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The Semester of Struggle: Male Junior College Transfer Student-Athletes' Experiences

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This study employed Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a lens for understanding how seven male transfer student-athletes experienced the transition from junior college to an NCAA Division I institution. The results of this study include the following themes: motivations, transfer preparation, the semester of struggle, adjusting to a new environment, and identifying new support structures. Taking stock of their coping resources (e.g., support, situation, self, and strategies) played a key role in participants' successful transition. This study raises implications for research and practice.

Keywords: junior college; transfer student-athletes; NCAA Division I; Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Junior colleges are seeing increased enrollment and are becoming more common entryways into higher education for a large number of students (Horton, 2009; Lazarowicz, 2015). The overarching purpose of junior colleges is to provide open-access education to all students who desire an education (Bahr, 2013). Junior colleges provide students the opportunity to live at home, save money on tuition, and adjust to college life. With smaller class sizes and opportunities to advance their education, attending a junior college is a great option for students who feel anxious about attending a large university. Yet, it is important for junior college students to be adequately prepared for the demands of a four-year institution should they choose to transfer. According to Jenkins and Fink (2016), improving degree outcomes for students who transfer from junior colleges to four-year universities is “critical to achieving national goals for improving upward social mobility and economic vitality” (p. 3). In this way, junior colleges play a vital role as entryways to higher education for a highly diverse group of students (Horton, 2015). However, academic motivations are not the only reasons that students attend junior college. Some students attend junior college to continue to play sports. Often, their goal is to improve their grades or skill so they can continue to play at a four-year institution (Horton, 2009; Pflum, Nadler, & Miller, 2017). Because most students will not make it onto a team at a four-year institution straight out of high school, junior colleges provide another opportunity to compete.

The athletic environment at a junior college is different from the environment at a Division I NCAA institution. In junior college, athletics is not about spectators or revenue; the athletic programs are about the student-athletes’ development and growth (Horton, 2009). The environment is friendlier and more encouraging, which allows the athletes to improve both academically and athletically. Horton (2009) found that “athletic programs at the community college offer a valuable experience for student participants and facilitate the continued desire to pursue academic endeavors beyond sports” (p. 25). Similarly, junior college athletics are a means to an end; students are often trying to get to the next level, and staff (both academic and athletic) are trying to prepare them for this transition. However, less is known about the unique experiences of junior college transfer student-athletes after they transition to a Division I institution. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) have called for research related to marginalized student populations, such as junior college transfer student-athletes, “to increase our understanding of, and ability to assist with, various transitions that these students experience while moving into, through, and out of our higher education settings” (p. 226). Hazelbaker (2015), who studied junior college transfer student-athletes in NCAA Division I men’s basketball programs, for example, found that junior college transfer student-athletes struggled with the transition to Division I institutions and graduated at a significantly lower rate than other men’s basketball players. Yet, more research is needed to understand the specific factors that influence their persistence and retention. Junior college transfer student-athletes are required to adjust to a new athletic and academic environment simultaneously, and this experience may pose different challenges for individuals.

Junior college transfer student-athletes are an important subgroup of the transfer student population that commands greater attention from the higher education and athletics literature. In 2016, Junior college transfer students made up 7.2% of the overall NCAA Division I male student-athlete population. This number is significantly higher than the 2.5% female junior

college transfer student population (NCAA, 2016). The percentage was highest in baseball, with 19.2% of NCAA Division I players being classified as junior college transfers (NCAA, 2016). Understanding the experience of junior college transfer student-athletes is important to increase the success of academic support programs and initiatives of Division I athletic departments. This study seeks to address the dearth of research regarding the ways junior college transfer student-athletes experience the transition from junior college to a Division I institution and the factors that facilitate their success. LeCrom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, and Gerber (2009) studied NCAA Division I student-athletes and found “certain populations of student-athletes leave institutions at a higher rate than others, and may suggest a need to target retention efforts at particular subpopulations of student-athletes” (p.14). In this way, there is a need to explore and understand the experiences of junior college transfer student athletes in order to understand how institutions can best support them. This study is unique as it hones in on the perspective of junior college transfer student-athletes with no former experiences at a Division I or four-year institution. Understanding the junior college transfer process and the factors that affect student athletes’ successful transition to a Division I institution can help institutions of higher education provide better services, support, and opportunities to succeed (Bush, Castañeda, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2009; Kissinger & Watson, 2009).

Student-Athlete Experiences

The existing literature on student-athletes highlights a range of factors that affect persistence and retention. Team dynamics, coach/athlete relationships, and athlete eligibility all have an influence on student-athlete persistence and retention (Horton, 2009; Weiss & Robinson, 2013). Students-athletes will differ culturally, economically, and socially, which according to Tinto (2006), will affect retention differently. Rivera (2004) found four factors that specifically relate to student-athlete retention: quality of academic experience, quality of athletic experience, in-network support, and out-of-network support. Quality of the academic experience relates to classes and academic work, whereas the quality of the athletic experience relates to a student-athlete’s athletic endeavors. In-network support is the academic support a student-athlete receives from faculty, staff, or anyone involved with the athletic department or team, and out-of-network support includes friends outside of athletics and other extracurricular activities. Other studies similarly emphasize the importance of in- and out-of-network support for transfer student-athletes—primarily the role of family members and individuals associated with athletics (Flowers, Luzynski, & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014).

