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**EXPLORATION OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT-ATHLETE  
EXPERIENCES AT A SUBURBAN DIVISION III INSTITUTION**

by

Mandy Jiang

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Higher Education  
at  
Rowan University  
May 1, 2020

Thesis Chair: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mom, Feng Lin. Thank you for instilling the value of education in me at a young age. Even though you did not have the opportunity to pursue higher education, your selflessness and lifelong encouragement are the reasons I have these amazing opportunities. This one is for you.

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank all the individuals whose assistance and advice became invaluable in the completion of this study.

To my friends and family: Thank you for always keeping me grounded and sane, for listening to me as my emotions played out throughout grad school, and for always keeping life fun.

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To my co-advisors Dr. Drew Tinnin and Dr. Tyrone McCombs: I am grateful for your passion for helping students aspire to their best. Your efforts to make our lives easier in this process have made the ultimate difference.

To a special individual, Dr. Cori Brown: There are not enough thank yous in the world to justify how much I appreciate you. I would be perfectly content to be even half the professional and person you are. The College of Education is lucky to have you, and I will miss you the most!

To the participants: Your priceless time and energy has helped bring this study to fruition. Thank you for your allowing me to learn a little more about you.

## Abstract

Mandy Jiang

EXPLORATION OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCES  
AT A SUBURBAN DIVISION III INSTITUTION

2019-2020

MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of first-generation student-athletes (FGSA) on a college campus. One major goal of this study is to offer new discussion for first-generation student-athletes to increase awareness on this population in current literature. While there is research on first-generation students and collegiate student-athletes as separate identities, this specific population, combining both identities, has not been at the forefront of scholarly research (Oratagus & Merson, 2015). By expanding the current literature with evidence-based research, student affairs professionals and college athletic administrators can better enhance the experiences of first-generation student-athletes on their campuses.

Findings from this study suggest that first-generation student-athletes are thriving, unique educational pioneers, who are motivated by their families and their own athletic and academic ambitions. Findings also challenge previous notions that first-generation students have lower educational aspirations. Attending college as a first-generation student while participating on a varsity team positively affects all aspects of the college experience. While these students arrive onto campus unaware of the expectations academically and athletically, they also adapt quicker and have more of a seamless transition because of athletics. Recommendations for further practices and research are also suggested.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Student-athletes participating in intercollegiate athletics undoubtedly face unique challenges, stressors, and experiences. This population has been prominent in higher education for years (Miller, 2003); over 460,000 student-athletes from more than 1,100 colleges and universities compete at the highest amateur level annually (NCAA, 2019). Collegiate student-athletes, occupying two important dual identities, face considerable stressors in addition to their roles as college students. Balancing the high demands of excelling athletically, staying on top of academics, assimilating to campus life and maintaining interpersonal and familial ties, are all considered stressors affecting a collegiate student-athlete (Comaeux & Harrison, 2011; Hwang & Choi, 2016).

Research on this intriguing population has grown over the years as concerns have intensified over student-athletes' mental health and psychological well-being. It is important to note that student-athletes may feel higher and/or lower levels of pressure in certain areas depending on the division; division I student-athletes may face a greater pressure athletically because they are on full scholarship, whereas Division III student-athletes, who are not allowed to receive athletic scholarships, may feel the pressure to succeed academically just as much as athletically. Regardless of division, the challenges these student-athletes face in balancing their dual roles as well as the responsibilities of being a college student can lead to psychological distress and negative consequences (Humphrey, Yow, & Bowden, 2000; Ward & Shiyko, 2016). Research has also shown that identity development and time commitment do not exist as separate entities but are conjoined and interactive; given their dedication to two roles, academic worries affect

athletic achievement while athletic performance conversely has a major impact on academics and students' social and emotional well-being (Hwang & Choi, 2016; Kimball & Freysinger, 2003).

Amid the growing research interest in collegiate student-athletes, another unique population is entering higher education at a rapid pace. The ever-changing landscape of higher education has encouraged a continual increase of first-generation students on college campuses (NASPA, 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics for the 2011-2012 academic year, first-generation students made up 34% of the undergraduate class attending colleges and universities (PNPI, 2018). Substantial research indicates that first-generation students face significant challenges that put them at a disadvantage when enrolling in higher education, succeeding academically once enrolled, and persisting (Choy, 2001; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Not only do these students face all of the anxieties, challenges, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences also involve adverse social, cultural, and academic transitions (Pascarella et al. 2004).

Faced with barriers before entering higher education, these students tend to have lower educational aspirations than continuing-generation students (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). This may stem from the lack of knowledge of admissions processes, unfamiliarity with college options, fears about going away to college, and misconceptions about the purpose of higher education (College Board, 2019). Greater numbers of first-generation students attend institutions within 50 miles from home, considering proximity, familial ties, and costs as major factors in their college admissions decisions (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

Furthermore, these gaps between first-generation students and their peers can be seen in the K-12 school pipeline. Studies have shown that first-generation students tend to score lower on standardized math and writing portions, while lacking social self-confidence and leadership ability (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Any student entering higher education will inevitably face an array of challenges, however, our first-generation students face barriers before they even step onto campus. Research is needed to help our understanding of the motivating factors for these students.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Despite research on both first-generation students and collegiate student-athletes alone, our understanding of first-generation student-athletes and their experiences on campus is extremely limited. While both first-generation students and student-athletes face their own sets of challenges, it is undeniable that they also both share certain disadvantages as a result. In one of the only scholarly research articles in this area, Ortagus and Merson (2015) found that faculty student interaction was found to be the most effective predictor of academic success for low-income first-generation student-athletes.

In the most recent NCAA GOALS study (2016), 15% of student-athletes at the Division III level are likely to be first-generation students. This NCAA GOALS study is the one of the very few sources that I have come across throughout my research on first-generation student-athletes; GOALS is an NCAA study of the experiences and well-being of current student-athletes detailing a variety of topics including the athletics, academic, and social experiences (NCAA, 2019). For first-generation student-athletes, navigating the college admissions process can be a daunting task because of the unfamiliarities

surrounding higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004). For these students, both coaches and teachers/guidance counselors are credited with playing a larger role in the college choice process as compared to their continuing-generation peers (NCAA, 2019).

Additionally, 93% of all first-generation student-athletes said they were confident that they would graduate from college. With statistics this high, the lack of research on this population is incomprehensible; there is a need to understand the way they think, act, and behave on a deeper level.

### **Purpose of Study**

First-generation student-athletes on college campuses certainly have not been at the forefront of scholarly research (Ortagus & Merson, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of all first-generation student-athletes at a suburban Division III institution. I will attempt to expand the current literature with evidence-based research that can be used to promote and enhance the initiatives and programs in place to further first-generation student-athlete success. This particular population of students is understudied; yet make up a large percentage on college campuses. The goal of this study is to close the gap in recent literature.

### **Setting of Study**

Rowan University, located in Glassboro, NJ, is a Carnegie-classified doctoral research institution offering bachelor's through doctoral programs to over 19,000 students – with more than 4,000 being first-generation students (Rowan, 2019). Rowan, located approximately 30 minutes outside of Philadelphia, PA, offers more than 80 bachelors and 60 masters degree programs, five doctoral programs, and two professional programs (Rowan, 2019). Committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion for all students

regardless of identities; Rowan offers first-generation students educational opportunities, resources to facilitate success in the classroom, and intentional support through Flying First – a First-Generation Task Force initiative (Rowan, 2019). Rowan Athletics offer eight men’s and 10 women’s NCAA Division III teams with more than 450 collegiate student-athletes amassing 11 national championships. This institution has set a solid foundation for this study by offering programs specifically designed for first-generation student success as well as having a top tier Division III athletics program.

### **Research Questions**

There are a plethora of questions around first-generation students and student-athletes that remain unknown. By combining these roles, is it permissible to say that first-generation student-athletes face considerably far greater challenges because of the roles they occupy? This research will attempt to provide answers on my questions regarding this intriguing population in higher education.

RQs:

1. What are the major motivators that drive first-generation student-athletes to persist?
2. What are first-generation student-athlete experiences academically, athletically, with faculty, and campus life?

From these major research questions, there will be additional questions that may be answered through the study; however all findings will help further our understanding of first-generation student-athlete.

## **Hypotheses**

From the current, yet minimal, literature on first-generation college students, my own lived experiences, and societal perceptions of these populations; a few hypotheses can be formulated. First-generation college students have difficulties assimilating and gaining a sense of belonging on campus colleges, among others (Pascarella et al. 2004). Collegiate student-athletes tend to have an easier transition to campus life and adjustment to the college culture because they are on similar schedules with their teammates and other student-athletes. It is no surprise that teammates may become best friends; people who share similar interests tend to befriend one another. One hypothesis is that while being a first-generation student, playing a collegiate sport can make the transition process more seamless and above all, help these students academically and athletically.

Being first-generation, I truly understand what education can mean to first-generation student-athletes and their families. My last hypothesis offered is that these students may find mentoring as a successful way to navigate through the college experience. Most college students reach out for help in one way or another during their time; these first-generation student-athletes may find mentoring and comfort in their coach(es), professors, upperclassmen, and even administrators on campus.

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

There may be some possible limitations to this study. With over 4,000 first-generation students enrolled at Rowan University, and close to 450 participating collegiate student-athletes, there are various limitations that come with data collection and sampling. These limitations may include the sample size and time constraints; with an allotted time to complete this study, interviewing more students is more difficult to



accomplish. My role as a coach in the athletics department may present a limitation because student-athletes may feel that I am an authoritative figure. The students' class standing may presume some limitations as well, assuming experiences change relative year to year. For example – a first year first-generation student-athlete's experience may not be the same as a fourth year student-athlete's experience because a fourth year student-athlete will have assimilated to campus life and have [hopefully] felt a sense of belonging to the school. However, keeping in mind that these are 18 to 22 year old undergraduate students, some will not feel as engaged and participate as much as anticipated.

