me. Ultimately, being a student athlete is just a vehicle I am using to pursue my dreams.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented the findings of this narrative inquiry. The common themes in the stories of participants were: (1) it takes sacrifice, (2) we are the Clery alerts: stories of race and racism, (3) “break it down day by day”, (4) “academics humbles us all”, (5) “they helped me get here” and (6) “it’s like a business”: the politics of college athletics. In addition, I analyzed structural elements to the stories in order to provide more depth for understanding the meaning each participant ascribed to their stories.

Two structural elements emerged in every participant narrative. The first was the shift from first person to second person when telling stories and deriving meaning. Participants shared personal experiences and details using the first person, and offered meaning or lessons from the stories using the second person. The other structural piece

seen in each narrative was the shifting nature of time. While some participants shared stories in the present tense, the overall dominate focus of time was in the past and future.

Next, the chapter presented the findings from the photo elicitation portion of the study. Three participants shared visual documentation of their experiences as students and athletes at STEM University. I presented the findings from the follow up interviews, where those participants offered interpretations of each photo.

Closing the chapter was a composite narrative. I touched on the themes that emerged from all the participants' narratives. This composite narrative utilized elements from each participants' story to create a realistic picture of what it was like to be an African American athlete at STEM University.

In the final chapter, I will discuss the conclusions that can be made from this narrative inquiry. Also, I will offer implications and recommendations for practice, which the athletic association at STEM University and other similar schools may want to consider moving forward. Lastly, the final chapter will make suggestions for future research.



Figure 1: Devon, “Me and my family after the [rival team] win”.