Relationships are also very important to student-athlete retention. Weiss and Robinson (2013), for example, found a strong correlation between team relationships and student-athlete retention. Team members who were active on the current rosters were more likely to have positive relationships with coaching staff, whereas inactive members who had been removed from the team roster were more likely to have negative relationships. This shows that negative relationships increased the chances that a student-athlete would leave, or be dismissed, from the team. These inactive student athletes were more likely to experience retention issues. Horton (2009) found that the students who described having connections with faculty increased their academic engagement while maintaining their athletic commitment. Generally, the literature indicates that relationships are key to retaining student-athletes (Horton, 2009; Rivera, 2004; Pflum, Nadler, & Miller, 2017; Weiss & Robinson, 2013). However, there are differences in the experiences of sub-groups of the general student-athlete population. According to LeCrom et al.

(2009), gender is a significant predictor of student-athlete retention. Retention of females is more likely than retention of males, as is the case with the general student body; however, there are different reasons for this pattern. An explanation that is student-athlete specific is the professional sporting opportunities that await men after college. Men typically have more professional sporting opportunities, particularly in revenue-generating sports, than women and a significantly higher financial incentive; these factors cause more male student-athletes to prioritize athletics over academics, which can result in poorer retention (LeCrom et al., 2009). Additionally, female student-athletes are more likely to encourage each other academically and less likely to become academically detached over time (Adler & Adler, 1985; Meyer, 1990).

Sport type is another significant factor affecting student-athlete retention. Retention of student-athletes in individual sports is more likely than retention of student-athletes in team sports (LeCrom et al., 2009). Interestingly, team sports tend to have more full scholarship athletes than individual sports. Partial scholarships are more common in individual sports. Yet, according to LeCrom et al. (2009), athletes who are on partial scholarships are more likely to be motivated intrinsically, whereas athletes on full scholarships are more likely to be motivated extrinsically. This different type of motivation could help explain differences in retention. Another explanation for this pattern is the added pressure that revenue generating team sports face, given increased media attention. According to Adler and Adler (1985), added pressure distracts students from their academic work, which may lead to eligibility and retention issues. The increased professionalization of a sport has an effect on the student-athletes' academic motivations. When student-athletes transition from high school to college, the demands of the sport increase, athletic participation is no longer recreational, and participation becomes an occupation. Riemer, Beal, and Schroeder (2000) found that, regardless of the quality of the team, players in commercialized sports were given a higher status by the university community than those in non-commercialized sports. This higher status led to greater athletic commitment and academic detachment.

Within the context of junior college athletics, Kissinger and Miller (2007) also noted the potential impact of athletic factors. Junior college student athletes, for example, often acknowledged that they would not have attended their particular junior college if they had not been able to participate in athletics (Pflum, Nadler, & Miller, 2017). Junior college student-athletes often viewed themselves as stopping-in to the junior college before continuing their athletic careers at a four-year institution. Flowers, Luzynski, and Zamani-Gallaher (2014) similarly found that continuing athletics was the main reason student-athletes decided to transfer to another institution. Though Flowers et al. (2014) looked at all transfer student-athletes, not solely junior college transfers, it suggests that athletic factors may similarly impact junior college student-athletes' transfer experiences.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Student retention is more likely when students have support structures (academic, personal, and social) in addition to clear pathways toward graduation (Tinto, 1999). For this reason, we used Schlossberg's transition theory to understand male junior college transfer student-athletes' experiences of the transition into a Division I institution. Schlossberg's transition theory provides a theoretical framework that helps to better understand the key aspects to the transfer experience. It "provides insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given

transition will have at a particular time” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 212-213). Transition theory consists of three stages: approaching the transition, taking stock of coping resources, and taking charge (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2011).

Approaching the transition consists of identifying the experience in terms of type, context, impact, and outlook. This first stage reflects the experience leading up to the transition and includes consideration of whether the transition is considered an event or nonevent. The second stage is taking stock of coping resources, which is tied with the 4-S resource system: support, situation, self, and strategies. Throughout a transition, individuals are constantly assessing their coping resources. Situation refers to how an individual views the transition; self refers to personal characteristics and psychological characteristics; support refers to the sources of assistance available to the individual; and strategies refer to the coping approach each individual uses to control, avoid, or prevent stressful situations. Schlossberg created the 4-S system to identify resources someone can use to cope with a transition. Taking charge is the final stage and is about strengthening resources and creating new strategies to assist with the transition. Taking charge allows individuals to take control of the transition and integrate the transition into their lives (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995).

The use of transition theory, specifically to analyze the transition from junior college to a Division I institution, is evident in previous higher education studies. Lazarowicz (2015), for example, connected aspects of Schlossberg’s transition theory to junior college transfer students and highlighted the relevance of the moving in, moving through, and moving out conceptualization of the transition process. Because the transition may take more time than what universities realize, Lazarowicz (2015) advocated against a standard one-size-fits-all approach toward working with junior college transfer students. Similarly, Flowers et al. (2014) describe how Schlossberg’s transition theory provides a relevant framework within which to examine how transfer students conceptualize their adjustment and transition experience. In their study, personal characteristics and strategies (self and strategies) as well as social networks (situation and support) were identified as coping resources for transfer student-athletes navigating the transition process between institutions of higher education. Aligned with these prior studies, the purpose of this study was to understand the ways male junior college transfer student-athletes experience the transition to a Division I institution. The following research question guided our study:

1. How do male junior college transfer student-athletes experience the transition to a four-year NCAA Division I institution?

Methodology

This study was conducted at a NCAA Division I institution from the Football Championship Subdivision in the southern region of the United States. The institution is a public four-year university with a total enrollment of approximately 12,000 students and an acceptance rate of approximately 90%. The institution has a predominantly white student body (68%), with black students being the largest minority population (16%). The graduation rate in the general student population was around 50%.