### **Operational Definitions of Important Terms**

- *First-generation college students:* (There are various definitions defining FGCS, for this study we are using this definition) Students of whom neither parent has completed a four-year college degree.
- *Collegiate student-athletes:* a student enrolled at a college or university and actively participates on one or more intercollegiate athletic teams
- *Dual identities:* Possessing two (2) roles, or identities
- *Continuing-generation college students:* Students who have at least one parent who had some postsecondary education experience (Redford & Hoyer, 2017)
- *Cultural capital:* forms of advantages in the educational system that are transmitted from generation to generation via three forms: embodied state (dispositions and communication), objectified state (materialistic and cultural goods), and institutionalized state (educational attainment and academics) (Bourdieu, 1977)

- *Underrepresented groups:* groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education; a group whose percentage of the population in a given group is lower than their percentage of the population in the country, ie: Hispanix, Latinax, African Americans, Native Americans, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, and those of two or more races (Penn State, 2019)

## **Organization**

Chapter I of this paper introduce the topic of the study, the research questions to be answered, and provided contextual information. This first chapter also details the purpose of the study and why this specific population is significant to higher education. Chapter II reviews the related literature among first-generation students, collegiate student-athletes, and the current population landscape in higher education. Moreover, Chapter II introduces the conceptual framework of the involvement theory (Astin, 1984), stressing the significance of this theory in relation with first-generation students, as well as student-athletes. Furthermore, Chapter III provides the methodology of the study, outlining the procedure and strategies being used for recruitment of the sample, data collection, and methods of data analysis. For this specific study, qualitative data was collected employing a usage of semi-structured interviews. Chapter IV, using pseudonyms, offered a brief biography of the sample. Additionally, this chapter presented an analysis of the interview questions offering emerging themes. Chapter V summarizes the study and provides the concluding findings of the study while offering recommendations for further practice and research.

## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

This chapter offers an overview of past and current research relevant to the study. This review will provide background information on the landscape of higher education currently, as well as the population being researched. Moreover, it will also uncover the lack of relevant research on first-generation student-athletes, specifically, and call for increasing research on this population.

#### Population Landscape in Higher Education

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), educational attainment rates for 25- to 29- year-olds increased at all levels from high school and beyond; additionally, it is estimated that by 2020, 64% of all jobs in the economy will require a form of postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). As postsecondary education enrollment is increasing, the demographics across higher education are changing as well; nearly a third of the undergraduate student population is considered first-generation (NCES, 2014). Defined as being from a family in which neither parent nor guardians have earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008), first-generation students are educational pioneers (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). For these students, the transition into higher education can pose a myriad of challenges but ultimately higher education can be key in improving their economic and social mobility (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2013; Warburton, Bugarian, & Nuñez, 2001).

As aforementioned, the demands and pressures that college students currently face are also greater than ever; similarly, student-athletes are a population that are often

times underrepresented and overlooked in higher education. Additionally, college student-athletes share distinct characteristics, and because of this heterogeneity, some researches have labeled them as a nontraditional student group (Comaeux & Harrison, 2011). In the most recent NCAA Goals study (2016), 16% of all student-athletes reported being first-generation student-athletes. As student-athletes transition to college, in addition to the extreme pressures of excelling in their sport, a full academic workload, the transition process, and time management skills, these students face their own set of challenges before stepping onto campus. As aforementioned, for first-generation student-athletes, their teachers, coaches, and guidance counselors are credited with playing a crucial role in the college choice (NCAA, 2016).

The major goal of this paper is to offer new discussion on first-generation student-athletes to increase awareness on this population in current literature. While research on the two separate entities has increased tremendously in the last several decades, there is still a lack of information on this growing student population. Future research and studies can help student affairs professionals and college athletic administrators in further assisting our first-generation student-athletes.

### **First-Generation Student-Athletes**

As the landscape of higher education changes and continues to contribute in the goals of upward social mobility (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), the discussion revolving around first-generation students and student-athletes and their characteristics have changed significantly. In this literature review, I explore the current and past research on first-generation students and intercollegiate

student-athletes in attempt to understand these entities as their own populations and additionally find similarities that merge them into one area of focus.

### **First-Generation Students**

Higher education is dynamic, ever changing, and can be used as a stepping-stone towards the ultimate American dream. Higher education has also made substantial strides since Harvard opened its doors in 1636. As demographics in higher education continue to diversify, many of the nation's historically underrepresented groups have paved their own path into higher education; many of these students are the first in their families to attend any form of post-secondary education (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). While earning a 4-year college degree can lead to higher socioeconomic status, the journey getting to graduation can surface difficulties and stress before even stepping foot onto campus.

**Demographically.** First-generation students are unique educational pioneers. Being the first in their families to attend any form of postsecondary education, they face considerable challenges including academically, intra-and inter-personally, socially, and financially (Greenwald, 2012; McConnell, 2000; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). More specifically, research has shown that these students differ in a multitude of demographic characteristics including being more likely to be from low-income families, coming from minority backgrounds, being female, being older in age, delaying enrollment in any form of postsecondary education, and working part-time to help pay for college (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

In addition to being demographically different, first-generation students tend to have lower educational aspirations, lack general knowledge on how to navigate college, and be less engaged in high school (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Saenz et al., 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Terenzini et al. 1996; McConnell, 2000). These students are also more likely to take a less rigorous curriculum and score lower on standardized tests in high school, leading them to being less academically equipped compared to their peers (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Chen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

For first-generation students, the value of cultural and social capital plays an integral role in their ability to navigate the college process (O'Shea, 2015). Social capital can be defined as a form of capital that exist in the relationships among individuals for purposeful facilitations, the access to resources, and general functioning of higher education (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). First-generation students are more likely to feel lost in accessing and understanding pertinent information that their counterparts can easily receive (Pascarella et al., 2004; Saenz et al., 2007), and having limited social capital poses a difficult challenge for these students transitioning in higher education. Most importantly, the decision to enroll in postsecondary education is a family matter. Entering higher education can also mean that these students are leaving home for an unfamiliar academic setting that they, their family, or peers have never experienced; these students find themselves balancing two cultures in attempt to manage their relationships at home and at college (McConnell, 2000; Thayer, 2000). Additionally, Inkelas and McCarron (2006) found a positive relationship between parental involvement and high educational aspirations; making the conscious effort to involve the parents can

be beneficial to the student, parent, and institution for an easier transition into higher education.

**Challenges they face.** Much of the current research on first-generation students focuses on the first year experience; however, the challenges these students face begin far prior to higher education. Research has also consistently shown that first-generation, low-income students are less likely to persist through graduation, regardless of increased accessibility into higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004; Radunzel, 2018; Thayer, 2000). First-generation college students tend to be at a disadvantage in basic knowledge about college and navigating the application process, levels of financial support, emotional and mental support, goals and plans for the future, and academic readiness (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Falcon, 2015; Pascarella et al., 2004). Pascarella et al. (2004) found that compared to their peers, having nonacademic involvements tended to have a significantly larger negative impact on outcomes for first-generation students throughout college. First-generation students tend to be less engaged in high school academics and extracurriculars and come from lower income families that hold fewer educational demands (Terenzini et al., 1996). These students face considerable differences compared to their peers right from the start, across all institution types (Engle & Tinto, 2008); they step on college campuses unaware of the challenges they may confront and lack a sense of belonging.

Once these students step onto campus, they find themselves at a disadvantage from the start; Chen (2005) found that first-generation students earned an average of 18 credits in their first year compared with the 25 credits earned by continuing-generation students. The first year performance of first-generation students is often a strong indicator

of lower grade point averages, the probability of repeating classes, and lower levels of persistence to graduation (Chen, 2005). However, it is also believed that the lower levels of persistence and graduation rates are not the result of the four years at college, but more so the precollege characteristics and differences of first-generation and continuing-generation students (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Thayer, 2000).

**Two-year vs. four-year institutions.** As well as having lower educational demands and entering higher education less prepared, first-generation students are also more likely to enroll in two-year institutions, or community colleges (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; McConnell, 2000; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Thayer, 2000; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Most of these students enroll at community colleges because of the proximity to home, affordability, and the abundance of programs offered (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Brooks-Terry, 1988). Additionally, Engle and Tinto (2008) found that those first-generation transfers who began at public two-year institutions went on to attain a bachelor's degree at five times the rate of low-income, first-generation students who started at public four-year institutions. Two-year institutions offer an ideal community for first-generation students by having smaller class sizes with attentive faculty and staff who can provide more detailed attention to each student.

Compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation students are more than twice as likely to leave a four-year institution before their second year (Choy, 2001; Toutkoushian, May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2019). Conversely, they are still more likely to graduate from two-year colleges (Toutkoushian, May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2019), possibly a result of their parent's educational background.



Unlike first-generation students, continuing generation students may greatly benefit from parents' greater social and cultural capital (Hui, 2017; Toutkoushian, May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2019). Comparing institutions, the concept of cultural capital plays an essential role in the college choice factor (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Introduced by Bourdieu (1973), cultural capital can be embodied in three forms: in the embodied state, in the objectified state, and in the institutionalized state. Cultural capital is acquired over time through the socialization process at home and follows from generation to generation (Bourdieu, 1973; Dumais & Ward, 2010). This form of capital includes the simple awareness and skills for navigating the college experience (Berger, 2000; Bourdieu, 1973) and can make for a seamless transition. Schools differentially value the capital of higher socioeconomic families and students who have this capital receive higher levels of attention from teachers, receive higher grades, and have better experiences with the education system (Dumais & Ward, 2010). The challenges first-generation students face stem from colleges differentially valuing their continuing-generation peers' cultural capital and assuming that all students are the same.

**Future discussion.** With the national declining enrollment issue across higher education these last several years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019), turning the focus towards improving the access, opportunity, and retention first-generation students can provide hope for higher education. This growing population can provide college administrators with knowledge about how to continuously meet the needs of every student and understand that students step foot on campus with their own set of challenges. Undoubtedly, while this population has become increasingly visible the last few years, first generation students still face implicit barriers in their higher education

journey. While this population has recently gained research interest in the last few decades, another group on campus – collegiate student-athletes – have been in higher education since the late 1800s.

### **Collegiate Student-Athletes**

Athletics have long been a part of higher education, dating back to the first intercollegiate athletic contest between the crew teams of Harvard and Yale in 1852 (Lewis, 1970; Miller, 2003). Fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in the last decade alone, the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) topped more than \$1 billion in revenue for the first time in history (Berkowitz, 2018; Rovell, 2018). Athletics, once viewed as leisure and extracurricular activities at colleges, has turned into a multi-million dollar generating organization within the realm of higher education.