Figure 2: Devon – Before football practice

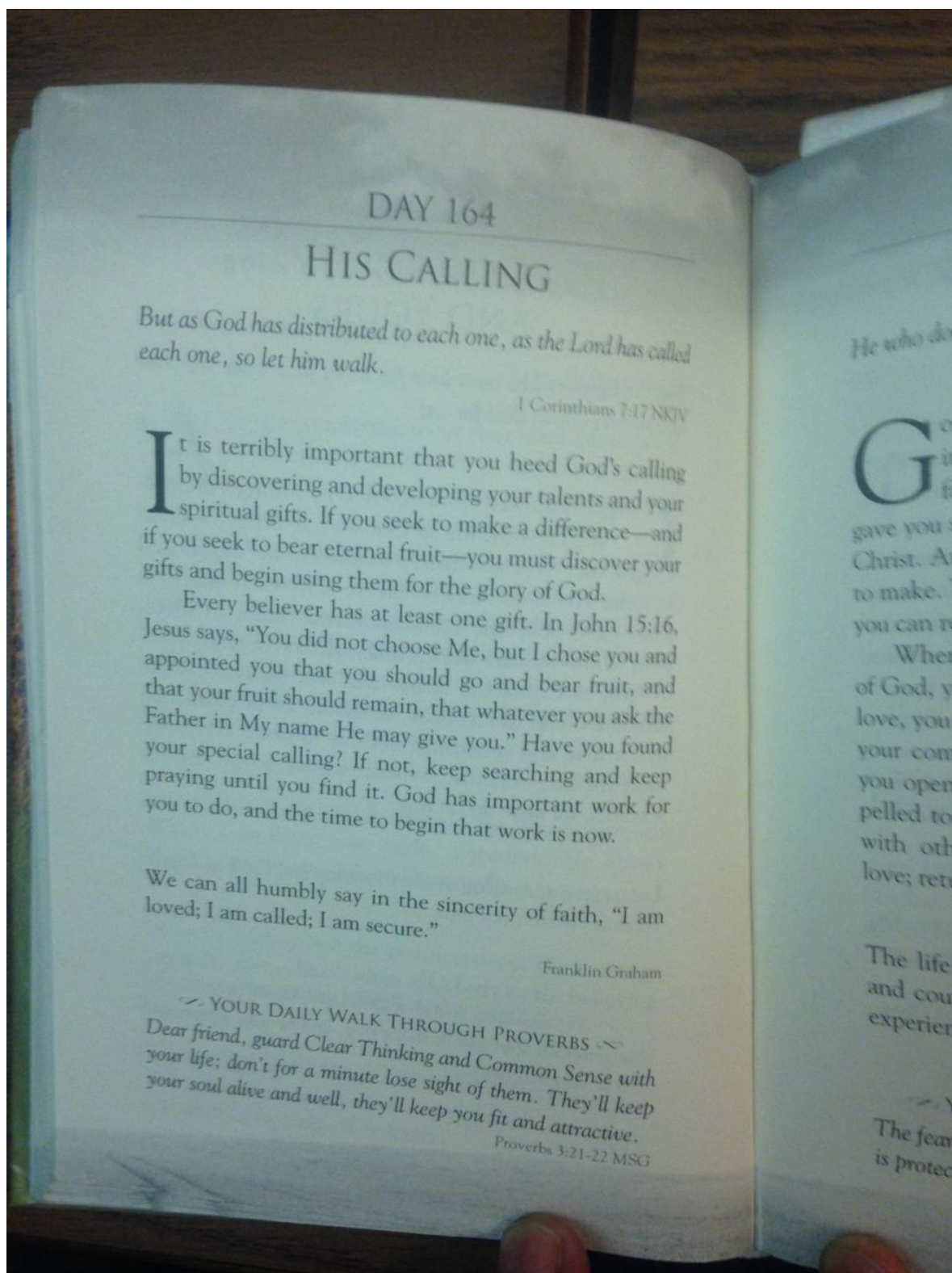


Figure 3: Devon – Today's Purpose



Figure 4: Brittany – Early morning dorm view

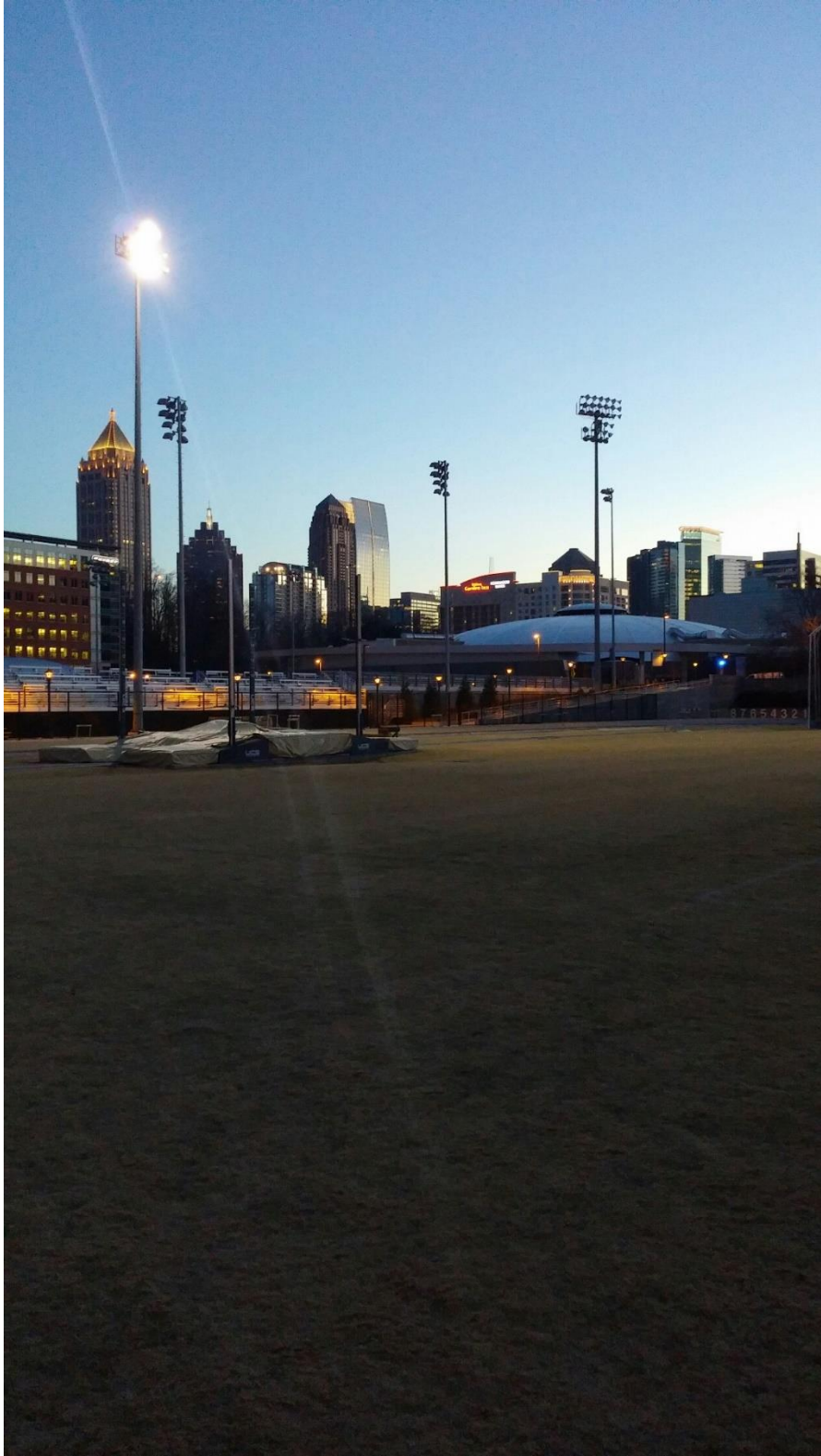


Figure 5: Brittany - untitled

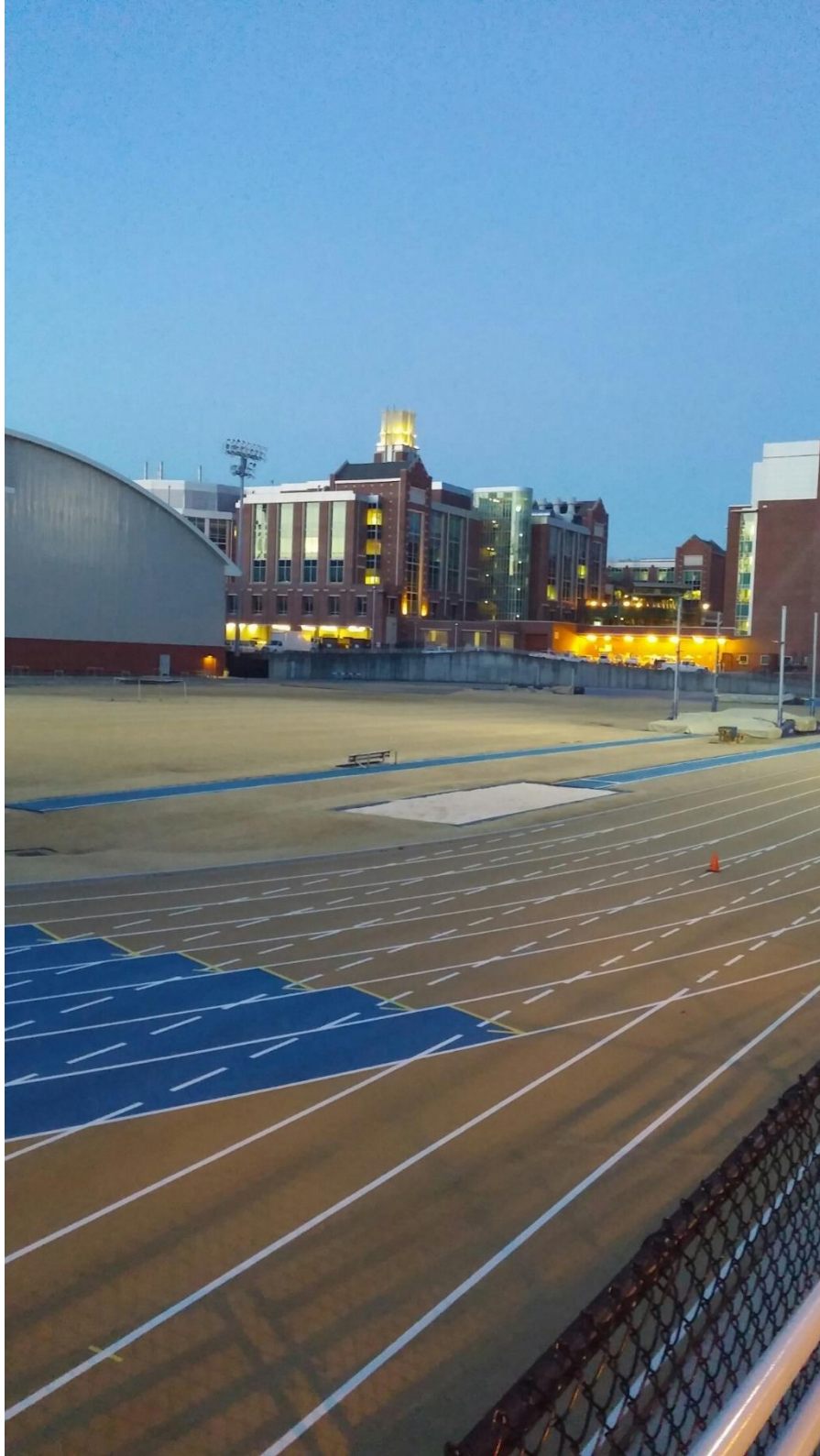


Figure 6: Brittany – A.M. Practice Flow

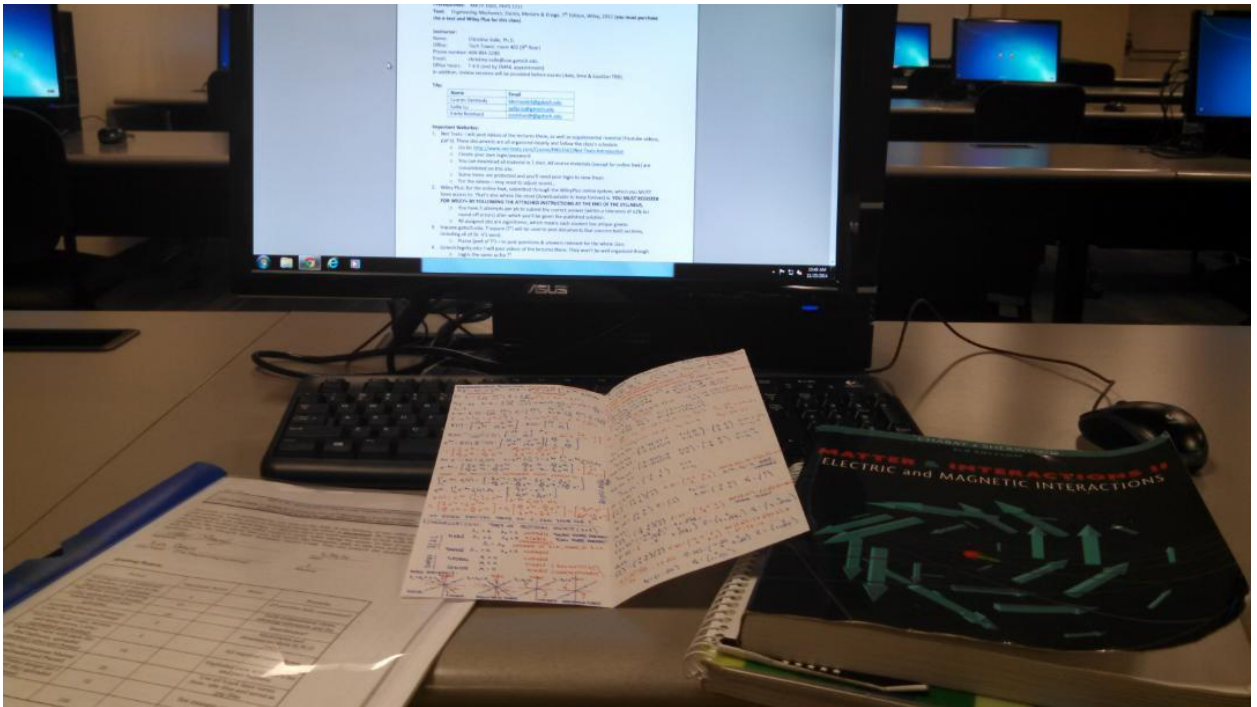


Figure 7: Xavier – Studying for finals



Figure 8: Xavier – Entrance to “My happy place”



Figure 9: Xavier – “Me and my brother”



Figure 10: Xavier – Favorite study spot, favorite drink

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

You will not wonder at his weird pilgrimage, you who in the swift whirl of living, amid its cold paradox and marvelous vision, have fronted life and asked its riddle face to face. And if you find that riddle hard to read, remember that yonder black boy finds it just a little harder; if it is difficult for you to find and face your duty, it is a shade more difficult for him; if your heart sickens in the blood and dust of battle, remember that to him the dust is thicker and the battle fiercer.