We used in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews to understand the meaning-making experiences of junior college transfer student-athletes. For the purpose of this study,

junior college transfer student-athletes were defined as individuals who competed in athletics at a junior college and completed at least one full time semester prior to transferring to a four-year institution (NCAA, 2017). We were specifically interested in understanding the transfer experience and the meaning participants ascribed to that experience. Because previous studies indicate that male and female student-athletes experience retention and college differently (Meyer, 1990; LeCrom, Warren, Clark, Marolla, & Gerber, 2009), our study focused specifically on male student-athletes who were junior college transfers. Participants must have competed in either baseball, basketball, football, golf, cross country, soccer, or track and field, as these were the only sports that were common across junior college athletics and the Division I institution.

We used theoretical non-probabilistic sampling to guide the process of data collection, whereby individuals who possess the characteristics or live in the circumstances relevant to the social phenomenon being studied are selected for interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Access to the student-athlete population was available through the lead researcher's relationships with coaches and athletic academic advisors at the Division I institution. Seven junior college transfer student-athletes were identified and referred for participation. The lead researcher met with each of them individually, explained the nature of the research, and invited them to participate. All seven referrals agreed to participate. Four students were classified as juniors and participated in baseball. The other three participants were classified as seniors and participated in football. The baseball players were on partial scholarships, while the football players were on full scholarships.

Interviews were conducted in-person or through video conference in January 2017. The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to generate narratives that served as the sole method of inquiry. Questions covered a broad range of topics, including the transfer preparation process, the transfer, academic and athletic challenges, and retention factors. Questions focused on the experience of the participant and how successful they believed their transition had been. Participants were asked to talk about anything that made the transition easier or more difficult. The lead researcher prompted each participant to speak about factors that led to their persistence academically and athletically; participants were also asked if they had considered withdrawing academically or athletically. While all participants were asked to share the story of their transfer experience, each participant retained the discretion to lead the direction of the interview and choose how to relay their story. All interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed by the lead author.

The lead author's experience as a former junior college transfer student-athlete allowed him to establish common ground with the participants and assisted in development of rapport based on shared experience (Grubrium & Holstein, 2002). He approached this study with awareness of how his positionality as a former junior college transfer student-athlete informed his engagement with participants (Collins, 1991; Mertens, 2015). He used his positionality as both an insider and an outsider to remain attuned to the ways participants described their experiences and how his own biases could be influencing the interpretation of participants' experiences.

To analyze interview data, the lead researcher reviewed each interview transcript systematically with the research question and theoretical framework in mind. Interview transcripts were coded into units of meaning and conceptual labels were placed on responses that described events, experiences, and feelings related to the transition between junior college and the Division I institution. Codes were organized into thematic categories, recurrent themes were identified across transcripts, and a thematic narrative was developed (Meriam, 1998). The lead

researcher edited and removed any preliminary conceptual labels that were not as salient within or across interview transcripts.

To enhance the trustworthiness of interpretations, the lead researcher employed member-checks prior to data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks were documented using analytic memos. During each interview, the lead researcher paraphrased and summarized participants' responses and inquired about the accuracy of interpretations. Participants were then provided the opportunity to clarify any misunderstanding or confirm the preliminary interpretation. Such collaboration with participants via member-checks ensured that interpretations aligned with participants' narratives and meanings.

Limitations

Efforts were made to reduce the effect of any limitations throughout the study, however, there were still a couple that need to be mentioned. Firstly, this study was conducted on a small sample size at one institution. This means results are not generalizable to the entire population, but they do provide insight into individuals' experiences, which are valuable to practitioners and future researchers. The participants in this study also came from only two sports; junior college transfer student-athletes in other sports, particularly non-revenue sports, would likely have different experiences. For this reason, data must be interpreted within the context of participants' experiences.

Results

This study sought to understand male junior college transfer student-athletes' experiences through the lens of Schlossberg's transition theory. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain the confidential nature of the study. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of each participant that were relevant to this study. Five themes emerged during the analysis of interviews: motivations, transfer preparation, the semester of struggle, adjusting to a new environment, and identifying new support structures. They are described below:

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

Name	Sport	Semesters at Junior College/Cumulative Junior College GPA	Semesters at Division I Institution/Cumulative Division 1 GPA
Ryan	Football	3 Semesters/3.80 GPA	4 Semesters/3.0 GPA
Steven	Football	3 Semesters/3.05 GPA	3 Semesters/3.10 GPA
William	Football	3 Semesters/3.90 GPA	3 Semesters/3.70 GPA
Brad	Baseball	4 Semesters/3.80 GPA	2 Semesters/3.50 GPA
Chris	Baseball	4 Semesters/3.20 GPA	2 Semesters/3.20 GPA

Josh	Baseball	6 Semesters/3.80 GPA	2 Semesters/2.30 GPA
Mark	Baseball	4 Semesters/3.60 GPA	2 Semesters/3.45 GPA

Note: Semester includes all full time fall and spring semesters in addition to the current semester the interviews were conducted in.

Motivations

All the participants had similar reasons for choosing to attend junior college after high school. Most chose junior college based solely on athletic motivations. Steven, a senior football player, for example, incurred an injury during his senior year of high school and chose to attend a junior college for a second chance to be recruited by Division I institutions. Ryan, a senior football player, had a similar experience, and felt “overlooked recruiting wise” in high school; he also wanted a “second chance” to be recruited by a Division I institution. William, a senior football player, chose to go to junior college for “the exposure” athletically, while Mark, a junior baseball player, and Josh, a junior baseball player, believed junior college was the only option for them if they wanted to continue to play baseball. The remaining participants cited athletics as one of the deciding factors for their choice to attend junior college; however, they also spoke about financial motivations. Chris, a junior baseball player, for example, believed the scholarship from the junior college heavily influenced his decision. Brad, a junior baseball player, similarly spoke about the financial benefits of junior college, believing junior college “is a lot cheaper than a four-year.”

