



Engaging College Athletes in & Through Graduate Study: Academic Trajectories and Implications

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This phenomenological study explores the academic trajectories of Division I football players who earned bachelor's degrees and took postbaccalaureate coursework prior to exhausting their NCAA eligibility, i.e., graduate(d) student athletes. Despite academic success, this population has been virtually invisible in the research literature. Findings were analyzed using college choice and transition-from-sport frameworks. Although most participants entered college with a predisposition toward college-going and, for some, plans to pursue graduate coursework, others were less traditionally college-bound but still successful. Further, as participants made meaning of their graduate student status, they tended to frame their trajectory as the result of taking full advantage of opportunities and, subsequently, reframed athletic participation as a means-to-an-end in providing those opportunities. Lastly, findings suggest that graduate coursework may function as an alternative high impact practice for college athletes toward the end of college by potentially easing the transition-from-sport in addition to having direct positive effects on career exploration.

Keywords: graduate student athlete, postbaccalaureate student-athlete, postgraduate athlete, intercollegiate athletics, college choice, fifth-year senior

Author: What would you tell younger guys who were thinking about trying to graduate early and even use their eligibility to take graduate courses?

CARLTON: I'd tell 'em "get it while it's free!" [laughter] That's what I'd tell them: "Get it while it's free." (Participant Interview)

The question of whether elite college football offers participating athletes a fair exchange by providing grants-in-aid (i.e., athletic scholarships) to financially support their college education is perhaps particularly applicable to graduate(d) student athletes¹ (Haslerig, 2017b; Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Graduate(d) student athletes have arguably received the academic credential promised by college coaches and institutions in exchange for their athletic performance (Haslerig, 2017a). As such, graduate degrees may be understood as an alternative way that some college athletes are already maximizing their athletic scholarship's value (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). This research suggests that cultivating such an instrumental framing of football may serve as a lever for graduate(d) student athletes as they complete identity shifts, e.g., developing their student and professional identities, as well as transitioning from sport.

Research has shown that transitions from sport are often psychologically and developmentally fraught (Park et al., 2013). As such, participants' stories may offer successful models for building on academic success to aid athletes' psychosocial transitions and thereby support the assertion that graduate study functions similarly to a high impact practice for college athletes. Further, participants' academic trajectories offer scholars and practitioners insight into how to better support more college athletes in accessing this promising practice.

Academic success for college athletes is often operationalized as graduation with a bachelor's degree (Turner et al., 2015). Similarly, success for all college students has historically been measured by retention and degree attainment (Astin et al., 2012). High Impact Practices (HIPs) identify with the goal of subsequently expanding practices that increase engagement and retention, as well as enhance student learning outcomes (Crisp, 2016; Finley & McNair, 2013; Hatch et al., 2016; Kuh, 2008). As such, HIPs inherently address both degree attainment and concerns about the educational value of a college degree—concerns that have been articulated particularly acutely by critics of intercollegiate athletics (Adler & Adler, 1991; Gurney et al., 2017). According to these critics, college athletes may not get the same value from their college degrees as other students due to structural disadvantages built into intercollegiate athletics, especially within high profile sports (Gayles et al., 2018; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Smith, 2009).

HIPs have been found to be particularly impactful for traditionally underrepresented groups (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008). As such, identifying HIPs that serve college athletes well is an urgent scholarly agenda. Pursuing graduate study can

¹ The term graduate(d) student athlete is used for very specific reasons throughout the text (for more information, see Haslerig, 2017b). When spoken aloud, it is "graduate and graduated student athletes" and serves as an umbrella term that emphasizes the graduate student status of some members of the group the NCAA now calls "postgraduate student-athletes." When the terms graduate student athlete or graduated student athlete are used, it is to signify that either graduate student or postbaccalaureate athletes are being addressed specifically.

be understood to function as a HIP in that college athletes might be able to access it as an alternative to the more traditional culminating HIPs that have often been inaccessible to athletes, including study abroad (Bell, 2009; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Watson-Hall, 2017), internships (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016), or capstone projects and alignment with career goals (Navarro 2015; Rubin & Moses, 2017).

Ten HIPs were initially identified in Kuh's research and promoted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (Kuh, 2008): common intellectual experiences; learning communities; first-year seminars and experiences; writing-intensive courses; collaborative assignments and projects; service or community-based learning; diversity/global learning, e.g., study abroad; student-faculty research; internships; and senior culminating experiences or capstone courses & projects. ePortfolios were later added as an 11th HIP (Eynon & Gambino, 2017; Kuh et al., 2017).

Other recent scholarship has reconciled AAC&U and research on community colleges by recognizing both High Impact and Promising Practices (HIPPs), thus expanding to practices that show promise and extrapolating to explore what common features make these practices impactful rather than fixating on the ten or eleven practices as silver bullets (Crisp, 2016; Hatch et al., 2016). In doing so, Hatch et al. (2016) identify the time period in which the practice occurs and differentiate between general curricular features and more specific policies and interventions. More recently, Kuh et al. (2017) refined the key features of HIPs to focus on eight characteristics: performance expectations set at appropriately high level; significant investment of concentrated effort by students over an extended period of time; interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters; experiences with diversity, wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which students are familiar; frequent, timely, and constructive feedback; opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications; public demonstration of competence; and periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning.