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to describe and understand the experiences of Black athletes competing and learning at a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) university. Participants in this study were 8 college athletes who, at the time of the study, were competing at STEM University. The goal of this study was to amplify each participant's story, and offer a narrative that portrayed Black athlete experiences in their own words. Additionally, I sought to counter the deficit framework that much of the research on African American athletes adopts. By listening to and analyzing the participants' stories I better understood their lives, and learned about the meaning the participants attributed to their daily experiences. The following research question guided the study; what are the stories of experiences of African American athletes at a STEM institution?

Discussion of Findings

In the stories that participants shared regarding their experiences, 6 themes emerged as consistent across each participant. While some participants discussed some themes more directly than others, I noticed elements of each theme in the stories that each participant told. The themes were, (1) it takes sacrifice, (2) “we are the Clery alerts”: stories of race and racism, (3) “break it down day by day”, (4) “academics humbles us all” (5) “they helped me get here”, and (6) “it’s like a business”: the politics of college athletics. These themes highlighted the complex environments and relationships Black college athletes in a STEM environment engaged with on a day-to-day basis. Below I discussed each theme as well as highlighted the connections to previous research on college athletics, Black athletes, and the college environment for African American individuals attending PWIs.

It Takes Sacrifice

This study found that participation in college athletics required sacrifice for these students. The nature of the sacrifice varied, but study participants discussed the physical, academic, mental and emotion, and relational effect of the athlete role. Each type of sacrifice influenced participants overall experience of college. Since these individuals were neither one-dimensional nor compartmentalize those experiences to a singular identity or role, each sacrifice influenced the whole individual, not solely the academic or athletic self.

Similar to other studies on the college athlete experience, participants in this study had extremely restricted schedules (Rothschild-Checroune, Gravelle, Dawson, & Karlis, 2012), and felt isolated from the non-athlete student body (Edwards, 2011). Research on

African American athletes' experiences at PWIs highlighted the mental and emotional as well as academic demand of coping with social isolation and racism on campus (Beamon, 2014, 2008; Person, Benson-Quaziena, & Roger, 2001). The findings of this study confirmed that regardless of the type of PWI, the impact of athletics on African American athletes remained the same.

“We Are the Clery Alerts”: Stories of Race and Racism

The stories participants shared related to race provided context for their overall experiences as African American individuals at a STEM institution as well as in a society that perpetuates racist assumptions about Black individuals. Some stories described experiences of being stereotyped by faculty and non-athlete peers. Most of the stories involving faculty related to stereotypes of participants' academic ability. Participants believed faculty differentiated Black athletes from other African American students, and identified the athlete identity as cause for beliefs about academic performance. Non-athlete peer stereotypes included academics, but expanded to other areas. Other students' stereotypes were rooted in disconnection and the master narrative society perpetuates about Black individuals and athletes, including the assumptions that Black athletes are inarticulate or aggressive. These stories confirmed CRT's assumption that racism is part of the everyday experiences of Black individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Additionally, participants highlighted the experience of being watched, as if under a microscope, which created additional pressure for participants to be conscious of how they act, speak, and carry themselves. Often participants discussed the desire to counter the stigma that was automatically attached to both their athlete and racial identity, which

required participants to work harder than their White counterparts to be respected and viewed as serious students.

Based on the stories participants shared, experiences of African American athletes at a STEM institution did not differ very much from the experiences of other Black students at the same institution or the experiences of Black athletes at other PWIs. Other research found similar results. Black students at PWIs interpreted the environment as hostile (Biasco, Goodwin, & Vitale, 2001), and experienced explicit racism as well as microaggressions in the classroom and across the entire campus environment (Beamon, 2014; Smith, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso 2000).

“Break it Down Day by Day”

Participants discussed a number of strategies that helped them persist as students and as athletes. Time management, utilization of resources, and faith were the most common. Time management and utilization of resources were strategies specific to the student and athlete roles, while faith was a strategy that encompassed other areas. Since college athletes maintained such rigorous schedules, time management was a skill that helped athletes balance the requirements of school, and athletic competition. Other research also noted time management as a necessity for college athletes (Rothschild-Checroune, et al., 2012).

Additionally, the resources participants mentioned were primarily initiatives based in the university’s athletic program, but they covered academic elements such as advising. The resources ranged from study hall to tutoring to assistance with academic scheduling. While participants noted appreciation for resources, it is important to note that some participants related the assistance to the athletic program’s need for athletes to

remain eligible for competition, and not necessarily focused on helping athletes pursue desired academic majors or persist toward graduation. Researchers noted similar concerns from other Black athletes (Beamon, 2014). This related to the CRT concept of interest convergence, which I discussed below regarding the politics of college athletics

A few participants indicated that faith and religious beliefs were another strategy for success, but unlike the other strategies, faith guided more than decisions. Faith was the foundation for an outlook on everything from everyday experiences to beliefs about social issues. Not all participants reported faith as influential for success, but those who did discussed faith in a manner that indicated a high level of commitment. While there were no studies that explore the faith of African American college athletes, specifically, one study on college athletes and faith showed athletes had a higher level of commitment as compared to their non-athlete peers (Storch, Roberti, Bravata, & Storch, 2004).

“Academics Humbles Us All”

Participants perceived the academically competitive environment as influential to how they experienced college. Each participant noted that the rigorous academic load seemed different than friends who attended other types of institutions. The difference was discussed in two ways; first, the overwhelming academic pressure inhibited most students at STEM University from taking an interest in social issues, such as police brutality. Second, the difficult academic environment helped keep students grounded. Even though there was a disconnection between athletes and non-athletes, everyone experienced the academics of STEM University as challenging and humbling.