Similar factors were evident in the decision-making process of transferring to a Division I institution. All of the participants described approaching the transition with athletics as the main driver for their decision to transfer. Such motivating factors represented the personal and psychological characteristics that participants utilized as coping resources during the transition to a four-year Division I institution. Josh, for example, decided to attend the Division I institution “based on athletics.” His decision was influenced by people involved with the athletic program, “I loved the coaches, I loved [the athletic academic advisor], and I just felt like it was the perfect fit.” Steven also based his decision on athletic factors and believed the coaching staff played a significant role. Ryan said that his decision to attend the Division I institution was “solely a football decision,” and he did not consider many additional factors. In this way, several participants defined their motivation within the narrow arena of athletics, and their decision to transfer to a Division I institution was an anticipated event.

Three participants focused more on the athletic scholarship offers they received from four-year Division I institutions. Chris, for example, stated, “I really wanted to play baseball and [the Division I institution] offered me a partial scholarship, so that helped me pay for school a little bit, so I decide to do that.” Financial aid heavily influenced William, who stated, “it seemed like the best school with a free education and a full ride and immediate playing time.” Brad had a similar thought process and said, “they were a [Division I] school; they offered me a pretty good scholarship, that was a deciding factor.” This pattern demonstrates the importance of athletics and financial opportunities in a student-athletes’ choice of institution, particularly for junior college transfer student-athletes.

When asked about their reasons to persist through graduation, athletics emerged again as a motivating factor keeping participants engaged academically. Participants’ responses

highlighted the impact of the transfer to the Division I institution in terms of academics. Mark, for example, described how he would have struggled to find motivation for academics without athletics. He commented, “if I didn’t have baseball, it would be a little hard for me to come to school; sports and athletics is just basically all I know.” He indicated athletics kept him motivated academically: “if I have no baseball, I wouldn’t do as good in school as I’m doing right now.” The NCAA requirements kept him on track to graduate. He stated, “if there’s a requirement for baseball, you need to meet those standards; you have to push yourself to go to school.” Athletics was also a significant factor that William relied on for motivation. As he shared, “I gotta stay in school to play football. I wanna play football in the NFL, so it’s a good time to train.” Williams’s motivation for persistence was development as a professional athlete, and school was something he had to do to be able to play. Steven’s experience also provided a direct example of how athletics shaped participants’ motivation to persist academically. Steven believed his coach overlooked him, and said, “the coaches just weren’t giving me an opportunity; you know, it was demoralizing; it was so tough.” The experience hurt his motivation and resulted in decreased academic performance because he was “frustrated all the time.”

Despite athletic motivators, participants recognized the importance of a college degree for life after athletics. As Josh explained, “I know baseball is not going to last forever, so I need to get a degree so I can have a life and have a family and kids, support them.” Brad described a similar view, recognizing the value of a college degree for his future success: “I love baseball and all of that, but getting my degree is the most important part.” Participants, generally, recognized the limited opportunities to pursue a professional athletic career after college. For this reason, a college degree served as a contingency plan as they pursued athletic aspirations.

Transfer Preparation

All of the participants interviewed had some form of advisor at their junior college; three had an athletic advisor, while the remaining four had only a general advisor. However, most participants relied more on their coach as an advisor. Participants described taking stock of their coping resources by gauging their levels of confidence during the transition. Five out of the seven participants, for example, said they had a poor understanding of what was required to transfer to a Division I institution, even though all of them had anticipated the transfer. Steven was the only participant that spoke confidently about the transfer requirements: “Everything [coaches and advisors] did for us was pushing us to get to a four-year. So the path that they set for us was very clear, how they wanted us to get there and what we needed to do to get there.” Steven spoke about the focus of his junior colleges athletic staff on preparing him for a Division I institution. Only two other participants had an athletic academic advisor in junior college; however, they described being unfamiliar with the transfer requirements. Both participants trusted their advisor to place them in the correct classes and deferred to their knowledge. William had no issues transferring and was actually able to graduate from junior college early, which he attributed to his advisor. Ryan, however, had some issues: “I was placed in a bunch of classes that were pretty much bogus, just so I could be eligible.” At the time, he did not think this was an issue; however, many of his classes did not transfer to the Division I institution. While he was still able to transfer, he felt it caused stress and anxiety as he thought he should have been advised to take different classes in junior college that would have transferred to the Division I institution. Ryan felt that he had wasted time and money on classes that he did not need.

The four remaining participants relied on a general advisor or a coach for their class selection. None of these participants claimed to have a good understanding of the NCAA transfer requirements. The participants who had a coach as an advisor transferred without any issues; however, Mark did not believe his coach was preparing him for a transfer to a Division I school, “he kind of just threw classes at me and I just completed them...I don’t think he really knew what was after that.” Those with a general advisor felt the advisor had no knowledge of the transfer requirements. Chris spoke about advisors “just advising us for college” and Josh thought the advisors “just kind of worried about the [academic] subjects; they didn’t worry about athletics.” Chris transferred without any issues; however, Josh faced some larger challenges. These issues arose because Josh attended junior college for three years instead of the conventional two years due to an injury that resulted in a redshirt year. Attending an extra year of junior college, and completing six full time semesters, changes the transfer requirements and neither Josh, nor anyone at his junior college, had considered this. The issue did not surface until the summer before he transferred to the Division I institution. As Josh shared, “I got a call this summer... and they said you got to take four classes before you can even enroll.” Josh described this as “a struggle” and stated, “if I would have failed one more class I wouldn’t even be here.” Josh was in this struggle because nobody knew the requirements for him to transfer to a Division I institution. Josh said having an academic advisor who was knowledgeable of the transfer requirements would have been an “easy fix” and that it “would have made it so much simpler.” These participants identified a lack of knowledge on transfer requirements amongst junior college staff, which caused them to view the transition as more challenging.