It is in this expanded understanding of HIPs that I propose that graduate study might be understood as a promising practice that shares common features with the 11 HIPs, at least for college athletes. This promising practice is potentially all the more impactful due to the many limitations on athletes' participation in the 11 official HIPs during undergrad, especially those that typically occur later in the college career. Haslerig and Navarro (2016) found that some graduate student athletes saw a graduate degree as a way to compensate for other career exploratory and preparatory experiences (e.g., an internship) that they had to forego because of their athletic participation. This aligns with the common HIP feature *opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world application*. Further, Haslerig (2017a) documented that college athletes who were graduate students experienced graduate coursework as more conducive to collaboration and engagement (speaking to the feature *interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters*) and that it sometimes served like a *public demonstration of competence* by countering negative academic stereotypes. Lastly, findings in this manuscript suggest that graduate study may serve as a culminating pursuit that lends meaning to participants' full experience as college athletes and prepares them for the transition from sport, speaking to the importance of the timing of various HIPs (Hatch et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2018).

Purpose and Significance

Participants in this study were racially diverse Division I (DI) football players who earned a bachelor's degree and pursued additional coursework within the time limits of their National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) eligibility. I refer to the population collectively as '*graduate(d) student athletes*' (Haslerig, 2017b). Grouping graduate student and postbaccalaureate college athletes is consistent with the NCAA's categories, in which they are equivalent statuses in terms of eligibility to participate. If graduate study shares features with HIPs for college athletes, as previous research suggests (Haslerig, 2017a; Haslerig & Navarro, 2016), understanding the trajectory of college athletes in pursuing graduate study is essential to making it an accessible practice. In that interest, semi-structured interviews with 11 participants addressed the following research questions: What motivated, supported, and/or enabled participants' academic trajectories, particularly their enrollment in graduate or postbaccalaureate courses during their athletic eligibility? How did participants understand their graduate(d) student athlete status and academic trajectory?

Given the cultural importance, visibility, and financial might of college football (Clotfelter, 2011), exploring the experiences of college football players is an essential and ongoing scholarly project (Navarro, 2015). The graduate(d) student athlete population has been virtually invisible in both scholarship and popular discourse regarding college athletes and academic achievement (Haslerig, 2017a). As such, this study significantly adds to research literature on higher education, student achievement and collegiate athletics, and simultaneously challenges assumptions and stereotypes about college athletes. The academic success of participants is in marked contrast to the overall low academic achievement and degree attainment of football players (Harper, 2016); their success may offer insight into how to better serve both high- and low-achieving college athletes' academic needs.

It is important for researchers and practitioners to look at success rather than always focusing on failure (Harper, 2012) or the minimum standard (Mathewson, 2000). Although student success is more multifaceted than a simple metric like graduation rate can capture, it is widely accepted that degree attainment is one important element of college student success, or even a prerequisite "to students reaping the promised benefits of the postsecondary experience" (Chang et al., 2019; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017, p. 19). As such, in this study, the participant selection criteria defined success as degree attainment prior to exhausting athletic eligibility. Findings address whether the trajectory to graduate study was impactful for participants. For example, if graduate student athletes are simply a byproduct of academic eligibility rules that lead many to finish early, figuring out ways to give athletes more agency in their academic process may be needed. Conversely, if graduate student athletes were primarily able to pursue graduate degrees because of decisions that happened even before they entered college, the ability of practitioners to effect change may be limited. This study explores these previously unexamined pathways through participants' lived experiences. Findings demonstrate that, with appropriate support systems, opportunities for graduate study can be accessible to more athletes. This study provides implications to help graduate program faculty and staff, athletics practitioners, and scholars alike understand college athletes' pursuit of graduate and/or postbaccalaureate education.

An estimated 618 football graduate(d) student athletes enroll at their original institution per year with 356 in graduate coursework (NCAA, 2015a, 2015b). Although relatively few college athletes pursue graduate or postbaccalaureate work while maintaining eligibility, changes to NCAA eligibility requirements aimed at increasing the 5-year graduation rate (e.g., rules

regarding credit hours, progress-toward-degree, and summer enrollment) have likely increased the number of college athletes graduating with remaining athletic eligibility (Haslerig, 2017b; Martin, 2008; NCAA, 2016). This subpopulation who are graduating prior to exhausting their eligibility represent the potential for more college athletes to pursue graduate degrees.

Accordingly, inferential generalization (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003) to this much larger subpopulation of college athletes is appropriate. We need to apply research attention to this phenomenon; in contrast, allowing the pursuit of graduate degrees to be accidental byproduct of policy, rather than intentionally supported is irresponsible and negligent. This research provides a student-generated model for supporting and encouraging the pursuit of graduate coursework.

Because so little is known about the overall population of graduate(d) student athletes, the primary goal of this study was not generalizability but to understand the individual experiences of college athletes who are part of the graduate student athlete phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As such, this exploratory study illuminates central themes in participants' academic trajectories and decision-making. This subpopulation has the potential to effect team culture and may encourage younger teammates to pursue a graduate degree. Moreover, graduate(d) student athletes' college experiences matter; this account of their trajectories may inform theory and guide future program development that better serves this population.

Review of the Literature

Prior research has examined the academic achievement of athletes, generally highlighting deficiencies rather than successes (Comeaux, 2007; Emerick, 1996). College athletes in revenue sports have consistently performed worse academically than college athletes in other sports and the general student body (Southall et al., 2015). For instance, researchers have addressed athletes' academic preparation and achievement before entering college (NCAA, 2001), whether they experience proximate academic difficulties while in college (e.g., repeat a class or become academically ineligible), and whether they earn a degree (Harper, 2016; Turner et al., 2015).

Researchers have also documented DI athletes' struggle to balance athletic and academic roles during college (Adler & Adler, 1991; Bell, 2009; Comeaux, 2007). This research suggests DI college athletes often identify more with athletic rather than academic roles, which can negatively influence their campus integration and engagement. Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) examined an athletic department which often implicitly pitted academic and athletic goals against one another, despite an espoused commitment to academic success, resulting in negative academic outcomes. Further, they found the institution used individualistic framing to avoid blame for the resultant failures.