**The student-athlete.** While substantial amounts of research emphasize the role that intercollegiate athletics has within higher education, there is not much investigation on the student-athlete experience and the challenges they may face on campus. A student-athlete is simply put, a student who participates on a varsity intercollegiate athletic team (Watt & Moore, 2001). Today's student-athletes represent a special population of students with unique challenges and added layers to their academic experience (Gayles, 2009; Watt & Moore, 2001). These students are placed in a tough position from the moment they step onto campus, having to balance academics, athletics, social life, and the challenges non-student-athletes students face. The transition to the college environment may differ from a non-athlete student whereas both internal (academic, class attendance, career choices, grades) and external (sport specific requirements, coaches, institutional policies) factors may challenge each other for time and effort (Simiyu,

2010). Furthermore, student-athletes spend on average anywhere from 20-30 hours per week in games, practice, traveling, weight room, study hall, and community service activities (Gayles, 2009; Street, 1999). The physical and emotional strain on student-athletes from their specific sport, in addition to ensuring their academic success, can be a considerable amount of pressure.

**Dual identities.** There are no doubts that student-athletes have to prioritize and manage their two identities as student and athlete to the best of their abilities. In a study done by Marx, Huffmon, and Doyle (2008), male and female student-athletes were surveyed on how they perceived academics and athletics. They found that the vast majority of student-athletes enter universities with a desire to successfully integrate both the student and athlete roles, suggesting these students felt a sense of belonging identifying as a student-athlete (Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008). This is crucial because there is evidence that suggest that the students who strongly identified with the athlete role had lower self-regard and had difficulty making mature career-related decisions, failing to invest their time in other roles they have as a college student – the student role (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008). Understanding the pressure that student-athletes face from all angles, institutions can offer student-athlete support services that can provide an unwavering amount of help.

Embedded in the research of student-athletes comes the debate on whether participating in intercollegiate athletics can take a toll on academics and whether student-athletes graduate at the same rate as their non-athlete peers. Student-athlete experiences differ in a variety of ways but none as significantly as those related to the division they are participating in. Division I student-athletes may have less of the traditional college

experience because of the demand and pressure they are faced with in their sport; being on a full athletic scholarship means there is an increased public attention on the sport and win-loss columns (Watt & Moore, 2001). According to the NCAA's Graduation Success Rate data, aimed to measure and track graduation rates across institutions, a higher percentage of Division I student-athletes are graduating than ever before at 88% (NCAA, 2018). A similar report, published by the NCAA Research Staff, found that across 325 institutions that represented the NCAA Division III, their student-athletes graduate at a higher rate than the student body (NCAA, 2019). At the Division III level, the successes of these student-athletes give credibility to the statement that athletics encourages academic success and can lead to upward mobility after graduation (Miller, 2003). Altogether, graduation rates that are published by the NCAA have consistently through the years shown that student-athletes complete degrees at higher rates compared to the general student population (Gayles, 2009; NCAA, 2019).

**National Collegiate Athletic Association.** Founded in 1906 originally as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association (IAA) in order to reduce the violence in college football, this organization was established to protect the amateur student-athlete and create structure in the governance of intercollegiate athletics in higher education (Rosenthal, 2003; Smith, 2000). In 1910, the IAA was renamed the NCAA to develop a national entity that governed the fairness, safety, and regulations of intercollegiate athletics and its student-athletes (Miller, 2012; Smith, 2000). Today, the NCAA is a dominant, multi-million dollar, member-led organization that governs and regulates over 1,000 colleges and universities, 100 athletic conferences, and nearly a million college athletes in the United States (Miller, 2012; NCAA, 2019).

Institutions that compete in the NCAA are separated into one of three divisions: Division I, Division II, and Division III. Formed in 1973, the purpose of separating institutions into three divisions was to align like-minded campuses in philosophy, competition, and opportunities (NCAA, 2019). Institutions, under their respective division, develop and approve legislation for their own division and groups of presidents and chancellors lead division committees with regularly scheduled meetings (NCAA, 2019). The most significant difference between the three divisions lies in athletic scholarships; Division I (DI) student-athletes receive multiyear, full athletic scholarships, Division II (DII) student-athletes may receive partial athletic scholarships, while Division III (DIII) student-athletes cannot receive any form of monetary athletic scholarships (NCAA, 2019). Though Division III institutions do not offer any athletic scholarships, more than 80% of DIII student-athletes receive non-athletic aid in the form of grants or need-based scholarships to academically qualified student-athletes (NCAA, 2019).

### **Conceptual Framework**

**Involvement theory.** Access, attainment, and persistence are only a few of the challenges that first-generation students encounter in their college journey (Choy, 2001; Garcia, 2010). Once on campus, these students face additional difficulties transitioning to campus life, balancing academics and other priorities, and perhaps experiencing a cultural shock. Deeply rooted in the research of college students, Alexander Astin's (1984) student involvement theory has been highly respected and used by many student affairs professionals in their practice and research. Involvement, in this case, simply refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1984). This involvement can range from being highly

generalized or highly specific and the more involved the student is with their college experience, the greater amount of student learning and personal development will occur (Astin, 1984).

For first-generation students, the time and energy they choose to spend involved on campus can be the difference between attrition and attainment. At the heart of the educational value, college serves to transform young adults into holistic, well-rounded citizens. Additionally, by the end of their college journey, they will leave with strong interpersonal skills, career-readiness proficiencies, lifelong friendships, immense amounts of knowledge, and a sense of personal fulfillment.

College student success has long been studied to bring about the best practices and resources in preparation for every incoming class. Astin's (1984) study used longitudinal data on several samples totaling more than 200,000 students while examining more than 80 different student outcomes. When looking at athletic involvement, Astin compared the effects of this being associated with satisfaction in four areas: the institution's academic reputation, the intellectual environment, student friendships, and institutional administration. First-generation students that may find it difficult to be involved in other forms may find athletic involvement to help.

Additionally, while first-generation students are already less likely to live on campus while attending college (Inkelas, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004), enrolling at universities that are further in distance may help them remove themselves from one culture and minimize conflict and tension that may hinder their ability to gain levels of social, academic, and cultural integration (Garza & Fullerton, 2018; Lee & Kramer, 2012). Students who live on campus show greater gains in interpersonal skills, but most

importantly they increase their chances of persisting and of aspiring to a graduate or professional degree (Astin, 1984).

Interestingly enough, involvement may not be an issue for intercollegiate student-athletes. Depending on the division of the institution, student-athletes spend a majority of their day focusing on academics or in their particular sport. Being involved in athletics showed positive correlations in personal satisfaction with the institution, the environment, other friendships, and administration (Astin, 1984). Findings from Iacovone's (2007) study showed student athletes are involved on campus outside of athletics in activities that do not take up a large amount of time such as Greek life and student government because much of their time is already taken up. This finding affirms that athletic involvement has a tendency to isolate student-athletes from the peer group effects that normally comes with the college experience (Astin, 1984). Most importantly, it is up to the student, rather than the institution, to choose what to do with their time and energy. Their involvement, whether in higher qualities or quantities, directly affect their learning, personal development, and college life satisfaction (Astin, 1984; Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013).

For the first-generation student-athlete, involvement throughout the institution is favorable in all ways. Being a first-generation student stepping onto campus may come with an overwhelming sense of emotions. However, being a student-athlete balances that well because it puts the student in an environment where they are surrounded with a group of people that already share similar interests. Being on an intercollegiate athletic team means spending 20 or more hours a week on their sport for months at a time. This may make for immediate engagement with other peers eventually providing an easier

social and academic transition into the college. Having this dual-identity and participating in athletics means representing the institution with a sense of pride. While first-generation students tend to have lower sense of belongingness and satisfaction than continuing-generation students (Stebbleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014), being a student-athlete may increase those levels of belonging. The identity and transitional process of a first-generation student-athlete may complement each other well: what one identity may lack, the other identity has, ultimately leveling the playing field.

### **Future Research**

While first-generation students and collegiate student-athletes have distinct presences on campus, both populations of students face several similar and unique challenges. While the most recent study shows that 16% of all NCAA student-athletes are first-generation (NCAA, 2016), there is minimal research on this population showing the factors that may or may not have helped with college decisions and beyond. Compared to continuing-student-athletes, more first-generation student-athletes found themselves financing education with need-based aid, loans, athletic scholarships, and jobs. Likewise, continuing-generation student-athletes were financing their education more from family and academic scholarships. This study is going to explore the influences that may have helped first-generation student-athletes enter higher education, while looking at the same motivators that help them persist, and their overall experience.

**First-generation student-athletes.** Merging into one specific population, first-generation student-athletes may possibly face an even greater amount of challenges. As educational pioneers in their families, these students may steer away from the cultural norm and face the pressure to succeed in their family and relationships, academics, and



particular sport. While much data exists on the two populations separately, this merged area has not been highly studied. Given these findings, identifying as both first-generation and student-athlete could potentially add to the stress, pressure, and demands that any college student may already face on campus. Is it more likely that this specific population share similar characteristics once on campus? Do they share the same drive and pursuit to persist?

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

This study is designed to provide in-depth, qualitative data by utilizing the phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of first-generation student-athletes at Rowan University. Employing semi-structured interviews as a means to data collection, transcriptions will be analyzed in order to provide findings and better understand this population to answer two research questions.

#### **Research Questions:**

1. What are the major motivators that drive first-generation student-athletes to persist?
2. What are first-generation student-athlete experiences academically, athletically, with faculty, and campus life?

#### **Context of the Study**

To help close the gap in current literature on first-generation student-athletes, this study will offer insight on their experiences while highlighting any overlapping factors that contribute to the success of Rowan University's first-generation student-athletes. This study was formulated and conducted in the 2019-2020 academic year with first-generation student-athletes at Rowan University (Rowan).

#### **Rowan University**

Beginning in 1923 as a normal school with a mission to train teachers for South Jersey classrooms, Rowan University has evolved into a nationally recognized public research university with strong academic and athletic reputation (Rowan, 2019).

Glassboro Normal School changed its name to New Jersey State Teachers College at

Glassboro gaining a national reputation as a leader in education while being one of the first in the country to recognize special education. In 1958, the school's name was again changed to Glassboro State College (GSC) after expanding curriculum, increasing enrollment, and adding infrastructure. The University, then GSC, received worldwide attention when it hosted a historic summit conference in 1967 from June 23 to June 25, between President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin in Hollybush Mansion; this was the location chosen because it was midway between Washington D.C. and the United Nations in New York City. In July 1992, Glassboro State College became Rowan College after Henry Rowan and his wife Betty donated \$100 million to the institution with the only request of a College of Engineering be created to address the shortcomings of engineering education (Rowan, 2019).