Preparation for the academic rigor at the Division I institution was another inconsistency that participants experienced. While Chris and Mark described feeling mentally and academically prepared for the transition to the Division I institution, the remaining participants did not. As Brad, for example, noted, “some assignments are tougher. The grading part is tougher.” Steven similarly shared, “[junior college] was definitely easier than what it is here.” Despite these challenges, both Brad and Steven described being able to adapt to the increased demands quickly in order to maintain their eligibility. As Steven shared, “[advisors and coaches] had been warning us about that [increased difficulty]. That’s just kind of one of the little things that everyone knows—junior college is gonna be easier than university.” Participants generally described personal and psychological characteristics that enabled them to respond to the transition effectively.

William also found that the classes were more difficult and demanding at the Division I institution, but found it a lot more difficult to keep his grades up. As he described, “the course load [in junior college] was easier to handle.” He felt unprepared for the increased demands of the classes at the Division I institution and suffered academically during his first semester, making a C when he was usually a “straight A student.” Josh also had good grades in junior college and felt “overwhelmed” with the increased demands of classes at the four-year institution. In his first semester, he realized the increased academic rigor and said, “I got in three senior level classes, and they just kicked my tail, and I couldn’t get above a C, so my GPA suffered.” He continued by saying, “schoolwork there, at my [junior] college, was pretty easy compared to this...I was expecting it to be a little harder; I just thought I would have to study a little more; I wasn’t expecting that huge of a jump.” Josh found the classes harder and felt unprepared for the changes in rigor. This increase in rigor can be seen in Josh’s GPA, as it dropped from a 3.8 cumulative junior college GPA to a 2.3 for his first semester at the Division I institution. Ryan also saw an increase in the level of difficulty that he was not expecting. He

knew his junior college classes were easy, and noted, “the content was easy, the teachers were not demanding; it was basically an extension of high school.” He was expecting the classes at the four-year Division I institution to take a similar shape. As Ryan shared, “I was thinking it was still gonna be a breeze”; however, he found the classes at the Division I institution to be harder, more demanding, and he thought the instructors had higher expectations. This increase in difficulty was a surprise to Ryan, who said, “my first semester it kind of shocked me,” and he was forced to change his study habits. Participants, generally, had very different academic experiences and expectations at the junior college level that left them feeling unprepared following the transfer to a Division I institution. These conditions set the foundation for the semester of struggle.

The Semester of Struggle

The semester of struggle referred to the way participants viewed the transition to the Division I institution (e.g., situation). Josh, for example, believed he had always been a good student. He had a 4.0 GPA in high school, a 3.8 GPA in junior college, but then found himself with a 2.3 GPA after his first semester at the Division I institution. Josh reflected on this experience: “I was just caught off-guard the first semester, and after a couple of tests, you’re just stuck in a hole.” Going into his second semester at the Division I institution, he felt better adjusted, and more confident he could improve his GPA. Ryan had a similar experience and remembered being “shocked” at the difficulty during his first semester; however, he thought he “definitely got used to it” by his second semester. William, who is “usually a straight A student,” made a C in a history class during his first semester because he was not accustomed to writing papers. He, too, thought that he was able to adjust academically after his first semester; he just had to adapt to the new academic requirements and expectations.

Changes in the academic environment following the transfer to the Division I institution brought about the semester of struggle. Participants described this situation as one of the more significant challenges of the transfer experience. Steven, for example, spoke about the classes at his junior college, and described them as having a more one-on-one feel. This one-on-one feel came from the relationships he was able to develop with his professors. He stated,

You know all of your professors out of class, and you talk to them when you’re walking. As to [the Division I institution], you may be in class with sixty kids, sixty to one hundred kids, and you may not get that one-on-one relationship that you get in junior college.

Brad also noticed this change after he transferred, and noted, “I was used to having class with, like, twenty people; here, we’re having classes with, like, forty people.” Mark similarly described how changes in class size, for example, can make academic work harder. He shared, “in junior college you have a smaller setting; here, in the university, it’s more big, more broad, and you know you kind of sometimes have to teach yourself.” He also stated, “to some teachers, you’re just a student; over there, back in junior college, you’re kind of individual.” This issue was most obvious to Mark when he needed extra help in a class:

[In junior college], you can just go up to the teacher and be like, “hey, can I do this” or “can you teach me a little bit extra.” Here, it’s kind of like some teachers are, like, “you know what, you’ve gotta teach yourself sometimes” ... or “if you need more help, go to tutoring” and stuff.

Mark saw tutoring as a “luxury” that he did not have in junior college; however, finding the time to get to tutoring was problematic. Being able to speak to his teacher after class was quick, but going to tutoring was more of a hassle. As Mark shared, “being a student-athlete, you kind of sometimes have so many things in your head; sometimes you don’t understand certain things; you don’t got time to go to another building to go to tutoring.” The inability to have a personal relationship with teachers, as a result of larger class sizes, posed a challenge for participants during the semester of struggle.