Two important features of the literature on academic achievement of college athletes relate directly to HIPs. First, this literature demonstrates several sources of skepticism about the value of the degrees college athletes earn (e.g., ample academic support, clustering, high stakes that dictate that athletes cannot fail), which necessitates other ways of measuring and practices for ensuring and affirming the educational value of their college degrees. Second, the *de minimus* concept is seen in action through the emphasis on early support services such as bridge programs, mentoring, and tutoring; these services are often successful and mirror several HIPs. However, athletics' support systems are disproportionately focused on HIPs that occur early in the college career to the exception of HIPs toward the conclusion of college, which help culminate the experience, assisting college athletes in their meaning-making processes and career

transitions (Miller et al., 2018). In contrast, by definition, opportunities for graduate study happen at the end of college and are uniquely positioned for alignment with career goals.

The Graduate(d) Student Athlete Population

Once athletes enter higher education, they may compete for as many as four years, which must be exhausted within five years of when they began college.² A “red shirt year” is one year in college when they may practice with the team, receive a grant-in-aid, and continue course work, but are ineligible to compete. To maintain their eligibility, college athletes must comply with NCAA regulations regarding academic standards and progress-toward-degree (as well as those regarding other issues, such as amateurism).

Overall, academic regulations have helped the NCAA make substantial progress in improving academic outcomes for college athletes in revenue sports since the 1980s; however, these regulations establish the *minimum* a college athlete must do and were largely designed to increase the five-year graduation rate, especially in the ‘revenue sports’ of football and men’s basketball (Mondello & Abernethy, 2000). In fact, one factor limiting the success of NCAA attempts to prioritize and increase college athletes’ academic achievement is a “... de minimis concept, which provides universities with substantial incentives to maintain [minimum requirements], and discourages them [universities] from investing in or exceeding, the minimum eligibility requirements” (Mathewson, 2000, p. 85). This results in the tendency to articulate only the minimum academic standards, thereby setting a ceiling rather than a floor (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Mathewson, 2000). Despite these limitations, even college athletes who far exceed minimum academic standards are entitled to the same length of eligibility (assuming they continue to compete). The NCAA permits college athletes who graduate with remaining eligibility to further their education at their original institution by taking postbaccalaureate or graduate courses, or by enrolling in a graduate degree program, while continuing to compete athletically.

Of the aforementioned 4% of football players in a given cohort completing postbaccalaureate coursework, 62% enrolled in graduate courses (NCAA, 2015a, 2015b). In 2015, ninety percent (90%) of graduate(d) student athletes in football continue at their original institution (85% in all sports), generating an estimate of 618 DI football players per year enrolled in postbaccalaureate or graduate coursework at their original institution (NCAA, 2015a, 2015b). Although this is a small population, it represents a rapidly increasing subpopulation (in football, the percentage of postgraduates competing almost doubled between 2007 and 2014). Yet the research literature tells us almost nothing about this population’s college experience, nor their decision-making processes.

Career Planning and Transition from Sport

College athletes are inundated with the expectations of others including coaches, teammates, non-athlete students, and fans; pressure to prioritize football above academics is often imbedded in these expectations. Conflict between academics and athletics is often framed

² The NCAA has the discretion to grant individual students a waiver allowing them an extra year of athletic competition. This waiver process is the exception; most college athletes are limited to five years of eligibility.

as zero-sum in that the commitment required to excel athletically is viewed as incompatible with college athletes having other priorities (Adler & Adler, 1991; Harrison, 2003; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Career steering toward professional sport may forestall college athletes from preparing for a healthy transition out of sports and may lead to “identity foreclosure” or impede college athletes’ career maturity (Adler & Adler, 1991; Brown et al., 2000). Knights, Sherry, and Ruddock-Hudson’s (2016) review of literature examining elite athletes’ transition out of sport found that, despite the documentation of negative effects of transition, there is “no current literature explicitly examining flourishing” (p. 291).

Mature career plans develop as a product of “self-exploration and identity development” (Lally & Kerr, 2005, p. 276). Yet, despite the well-established importance of self-exploration to career maturity (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Super, 1957), other findings suggest that many high-profile college athletes do not (or cannot) engage in these processes of academic and intellectual exploration throughout college, particularly during the beginning of their college careers (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Navarro, 2015). In contrast, recent research has found that pursuing graduate coursework may offer some college athletes a secondary opportunity to explore and/or to pursue alignment between coursework and career goals (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). Similarly, Miller et al. (2018) found that HIPs positively impacted college seniors’ career plans and early job attainment.

Theoretical Framework

The college choice process serves as a broad framework for understanding how students develop educational aspirations and actualize them. Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) influential three-stage model of college choice divides the process into *predisposition*, *search*, and *choice* stages. Individual and organizational factors impact each stage of the model. During the predisposition stage, which is closely aligned with the development of aspirations, students decide whether they want to attend college. McDonough (1997) linked predisposition to students’ habitus, arguing that schools and other factors (family, peers) helped form a college culture which, in turn, affected students’ aspirations, choice process, and enrollment decisions. The search stage is characterized by a more active exploration in which students decide which characteristics matter to them and narrow their choice set (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Pooch & Love, 2001). The final stage describes when a student chooses a specific institution. In this stage, students choose from the narrowed “choice set” they defined during the search stage and “courtship” or recruiting behaviors from higher education institutions may influence students’ choices. For the purposes of this article, the three-stage model of college choice is being applied to college athletes’ later decision to pursue graduate coursework. Understanding these decision-making processes is invaluable for developing better policies and practices to support more college athletes in participating in this promising practice.