Since the transformative donation, Rowan University has evolved dramatically, gaining university status in 1997 and becoming New Jersey's second comprehensive public research institution housing seven colleges and five schools. In 2017, Rowan was recognized as a Carnegie R3 moderate research activity institution, and in 2018 reclassified as a R2 high research activity institution. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* named Rowan as the nation's 6<sup>th</sup> fastest-growing research university among public doctoral institutions and is one of only three universities in the nation to have both a D.O.-granting medical school (Rowan School of Osteopathic Medicine) and M.D.-granting medical school (Cooper Medical School of Rowan University). As of the 2018-2019 academic year, over 19,000 students from over 41 states and 35 countries attend Rowan University across three campuses.

**Athletics.** Rowan University is home to the Professors (Profs), comprising of student-athletes competing in 18 intercollegiate teams – eight men and 10 women. The men’s teams include football, soccer, cross-country, basketball, swimming & diving, baseball, indoor track and field, and outdoor track and field. The women’s teams are field hockey, soccer, cross country, volleyball, basketball, swimming & diving, lacrosse, softball, indoor track and field, and outdoor track and field. Rowan Athletics mission is to purposely foster a selfless environment that cultivates community, embraces learning, and enhances excellence in sport and life (Rowan Athletics, 2019). At the forefront, the athletic department bases their core values around excellence, community, integrity, teamwork, and education. Rowan Athletics participates in the New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC), a college athletic conference affiliated with the NCAA Division III; all 10 members are public universities in New Jersey. Over the last 50 years Rowan has continuously showed excellence within the NJAC, having won 195 NJAC championships and three of the four NJAC cups (Rowan Athletics, 2018). Rowan Athletics has also dominated at the national level winning 11 NCAA Division III Championships, making 331 appearances in NCAA tournaments and championship events, and awarding 46 individual national champions. Rowan student-athletes compete at the highest-level year in and year out at the Division III level.

### **Research Method**

This study was done using a qualitative research design to understand the experiences of the first-generation student-athlete population. This research method will systematically provide answers to my research questions and provide broad, contextual data and furthers knowledge on: first-generation student-athlete experiences on campus,

the factors they feel motivates them to persist, and their personal understanding with both identities. Furthermore, by using qualitative research, I should be able to gather larger amounts of information-rich data to help explain the phenomenon (Crsewell, 2007). Additionally, this study will utilize the phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of the first-generation student-athlete population. This research approach is used to study what an experience means to a particular group of people and to gather descriptions of their lived experiences (Grossoehme, 2014).

**Procedure.** Following approval from the IRB, the next step was to identify the first-generation student-athletes. I contacted interim Athletic Director Dr. John Giannini and Associate Athletic Director/Senior Woman Administrator Penny Kempf to inform them of this study that was going to be taking place in the department. To gain interest for the study, a recruitment flyer was made and sent out to the administrators and coaches in Athletics to generate interest with all the student-athletes. After speaking with Ms. Kempf, it was noted that all student-athletes were asked to complete a Rowan Athletics Inclusion Survey in January 2020. The question, “Are you a first-generation student” was asked. By gaining access to the survey results, I was able to identify the students who were first-generation students. An email was sent to the students, providing the purpose of this study, who I am and what I am trying to accomplish, and what was needed of them. Additionally, prospective participants individuals were told this was 100% voluntary and all names and personal information would remain confidential.

**Population.** The targeted population for this study consisted of all full-time, first-generation students who participated on an intercollegiate athletics team at Rowan University. In the 2018-2019 academic year, a total of 277 male student-athletes and 214

female student-athletes participated on intercollegiate athletic teams at Rowan (EADA, 2019). While the demographic numbers have not been reported in the 2019-2020 school year, a total of 262 student-athletes participated in the voluntary Athletics Inclusion Survey. During this time of completing my thesis, the global society was facing a bigger issue at hand – the pandemic of the coronavirus. The uncertainty of COVID-19 and its effects on society as a whole, including major changes on higher education substantially affected the final numbers of the student-athletes at Rowan.

These numbers reflected the unduplicated count of participants – meaning the neither report nor survey counted count student-athletes who participated in both indoor and outdoor track and field.

**Sample.** In this study, purposeful criterion sampling was used to ensure all students met my criterion. The participants in this study had to be a first-generation student-athlete, currently enrolled at Rowan University. Participants also had to be completing their undergraduate degree. The lack of literature on first-generation student-athletes influenced my criterion to look at only undergraduate first-generation student-athletes. My hope is these participants provide insight on their experiences to come up with themes within the data. The goal for the sampling size was anywhere from 10-12 first-generation student-athletes. The final sample size for this study included 12 first-generation student-athletes, out of the 44 FGSA that self-identified in the Athletics Inclusion survey.

**Data collection.** Throughout the course of 6 weeks, I conducted 12 one-on-one, face-to-face interviews that lasted between 30-45 minutes long. The interviews were semi-structured employing a mix of closed- and open-ended questions to allow the

researcher to gain more control over the topics of the interview (Givens, 2012).

Participants were asked a set of pre-determined questions with hopes that dialogue would flow freely similar to having a conversation. To accommodate the participants, the setting where interviews took place was an option. If the participant did not have a preference, the interviews took place in a classroom or the media in Esbjornson Gymnasium on Rowan University's campus. This location was picked because all its central location and familiarly amongst the student-athletes. Each interview lasted no more than 45 minutes and was transcribed the same week. Participants were thanked for their valuable time and notified that in the case of any additional questions, they would be contacted through email. Likewise, participants were told they could email the researcher with any questions revolving the study at any time.

**Data analysis.** For this study, to best analyze the qualitative data, thematic analysis approach was utilized. This type of analysis allows the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data, be able to offer preliminary codes to the data in order to describe the content, and offer themes from the codes across the different interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mortensen, 2020). Interviews were transcribed within the week they were recorded and given another week to be analyzed. Each interview was skimmed through the same week they were described and put into a separate Google drive containing the transcription files. This drive including correlating documents for categorizing key terms and coding. To provide the most rich and in-depth analysis, the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were followed closely. Transcriptions were printed out and read repeatedly to familiarize myself with all the data. The coding process was done in stages: broadly, more precisely, and sorting. These

stages involved re-focusing the analysis on a broader scale, and then looked at more specifically. By using similar words and phrases, the researcher can analyze and use the data to create different categories of codes (McMillian, 2016). While coding is only the initial step towards an even more rigorous analysis, it provides researchers the ability to link – leading from the data to the idea and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea (Saldaña, 2009). Ultimately, the coding process leads to the final phase of finding emerging themes and then refining them. For their confidentiality purposes, participant's real names were replaced with pseudonyms. The second half of the academic year was dedicated to reading interview transcriptions and categorizing codes. Ultimately, all of this work will hopefully uncover new concepts that give researchers more insight into the first-generation student-athlete population.

**Ethical consideration.** Before collecting any data, and to ensure the protection of all individuals who participate, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted on Friday, December 20, 2019. IRB approval was gained on February 3, 2020 and was obtained before any data collection began. The application included a protocol form that discussed the purpose and further details of the study, recruitment flyers, disclosure and consent forms, and other pertinent information related to the distribution of the study. There were no significant risks for the participants in the interviews nor was there any kind of incentive. All participants signed two consent forms and were made aware of the purposes of the study – to explore the experiences of first-generation student-athletes at Rowan and to fulfill a requirement for my masters program.



## Chapter IV

### Findings

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of first-generation student-athletes (FGSA) at a Division III institution. While first-generation college students and collegiate student-athletes are widely researched populations on college campuses, there is a gap in literature on this specific population. Using semi-structured interview techniques, this study adds qualitative research findings in order to further the literature on first-generation student-athletes. This chapter includes the (a) profile of the sample and (b) data analysis of the interview questions.

#### Profile of the Sample

The individuals in the study were recruited by purposive sampling – a process where predetermined criteria are used in relevancy to the research questions. In order to be qualified for this study, the student must be a first-generation college student as well as participate on a Division III sponsored athletics team at Rowan. Though there is currently no known database on campus to identify first-generation student-athletes, a list of student-athletes self-identifying as first-generation was gathered from an Athletics Qualtrics survey to narrow down the sample population. From this self-identified list, emails were sent to ask for their participation in this study; time and location were set up in the following emails after the individual acknowledged their participation. Out of 264 voluntary survey participants, 44 student-athletes self-identified as first-generation students. My sample goal was 12, and I ended up being able to achieve that. In total, this sample consisted of eight females and four males; six freshman, three sophomores, one junior, and two seniors; one from softball, one from football, one from men's track and

field, two from men's soccer, two from women's lacrosse, one from field hockey, and four from women's basketball. Three of the participants commuted, six lived on-campus, and three lived off-campus. Twelve one-on-one interviews, lasting from 30 to 45 minutes, took place between February 3 – February 29, 2020 at locations discussed between the participant and co-investigator. To protect the confidentiality of the individuals in the study, I have replaced the participant's names with a number.

**Sample biographies.** Below is a short biography of each of the twelve individuals who participated in this study. Real names are replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality.

- Claire is a freshman on the women's lacrosse team. Claire commutes and is majoring in education.
- Garrett is a freshman on the football team. Garrett lives on-campus and is majoring in education.
- Hannah is a freshman on the field hockey team. Hannah commutes and is majoring in civil engineering.
- Michelle is a freshman on the women's basketball team. Michelle lives on-campus and is majoring in psychology.
- Michaela is a sophomore on the women's basketball team. Michaela lives on-campus and is majoring in education.
- Rachel is a sophomore on the women's lacrosse team. Rachel lives on-campus and is majoring in biological sciences.
- Sonia is a freshman on the women's basketball team. Sonia lives on-campus and is majoring in law and justice.

- Spencer is a senior on the men's soccer team. Spencer lives off-campus and is majoring in liberal studies.
- Troy is a senior on the men's track and field team. Troy lives off-campus and is majoring in law and justice.
- Tracy is a junior on the women's basketball team. Tracy lives off-campus and is majoring in education.
- Vincent is a freshman on the men's soccer team. Vincent lives on-campus and is majoring in psychology.
- Zoey is a sophomore on the softball team. Zoey commutes and is majoring in education.

### **Analysis of the Data**

The 12 semi-structured interviews were completed using a list of questions pre-approved by Rowan University's IRB. With audio and participation consent forms signed, interviews were conducted and lasted 30-45 minutes in length. Each interview was audio recorded, with permission from the participants, and consent forms were signed and collected. The co-investigator, instead of using any online transcription services, for validity, then transcribed individual recordings and printed out hard copies.

Using the thematic analysis method and its six-step process, individual transcriptions were re-read multiple times before generating initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I manually coded the data systematically throughout all transcriptions. This coding process was done repeatedly in multiple stages to look for potential themes. The themes that emerged from this study were: finding the right fit, greater sense of

community, developing soft skills, higher commitment to goals, and establishing a structure and sense of normalcy.