Another factor that contributed to participants’ struggle was the loss of support structures following the transition to the Division I institution. For the majority of participants, the junior college was closer to home whereas the Division I institution was significantly farther away, resulting in less direct support from family and friends. William noticed the increased distance from home as a challenge, and shared, “at my junior college, I could go home every weekend if I wanted.” Being close to home was important to William because it provided him a renewed sense of self: “when I go home, I get this focus; I realize I remember everything...I get renewed motivation.” Being away from home so often gave him “kind of a disconnect,” which made his transfer more difficult. When talking about his transfer, Steven similarly shared, “the hardest part about transitioning was probably coming up here alone, by myself, not knowing anybody.” It took Steven three to four months to familiarize himself with his teammates and feel like a part of the team. During these three to four months, the loss of the support structures made it increasingly difficult to adjust to the transition. Mark also found being away from home difficult. He described the experience as “doing it by yourself.” Because he relied on family and friends for support, the transition became difficult when he felt alone. According to Mark, his family and friends had to encourage him to persist and “to stay out there” when he felt most alone and far from home.

Adjusting to a New Environment

Participants described athletic pressure at both their junior colleges and their Division I institution; however, participants experienced this pressure differently. Steven, for example, described the pressure as being more salient at the Division I institution. He said, “the pressure is a lot bigger here, because you’re competing for your spot with more guys than you would be in junior college.” He noted, however, that, “in junior college, you’re not only competing for playing time with one or two other guys, but you’re also competing for a Division I scholarship that’s gonna come at the end of the season.” Hence, though athletic pressure was present before and after the transition, the stakes were different. Mark held a similar perspective about the Division I institution and shared the following: “it is a bigger school, so you kind of have to do a little bit better.” However, he also described experiencing a different type of pressure prior to the transition. As he described, “at junior college, your main goal is to get out of there and play at a four-year school, so, I mean, I think it’s more pressure there to really perform well and see other coaches see you get recruited.” The pressure to be able to transfer to a Division I institution and

to compete for playing time after the transition, hence, was the situation that several participants described having to adjust to.

Another pattern that emerged was a more demanding athletic travel schedule at the Division I institution. Most of the participants spoke about the increased demands. Mark, for example, found the travel schedule at the Division I institution to be completely different from his junior college. He said, “you’ve gotta go travel eight hours to go play somewhere, rather than in [junior college], I would only travel thirty-five minutes.” He believed this increased travel time had an impact on his academic work.

It’s gonna be a challenge because there will be certain times where we’ll be back at like two in the morning and then try to go to class the next day and trying to, you know, focus, and you’re tired and you need to focus to pass, so it’s gonna be a challenge.

Brad had a similar experience of the travel schedule, whereby staying on top of academic work became more difficult. As Brad stated, “we travel a lot; we are gone for school a lot; it’s a lot tougher for sure.” Steven also believed the travel schedule was more demanding at the Division I institution and acknowledged how the increased demands pushed him to develop better self-management skills. He spoke about the importance of communicating with his teachers and taking a proactive approach to ensure no problems arose. Josh had a similar view on the more demanding travel schedule and believed the schedule helped him stay organized and ahead of his academic work.

Other participants focused on the direct effect athletic participation had on their academic work. Most spoke about being able to find balance in this area; however, the topic of balance emerged as a more significant factor for Ryan and William. Ryan thought that schoolwork was hard to focus on after practice. He said, “I mean you just grind and grind for a couple hours of practice, you’re just dead and you don’t even wanna do your homework at the end of the day.” William also felt that after practice, he had less motivation to complete his schoolwork. William thought that in-season, focusing on school was harder. He said, “during the season, I just get [school work] done, you know; I don’t even try hard, just do it...I can’t tell you what I learned; I can’t even tell you what classes I took.” Within this context, participants also described the benefits of transferring during the off-season. Josh, for example, spoke about travel and the difficulties it posed, and shared, “we have to go to class every day, and now [in-season], we will miss class twice a week. I’m glad I got to get my feet wet in pre-season, so now I understand how to handle it.” Chris similarly thought beginning classes in-season would be tough academically, because there is “less time to get acclimated to everything.” In addition to this, he saw challenges from an athletic perspective, because he would have less time to prove himself to his coaches. Steven thought the overall adjustment to the new institution in-season would have been a lot to handle, because, “in-season, it would have been a lot more thrown at me at once. I don’t think there would have been enough time for me to settle in and meet people.” William shared a similar view regarding an in-season transfer by stating, “having to find out my schedule, and how I’m gonna live, the layout of the school, who everybody is; it would have been a lot to handle.” In this sense, transferring to a Division I institution during the off-season was more responsive to the needs of participants and the setting in which the transition took place.

Identifying New Support Structures

All participants spoke about their teammates as a support structure. They described how their athletic support network facilitated their transition to the Division I institution and served as an effective coping strategy. Ryan, for example, spoke about the importance of his teammates: “I would say I have a close circle of friends, and we keep each other on track, and you know, in all aspects of our lives.” Often living together, participants described becoming “really tight” with their teammates. Steven, for example, spoke about the importance of a close group of friends. When he transferred to the Division I institution, the support of two players’ was significant to him. He said, “they were the ones that kind of took me under their wings; they, you know, showed me the grounds at [the Division I institution], so we became very close.” He believed this relationship made the transition “a lot easier.” He found those teammates helpful both athletically and academically, and said, “kind of seeing how they’ve done academically has kind of pushed me to get on the same page as them.”

Josh thought his teammates were “like a family,” and found them to be a viable source of support. As Josh shared, “I went to one of my teammates last night because he had taken one of my classes last semester, and he helped me out with a project.” The willingness of his teammates to support him in areas such as academics contributed to the sense that they were “like brothers.” Mark spoke about a slightly different support from teammates, focusing on a connection he had with other junior college transfer student-athletes. He stated, “they encourage me to keep going, and we kind of push each other and that’s more the junior college side.” He felt he had a connection with the other junior college transfers because they understood the transition he had experienced. In these ways, participants described taking charge of the transition and integrating the transition into their lives.