Search and choice processes differ substantively for athletes as compared to the general student body (Huffman et al., 2016; Letawsky et al., 2003; Ryan et al., 2007). The popular narrative that intercollegiate athletics provides college access opportunities and mobility for disadvantaged students is one adaptation of the American meritocracy myth (Bilberry, 2000; Eitzen, 2003; Harrison et al., 2011). The predisposition of some athletes may be shaped by athletics, specifically athletic recruiting; for a subgroup of athletes, college may only have entered their choice set as a meaningful option because of their participation in athletics. For some students, at least in terms of their perception, athletics (and athletics recruiting) function as

an alternative pathway to college, one that may seem more realistic and/or welcoming of them. Recruiting and its attendant pressures also exert considerable power in narrowing the search and ultimate decision, reorienting the process from individually-driven and exploratory to reactive to the options institutions offer, for example, in the form of scholarships and recruiting tactics. Participants' search and choice processes regarding whether to enroll in graduate or postbaccalaureate courses were similarly constrained in this study because all participants stayed at their original institution. For that reason, the focus in this paper is primarily on participants' predisposition to pursue higher education and graduate education, examining how these early factors interacted with participants' college experiences to affect their academic trajectories.

Although Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model remains influential, as college attendance has increasingly become the presumed outcome of a successful high school career (Roderick et al., 2009), scholars have focused attention on the choice stage and the prestige of where students attend (Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Kim & Gasman, 2011). Poock and Love (2001) applied Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model to enrollment in a specific doctoral program, focusing on the choice stage. In contrast, this paper examines the predisposition and search stages for athletes deciding to pursue graduate study while competing. For participants in this study, in the context of decisions about whether to 1) graduate early, 2) enroll in a graduate program, and 3) which program to enroll in, there is not one foregone conclusion. Athletes could just as well decide to take all of their five years of eligibility to earn their bachelor's degree or to take post-baccalaureate coursework. As such, the predisposition and search stages of the model—which focus on whether to attend and delimit the parameters of one's choice, rather than the choice stage of specific institution—are essential to the analysis of this data. In particular, participants' predisposition to attend college and/or pursue graduate education, is the first section within the findings.

Given that athletes' college search and recruiting process differs significantly from non-athletes' (Huffman et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2007), which may lead to a relative lack of control over their college choice (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016), and that their career exploration process is often delayed (Navarro, 2015), subsequent choice processes may revisit Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stages. For example, the exploration and choice of a major and of a graduate degree program may parallel the traditional college choice process. Athletic recruiting served as a disruptive intervention in college choice processes (Huffman et al., 2016), reframing athletes' choice sets and ultimate decisions. As such, those original predispositions and aspirations may have been sidelined during the recruiting process and only reignited when making graduate education decisions (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016).

Lastly, research suggests debt may inhibit students from applying to graduate school and from enrolling after they are admitted (Millett, 2003). Scholarship "athletes have been promised by their colleges and coaches that their educational pursuits will be fully supported with a 'full' scholarship" (Huma & Staurowsky, 2011, p. 19). However, historically, athletic scholarships have fallen short of covering the full cost of attendance (Heitner, 2014; Huma & Staurowsky, 2011). The new cost of attendance rule in 2015 attempted to address this gap at institutions with autonomous governance (i.e., Power 5) (Hosick, 2015). As such, scholarship athletes in football at these high-resource institutions are presumably debt-free when they graduate, and are certainly burdened by significantly less educational debt than the 63% of 18-29 year old bachelor's degree recipients in 2016 who had used debt to finance their own education (Federal Reserve Board, 2017, p. 52). Further, due to the selection criteria, participants in this study had at least a year of funding they could use toward graduate school. Given the effect of indebtedness on students'

decision to pursue graduate studies (Millett, 2003), participants' lack of debt and remaining year (or more) of funding likely influenced participants' decision to pursue further education.

Method

To address the phenomenon of graduate(d) student athletes in football, data was collected through semi-structured phone interviews with 11 DI football players who earned a bachelor's degree and began postbaccalaureate coursework within their athletic eligibility. The interview protocol included questions about participants' precollege experiences (particularly with athletics and education); their college choice process and transition; the decision to pursue either postbaccalaureate coursework or a graduate degree; and their experiences as a graduate(d) student athlete. Qualitative research recognizes the researcher as central to data collection and analysis and demands that we consider the way(s) a specific researcher affects a given study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I conducted phone interviews in order to support a positive researcher-participant relationship (Stephens, 2007), in addition to the qualitative advantages to phone interviewing (Holt, 2010; Stephens, 2007). Phone interviews can benefit from the inherent distance between interviewer and interviewee, wherein differences are muted and mitigated, enabling rapport to develop despite differences (Stephens, 2007). Furthermore, the phone medium mutes body language, creating a "need for full articulation" (Holt, 2010, p. 116) and leading to rich data.

Recruitment

Purposeful sampling was used (Maxwell, 2005) to recruit participants who had begun postbaccalaureate coursework during their NCAA eligibility and to ensure a racially diverse sample. Participants were recruited through athletics' academic support staff at universities whose football programs had high graduation success rates (GSR); they disseminated information on the study to eligible athletes. Snowball sampling was also employed (Merriam, 2009). The average interview was 59 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim; participants and universities were given pseudonyms. Each participant was given the opportunity to review the transcript of his interview to ensure it was accurate and reflected his views (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Maxwell, 2005).