### **Finding the Right Fit**

For many college students, being comfortable and excelling during their time on campus is attributed to many revolving and interchangeable factors. Because the transitional period for individuals vary with their own pre-existing factors, arriving on college campuses may seem daunting. For these FGSA's, finding the right fit was crucial in choosing an institution to be their home away from home. This overarching theme directly emerged from the three sub-themes below.

**Athletic excellence.** Being a Division III institution, Rowan does not offer any monetary scholarships for perspective student-athletes. In all the interviews, participants immediately mentioned their individual sports, coupled with other reasons, as playing a critical role in choosing Rowan. Michelle described, "I've always wanted to play basketball at a bigger school, and Rowan fit that, so I took the opportunity." While almost all of these individuals wanted to continue their athletic careers at the collegiate setting, Vincent noted that, "If I didn't play soccer, I would not be in college, nor would I enjoy it." Moreover, two participants were transfer students from other institutions. Troy transferred from an out-of-state institution to attend Rowan and had prior, positive knowledge of the men's track and field team mentioning, "Rowan has always been on my radar. The track and field team was ranked number one before I came here." Spencer transferred from another public in-state institution and expressed his journey:

I went to Ramapo College for a year and my first year there I had a really bad concussion, so I decided to leave altogether and get healthy. After that, I was

trying to find other schools to go to and play soccer. The head coach from Rowan came to my house and talked to me about playing for their program. I actually talked to him [the coach] in high school before I committed to Ramapo. I never visited Rowan when I decided to transfer. But soccer has a big reason I chose Rowan.

All 12 participants mentioned that their respective sport played a factor in choosing an institution.

**Campus climate.** Participants used phrases including: close to home, familiar with the area, low class size, feels like home, and campus atmosphere to describe how they felt with the institution. All, but two, described the location as playing a significant factor. Zoey and Claire, both commuters, explained how they wanted somewhere close enough since they commute. Zoey, specifically said, “I chose Rowan because of its location, which had a great influence because I commute. It just worked out best for me.” Hannah, also a commuter, also stated:

My coach went to Rowan so just talking to her about her experiences had gotten me interested. I knew it was close but when I visited campus a few times and met the team and I really liked the way that it felt like a community. I liked it not only for sports, but also how there are low class sizes, you know, so I think there are a lot of attractive things.

As prospective student-athletes, these individuals are allowed personal tours of the campus and athletic facilities with the coaching staff and family. During this time, the prospective student-athlete can meet the team, other coaches and administrators. Eight participants recalled how much they liked the campus on their visits; they felt welcomed

and were met with friendly and welcoming regards. Tracy was the only one to state the opposite:

Originally, I didn't want to stay close to home. But as I decided that I wanted to major in Health and Physical Education, I found that there weren't a lot of great schools that offered this major. I met the basketball team at Rowan during my visit and then decided I wanted to go there. I liked the size and I knew this was a great school. But I did have to limit myself because I wanted to play basketball in college.

In total, all but one individual had toured or visited the college campus at least once.

**Institution and academic reputation.** Rowan University, formerly Glassboro State College, has seen a remarkable period of transformation and growth in the last two decades. Rowan alumni/alumnae are everywhere. They are seen in forms of educators, engineers, lawyers, doctors, higher education professionals, and coaches. Most of the participants in this study acknowledged prior awareness of Rowan. Garrett explained, "I know a lot of people from my area that already go here. Teachers and kids always talked it up at my high school, it was known as a good school but also a really good teaching school." Likewise aforementioned, Hannah knew about the academics and athletics at Rowan from her coach. Three other participants also shared similar experiences with coaches having ties to Rowan. Michaela always knew two things: 1) she wanted to play basketball in college and 2) she always wanted to be an elementary school teacher. She knew Rowan had a really good program for education. Zoey shared the same thought saying, "It's a great school. It has a great teaching program and it just worked out best for me financially, academically, and athletically." Sonia was the only participant that went

more in-depth about the relationship between her degree and life post-graduation. “My major is pretty big here, so it will give me opportunities after I graduate to be able to follow my career and do what I want with my life like work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).”

### **Greater Sense of Community**

All participants reported gaining some sense of community as they became acclimated to college. Receiving support through a transitional period, and during college, can be crucial to a student’s success. Many participants also felt surprised, and overwhelmed in a positive way, on how quickly they gained a sense of belonging. Even while possessing multiple identities, these first-generation student-athletes felt more support from being a part of athletics than being first-generation. Michelle, a newcomer on the women’s basketball, stated, “I definitely made friends more easily because of Rowan Athletics and from all the different teams. The transition was easier because I already had friends from basketball.” Along with teammates, students enjoyed multiple layers of support through their time on campus.

In a question asked to only upperclassmen, “are there notable differences between the first year compared to the second year”, their answers were clear evidence that by the second year, first-generation student-athletes feel more comfortable and secure with their friendships, relationships with coaches, faculty and administrators, as well as navigating the college experience.

This study found that first-generation student-athletes benefitted from gaining a strong sense of community across athletics, academia, and familial support. The sub-themes, described below, will detail further this primary theme.

**Teammates turned family.** At the Division III level, student-athletes compete at the highest level without monetary scholarships. For these college students, being on a team means voluntarily spending a large majority of their time with the same individuals throughout a given period of time.

When asked to describe “what is it like being a college student-athlete, and have you faced any challenges, or received any benefits,” surface level codes appeared: fun, busy, one big family, great experience, more opportunities, immediate friends.

When asked to describe their experience with their teammates, 10 individuals easily expressed how much they all enjoyed their teammates using phrases like: strong bond, second family, big community, sisters, mentors, recognition. Ten participants responded to having received a form of benefit in having teammates become like a second family, while six also included some sort of challenge. Claire voiced:

I love being a student-athlete because you automatically make friends and are a part of something. I was scared of coming into a new team, but they have been really welcoming with open arms. It’s crazy because we’ve only known each other since September, but you know everything about them because you’re with them so much. It’s definitely a good family already. I’m glad I’m involved in something. I think it would’ve been a lot harder if I didn’t play a sport because I’m a commuter.

Rachel also articulated this positive atmosphere saying:

I did not think I was going to meet people that I liked so fast. I was thinking I was going to be more friends with people in my classes than my actual teammates, but it’s been the complete opposite. I wouldn’t change meeting these people for the



world. Being around these people have helped me emotionally, mentally, everything. You meet so many different people and learn everyone's personalities in such a short time; it's a great bond.

Other participants like Zoey and Garrett, also expressed the same feeling of teammates turning into family. Garrett explained how being in college, he has individuals to push him, whereas back in high school he didn't. One individual expressed this dual identity internally, stating, "I love being a student-athlete, it is not easy, but I have so much fun with it. Playing basketball has taught me how to set goals off the court and has definitely made me a better person." One participant, Vincent, recalled a dissimilar experience saying, "It can vary. I have the same five friends on the team I hang out with everyday because it can get cliquy."

Conversely, when asked, "as a first-generation student, have you faced any challenges or received any benefits as you are seeking to complete your college degree", eight participants responded to having faced some sort of challenge. No responses attributed to forming friendships or relationships on campus. Two participants said that being a first-generation college student does not positively nor negatively impact them. Garrett responded, "I really don't feel any different from other students (continuing-generation), it's just the fact that my parents didn't go to college but in classes and sports, I don't really feel a difference." Another participant, Tracy, had a similar answer, "For me, it doesn't really make a difference if my parents went to college or not because I am not struggling academically or athletically." Tracy did acknowledge her situation might be different than other first-generation college students because she had some help from her brother who went through college.

Almost all participants reported positive experiences with their teammates, even comparing it having a second family on campus.

**Multiple layers of support.** The second sub-theme that arose from this study was the varying levels of support felt by the individuals. Support was mainly felt during two main periods: 1) from the recruiting process through the transitional period, 2) athletically and academically once on campus. This support came from mostly teammates, coaches, faculty, and their families in different forms.

*Coaches.* Being on campus without their families can introduce unique barriers for any college student. Many participants expressed gratitude for the support and welcoming nature from coaches as well as positive interactions with faculty members on campus. For the two individuals that transferred, the coaching staff not only played a large role in getting them to enroll, but also helped with their experiences on campus. Four individuals expressed the coaches as being positive influences and always encouraging open communication. Vincent voiced, “They are always there for me and have an open door policy”, while Garrett reiterated saying, “They’re always there for you and preach communication. If anything ever happens, it doesn’t matter what time, they’re there.”

Some of these students also felt comfortable in discussing off the field topics with their coaches. Hannah said:

They’re definitely open and trying to help me as much as possible. Even when she (head coach) wasn’t able to answer my questions, she would forward me to people that could. They care a lot.

For Rachel, not only did her coach help ease her transition into college, she (head coach) also helped me “make connections with other people and prepare a plan for my future.”

All of the participants in the study acknowledged their coaches as positive influences.

**Faculty.** For most of the individuals that participated in this study, faculty members were valuable and welcoming. Certain codes and phrases emerged including: willingly to help, really care, informative, awesome, and resourceful. Claire recanted, “I like all my professors and haven’t had a bad experience yet. They’re always welcoming us to ask questions and they also teach really well. In high school, they make it seem like your professors are going to be terrible but it’s been the complete opposite.” Sonia described similar thoughts adding, “the faculty here know a lot of the resources on campus and they are always willing to help if I ever need it.”

Not only were faculty members welcoming in the classroom, they also were able to help these (two) FGSA secure on-campus jobs working in the Academic Success Center as success coaches for other students.

**Emotional support.** All but three participants stated feeling supported in an emotional capacity from family members. While findings from this study show that first-generation student-athletes do not receive a high level of support in terms of being familiar with the college process and available resources on campus, findings do show that families, more specifically, parents, provide support behind-the-scenes emotionally and mentally. Zoey recalled a personal experience:

My family has been really supportive in my goals. Even when I was younger, I wanted to be a professional baseball player, and my dad was like, go for it! They

were always really encouraging in whatever I wanted to do, whether it was academics or sports. They helped me in more ways than one.

Having a strong community was a crosscutting theme that emerged from all of the interviews. Behind each first-generation student-athlete, there were multiple tiers of support that helped each individual progress.