Other participants described the support they received from family members who had also been student-athletes. Participants believed relationships between generational student-athlete families had a positive impact on their transition. Chris, for example, shared how his older brother became a source of support outside of his team.

He has helped me through a lot of stuff because he has been through exactly what I have been through, and if I ever have any troubles, I can just go to him, and he usually has most of the answers for me.

Similarly, Josh believed his family could all relate well to each other because both his parents and his older sister had been student-athletes. He said he could rely on them for support and advice because, “they have been through the ropes; they know how it works.” Being able to relate to others based on the student-athlete experience seemed to be particularly important as participants transitioned and adjusted to the demands of the Division I institution.

Relying on the athletic academic advising staff at the Division I institution also served as an effective coping strategy. The advising staff were able to keep participants on track academically, in addition to assisting with the transfer process. Josh, for example, found the Division I athletic academic advising staff to be important confidence boosters when he experienced transfer difficulties. He stated, “[my advisor], the whole time was like, you can do it, you’re gonna be fine, and [my advisor] helped me get the confidence to do it.” Josh also described his advisor as one of the most important people to ensure he remained on top of his academic work. He said, “[my advisor] always keeps us updated on how we are doing, keeps us

motivated. She is, like, you only have a couple more weeks in school; you can do it.” The athletic academic advising staff, in this sense, were important for ensuring participants’ eligibility and academic progress.

Discussion

In approaching the transition to a Division I institution, all participants reported anticipating and preparing themselves for the transfer. Aligned with previous research, athletic factors carried a lot of significance for junior college transfer student-athletes (Letawsky et al., 2003). Athletics motivated participants to stay on track academically and manage their academic and athletic responsibilities better (Adler & Adler, 1985). One of the main reasons participants decided to attend junior college was to get a second chance at Division I scholarships. Consistent with previous studies (Horton, 2009; Pflum, Nadler, & Miller, 2017), the goal of participants was often to improve in their sport and gain another chance at recruitment to a Division I institution.

Participants described taking stock of their coping resources as they engaged the transfer process. The situation of each participant had a significant effect on the success of his transition. The lack of preparation for the transfer to and academic rigor of the four-year Division I institution were significant contributors to the semester of struggle that several participants described experiencing (Ishitani, 2008; Johnson, 2005; Whitfield, 2005). Some participants described having access to athletic academic advisors at the junior college level, while others described being dependent on general advisors or coaches to help them choose classes and prepare for the transfer. Though every participant planned to make the transfer to an NCAA Division I institution, only a few participants felt knowledgeable about the transfer process or prepared for it. This finding supports the notion that student support services are helpful in preparing junior college students for transfer, but only when implemented effectively (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). According to Hagedorn, Cypers, and Lester (2008), a carefully considered academic plan can increase the success, or likelihood, of a transfer. Unfortunately, many junior college student-athletes do not understand the transfer requirements and, thus, experience issues when they take courses that will not transfer (Smith, 2009).

Motivations to remain enrolled, and for selecting an institution, related to each participants’ self. Athletic and scholarship opportunities emerged as motivating factors in participants’ choice of institution and decision to persist. All participants understood the value of an athletic scholarship. Athletic scholarships were seen as an investment in themselves by the coaches at the Division I institution; it was a signal that the coach wanted them to be a part of the team and that they would receive playing time, which according to Weiss and Robinson (2013) is a factor student-athletes consider to be important to their retention. The lack of preparation for the transfer, however, caused stress and challenges for many of the participants, particularly as they encountered changes in class size and student-faculty relationships (Gaston-Gayles, 2013). For this reason, support structures proved to be significant retention factors for participants in this study. Teammates, coaches, and athletic advisors were all essential to assisting with the social and academic challenges of the transition. Teammates were a key support structure, and relying on them for support both on and off the field served as an important coping strategy. Most participants relied solely on teammates following the transition to the Division I institution; however, family also served as an important source of support, particularly when family was composed of generational student-athletes. This finding supports research by Flowers et al. (2014), as the participants in this study also relied on a relatively small, athletic or family related

support network. Most of the participants with previous student-athletes in their family found the relationship to be beneficial and often relied on them for support and guidance, which also served as an effective coping strategy. Participants, hence, took charge of their transition after the first semester and believed they were better prepared for their second semester. One factor that was attributed to participants' success was transferring to the Division I institution during the off-season. The off-season allowed participants to adjust to the new challenges and pressures before their competition season began.

The results of this study indicate the importance of understanding Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and particularly the 4-Ss (e.g., support, situation, self, and strategies), when working with male junior college transfer student-athletes. The transition from junior college to a Division I institution is typically an anticipated event. After the transfer, or event, has taken place, the successful junior college transfer student-athlete takes stock of his coping resources to better manage the transition. Taking stock of the coping resources was the most relevant aspect of the theory for male junior college transfer student-athletes. Each of the 4-Ss played a key role in the students' athletic and academic persistence. Understanding how each of the 4-Ss provides support is crucial to assisting students through the semester of struggle, as changes in the athletic and academic environment can act as hurdles to junior college transfer student-athletes' persistence and retention.

Implications for Research

Junior college transfer student-athletes are a unique subset of both the overall student-athlete population and the transfer student population. They are expected to simultaneously adjust to the demands of a more rigorous academic load and a more demanding athletic schedule. As the results from this study show, this can be a tough task. Participants in this study thought they had already adjusted to a college workload and schedule; they were not expecting such a significant increase in academic rigor. Participants were required to take upper level courses during their first semester at the Division I institution, which may have magnified the increase in rigor. Further studies on junior college transfer student-athletes' experiences are important for identifying successful retention programs and strategies. Hollis (2002), for example, found that funding and resources of an institution, alone, do not predict successful student-athlete retention; summer programs and academic preparation strategies are recommended as some of the best ways to promote academic success among student-athletes. Understanding the effect of such programs and strategies on junior college transfer student-athlete success would be an important future area of research, given the expressed need for intentional support.