As previously discussed, just under 4% of football players in a given cohort are completing postbaccalaureate coursework of any kind and an estimated 618 DI football players per year enroll in postbaccalaureate or graduate coursework at their original institution (NCAA, 2015a, 2015b). Given the small and diffuse, elite, extremely busy, and hard-to-reach nature of the graduate(d) student athlete population, recruiting this group for participation was challenging (Haslerig, 2017b; NCAA, 2016; Stephens, 2007). Graduate transfers have different graduation outcomes than graduate student athletes who remain at their original institution (NCAA, 2015a, 2015b, 2019) and may have different motivations for pursuing graduate school. I chose to limit the dimensions of difference within the sample in this way to obtain richer data about the specific population. Although the sample is small, data saturation was apparent in the repetition of themes and the lack of new themes emerging in later interviews, meaning that further interviews would have had diminishing returns (Creswell, 1998; Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Participants

The final sample included 11 men, of whom five identified as Black, five as White, and one as Pacific Islander. Participants hailed from six universities, representing four conferences in the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision. Two participants attended private universities; the remaining nine participants attended one of the four public universities represented in the sample.

All participants had graduated with a baccalaureate degree at the time of interview; of those, two had completed their master's degrees, six had started graduate coursework (five toward a master's degree), and three had not taken graduate coursework. I chose to include participants who were taking postbaccalaureate coursework in order to capture participants who were likely to earn credits toward a graduate degree while playing but might self-select out if given narrow selection criteria. Of the four who had not enrolled in a graduate program, one did not intend to take any graduate coursework, one was unsure whether he would take graduate courses while eligible (though he intended to pursue a graduate degree later in life), and the other two had realistic and well-developed plans for enrolling in and completing degree-granting graduate programs during their scholarship eligibility (both had at least a year and a half of eligibility remaining). All but one participant had a full scholarship throughout college; the other earned a full scholarship after being a recruited walk-on. All participants used a redshirt year, thereby gaining a fifth year of scholarship eligibility, and all participants stayed at their original institution for graduate or post-baccalaureate work.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process, wherein I reexamined and reshaped my methodology and analyses as I learned (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The strategy of analysis considered previous research and existing theories, as well as emergent themes in the data, and used them as a starting place for "broad codes." This broad coding scheme helped me get a sense of data as a whole and served an indexing function (Huberman & Miles, 2001), as well as my starting point for Glaser's (1965) *constant comparative method* of data analysis. I used the method to refine my coding scheme, then managed data and coding within Dedoose. A rigorous, iterative, coding process was followed; this enabled confidence in both the richness and the thickness of the data. This article focuses on the codes *college choice*, *preparation*, *trajectory*, *money (\$)*, *program's place/meaning*, and *utility of football*. This study relies on participants' retroactive reflections on the decision process and findings are filtered through participants' narrative voice. As such, in addition to having implications for college choice theory, findings are suited to examining the meaning participants made of their choice process.

Table 1
Participant Sample and Mapping the Findings

Participant Pseudonym	Enrolled in Grad Program or received graduate degree (as indicated by ✓) at time of interview	Race (Black y/n) ^a	1 st generation ^b	Predisposition	Premeditated		Football as intervention
					\$	Status / Prestige	
Alec	✓			~			~x His parents paid for a semester of prep academy because of an eligibility issue; he didn't think he'd have graduated without football
Braeden	✓			x	x	x	
Carlton	Enrolled in postbacc coursework, applying to grad programs	Black	1 st gen		x		x
Cliff	✓	Black	1 st gen				~x
Darius	Postbacc--intended to take graduate courses after eligibility	Black		x	x	x	
Ellison	✓	Black		xx			-- Applied and was accepted outside of athletics, in case of injury
Myles	✓		1 st gen	xx	xx		
Ryan	Enrolled in grad coursework, applying to grad programs			xx			
Tevin	Postbacc-Did not intend to take graduate courses	Black	1 st gen	~			x
Toby	✓			x	x	x	-- Had academic scholarship offers at other institutions
Zach	✓			x		x	-- Walked-on, his parents paid first 2 years; had academic scholarship offers at other institutions

Note: One x applies to undergraduate, xx extends to graduate. ~ means the participant partially aligns and -- means it does not apply for that participant.

^a To protect the confidentiality of the sole Pacific Islander (PI) participant, I do not label the races of the white or PI participants at any point. Although it is an imperfect solution, scrubbing these participants' racial identifiers throughout the analysis was the best way to protect the PI participant's confidentiality without distorting his experience. I did not similarly scrub the race of Black participants because of my desire to provide that context to readers wherever possible without compromising participants' confidentiality.

^b 1st gen refers to those who explicitly self-identified as first-in-family to attend college. Additional participants may have fit the criteria, but not have shared it in their interview.

Findings

Given extant knowledge about the many constraints and pressures on college athletes' time, public image, and sense of self, and assuming those pressures are likely amplified as a graduate student athlete, questions about participants' path to becoming a graduate student take on new urgency. During the research process, it became apparent that even for those athletes who had mapped out this path for themselves very early on, their college experiences had a crucial impact on their persistence and eventual degree attainment. As a result, many participants' planned trajectories were inseparable from their college experiences, with both mutually evolving rather than one determining the other. This findings section addresses the research questions by first examining participants' academic planning (*predisposition* and *premeditation*) or lack thereof (*incidental* and/or *unanticipated opportunities*; *structural factors*) (R1). It then explores the high value participants placed on educational opportunity and the meaning they derived from doing so (*self-determination*), concluding with the *ends* revealed by participants' instrumental framing (R2).

Academic Trajectories

Predisposition. College access theorists emphasize the importance of early predisposition (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) as well as expectations (McDonough, 1997) in developing the college aspirations that lead to college preparatory behavior and eventual attendance. Several participants (7) discussed their strong predisposition to go to college.³ Three of these participants articulated early graduate degree aspirations in addition to the strong predisposition to attend college. These aspirations were not necessarily connected to participants' athletic goals and instead reflected messages from their families and educational contexts. Participants described the ever-present norm of college attendance advanced by their parents and school environments, as well as material support for those professed goals.