### **Higher Commitment to Goals**

First-generation student-athletes push themselves to excel in the classroom just as much as they do athletically. In addition to the normal stressors college students face, these individuals willingly sacrifice valuable time throughout their time on college campuses. This study provides clear conclusions that first-generation student-athletes have not only multiple tiers of support, but also more reasons to stay committed and motivated in the pursuit of their goals. This unwavering commitment develops from varying sources and is discussed more in-depth through the sub-themes below.

**Making the family proud.** As the first one's in their families to attend college, these individuals have an opportunity to do what their parents did not. A common answer amongst the participants was, "wanting to do it [graduate] for their parents." Moreover, this response came up in 8, out of 12, interviews. Spencer was quick to show his appreciation stating:

For me, it's a great honor [being a first-generation college student]. My dad's goal was always for me to graduate college so he could say, "my son graduated college and got his degree." That would be the proudest moment for me to be able to do that for him.

Another participant, Troy, acknowledged that he is also doing it for his dad – both attending college and running on the men’s track team. Being the first one in the family to attend college presents an opportunity that these individuals do not take for granted. Likewise, two individuals stated being a role model for their siblings is an accomplishment. Garrett, a freshman on the football team, explained, “it definitely motivates me because I have siblings that look up to me. My older brother tried school but it didn’t work. My brothers are young and they look up to me. They see the goals I set so I have to work hard and graduate for them.” Sonia also described why her parents and siblings are reasons behind her motivation:

I do it for my family, especially my parents, because they do so much for me to be here. I want to graduate and be able to put that diploma in a frame and give it to them. Keeping that in the back of my mind, it definitely pushes me and motivates me further. But also, my sisters look up to me so by being in this position, they can say, “like okay, [Sonia]’s going to college, she’s doing all these big things so I’m going to do the same.”

Rachel emphasized:

I want to prove to my parents and family members that you are able to do it. I’m doing it for myself but at the same time also doing it for my family members that did not have the opportunity to go to college. Showing them you can achieve great things by working really hard towards the goals you set for yourself when you were younger.

Many participants acknowledged their families as an influence while persevering towards their goals.

**Meeting athletic ambitions and standards.** Identifying as a student-athlete increases their will to excel during college. This was a common response that emerged throughout the study; all of the participants noted that being a student-athlete is more motivation for at least one of the following: do well academically, stay out of trouble, practice to excel athletically, and go the extra mile to try and stay healthy – physically and mentally. As a freshman, Sonia was aware of having to maintain a certain grade point average (GPA) to be eligible to participate. “I feel like during the season, my grades are at its highest for some reason. Athletes need a certain GPA to play so you need to keep your grades up. That’s an important connection that I have with basketball and academics,” she recalled.

Some participants also acknowledged that being a student-athlete and a part of Rowan Athletics meant that standards were raised and recognition increased around the community. This pressure of meeting standards was not relayed negatively, but more so good stress.

**Internal motivation from multiple identities.** The participants in this study are ambitious both academically and athletically. Being first-generation pushes these students to take full advantage of the opportunity presented. Hannah described:

It [being first-generation] kind of motivates me to do my best, you know what I mean? Because I know that college isn’t something that everyone can get. I feel really privileged to be able to come here and be able to attempt to achieve these awesome things [education and athletics]. So, it kind of motivates me to realize that I pay for these classes, I pay to be here. I’m not just going to throw away my chance to make my future better.

Additionally, being a first-generation student motivates them to raise the bar. They set their own expectations and goals and are driven to do better. Sonia and Vincent both acknowledged that being the first in their family is further motivation to do better and push them to beyond what they set their goals. Another participant, Michelle, added:

As far as my goals go, I probably set them pretty high for being a first-generation college student because it makes me feel even better when I reach higher expectations.

Their internal motivation to succeed in the classroom also stems from being a student-athlete. As said before, being a student-athlete means adhering to policies guidelines, and standards set by the department. Participants in this study also acknowledged staying healthy – physically, mentally, and emotionally – during the season, and off. Garrett touched on this aspect saying, “I didn’t do that well in the first semester but knowing that I’m going to have a bigger role next season, I have to get it together academically. Out-of-season, I feel like it’s easier to get to where I need to be for next season and get stronger, mentally and physically.” Vincent also expressed, “being a student-athlete also keeps me in shape, physically and mentally. It helps me stay balanced and healthy, as well as keep in check in school. You can’t miss classes or you’ll fall behind.”

***First-generation student-athletes.*** Overall, possessing these multiple identities have shaped the college experience for many of these participants. When asked to describe the impact of these identities, multiple codes emerged including: made it more comfortable, made it easier, shaped me, and involved. Only one individual expressed that identifying as first-generation did not affect them – “for me, it doesn’t really make a difference if my parents went to college or not, just because I am not struggling

academically or athletically.” The rest of the participants reported internal motivators stemming from identifying as both first-generation and student-athlete. Finally, Michelle portrayed how the positive impact of being a first-generation student-athlete saying, “I think it’s impacted me a lot more since my parent’s didn’t go to college, they couldn’t help me with what to expect. Therefore, I set and create my own expectations and goal high”.

### **Progressive Soft Skills**

One of the most dominant themes that emerged from this study is the progressive improvement of participants’ soft skills. These skills, a combination of transferrable character traits and personal capabilities, are considered important skill sets to have for any individual in the work force, and in life. These individuals balancing multiple identities as a first-generation student and collegiate student-athlete may certainly face barriers, time constraints, and situations that call for higher levels of prioritization skills, in addition to the normal challenges regular college students face. The participants in this study felt that certain skills were consistently used and improved over time. Even when facing the feeling of “not having enough time”, these individuals wouldn’t have it any other way. The sub-themes below are the most consistent skills that the participants felt were being developed.

**Time management and staying organized.** Having high levels of time management and organization skills were the most commonly stated skills amongst all participants. Normal college students face the regular challenges of being a student – the lack of sleep and time, trying to juggle classes and schoolwork, and balancing



relationships and family. These individuals, in addition to those typical challenges, give an additional 30+ hours of a week to lifts, practices, travel, and games.

While many of the participants reported feeling “not having enough time,” they still acknowledged needing high levels of time management skills. Michaela emphasized this saying:

A big challenge is just time; there are lots of times where I have practice, or lift, but also have homework that is due. Figuring out that balance and other ways to get my work done. You need to be really organized and have really good time management skills.

Another individual, Claire expressed similar thoughts and used this example, “I would be in the middle of my homework, focused and doing good. But then I have to go to lift and my mindset switches and my concentration has to be on something completely different.” Though many participants expressed the lack of time as a challenge, they also added the lack of time did not hinder or negatively affect their experiences. Rachel said:

Being a student-athlete is like a double-edged sword, sometimes. It can make it more difficult with less time. For example, I need to get clinical hours but it’s really hard to do that when you have fall ball in the first semester and in-season during the second semester. I know that if I wasn’t playing a sport I would be able to finish my hours but I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Additionally, these individuals reported feeling organized as well as able to prioritize their commitments. There were no comments that the lack of time was too much to handle. Upperclassmen, consisting of half the participants in this study, also described major differences between their first and second years. All six upperclassmen stated there

were significant differences including: becoming more organized, being more comfortable interacting other people on campus, having better time management skills, seeing self-growth, as well as procrastinating less and being more organized. Overall, it can be stated that identifying as a student-athlete, more so than first-generation, assists with refining soft skills.

### **Establishing Structure and Normalcy**

Another interesting theme that emerged from this study is the correlation between playing a collegiate sport and establishing structure, or a sense of normalcy, in these first-generation college student's lives. Most of the participants recognized that being a student-athlete, despite posing additional challenges, is extremely rewarding. Many also agreed that going to college would be exceptionally different if they did not play sports. Eight participants, out of the twelve, noted that being a collegiate student-athlete helps by keeping them on a schedule and staying organized. Michelle elaborated:

Being an athlete in college can be stressful at times because I set my goals really high. But basketball keeps me on track of things; with basketball, my whole schedule is set. We have priority registration both semesters so we pick our classes around basketball. I feel like without it, I would be less organized and have no schedule.

Other participants shared similar thoughts. Claire added, "Being a student-athlete gives you a structure and I work better with that" while Tracy chimed in saying, "Basketball helps me structure my days. If I know I have a game on Saturday, I need to get all my work done before. It basically helps me frame and structure my days." Having a structure helps Spencer keep "tunnel vision" by staying on top of his academics, out of trouble,

and in shape. Likewise for Vincent, planning his schedule around soccer throughout the academic year allows him to be done with classes by a certain time and focus on soccer.

Two commuters also explained that being on campus all day requires them to plan their entire day out with classes, practices, and everything in between. Hannah articulated, “I’m kind of forced to balance my work and plan out my days because it can be a bit overwhelming at times having to run around so much.” Having a sense of normalcy can play crucial role in their transition to college and success on campus.

### **(Lack of) Expectations and Their Transitions**

One of the most intriguing themes that emerged from this study involved first-generation student-athlete’s expectations pre-college and how smoothly they transitioned to college life. Seven participants expressed they had no expectations at all. Three participants knew a little of what to expect from coaches and friends in high school, while two participants thought it was exactly how they imagined it was going to be.

Choosing to pursue higher education can easily be one of the most transitional and daunting periods of an individual’s life. Some of these first-generation student-athletes faced pre-existing challenges of not knowing how to navigate the college process, while others felt their confidence deteriorate from not knowing if they could play at the next level. Regardless of their early expectations, 11 of the 12 participants reported their transition to college as one of the following: “smooth”, “good”, “easier than I thought”, “wasn’t that hard”, and “surprisingly easy.” Asked to describe her transition, Michelle responded:

It was actually pretty smooth. I don’t live close so I thought it would be a little rough because I do love home. I’m still surprised it was so smooth, but I think

basketball really helped just making friends and having stuff to do right away. Academically, I'm doing a lot better than I did in high school, which surprises me.

When asked to elaborate on what she thought contributed to the academics, she replied, "I think just having the resources on campus and taking advantage of them quickly. The library and writing center really helped, having space and time to do work, and the environment – because in high school, there are so many distractions." Some individuals surpassed their expectations. Rachel explained, "It's definitely more than I expected – in a good way. I didn't think I was going to meet people that I liked so fast. I thought I was going to be more friends with people in my classes than my actual teammates, but I was wrong. I didn't know how lacrosse was going to be because I came from a small school so I didn't know if I was going to be good enough to play." Rachel started the whole season her freshman year.