Longitudinal research following junior college transfer student-athletes during their first year would also be important for understanding issues of retention. Such investigation could provide access to student-athletes' experiences who are not retained and the factors that lead to their departure. Retention studies must attempt to include not only the perspectives of those retained, but also those lost. Following student-athletes through their first and second semester post-transfer may help provide a more holistic account of junior college transfer student-athletes' experiences and decision-making processes.

Another area to investigate is the concept of generational student-athletes. There is a lack of information on this concept, yet several participants in this study referred to previous student-athletes in their family as important sources of support. Identifying a first-generation student-athlete could be a tool used to identify at-risk athletes. First-generation student-athletes without

familial supports, for example, may be matched with mentors or success coaches to support their transition into a Division I institution. However, there is a need for additional research regarding generational student-athletes as a different subset of the general student-athlete population.

Another area of study is coaches' attitudes towards academics. The results of this study indicated slight differences between coaches across sports and institution types. Because continuing increases in commercialization and professionalization are taking the focus of student-athletes away from academics, coaches attempting to persuade student-athletes to change to an easier academic major to maintain eligibility can perpetuate a decreased focus on academics (Riemer, Beal, & Schroeder, 2000) and a more difficult transfer to a Division I institution. This trend is much more common among athletes in commercialized sports, promoting the belief amongst athletes that their sport comes before academics (Kulics, Kornspan, & Kretovics, 2015). For this reason, a more detailed study regarding coaches' attitudes could help explain how coaches' attitudes toward academics influence junior college transfer student-athletes' transition to a Division I institution.

A final area of study regards the use of Schlossberg's transition theory. Evans, et al. (2010) suggest that both quantitative and qualitative studies on Schlossberg's transition theory are needed in order to support its validity within the context of the study of higher education. However, they also advise that "qualitative research might present a better place to start in that transitions could be viewed holistically, as perceived by individuals experiencing them" (p. 226). The present study aimed to contribute to the larger body of literature supporting the relevance of Schlossberg's transition theory for examining how junior college transfer student-athletes conceptualize their adjustment and transition experience; however, additional research is needed.

Implications for Practice

Inconsistencies at the junior college level influenced participants' initial semester of struggle. For this reason, adequate preparation of students by advisors at the community college is important to ensure a successful transition (Keim & Strickland, 2004; Lazarowicz, 2015; Storch & Ohlson, 2009). Student-athletes may need more strategic, individualized preparation for the transfer process than what may be provided by practitioners whose primary responsibility is not transfer student-athlete academic advising. At Division I institutions, support services are provided predominantly by the athletic department. The purpose of these athlete-specific support services is to assist with student-athlete retention; however, this is a new and inconsistent process for many junior colleges. According to Smith (2009), athletic academic advising at the Division I level is significantly more developed than athletic academic advising at the junior college level. More attention and resources should be devoted to the implementation of athletic academic advising at the junior college level to ensure all junior college transfer student-athletes have the resources needed for a successful transition. Student-athletes are balancing athletic and academic commitments constantly, and according to Gaston-Gayles (2013), most students need help and guidance. Implementing programs at the junior college level could assist student-athletes make the transition to a Division I institution.

Junior college student support services professionals must be intentional in identifying students' post-junior college goals. Junior college student support services must assist students who desire to transfer to a Division I institution; support services focused on academic preparation, transfer processes, and transfer requirements are necessary. Academic preparation involves teaching students about the demands of a Division I institution and preparing them for

this transition. Junior college student support services could coordinate meetings for student-athletes interested in transferring to a Division I institution. In addition, junior college student support services can teach student-athletes about the transfer processes, which will vary by institution, and the requirements that the NCAA requires of them. Hagedorn, Cypers, and Lester (2008), for example, found that taking prescribed courses designed to transfer to a four-year institution led to higher transfer rates from junior college.

Because employing athletic academic staff at the junior college level is expensive and often not feasible, an alternative is for the NCAA to provide an athletic transfer specialist to junior colleges with athletic programs. A regionally assigned transfer specialist could work with multiple junior colleges in one area and educate students on requirements for NCAA Division I, II, and III institutions. This strategy is in the best interest of the student, the junior college, and the NCAA. The responsibility of the transfer specialist would be to educate student-athletes on transfer requirements, monitor their progress, and prepare them for the demands of their chosen institution. This program could increase student-athlete retention rates and help ease the semester of struggle.

Results from this study suggest that coaches often play a significant role in preparing student-athletes for the transfer to a Division I institution. To increase student-athletes' knowledge of NCAA transfer requirements, coaches can conduct ongoing sessions that go over the transfer process. The sessions could include resources on timelines for transferring, guidance on how to navigate the transfer process, and inviting an individual with an understanding of NCAA rules to discuss the transfer requirements. This initiative would be particularly important if no other staff member at the junior college is responsible for preparing student-athletes for the transfer process. Other alternatives coaches can implement include disseminating print materials, such as posters or fliers, or facilitating orientation sessions that explain the basic transfer requirements and increase student-athletes' understanding of the transfer process. If student-athletes are aware of the transfer requirements, then they can take ownership over their academic progress when no staff is specifically designated for student-athletes. Taking these strategies in tandem can support junior college transfer student-athletes' transition to a Division I institution.

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