Myles, like other first-generation participants, recounted the ways college attendance was promoted within his working-class family, "it was always stressed it was important." In contrast, college attendance and graduation was taken-for-granted during Ellison and other middle class participants' upbringings. He explained, "my expectations were to always graduate college, from my family and from everybody else." Despite differing levels of parental education and differences in how explicitly college attendance norms were articulated, both Myles and Ellison's families succeeded in creating strong college-going cultures for their sons.

Premeditated use of grant-in-aid. For several participants (5), earning an athletic scholarship was a pre-planned strategy for accessing higher education. These participants were similar to those discussed in the preceding section in terms of their early predisposition toward higher education; on top of that predisposition, they were highly strategic in using football for educational ends. For instance, Braeden had the goal of earning an athletic scholarship from the time he was in elementary school, for the express purpose of sparing his parents the expense.

³ Two additional participants articulated elements of predisposition, like encouragement to go to college, but lacked other aspects such as preparation for college and the normalization of college-going.

Echoing others, Darius explained, “my goal was basically to get a full scholarship.” Ryan recalled his high school coaches encouraging him to think about football instrumentally and to aspire to a graduate degree. Similarly, Myles explained his strategy as, “it was my plan all along to try and get my undergrad done really quickly, so that my graduate program could be paid for by the university.”

In particular, Darius chose to attend an elite public university to demonstrate he was “intelligent and an intellectual,” not just a football player. He was taking postbaccalaureate coursework but hoped to pursue a graduate degree after his football career. He also discussed how he negotiated his academic image more explicitly than participants who were pursuing graduate coursework. Toby shared that although he was offered academic scholarships by in-state universities that “are good schools,” they were “not as highly regarded” as the elite private institution he ultimately attended. He recounted that his mother emphasized price as a reason to take the football scholarship, thus using institutional sticker price as a proxy for both academic quality and the value of his scholarship. For both Darius and Toby, football participation provided access to more elite educational opportunities.

Football as intervention. In contrast to those who had early aspirations of college attendance, Carlton did not grow up in a strong college-going culture. He explained his family’s beliefs about education thusly, “well, no one in my family had ever went to college, so, I mean, pretty much if you graduated high school, that was pretty much the standard. Other than that, no one ever pressured you to go to college.” As a result, Carlton described realizing college was an option for him during his junior year in high school, when he received his first recruiting letter, “my coach called me into his office saying they wanted to offer me a scholarship.... I was like, ‘are you serious? I can go to college?’” Importantly, Carlton’s experience validates the narrative of college athletics as a path to higher education for some athletes. His experience was unique among the high achieving participants in this study, but that does not make it less powerful. Carlton’s surprise about the opportunity to attend college captures the profound effect athletics can have on college access for students who are from a low socioeconomic status (SES), first-generation, or otherwise educationally disadvantaged.

Tevin’s story provides another example: his grandmother encouraged him to attend college, yet Tevin did not believe his degree attainment would have been feasible without football. Tevin explained, “I probably wouldn’t be here today, graduating from a big-time college [if I hadn’t been recruited].” Alec shared, “I don’t think I would’ve gone to college if I didn’t play football.... I would probably not have been as persistent.” Other participants mused that they would have gone to less selective universities or ones closer to home had they not been recruited, adding complexity to the many ways that football participation can impact college-going and, ultimately, degree attainment.

Tevin, the only participant who did not plan on graduate school at any point, was “the first in my family to graduate from college, and that just was all the motivation I really needed” to push him to take extra classes and ensure he graduated as a redshirt junior. However, he hesitated to take graduate coursework, saying, “I could have started taking graduate classes, and then it’s easy to say that you are going to come back and finish, but... I don’t know.” Carlton explained why he took a semester of ‘postbacc’ courses before starting his masters thusly, “I just wanted a little bit of time to kind of regroup.... before starting something that’s going to be even more stressful than undergrad.” He applied to a graduate program during his postbaccalaureate term. In contrast, the one white participant who did not immediately enroll in a graduate program

pursued graduate coursework while he applied. It is notable that the two participants with the least predisposition to go to college in the sample were also more hesitant to take advantage of postgraduate opportunities. Further, their experiences may point to the ways in which graduate opportunities are uneven, depending on individuals' existing knowledge and advising practices.

Graduate study as unanticipated opportunity. Even for participants with early degree aspirations, circumstances sometimes presented them with unanticipated educational opportunities; in particular, a few participants only realized later in their college careers that pursuing graduate study while playing was a realistic possibility. Alec, who was awarded a *medical redshirt* (i.e., an extra year of athletic eligibility due to injury) in his junior season, was especially surprised by the graduate school opportunity that suddenly presented itself at the beginning of his fourth year. He shared, "I had never really thought that it was an option for me... then the opportunity kind of just arose out of nowhere." Alec described the role that his medical redshirt played as "I gained another year of eligibility as far as playing, but stayed on course in the classroom. So I basically got my grad school paid for because of football." Similarly, Ellison explained a medical redshirt as ensuring "that year didn't count against me" in terms of athletic eligibility. Both Ellison and Alec described their medical redshirt year as an unexpected *academic* boon they were able to capitalize on; in contrast, some participants who were redshirted their first year had to more consciously pursue a 'fast track' to ensure they were not counseled into a course load that stretched the bachelor's degree to fit their five years of eligibility. Alec asserted, "once [a player's] four years are up and they've graduated, [the coach] has no obligation to send them to grad school or not, even if they are able to." This observation highlights the need for support for graduate student athletes from other athletic staff and underscores concerns about how the graduate transfer rule (as well as other concerns) might serve as a disincentive for athletic departments and coaches to encourage graduate study and early graduation (Haslerig, 2017a, 2018; Martin, 2008).