Furthermore, most participants pointed out they were accepted into the university as students first, which counters the popular beliefs that African American athletes were

special admits or they were unprepared for the rigorous academic environment of STEM University. Participants indicated a high level of academic achievement in high school, and a dedication to learn as much as possible from the college experience. Most participants recognized the temporary nature of athleticism and physical ability, and reported appreciation for the high quality education received.

The academic ability of these participants counter what is often reported in research about African American athletes. Some secondary education systems fail to adequately prepare Black athletes for college, and promote a lack of academic commitment (Anderson & South, 2007; Hawkins, 2010). While research confirmed a disparity in school funding (Bifulco, 2005) and under preparedness for college level work (Palmer & Young, 2009), this study demonstrated that administrators, faculty, and students should not make assumptions of one's academic ability based on racial/ethnic identity or athlete role.

“They Helped Me Get Here”

Each participant discussed how family and home community support were tied to their experiences leading up to and during college, as well as were a source of motivation for future endeavors. Regardless of the knowledge participants' families and communities had about the college athlete experience, these entities both supported and motivated participants. In a sense, the support of family and home community grounded participants as well as assisted them in staying focused on their goals for school and the future.

In a study on student athlete relationships, Donohue et al. (2007) found athletes perceived their family relationships to be the strongest, and contributed most positively to

athletic performance. While Edwards (2000) critiqued African American families for pushing their children toward athletics, Lomax (2000) countered that Black families prioritized school as a way to exit disadvantaged circumstances. This study demonstrated family and community support, regardless of athletic success. Participants viewed athletics as a vehicle to access education, which was considered more important for a successful future.

“It’s Like a Business”

What emerged through this theme was recognition of the political systems of college athletics, particularly in terms of revenue generating sports. Most participants noted how college athletics involved these systems, but only those who actively competed in revenue generating sports related it to their personal experiences. Other participants who competed in non-revenue generating sports discussed it as a reality for other sports team, but not for themselves directly. The overrepresentation of African American individuals, particularly in revenue generating sports, is well documented (Harper, Williams, & Blackmon, 2013; Lapchick, 2014), and the composition of participants in this study mirrored previous research. More than half of the participants competed in revenue generating sports. In this study, the CRT principle of interest convergence undergirded the theme “it’s like a business”: the politics of college athletics.

Interest convergence is a concept that Bell (1990) used to explain the laws and policies that maintained the power of the White majority and oppress underrepresented groups. In essence, White individuals promote racial equality only when it benefits the White majority. The interaction between coaches and participants represented this concept. In some situations, coaches provided support and attention, while in others

coaches ignored or treated athletes harshly. Athletes perceived these interactions as based on what the coach needed to do in order to win and get paid. The findings of this study aligned with other research that argued Black athletes are part of complex political systems that earn money off their hard work on the field (Donner, 2005; Hawkins, 2010).

Structural Analysis Findings

The way participants narrated their experiences demonstrated a few key concepts that expanded my understanding of the participants' stories. First, participants discussed their experiences as personal occurrences as well as lessons from which others can learn. When the participants explored the meaning associated with their stories, a shift occurred. The story transitioned from recounting a specific event to teaching me, and future readers, about the story's relevance for understanding the world of a Black athlete at STEM University and in society. The participants demonstrated a commitment to social change and saw themselves as active agents to produce that change.

Another structural element was the shifting nature of time. Participants told stories primarily from the past or about their ideas for the future. Some stories were set in the present, but generally provided contextual information rather than meaningful representations of experience. The shifting nature of time demonstrated the influence the past has on participants' experiences as well as the perspective that the future holds positive opportunities.

The other structural elements that participants demonstrated through the narration of their experience highlighted the importance of analyzing qualitative data within the context of a complete interview. Similar to the counseling process that attends to both content and process, I developed a deeper sense of who my participants were through

analyzing both themes (content) and structures (process). As Gee (1991) pointed out, how one narrates his or her story can offer just as much useful information as what one's story is about.

Photo Elicitation Findings

Three athletes participated in the photo elicitation experience. I asked each person to document his or her daily experiences and provide three to five photos of a typical day. In follow-up interviews participants shared about their photos and the meaning they associated with each picture. What emerged was participants chose to highlight physical spaces and relationships that were meaningful in their experiences.

The physical spaces that were part of the participants' daily experiences represented academic and athletic locations as well as places the participants saw as safe or refreshing. While discussing these places, participants recounted the value of each space, which reminded me of the important role environment plays for helping not only African American athletes, but also all students be successful. Since research shows that African American students often find the campus environment of a PWI as negative (Beamon, 2014; Singer, 2005), it is important that college and universities create spaces what feel welcoming and safe for African American students.

Participants highlighted relationships as sources of motivation and stability. These relationships were with family members, which represented the importance of a strong family connection. Of note was how participants wanted to highlight these relationships to counter the negative stereotypes that exist about the strength and stability of African American families. The reality that African American individuals have to

work to counter those stories confirms the first tenant of CRT, that racism is part of the daily, lived experience of Black individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Conclusions Based on Findings

The participants in this study had some important similarities beyond a shared racial and athlete identity. Each individual studied and competed in the same higher education context, which brought challenges as well as privileges. The challenges were centered on the stigma associated with the athlete identity, the navigation through the highly political system of college athletics, and the societal stereotypes of African American individuals. Racism cannot be ignored, as it affected the everyday experiences of each participant.

However, there were aspects of privilege in each participant experience. The institution where the participants studied and competed recruited top tier individuals, who demonstrated the ability to perform under rigorous academic conditions. Most participants came into higher education with a strong academic background, which means they had access to school systems and resources that promoted educational success. In addition, their family structures provided positive support.

Furthermore, each individual understood the complexity of their experiences, as demonstrated through stories that discussed the real challenges and difficulties as well as the positive aspects. As participants shared, it became clear that each worked to integrate their ideals and possibilities with the reality of their day-to-day experiences. The university environment felt like home, and there was comradery. However, it was also isolating, and distrust permeated academic, social, and athletic environments. The

participants understood this dichotomy and work to make the most out of their experiences both positive and negative.