Though transitions for the most part were smooth, some individuals expressed that the workload and living on campus did take a few weeks to get adjusted to. Sonia explained, "My transition wasn't that hard. Surprisingly, it was pretty easy because my high school prepared me well for this. The only thing that took longer to get used to was living on campus and living on my own. The season is also much longer than high school so being physically and mentally prepared is important." Moreover, Sonia was one of the two that had expectations about college; Sonia's high school prepared their students well by going on college visits and encouraging overnight stays.

Interestingly enough, the seven participants who expressed no expectations about college all had smooth transitions into college. One individual had a tougher transition in

addition to having no expectations of college. Spencer, a transfer, had a easier transition athletically than academically. He explained:

I had no clue or expectations about college. I always just went with the flow. But my transition is a story about not giving up and going through it. My dad has always motivated me to get my degree. It's been tough but now it's definitely getting easier as I'm reaching towards graduation. Each year has had its experiences to help; college has learning process and many new experiences.

Regardless of expectations, almost all of these individuals adjusted fairly quickly to college and campus life.

## **Chapter V**

### **Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and, Recommendations**

This final chapter will summarize the study and offer new discussion on first-generation student-athletes. Furthermore, this chapter will answer the research questions brought forth in the study by providing a wealth of qualitative findings. Finally, recommendations for future discussion and research will be offered for first-generation student-athlete success.

#### **Summary of Study**

This thesis explored the experiences of first-generation student-athletes on the campus of a Division III institution. As an understudied population across college campuses, a major goal of this study was to expand on current literature with qualitative findings from this thesis. These findings will optimistically be used to promote and enhance programs, initiatives, and policies already in place to further first-generation student-athlete success. Equally as important, this study examined how identifying as both first-generation and student-athlete affects levels of motivation during the college experience, as well as their experiences athletically, academically, and with campus life. Overall, the hopes of this study were to help close the gap in literature.

Purposeful criterion sampling was employed to ensure students met the criteria: being a first-generation college student as well as a student-athlete. Using data from the Athletics Inclusion survey, 44 student-athletes identified as first-generation. The final sample size for this study was 12. Over the course of six weeks, 12 one-on-one, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Esbjornson Gymnasium, on the campus of Rowan University. I audio recorded and then transcribed all interviews. To best understand the

data, thematic analysis was employed to understand the crosscutting codes and themes that emerged. Direct and indirect quotes from participant interviews were used to explain themes and provide insight into their experiences.

**Brief review of literature.** Much of the earlier literature focused on first-generation students have exposed the challenges and barriers these students face as they prepare to enter higher education. These students are often stigmatized as having lower educational aspirations while continuing-generation students possess higher levels of social and cultural capital (O’Shea, 2015; Pascarella et al., 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Research has also shown that, regardless of increased accessibility, first-generation students are less likely to persist through graduation (Pascarella et al., 2004; Radunzel, 2018; Thayer, 2000). Moreover, these students tend to be at a disadvantage in having emotional and mental support, as well as having goals and plans for the future (Greenwald; 2012; Pascarella et. al., 2004).

On the contrary, collegiate student-athletes have been prominent figures on college campuses, dating back to the first collegiate crew meet in 1852. These students often represent their institution, athletic department, and contribute to the spirit of college campuses. While playing an integral role to their teams, student-athletes also have additional demands imposed by their sport, which creates considerable challenges to their college experience (Jolly, 2008). Despite these additional demands, student-athletes at the Division III level are graduating at a higher rate than the normal study body (NCAA, 2019). The persistence rates of the student-athletes playing Division III gives credibility to the statement that Division III encourages academic success and can lead to upward mobility after graduation (Miller, 2003).

## Discussion of the Findings

**Research question 1.** What are the major motivators that drive first-generation student-athletes to persist?

First-generation student-athletes are self-driven, determined, and goal-oriented individuals. These students push themselves to excel in the classroom just as much as they do athletically; they are committed to themselves and their goals. The major factors of motivation of first-generation student-athletes come their families, their own athletic and academic ambitions, and understanding the importance of maximizing this opportunity. For these individuals, being first-generation as well as a student-athlete has helped define who they are. Having these identities gives a plethora of reasons to stay motivated. Individuals expressed that being a first-generation student means that they have to take advantage of the opportunity they have and not let it go to waste, while the same individuals expressed that being a student-athlete means they have athletic standards they have to live up to. These motivators combine into a very powerful sense of determination that is exemplified through their career and athletic goals, self-drive, and ability to give 100% to everything they commit to.

The findings of this study challenge the notions that first-generation students have lower educational aspirations and lack goals and plans for their futures (Engle & Tino, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). For a first-generation student arriving on a college campus, it can understandably be a daunting experience. Though there is not enough concrete evidence based on this one qualitative research study, an assumption between the persistence of first-generation students and first-generation student-athletes is the role an athlete holds. Based on literature on first-generation students, being a student-athlete on



campuses adds fuel to the fire for these students to persist to graduation. Division III is the only division that does not allow student-athletes to gain scholarships – meaning, it is entirely voluntary. When monetary gain is not possible, the true meaning of student, or scholar-athlete comes to light.

First-generation student-athletes have ambitious goals and expectations stemming from wanting to make their families, themselves, and the people around them proud. These individuals are capitalizing on the opportunity and understand that college is not a given. While more research has to be done, there is evidence that having a large quantity of involvement within the institution can enhance and help first-generation students persist.

**Research question 2.** What are first-generation student-athlete experiences academically, athletically, with faculty, and campus life?

This study found that when first-generation student-athletes first step onto campus, they are unaware of what to expect academically and athletically. While they arrive “not knowing what to expect”, they also transition quickly and adapt to the demands of academics, athletics, and relationships. These individuals felt a sense of belonging to the institution, which eased their early unknowns and allowed them to thrive in a new environment. These positive findings support Alexander Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory, a highly respected theory used by higher education professionals for years, in practice and research. His theory, in simple terms, states that a student’s involvement with their academic experience can affect the amount of student learning and personal development. Involvement, in this case, refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1984).

Moreover, the findings from this study agree with Astin's (1984) finding that being involved in athletics showed positive correlations in personal satisfaction with the institution, the environment, friendships, and the administration. Researchers who focus college student success have found that involvement, in some capacity, with their institution, directly affects student learning, personal development, and college life satisfaction.

Attending college as a first-generation student while also participating on a sports team positively affects all aspects of the college experience. Much of the data from this study points to greater benefits being a student-athlete, than being a first-generation student. Being a student-athlete helps give structure and provides a sense of normalcy for these first-generation students entering college. As noted in literature, first-generation students face considerable challenges that may stand in way to attainment and persistence. This study shows first-generation students are more likely to persist, excel academically, and have positive interactions with faculty members. While more research needs to be done, evidence from this study shows a positive correlation between the effects from the student-athlete identity and how it positively assists the first-generation identity.

*Academically and athletically.* First-generation student-athletes are more inclined to be self-driven to excel in both the classroom and sport. Individuals from this study expressed that being student-athletes means the standards and expectations are raised to another level. These standards and expectations are rooted in the classroom and rightfully expand to their sport. At the Division III level, where academics are highly prioritized, student-athletes are competing at the highest level while putting in just as much effort

devoted to their academics. First-generation student-athletes have extremely positive relationships with their teammates and coaches. Teammates have become a second family; while coaches are seen as resourceful guardians that promote open communication and an open door policy. The relationships built with teammates and coaches directly relate to the high sense of belonging felt by first-generation student-athletes. Through the recruiting periods, some coaches made personal connections and offered their resources before the student-athlete officially stepped on campus. By checking up and helping the student-athlete with questions and concerns through the college process, these students felt an immediate sense of togetherness. A common response regarding the transition to being a collegiate student-athlete was the immediate friends give to them by their sport. It is not unusual for teammates to become close, given they spend many hours of the week together and have similar interests and passions. This immediate sense of belonging helped these first-generation student-athletes transition effectively. Additionally, these findings agree backup Marx, Huffmon, and Doyle's (2008) findings that student-athletes feel a sense of belonging on campus.

***Faculty and campus life.*** First-generation student-athletes also had positive interactions and relationships with their faculty members. Some individuals reported receiving on-campus jobs from their professors, while some expressed they stay in touch with their professors for future research opportunities. Faculty was described as being knowledgeable, welcoming, resourceful, and caring. However, when comparing the qualitative data between coaches and faculty, there are major differences in choice words, phrases, and direct quotes that reflect that FGSA are more likely to be more comfortable with their coaches.

The on-campus life is a great experience for first-generation student-athletes. While most individuals lived on-campus, some commuted from their own family homes. These students thoroughly enjoy the freedom that college brings them, but also makes them appreciate the opportunity they have. The transition to campus life was easier than expected for those who are campus residents.

### **Conclusions**

First-generation student-athletes are thriving, unique educational pioneers who are the first in their families to attend college, and for the participants in this study, also the first to play a collegiate sport. The findings of this study were able to add to the literature on first-generation student-athletes. This study also challenged first-generation stigmas, while supporting research on student-athletes and Astin's (1984) student involvement theory. This particular population has long been understudied in higher education; but as accessibility of postsecondary institutions and demographics of who is going continues to shift, I hope this population will be given more focus. Along the way this study has also helped me, as a former first-generation student-athlete, gain a deeper understanding about the identities that make up a large part of myself.

The participants in this study illustrate who and what motivates them, as well as describes the interactions and experiences felt so far during their college journey. These students work extremely hard and do not let the odds defy them. They are appreciative of the opportunity and have gained a great sense of community surrounding them that attribute to their successes so far. The themes that transpired from this study were: finding the right fit, greater sense of community, higher commitment to goals,

progressive soft skills, establishing structure and normalcy, and (lack of) expectations and their transitions.

I want to extend my gratitude for the students that offered their time for this study. The themes and findings that emerged were more than I could have imagined.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study, the current research on this population, and personal examples from the participants in this study, the following recommendations for Rowan University's First-Generation Task Force and Rowan Athletics are presented:

1. Rowan University's First-Generation Task Force and Rowan Athletics should collaborate and work together during the academic years to create programs and design workshops altered for first-generation student-athletes. This will enhance academic, athletic, and career success.
2. Rowan University's First-Generation Task Force and Rowan Athletics should collaborate to put a list of all resources available for first-generation students and promote this list in various ways to reach all first-generation student-athletes.
3. Rowan Athletics should start keeping a database for their first-generation student-athletes. This database will be continuously updated with future incoming first-generation student-athletes and will be a promising way to see the forward progress.
4. Rowan Athletics, provided the numbers are there, should look into creating a first-generation student-athletes club within the department. This will create inclusivity and promote first-generation identity.