Participants who approached college going or graduate school as 'incidental educational opportunities' did not discuss football's role in financing their education as frequently as participants who formed degree aspirations earlier. Nonetheless, the ways in which football participation enabled the former group's access to higher education extended beyond just financing attendance into their personal motivation, sense of feasibility, and other variables. In other words, those who credited football with providing access to higher education in ways beyond the financial (e.g., Alec, who did not think he would have persisted in higher education without football, and Carlton and Tevin, who would not have considered college a viable option without football) were less vocal in terms of strategizing in financial terms. But, for them, the opportunity that football provided them was highly revered and the financial benefits were an implicit part of the larger access context.

Structural factors. Participants expressed the view that there was no reason not to pursue graduate coursework, especially given that they were expected to enroll in courses year-round. Many participants (7) discussed being continuously in school, without real breaks, and how many courses they accumulated as a byproduct of the structure. In this way, participants connected the sheer volume of classroom hours built into their schedule to the opportunity to enter graduate school. Participants frequently cited the fact that it was *possible* to start graduate school while on scholarship, so they felt more or less obligated to do so. According to participants, the NCAA rules that allowed them to pursue graduate degrees, not more individual

enabling factors, meant that they ought to do so. Cliff shared his advice to future athletes about whether to pursue graduate coursework, “if it allows itself to be done, then why not, because you’re only going to better yourself and further your education, so why not?” Toby also attributed his ability to graduate so early to his summer coursework, adding, “I thought it was a good opportunity, since I didn’t enjoy my major as much as I had hoped, to start something that interested me more so I started to do a Master’s program.”

Another common argument structure for participants regarding whether to pursue graduate coursework was to acknowledge the hard work and sacrifices entailed in pursuing graduate work, then assert that the sacrifices were unequivocally worthwhile and, therefore, as Alec noted, “if you have an opportunity to do something like that and to continue your education, there’s no reason why you should not.” Zach structured his argument similarly, connecting the opportunity to earn a graduate degree to future career opportunities: “you might see it as a sacrifice, but you’re coming out of a great academic institution with two degrees—with a master’s degree that’s gonna hold a lot of weight when you’re looking for a job.” Braeden was even more explicit, discussing how graduate school could set athletes up to easily transition from sport, “absolutely do it, if you can, because it’s just going to put you in a better position, as far as when you’re done with football.” Braeden also expressed frustration with other college athletes who he felt were not taking advantage of these opportunities.

Meaning-Making

Value of graduate opportunities. Participants felt responsible for utilizing every resource available, encouraging future college athletes to take graduate courses during their eligibility if given the opportunity and advocating this specific way of viewing the opportunities provided by a football scholarship. Alec shared that “telling somebody to use every resource possible and *exhaust them all* would be my best piece of advice,” and Ryan expanded, “I’ve already told a few of our freshmen... ‘guys, make sure you get on top of your academics so you can, you know, get the most out of your education and maybe even start grad school down the line.’” This advice becomes an ethos, which justifies actions and guides decisions. Ellison’s decision-making process regarding pursuing a master’s reframes the decision as simply the moment when he was able to *act* in accordance with his preexisting belief system, “I knew that I’d want to do it [get a master’s degree], and when I was given the opportunity, I didn’t hesitate to do it.” Similarly, Alec said of his decision to pursue a graduate degree while still playing, “it was always a ‘go’ from the beginning; once I found out I could, that’s what I was gonna do.”

Career options and self-determination. Myles explained his understanding of the credentialing aspect of higher education, saying, “that’s just the way the world is now: you need to have a degree and you need to have something to stand next to your name in order to get that high-paying job or that job that will allow you to live comfortable.” Myles’ parents and grandparents inspired him to realize that “I didn’t want a blue-collar job. I didn’t want to be working really hard all the time; I didn’t want to have a disadvantage because I didn’t have a degree.”

In contrast to Myles, college attendance was not presented as a goal, or even a realistic option, within Carlton’s family, and he would not have considered going to college without the encouragement and accommodations provided by being recruited for football. Carlton mused that, if he had not been recruited to play college football, “I woulda probably been cutting hair,

because that's the only hobby I enjoy besides playing football." Carlton's assessment that whatever he would have done without college would have needed to be a "hobby" is a tacit acknowledgement of the need for a degree to enter a *career*; because Carlton would have begun work straight out of high school without football, the only options available to him were "hobbies." In contrast to this perception of only one feasible job option without a college degree, at the end of his interview Carlton listed three viable career paths, based on his education, that he was now considering. Even more striking was the shift demonstrated when Carlton explained, unprompted, that even if an NFL career did not work out for him, "I'll be just fine, because I have a degree and I can do something else that I enjoy doing besides football." The juxtaposition of Carlton's two assessments regarding what career paths were available to him is profound—not only does Carlton see his life chances as improved, his ability to access what brings him *joy* has actually expanded too. Despite the differences in their families' early messaging about college-going, Carlton and Myles arrived at similar understandings of the credentialing function of higher education and the ways in which credentials would enhance their lives, namely, by increasing their career options and future opportunities.