Ultimately, the experience of African American athletes at STEM University were similar to other Black athletes at PWIs. One key difference was the perception of academic rigor. Participants perceived their academic experiences as more difficult than student attending other types of colleges and universities.

Implications for Practice

While the purpose of narrative inquiry is not to generalize the findings to a wider population, there were important implications to consider for the institution, STEM University, as well as for individuals who work with African American athletes at other PWIs. Through this study, participants shared meaningful stories from their lives and experiences as athletes and students. Prior to participating in the study, athletes were never asked to share about their experiences. Each athlete thanked me for doing this study, and for listening what they had to say. Participants indicated that it felt good to talk about their stories. Based on the reaction of the participants, Black athletes should be provided the opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences, which can occur through a few avenues.

Access to Mental Health Professionals

One recommendation of this research is the need for colleges to provide increased access to mental health professionals. Meeting with a sports psychologist or other counselors and therapists can provide the space for African American athletes to vocalize their experiences in a safe and nonjudgmental environment. Since the athlete schedule is challenging to accommodate, these opportunities need to be incorporated into already

established expectations such as study hall. Some individuals may balk at the idea of speaking with a mental health professional, so it may be advantageous to provide meetings as part of a yearly check in with each athlete. Broughton and Neyer (2001) provided a model that athletic departments can follow as well as highlighted common issues and concerns of college athletes.

Mentoring Program

Another recommendation is to add a mentor program for African American athletes to the existing life skills program. The NCAA already works with member institutions to provide life skills programs to teach skills that will help college athletes during school as well as after graduation (*Life Skills*, 2015). A mentor program for African American athletes could offer intentional, ongoing discussions with a trained mentor. Mentors could be professionals who work at the institution, outside of athletics, or community members who want to support these students. Other athletic programs utilize mentor programs for athletes, and these programs are formal aspects of the athlete experience, complete with formal content for mentoring sessions. Mentorship can include educational aspects, such as life skills development as well as provide a relationship of one-on-one support.

Affinity Groups

Affinity groups are another way for African American athletes to connect with each other and the professional throughout athletics who share their racial/ethnic identity. Participants shared that the African American students who are not athletes connect through student organizations and clubs. While these opportunities exist for African American athletes as well, a racial affinity group gives Black athletes the opportunity to

specifically discuss racism, oppression, and privilege associated with their athlete role. Michael, Conger, Bickerstaff, Crawford-Garrett, and Fulmer (2009) described affinity groups as "an assembly of people gathered with others who share a common element of identity in order to explore, celebrate, sustain, and process their experiences around that identity" (p. 56). Utilizing this framework, an African American athlete affinity group is an avenue for individuals to create interpersonal connections and find support.

Intergroup Dialogue

Another finding of this study was the significant disconnect between Black athletes and their non-athlete peers. From this disconnection stemmed hurtful stereotypes and assumptions. Programs that connect athletes and non-athlete peers can build bridges of understanding that are currently lacking. In order to overcome the disconnection between African American athletes and non-athlete peers, STEM University should host a series of intergroup dialogues. Intergroup dialogues are an intentional way to bring individuals from different social identity groups together in order to talk about social issue in a meaningful way (Gurin, Nagda, & Sorensen, 2011). Research on intergroup dialogues demonstrated that college students developed more awareness of their own identities and societal issues as well as greater motivation to promote social justice (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). Since researchers demonstrated the benefit of intergroup dialogues for creating understanding between groups, intergroup dialogues at STEM University are likely to help close the gap between Black athletes and non-athletes.

Reform

Colleges and universities, the NCAA, and other entities invested in intercollegiate

athletics should pursue reform. It was clear that participants' were impacted by the rigors demands of athletics and academics. In addition, participants discussed how the political nature and commercialization of college athletics influenced their experiences. There was pressure to remain eligible, but some athletes indicated that did not always mean progress toward degree completion. While the NCAA has enacting reform to address academic issues (proposition 48), more needs to occur across at institutions as well as nationally.

Reform is part of the history of the NCAA, and throughout its existence numerous changes addressed issues and concerns, including safety and academic performance (Hawkins, 2010). Beyond the NCAA, other entities have promoted reform for college athletics. Reform should empowers Black athletes, rather than use them. Options for reform should begin early in the recruiting pipeline, in the secondary school systems and communities from where Black college athletes start their careers, and continue through the college experience on to professional sporting environments. Ideas for athletic reforms that empowers African American athletes include allowing for reduced in-season course loads, increased stipends for living expenses, decreases in commercialization of college athletics, and increasing the overall diversity in the university structure, including faculty, students, coaches, and administrators (Hawkins, 2010).

On a small scale, faculty and staff members can make small changes or reforms in order to positively contribute to the Black athlete experience. Participants noted that faculty members that took interest in the athlete's experience made them feel valued. Faculty and staff can simply ask athletes about their athletic endeavors to start to build positive change. Additionally, the formation of groups in class discussion and in group project created a negative academic experience. Assigning groups in a way that does not

single out the athletes in a class can assist in avoiding the class shuffle that participants mentioned non-athletes do to avoid being in groups with them.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the stories from African American athletes within a specific institutional context, and can provide a foundation for additional inquiry. Much of the research on Black athletes focus on males and individuals who participate in revenue generating sports. The study was open to athletes from all sports and genders, and I did not explore differences based on sport or gender. More in-depth exploration of experiences of athletes from a single sport may reveal key differences, particularly if the research expands beyond revenue generating teams.