5. Rowan Athletics, in support with other first-generation task forces on campus, should bring in speakers that can attest to being a first-generation student-athlete. Hearing from someone who has been in their shoes can help current students relate to what they may be feeling or facing now.
6. Lastly, Rowan Athletics, working together with the First-Generation Task Force, should actively promote symposiums, panels, workshops, with multiple time slots due to time constraints from being a student-athlete on campus.

These ideas are not limited to Rowan University and Rowan Athletics, but can be duplicated to serve all athletic departments, university administrators, and student affairs professionals.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for further research are presented:

1. A study should be conducted on a broader scale, using a larger sample size to further explore the experiences of first-generation student-athletes.
2. Future studies that involve first-generation students as well as first-generation athletic administrators within a department.
3. Future studies should compare the academic differences between first-generation student-athletes and continuing student-athletes.
4. Future research should focus on understudied populations that possess multiple identities including: first-generation student-athletes, first-generation college students identifying as LGBTQ+, first-generation graduate students, and first-generation administrators on college campuses.

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## Appendix A

### Institutional Board Review Approval

#### STUDY PROFILE

<b>Study ID:</b> Pro2019000800					
<b>Title:</b> Exploration of First-Generation Student-Athlete Experiences at a Suburban Division III Institution					
<b>Principal Investigator:</b>		MaryBeth Walpole		<b>Study Coordinator:</b>	
<b>Co-Investigator(s):</b>		Mandy Jiang		<b>Other Study Staff:</b> There are no items to display	
<b>Sponsor:</b>		Department Funded		<b>Approval Cycle:</b> Twelve Months	
<b>Risk Determination:</b>		Minimal Risk		<b>Device Determination:</b> Not Applicable	
<b>Review Type:</b>	Expedited	<b>Expedited Category:</b>	6 7	<b>Exempt Category:</b>	N/A
<b>Subjects:</b>	10	<b>Specimens:</b>	0	<b>Records:</b>	

#### CURRENT SUBMISSION STATUS

<b>Submission Type:</b>	Research Protocol/Study	<b>Submission Status:</b>	Approved
<b>Approval Date:</b>	1/31/2020	<b>Expiration Date:</b>	1/30/2021
<b>Continuation Review Required:</b>	Progress Report		
<b>Pregnancy Code:</b>	Not Applicable	<b>Pediatric Code:</b>	Not Applicable
		<b>Prisoner Code:</b>	Not Applicable

<b>Protocol:</b>	Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes Recruitment Flyer 1 Interview Questions Recruitment Flyer 2	<b>Consent:</b>	Audio Consent Form to be Recorded Consent Form to Participate	<b>Recruitment Materials:</b>	Recruitment flyer 1 Recruitment flyer 2 Recruitment Email
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## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

Title: Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes  
PI: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.  
Co-Investigator: Mandy Jiang



#### ADULT CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Exploration of First-Generation Student-Athletes Experiences at a Division III Institution

**Principal Investigator:** MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

**Co-Investigator:** Mandy Jiang

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide key information that will help you decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study.

Please carefully read the key information provided in questions 1-9 and 14 below. The purpose behind those questions is to provide clear information about the purpose of the study, study specific information about what will happen in the course of the study, what are the anticipated risks and benefits, and what alternatives are available to you if you do not wish to participate in this research study.

The study team will explain the study to you and they will answer any question you might have before volunteering to take part in this study. It is important that you take your time to make your decision. You may take this consent form with you to ask a family member or anyone else before agreeing to participate in the study.

If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask the study team and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

The Principal Investigator, Mandy Jiang, or another member of the study team will also be asked to sign this informed consent.

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Version #:1  
Version Date: 01/22/2020



Title: Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes  
PI: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.  
Co-Investigator: Mandy Jiang

**1. What is the purpose of the study?**

This study is being conducted to fulfill the thesis requirement of my program – M.A. in Higher Education. There is currently little research on this population. This study will look at the experiences that first-generation college student-athletes face in attempt to close the gap.

**2. Why have you been asked to take part in this study?**

First-generation college students, who are also student-athletes, are invited to participate in this study because this is a unique population.

**3. What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?**

You will be asked to complete an online survey that would take no longer than 10 minutes.

**4. Who may take part in this research study? And who may not?**

All full-time, first-generation college student-athletes are allowed to participate in this study. College students that are first-generation but do not participate on a intercollegiate athletic team cannot participate.

**5. How long will the study take and where will the research study be conducted?**

The study will take no longer than eight months from start to finish. The first four months are associated with the length of the course and the remaining two months will be used for data collection and analysis. The study will take place at Rowan University, in the College of Education and Rowan Athletics.

**6. How many visits may take to complete the study?**

This study will take one visit to complete.

**7. What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?**

There are no risks and/or discomforts by partaking in this survey.

**8. Are there any benefits for you if you choose to take part in this research study?**

By participating in this research study, you are increasing the research on this unique student population. The private investigator will benefit from this study by gaining answers on research questions.

**9. What are the alternatives if you do not wish to participate in the study?**

Your alternative is not to participate in the study.

**10. How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?**

Estimate between 30-60 participants.

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Version #:1  
Version Date: 01/22/2020



Title: Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes  
PI: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.  
Co-Investigator: Mandy Jiang

**11. willing to stay in this research study?**

During the course of the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect you, you will be contacted.

**12. Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?**

There is no cost to participate in this survey.

**13. Will you be paid to take part in this study?**

You will not be paid to take part in this study.

**14. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?**

All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your personal information may be given out, if required by law. Presentations and publications to the public and at scientific conferences and meetings will not use your name and other personal information. (All information will be confidentiality kept in a document that can only be viewed by the private investigator. If needed, all names will be changed using pseudonyms).

**15. What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time.

If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to Mandy Jiang.

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

**16. Who can you call if you have any questions?**

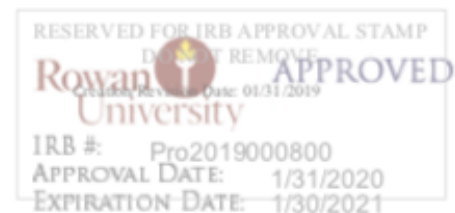
If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can call the Co-Investigator:

Mandy Jiang  
Educational Services & Leadership, College of Education  
856-256-4750

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

3

Version #:1  
Version Date: 01/22/2020



Title: Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes  
PI: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.  
Co-Investigator: Mandy Jiang  
Office of Research Compliance  
(856) 256-4078– Glassboro/CMSRU

**17. What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?**

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

---

**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

I have read the entire information about the research study, research risks, benefits and the alternatives, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed.

All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered and I agree to volunteer to participate in the study.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

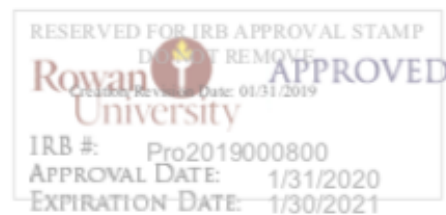
To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**FOR NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING SUBJECTS:**

Translation of the consent document (either verbal or written) must have prior approval by the IRB. Contact your local IRB office for assistance.





## Appendix C

### Audio Consent Form



ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Mandy Jiang. We are asking for your permission to allow us to audiotape the interview as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording will be used for:

- Transcriptions for the researcher
- Analysis for the researcher

The recording will include the voices of the participant and the researcher. The audio will not be able to identify who the participant is.

The recording(s) will be stored in a secure computer file and will be deleted after the study is completely finished.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

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#### AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read the entire information about the research study, research risks, benefits and the alternatives, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed.

All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered and I agree to volunteer to participate in the study.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Version #1  
Version Date: 01/22/2020

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## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol

Title: Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes  
PI: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.  
Co-Investigator: Mandy Jiang



#### APPENDIX D Interview Questions

Each interview will include the following questions.

1. Tell me about why you chose Rowan?
2. Tell me about your college experience so far.
  - 2-a. What is it like being a first-generation college student?
  - 2-b. What is it like being a collegiate student-athlete?
3. How does being a first-generation student affect your goals here at Rowan?
4. How does being a collegiate student-athlete affect your goals here at Rowan?
5. How has your experience been interacting with:
  - 5-a. faculty
  - 5-b. teammates
  - 5-c. non-athletic peers
6. Describe your transition to college. How was that transition been for you?
  - 6-a. Has it been what you thought it was going to be?
7. How has your dual identities impacted your experience during college?
  - 7-a. As a first-generation student, have you faced any challenges or received any benefits as you are seeking to complete your college degree?
  - 7-b. As a student-athlete, have you faced any challenges or received any benefits as you are seeking to complete your college degree?
8. How can colleges and universities like the one you are attending make it easier for first-generation student-athletes to succeed?
  - 8-a. What can faculty do?
  - 8-b. What can coaches and athletics administrators do?

Version Date: (01/23/2020)

Title: Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes  
PI: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.  
Co-Investigator: Mandy Jiang

**8-c.** What can peers do?

**8-d.** What can university administrators do?

**9.** What is your career goal, and how are you moving towards achieving that?

**10.** *Upperclassmen only:* Are there notable differences between the first year compared to the second year?

Version Date: (01/23/2020)

## Appendix E

### Recruitment Email

#### **Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes**

Dear Potential Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study that examines a first-generation student-athlete's experience while attending a NCAA Division III institution in New Jersey. I am currently enrolled in the M.A. in Higher Education Administration program and am in the process of writing my thesis to fulfill graduation requirements. This study is entitled *Exploring the Experiences of First-Generation Student-Athletes at a Suburban Division III institution*.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of first-generation student-athletes on college campuses through two (2) research questions. I will attempt to provide evidence-based research used to promote and enhance the initiatives and programs in place to further first-generation student-athlete success. While these students are prominent on college campuses, this population is understudied. Closing the gap in literature on this population can enhance and benefit University efforts academically and athletically.

This study will require one (1) face-to-face interview lasting 30-45 minutes. Your participant is completely voluntary and personal information will be kept confidential. Criteria to participate in the survey include: being a full-time student at Rowan University, being a first-generation student (first person in your family to attend a four-year institution), and being a student-athlete.

There are no risks or discomforts associated with this study; the interview process will be conducted on campus at a location to the participant's choosing. There may be no direct benefit to you, however, by participating in this study, you will help address the lagging gap in literature. All data will be destroyed after the study is completed.

If you are interested in being a part of this research study, or have any questions, please email Mandy Jiang at [jiangm0@rowan.edu](mailto:jiangm0@rowan.edu) stating your interest!

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study # [Pro2019000800](#))