Discussion: Instrumental Framing and Shifting End-Goal(s)

Regardless of whether a given participant intended to follow this trajectory before college or opportunistically revised his educational plans when it became possible to earn his bachelor's degree prior to exhausting his eligibility, working toward a graduate degree can imply a means-to-an-end motivation for football and may serve to symbolically re-legitimate participants' student role-identity. All of the effort invested in football takes on new meaning (and is justified) by reframing it as a means-to-an-educational-end, even as they begin to divest from their athletic identity; thereby allowing athletes to reframe the college football experience as worthwhile and again lending them autonomy by making their decisions seem like they relied on foresight. For example, although Carlton had not considered going to college—much less getting a graduate degree—before he was recruited for football, he encouraged other athletes to adopt an instrumental understanding of the benefits of football participation, repeatedly exclaiming, "I'd tell 'em, *'Get it while it's free!'*" Carlton was not someone who intentionally sought out football for the scholarship money or improved educational access, but he, ultimately, enthusiastically recommends the instrumental framing. This means-to-an-end framing legitimated participants' academic identities, as did their increased readiness for careers after they retired from football. The specter of injury inspired some participants to develop their identities beyond football, but many also looked forward to the increased control over their lives, bodies, and image that they would have after they were done playing football. All these factors contributed to participants' understanding (and portrayal) of football participation as a means to educational and career ends.

Distancing themselves from their athletic role identification is developmentally appropriate and suggests that graduate coursework may help ease the psychological transition from sport, in addition to its direct positive effects on career exploration and advancement (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016). In turn, a more developed student identity may help these college athletes' career development and to avoid the well-documented difficulties that frequently accompany the transition from sport (Park et al., 2013). Further, pursuing a graduate degree may help offset other opportunities (e.g. internships, study abroad, student organizations) that could aid development and shape students' identity, but are not feasible during athletic participation.

Of the eight common features of the 11 HIPs, several, such as increased relevance and application (Haslerig & Navarro, 2016) and higher-quality faculty and peer interaction within graduate coursework (Haslerig, 2017a), have been found in previously published work on this population. Other scholars have consistently shown the ways that college athletes are often cheated out of characteristics common to HIPs during their undergraduate experience (e.g., performance expectations set at appropriately high levels [Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016]). Graduate study may share key features of HIPs for many students, yet this effect is likely heightened for athletes because of the frequent dearth of such opportunities during their undergraduate experience. For example, through the means-to-an-end reframing, pursuing graduate study served for participants as both an opportunity for reflection about their academic path and a public demonstration of competence.

As agentic as college athletes are in these processes, institutions are also responsible for facilitating and encouraging graduate study (Haslerig, 2018). Future research should examine institutional factors influencing whether academically successful college athletes pursue graduate studies within their eligibility. Participants argued that the opportunity itself meant they had a responsibility to take advantage of it, a framing that may lead them to internalize failure rather than note structural constraints. Jayakumar and Comeaux (2016) demonstrated how support systems can be deployed to blame individuals (rather than institutions) for failure. Similarly, opportunity is framed as ripe for the taking and the individual is blamed if they fail to take advantage of those opportunities. There is an inherent contradiction in participants who both underscored their own agency and excoriated teammates who did not similarly take advantage of opportunities.

Implications and Conclusion

Whereas previous research has demonstrated the detrimental effect that socialization during college can have on athletes' academic identity (Adler & Adler, 1991; Bell, 2009; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016), findings from this study suggest the college experience can also alter college athletes' trajectories in positive ways, encouraging investment in academics. Encouraging more college athletes to pursue graduate study would require athletics practitioners to shift from the current overemphasis on HIPs that occur during the transition into college, which primarily ensure continued athletic eligibility, and toward more balanced practices by further developing opportunities that occur later in the collegiate career and help facilitate healthy transitions from sport. Nonetheless, college athletes need to be made aware of the opportunity to pursue graduate coursework while competing, preferably early in their collegiate careers.

Whereas some participants emphasized the importance of their early aspirations and agency as driving forces in their attainment, others reacted to the choice set available to them and took the most advantageous route. One implication for practitioners is that many college athletes may like to pursue this path—and are capable of succeeding if they do so. This research suggests that not only highly academically motivated athletes—nor only those who plan early—can benefit from graduate opportunities. Findings suggest that graduate study can be accessible and beneficial for many college athletes, including those without an early predisposition to go to college. There is an irony in that college athletes have been supported in finishing with remaining eligibility because of the effective support of early transitional HIPs within athletics and on campus more broadly (Haslerig, 2018). However, these same athletes are not necessarily

getting the capstone and meaning-making experience of traditional HIPs at the end of college (Miller et al., 2018) and may miss out on graduate study as a supplemental promising practice unless practitioners build intentional support systems to encourage the pursuit.

Further, findings demonstrate how targeted reminders of the opportunity during key transitional periods could yield more athletes taking advantage of postbaccalaureate opportunities. For example, when an athlete requires a medical redshirt, it may provide the opportunity to pursue a graduate degree in the unanticipated ‘extra’ year of eligibility. College athletes would benefit from explicit counseling to this effect immediately, as it is a high-impact period for graduate advising. Similarly, when athletes are redshirted in their first year, the potential for academic advantage should be discussed. For some athletes, redshirting for athletic reasons can be demoralizing, particularly if they over-identify with their athlete role. Recasting a redshirt as an academic opportunity may be one way to re-center their academic identity and reduce the psychological stress associated with injury or losing connection to their athletic identity.

These athletes are important to study because their academic trajectories contradict much of what we know about college athletes’ experiences and attainment (e.g. low graduation rates, pragmatic detachment, role conflict). Understanding how participants were able to forge these particular success stories matters for researchers and practitioners who seek to improve the academic experience and degree attainment of college athletes. Further, these success stories describe a new promising practice to consider and encourage college athletes to pursue. Degree attainment is inarguably important, with real world implications for employment, earning potential, and intellectual growth. As such, opportunities to participate in graduate study are important for lifelong learning and satisfaction. Beyond that, this study explored the academic trajectories of a group that cannot be ignored if institutions are serious about providing meaningful educational experiences to college athletes.

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