In addition, participants indicated the surrounding community effected how the university community responded to and interacted with them. The local town or city environment permeates across campus boundaries, and can increase or decrease feelings of acceptance. Colleges and universities should explore how to local community influences the campus environment, so the institutions understand not only how their systems impact African American athletes, but also how the larger environmental context frames the Black athlete experience.

Another recommendation for future research is a longitudinal study that follows athletes from high school through college, and the years after leaving higher education. The stories of experiences across a significant period of time could offer a deeper understanding of how athletics influence Black athletes as they experience key life transitions. Also, through a longitudinal study researcher could explore the way the stories of participants change. While there have been some longitudinal studies regarding

African American college athletes, most are quantitative in nature (Comeaux, 2008;), or only include data from one or two levels of competition, high school, college, or post-college (Harrison, Comeaux, & Plecha, 2006). A study that follows participants from high school, through college and beyond may generate information that will help college and universities develop effective interventions that promote the success of Black athletes.

As noted previously, there is research regarding the African American college athlete experience. However, there is little on the athlete experiences of other racial/ethnic groups. Iber (2008) discussed an increased focus on a Mexican American college and professional athlete in popular literature, and Lee (2005) studied Korean American women and the cultural meaning of sport. However, research that included other underrepresented racial/ethnic groups studied populations from a White and non-White dichotomy (Demeulenaere, 2010). Future research on college athletics should explore how individuals of other racial/ethnic groups describe and interpret their athletic experiences.

Research on Black female athletes is an emerging field. Recent studies found female African American athletes experienced isolation, stereotype bias, and an expectation to educate coaches and teammates on Black culture (Norwood, Waller, & Spearman, 2014) as well as are more intrinsically motivated than their male counterparts (Outlaw & Toriello, 2014). In addition, Cater and Hart (2010) found that Black female athletes tend to have multiple mentors related to different areas of life, which helped athletic administrators better understand and support these students. Previous studies of female African American athletes recognized unique needs of these individuals, but more

research needs to occur so educators and administrators are promoting practices based on sound research rather than assumption.

Limitations

While the context of a STEM environment was central to this study, I recruited all the participants from one institution. The institutional context was unique, but there are other, similar schools where this exploration could occur. Expanding this study to other STEM colleges and universities may offer a clearer understanding of how the institutional type effects the experiences of African American athletes.

In addition, it was a challenge to use photo elicitation. Initially, six participants indicated interest in the photo elicitation experience. However, only three individuals participated in the actually photo elicitation portion of the study. Participants indicated interest in taking pictures, but remembering to take ones that depicted their daily experiences added to the already long list of daily tasks. The responses received from the three participating athletes enriched my understanding of their experiences as well as offered insights that would have been missed without the this visual data collection method.

The overrepresentation of football players in this study mimicked the overrepresentation in college athletics. However, there are teams that were unrepresented through this study. Different sports have cultures and subcultures that may not be consistent across all kinds of athletics. Since this study did not represent all sporting subcultures, some of the experiences of African American athletes who competed in other, unexplored sports may be unrepresented in the stories told by other athletes. Furthermore, participants self-selected into this study and most disclosed a leadership or

mentorship role within their specific team or for the athletic department as a whole.

Individuals who agreed to participate may be more intrinsically motivated or active in the community than those who declined the invitation to participate.

Critical Race Theory as a White Woman

Initially, I thought I would be able to utilize Critical Race Theory for this study.

While I was aware of the objections of some scholars regarding the use of CRT by White researchers, I believed the methodology I employed and the measures for trustworthiness would allow me to adequately follow the theoretical assumptions of this framework. I thought that because I provided stories that countered a deficit view of college athletics, I would align with the CRT tenant of counterstorytelling. I believed that because I preferenced the voice of the participants, I acknowledged the legitimacy of the participants' experiences. Additionally, because I believed racism was an everyday reality for participants and I committed to social justice, I would utilized CRT well. These were assumptions made out of the privilege that I have. Certainly there were portions of this study that were critical of college athletics and aligned with CRT tenants, however, I failed to fully understand and utilize Critical Race Theory in the data analysis. What occurred was a thorough narrative analysis, which included some critique of college athletics.

I found myself uncomfortable, as well as unable to interrogate the stories participants shared as a CRT scholar would. I struggled with the idea of questioning the stories participants shared for ways society has socialized the participants into alignment with the master narrative and into oppressed roles. CRT required me to call into question not only the way I see the world, but also the way the participants do. A CRT study

would question how systemic oppression caused these individuals to adopt the identity of a college athlete, taught participants to narrate their stories the manner they do, and even why participants chose to take part in the educational and athletic settings chosen.

I acknowledge that I was naïve about my understanding of, and my ability to use Critical Race Theory as a novice scholar and especially, as a White individual. The privilege I have as a White woman made me unable to know how the interviews were influenced by conscious and unconscious relational structures that exist between individuals of different racial/ethnic groups. What was and was not said in interviews may relate to my own race and gender. Did participants disclose the same information in the same manner as they would if I shared the African American identity? I do not know. Even though I worked with a research team and utilized member checking to account for possible bias in analysis, those measures can neither mitigate the fact that a White woman conducted interviews, and information may have been lost in the initial interview process nor account for the power dynamics that were at play out of my and the participants' awareness.

I see Critical Race Theory as an important theoretical framework for research, and I will continue to learn about CRT as well as read studies that utilize CRT. However, through this study I realized that I must respect the complexity of this approach. In the future, I may be more equipped to use CRT, especially as I grow in my ability to interrogate my own privileges.

Final Thoughts

The influence of college sports on the life of African American athletes is significant. However, to focus solely on the athlete role ignores the whole person. As my

participants taught me, each is more than just the athlete identity. They each carry familial, academic, sport, and societal expectations, and the college environment influenced their experiences, as did the individuals who shared classes and spaces with them.

When I started this research, I set out to study the resilience of African American athletes who studied and competed at a STEM institution. The rationale was to counter the common deficit framework often utilized when researchers study Black college athletes. What I realized through challenges from my committee and research team was that I was viewing the African American athlete experience through my own privileged perspective. I made assumptions about my observations and interactions, prior to actually listening to the stories of the individuals who participated in my research. What emerged from this study was a combination of resilience and coping. The participants openly acknowledged the need to cope in an environment that was, at times, hostile. Resilience was a process that continued as these individuals succeeded in classes and in sport competitions. Participants characterized resilience as “getting out” and graduating.

Ultimately, the path to social justice in college athletics is before us as educators, and learners. Without reform in college and university athletic programs, the NCAA and across the entire educational spectrum, the systems of inequity will persist. It is the responsibility of everyone, regardless of identities and social status, to promote practices that value the individual over revenue.

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APENDIX A

Demographic Questionnaire

 **THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**

Have you completed a year or more of college at Georgia Tech?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do you identify as African American/ Black

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are you currently an athlete competing (including red-shirt status) in a NCAA Division I recognized sport? These sports are: football, volleyball, basketball, baseball, softball, cross country, swimming and diving, track and field, golf, and tennis.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Name:

Email address:

Cell number:

Are you willing to be contacted via text message?

☐ Yes

☐ No

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APENDIX B

Recruitment and Consent Letter

Dear [Institution] Athlete:

November 19, 2014

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Diane Cooper, in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled Narratives of African American Athletes at a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Institution. The purpose of this study is to share the stories of how African American athletes describe and interpret their experiences at a STEM Institution. I based participation in the study on the following criteria: (a) identification as African American/Black, (b) been enrolled for a year or more as a student at Georgia Tech, and (c) currently an athlete competing (including red-shirt status) in a NCAA Division I recognized sport.

Your participation will involve 1 face-to-face interview, and should only take about 45 to 60 minutes. In additions, participants will have the opportunity to opt in to additional participation through taking pictures highlighting your everyday experiences, sharing them with me, and participate in a follow-up 30 minute interview describing the pictures. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

All participant information will remain confidential. Only I will have access to the identifiable information. All information shared with research team members will be de-identified. All information associated with the study will be password protected, and locked in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. Each participant will have a pseudonym, and I will not reveal any personally identifiable information. Any individual identifiers will be removed at the time of transcription. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only. The findings from this project may provide information on better understanding the experiences of African American athletes at attend a STEM university. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you meet the criteria and agree to participate in the above described research, please follow the link that will ask for your contact information so that a researcher can contact you to schedule an interview:

https://ugeorgia.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_bezI2BdlW8taVoh

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call or text me, Shauna Nefos Webb at (423) 915-6348 or send an e-mail to snwebb@uga.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 609 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu. Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records. Sincerely, Shauna Nefos Webb, M. Ed. Doctoral Candidate, University of Georgia

APENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Greetings! I am Shauna Nefos Webb and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. I am a student in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services. Thanks for making time in your schedule to meet with me and participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to gather stories African American athlete experiences while enrolled at [Institution] The goal is to provide a better understanding of how African American college athletes describe their experiences. Additionally, the study will offer stories of how African American athletes at a STEM institution succeed. By hearing your stories and experiences, I hope to better understand your experiences at [Institution].

All information that you share will be confidential and your identity will not be associated with any of the study documentation. You will choose a pseudonym, which will ensure confidentiality. I will audio record our interview and take some notes during our time together. I will transcribe this interview and will send you a copy for the transcription for review. You may end the interview at any time or decline to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. Feel free to ask any clarifying questions about the questions I ask throughout our time together. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Can you tell me about yourself and what aspects of your identities are most meaningful to you.
2. Can you tell me about your decision to participate in athletics?
3. Can you share with me about your decision to attend [Institution] and compete as a college athlete?
4. What is it like to be an athlete at [Institution]?
 - a. Tell me about your experiences in the classroom.
 - b. Tell me about your experiences on the field.
 - c. What are your experiences with your teammates and your coaches?
5. Think about a time while at [Institution] when you were facing a difficult situation, a challenge or some adversity. Tell me about that experience.
 - a. How did you manage that experience?
 - b. Describe the strategies, people, relationships that help you during that experience
 - c. What did it feel like to face this situation?
6. Can you think of a time when you had to overcome a difficult situation while a student-athlete at [institution name]?
 - a. Tell me about it. Can you describe it for me?
 - b. Tell me why that particular moment stands out to you.
 - c. How do you know you have bounced back?

Thank you for sharing your stories with me. It is an honor to hear about your ability to overcome challenges, and it will be extremely helpful in my research.

APENDIX D

Photo Elicitation Protocol

Another dimension to my study is to see visual representations of what your experiences look like for participants. I am asking participants to take pictures (1 to 5) on their phones and email or text me a visual representation of their experience over the course of the next 2 weeks. Once I receive pictures, I would like to meet up again for a short conversation about what your pictures mean and why you chose those images. Are you willing to participate in this? If so, here are the instructions and guidelines.

Thank you for your willingness to document visual representations of what African American athlete experiences look like to you. As you experience your life in the next 2 weeks, take a few pictures that portray your experiences and email or text them to the researcher. In order to maintain confidentiality, any identifying image of yourself will not be reproduced without your permission. Also, please do not take pictures that identify others without their permission. Photos revealing the identity of non-study participants will not be reproduced without that individual's written consent. Once the two week period time concludes, I will contact you for a follow up interview to discuss the images you chose to submit. Email pictures to: snwebb@uga.edu and text pictures to 423-915-6348. Also, contact me with any questions or concerns you may have.